

India's Lunar Mission Chandrayaan-3: Media and Perception

Dr. Junali Deka¹

¹Assistant Professor, Department of Mass Communication and Journalism, Tezpur University, Assam, India,

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ABSTRACT

India accomplished a glorious stride by launching the lunar mission Chandrayaan-3 and subsequently landing it on the south pole of Moon on August 23, 2023 for the first time in the history of space exploration garnering immense global appreciation and admiration for India's incredible scientific vision, ability and progress in space science and technology. While every citizen of our country is a part of this pride and prestige, it is very important to know the perception of young minds on ISRO's Chandrayaan-3 mission. The present article therefore attempted to understand the reach and popularity of Chandrayaan-3 among the school students of class 1317-1322th standard in North East India. While doing so, the role of media in promoting the Chandrayaan-3 mission and space science literacy is also examined. With the help of a semi-structured questionnaire, online survey was conducted among the selected high schools located in the North East region. As part of the study, a content analysis of a popular daily English newspaper of the North East region 'The Assam Tribune' published during July-August 2023 was carried out to find out the amount and kind of news coverage on Chandrayaan-3.

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1. Introduction

In early sixties, the Father of the Indian space program 'Dr. Vikram Sarabhai' eloquently summarized the importance and dire need of a space program in India by saying "There are some who question the relevance of space activities in a developing nation. To us, there is no ambiguity of purpose. We do not have the fantasy of competing with the economically advanced nations in the exploration of the moon or the planets or manned space-flight. But we are convinced that if we are to play a meaningful role nationally, and in the community of nations, we must be second to none in the application of advanced

technologies to the real problems of man and society." The meteoric and historic rise in the numerous space activities diligently and unrelentingly chased by Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO) since its inception is the finest testimony of it. The diverse and challenging space activities undertaken by ISRO and other organizations in India (in collaboration with ISRO) have left indelible footprints in accelerating the economic growth of the country and overall nation building. For example, the Indian National Satellite System (INSAT) is in the service of nation by providing telecommunications, broadcasting to the remotest part of the country as far as possible and takes part in the critical search and rescue missions. The Indian Remote Sensing Satellite

Systems (IRS) provides timely inputs for monitoring and forecasting of weather and natural disasters, management of natural resources and agriculture etc. Similarly, the Educational Satellite (EDUSAT) program demonstrates the unique capability of supporting distance education through tele-education for the development of effective human resources. Another important addition of ISRO is AstroSat which is a dedicated Space Astronomy Observatory for undertaking advanced level research activities of celestial objects.

Recently, ISRO accomplished an extraordinary landmark in the field of space science by successfully launching indigenously developed lunar mission Chandrayaan-3 on July 14, 2023 and its subsequent soft landing on the south pole of the Moon on August 23, 2023. It garnered unprecedented appreciations at both national and international level and was termed as a remarkable historic event since this made India as the first nation to successfully land a spacecraft on the lunar South Pole. Chandrayaan-3 is a follow-up lunar exploration programme of Chandrayaan-2 and Chandrayaan-1 with one of the specific scientific objectives of studying the moon by conducting in-situ scientific experiments. This particular event was able to attract the attention of the masses and the pivotal role played by the various forms of media in disseminating the information is quintessential. The most important point here is to understand the perception of our country's young minds about this kind of space activity. Inspiring our youths for space education, shaping their minds for space innovation and subsequently harnessing their talent for space missions may further propel the growth of our country's space science and technology. Therefore, the present article attempts to understand the overall perception of Chandrayaan-3 mission among the young school children. The study was accomplished by collecting responses from the school children which reflected their experiences from the entire process.

While the paramount role played by media in establishing the social and cultural identity of young people cannot be ignored, it is also established that the proliferation of scientific issues among masses is dependent on both mass and digital media (Buckingham, 2008, Brossard, 2013). It is also noted that an indirect measure of scientific literacy in the society depends on the citizen's ability to read, understand and apply the scientific knowledge and updates communicated by various forms of media (DeBoer, 2000; Jarman & McClune, 2010; Norris, Phillips & Korpan, 2003). The quantitative study conducted by Ummer and Rajgoli (2021) on print media coverage of ISRO reflected the role of the media in creation of public interest on space mission. This article also aims to examine the importance of media in informing and educating school students on Chandrayaan-3. The objectives of the study are: (i) To find out the awareness on Chandrayaan-3 mission among school students, (ii) To understand the reach of media in spreading the information related to Chandrayaan-3 among the school students and (iii) A study on the news items on Chandrayaan-3 published in a popular regional print media.

2. Methodology

The study is based on a questionnaire survey method conducted among the school students belonging to the class of 1317-1322th standard. The questionnaire is comprised of multiple choice and open-ended questions. The questionnaire was in the form of a Google form and it was circulated to the schools primarily located in the North-East India. In order to locate the respondents, purposive and snowball sampling were employed to conduct the online survey. The reason for choosing North East region is the diverse demography located in the remote part of the country and a measure of the impact of Chandrayaan-3 on them bears immense significance. The survey was carried out from September 15, 2023 to October 15, 2023. In the online survey, a total of 296 responses were received from school students of the North Eastern states namely-Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur, Tripura and Nagaland.

Verbal informed consent was obtained from the participants.

For the content analysis of news coverage on Chandrayaan-3 published during July-August 2023, the prominent regional English newspaper '*The Assam Tribune*' was considered. The justification for selecting '*The Assam Tribune*' is that it is the most popular English daily newspaper of the North East region. A total of 62 issues of *The Assam Tribune* (without supplements) were collected and studied with the help of content analysis. The news articles on Chandrayaan-3 were categorized into two sections namely: (i) pre-launch, launch and post-launch news coverage of Chandrayaan-3 and (ii) ISRO and its future space activities. With reference to the theoretical framework, uses and gratification theory by Jay G. Blumler and Elihu Katz (1974), the study tried to look into the media usage pattern by school children to access information on Chandrayaan-3.

3. Results and Discussion

Regarding the student's familiarity with ISRO, it is found that fairly a large number of students (69.96 %) are familiar with our country's leading space research organisation. This survey finding hints at the immense popularity of ISRO among the young minds of the nation. It is also interesting to know that a large number of students (66.26 %) are also aware of the prominent international space organisation NASA. It shows their keen interest on space related activities at such a tender age. As far the awareness on the Chandrayaan-3 is concerned, a spectacularly large number of respondents (82.72 %) mentioned about their awareness of the historic mission. Only a meagre fraction of students (8.64 %) expressed their ignorance of the mission. It can be interpreted that respondents were exposed and informed of the lunar mission. The role of the media in popularizing this event can't be undermined here and it will be discussed shortly. Though not significant, yet it is worth noting here that some of the students (19.23%) even participated in the online Chandrayaan-3 MahaQuiz organized by

ISRO in collaboration with MyGov. In addition, a fair proportion of respondents (48.25 %) agreed that Chandrayaan-3 has motivated them to consider space science as a career option.

Corroborating the previous findings, the survey data shows that an impressive number of the respondents (72.84%) have watched either the live telecast or highlights of the soft landing of Chandrayaan-3 on the moon. ISRO facilitated the live telecast programme on 23rd August 2023 in order to make the masses witness the historic moment. In a special effort, the central and various state governments directed the schools and higher education institutions to live stream the landing of Chandrayaan-3 for the benefit and encouragement of young minds. It was revealed from the survey that YouTube was the most preferred audio-visual platform to watch the live telecast of Chandrayaan-3 on August 23, 2023. It was followed up by news channels, others, Facebook and web portals. More than 50 % respondents utilized the service of YouTube for this viewing purpose. It is to be noted here that ISRO has its own official YouTube channel and the event was also live streamed over there. Interestingly, the soft landing event of Chandrayaan-3 also became the most viewed live stream on YouTube in the world. Hence, it could be inferred that the digital media, in particular the social media platforms, is more popular among the youngsters and a convenient way to connect with them. It is interesting to know that that most of students were keen in gathering information on Chandrayaan-3. The awareness and interest on Chandrayaan-3 were more dominant during the post launch period. While a majority (32.53 %) of them looked for information post launch, a considerable number of respondents (30.48 %) became more active during both the pre and post launch of the event. Interestingly, the data analysis of the media preferences opted by the students to access information on Chandrayaan-3 indicates that YouTube is again the most used media, followed by other media such as TV, Google, Newspaper, Facebook, Twitter, Radio and Magazines to collect information on Chandrayaan-3. It could be interpreted that due

to the ease in access and speed, internet-based media like YouTube, Google news are emerging as the more popular choice among the young learners. This important finding also hints at the growth and proliferation of the media technology in the North Eastern region.

In response to the question on the kind of media format most used to follow the happenings of Chandrayaan-3, a vast majority (40 %) of the respondents basically followed news, 22 % accessed online videos and 12 % preferred popular articles. The inference that could be drawn from here is that news being the 24 x 7 platform is one of the most convenient forms of medium for getting the latest developments on space activities. One of the reasons for the popularity of news is that brief snapshots or discussions of breaking news could be very easily searched and consumed over Google and YouTube. Print media is still considered as the most trusted source of media even in the contemporary times of digital era. According to the CVoter Media Consumption Survey 2020, Indian audiences largely voted for the print media and called it to be the most credible source of valued information (*The Hindustan Times*, 2020). Hence, a content analysis of the daily English newspaper '*The Assam Tribune*' published during July-August 2023 was carried out to find out the news coverage on Chandrayaan-3. As per the study, it was found that approximately 40 number of news items were published related to Chandrayaan-3 and ISRO's various space missions. The news items were published in various forms such as hard news, letters to the editors, editorials, interviews, photographs etc. For the analysis, the news items were classified in the following three primary sections.

Section I: For the first section of pre-launch, launch and post-launch news coverage of Chandrayaan-3, the news stories published were identified.

The assessment helped in understanding that maximum news coverage on Chandrayaan-3 was published on August 24, 2023 with a wide range of perspectives from NASA to ISRO, Government to other

stakeholders, politics to entertainment industry etc. It is also noticed that news was published in a sporadic fashion during pre- and post-launch of Chandrayaan-3. The study reveals that the most of the articles were in hard news format and covered mostly in the front page of *The Assam Tribune*. The headlines were very specific and scientifically informative for the readers. The news articles featured the stage-wise development of the moon mission. Apart from the hard news, the issues also carried editorials, interviews and letters to the editors. The news coverage is believed to be creating a balanced scientific knowledge repository and contributing in popularization of Chandrayaan-3 mission and ISRO's effort in sending indigenous and cost-effective spacecrafts to Moon. The following key findings under Section I could be summarized.

1. The news items were clear and comprehensive,
2. Systematic and logical flow of the key timelines, historical background, scientific and technical specifications,
3. Significance of ISRO and its contribution in the promotion of space science activities,
4. India's positioning in the world's space science club,
5. Perspectives from NASA and other European space agencies
6. International media's reaction to Chandrayaan-3

Section II: News coverage on ISRO and its future space activities

In conjugation with the news coverage of Chandrayaan-3, there were additional but related news published on ISRO and its upcoming space activities in the *The Assam Tribune*. It was reported that ISRO has planned for a series of activities over the next few months including launch of GSLV and PSLV as was informed by the ISRO Chairman S. Somanath in a press conference. A news report on the interview of former director of the North East Space Applications Centre, KC Bhattacharya on the topic Chandrayaan-3 was

also published. In another reporting, it was highlighted that August 23 will be celebrated as National Space Day as announced by Indian Prime Minister. There is a coverage on the next big project Aditya L1, the first space based Indian mission to study the Sun, to be launched by September 2, 2023. The involvement of young researchers from North East region in the space activities of ISRO was also reported.

4. Conclusion

It is well reflected from the study that the space science literacy among the young school goers is impressive. The Chandrayaan-3 mission is an added fillip to it. In the process of promotion and popularization of Chandrayaan-3 or other space activities, various platforms of media explicitly played an imminent role. One of the major findings of the study highlighted that digital media is the most preferred platform for gathering information and enhancing knowledge on space science by the school children. It echoes a similar interpretation to a study conducted among American adults that scientific information disseminated via Internet based media helps in bridging the knowledge gaps (Cacciatore, 2012). As was revealed in the study, internet-based media platform YouTube is most used for gaining information on Chandrayaan-3. There may be couple of prominent reasons. First, the content published in traditional media is generally predetermined by a coterie of media personnel. This limitation of preselected content could easily be avoided by using YouTube. The information seekers, irrespective of their ages, have an equal opportunity in accessing the relevant news according to their choices. Second, as far as space exploration news is concerned, eye catching audio-visual descriptions of a space event in a preferred language of the viewers are

always sought after. YouTube provides this unique opportunity to all. A study conducted by Jarman & McClune (2002) hinted at the growing popularity of audio-visual media over the print media among students for collecting science information when they are not in school. Third, YouTube provides a platform where information could be obtained from multiple of authentic sources. In the case of space science, relevant yet at times highly esoteric scientific information can be obtained not only from science journalists but from top notch academician or technocrats who are experts in this area. Having said so, the role of traditional print media in propagating space science activities among masses cannot be ignored. Early studies, when there was no popular internet based visual media, clearly indicated that students' dependency on the print media for accessing scientific information (Gunter et al., 1998). Depending on the content and context, users get motivated to use certain media that helps to gratify their needs in order to gather scientific knowledge, as it was found that that news on Chandrayaan-3 was the most read and viewed by the students. Considering the nature, timeliness and availability of the media content, news remained the prime source of space science information. Therefore, it can be said that the students' uses and gratification pattern of media consumption on science related matters is directly proportional to the available new media technologies. Meanwhile, the study on the news content on Chandrayaan-3 in *The Assam Tribune*, reflected on the importance of print media in creating awareness on space science literacy among the literate population in the region. Hence, it can be summarized here that media discourses can contribute in the promotion of scientific literacy in the North East India.

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6. Author Declaration

The author declares no conflicts of interest related to this study.