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Framing Violence in Muzaffarnagar Riots: An Analysis of Web Editions of 2 National Dailies

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Abstract
This study examines the linguistic framing of the 2013 Muzaffarnagar riots in two leading Indian English-language newspapers, *The Hindu* and *The Indian Express*, with the dual objectives of analyzing the use of potentially inflammatory or discriminatory language and comparing differences in coverage across outlets. Adopting a descriptive, mixed-method research design, the study integrates manual content analysis with corpus linguistics tools, including keyword extraction, collocation analysis, n-grams, and KWIC (Key Word in Context). A total of 221 articles published between 2013 and 2022 were analyzed. The findings reveal that *The Hindu* placed greater emphasis on political and religious identifiers, with higher frequencies of terms such as *"Muslim(s)" "Hindu(s)," "BJP"* and *"communal"*, suggesting a focus on socio-political dimensions of the riots. In contrast, *The Indian Express* leaned toward incident-specific and legal framing, with greater use of terms such as *"Muzaffarnagar," "Murder,"* and *"Court."* Collocation and n-gram analyses further demonstrate how lexical pairings like *"riot victim," "Muslim community,"* and *"Hindu parishad"* shaped narrative tones of violence, identity, and inter-religious relations. KWIC analysis of *"riot-hit"* highlighted its role in constructing discourses of trauma, administrative response, and humanitarian relief.

Keywords: Riots, Hindu, Muslim, Muzaffarnagar, Violence

Introduction

Riots and Its Impact on Society

India, known for its ethos of *unity in diversity*, has historically embraced a mosaic of languages, religions, castes, and cultures that collectively foster a sense of nationalism **(Nehru, 1949)**. However, this pluralistic identity often becomes vulnerable when exploited through communal ideologies. Communalism, in this context, emerges as a significant threat to national integrity, particularly when it manifests as violent communal riots.

Communal riots are typically the outcome of sustained communal tension and have far-reaching socio-economic and political repercussions **(Ahmad, 1989)**. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a riot is defined as "a violent disturbance of the peace by a crowd," reflecting its chaotic and destructive nature. Former Indian bureaucrat S.R. Sen further explains riots as unorganized socio-political disruptions involving two or more groups. Paul Brass **(2006)** elaborates on the staged nature of riots, categorizing them into three phases: preparation/rehearsal, activation/enactment, and explanation/interpretation. In this process, certain actors, termed as "fire tenders," sustain communal tension through rumor-mongering and provocative messaging, while "conversion specialists" mobilize and incite mobs to initiate violence. Post-riot narratives are often shaped by politicians and media to divert blame or justify actions.

Aftermath of Riots

The aftermath of such violence is particularly devastating for marginalized communities. Following the Ayodhya demolition in 1992, India saw an increase in communal confrontations that severely affected Hindu-Muslim relations **(Brass, 2006)**. The 2013 Muzaffarnagar riots in western Uttar Pradesh stand as a stark example of how caste-based

mobilization and communal hatred can converge into organized violence. Triggered by the lynching of a Muslim youth by two Hindu Jat boys, the violence was inflamed by hate speeches and political maneuvering **(Dutt Garg, 2013).** The riots resulted in at least 50 deaths and the displacement of over 50,000 people, highlighting the extent to which communal tensions can disrupt social fabric and human security **(Mogha & Kamran, 2023)**. The role of media during such events is crucial-not only as a disseminator of news but also as a carrier of ideologies that can either mitigate or intensify societal conflict **(Ahmad, 1989)**. In many cases, the worst affected are daily-wage laborers and marginalized Dalit communities, such as the Valmiki and Chamar, who lack the resources to recover from the social and economic displacement **(Mogha & Kamran, 2023).**

Importance of This Research

Despite India's secular foundation and cultural pluralism, communal riots continue to pose a serious threat to national unity and socio-political harmony. The Muzaffarnagar riots of 2013 underscore a disturbing pattern of caste and religious polarization being used as political tools, with vulnerable communities bearing the brunt of violence and displacement. While scholars have analyzed the structural and psychological underpinnings of riots, there remains a critical gap in understanding how political actors, caste-based mobilization, and media narratives collectively shape the trajectory and aftermath of such violence. This study seeks to explore these dynamics with a focus on the Muzaffarnagar case, examining how the orchestration and interpretation of riots contribute to long-term communal fractures in Indian society.

Literature Review

The existing literature on communal riots in India offers a robust foundation for understanding their complex dynamics and profound societal impact, thus significantly shaping and directing further research. Scholars like Brass (2006) have meticulously categorized forms of collective violence, providing a framework to analyze riots beyond simplistic explanations and highlighting the often-orchestrated nature of such events. This foundational work prompts researchers to look beyond immediate triggers and investigate the deeper institutional and political underpinnings.

Furthermore, studies like those by Ahmad (1989) and the more recent analyses concerning the Muzaffarnagar violence by Mogha & Kamran (2023) and Dutt Garg (2013) critically examine the role of the press and media. This body of work underscores how media narratives can both exacerbate communal tensions through biased reporting or misinformation, and potentially contribute to peacebuilding through responsible journalism. This points research towards investigating media's evolving influence, particularly with the rise of social media, in mobilizing and shaping public opinion during times of conflict.

Historical perspectives, as seen in Sharma (2024)'s work on colonial Punjab, provide crucial context, demonstrating how pre-existing societal structures and colonial policies laid the groundwork for future communal strife. This encourages current research to adopt a diachronic approach, tracing the historical roots of communalism and understanding how past events continue to resonate in contemporary conflicts. Finally, analyses focused on prevention and containment, like Sen (1993)'s work, emphasize the administrative and policy dimensions, directing research towards identifying effective mechanisms for conflict resolution and fostering inter-community harmony. Collectively, this literature moves beyond merely documenting incidents to exploring causality, impact, and potential avenues for mitigation, informing future inquiries into the socio-economic, political, and psychological dimensions of communal violence in India.

Objectives of the Study

1. To analyze the use of language in the coverage of communal riots, such as the use of inflammatory or discriminatory language.
2. To compare the coverage of communal riots in different newspapers, to see if there are any differences in how they are portrayed.

Research Design:

This research is descriptive in nature, as it aims to systematically observe, document, and interpret linguistic and framing patterns in media coverage of the 2013 Muzaffarnagar riots. The Muzaffarnagar riots largely took place from August 2013, to 2022. to capture the immediate digital coverage of these events. By adopting a qualitative-quantitative mixed-method approach, the study integrated manual content analysis with corpus linguistics tools to analyze how two prominent Indian English-language newspapers-The Hindu and The Indian Express-framed the riots in their digital editions. The Hindu, an English daily in India, had an average circulation of around 1.39 million copies in 2013, according to Scribd, with its largest readership concentrated in Kerala and Tamil Nadu. The Indian

Express had a daily circulation of approximately 1 million copies in 2013 (The Media Ant), known for its investigative journalism and strong editorial stance.

The descriptive orientation of the study is evident in its focus on identifying frequencies of riot-related content and analyzing headline structures, all without manipulating variables. Using AntConc, the study conducts keyword extraction, collocation analysis, and KWIC (Keywords in Context) to observe how terms related to communal identities, violence, and blame are embedded within media texts. Additionally, Concordance and N-gram analysis help uncover recurrent phrase patterns that may signal ideological framing, while lexical density and sentiment Clustering reveal the tonal and emotional undercurrents of the reports. Through these descriptive techniques, the study aims to establish how the Muzaffarnagar riots were framed in the immediate digital coverage of national dailies, offering insights into the representational practices and narrative construction of communal violence in mainstream Indian media.

Result and Discussion

Table 1: Statistical analysis for Muzaffarnagar riots-based news from 2013-2022 in The Hindu & The Indian Express

Sr. No	Newspapers	Total no. of news analyzed
1	The Hindu	97
2	The Indian Express	124
Total		221

Source: Based on authors calculation

The table shows the total number of news articles analyzed from 2013 to 2022 based on the Muzaffarnagar riots. The Hindu published 97 articles, while The Indian Express published 124, indicating a slightly higher coverage of the topic in the latter.

Table 2: Highest frequency words in The Hindu and The Indian Express

Sr No	Word	The Hindu	The Indian Express
1	Riots/Riots/Rioting	377	466
2	Muzaffarnagar	271	438
3	Muslim/ Muslims	607	364
4	Violence	303	274
5	Government	272	267
6	BJP	495	240
7	Hindu/Hindus	314	188
8	Communal	260	180
9	Murder/murders	51	145
10	India	170	102
11	Court	150	140
12	Community/Communities	202	139
13	Law	114	105
14	Congress	92	67
15	Adityanath	90	55
16	Jat	107	51
17	Akhilesh	33	46
18	Protest/protests	168	30
19	Rape	45	25
20	Sadhvi	5	24
21	Opposition	17	23

Source: Based on authors calculation

Based on the word frequency analysis this paper highlighted on how often sensitive and potentially polarizing terms (e.g., "Muslim/Muslims," "Hindu/Hindus," "Riots," "Communal," "Murder," "Rape") appear in The Hindu and The Indian Express. The significantly higher frequency of terms such as "Muslim/Muslims" in The Hindu (607 vs. 364) and "BJP" (495 vs. 240) suggests a stronger focus or different narrative framing in its reportage. Similarly, The Indian Express uses words like "Murder/murders" and "Muzaffarnagar" more frequently, which could imply a more

incident-specific or crime-focused reporting style. These patterns can be analyzed for bias, sensationalism, or communal framing by closely examining the contexts in which these words appear.

The Hindu appears to engage more with political and religious identifiers (e.g., "Muslims," "BJP," "Hindus," "Communal"), potentially reflecting a broader socio-political analysis, whereas The Indian Express seems to emphasize event-specific and legal terms like "Murder," "Muzaffarnagar," and "Court." These variations in lexical choices can be further substantiated through qualitative content analysis to interpret tone, narrative focus, and representation practices. Collocates are also known as node words these are the words which frequently occur near a particular searched term. Collocates help in finding specified pattern and associations used in language **(Gablasova, 2017).**

Table 3: Collocates of 'Riots' in The Hindu & The Indian Express

Sr No	Word	The Hindu	The Indian Express
1	Riot	15	17
2	Riots	25	18
3	Rioting	12	13
	Total	52	48

Source: Based on authors calculation

The Hindu used "Riots" (25 times), suggesting more coverage of riots in plural, possibly referring to multiple incidents/events. The Indian Express uses "Riot" (17 times) and "Riots" (18 times) almost equally, suggesting balance between reporting single and multiple incidents. This form often describes the act or process (e.g., "rioting broke out"), rather than just the event. The Hindu leans toward describing riots as collective events ("riots"). The Indian Express presents a balanced distribution between single incidents and collective ones. This suggests a slight difference in editorial style and framing of violence-related news.

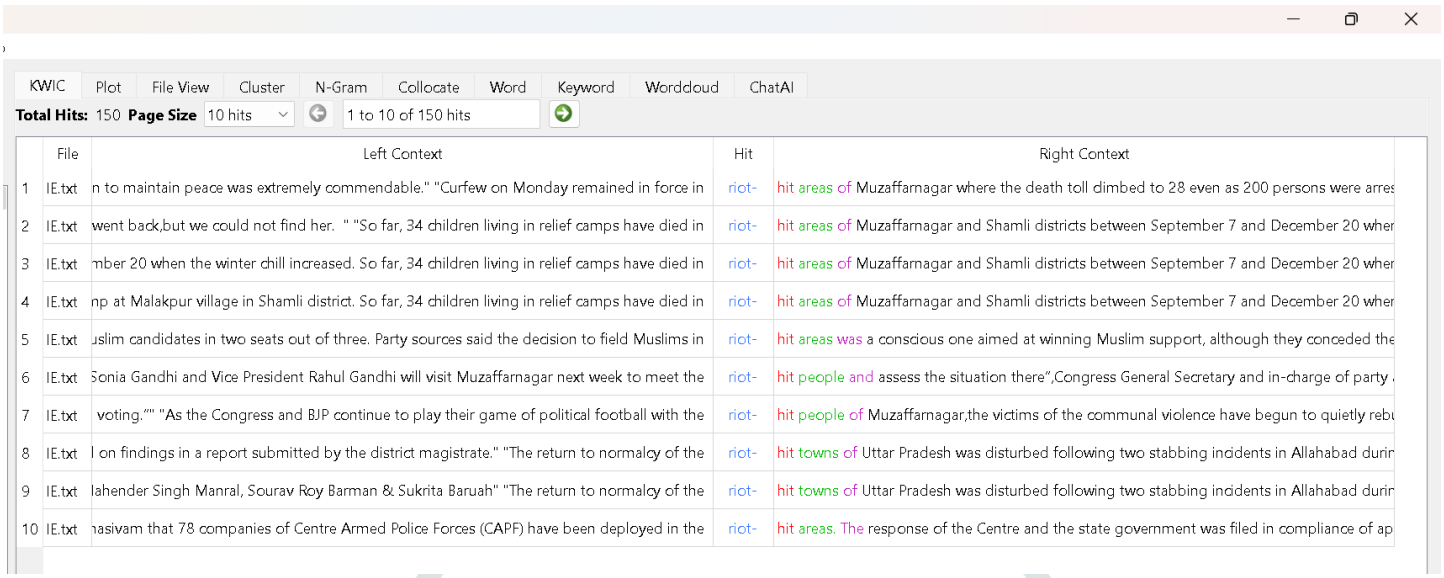
N-grams- An *n-gram* is a sequence of *n* items (words, characters, or tokens) that appear together in a text **(Freund & Willet, 1982)**. The analysis of n-grams has revealed how specific word combinations establish the tone and narrative angle of the news discourse. For instance, n-grams associated with the term riot (e.g., "riot victim", "riot murder", "rioting rape") emphasize violence, suffering, and criminality, thereby framing riots primarily through a lens of conflict and victimhood. Similarly, the collocations of Muslim (e.g., "Muslim community", "Muslim women", "Muslim dominated") construct collective identities, often highlighting religious or demographic dimensions. On the other hand, the associations with Hindu (e.g., "Hindu Muslim", "Hindu yuva", "Hindu parishad") foreground inter-religious relations and organizational affiliations.

These lexical patterns are not neutral; rather, they guide audience perception by selecting particular frames of reference. The recurrence and frequency of such n-grams (e.g., riots-192, riot-49) reinforce certain ideological positions and influence how events are interpreted, thus contributing to the overall tone of reporting and shaping the angle from which news is presented.

Keyword In Context

KWIC (Key Word in Context) is a general format of concordance. It is a text analysis which allows researchers to examine how the word is used in different contexts, making it possible to identify patterns of meaning, collocations, and discourse structures **(Baker 2006)**.

Figure 4: KWIC on Riot



KWIC | Plot | File View | Cluster | N-Gram | Collocate | Word | Keyword | Worddoud | ChatAI

Total Hits: 150 **Page Size** 10 hits 1 to 10 of 150 hits

	File	Left Context	Hit	Right Context
1	IE.txt	n to maintain peace was extremely commendable." "Curfew on Monday remained in force in	riot-	hit areas of Muzaffarnagar where the death toll dimbed to 28 even as 200 persons were arres
2	IE.txt	went back,but we could not find her. " "So far, 34 children living in relief camps have died in	riot-	hit areas of Muzaffarnagar and Shamli districts between September 7 and December 20 wher
3	IE.txt	mber 20 when the winter chill increased. So far, 34 children living in relief camps have died in	riot-	hit areas of Muzaffarnagar and Shamli districts between September 7 and December 20 wher
4	IE.txt	np at Malakpur village in Shamli district. So far, 34 children living in relief camps have died in	riot-	hit areas of Muzaffarnagar and Shamli districts between September 7 and December 20 wher
5	IE.txt	uslim candidates in two seats out of three. Party sources said the decision to field Muslims in	riot-	hit areas was a conscious one aimed at winning Muslim support, although they conceded the
6	IE.txt	Sonia Gandhi and Vice President Rahul Gandhi will visit Muzaffarnagar next week to meet the	riot-	hit people and assess the situation there",Congress General Secretary and in-charge of party
7	IE.txt	voting."" "As the Congress and BJP continue to play their game of political football with the	riot-	hit people of Muzaffarnagar,the victims of the communal violence have begun to quietly rebu
8	IE.txt	l on findings in a report submitted by the district magistrate." "The return to normalcy of the	riot-	hit towns of Uttar Pradesh was disturbed following two stabbing incidents in Allahabad durin
9	IE.txt	lahender Singh Manral, Sourav Roy Barman & Sukrita Baruah" "The return to normalcy of the	riot-	hit towns of Uttar Pradesh was disturbed following two stabbing incidents in Allahabad durin
10	IE.txt	nasivam that 78 companies of Centre Armed Police Forces (CAPF) have been deployed in the	riot-	hit areas. The response of the Centre and the state government was filed in compliance of ap

Source: Based on authors calculation

The KWIC analysis of the keyword *riot-hit* reveals that its repetitive use constructs a discourse of trauma and disruption, wherein the collocates (e.g., *areas, towns, people, Muzaffarnagar, Shamli*) frame specific geographies and communities as permanently marked by violence. This adjectival pattern not only attaches a negative semantic meaning to the locations but also aligns with broader discourse structures: political (electoral mobilization), administrative (law-and-order control), and humanitarian (victimhood and relief). Thus, KWIC demonstrates how a single keyword can shape narrative frames by embedding patterns of meaning, collocations, and discourse structures in news reporting.

Conclusion

This study set out with two objectives: first, to analyze the use of language in the coverage of communal riots with a focus on potentially inflammatory or discriminatory expressions; and second, to compare the portrayal of the 2013 Muzaffarnagar riots in two leading English-language newspapers, *The Hindu* and *The Indian Express*. The findings demonstrate that both newspapers devoted considerable attention to the riots, but their lexical choices and framing strategies differed in meaningful ways. *The Hindu* used a higher frequency of religious and political identifiers such as *"Muslim(s)," "Hindu(s)," "BJP,"* and *"communal"*, suggesting an emphasis on socio-political analysis and the role of identity in shaping narratives. By contrast, *The Indian Express* displayed a stronger tendency toward incident-specific framing through higher occurrences of terms like *"Murder," "Muzaffarnagar,"* and *"Court,"* reflecting a more event- and crime-centered style of reportage.

Through collocation and n-gram analysis, the study showed how certain word pairings-such as *"riot victim," "Muslim community,"* and *"Hindu parishad"* established dominant tones of violence, victimhood, and inter-religious dynamics. Likewise, the KWIC analysis of *"riot-hit"* revealed how repetitive adjectival framing marked spaces and communities as sites of trauma and disruption. These patterns confirm that the language of reporting is not neutral; it encodes ideological positions and frames public understanding of communal violence. By integrating qualitative content analysis with corpus linguistics tools, this research highlights how mainstream Indian dailies construct distinct representational practices around communal riots. The comparative results suggest that while *The Hindu* foregrounded political and religious dimensions, *The Indian Express* leaned toward legal-institutional and incident-driven narratives. Together, these findings illustrate how editorial orientations and linguistic choices shape not only the tone of reporting but also the angle from which communal violence is made visible to readers.

Ultimately, the study underscores the critical role of language in media framing of communal conflicts. It reinforces the need for continued scholarly attention to media discourse, particularly in contexts where linguistic representation can influence inter-community relations, public opinion, and the broader democratic conversation on communal harmony in India.

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