

# Indian Televisual News Discourse on the Russia-Ukraine War

Abhishek Roy & Pompy Paul



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The influence of the war against  
Ukraine on discourses worldwide

## About the authors

*Abhishek Roy* (UGC-NET qualified) is working as an Academic Associate at IIMC, Dhenkanal. He has provided his services as a Health-Communication Specialist under the direct supervision of Padmashree Dr. Ravi Kannan at Cachar Cancer Hospital and Research Center, Silchar. Presently, he is working as an Academic/Teaching Associate at IIMC, Dhenkanal. He has also worked as a Research Associate in a major ICSSR project. He is currently pursuing his Ph.D. from Assam University; a central university located in Silchar, South Assam. He teaches across all media verticals with a focus on new media, market research and digital journalism. Additionally, he has a passion for graphic design and documentary filmmaking.

Contact: [abhishek.roy.iimc@gmail.com](mailto:abhishek.roy.iimc@gmail.com)

*Pompy Paul* is a doctoral scholar of communication with Assam University. Her research interests are Communication and Information for Sustainable Development, Media Framing, and Digital Social Sciences. Pompy is the recipient of the National Foundation for India (NFI) Media Fellowship. Pompy has worked as a Communication Officer with Cachar Cancer Hospital & Research Centre in the past.

Contact: [pompypaul1@gmail.com](mailto:pompypaul1@gmail.com)

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## About the Special Issue: Discourses of War: The influence of the war against Ukraine on discourses worldwide

*Edited by Jens Maesse, Magdalena Nowicka-Franczak,  
Elena Psyllakou, Gerardo Nicoletta & David Adler*

The war against Ukraine has significant impacts on many societies world-wide, especially in Europe. The war changes public debates and political discourses in many countries. In addition to that, economic, technical, academic and other discourses are also influenced by this new state of things. We invite Short Papers (1200–3000 words) which reflect on these discourses.

# Indian Televisual News Discourse on the Russia-Ukraine War

Abhishek Roy & Pompy Paul

The discussion in the mainstream Indian television news media over the war in Ukraine and Russia has been rapid and excessively sensational, characterized by the constant reiteration of the same themes that reinforces India's non-aligned stance in the global political order. In addition to outlining its own position in the discussion, the Indian TV news media discourse has made conscious efforts to portray Prime Minister Narendra Modi as a significant and assertive leader in order to steer the public discourse towards a more self-reliant and decisive India rather than seeing this ambivalence as a failure of foreign policy toward Ukraine. The intended study will make an effort to identify the various aspects of the Indian television news media discourse on the Russo-Ukrainian War and critically examine the influence of private television news channels in setting the nature of public discourse on the subject. The study will analyze media coverages and debates of the Russo-Ukrainian War on select traditional TV news channels using the three-dimensional framework developed by Norman Fairclough as the theoretical foundation and analytical method for critical discourse analysis (CDA). The paper will serve as a descriptive summary of the types of narratives backed up by the mainstream media throughout the crisis.

*Keywords:* Russia-Ukraine War, TV News Discourse, Critical Discourse Analysis

Media organizations are well recognized for influencing public opinion and setting the agenda for discourse. News discourse influences public opinion worldwide as mass media rapidly permeates all facets of the global population (Newton, 2006). As a result, it has always been one of the key research areas for critical discourse analysis (CDA). The approach allows us to understand the implied viewpoints of the author and the actual context of a particular debate or discussion on any given event. As a result, the conversation itself becomes event data that can be leveraged to probe into in order to stimulate more ideas and discoveries. At the same time, the media discourse as a whole is also subject to change in response to external social and political forces. Although a lot of news discourse appears to be dispassionate and fair, it often contains ideological content that subtly influences the audience. Therefore, the news is not always objective and impartial.

According to Halliday and Matthiessen (1996), there are a number of approaches that we can take to research media discourse, and in doing so, we can examine more closely the role and effects of the media on public discourse. Norman Fairclough (1995) defines Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as an analysis that seeks to methodically explore the recurrently ambiguous causal and deterministic relationships between (a) discursive practices, events, and texts, and (b) the larger social and cultural structures, relations, and processes; to examine how such practices, occurrences, and texts are ideologically influenced by power relationships and struggles, as well as how the complexity of these connections between discourse and society which contributes to the maintenance of power and hegemony (p. 135). To understand the Russo-Ukrainian discourse, this study incorporates Fairclough's three-dimensional framework to investigate the way in which the war is represented in the neoliberal mass media, particularly in mainstream television news channels, and the ways in which this discourse permeates. The discursive context of the discourse constitutes a crucial aspect of communication which enables us to gain insights into the relationship between language, power and reality. The economic logic of a large media market, the concentration of ownership, and political affiliations of both covert and overt nature, altogether influence the discursive

sive context, as if all these components are in a live loop of ideological gameplay.

## 'War' and the 'Exclusive' Indian Televisual News Discourse

The Indian media is infamous for propagating skewed viewpoints that misguide citizens, undercut democracy, and undermine the system. Recently, the Chief Justice of India, N. V. Ramana issued a statement condemning media trials and kangaroo courts that would go on for months during prime-time news debates on major news networks. Although the Indian media is highly fragmented, even polarized; nonetheless, it does provide reasonable space for diverse views on world affairs. However, with false and outrageous headlines about the threat of a nuclear war, the Indian media turned the entire Russian-Ukrainian conflict into a public spectacle – “War” as “Exclusive” news. The television news networks came out swinging, claiming that the stories they covered were “breaking” and “super exclusive.” This is certainly done to draw more viewers and get a profitable Target Rating Point (TRP) score in order to entice additional sponsors/advertisers. In addition to anchors imposing their opinions as facts and using exaggerated images and graphics as the background, self-serving narratives of a “cold war”, “nuclear war” etc. were also woven to set the agenda for a speculative discourse on the issue. Almost all media sources began to focus extensively on concerns of a probable nuclear assault and possible World War III. Such suppositions, however, are dangerous because they oversimplify the issues brought on by the Ukrainian conflict and promote fearmongering and paranoia. The lexical choice of news discourse on prime-time television included words like “atomic bomb”, “nuclear annihilation”, “final fight”, “retaliation” etc., thereby framing this entire crisis in a hyper-masculine- almost apocalyptic discourse. Some media houses even reported that Putin carries a briefcase which can detonate Russia’s nuclear arsenal just at the press of a white button. News Nation’s coverage of the issue had a moving image of Putin (apparently a doctored image) riding a bear as the background, thereby painting Putin in a powerful light. This kind of coverage has exposed the television media’s inclination towards sensationalism. Mapping the usage of words and

images of war allows us to gain insight into the structural organization of news as a form of writing, its representation of subject and object in society, and the ways in which meaning is created through the use of discourse (Halliday and Matthiessen, p. 2). Hence, rather than being expository, the Indian TV news media employed persuasive tactics in their coverage of the war and the subsequent struggle. The narratives were aimed at persuading people to form a public opinion which would reflect the national consensus. This was apparent in the way their news reports presented the war, and they failed to present a balanced analysis of the causes and motives of the war.

Another recurring issue is that Indian media outlets deliberately chose to follow a seemingly ‘balanced’ path in the Russo-Ukrainian War, displaying reluctance in criticizing Russia’s invasion. The Chinese and Indian governments have both been noticeably reserved on the issue. In accordance with its long-standing neutrality policy, India has refrained from condemning the conflict and begun purchasing Russian oil at a discount price, while China has echoed Russia’s narrative about NATO expansion and criticized the U.S. for inflaming tension in the concerned region. India and Russia have basically been friends since India and the then Soviet Union signed the Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation in 1971. This was India’s first bilateral treaty and acted as a counterbalance to the burgeoning Pakistan-US-China alliance. Even when the Soviet Union collapsed, Russia and India maintained strong relations. And in 2000, Putin and the then Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee signed another strategic partnership treaty, which was renamed as the Special and Privileged Strategic Partnership in 2010. Besides, Russia is one of the few nations that backs India’s claim to Kashmir and has also declared that it favours India getting a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). However, the foundation of this partnership has been military hardware. Somewhere between 17 and 80 percent of India’s arms imports come from Russia, making it Moscow’s biggest arms market. And most of India’s military hardware today is basically old Soviet or Russian stock. Despite the fact that they don’t do a lot of commercial trade, both countries appear to want that to change. By 2025, Putin and Modi want to increase their current \$10 billion bilateral commerce to \$30 billion. These warm relations, combined with India’s longstanding policy of neutrality, help



## Modi stopped Russia-Ukraine war for 3 hours to evacuate Indian students: Ravi Shankar Prasad

explain why India has been so reluctant to criticize Russia's invasion of Ukraine or join in with Western-led sanctions. Hence, the media discourse surrounding the conflict has been portrayed in several ways, with diverse points of view positing this conflict as a humanitarian crisis and a collapse in the world order. A common theme of the majority of Indian media outlets is that they feel no responsibility for the conflict since they are not directly affected by the issue. Most pro-establishment media outlets have embraced a strategy of subtly "appeasing the aggressor" in their coverage of the Ukraine crisis. They tend to focus only on negative aspects of the war that Ukrainians are fighting and attribute the country's predicament to "Western influences." The media had argumentative discourses on NATO and potential future enlargement of the European Union while primarily focusing on the Ukrainian crisis from the standpoint of human rights. They, however, accused Russia of violating international law in an effort to defend India's non-alignment position. The Indian news media incorporated defensive, nationalistic, intuitive and speculative overtones to form the dominant discursive context of the discourse.

As the crisis in Ukraine entered its third month, the media started to engage in foreign policy advocacy, justifying India's non-aligned stance. Meanwhile, the entire discourse shifted from war and death to the safety and security of Indian nationals in Ukraine. India's external affairs minister, S. Jaishankar, made the first formal statement on 15th March 2022 in which he assured that India's first priority was to evacuate the 22,500 Indian nationals from the war-torn eastern border of Ukraine and bring them back to their country. "Operation Ganga," a government programme that was initiated to rescue Indian citizens who had crossed neighbouring countries following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, received a lot of press. Interestingly enough, in the midst of all the procedures for bringing Indian students from Ukraine, BJP Maharashtra's official Twitter handle shared a post with a Marathi caption on 3rd March 2020, which in English reads,

"This is the new India! Russia stopped fighting for 6 hours to get Indians out of Ukraine safely. Prime Minister Shri. This was @narendramodi possible when he spoke to Russian President Vladimir Putin. Russian Air Force aircraft and military vehicles announced the evacuation."

It was a big challenge for the Indian government to evacuate medical students stranded in Ukraine due to war. When PM Modi asked the high commissioners of India in Ukraine and Russia about the evacuation plan, they said that it is possible only when a ceasefire is observed. They also said that the PM was capable of doing it. Prasad claimed.

Prime Minister **Narendra Modi** had managed to stop the Russia-Ukraine war for three hours to provide a safe passage to Indian medical students stuck in the conflict zone, former union law minister and senior **BJP** leader **Ravi Shankar Prasad** has claimed.

Prasad said that the incident took place when the war was at its peak and a large number of Indian medical students were trapped in Ukraine.

While interacting here on Friday

**MEA Denies Claim Russia 'Stopped' War for 6 Hrs to Evacuate Indians From Kharkiv**

A number of tweets started coming in hailing PM Modi, as reports emerged that Russia had stopped the war for India.

**THE QUINT**  
Updated: 04 Mar 2022, 10:56 PM IST

**INDIA**  
2 min read

This claim under the name of the Indian government went viral on social media so much so that people began praising Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Indian administration on Twitter and asserting that Russia had ended the conflict on India's behalf. The assertion was also supported by former union law minister and prominent BJP politician Ravi Shankar Prasad, and it was reported on by news anchors on major TV news stations. Many journalists and "defence panellists" began to tweet the same narrative in the interim, raving over the effectiveness of a BJP-led administration. Many other influencers with high popularity and credibility on right-wing networks including Aditya Raj Kaul, Amish Devgan, Abhijit Majumdar, Pradeep Bhandari, and Abhijit Iyer Mitra, supported this assertion as an actual development. Later, the Ministry of External Affairs flatly rejected the claim.

Meanwhile, Russia made allegations regarding Ukrainian security forces using Indian students as "human shields." The perception of this alleged threat was quickly sensed and exclusively reported by both national and regional

Ukrainian amb at UNSC to India: "It is exactly the safety of your nationals, why you should have voted Yes to end the war."

Confirms that the Maidan regime is using Indians as 'hostages.' They are turning away planes sent from India, and are shelling border posts used by buses.

9:52 AM · Feb 26, 2022 · Twitter Web App

1,039 Retweets 210 Quote Tweets 2,634 Likes

Replying to @b...

Our students are being used like hostages, bargaining chips, human shields, and cannon-fodder by the Ukrainians.

**Ruchir** @ruchi... · Feb 27

Indian student: "The Ukrainian military and police are sending these [international] students back."

The way the students are being sent back is, by firing in the air, beating with batons.

Another method is to ram cars and vans into groups of students."

Show this thread

I can confirm the accuracy of Ukrainian ambassador's statement.

05:15

0:27 / 210.7K views

**Tanuj** @... · Feb 26

Ukrainian amb at UNSC to India: "It is exactly the safety of your nationals, why you should have voted Yes to end the war."

Confirms that the Maidan regime is using Indians as 'hostages.' They are turning away planes sent from India, and are shelling border posts used by buses.

Show this thread

11:03 AM · Feb 26, 2022 · Twitter Web App

541 Retweets 307 Quote Tweets 1,590 Likes



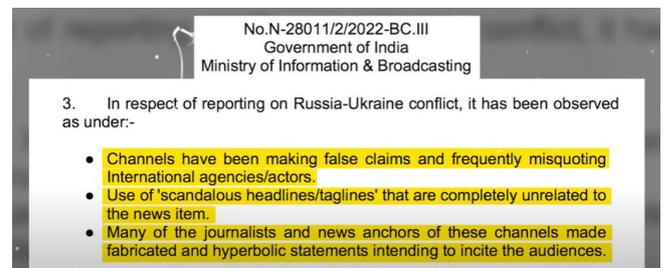
television news networks. This notion was further cemented by the Ukrainian Ambassador's remarks at the UNSC which was intuitively, if not conveniently, interpreted to support the increasingly polarized discourse on the topic of "growing insecurity of Indian Students" in Indian television news. These persuasive media tactics combined with the nationalistic framing of "Operation Ganga," directed the entire public discourse towards a discussion of security threats to Indian nationals allegedly posed by Ukraine for not voting in its favour at the UNSC, and painted a convincing picture of the Indian government trying its best to rescue its citizens. However, Ukraine denied these accusations and the Indian government also later dismissed such reports.

In one of India's leading Hindi TV news channels, TV9 Bharatvarsh, headlines like "Ukraine will be destroyed in 72 hours," "Biden Surprised, Final Fight," "Atomic Bomb will bring End, Target Done," "May, the month of destruction," etc. were put like the 'ticket on the meat' and its TV anchors asking the US to not poke "The Bear" (Russia) or else there would be nuclear annihilation. They emphasized a lot on Putin's warning to the West and how they should tread those lines with caution. They placed a lot of emphasis on Putin's warning to the west and the need for prudence in those areas. They talked extensively about the Eurasian bear, which stands for Russian honour and pride, and even reported on dolphins trained by the Russian military to help them in maritime conflicts. The Indian TV media, in a sense, supported Putin's 'nationalism' and Russia's right to defend its sovereignty as justifications for Mos-

cow's invasion unlike the Western media which was reporting on Putin's invasion as an unjust strategy to fulfil his own territorial ambitions.

The blunt coverage of the Russia-Ukraine crisis has revealed the intent of mainstream Indian television news media to sensationalize the war, which has resulted in the spread of fake news and misinformation. Most of the top networks utilized phrases like "World War III," "Mahayudh" (The Great War), "War Room," "Immersive Coverage," and "World War," in their reportage and prime-time shows to dramatize the entire conflict and render the audience with a sense of impending doom in which India has no part. These shows, which usually feature invited "specialists," are akin to kangaroo courts, where the powerful journalist functioning as the moderator also functions as the judge and the executioner. Due to instances as such,

the Information & Broadcasting Ministry was forced to issue a strict warning to private satellite TV networks asking them to stop spreading false statements regarding the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Anurag Singh Thakur, the Union Information and Broadcasting Minister, had to caution these networks against using sensational headlines and violent footage that may stir up intergroup animosity. The Ministry instructed TV networks to follow Section 20 of The Cable Television Networks (Regulation) Act, as well as the Programme Code established thereunder, and carry out their obligations properly.



Even though the Indian media would promote the notion that India is not out-rightly taking sides in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, however, it also made sure to communicate that India would not be an exception and go by the fact that it already has military agreements with Moscow, and it is being talked about the prospect of India being a part of the New Global Order. These statements can be taken as, either just rhetoric or a reflection of their real intention, which is no longer a mystery. However, the issue is not whether India has, or should, or should not, take a military, economic, or strategic stance towards Russia but how does it develop a consistent one-sided approach of 'not taking sides' by being cautious yet taking an aggressive stance by promoting India's 'exceptionalism'.



And in this regard, the Indian media has played a key role in promoting India as a 'non-interfering' nation state which stands for peace and prosperity in Asia and the rest of the world.

## Conclusion

The media's coverage of the conflict has evolved into a divisive topic based on how many non-western nations' media outlets covered the invasion of Ukraine. While it is in the best interest of the western media to find it a bit simplistic to blame Moscow's intervention in Ukraine on the 'fear' or 'aggression' of the West and highlight the Kremlin's determination to grab a strategically important corner of the continent for itself; the Indian media, however, Indian media had its own nationalistic interests to defend. As the war in Ukraine continues and possibly escalates into a wider conflict between Russia and the west, countries sitting on the fence will face increasing pressure to choose sides, which could result in some interesting geopolitical shifts. Hence, India's predicament is a sign of a larger geopolitical phenomena, and the Indian media, just like any other agenda-setting entity involved in this complex and evolving war situation, used language as a powerful tool to further its own goals. In a high-context culture like India, the sensational treatment of an ongoing war discourse can lead to the impression that things are escalating too quickly, or it is too late to do anything about it, making it difficult for the public to seriously engage with the context of a full-blown war, let alone its domino effect, leading to non-responsiveness and collective inertia. Besides, India's concerns about relying on a more unpredictable U.S. could be a possibility and a credible explanation, albeit a remote one, for its abstention on the matter. Hence, the Indian media's coverage of Russia Ukraine war was more about negotiating India's foreign policy stance on Russia than actual reporting on the Ukraine situation. Since the entire world is getting aligned one way or another, it is important for India to understand where it stands, for the situation is very challenging, and TV news channels left no stones unturned to make their audience aware of the fact that this is actually the start of new world order. Thus, it can be concluded that the mainstream Indian television media used the sentiment of nationalism as a socio-economic background to frame the Russia-Ukraine war discourse to support India's non-alignment foreign policy and subsequent decisions that received criticism from the West.

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