Effect of Religious Propaganda on Commercial Interaction between Believers and Non-believers of a Particular Religious Ideology

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Abstract

The paper is an attempt to understand the impact of religious propaganda on believers and evaluating their attitudinal changes, both personal and trade-related towards non-believers. To analyse the impact of propaganda, a controlled experiment was undertaken with 86 post graduate students and 3 faculty members from a College in Tamilnadu and subjecting them to narratives based on three different forms of propaganda - fundamentalist, moderate and secular. After each propaganda, the responses were taken through a questionnaire to measure the impact of propaganda on personal relations and commercial relations: 1) with believers or people following the same set of beliefs, 2) with non-believers or people projected as enemies of the community, and 3) with intermediaries or people who are deemed as tolerable. The results were statistically analysed and interpreted. The results provide insights into the value of different types of propaganda on commercial and personal interactions between those subjected to the propaganda and the community targeted through such propaganda (believers and non-believers). The results show that moderate propaganda is not a full-fledged antidote to fundamentalist propaganda; it only improves the commercial relationships. Only secular propaganda can withstand the onslaught of fundamentalist propaganda in both personal and commercial interactions. The results also reveal that creating a set of intermediaries would be helpful in increasing the commercial interaction among believers and non-believers.

Introduction

The article aims to analyse the impact of propaganda on common people by three different groups - fundamentalist religious groups, moderate religious groups and secular groups on a matured and educated audience. Fundamentalist groups claim to adhere to the puritanical versions of their religions as they existed several centuries ago (Denoeux, 2002) and with the onset of communication era, their potential for propaganda has grown enormously, including through Social Media on distance audiences (Klausen, 2015). The case of @Shamiwitness is a recent example (OHPI, 2014; Klausen, 2015). Though fundamentalists

are minorities within their religions (Rabasa, 2005), certain territories are exclusively under the control of fundamentalist groups now - examples are: ISIS controlled territory in Syria and Iraq, certain remote corners of Afghanistan and Pakistan controlled by various fundamentalist groups, territories under the control of Al-Shabaab in Somalia, Boko Haram in Nigeria etc. Moreover, the efficiency of fundamentalist propaganda is resulting in movement of believers to these closed territories (Shane and Hubard, 2014); this increases the importance of analysing the impact and efficacy of various types of propaganda.Understanding the implications and efficacy of different forms of propaganda is important in the context of a modern State in countering and negating the propaganda by the religious fundamentalists and to improve commercial relations with countries and regions that are under the sway of such religious fundamentalists. The analysis assumes importance not only in the context of future expansion of fundamentalist groups with their multifaceted propaganda tools; even to retain the existing trade relations, understanding the importance of religion and propaganda is very important. The study is unique since the contrasting impact of fundamentalist, moderate and secular propaganda on a matured audience from a predominantly theistic, lower strata of a society in a developing country has been attempted and analysed; the introduction and analysis of attitudes of believers towards intermediaries has also been analysed for the first time under these various forms of propaganda. This experiment can also be applicable to similarly placed societies in other countries, nations and organisations apart from individuals in their commercial and personal interactions.

The aim of the study is to analyse the attitudinal changes in commercial and personal relations that are brought in after three types of propaganda; it helped us in analysing (1) the efficacy of these propaganda, (2) which type of propaganda effectively counters the fundamentalist propaganda - moderate or secular, and (3) what is the impact of these propaganda on relations with Intermediaries, a group of people who are neither believers or non-believers. The concept of intermediaries have been taken by analysing the example of Islam where the concept of 'people of the book' is present and which was utilized during the medieval period to justify tolerating Hindus and Buddhists in the islamic territories, due to the fact that they were numerous or armed or difficult to be dealt with (Kopel, 2008; Younan, 2014; Klune, 2014).

Literature Background

● **Religion and Trade**

Weber (1930) suggested that there is a relationship between economic conditions and religious beliefs. He pointed to the differences between catholics and protestants in choices and argued that these are determined by the religious environment. Religion, being part of culture is considered to exercise influence over economic outcomes (Barro and McCleary, 2003). The existing research suggests that it is important to 'consider the relationship

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between religion and economic performance via economic behaviour' (Tan and Vogel, 2005). Empirical evidence also points out to the relationship between religions and trade (Helble, 2006) and the openness of the religions to that of trade (Helble, 2006).

• Propaganda

Jowett and O'Donnel (1999) mention propaganda as "a form of communication that attempts to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist". Silverman (2011) quoting Lasswell and Blumenstock (1939), defines propaganda as "control of attitudes via the manipulation of symbols". This manipulation may also extend to use of a negative imagery as it happened during the World wars (Bernays, 1942) or in the middle eastern wars (Cohen, 2007) positive imagery as has been done in the case of the erstwhile Soviet Union. Propaganda thus, could be positive or negative and may include "exaggerated facts, lies, distortion and brainwashing" (Silverman, 2011), including photos altered through software in this era of information technology and detection and counter propaganda against this by those who use internet such as bloggers (Cohen, 2007). Bernays (1942), quoting George C. Bruntz book, 'Allied Propaganda and the collapse of German Empire in 1918', mentions various types of propaganda as Propagandas of Enlightenment (passing on the true information), Despair (breaking the morale of the opponent by showing their downfall), Hope (giving hope to the enemy that surrender would entail them peace and prosperity), Revolutionary(breaking the enemy from within) and Particularist (dividing the opponents). The germans considered that the British were good at propaganda and it enabled them to defeat the germans (Bernays, 1942), even Adolf Hitler subscribed to this view in his autobiographical manifesto, Mein Kampf.

Thus, propaganda plays a major role in determining our attitude towards various aspects of life. It may be towards another nation as was done in case of Soviet Union (Kennan, 1947), where the devotion to the State resembled that of a religious faith (Froese, 2004) or part of ideological war as it existed during the cold war era (Brown, 2006) and many times during wars when hatred towards the enemy was aroused to make people sacrifice their pleasures for the war effort (Jowett and O'Donnel, 1992).

• Propaganda and religion

However, it may be noted that there are also questions about the uniform effect of propaganda, ignoring the social and mental state of the recipients (Jowett and O'Donnel, 1992). Thus, depending upon the religiosity of the recipient, the effect of propaganda might vary. A study conducted in United Kingdom among Pakistanis and Bangladeshis with islamist propaganda material has shown that the participants are not swayed by the propaganda clips (Baines et al., 2010).

• **Fundamentalist – Moderate – Secular Propaganda**

While the classification between fundamentalist and moderate ideologies is a question of individual perception, fundamentalism is generally considered as "a call for restoring the original purity and integrity of the faith through a literal reading of the founding religious texts"(Denoeux, 2002). These fundamentalists are created out of propaganda (Powell, 1967). There are some authors who point out that even the fundamentalist or puritanical ideologies have within themselves moderates and radicals, with anecdotal evidence pointing to the prevalence of moderates within the puritanical groups (Knysh, 2001).

The existing literature points out that empowering moderates is an effective way of combating the fundamentalist propaganda and creating a network comprising of moderates is considered as an effective antidote to fundamentalism (Coles, 2005). There are anecdotal evidences to the alternate as well, moderate religious propaganda is considered as turning people from secular to religious life and this may be a stepping stone for fundamentalist upsurge in future. The case of Ahmad al-Shugairi is a point to note, while he preaches a moderate version of religion, many comment that it has made them transform from irreligious or secular persons to religious persons (Worth, 2009). Many a times, persons recruited by radical groups turn to more radical or fundamentalist groups as they mature and go deeper into religion (Rabasa, 2005).

Objectives of the Study

- To understand the impact of propaganda on commercial interactions between believers and non-believers.
- To understand whether fundamentalist propaganda can be countered by providing a moderate or secular interpretation to religious texts, that is assessing the efficiency of moderate and secular propaganda in countering fundamentalist propganda.
- To understand whether trade relations between believers and non-believers can be improved in societies targeted by fundamentalist propaganda, by introducing a new set of communities (intermediaries) or by interpreting some communities as intermediaries.

Research Methodology

For understanding the impact of religious propaganda, two classes of students (86) who are studying Bachelor of Education along with 3 faculty members participated in the study. The college is situated in a village called Pappakovil, at the outskirts of Nagapattinam, a district headquarter in Tamilnadu in India. The selection of the college and location were merely due to convenience as the first author hails from that area. Nagapattinam is a district with a significant proportion of muslims, as per 2001 census, the proportion of muslims in the

district is 7.6% compared to State average of 5.6% and hosts a popular Sufi Shrine of South India, the Nagore Dargah. In fact, the Dargah is situated at a distance of 6 kms from the College where the study was conducted. It also has Velankanni Shrine, a basilica popular in South India; the Velankanni Church is situated at a distance of 8 kms from the College. It is also a district with highest proportion of Scheduled caste (SC) considered as the lowest in the caste hierarchy among hindus as per census data, with 29.63%, it is one of the 51 districts in India with a significant SC population (Planning Commission, 2005). Pappakovil also has a sufi shrine, famous among both hindus and muslims. Around two kilometres from the location lies the shrine of another popular Saint, Korakkar who was a Tamil Siddhar. The concept of Siddhars who were Tamil Saints is popular in local folklore and many are emotionally attached as they are considered as against the caste hierarchy and are considered to be mystics in communion with God who have preached moral values. Similarly, Sufism is also popular due to the presence of Nagore Dargah and several minor sufi shrines across the district like Pappakovil shrine, though wahhabism is on the ascendence as it is the case in other parts of Tamilnadu (Venkatachalapathy, 2013).

Analysis of the answers reveal the following information about the participants: All the participants are graduates, 26 of them are post graduates. With regard to caste backgrounds, while none of these 89 participants are from forward castes also called as open category (OC), 12 of them are from Backward castes, 11 are from Most Backward castes and the remaining 66 are from Schedules castes . It may be noted that this classification has been done as per Government of Tamilnadu norms). With regard to their economic conditions, none of the participants' families, including faculty members have cars, 25 own motor cycles (locally called as two wheelers) and 7 of the participants doesn't have bicycle at home. It may be noted that Tamilnadu is a State which gives free bicycles to the students of 11th Standard and it is. Due to this, open market is flooded with cheap bicycles. With regard to religious beliefs, two of the participants have mentioned that they are atheiests, 9 as agnostics and the remaining 78 as theists.

The study was conducted by using a simulation in which a narrative in history form was administered to the students. For the three types of propaganda, three types of simulations were administered with a time interval of 1 hour in between the simulation. The order of the simulations were fundamentalist, moderate and secular, that is Simulations 1,2 &3. At the end of each simulation, the views of the students and faculty were taken through a questionnaire. The participants were first asked to fill in the introduction part of the questionnaire and their details such as name, educational qualifications, age, gender, social background (Forward caste, Backward caste, Most Backward caste, Scheduled caste, Scheduled Tribe as classified by Government of Tamilnadu) and economic status were taken (instead of asking it directly, the ownership of vehicles was used as an indicator to get the economic details – those who have cycles are considered as low income group, those with motorcycle as middle income and those with car as high income). The entire explanation to the participants was done in Tamil in a narrative form, participants were encouraged to ask questions, seek clarifications and also discuss among themselves while

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answering. But not much time (responses were obtained within 20 minutes of the simulations) was given and their spontaneous perceptions were asked to be translated into responses.

Considering the socio-religious background of the audience, the concept of Siddhars was used, to make the fundamentalist propaganda sound natural and appealing to them. To induce emotions, a locally popular and revered Siddhar, Agasthiar's name was used.

A short description of Fundamentalist narrative (**Simulation I**) is as follows:

A Saint (Agasithar) was divinely ordained tried to reform his people, who were barbaric. These people were called Puras (Purathaangal in tamil). These Puras were killing female children, drunkards, were very cruel and uncivilized. The Saint faced persecution from them. As a result, the Saint decides that to make good prevail in the society and to reform the society, it is necessary that a war has to be waged with the barbaric people. Some people (Aghas) understood the Saint's greatness and that he was trying to reform the people, so they believe in him, assemble under him and fight the Puras. Ultimately, Puras are eliminated from the society and a peaceful society dawns. Some Puras who remain are banished and they move out of the society. It was told to the participants that the Saint (Agasithar) has warned the Aghas of the consequences of dealing with the Puras who have the tendency to corrupt them and make them relapse into uncivilized state. The teachings and preachings of Agasithar against Puras were explained in detail. The name Agasithar was carefully chosen so that the participants who are tamils, well acquaintained with the history and culture of the region where Sithars are held in high esteem and viewed as visionaries and reformers was used. A dark view of the Puras was painted to the participants, pointing out how evil they were, how uncivilized and cruel they were and how they persecuted the Saint.

A short description of Moderate narrative (**Simulation II**) is as follows:

Participants were told that 1000 years have passed since the times of Agasithar. An alternate view or interpretation was narrated on these lines: (1) Agasithar actually didn't fight with Puras, the teachings narrated in Simulation-I which were handed over from generation to generation during the past 1000 years doesn't describe actual or physical events. They are all esoteric explanations of the inner struggle undergone by the Saint. (2) Even if those events took place for real, it's now 1000 years since it happened and there is no black & white way of separating Puras and Aghas into Evil and Good. Some Aghas are wicked and some Aghas are good. So, it is better to not bother about these things. The participants were told during discussions about the fallacy of the concepts narrated during Simulation-I and by presenting an alternate view of things, the reverance towards Agasthiar was retained as such as was done in the case of Simulation-I, but the interpretation about his persecution and the fights which happened 1000 years ago were changed.

A short description of Secular narrative (**Simulation- III)** is as follows:

This scenario largely imitates the secular propaganda based on appealing to the reason and secular ideas of the people as is being done by the civil society in India. Participants were explained the logic of conducting the study. It was explained to them that Simulation-I is a camouflaged version of the ideologies and views that prevail in different parts of the world under the sway of fundamentalists and Simulation-II that of moderate religious discourse. The presence of fundamentalist groups who portray interaction with India on the lines of Simulation-I was explained to them. They were also pointed out about the presence of moderates and agnostics in such societies and it was explained that Simulation-II is a situation where such views are largely presented to such societies by the moderates. It was also explained to them that not all those who oppose commercial interaction with India are necessarily fundamentalists. It was pointed out that there could be valid concerns about the fate of local trade and industry among some sections of such societies. It was repeatedly pointed out that these concerns are very much true. This was done to mould the mood of the participants to a position of neutrality in assessing the situation in the light of all these conflicting viewpoints and to make them detach from immediate reaction in favour of India.

Data Analysis

As stated earlier, questionnaires were distributed at the end of each simulation and were immediately collected back. The responses were coded in excel sheet. The data is a discrete category (count) since a three point scale was used to ensure a precise capture of responses. A cross – tabulation of the count of responses and with the help of Chi – square test we can check on the respondent's (being a Theist or Confused/Atheist) behavior towards negotiation attributes. However, since the sample size is small (less than 5) in some of the cells, Fisher's Exact Test was used to calculate the probability value, which is the most appropriate method applicable for all sample size. We used Freeman-Halton extension of Fisher's exact test to compute the (two-tailed) probability of obtaining a distribution of values in a 2x3 contingency table, given the number of observations in each cell and the results are given below at 5% level of significance.

Results

$H_0 1$ **:** Religious belief and friendly attitude towards interaction with non-believers or persons deemed as outsiders are independent.

The P values of fundamentalist, moderate and secular propaganda for this hypothesis were 0.006, 0.018 and 0.85 respectively. This means that fundamentalist and moderate propaganda impact their behaviour.

$H_0 2$**:** Religious belief and Trade relationship with outsiders are independent irrespective of

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the gain

The P values of fundamentalist, moderate and secular propaganda for this hypothesis were 0.041, 0.097 and 0.89 respectively. This means that religious belief and trade relationship are dependent with respect to fundamentalist propaganda

$H_0 3$: Religious belief and Commercial interaction with Fundamentalists are independent irrespective of the gain for both the parties.

The P values of fundamentalist, moderate and secular propaganda for this hypothesis were 0.349, 0.607 and 1.0 respectively. This means that irrespective of the types of propaganda religious and commercial interaction are independent.

$H_0 4$: Religious belief and Commercial interaction with Moderates are independent even if the gain is more than the Moderates ??.
The P values of fundamentalist, moderate and secular propaganda for this hypothesis were 0.032, 1.0 and 0.001 respectively. This means that religious belief and commercial interaction are dependent with respect to fundamentalist and secular propaganda.

$H_0 5$: Religious belief and Trade relationship with Intermediates are independent.
The P values of fundamentalist, moderate and secular propaganda for this hypothesis were 0.396, 0.497 and 0.43 respectively. This means that there is no association between religious belief and trade relationship irrespective of the types of propaganda.

Conclusions from the Statistical Analysis of Responses to the Questionnaire:

The fundamentalist propaganda affects not only the commercial relationships with persons identified as outsiders or non-believers, it also extends to the personal relationships between both the categories. Strangely, moderate propaganda also impacts the personal relationships between these two groups, though it ensures the commercial relationships between these two categories. Similarly, despite gains, those who are subjected to fundamentalist propaganda would shun commercial relationship with persons considered as outsiders or non-believers. Thus, the fundamentalist propaganda would result in cutting of both personal and commercial interaction with outsiders and though moderate propaganda may result in enhanced commercial relationship between believers and non-believers, the underlying tensions may not subside and normal relations between the two categories would be affected despite the moderate propaganda.

Similarly, introducing a category of Intermediaries would ensure that trade relationships are established between those who are subjected to fundamentalist propaganda and persons considered as outsiders which otherwise is not possible if there are only two divisions, that

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is, believers and non-believers. Interestingly again, despite secular propaganda, the commercial relationship with fundamentalists doesn't suffer. That is, the secular propaganda doesn't result in creating an atmosphere of hate against fundamentalists. As against our expectation, the secular propaganda impacts the commercial relationship with moderates. It is not clear as to how this is possible when the secular propaganda doesn't result in impacting the commercial relationship with fundamentalists.

Limitations and thoughts on Future Research

- Most of the students were from lower strata of the society and all were Tamils and mostly Hindus. Attitude and behaviours between Tamil and non-Tamil, Hindu and non-Hindu, rich and poor cannot be conclusively ascertained from this one study alone due to the limitation on sample size and convenient sampling..
- The impact of the propaganda on varied audience would have helped - for example, taking fundamentalists, identified by their membership in organisations recognised as fundamentalist or taking members of an atheistic organisation like the Dravidar Kazhagam of Tamilnadu and conducting a study on them. Thus variation between impact of propaganda on persons with strong views couldn't be ascertained from this study.

- The study is limited by its sample size, culture, region and age group. Hence may not be generalised for all situations and environments.

Conclusion

There is a relationship between propaganda and the attitudes of the target audience with regard to commercial interaction as well as personal interaction with non-believers or persons projected as enemies. It also shows that the impact of fundamentalist propaganda can be nullified either by creating a category of intermediaries - or by furnishing new interpretation by which either intermediaries are created or such a new interpretation offers an alternative to the fundamentalist world view such as a moderate view. However, even if moderate views are encouraged and successful, it only encourages commercial interaction between the two populations(believers and non-believers) and the friendliness of the two populations doesn't improve. Encouraging secular propaganda and appealing to the reason of the population is the viable alternative as it improves the perception of the people and bring the people together.

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