

FROM FRACTURES TO FRAMES: CONFLICT REPORTING IN NEWSPAPERS OF ASSAM

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Abstract

The Northeast region of India has been marked by sustained separatist insurgencies, mass agitations and ethnic conflicts. This region has been the setting for the earliest and longest lasting insurgency in the country. Subject to 'various brands of identity politics' ever since the colonial days, leading to exclusion and deprivation, the region's history of violence can be seen as a powerful manifestation of its vehemence to preserve its identity. This 'identity crisis' which is considered to be the core cause of bloodshed in the region, has been the subject of dissection by a number of academicians as well as journalists. The identity crisis in the region manifests itself in two major forms of identity movements – (1) Independence movements for autonomy or self-rule and (2) Movements for ousting of foreigners/ outsiders from their 'mother land'. Like other ethnic groups in the regions, the Bodos too have a long history of such identity crusades – beginning with the movement for Bodoland dating back to the 1960s to the more recent instances of resisting immigrant settlers, both from Bangladesh and from other regions of India, even Assam. The two latest incidents of conflict involving the Bodos represent resistance to two distinct groups of 'outsiders': The July– September, 2012 conflict between the native Bodo community people and the Muslim settlers which eventually took shape into one of the bloodiest instances of ethnic violence in Assam, left over 90 people dead and 400,000 displaced. The more recent December 2014 Bodo- Adivasi conflict fired up due to terror attacks by the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (Songbijit) on Adivasi villages on the night of December 23 triggering a humanitarian crisis. Scores of innocents including children lost their lives and lakhs of people had to take shelter in make-shift relief camps. Both these incidents received widespread coverage in the media – both local and national media. The objective of this study is to compare the coverage of the 2012 Bodo-Muslim violence in the two leading English and vernacular dailies in Assam over a two month period with reference to the standards of conflict sensitive journalism and sensitivity towards communal harmony. Using framing analysis, the present enquiry also attempts to understand the prominent frames used by the newspapers while reporting the issue.

Keywords: Northeast India, Development, Development reporting, Conflict sensitive journalism, Inter-ethnic conflict

Introduction

India's 'Northeast' has always been a trouble-torn region – at least ever since the country gained its independence from the British in 1947. Currently, every state in this region – Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland & Tripura – together known as the seven sisters, is affected by separatist insurgencies and ethnic conflicts. With over 70 insurgent groups armed with some of the most sophisticated artillery and the magnitude and intensity of violence surpassing even Kashmir, the Northeast is fast gaining reputation as 'South Asia's hottest warring spot' ((Hussain, 2000; Bhaumik, 2007; Das, 2008).

The issues of identity and conflict in Northeast India vis-à-vis the process of development in the region have been the subjects of much attention and scholarly discourse with numerous attempts to understand and explain the unique and classic case of this strategic yet vulnerable region which has been torn apart by violence and disorder of an extraordinary magnitude for a very long time now (Gill & Sahni, 2002; Baruah, 2005; Baruah, 2008; Biswas & Suklabaidya, 2008; Hussain 2008).

Culturally and demographically viewed, 'heterogeneity' is considered to be the "most striking feature of the social order" of the Northeast. The region is a melting pot of an extraordinary variety of ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic groups - an assemblage of diversity so grand yet representing a complexity almost beyond comprehension.

These diverse groups of people lived in peace and harmony till the British colonisation process of Assam (between 1826 to 1898) and later the policies of homogenization and assimilation designed by the post-colonial state to integrate different ethnic categories within the fold of composite Assamese nationalism lead to the creation of a fissure of such great magnitude between the different groups that it has defied redemption even today, and has resulted in a culture of rifts and consequent distrust which as social anthropologist N.K. Das puts it, can be perceived today in a multitude of binary terms such as - majority-minority; sons of the soil-immigrants; locals-outsiders; tribals-non-tribals; hills-plains; inter-tribal; and intra-tribal (Singh, 1987; Das, 2008; Das, 2009; Borah, 2012).

The growing 'Assamese hegemony' perpetrated by the post-colonial Indian state through its "assimilationist" policies to homogenize the region by bringing it under the fold of composite Assamese nationalism further opened the floodgates for a different breed of ethnic movements for territorial autonomy and cultural reconstruction and ultimately led to the

division of “undivided Assam” into the seven states of Northeast India in the 1960s. The cultural, economic as well as political ramifications of greater territorial autonomy continue to motivate ethnic groups to fight for separate statehood, warranting the “durability of disorder” in the region (Baruah, 2007; Borah, 2012).

Today the identity crisis in the region manifests itself in two major forms of identity movements –

- Independence movements for autonomy or self-rule and
- Movements for ousting of foreigners/ outsiders from one’s ‘mother land’

Context of the conflict in BTAD

During July– September, 2012, a violent outburst in the Indian state of Assam took place around the Bodoland Territorial Administered Districts (BTAD) in Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baksa and Dhubri (which is outside BTAD). On 20 July, 2012, the first incident of the conflict between the native Bodo community people and the Muslim settlers was reported which eventually took shape into one of the bloodiest instances of ethnic violence in Assam leaving over 70 people dead and 400,000 displaced. Many people also went missing.

The Bodos constitute about six percent of the total population of Assam and they are the largest tribal community in the state. Bodoland which is predominantly populated by the Bodo inhabitants, is a self-governing legislative unit created under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India. The main rationale for the formation of Bodoland was to bring about development in various areas such as education, economy, infrastructure, linguistic aspiration, safeguarding land rights of the people and most importantly, protecting the socio-cultural values and ethnic self of the communities in the BTC region.

Like other ethnic groups in the regions, the Bodos too have a long history of resisting immigrant settlers, both from Bangladesh and the Indian mainland. The Bodo’s resistance of the Muslims represents only a small scrap of the greater struggle for identity preservation by the ethnic communities in general and the Bodos in particular in apprehension of being reduced to minorities in their own land. The insecurity of the Bodos coupled with increased competition for work, land and political authority come across as the prime reason behind their conflict against the non-Bodos in the region especially the Muslims.

While criminal activities have apparently been the trigger for the riots that took place during July – September, 2012 it would perhaps not be wrong to explain the conflicts as a consequence of the increasing mistrust between the Bodos and Muslims reaching a breaking point. Whereas, on one hand the Bodos allege large scale encroachment of tribal land by the ever growing population of immigrant Muslim settlers, in contrast the insecurity of the Muslims arises from the grit of the Bodos to dispossess the Muslims of land rights and other facilities.

The Muslims contest the over-generalization and consequent branding of all Muslims living in their area as ‘illegal Bangladeshi infiltrators’. They claim that they are an integral part of the state and resent the ventures of Bodo pressure groups to divest them of their citizenship rights.

While in essence the Bodo-Muslim conflict in Assam is deeply rooted in issues of identity and land rights, with Muslim fundamentalist elements in Assam as well as other parts the country giving it a communal hue, the conflict flared up to such a proportion that its repercussions could be seen in other parts of the country where many people from Assam and other states of the Northeast living outside the region were reported to be attacked by groups of Muslims in retaliation of the killing of Muslims in Assam. An identity conflict between two groups living in Assam thus turned into a clash of Muslims versus North-easterners and resulted in the creation of such a climate of fear amongst people of the Northeast living in mainland India that they returned in hordes to their homes in apprehension of losing their lives.

Objective and Significance of the Study

Given the magnitude of developmental issues and intensity of conflict in Northeast India, the responsibility of media, particularly the local media in the region, assumes enormous significance. In spite of this, however, one rarely comes across any systematic analysis of the media’s role in the coverage of conflict situations in this highly conflict-inflicted Northeast region of India. This study will be able to fill up this gap in systematic understanding of the role of media in northeast in reporting the conflict within the region.

The objective of this study is to compare the coverage of the Kokrajhar violence between the leading English and vernacular dailies in Assam with reference to the standards of conflict

sensitive journalism while situating peace and conflict as factors for development. Using framing analysis, the present enquiry also attempts to understand the prominent frames used by the newspapers while reporting the issue.

The findings of this study will outline the status of reporting on conflict by the leading newspapers of the region which may in turn become the aspirational targets for editors and reporters for achieving standards in peace-sensitive and development oriented journalism while recognizing the inter-linkages that peace and development inevitably share. It will provide important insights into how media can play a more active role in improving inter-ethnic solidarity and integration within the region.

Theoretical framework

Development has been a subject of much scholarly attention and the discourse around this issue has been intensifying over the years. At present, peace and conflict resolution as factors in development are also gaining attention. Early development discourses did not account for conflict or the dynamics leading up to conflict as part of the development mandate and viewed events of conflict only as “unfortunate occurrences forcing development workers out and humanitarians in - an order to be reversed when the conflict was over and conditions were safe for normal development work to resume” (Uvin, 2002). Today, however, the issues of conflict resolution and peace building occupy a very significant place in development thinking and practice. As Peter Uvin puts it, “the nexus between development and peace” is well recognized and insecurity and violence are seen as “crucial dimensions of deprivation and poverty”.

Conflict and development share a relationship of causality where conflict can often be seen both as cause and effect of development and underdevelopment. While many consider conflict resolution and conflict prevention as necessary steps towards development others point towards the role that development can play in plummeting or escalating the risk factors of conflict

Given these considerations, the issue of governance assumes prominence in development thinking. Wood (2003) contends that conflicts that arise during processes of development are the most challenging to master. During such occasions governance capacities come to be

tested most and often suffer a break down. Good governance and rule of law can play a vital role in preventing both greed and grievance from transforming into violent conflicts.

....some of the presumed “root causes” of violent conflicts - for example, ethnic, religious or regional differences, economic or environmental pressures, even poverty and disparities — are often only transformed into proximate causes of violence when they are mobilized politically, and then when the governance structures are not flexible and resilient enough to manage the pressures, so that extremism and/or political opportunism can prevail (Wood, 2003).

Like governance, the role assumed by media during conflict situations is also considered to bear much significance. The power of media in shaping public opinion and influencing the social construction of reality is well established. The slant of public opinion, the society’s construction of reality and the role of the media therein can well be decisive factors in the possible escalation or resolution of the conflict. While professionally practised journalism of constructive agenda-setting in a conflict environment can open up channels for communication, educate people, build confidence, frame conflicts, humanise disputants, provide emotional outlets and note solutions elsewhere, poor or deliberately manipulated conflict coverage can further fuel the conflict (IMS, 2003; Howard, 2004).

Veteran journalist and trainer specializing in media in conflict and democratization, Ross Howard (2008) contends that the news media is often the most important channel of communication that exists between sides in a conflict. A responsible media, which is ‘conflict-sensitive’ can not only set in motion the process of construction of a general ‘culture of tolerance’, but can also help dispel the sense of ‘singular affiliation’ by emphasizing ‘multicultural knowledge’.

El-Nawawy & Powers (2008) developed a typology of media that best serves a conciliatory function. The role of the conciliatory media in a conflict situation should demonstrate a desire towards solving rather than escalating conflicts; provide multiple viewpoints including those of politically underrepresented groups; provide background, contextualizing; and avoid use of demonizing labels and victimizing terms.

Others like Park & Deshapriya while concurring to the stand that journalists may not have a direct role in resolving a crisis, hold that the media is certainly responsible towards the promotion of an “honest and pluralistic political debate, and in providing accurate and timely

information about issues, policies and strategies that will reduce tension, create the conditions for equitable development and reduce the levels of ignorance and fear that contribute to misunderstanding and hostility in society.” As Howard rightly pronounces, “Professional journalists do not set out to reduce conflict. They seek to present accurate and impartial news. But it is often through good reporting that conflict is reduced” (Howard, 2008).

According to Lynch and McGoldrick (2010) accurate peace journalism is a remedial strategy in itself that goes to iterate background and context; where the journalist goes beyond sources of “official power” to connect with visions and creative ideas of peace.

Kempf (2007) identifies peace journalism as a two-step process and cautions that during the “hot phase” of the conflict, journalists should not resort to “solution oriented conflict coverage” which explores reconciliatory possibilities as it may be rejected as unreliable and hostile propaganda. Rather, during this phase, they should provide objective, distanced and respectful reportage which is fair to all sides but maintains distance from war supporters of every stripe and makes the public aware of consequences of violent conflict. Kempf identifies this “de-escalation oriented conflict coverage” as the first step towards peace journalism.

Framing by media

The present study uses framing as the broad theoretical framework. In recent times framing is increasingly being used by communication scholars in applied communication studies though framing theory traces its origin to the field of cognitive psychology and anthropology (Yang & Ishak, 2012). Framing is associated with assigning meaning to or interpreting information. It deals with the process of message construction by which media presents events so as to appeal to specific cognitive frameworks of the audience. It refers to the modes of presentation employed by various communicators or journalists to arrange information in a manner so as to match pre-existing schemas within the audience (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007).

Entman (1993) defines media framing as the process of selecting some aspects of perceived reality and making them more salient in a communicating text so as to promote a particular definition of a problem, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described.

It is usually seen that different frames are used in different contexts and also there are attempts to develop some frames by theorists which may become applicable in multiple contexts like those developed by Semetko and Valkenberg (2000) in the coverage of a range of issues, including integration, racial-ethnic issues, immigration, drugs, or crime. These five frames, *conflict, consequence, responsibility, morality and human interest*, developed by Semetko and Valkenberg have been used by Yang & Ishak (2012) in analysing the inter-ethnic conflict in Malaysia.

Journalists as such are understood to get influenced by various factors including social norms and organizational and modality constraints while framing news stories. Also their background, professional judgement, access to sources, knowledge about an issue and various other operational factors influence the process of framing (Scheufele, 1999; Park & Deshapriya, Undated). Lewis & Reese (2009) while exploring the 'War on terror' framing process with journalists argue that frames do not occur organically. They are constructed and disseminated as a result of social and institutional interests. They observe that "journalists adopt and naturalize frames put forth by powerful institutions". Scheufele (1999) argues that in the context of political communication framing must be understood from the perspective of social constructivism. Mass media are understood to have a strong impact by constructing social reality which is in turn achieved by framing images of reality.

Thus mass media can impose social frames to either legitimize or marginalize political movements so as to resonate with popular public and national sentiments (Song, 2007; Benford, 1997).

Methodology

Content analysis was used as the research methodology for this study. Two newspapers published from Assam and with highest circulation figures within the northeast region of the country were selected for the study. Of these, *Asomia Protidin* is an Assamese language daily with highest circulation within Assam and the other, *The Assam Tribune* is an English language daily, with second highest circulation within the region and highest circulation figures in its language section. According to Audit Bureau of Circulation in India, the 2013 average daily circulation figure of *Asomia Protidin* was 170,658 and that of *The Assam Tribune* was 78,341.

The two newspapers were studied during the two month period July 21 to September 21, 2012 when the conflict was at its peak. The first incident of violent conflict occurred on the night of June 20, 2012 and was reported in the next day's newspapers. The whole impasse later reached its political settlement with the symbolic flagging-off of the 'Train of Hope' on September 7, 2012 that helped the migrants from northeast to other states of India return to their respective place of work after having fled from there due to fear of communal backlash. This also marked the beginning of the process of rehabilitation of the conflict affected people to return from the refugee camps in Kokrajhar. And hence the period during September 7 to September, 21 is considered to see the continuity of coverage on the issue in the two newspapers.

All published items related to Kokrajhar violence in the two newspapers during the period were analysed with reference to three parameters: 1. Attention 2. Conflict sensitive reporting, and 3. News frames used.

Attention was measured in terms of number of newspaper items published, type of newspaper items and their positioning in the newspaper.

To analyse conflict sensitive journalism practiced by the two newspapers, four pointers were identified.

1. Context and background – where newspaper items go beyond reporting the manifest violent conflict and binary perspectives of winners and losers to provide the background and context to the conflict;
2. Options for conflict resolution – newspaper items that explore common grounds between the confronting parties and explore possibilities for reconciliation of the conflict;
3. Use of multiple sources – where newspaper items do not just quote the dichotomous opinion of the two parties involved in conflict and the “official sources in power” but try to gain insights from other sources in civil society who may have some creative ideas for conflict resolution;
4. Use of demonizing labels, victimizing and provocative terms – the newspaper items resort to highlighting acts of violence through use of provocative adjectives, demonizing labels and victimizing terminologies.

Deductive framing technique was used to analyse the framing of the news stories by the two newspapers. This study adopted and modified the frames used by Yang & Ishak (2012) - conflict, human interests, economic consequences, morality and responsibility; and Conaway (1999) – racial frame and identity frame, in studying inter-ethnic conflicts. The frames identified and the operational definitions of the same are as follows -

1. Conflict - emphasizes conflict among and between individuals, groups and parties as a means of capturing audience interest; news item refers to two sides instead of more than two sides of the issue/problem and try to designate winners and losers.
2. Consequences - reports an event, issue or problem in terms of the consequences on individuals, groups, parties, or the country.
3. Responsibility – the news reports try to attribute responsibility for its cause or solution to either the government or to an individual, group, or party.
4. Human interest - brings a human face or an emotional angle to the presentation of an event or issue; emphasizes how individuals and groups are affected.

A total number of 202 newspaper items from *The Assam Tribune* and from 408 *Asomiya Pratidin* were analysed. Only items which had relevance and reference to the conflict were considered for analysis. Codes were developed for each of the three parameters. Accordingly, all the items were coded for analysis.

To verify the applicability of the codes, the researcher coded 10% of the total number of items in each newspaper for a pilot test. After the pilot test, necessary changes in the codes were incorporated. Then 20% of the total number of items was coded by the researcher and another two coders to bring out inter-coder reliability. 122 newspaper items were thus coded and the inter coder reliability calculated through Holsti method, was found to be 0.923, which is within the range of allowed degree of inter coder reliability. After this the researcher coded all the other items.

Drawing from the list of framing mechanism or focal points for identifying and measuring news frames proposed by Vreese (2005), seven framing mechanisms – headlines, subheads, photos, photo captions, leads, source selection and quotes selection – were selected and used for the identification and measurement of frames.

Again, since one of the two newspapers taken up for analysis was an Assamese language paper and the other English, to eradicate the biases which could arise out of the syntagmatic as well as paradigmatic differences between the two languages, the headlines appearing in the Assamese newspaper were first translated into English before doing the coding. Once again to verify the consistency of the translation, 10 % of the headlines in the Assamese newspaper were translated by two other translators to bring out inter-translator reliability. The Holsti reliability was found to be 0.9667. Subsequently the remaining headlines were translated into English before proceeding for identification and measurement of frames.

FINDINGS

A total number of 610 newspaper items on the Bodo-Muslim conflict in the two newspapers – *The Assam Tribune* and *Asomiya Pratidin* were taken up for the study.

Attention: Extent of Coverage and News Sources

Asomiya Pratidin's coverage of the issue with 408 news and other items was much more extensive, infact more than twice the volume of coverage by *The Assam Tribune* (202 items). As indicated in Table 1, both the newspapers had most of their coverage in the form of straight news. During the first 30 days of the conflict period, *AsomiyaPratidin* was seen to devote much of the front page to coverage of the issue. Again, a good number of editorials in both newspapers addressed the issue during the period. Over a period of 60 days, *Asomiya Pratidin* had 24 and *The Assam Tribune* had 13 editorials pertaining to the conflict, calling attention to the degree of importance the two newspapers accorded to the issue.

Table 1: Extent of News Coverage

	<i>Asomiya Pratidin</i> (n=408) %	<i>The Assam Tribune</i> (n=202) %
Type:		
1. Straight News	85.29	82.67
2. Editorials	5.88	6.43
3. Columns	2.94	2.97
4. Letters	1.71	3.94
5. Opinions	2.69	1.98
6. Interviews	0	0

The most frequently cited sources in both the newspapers were representatives of the ruling party, opposition parties, Bodo as well as Muslim pressure groups and the police. *The Assam Tribune* mostly cited official sources and refrained from making arbitrary comments, *Asomiya Pratidin* was seen to often run stories without proper attribution.

Conflict Sensitive Journalism

As depicted in table 2, both the newspapers scored rather low in terms of the indicators for conflict sensitive journalism. Both *Asomiya Pratidin* and *The Assam Tribune* directed little attention to the presentation of context and background of the conflict. Six instances in *Asomiya Pratidin* and four in *The Assam Tribune* – in the form of columns, articles or editorials - were found where context and background was discussed.

In terms of looking for solutions for conflict resolution too, little was said. Only a few articles and columns (eight each in both the newspapers) addressed the issue of conflict resolution offering strategies for reconciliation.

Table 2: Indicators for Conflict Sensitive Journalism

	<i>Asomiya Protidin</i> (n=408) %	<i>The Assam Tribune</i> (n=202) %
Indicators:		
1. Context and background	1.47	1.98
2. Conflict Resolution	1.96	3.96
3. Multiple sources	0	0
4. Demonizing Labels, Victimizing and Provocative Terms	7.35	0

The absence of multiple sources was also glaring. Not a single news item was observed in either *The Assam Tribune* or *Asomiya Pratidin*, citing any other source beyond the two parties involved in conflict and the official sources like government and police.

The only positive indicator that *The Assam Tribune* portrayed was the avoidance of use of demonizing labels, victimizing and provocative terms. *Asomiya Pratidin*, however, was quite insensitive to this and made extensive and uninhibited use of such terms, particularly in the

headlines and lead paragraphs. For instance, *Asomiya Pratidin* carried a news item on July 27 with the headline ‘Gun trotting Hagrama army carrying out minorities massacre mission’.

NEWS FRAMES

The Conflict Frame

The analysis of frames used by the two newspapers revealed a picture both interesting and thought-provoking. The magnitude of the difference in the manner in which two leading newspapers of the region framed a single issue was unanticipated. As indicated in table 2, while the most salient frame found in *Asomiya Pratidin* was conflict, in *The Assam Tribune*, conflict frame was visibly downplayed. The *Asomiya Pratidin* presented every minute detail of the conflict, not missing any opportunity to accentuate the extent of terror and hostility. Headlines and sub-headlines were hugely provocative and one could observe deliberate attempts to sensationalize and heighten the sense of fear in the minds of the people. Sources were often quoted out of context and volatile comments were persistently used as headlines and lead paragraphs were worded so as to augment the melodrama and sensation. Photographs too depicted the violence in full scale, often blown up to boost the impact.

Table 3: News Frames

	<i>Asomiya Protidin</i> (n=408) %	<i>The Assam Tribune</i> (n=202) %
Frames:		
1. Conflict	73.03	2.47
2. Consequences	23.77	9.90
3. Responsibility	9.55	47.02
4. Human Interest	2.69	1.48

The Assam Tribune on the other hand framed conflict in more objective and ‘matter of fact’ terms. Facts were reported without over-emphasizing on the violence. Smaller incidents of violence were not even covered. Provocative language was avoided. Headlines simply summarized the story and did not needlessly call for attention. Use of photographs depicting violence was minimal and as a rule carried captions for appropriate contextualization.

Photographs depicting extreme violence which could accentuate the sense of trauma or fear or generate emotional turmoil were carefully avoided.

The Consequence Frame

The consequence frame was used by the newspapers to focus on the loss and damage caused by the conflict, action taken by police and other competent authorities, protests by public and pressure groups – strikes, demonstrations, rallies and bandhs. Again there was marked difference in the way the two newspapers used the consequence frame. *Asomiya Pratidin* significantly highlighted the consequences of the conflict both in terms of the volume of coverage and the intensity of the emphasis given. Consequence was the second most used frame in this newspaper after conflict with almost one-fourth of the total news items framed as consequence. Use of provocative adjectives and sensational idioms used in the headlines and leads along with stirring emotional language in the body of the news items mainly characterized the consequence frame in this newspaper. Photographs too contributed towards this end. For instance, photographs of dead bodies of children, broken down houses, relief camps, people staging demonstrations, vehicles burning during bandhs and protests, police firing etc. were consistent appearances.

In the *The Assam Tribune* only about 10 percent of the items used the consequence frame. Unlike *Asomiya Pratidin* which published multiple items on consequence on several days, *The Assam Tribune* summarized all consequences into just a single report on a given day. Headlines were found to be crisp and objective. Sensationalization and exaggeration of consequences were avoided. Photographs also came across as more balanced. The avoidance of depiction of stark evidences of violent consequences was noticeable in *The Assam Tribune* in contrast to *Asomiya Pratidin*. On August 29, 2012 for instance, while reporting about a bandh called by All Assam Minority Students' Union (AAMSU) the previous day, *The Assam Tribune* carried the photograph of a defence personnel keeping vigil along a deserted road, while the *Asomiya Pratidin* carried several photographs showing violence during the bandh.

The Responsibility Frame

The two newspapers used the responsibility frame to attribute responsibility - for causing the conflict, finding ways for resolution of the conflict and rehabilitation of the victims - to either

the government or to certain individuals or groups. While only about 10 percent of the news items in *Asomiya Pratidin* used this frame, *The Assam Tribune* was seen to make extensive use of this frame with almost half of the total news items framed along the lines of responsibility.

Both the newspapers quoted individuals and groups ascribing responsibility to others for causing the violence. While the opposition parties, particularly Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), and All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF) and different pressure groups like All Assam Students' Union (AASU), All Assam Minority Students' Union (AAMSU), All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) were reported to blame the government for not doing enough to pre-empt the conflict, the government on the other hand tried to evade blame and shift part of the responsibility to preceding governments. Reports quoted government representatives, including the Chief Minister contesting allegations of protecting illegal migrants to retain his party's vote bank. Holding the government responsible, different groups urged for appropriate government action towards conflict mitigation, finding lasting solutions to prevent recurrence of such incidents and rehabilitation of the sufferers. While organizations like AASU, ABSU etc pushed for updating of the National Register of Citizens (NRC), identification and deportation of illegal immigrants and sealing of the porous Indo-Bangladesh border, the AAMSU pressed for protection of the rights of the Muslim community. Many organizations also raised demands for instituting a high-level probe into the matter. The government's actions towards granting compensations and making arrangements for rehabilitation of the victims and appealing to members and leaders of the conflicting communities to assume collective responsibility for maintaining peace was also covered under this frame.

The Human Interest Frame

Both the newspapers made use of this frame to give news presentation an emotional slant. The use of this frame was limited - mostly used to draw attention to the consequences of the conflict, the sufferings of the innocent and attempts by these people to rebuild their life. The concentration here was to draw attention to the lives of certain individuals rather than generalizing the issue giving it a more humane treatment. Headlines were worded to appeal to the reader's emotions. Photographs accompanying such stories served to consolidate the frame. *Asomiya Pratidin*, for instance, carried the story of a mother searching for her son lost

during the conflict. *The Assam Tribune* carried a picture of actress Chetana Das crying while consoling a camp inmate.

CONCLUSION

In the northeast region of India which is composed of over 400 distinct tribal, ethnic and non-ethnic groupings, the slant of public opinion, the society's construction of reality and the role played by media can well be decisive factors in outlining an effective strategic development policy within the region. Since independence, the northeast region of India has been witness to a lot of restructuring and disorder. Sensitive and responsible journalism within the region therefore bears a prime significance in this politically strategic yet vulnerable region of India.

The role assumed by mass media in imposing social frames either to magnify or marginalize a conflict situation is not sans responsibility particularly in the context of a multi-ethnic region like northeast India. Many-a-time, media coverage of a conflict situation is purely influenced by social or institutional interests and the descriptions presented are either framed images of the actuality or constructed realism. In such a situation, it becomes necessary that the journalists adopt a multi-dimensional strategic approach while reporting that focuses purely towards finding solutions to the conflict rather than extensively highlighting on the conflict itself.

Instead of generalizing the issue robustly, it is worth appreciation when media approaches a conflict situation with sensitivity and concern. Giving a more humane treatment to the style of news presentation, media can undoubtedly be a dynamic stakeholder in improving inter-ethnic harmony within a region like northeast India which has for long been considered a trouble-torn region from the outsider perspective, and probably overturn this notional frame itself.

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