



From Policy to Public: An Assessment of the Reach and Public Perception of the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao Scheme

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Abstract

This paper examines how a flagship government welfare initiative is communicated and understood in the contemporary media environment. The primary objective of the study is to assess the reach and public perception of the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP) scheme within the broader context of digital-era journalism. Adopting a purely theoretical and qualitative approach, the study is based on a critical review and synthesis of existing literature, policy documents, and scholarly debates on media representation, public policy communication, and gender-focused campaigns. The analysis engages with key theoretical frameworks related to agenda-setting, framing, and public sphere discourse to interpret how media narratives shape awareness and attitudes toward the scheme. The study argues that while digital journalism enhances visibility, variations in framing and dissemination significantly influence public understanding and perception of the initiative.

Keywords: *Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, public policy communication, agenda-setting, framing theory, digital journalism, gender policy, public perception, media narratives*

Introduction

The relationship between public policy and popular awareness is mediated, in large part, by the apparatus of mass communication. A government scheme, however well-designed or well-funded, can only achieve its social objectives when it successfully penetrates the consciousness of the population it seeks to serve. In this respect, the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP) scheme translating to 'Save the Girl Child, Educate the Girl Child' represents an especially instructive case study in the architecture of policy communication in India.

Launched on January 22, 2015, by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Panipat, Haryana, BBBP was conceived as a tri-ministerial response to one of India's most persistent demographic challenges: the declining Child Sex Ratio (CSR). The 2011 national census had confirmed a troubling trend the CSR had fallen to 918 girls per 1,000 boys from 927 in 2001 and the Sex Ratio at Birth (SRB) was identified as the principal driver of this decline. The scheme was designed to address this through a three-pronged mandate: preventing gender-biased sex-selective elimination, ensuring the survival and protection of the girl child, and promoting her education and participation. It was administered jointly by the Ministry of Women and Child Development (MoWCD), the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW), and the Ministry of Education (MoE).

From the outset, BBBP distinguished itself from earlier gender-welfare initiatives by investing heavily in media-based advocacy. Its nationwide campaigns deployed across television, radio, print, and eventually digital platforms rapidly made the slogan one of the most recognizable in Indian

public life. Yet, as this paper argues, visibility and comprehension are not synonymous. High brand recall does not necessarily translate into informed public understanding, and the patterns of framing through which media represent the scheme significantly shape and in some cases distort public perception.

This paper undertakes a theoretical and qualitative assessment of how BBBP has been communicated and received across the contemporary media environment. Drawing on agenda-setting theory, framing analysis, and Habermasian public sphere discourse, it analyses how digital and traditional journalism have together produced an uneven landscape of awareness: nationally prominent but locally shallow, statistically encouraging but analytically contested.

2. Background and Policy Context

2.1 The Problem: Declining Child Sex Ratio

Gender-biased sex selection has been one of India's most entrenched social pathologies. The cultural preference for sons rooted in patrilineal inheritance practices, dowry norms, and the expectation that sons will provide for ageing parent has, for decades, translated into discriminatory practices ranging from differential nutrition and healthcare to female foeticide enabled by prenatal diagnostic technologies. The introduction of ultrasound technology in the 1980s dramatically accelerated sex-selective abortion, and despite the passage of the Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (PCPNDT) Act in 1994, enforcement remained weak and the CSR continued to fall.

The 2011 census registered an alarming CSR of 918, confirming that the problem was both widespread and deepening. Dissevered data revealed sharp regional variations: while states like Kerala recorded relatively balanced ratios, northern states such as Haryana (834), Punjab (846), and parts of Uttar Pradesh emerged as the most severely affected. It was against this backdrop that BBBP was designed as an urgent policy intervention.

2.2 The Scheme: Design and Objectives

BBBP was conceived around two overarching categories of objectives: quantitative and qualitative. The quantitative objective was to directly arrest the decline in the CSR and improve the SRB. The qualitative objective was to transform social norms to shift the deep-seated cultural devaluation of girls through awareness, community engagement, and institutional change. These dual aims required both a structural component (improving health and education infrastructure for girls) and a communicative one (changing minds).

The scheme was initially targeted at 100 districts with the lowest CSR, selected on the basis of gender-disaggregated census data. It was subsequently expanded to 161 districts in 2015–16 and ultimately extended pan-India in 2018. Administratively, BBBP operates under the MoWCD's Sambal vertical under Mission Shakti, with financial assistance to districts calibrated according to their SRB: ₹40 lakh per year for districts with SRB at or below 918, ₹30 lakh for those between 919–952, and ₹20 lakh for districts above 952.

The scheme's operational manual identifies media and advocacy as one of its

core pillars alongside multi-sectoral health and education interventions. This dual architecture communication-heavy and community-facing would come to define much of the subsequent debate about BBBP's effectiveness.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Agenda-Setting Theory

McCombs and Shaw's (1972) foundational formulation of agenda-setting theory holds that mass media, while not determining what audiences think, powerfully shapes what they think about. By controlling which issues are granted salience and how frequently they appear in the news cycle media actors effectively curate the public's hierarchy of concerns. In the context of BBBP, agenda-setting theory illuminates how the sustained visibility of the scheme's messaging has helped elevate the issue of gender discrimination and the girl child's welfare to a position of national prominence.

However, agenda-setting does not guarantee comprehension. Research consistently shows that high exposure to an issue can coexist with limited substantive understanding of its causes, mechanisms, or policy implications. The fact that BBBP achieved exceptional brand recall Mitali Nikore, an economist and feminist scholar, observed that the slogan's constant repetition reached even the most hard-to-access demographic segments does not, in itself, confirm that recipients understood the scheme's objectives or mechanisms.

Second-level agenda-setting (McCombs et al., 2000), which concerns the attributes of issues that media emphasise rather than simply the issues themselves, is

equally relevant here. How BBBP was presented as a welfare initiative, a cultural reform movement, or a political branding exercise shaped the attitudinal landscape around it. Different media outlets, depending on their political orientation and target audience, emphasised different attributes of the scheme, producing a fragmented rather than unified public understanding.

3.2 Framing Theory

Framing theory, associated with the work of Goffman (1974) and subsequently Entman (1993), holds that the way in which an issue is presented the frame within which it is enclosed significantly influences how audiences interpret and evaluate it. Entman defined framing as the act of selecting aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient in a communicating text in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, or treatment recommendation.

Applied to BBBP, framing analysis reveals significant divergence across media channels and genres. Government-controlled and pro-establishment outlets overwhelmingly adopted an achievement frame: reporting incremental improvements in the SRB as evidence of the scheme's success and celebrating its grassroots community-engagement components. Independent and investigative outlets, by contrast, deployed a governance-accountability frame: foregrounding the Parliamentary Committee's finding that nearly 79% of released funds between 2016 and 2019 were spent on media advocacy rather than direct intervention, and questioning whether improvements in gender metrics could be causally attributed to BBBP

at all, given the presence of multiple concurrent government schemes.

This divergence in framing has direct implications for public perception. Citizens whose media consumption is dominated by pro-establishment sources are likely to hold a more positive and less critical view of BBBP than those exposed to investigative or independent journalism. The framing thus does not merely reflect public opinion it constitutes it.

3.3 Public Sphere Discourse

Habermas's (1989) concept of the public sphere an arena of communicative reason in which private individuals come together as a public to deliberate on matters of common concern provides a normative framework against which to evaluate BBBP's communicative strategy. An ideal public sphere is characterised by inclusive participation, rational-critical discourse, and the subordination of power to the force of the better argument.

BBBP's communication strategy, dominated as it is by one-directional government-to-citizen messaging, partially fulfils the publicity condition of the public sphere: it disseminates information widely and generates public awareness of an important social problem. However, it falls short of the deliberative ideal in several important respects. The scheme's messaging has been predominantly aspirational and sloganistic rather than analytical; it has not consistently engaged with the structural determinants of son preference (such as the absence of social security for ageing parents or the persistence of the dowry system); and it has been largely insulated from feminist critiques that challenge its framing of girls

principally in terms of their instrumentality to families rather than as rights-bearing subjects in their own right.

Digital media, in principle, expands the possibilities for public sphere discourse by enabling horizontal, citizen-to-citizen communication alongside vertical, government-to-citizen transmission. Social media platforms allow for commentary, critique, and contestation of official narratives. In practice, however, as research on digital publics shows, the affordances of social media also enable echo chambers, partisan amplification, and the rapid spread of misinformation complicating rather than straightforwardly democratising the public sphere around BBBP.

4. Media Representation and Communication Strategies

4.1 The Dominance of Media Advocacy

The most striking feature of BBBP's communication architecture is its extraordinary emphasis on media expenditure. Parliamentary Committee data reveal that out of ₹446.72 crore released between 2016 and 2019, approximately 78.91% was spent exclusively on media campaigns and advocacy. A Rajya Sabha reply confirmed that between 2014–15 and 2020–21, total media advocacy spending amounted to ₹401.04 crore representing 58% of the scheme's entire expenditure across that period. This pattern has been widely noted as a structural anomaly: a social welfare scheme devoting the majority of its resources to communicating about itself rather than implementing direct services.

The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Women's Empowerment, in its

December 2021 report, explicitly recommended that the government reconsider advertising expenditure and redirect funds toward planned sectoral interventions in education and health. The committee acknowledged that BBBP had successfully elevated the issue of the girl child to national consciousness but argued that the time had come to 'focus on other verticals by making ample financial provisions to help achieve measurable outcomes.'

Critics have gone further, characterising BBBP's spending pattern as 'branding rather than empowerment.' The criticism is particularly pointed because the scheme's non-media components multi sectoral interventions in health infrastructure, school enrolment support, and community engagement are precisely those most likely to produce durable behavioural change in the communities most resistant to it.

4.2 Channels and Platforms

BBBP has employed a multi-channel dissemination strategy spanning television, radio, print media, outdoor advertising, and increasingly, digital platforms. Television and radio campaigns were responsible for the scheme's high urban recognition rates; research by Shukla and Sen (2020), conducted across ten aspirational districts, found that urban respondents readily identified the scheme through these channels. However, the same study found that in rural areas precisely the communities the scheme most urgently needed to reach only 15 to 20 percent of respondents recalled encountering BBBP materials or participating in BBBP events. This urban-rural awareness gap represents a structural limitation of media-heavy dissemination strategies that rely on

broadcast infrastructure whose penetration remains uneven across India's geography.

The scheme's digital presence has grown considerably since 2018, with BBBP-branded content circulating across social media platforms including Facebook, Twitter (now X), and YouTube. The shift to digital-first communication was accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic and by the broader government move toward zero-budget online advocacy. Rana (2024) notes that by 2022–23, the scheme had significantly reduced conventional advertising expenditure while maintaining digital outreach, though this shift also complicated expenditure tracking and accountability.

4.3 Framing Variations Across Media Types

Analysis of media coverage reveals several distinct frames through which BBBP has been represented. Government communications and allied media have consistently deployed a national pride frame, positioning the scheme as a transformative movement that has shifted India's cultural conscience on gender. Success stories of districts recording improved SRB, of village-level girl-child celebration ceremonies (Guddi-Gudda boards), of women achievers honoured in BBBP events populate this frame, projecting the scheme as evidence of political will and institutional effectiveness.

Independent investigative journalism, particularly from outlets such as BehanBox, The Wire, and organisations focused on gender accountability, has deployed a structural critique frame. These analyses question whether improvements in gender metrics over the past decade can be attributed to BBBP specifically, or whether they reflect

the combined effect of economic development, urbanisation, other concurrent government programmes (including the Sukanya Samriddhi Yojana and the PCPNDT Act's strengthened enforcement), or longer-term demographic trends. The attribution problem whether BBBP caused improvement or merely coincided with it is analytically unresolved and represents a genuine challenge for policy evaluation.

A third frame, observable in regional and vernacular media, might be characterised as a localised adoption frame. In this framing, BBBP's slogan is appropriated for diverse local purposes community mobilisation drives, school awareness events, local political messaging in ways that may reinforce the brand while potentially diluting the scheme's specific policy content. This vernacularisation of BBBP extends its cultural reach while making it harder to maintain fidelity to the scheme's original objectives.

5. Reach, Awareness and Public Perception

5.1 Aggregate Awareness Findings

Survey-based research provides the most direct evidence of BBBP's public reach. A household survey conducted by the Journal of Student Research (2024) across 114 households in Alirajpur district, Madhya Pradesh, found that 89.47% of respondents were very or somewhat aware of the scheme. Of these, 63.16% reported that the scheme had encouraged them to enrol their female children in school, with financial assistance and scheme publicity identified as the primary motivators. This represents a notably high awareness rate for a rural district survey sample.

A study by Chouhan et al. (2022) in the Buddhi village of Dehradun district found that 59% of respondents had moderate knowledge of the scheme and 77% held a favourable opinion. Awareness was present even among respondents with low educational qualifications and from backward castes, suggesting that the scheme's mass media campaigns had achieved meaningful penetration across socioeconomic strata. A study in Kanpur Nagar (Devi et al., 2021) produced comparable findings, with a majority of respondents aware of the scheme despite low educational levels.

The NCAER evaluation (2020), the most geographically comprehensive independent assessment, surveyed both urban and rural households across 14 states, disaggregating findings by awareness of BBBP objectives, attitudes toward the treatment of girls, and perceptions of gender bias in society. Its state-wise breakdowns reveal significant variation in both awareness levels and attitudinal change, confirming that aggregate national figures mask substantial regional heterogeneity.

5.2 The Knowledge-Attitude Gap

While awareness rates are generally high, a consistent finding across multiple studies is that surface-level familiarity with BBBP does not necessarily translate into deeper knowledge of the scheme's objectives, mechanisms, or entitlements. Respondents may recognise the slogan without being able to articulate what the scheme specifically provides or how to access its benefits. This knowledge-attitude gap has important implications: it suggests that the scheme's communication has been more effective at generating broad cultural resonance than at

equipping potential beneficiaries with actionable information.

The ISPP (2022) evaluation study observed that progress in improving the SRB had been inconsistent year-on-year and across districts, and that there was insufficient data to assess the scheme's specific impact on girls from marginalised communities or on the decision-making agency of educated girls and expectant mothers. This evidential gap undermines strong causal claims about BBBP's effectiveness as a tool for substantive behavioural change.

5.3 Indicators of Improvement

Official data, confirmed by Parliamentary answers, indicate measurable improvements across BBBP's target indicators since 2015. The Sex Ratio at Birth improved nationally from 918 in 2014–15 to 930 in 2023–24. The Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) for girls at secondary school level increased from 75.51% in 2014–15 to 80.2% in 2024–25, according to UDISE data from the Ministry of Education. A NITI Aayog-commissioned third-party evaluation (2019–2024) concluded that the SAMBAL vertical of Mission Shakti, under which BBBP operates, was highly relevant and effectively addressed key gender challenges through integrated, data-driven services.

A 2025 SSRN study by Ashraf, Agarwal, and Mukherjee provided econometric evidence of a positive effect: using data from the 2019 Time Use Survey and exploiting the phased geographical rollout of BBBP to construct a quasi-experimental design, the study found that greater exposure to the scheme significantly increased girls' learning time, formal

education, and school attendance. This finding challenged earlier studies that found no statistically significant impact on enrolment or grade completion.

5.4 The Attribution Controversy

Perhaps the most consequential analytical challenge facing assessments of BBBP is the attribution problem. A July 2024 paper reviewed by BehanBox found no statistically significant impact on girl children's enrolment, grade completion, or girl-specific educational expenditure when comparing districts in the first phase of BBBP implementation with those not yet covered. The study noted that the scheme's apparent outcomes could not be disentangled from the effects of parallel government programmes including Sukanya Samriddhi Yojana, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, and various state-level girl-child incentive schemes as well as broader macroeconomic trends.

Rana (2024) pushes this critique further, observing that recorded expenditure figures are themselves unreliable: beyond media campaigns, only 18% of allocated funds were actually disbursed on programmatic activities, with parliamentary records pointing to unrecorded expenditures, diversion of funds, and unjustified budget increases in years when advertising was nominally wound down. If the scheme's non-media expenditure was effectively negligible, Rana argues, then attributing improvements in SRB or GER to BBBP becomes analytically untenable.

6. Critical Debates and Structural Limitations

6.1 Advertising as Governance

The concentration of BBBP's budget in media advocacy raises fundamental questions about the relationship between communication and policy implementation. A welfare scheme that primarily communicates its existence rather than delivering services is, in effect, substituting visibility for effectiveness leveraging the state's media apparatus to generate political capital while deferring or diluting substantive structural change. This pattern has been characterised by critics as 'governance by branding': the deployment of state resources to produce the impression of policy action rather than its substance.

The Insightful Take (2025) observed that 'large-scale social campaigns require a careful balance between communication and implementation' and that 'excessive focus on visibility can undermine credibility, especially when ground realities fail to reflect the rhetoric.' This tension between the scheme's extraordinary communicative reach and the modest and contested evidence of its substantive impact is the central paradox that any rigorous assessment of BBBP must confront.

6.2 Feminist Critiques

Feminist scholars have raised concerns about the normative framework within which BBBP operates. While the scheme is ostensibly about empowering girls, critics argue that its messaging frequently frames girls in instrumental rather than intrinsic terms: girls are valuable because they contribute to families and to national development, not because they are bearers of fundamental rights. This framing reproduces rather than challenges patriarchal logics of female worth, positioning empowerment as conditional on utility.

The scheme has also been criticised for not engaging seriously with the structural determinants of son preference: the absence of universal social security for the elderly (which creates the economic incentive to invest in sons as future providers), the persistence of dowry and the financial burden it places on girls' families, and the lack of safe public infrastructure (transport, sanitation, street lighting) that makes girls vulnerable outside the home. Without addressing these root causes, awareness campaigns risk treating symptoms rather than causes, generating surface-level attitudinal shifts that fail to penetrate the deeper economic and social calculus that drives gender discrimination.

6.3 Intersectionality and Data Gaps

BBBP's reach and effectiveness have been assessed primarily through aggregate national and state-level data. There is a near-total absence of disaggregated analysis of how the scheme's messaging has reached, or failed to reach, girls and women at the intersections of caste, class, disability, and geography. The ISPP (2022) evaluation explicitly noted that the scheme's impact on girls from marginalised communities could not be assessed due to the absence of relevant data. Research on aspirational districts (Shukla & Sen, 2020) suggests that the scheme's materials and events were significantly less visible in rural areas, where the most severe gender discrimination tends to be concentrated.

The scheme's predominantly urban-facing media strategy relying on television and radio in its early phases and migrating to digital platforms as smartphone penetration increased structurally disadvantages rural and low-income communities whose media

consumption patterns differ significantly from national averages. This creates an ironic inverse relationship between need and reach: the communities most in need of attitudinal change are the least likely to be exposed to the scheme's messaging.

6.4 Digital Journalism and Platform Inequalities

The migration of BBBP's communication strategy toward digital platforms reflects a broader shift in Indian media consumption and introduces new tensions. Digital media enables the rapid, low-cost dissemination of content and allows for interactive engagement that traditional broadcast channels cannot provide. The proliferation of BBBP content on social media, through official accounts and citizen amplification, has extended the scheme's visibility in urban and semi-urban contexts.

However, digital platform logic also introduces distortions. Social media algorithms reward emotionally engaging, visually compelling, and politically aligned content characteristics that favour success-story narratives and celebratory framing over analytical, critical, or nuanced representation. The result is a digital ecology in which BBBP is predominantly represented through its most positive framings, with critical assessments circulating in more limited, niche online spaces. Platform inequalities differentials in digital access, literacy, and connectivity — further limit the scheme's digital reach among the rural poor, reinforcing the urban-rural awareness gap documented in offline surveys.

7. Conclusions and Recommendations

This paper has examined the reach and public perception of the Beti Bachao Beti

Padhao scheme through the lens of agenda-setting theory, framing analysis, and public sphere discourse. The evidence presented points to a scheme of extraordinary communicative ambition and measurable, if contested, aggregate outcomes but one whose architecture of communication has consistently outpaced its architecture of implementation.

BBBP has undoubtedly succeeded in its agenda-setting function: it has elevated the issue of gender discrimination and girl-child welfare to the top of India's national consciousness, embedded its slogan in popular discourse, and created a cultural context in which the birth of a girl is more publicly celebrated and less publicly shamed than before its launch. The national SRB improvement from 918 to 930 over a decade, and the rise in girls' secondary GER from 75.51% to 80.2%, are real and meaningful gains, even if their precise attribution to BBBP remains analytically contested.

Yet the framing analysis conducted in this paper reveals a media landscape deeply divided between official achievement narratives and critical accountability perspectives, a divide that mirrors, and partly constitutes, the divergence in public perception of the scheme. Urban, digitally connected, and media-literate citizens are likely to hold more nuanced and possibly more sceptical views of BBBP than rural communities whose awareness of the scheme, while significant, is more likely to be surface-level and uncritical. The rural-urban awareness gap starkly illustrated by the finding that only 15 to 20% of rural respondents in aspirational districts recalled BBBP materials represents the most urgent structural limitation of the scheme's communication strategy.

The public sphere analysis identifies a deeper normative deficit: BBBP's communication has been predominantly one-directional, sloganistic, and insulated from the substantive deliberative engagement that genuine public sphere discourse requires. The scheme's framing of girls in instrumental rather than intrinsic terms, and its failure to engage seriously with the structural determinants of son preference, limit its capacity to produce lasting attitudinal transformation.

Policy Recommendations

On the basis of the foregoing analysis, this paper advances the following recommendations. First, the balance of BBBP's budget should be decisively reoriented from media advocacy toward direct service delivery and structural intervention — in school infrastructure, safe transport, girls' health, and community engagement in the most underperforming districts. The Parliamentary Committee's 2021 recommendation to this effect remains unimplemented and deserves urgent policy attention.

Second, the scheme's communication strategy should be redesigned to prioritise rural outreach through interpersonal and community-based channels including local Anganwadi workers, Self-Help Groups, and Panchayati Raj institutions rather than relying primarily on broadcast and digital media whose reach is structurally limited in rural contexts.

Third, the monitoring and evaluation framework for BBBP must be strengthened to produce disaggregated, district-level, caste-and-class-differentiated data that allows for rigorous attribution analysis. The current

absence of such data makes it impossible to determine whether the scheme is reaching the most vulnerable communities or whether apparent improvements in gender metrics reflect its impact.

Fourth, the scheme's communicative framing should evolve beyond the 'save and educate' paradigm toward a rights-based discourse that positions girls as autonomous subjects rather than objects of beneficent intervention. This shift would align BBBP's messaging more closely with international human rights standards and address the feminist critiques that have questioned its deeper normative premises.

Finally, the government should commission and publicly release a comprehensive, independent, peer-reviewed impact evaluation of BBBP that addresses the attribution problem directly comparing outcomes in BBBP-targeted districts with comparable control districts while controlling for the effects of concurrent schemes. The absence of such an evaluation after a decade of implementation represents a significant accountability deficit.

In conclusion, Beti Bachao Beti Padhao stands as a powerful case study in the possibilities and limitations of media-driven policy communication. Its achievements in awareness, in normative agenda-setting, and in measurable gender metrics are real. So too are its contradictions: between visibility and reach, between communication and implementation, between official narratives and critical evidence. Understanding these contradictions is not merely an academic exercise; it is a precondition for designing more effective, equitable, and evidence-grounded public policy communication in the future.

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