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# Media, politics, and the Asianisation of a polarised immigration debate in New Zealand

Debashish Munshi

## ABSTRACT

*The immigration issue in New Zealand was presented by the country's media in the election year of 1996 as a debate on the pros and cons of Asian immigration. In a country where immigration legislation has had a history of institutionalised racism, and where politicians have periodically raised the issue for electoral gain, such racial labelling of the issue can be seen to lay the ground for social and political tension. Using the principles of discourse analysis charted by Fairclough (1995), this paper analyses the text and the context of print media reports on the immigration issue.*

## INTRODUCTION

Immigration was a subject of public debate in New Zealand in 1996 but, curiously, the major newspapers in the country ended up discussing it as an Asian immigration issue. Throughout the year, there was a wide range of stories about the pros and cons of Asian immigration. Media commentators extensively pursued the Asian theme, speaking out for or against Asian immigrants. Some felt that immigrants from Asia were having a 'free ride' in New Zealand (Roger, 1996, p. 6), while those at the other end of the scale argued that fewer Asian migrants would 'hurt the country's economy' (Riordan, 1996, p. D1). Why was everyone talking about Asians when large numbers of immigrants were coming in from Britain, other parts of Europe, and South Africa as well? According to Heeringa (1996), the largest number of 77,563 long-term arrivals in New Zealand between 1993 and 1995 were either returning

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New Zealanders (23,273), or people from the United Kingdom (14,382) and Australia (12,894). Residency approval figures for 1996, the year under review, revealed that there were almost as many immigrants from Britain (5,371) as there were from Taiwan (5,634), the two biggest source countries in the year ('Residence Approvals Drop', 1997). A monthly break-up of the figures, in fact, shows that towards the end of the year, Britain had assumed its traditional position as the biggest contributor of immigrants to New Zealand with 513 residency approvals in September and 389 in October, ahead of China with 433 and 383 approvals, respectively ('Fewer Given Residence', 1996; 'Residence Approvals', 1996).

In reporting on what became a contentious issue in 1996, the media appeared to function more like 'fun house mirrors' (Gitlin, 1980, p. 109), at once constricting and expanding, shortening and lengthening the picture of the immigration statistics in the country. The hands that held these 'fun house mirrors' were often political leaders who made a lopsided use of the statistics to either hit out at the arrival of hordes of immigrants from Asia or praise the contribution of Asians towards a healthy New Zealand economy. In all the discussion on Asian immigration, positive or negative, arising at least partly out of the reproduction of the views of politicians, a sense of scale was absent. Few observed that the social, economic, or political impact of the number of people coming in from different countries in Asia was far from momentous. In fact, as scholars such as Bedford and Pool (1996) have pointed out, the net gain of people in 1995 from Australia, Europe, North America, and South Africa was larger than that from the principal Asian countries (p. 16). Besides, although the gain of Asians was the same as the net loss of New Zealand citizens that year, there wasn't as much discussion on the "'exodus" of New Zealanders' (Bedford & Pool, 1996, p. 16). The Asian angle of the media coverage of the immigration issue had much to do with the clubbing together of immigrants from diverse countries in Asia as one large homogeneous body that was different from the easily understood definition of a New Zealander. Counted together, immigrants from Asia did form a large group of new residents in 1995. But why were Asians grouped together when Europeans were not? After all, an Asian from Afghanistan had as little in common with an Asian from Korea as a European from Ireland had with a European from Bosnia. The use of a collective label like 'Asian' for individuals and families from scores of different countries 'obscures more than it reveals' because it 'fosters a belief in an illusory homogeneity and separateness' (McKin-

non, 1996, p. 56). Asia, in fact, 'represents a far greater diversity based on race, religion, culture, language and ways and values of life than Europe' (Vasil & Yoon, 1996, p. 5).

The emphasis on the Asian component of the immigration issue derailed what could have been a healthy discussion on the country's demography. Instead, this emphasis injected a lethal dose of race into the debate and polarised the country, not only on whether immigration (read Asian immigration) was good for the country, but also on whether it was useful for New Zealand to have links with Asia at all! To adapt a phrase of the well-known media researcher, W. L. Bennett (1996, p. xv) to the local context, 'the deluge of simplistic but politically expedient' positive-negative reports on Asian immigration in New Zealand actually jeopardised chances of a more searching discussion on the issue of immigration in general.

## **RESEARCH DESIGN**

As qualitative research is essentially a social process (Altheide, 1996, p. 4), any search for answers to sociopolitical questions about the impact of the print media on the public or vice versa needs to go beyond spools of microfilm and stacks of newspapers in the archives. Such a search must have an elucidatory social context as well. If media reports form the textual dimension for qualitative research, the socio-cultural issues that define these reports provide the context within which the text can be examined (van Dijk, 1988). In the mediatised immigration debate in New Zealand, 'the macrodimensions of social structure, history, or culture are enacted or translated at the microlevel of news discourse and its processing' (van Dijk, 1988, p. 182). News reports on immigration have to be seen in the context of the sociocultural, as well as historical, background of New Zealand, a country where immigration legislation has been marked by institutionalised racism (Chen, 1993; O'Connor, 1968), and where politicians have periodically raised the issue for electoral gain.

This paper, part of a larger project that seeks to study the textual and contextual elements of the media discourse on the immigration issue in New Zealand, follows the map of discourse analysis charted by Fairclough (1995). This line of analysis can be understood as an attempt to show 'systematic links between texts, discourse practices, and sociocultural practices' (p. 16). It not only examines texts, but also studies discourse practices or the manner in which texts are produced by journalists in the context of the sociocultural dimensions of the issue being discussed.

The textual dimension of this analysis is charted through an examination of the content of about 250 news reports on the immigration issue published in three major newspapers in New Zealand in 1996. Although any study of the media should ideally include an analysis of both print and audiovisual media, I scrutinised only a select sample of the print media for this paper because newspapers are important indicators of media trends. The three newspapers chosen for the study were (1) *The New Zealand Herald*, a morning daily published from Auckland, the city on which the immigration debate was primarily focussed in 1996, and the newspaper with the largest circulation in New Zealand (226,702 copies, according to the Summary of Audited Circulations, 1996); (2) *The Dominion* (66,767 copies), the largest newspaper published from Wellington, the capital of the country; and (3) the *Sunday Star Times* (191,945 copies), a weekly newspaper with a country-wide reach.

I manually searched the newspaper files in the University of Waikato library to identify reports on the immigration issue published in the three newspapers, read all the reports on the subject, examined the ways in which the immigration issue was covered by the newspapers, and slotted patterns of the coverage into frames and themes. In reading the reports, I searched for answers to questions on whether immigration was treated as a general demographic issue, or as an ethnic issue, and whether the coverage was influenced by politicians. I also tried to place the reports in the larger context of the sociocultural history of New Zealand to analyse them from the discourse analysis perspective of Fairclough (1995). What follows is, firstly, a textual analysis of the media reports on the immigration issue in New Zealand in 1996 and, secondly, an exploration of the sociocultural context in which these texts were formulated.

### **THE TEXT (1): MEDIA AND POLITICS**

Being the vehicles of much of today's political discourse, the media have a close relationship with politics. So conscious are politicians of this relationship, that speeches delivered by them in public meetings are very often tailored for the media in the hope of their being picked up for mass circulation among readers (Fairclough, 1995, p. 183). This trend, so aptly called 'mediatised politics' (pp. 184–200), was in evidence in 1996 in New Zealand, where politicians made effective use of the media to propagate their political ideologies on the immigration issue to the public. These kinds of ideological positions not only cloud a debate but, as Diesing (1982) says, 'produce distorted communication, allowing some concepts to be communicated but blocking and distorting others' (p. 5). Given the reach of the media and its ability to set the agenda for

political issues (Rogers & Dearing, 1988), the spread of distorted and simplistically polarised discourses often emotionally stirs the reading public, leading to the drowning out of substantive parts of an issue under a deluge of personal prejudices.

A major feature of mediatised politics is the appropriation of public discourses on contemporary issues by politicians as well as media reporters (Fairclough, 1995). In February 1996, the leader of the New Zealand First Party, Winston Peters, catapulted the immigration issue onto the front pages of New Zealand's leading dailies. After he made a speech at Howick, an Auckland suburb, about the need to cut immigration 'to the bone' (Young, February 14, 1996, p. 5), the immigration issue started getting a lot of attention in the print media in the days, weeks, and months to follow. Just a day after carrying the report of Peters's Howick speech, *The New Zealand Herald* elevated the politician's remarks on the issue to the status of an eight-column banner lead on the front page ('Peters: NZ Scared', 1996). Other newspapers, as well as the audiovisual media, were quick to pick up the cue, and soon the immigration issue became a major talking point in the country.

Peters's popularity ratings soared almost immediately thereafter. A TV 3-CM Research poll projected him as the 'preferred prime minister' of the poll respondents, at least seven percentage points ahead of the incumbent prime minister ('Immigration Issue', 1996). The rising Peters graph could easily be based on two factors. For one, the issue raised by him appealed to many New Zealanders, who saw in the politician's promise of immigration cutbacks, as Hargreaves (1995) describes in the French context, a vision of 'somehow ridding the country of all the problems linked in the public mind with people of immigrant origin' (p. 1). The second, and by no means less important, factor relates to the wide coverage given to Peters's views by the media. If Peters's Howick speech, addressed to a handful of party faithful, had gone unreported, the issue might never have reared its head in the way it did. But it was a speech the media could not possibly ignore. From the media's point of view, 'news consists of events which can be recognised and interpreted as drama; and for the most part, news is what is made by individuals who are certifiably newsworthy' (Gitlin, 1980, p. 147). Apart from the fact that Peters had been certified as newsworthy, his stormy relationship with the media notwithstanding, his speech and choice of venue had all the ingredients of drama, particularly when he put his finger on the fears and insecurities of at least a part of the population. For a reporter covering the speech, the concern expressed by Peters about 'a group of Vietnamese refugees stealing gold jewellery around the country' or about wealthy immigrants 'milking New Zealand's

resources' was news (Young, February 14, 1996, p. 5). It didn't seem to matter if there was any basis for Peters's concerns. After all, a stray incident of crime linked to a group of refugees could not be attributed to all immigrants, Asian or otherwise. Besides, wasn't the categorisation of all new immigrants as 'wealthy' misplaced, given that, even at its peak in 1995, the business investor category attracted only 1,858 migrants out of a total of 56,260 ('Big Money', 1996)?

Once the newsworthiness of Peters's anti-immigration speeches was established, the New Zealand First leader's mediatised politics was in full play. Journalists made it a point to be around whenever Peters spoke. Even if he repeated his comments about new immigrants, it still made news: 'Peters Rejects Racist Tag, Resumes Attack' (Ferguson, 1996, p. 3). This mediatised political discourse laid the ground for the building-up of stereotypes. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many Asian businesspersons left their families in New Zealand while continuing to work overseas, although the immigration rules made it clear that no one in the general or business categories would be eligible for a returning resident's visa unless the principal applicant spent at least 183 days in the country every year.

As far as Peters was concerned, if the immigration debate was given an ethnic colour, it was 'the media's fault' (W. Peters, personal communication, September 17, 1996), and he maintained that in his speeches on controlling immigration he had never mentioned Asians. Peters may not have used the term 'Asians' in his speeches, but he did start his 1996 political campaign with an anti-immigrant speech at Howick which, as the media were quick to point out, was 'the heart of Auckland's Asian community' (Young, February 14, 1996, p. 5). Soon after, the immigration issue came to revolve around people from a certain geographical region. So who influenced the nationwide discussion on the subject? Political leaders or the media? There is enough evidence to suggest that it was partially constructed by both.

## **THE TEXT (2): WAR OF WORDS**

With Peters's anti-immigration campaign giving his popularity ratings a boost, the ruling National Party jumped into the fray with a counter campaign. Then Prime Minister Bolger described Peters's speeches as 'grubby and despicable gutter politics' ('PM Attacks Peters', 1996, p. 2) and went on to defend his government's immigration policy. That this counter campaign, too, was lapped up by the media is illustrated by stories such as: 'PM Attacks Peters' Immigrant Talk as Grubby and Despicable' (1996, p. 2) and 'PM Defends His Immigration Policy' (Young, March 14, 1996, p. 5). The setting was perfect for a grand debate on

immigration. The subject of the debate, however, was not so much the pros and cons of immigration but whether Asian settlers were strengthening the economy of the country with their 'skills and enterprise' or were mere 'parasites' eating off a country not their own (Munshi, 1996, p. 38). Those on the side of the Asian immigrants swore by their competence and the essence of their work ethic. Those against accused them of bringing social and cultural instability to the country, some even going to the extent of blaming them for the spread of disease and rising road accidents. The tenor of the debate was clearly divisive, as those who called for a reduction in the numbers of immigrants were accused of being racist while those who supported immigration were said to be selling out the country (Victoria, 1996).

If Peters and his supporters claimed that the government's immigration policy had left floodgates open for immigrants to steal the jobs of New Zealanders, Bolger and his cabinet colleagues praised the positive contribution made by immigrants to the economic growth of the country and said that New Zealand needed to develop economic ties with Asian countries. The media faithfully provided the forum for the spread of the two mutually antagonistic political discourses, which ended up polarising the country on an emotive social issue. As far as the media were concerned, it was not just a debate; it was warfare: 'Peters Takes Immigration War into PM's Territory' (Gregory, 1996, p. 5); 'Bolger Swoops in on Peters' Campaign' (Young, March 22, 1996, p. 3); and 'PM Makes Furious Attack on Peters' (Bain, 1996, March 22, p. 3). The media woke up to the hollowness of these theatrical political discourses later in the year when the political protagonists who presented the two faces of the immigration debate teamed up to form a coalition government (Armstrong, 1996) and, in the process, deftly put the immigration issue aside. By the end of the year, the issue had almost completely died down. Media reports on immigration were down to an odd, inconspicuous paragraph or two on the drastic fall in the number of residency approvals and the restoration of Britain to its traditional position as the principal source of immigrants to New Zealand ('Fewer Given Residence', 1996; 'Residence Approvals', 1996).

## **THE CONTEXT (1): RACISM AND THE MEDIA**

The damage, however, had already been done. The immigration debate had allowed latent racists to come out in the open. According to the Race Relations Conciliator, Dr Rajen Prasad ('Conciliator Sees', 1996), 'reports of letter boxes being attacked, children being accosted and recent arrivals being harassed had risen with the debate on immigration' (p. 2). So worried was he about the 'increasing number of strident racist comments in the news media and attacks on members of

ethnic minority groups' (Prasad, 1996) in the wake of the immigration debate, that he launched an advertising campaign aimed at challenging attitudes towards racism. The advertising campaign itself, which depicted three normal-sized brains labelled 'Maori', 'Pakeha', and 'Asian' and a much smaller brain labelled 'Racist', evoked highly polarised reactions. While the Federation of Ethnic Councils welcomed the campaign as an 'education', anti-immigration groups such as the Government Accountability League and also political leaders such as Peters described it as a 'waste of money' ('Conciliator Says', 1996, p. 2).

The polarisation of the immigration debate continued to skirt the substantive issues of immigration per se. Instead it dragged on as a war of words between those who were for and against Asian immigrants, aided considerably by the formation of stereotypes in public as well as private spheres. Stereotyping, a practice born out of the categorisation process, has a lot to do with cognitive biases in groups of people (Brown, 1995, p. 116). These biases, propped up by media images that categorise all members of a social or ethnic group by an attribute that can be traced to some members of the group, have the potential of developing into deep-rooted prejudices. Scholars such as Cohen (1980) and van Dijk (1987) have shown how the formation of prejudices about new immigrants, particularly ones who are racially different from the dominant majority community, are associated with media images that talk of immigrants 'flooding' or 'invading' the host country [even a balanced news feature on the immigration debate in an issue of *The Dominion* carried the headline 'Opening the floodgates' (Bain, March 15, 1996, p. 11)].

The attention was focussed on Asian immigrants primarily because the mediatised political campaign of Peters had scratched 'a traditional anti-immigrant itch' in the country (Heeringa, 1996, p. 57), an itch left behind by racial wounds of old. Immigration legislation in New Zealand has had a history of institutionalised racism (Chen, 1993; O'Connor, 1968), and it was not until 1964 that racially based laws were repealed in the country. Prominent politicians of yesteryear, such as Sir George Grey, Sir Robert Stout, Richard Seddon, and William Pember Reeves, were responsible for pushing through legislation aimed at restricting immigrants who were not of European, or, more specifically, British stock (Brooking & Rabel, 1995). Even after racially discriminatory laws were done away with in New Zealand under the Immigration Amendment Act of 1964, politicians continued to sow seeds of disharmony among the people, playing on the racial prejudices still existing in society. The desire of politicians to use the immigration card to win votes has not diminished to this day, no matter what the social consequences. If

Pacific Islanders were the target in 1975, Asians were, in 1996, the subject of the Great Immigration Debate, engineered by politicians with considerable support from the news media.

The issue of immigration, seen clinically, relates to the social dimensions of the movement of a large number of people from one geographical location to another. But it has become entwined with the issues of race and ethnicity in many parts of the world, primarily because of the overtly, as well as covertly, racist immigration policies of governments in nations shaped by immigrants at various times in history, and the consequent socialisation processes of groups of people living in such societies. Immigration as an issue today has much less to do with the study of demography and the movement of people from one part of the world to another than it has to do with race, ethnicity, and politics. The 'racialisation' of the immigration issue (Gabriel, 1995, pp. 570–572) is evident in a number of ways: in how Proposition 187 (seeking to bar illegal immigrants and their children, who are, for the most part, U.S. citizens, from receiving welfare, education, or health benefits) was pushed through in the American state of California in 1994; in the fervour with which the French police broke into the church of St Bernard de la Chapelle in Paris in 1996 to round up immigrants from former French colonies in Africa (whose status became illegal because of changes to French immigration law long after their arrival); and in the rhetoric of Australian politician Pauline Hanson, who recently chose to prop up her anti-immigration speeches by hitting out at ethnic minorities such as Asians and Aborigines. These developments have a long prehistory since the 'restriction and exclusion of Asian migrants were the cornerstones of Australian, New Zealand, Canadian, and American immigration policies' for much of the 20th century (Brawley, 1995, p. 327). It is not surprising, therefore, that studies on media and immigration, in the countries named above as well as in Britain and much of the Western world, have been part of larger studies on media and the issues of race and ethnicity.

Hartmann and Husband (1974) dwell at length on the media coverage of issues relating to coloured immigrants in Britain. While the media do keep the people informed about the discrimination suffered by coloured immigrants, they also spread among the people the perception of coloured population as a problem (Hartmann & Husband, 1974). This perception is 'more conducive to the development of hostility towards them' (Hartmann & Husband, 1974, p. 112). In a comprehensive study on racism and mass communication, van Dijk (1987) argues that the media, more often than not, echo the attitudes of dominant elite groups such as politicians, professionals, and civil servants in

presenting formulations about immigrants being a burden on the socioeconomic resources of the host country, leading to stereotypical negative images of immigrants. The 'media-induced prejudices' may be sustained by inferences drawn by readers from their own observations of 'foreigners who do get a house, a job, welfare, or other forms of "favorable" treatment' (van Dijk, 1987, p. 365).

Some scholars (e.g., Betts, 1988; Birrell & Birrell, 1981) have provided a counterpoint to researchers codifying the negative attitude of the media towards immigrants by arguing that the mass media (in the context of Australia) have promoted the immigration 'growth lobby' by concealing or distorting the effects of rapid demographic changes caused by immigration. Betts (1988), in fact, makes an appeal for the delinking of racial issues from a discussion on immigration, but, in doing so, also acknowledges how entwined the subjects of race and immigration are.

## **THE CONTEXT (2): MEDIA, IMMIGRATION, AND NEW ZEALAND**

In *Racism and Ethnicity* (1988), Spoonley finds in the New Zealand media a case of institutionalised racism. Focussing, among other issues, on the common media practice of using labels and codes to describe specific groups of people in specific contexts, he confirms that newspapers in this country do establish stereotyped images. Spoonley's findings can easily be extended to include the media's approach towards issues relating to immigration and immigrants, particularly those from non-European countries. For example, it is a common practice for newspapers to tag some groups of migrants by their places of origin, such as Asia or the Pacific Islands, reinforcing stereotyped images of these groups. Kernot (1990) provides examples from news reports in the New Zealand media that resort to 'irrelevant race-tagging in crime reporting' that was selective in 'targeting minorities' and accentuating 'their negative aspects' (pp. 53–55). Although New Zealand is essentially an immigrant nation, a large part of contemporary discussion on immigration in this country has almost always revolved around immigrants of non-Caucasian stock.

One of the principal frames to emerge from the media texts under study is the Asianisation of the immigration issue. Around half of all the reports on the general subject of immigration (including reports on refugees and migration in a wider context) published in the newspapers under review in 1996 have a direct or indirect reference to Asians. Of the 144 reports in *The New Zealand Herald* in 1996, at least 71 are connected to the Asian immigration issue in some form or the other; 12 of them even have the word 'Asian' in the headline. At least 50 of the

96 reports on the subject published in *The Dominion* refer to the Asian immigration issue; seven of which carry headlines with the word 'Asian' in them. Eight of the 13 reports on immigration in the *Sunday Star Times* have references to the Asian immigration issue; five of their headlines include the word 'Asian'.

Back in 1983, a major empirical study in the exclusive area of media and immigration in Australia found that 'the frequency of references to Asians in the press was out of all proportion to their actual presence in Australia' (White & White, 1983, p. 47). Media reporting on the immigration issue in present-day New Zealand is evidently not much different. The emphasis on the 'Asian angle' of the immigration issue by the media does seem more than a little lopsided in a country where the population of no ethnic group of Asian origin is more than 1.33 per cent of the total national population. Among the Asian ethnic groups resident in New Zealand are the Chinese (1.33 per cent), Indians (0.91 per cent), Filipinos (0.14 per cent), Cambodians (0.13 per cent), Japanese (0.09 per cent), Sri Lankans (0.08 per cent), and Vietnamese (0.08 per cent) (Thomson, 1993). According to Bedford and Pool (1996), the reason for the prominence of Asian migration figures in the debate on immigration in New Zealand 'seems to lie in an inability of New Zealanders to cope with large numbers of immigrants of colour' (p. 16). The indiscriminate use of statistics without any exploration into the complexities of immigration has, as Pool et al. (1996) have pointed out, fanned a debate that has generated 'more heat than light' (p. 2).

The categorisation of Asian immigration as a phenomenon distinct from immigration in general in media texts has a parallel in academic writing as well. A recent scholarly collection of essays on immigration and national identity in New Zealand highlights issues relating to Asian immigrants, Chinese and South Asians in particular (Greif, 1995). Although its theme is the larger issue of immigration, the volume pays most attention to 'controversial Asian groups, whose numbers are starting to make more than a dent on the self-declared perception of what is a Kiwi' (p. 10).

That the arrivals from Asia have given rise to antagonistic points of view on new immigration can also be seen in the range of literature on the subject in New Zealand in the last few years. If one school of thought believes that the new Asian migrants are 'valuable assets' to the country's economy (Ip, 1995, p. 199), another is convinced that the government has been naive 'to open up the country to the rest of the world at a time when the nations of Europe are trying to insulate their borders against outsiders' (Walker, 1996, p. 202). These antagonistic

points of view have been parts of a keen tussle between multiculturalism and biculturalism, both of which have emerged as competing frameworks of discourse and practice in New Zealand (Pearson & Ongley, 1996).

## CONCLUSION

The appropriation of public discourses on contemporary issues by both politicians and media reporters is, as Fairclough (1995) points out, a key element of mediatised politics. Immigration has always been a 'controversial' subject in New Zealand (Greif, 1995, p. 8), and it is precisely the controversial nature of this issue that makes it attractive not only for political leaders to comment upon but also for the media to report on. But by reporting the issue in black and white terms, they invariably end up reinforcing stereotyped images of various immigrant groups and, consequently, consolidating already entrenched views among the people either in favour of or against immigration. The media-propelled Asianisation of the immigration issue in 1996 reduced a debate on whether growing immigration leads to higher unemployment and strains the country's health, education, and transport infrastructure, or whether it stimulates local economies, creates more jobs, and raises returns to domestic production factors, to a simplistic debate on whether Asian migrants are good for the country or not. But the media texts need to be seen in the context of the sociocultural factors of the environment in which such texts are written. The polarisation and the Asianisation of the immigration debate in the media have constructed a mediatised political discourse that seeks sustenance, as Fairclough (1995) suggests, not only from political discourses but also from ordinary lifeworld discourses.

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