

# Media a Tool or Guardian of Truth in Assam's Conflict Situation?

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**Abstract:** Terrorism in Northeast India has a long history, so does mass media. While local media was still very small in size and reach in the early phases of terrorism in the region, the last two decades of the last century saw tremendous expansion of media alongside rising terrorist activities. Media and conflict enjoy a kind of symbiotic relationship. Media growth has a strong correlation with uncertainty in society. There was a significant rise in newspaper publication and readership in the US during World War II, in France during the French Revolution and in Britain during the Industrial Revolution.

A similar trend was seen in Assam, the largest state by population in India's Northeast, during the peak of insurgency. While this connect has a lot to do with the basic human trait of curiosity and hunger for information in times of uncertainty, in the Assam perspective, media's role in situations of terrorism has often come into focus because of a culture of sub-nationalism, which is very much ingrained in the local press. A close scrutiny of media role during the heydays of terrorism in the state shows this sentiment of sub-nationalism, a tendency to ride piggyback on popular sentiment to grow in a competitive market and, often, lack of experience and exposure among media practitioners willy-nilly turned media into a tool in the hands of terrorists, which is when the media failed to play its role as a guardian of truth and failed in its duty towards society.

**Index Terms:** Terrorism, Northeast, Conflict, Mass Communication, Social Media, Electronic Media, Print Media, Assam, Ulfa

## 1. Introduction

Truth is always first casualty in a conflict situation. Often, media willy-nilly becomes a tool for a party/parties involved in a conflict. Historically, media in the Northeast has always preached sub-nationalism, often going against the standards of media behaviour. In a conflict situation, mass media's basic policy of always being on the side of the masses often puts it in conflict with the social responsibility of telling the truth, as the sentiment of sub-nationalism or ethnic identity blinds the masses to economic, political or social realities and that in turn sways media opinion as well.

In a mobile-led and social media-powered environment, the situation can become dicey in such conditions, as technically every individual is today a messenger or mediaperson and information can generate from anywhere anytime. Media of modern times face two hard realities: separating disinformation from information and standing on its ethical ground in the face of a multitude of challenges posed by technology, market forces and various interest groups.

Politics of difference thrives in situations of misperceptions and disinformation. That is where media and its dissemination of information has to play a key role in facilitating constant communication, developing mutual understanding, addressing issues of mistrust and misperception with trustworthy analysis and opinion in order to ensure peace in society at large. But as the means and sources of communication expand, we have a situation where the media has either failed to communicate effectively or ended up becoming a tool for parties involved in such conflicts rather than being a means to resolving it.

## 2. Review of literature

In his book titled *India against Itself*, Bard College professor Sanjib Baruah defines Northeast India's regional politics as sub-nationalism, which fostered a sense of negligence for far too long creating a fertile ground for the kind of conflicts and unrest witnessed over the past several decades.

Eminent author, journalist Sanjay Hazarika in his book, *Land, Conflict, Identity of India's Northwest: Negotiating the Future*, calls NE conflict the single largest human tragedy in post-Partition India in terms of the number of people displaced.

Till some years back, the media scenario of the region suffered from a similar pattern of seclusion, failing to grow at the pace of the modern media industry in the rest of the world, as reflected in the *History of Assamese Newspapers*. With the proliferation of mobile communication and the internet, that gap is getting blurred pretty fast now, which holds hope for the future.

On media's role in conflict situation, Johan Galtung establishes a beautiful correlation, when he said "Our culture, particularly our media culture, is long on descriptions of the meta conflicts that related to the roots of the conflict, like a metastasis to the primary tumour. There is a focus on the negative attitudes = hatred, and on negative behaviour = violence, and much less focus on the contradiction roots."

In the compilation titled *Media and Communication Research*, Anjani Kumar Srivastava offers an interesting analysis of the interplay among the different stakeholders in an environment of terrorism, with media getting entrapped in a vicious cycle of agenda pushing for one party or the other.

In his book *Media and Society Into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Lyn Gorman and David McLean address the issue of control and presentation of information in situations of war and conflict and the challenges posed by new media.

The Eighth Report of the Second Administrative Reforms Commission (2008) headed by Veerappa Moily is on 'Combating Terrorism: Protecting by Righteousness', shed light on the role of media in a conflict situation. It offers a set of recommendations on what media and the government should do to effectively deal with such situations.

In an e-book on *Conflict-Sensitive Reporting: State of the Art*, Howard Ross dwells at length on the responsibility and sensitivity that media needs to show and the code of conduct they are required to deal with in such situations.

Besides, Charlie Beckett's work titled, *SuperMedia: Saving Journalism So It Can Save The World*, and three research papers: *Sub-Regional Nationalism in Assam Print Media* by Joydeep Biswas, Associate Professor, Cachar College, Silchar; *Local press in the making a study on the emergent media of Assam* by Jayanta Vishnu Das of Tezpur University; *Mapping of Media (Print) Industry in North East* by Athikho Kaisii of Jamia Milia Islamia, New Delhi were also consulted for this research paper. This paper also makes a reference to an article titled *Colourful Mosaic* from The Hindu (Chennai, India, June 21, 2009) by Sevanti Ninan, who runs media monitoring portal thehoot.org.

### 3. Objective

This paper is an attempt to look at the broader trends of conflict reporting, commentaries and editorial perspectives of various newspapers during the Ulfa insurgency in Assam, a state that saw the fastest growth in newspaper numbers and readership for almost a decade through the peak phase of the insurgency situation. The main objective of this study was to find out whether the local media behaved within the defined ethical standards for media practitioners during this phase. To put in another way, "Would Assam's conflict situation and its outcome have been different had the local media behaved in a different way?"

This paper also tries to underline the extremely important role that communication in general, and media in particular, has to play in such situations and draw lessons for an environment where social media and mobile-based communication has changed the entire paradigm of media communication.

It also aims to answer the questions:-

- a) Did the rapid mushrooming of local print media in Assam during 1985-2000 had anything to do with peak of insurgency and the socio-political uncertainty that Assam witnessed during those days in the aftermath of army deployment to fight the terrorists?
- b) If yes, did local media focus more on growing circulation and readership in a tough competitive environment rather than delivering on their social responsibility and ethical duty of covering the conflict situation from a neutral perspective?
- c) When business and commercial interests override everything else, is it possible media – or for that matter, any entity – care least about society, responsibility and ethical standards?
- d) What happens when media run after readership/audience? It tries to cater to popular sentiment, milks popular issues, plays to the gallery. In Assam's typical environment of hyper sub-nationalism nurtured for decades by a language movement followed by an even more popular anti-immigrant movement, when the insurgents tried to tap the popular

sentiment of hatred and revolt against the Centre in Delhi, was it possible that the local media simply played along, with little care for objectivity, rationale and its own responsibility of reporting in an unbiased way.

- e) Till the year 2000, Assam had just one media school at the Gauhati University, which produced fewer journalists, but more degree holders. Is it possible that when this rapid expansion happened, local newspapers faced a huge dearth of trained manpower in journalist and mass communication and had to rely on untrained human resources to run their businesses?

#### 4. Methodology

This study was done based on empirical data collected through observation as well as sampling of historical records of various newspapers and magazines, review of literature and peer research and interview of a few veteran journalists and media watchers.

#### 5. Data analysis

The quality of media depends on three key factors; editorial policy, source of news and ownership. Professionalism, experience and skills of editors and journalists manning a media organisation, ethical standards prevalent in a competitive media environment and legacy of the organisation are some of the key determinants of the editorial policy that the media outfit follows.

Balanced reporting is the backbone of ethical media coverage where news sourcing is key. News source is critical for ensuring ethical standards, neutrality and fairness in media coverage. Agenda-driven journalism tends to depend on select news sources, often dubious ones, while ignoring the counter view or other side of the story. Media that depend on rumours, hearsay and do not always rely on dependable, official and identifiable sources for news coverage constantly violate ethical standards and often end up spreading misinformation and disinformation instead of delivering on its duty to provide balanced information to society.

Media ownership has often been an issue in focus, as it has often come in the way of media's independence and impartiality. In a competitive industry, promoters tend to be guided more by economic interest than ethical standards and issues like media independence and fairness, balance and neutrality in media coverage tends to become a casualty. This issue has been under the lens more often in the third world countries and conflict belts, where the strong weapon of media has often fallen in wrong hands or is being misused to willy-nilly serve vested interests.

##### 5.1 Ownership issue

Writing for *'The Hindu'*, media watcher and columnist Sevanti Ninan says:

*"Regional media is increasingly a colourful mosaic in terms of who owns it or runs it, be it TV or newspapers, or periodicals. And a state which runs the gamut of possibilities is Assam. Congressmen, ULFA (United Liberation Front of Asom) sympathisers, former militants, former bureaucrats and police officers, litterateurs and novelists: the state's proprietors and editors are drawn from all these categories."*

That speaks volumes for how Assam's print media industry – of late also electronic media – has got trapped in the hands of a group of owners, whose interest lies in making money, gaining clout. There is no hard evidence to prove it, but there has often been finger pointing about some people using media businesses to turn their black money white.

Assam's worst period in terms of socio-political conflicts between 1985 and 2000 also happened to the best period of the nearly 175-year-old Assamese print media industry. In an environment of insurgency-induced social uncertainty and turmoil, newspapers grew exponentially both in numbers and readership.

But when consumer demand spells economics, people often use such opportunity to mint money. Problems arise when the domain happens to be a key pillar of society such as media and the people involved are unscrupulous or have little care or concern for ethics and social responsibility in their pursuit of profit.

##### 5.2 Economics over independence

Media is called the fourth pillar of a democratic society, given the huge role it is supposed to play and the responsibility entrusted upon it. For the three biggest pillars, the masses elect legislatures with popular vote, the most qualified judges are chosen to represent the judiciary and the country's best talent qualifies to run the executive. The Fourth Pillar in Assam during media's peak days was not entirely manned by the best talent, the most qualified and the most skilled.

Dhirendra Nath Bezbaruah, one of Assam's most respected journalists, who edited one of Assam's most well-read English newspapers, *The Sentinel*, during the peak of Ulfa movement and who had earned the wrath of the Ulfa insurgents because of his

no-holds-barred views against them, says Media ownership of a very powerful weapon and in Assam there has been a widespread attempt to capture this very powerful weapon without the responsibility that has to go with it. This has affected media's credibility. There is an awareness of what one can do with this weapon. But nobody loses any sleep over the responsibility of using this weapon, he said.

Bezbaruah also questions the economics of some newspapers and their total dependence on government advertising, which he says is curtailing their independence in some ways.

"It's a funny situation. I cannot think of any other state in the country, where there are so many daily newspapers. If you take a close look at the content of these newspapers, especially the ad content, there is hardly any commercial ads in most of them. They are all surviving on government ads and they do not seem to mind this. There is far greater freedom if you have a healthy kind of ad revenue coming in from commercial ads. There is total dependence on state govt. Media cannot claim to be independent in such a situation."

A well-run newspaper usually needs to devote at least 60 per cent of its space to ads coming from a wide variety of sources. But when the ad source becomes singular, the equation can become artificial and perverse and a newspaper can be at risk of compromising on its independence, neutrality and fairness.

### 5.3 Lack of skilled manpower

Manoram Gogoi, who was Founder News Editor of the immensely successful language daily *Asomiya Pratidin*, which was launched at the height of insurgency, says the new newspaper was run with a batch of very inexperienced journalists when the conflict was at its peak

"When as part anti-insurgency operation, Indian military let loose a reign of terror and indulged in excesses on local people, raping women, killing people, many senior journalists were doing armchair reporting, based on information fed by government officials and the military PR. But we were reporting from the spot. A lot of senior journalists reacted very late to the poor human rights situation. Maybe, they didn't even understand the situation properly," says Gogoi.

He claims even today a section of journalists in the media allows themselves to be guided constantly by politicians. Many journalists are part of this mechanism. Most journalists are trapped in an intricately-designed political trap. That has spoilt the whole system.

Mani Mahanta, another founder member of the news bureau of the same daily, said reporters and correspondents in his newspaper did publish press releases and statements issued by the insurgent outfit and highlighted the ideas floated by the extremist organisations. "But those were also issues that the society was debating at that point. Had media not highlighted those, those issues would have never received the attention of the powers that be. Media needed to highlight those issues. That was probably the call of the time, despite the short comings," he argues

### 5.4 News sourcing

Media sources news and information from trustworthy official or unofficial sources and disseminates them. In a conflict situation, various parties involved usually try to influence the media into its side and try to win sympathy and gain publicity. In an environment where it is easy for insurgent elements to easily sway popular sentiment after a cause, it is the duty of the media to put out the situation and issues objectively, which requires careful news gathering, unbiased analysis and encouraging multiplicity of views. The official apparatus needs to work closely with the local media to fight the information battle objectively to put out the issues transparently.

In the case of Assam, the official machinery went after the media instead of taking them into confidence in the fight against insurgency. While the media got swayed by popular opinion and was busy catering to public sentiment, it compromised on fostering multiplicity of views, news sourcing was not always from reliable sources, and analysis carried jaundiced views tilted towards popular sentiment.

Says Mani Mahanta of *Asomiya Pratidin*, "Our conflict reporting standard was possibly not up to the mark, first because we didn't have skilled people, who had exposure to similar situations. Second, there were only a handful people who are handling the issue seriously. Most journalists were biased, some even were part-time activists. Both insights and foresight were missing. There were very few senior journalists studying the situation as a neutral observer or having an impartial view of the situation. They reported the ground reality and their coverage things like mass grave or army atrocities in villages was outstanding."

These newspapers generally sourced news from the remote areas through a network of stringers or freelance journalists, who were prone to manipulation and there did not exist a common policy on conflict reporting to have them all in alignment.

Lack of skilled man power, a journalistic tradition that thrived on armchair reporting, unpreparedness to deal with a conflict situation that developed almost like something out of the blue resulted in rampant coverage of one-sided news and views, most of which were in alignment with the causes of the insurgents. Also, the insurgents' early strategy to deploy themselves in social service and fight against social evils earned them a Robin Hood image, one that masses and the media fell for with equal ease.

The best reflection of how media, instead of working objectively and in an unbiased way, got swayed by popular sentiment was best reflected by two incidents. The insurgents largely managed to carry the popular sentiment with them for a long time despite strong army actions that created a suffocating environment amid large-scale harassment of and atrocities on innocent people, leading to many deaths. All this while, the local media, too, remained soft on its agenda and activities.

But local sentiment turned against the insurgents after they targeted a popular young dancer in Nagaon for performing at a military do and after they militant outfit carried out a bomb blast in a place called North Lakhimpur that killed a number of schoolchildren. Immediately, the tone of local media too changed in line with popular sentiment. The media, which was rarely critical of the insurgents till then, suddenly began to target and criticise insurgent activities, which eventually led to the waning of the insurgent movement and forced many insurgents to turn overground and triggered a vertical split within the group.

### 5.5 Editorial policy

Assam's media has a long tradition of aligning with local interests and issues in the larger socio-political landscape of the country. The media itself got its birth to give voice to a people when they were seeking to assert their socio-cultural identity, fighting against the imposition of an alien language and medium of instruction on them and in the backdrop of acute under-development and lack of economic progress.

While the state and its economy long came out of those difficulties, the local media carried on with that tradition. A sense of social service overrode standards of professionalism. Creative literature was part and parcel of everyday media coverage along side news and views and editors invariably came from among litterateurs and authors. Thus, the entire media establishment lacked a professional touch on top, leading to a dearth of standards and set principles for operating in critical situations, like a conflict environment.

The journalists and editors quoted above admitted without hesitation about lack of proper guidelines, guidance and set standards for conflict reporting, which allowed journalists and editors to work on their own tangent without any defined direction.

Says Dharendra Nath Bezbaruah, one of Assam's most respected journalists and who edited the widely respected *The Sentinel* through the phase of conflict, "We in the media needed to play a very positive role, a very pro-active role. But there was an inertia. Our media was a trifle slow in reacting. That makes one big difference. Media not just have to be accurate, truthful, objective, but also have to be fast. Our major failing was that we do not see the importance of time. In many situations we have not been fast enough."

Had media been fast enough, we would have been able to avoid a lot of situations arising out of conflicts. Had there been a focus on identifying this inertia, things would have been different. Bureaucrats and the political representatives responsible for a total lack of development, lack of planning are all of them responsive to what the media talks about, Bezbaruah points out.

### 5.6 State's view of media role in conflict situation

The Administration Reforms Commission formed by the Government of India dealt with 'Combating terrorism: Protecting by righteousness' in its eighth report released in June 2008. It dwelt elaborately on the role desired of the media in conflict situations.

It states:-

*"With the advent of the electronic media and modernisation of print media, the coverage, influence and reaction time of the media has improved substantially. There have also been instances where media reports have stoked conflicts; though on several occasions they have been instrumental in prevention of outbreak of violence."*

It then goes on to dwell on the extremely tricky situation that media often finds itself in when such a situation arises.

- A terrorist act affects each of the three – the media, government and terrorists– differently. The conflicting perspectives arising out of their mutually exclusive concerns and the urge, of both the terrorists and the government, to bend the media to serve their respective agendas, could widen the distance between government and the media. Terrorism in democratic countries shows that terrorists thrive on publicity.
- The media does not intend to promote the cause of terrorism, but the nature and mandated function of the media – to cover events, developments and issues – can be exploited by the terrorists. Thus, regardless of the media's intentions, the news coverage may serve the expectations of the terrorists. It should be recognised that even terrorists have a craving for publicity, and the media should not unwittingly help the terrorists in their designs.

- Government has its own expectations, it wants the media to depend on the official version. Government therefore wants the media to be cooperative and keep the national interests or security concerns uppermost. In fact, when it comes to acts of terrorism, both the media and the government have a common interest in protecting people and democracy. But their perspectives and positions defined by their functions and responsibilities could lead to different and sometimes conflicting stands. Therefore, it is necessary that government should work towards harnessing the power of the mass media as a part of its strategy to defeat terrorism.

The ARC says it would be necessary to have an affirmative media policy based on transparency in governance; easy access to information and sources; advancing the media's role as an instrument of vigilance to scrutinise and check administrative, legal and judicial violations and excesses that endanger civil and democratic rights in situations of conflict and terrorism; engaging, enabling, encouraging and assisting the media to fulfill its role of informed, fair and balanced coverage of crisis, particularly terrorism.

It stresses that media policy should include principles of self-restraint. Publishers, editors and reporters need to be sensitised to avoid and exclude those elements of media coverage that may unwittingly advance the agenda of terrorists.

The report called upon the government machinery to become media-savvy and the media to focus more on skill building to handle such tricky social situations to build capacity of citizens in dealing with any public disorder, particularly terrorist violence.

This shows greater appreciation and sensitivity at the government level of the need for better focus on communication in handling conflict situations and also the increased importance that communication has come to enjoy in policy formulations and in strategic areas.

## **6 Findings and discussion**

Historical records of newspaper coverages and views expressed by leading media watchers in the region clearly bear out the following:-

- A large section of Assam's local press didn't behave within the traditional limits and ethical parameters of journalism through the phase of insurgency, and to a large extent commercial interest in expanding readership played a big role in determining media coverage of popular issues.
- Because of dearth of talent and skilled manpower, local media used untrained professionals to cover the conflict situation, leading to reckless handling of issues of immense socio-political implications. News was not always based on defined sources, analyses were infested with jaundiced views heavily influenced by a sense of sub-nationalism and multiplicity of opinion did not find free expression.
- Media was not a part of the state strategy to deal with the conflict situation and the state didn't recognize the constructive role that media can play in such situations.

### **6.1 Discussion & Conclusion**

Conflict has come to become a key concern for modern societies across the world, but media in our country and backward regions like Assam have failed to evolve adequately with a code of conduct to remain rooted to professional standards and deliver on their responsibility during such situations. At least, that was the experience during the insurgency in Assam.

With the advent of newer forms of media, such as social media, which democratises the medium, allowing every citizen to freely voice his/her opinion with no control, the society might find itself in deep crisis should it fail to appreciate the hugely important role that media can play in such environment and how to respond to such situations.

Modern media empowers the society at large, but it also creates a tricky situation of people with or without the understanding of the power communication using it recklessly, thus creating chaos in certain situations. The traditional media is ill-equipped to face such a situation and society is not adequately sensitised to face a crisis that can erupt. With social media as an evolved form of mass communication already gone to the hands of every citizen holding a smartphone, we as a society are could be at peril should we fail to sensitise ourselves in time to use such medium and receive/process information responsibly, especially in situations when society is in turmoil.

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