

REPORTING THE CONFLICT: INDIA'S NORTHEAST

by

Dr. SubirBhaumik

Author & Former BBC correspondent

email : sbhaum@gmail.com

Since independence, India's northeast has been mostly in the focus for its violent separatist movements. These movements have peaked and ebbed but most of them never quite gone away. Apart from these, North East India has also witnessed some of the most powerful mass agitations and violent ethno-religious riots in independent India.

In the broader landscape, the eastern states of India had witnessed the fierce Naxalite (Maoist) uprising in 1967 and also a resurgence of Maoist guerrilla activity over the first decade of this century. The neighbourhood has been equally disturbed. Tibet has been in ferment since the Chinese takeover.[1] Bangladesh won its independence through a bloody liberation war in which more than two million people died. But, sovereignty has not meant space and stability for Bangladesh. Much of the country's liberation war leadership was wiped out in 1975 in a military takeover. Also, a violent tribal insurgency rocked the southeastern Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh for two decades until a settlement was reached in 1997. Moreover, in the recent years, Islamic radicalism is raised its ugly head with the murder of secular bloggers now – and attacks on many journalists specially during the Khaleda Zia regime (2001-2006) Eight of them, including a BBC stringer ManikSaha, were killed in 2004 alone. Many other journalists complain of regular death threats and some, like the Time magazine's SaleemSamad, left to settle in the West after being imprisoned and tortured for months. Samad returned after the Awami League came back to power in 2009.

On the east, Burma's ethnic minorities have been up in arms against the country's central government since the country's independence in 1948. The Kachins, the Chins and the Arkanese have rebelled against Rangoon since the early 1960s, unsettling Burma's northwestern borders with India. The use of Burma's frontier region by northeast Indian rebel

groups has complicated the scenario- as have the emerging linkages between the northeast Indian rebels and the Nepali and the Indian Maoist groups. Any journalist trying to expose such linkages, which explain the spurt in smuggling of drugs and arms, runs the risk of becoming a target.

For a journalist based in India's northeast, all these mean not only following the conflicts within one's own borders but also beyond them. Besides keeping a watch on complex developments of India's troubled border regions, we are also compelled to look beyond our immediate borders and link it to the changing geopolitics of Asia. It has often meant "operating like a guerrilla"- illegal border crossings, dealing with intelligence agents, drug lords, smugglers and ruthless rebels, snooping on corrupt politicians and government officials with illicit links to rebels and drug lords. Physical and professional survival in this situation is not always easy. Many journalists who did not hail from the region left for areas safer and less complex or in fact switched over to other safer professions.

Acquaintances, Friends and 'Sources'

India's northeast is a bridge between two great civilizations, the Indo-Gangetic and the Southeast Asian. Population have moved back and forth and turned it into a great melting pot of races, religions and cultures. Ethnic conflicts such as Moamaria rebellion in Assam, a northeast state of India located just below the eastern Himalayan foothills have scarred the region's landscape since medieval times. In the post-colonial period, the conflicts have intensified over lands, jobs, business opportunities, political space and cultural competition. Fairness and balance has usually been the first casualty in reporting.

I was a college teacher, not a journalist as yet, when my home state Tripura, in northeast India, was gripped by violent ethnic riots in June 1980. Tripura's demography has undergone the most profound change since the Partition of India in 1947. In the last 50 years, the indigenous tribes people have been reduced to a minority and Bengali settlers from East Pakistan- now Bangladesh- have come to constitute more than 70 percent of the state's population. The tribes' people have lost out on lands, jobs and other opportunities, and have been marginalized in politics and the economy of the state. Since the late 1970s, younger generations of tribesmen have formed underground rebel groups and unleashed much violence against the settlers. Over the past decade, kidnappings and killings have increased.

During the 1980 riots, the Bengalis suffered heavy losses. Hundreds were killed- nearly 400 in one village Mandai- one thousands were rendered homeless. The newspaper industry in Tripura is totally dominated by the Bengali settlers. All the Bengali vernacular and English dailies and weeklies are owned by Bengalis; the reporting corps is almost wholly Bengali and there is no newspaper of local cable channel in Kokborok, the language of the tribes' people. During the 1980 riots, the reportage in the Tripura newspapers (there was no local cable TV channel those days) was an endless string of "weep-and-lament" stories about the massacre of the Bengalis, their woes in refugee camps and sopolitics and society forever and made "infiltration" from neighboring countries a national issue. Like Tripura, so in Assam, the Bengalis were target community. After a few months in *DainikSambad*, I joined the *News Star* in Guwahati, Assam's capital, in April 1982. The management was fair and balanced, much more even-handed than the management in the *DainikSambad*-otherwise, there was no reason they would have recruited a Bengali reporter in such turbulent times.

Any indigenous community always resents demographic change anywhere in the world. They perceive the settlers as a threat and Assam was no different. If the Americans perceive a threat in the "changing color" of their country, if the hyphenated identity can persist in what is essentially a settler society, if the US government can make laws to restrict migration, why should one blame the Assamese or the Tripuris for being resentful of the Bengali settlers, the refugee and the economic migrant alike? The Thakurs and Pandits in Uttar Pradesh will not accept the Tamils becoming a majority in their state or vice versa.

So I made a conscious effort to shed the "us" and "them" barrier. As I made a conscious effort to understand the Assamese side of the story, the Tripuri side of the story, I started making a wide range of acquaintances, many of whom later became trusted sources. The source network widened as I reached out to other tribal groups like the Assamese and the Bengalis, the Muslims and the Christians, the migrant and the neo-convert, and even the smaller communities from other parts of India who have settled in this troubled region have a viewpoint that cannot be overlooked.

For a journalist reporting this region (or any other similar conflict zone of comparable diversity), it is important to have a wide range of sources in the various communities. It is important to know the community leaders, young and old, traditional and modern, interact with them and also reach out to the grassroots to get a varied perspective. In any other conflict zones of the world, an intrepid journalist will have to cross the "identity barrier" and

develop access in all communities. So, ideally, a Protestant reporter in Belfast should be able to develop sources among Catholics, which, during a subsequent visit to Belfast on a study tour in 1990-1991, I found was very, very rare. An American or a British reporter in Iraq should be able to develop adequate sources among Iraqi rebels, even Al-Qaeda elements, if possible.

While reporting conflicts, fairness and balance of the journalist is the key to greater access and acceptability. And greater access and sourcing is a key to good comprehensive coverage. In conflicts, more than in other situations, a journalist may run the risk of getting one-sided with sources. So, it is important:

- (a) to consciously create the widest possible network of sources;
- (b) to assess the sources on a continuous basis, discard dubious ones (those who try to plant stories) and reinforce ties with credible ones;
- (c) to keep reaching out to diverse communities within the region and across the borders (in my case, the normal progression was to first reach out in Assam and Tripura, the Nagaland, Mizoram and Manipur, and finally to the Chakmas in Bangladesh and Kachins, Chins and Arkanese in Burma and round off the exercise by building adequate “mainstream contacts” in Burma and Bangladesh);
- (d) to make source-building a continuous exercise- so if one is weak in an area or does not have enough sources within a community or an important organization, there must be a conscious attempt to reach out;
- (e) to be fair and come across as fair because that is the key to wider networking and source-building;

and

- (f) to handle the sources through continuous interactions, periodic assessment and a balanced personal relationship that does not affect the journalist’s objectivity but binds the source and the journalist in a bond that transcends the attraction of material benefit.

The key question here is how personal a journalist can afford to get with his or her source. Some of them do become friends but beyond a personal level, whenever they offer a story, it needs to be closely tested out against other sources. The more personal a reporter's relationship with a source, the more closely a story offered by him or her should be scrutinized. The "motive analysis" of a source--of a source-turned-friend or a friend-turned-source—needs to be done at all levels of a story offered by him/her. If the source is a kin, it is preferable the story is handed over to another reporter in bureau. This is to avoid allegations of bias in future. Reporters have often been trapped by interested parties and have run a planted story; often without realizing it was one.

In an era when governments, rebels and corporations- almost everyone with an interest-develop media management capabilities, it is for the journalist to be ever more watchful. His/her power lies in his/her credibility and credibility is built up over years of unbiased, accurate reporting and a demonstrated evidence of integrity. Journalists, unlike intelligence services, rarely get to work with huge source funds so "buying off" sources is rarely possible in the media unless the stakes are high and the media organization is rich enough to afford the funds. It is therefore desirable that the journalist impression his or her source:

- (a) the sincerity of purpose (in our case, reporting as truly as possible); and
- (b) the unacceptability of favors of a material kind- just to get this across to a rebel leader that you value his interview or access to his base for pictures than the gifts he may offer.

But, there are elements that try to influence the coverage by leveraging the access he is offering. The Indian army has managed to get favorable coverage from TV channels by just leveraging the access to crews in remote areas.

If the army flies in TV crews to remote Siachen, as it often does, it ensures that the channels give them "positive publicity". It is often left to a probing magazine reporter, under no obligation to the army for flying in crews and providing "great pictures" by firing artillery pieces when there was no reason to fire, to write on the massive damage to the environment in and around Siachen and the possible shrinking of the Siachen glacier as a result of the huge military deployment. A probing eye, a still camera, a notepad and lot of research often yields a better-investigated story than a dozen cameras rolling to military orders. But, as I have

sometimes found, some interested parties have better media management instincts. They will take advantage by offering a real story that a journalist cannot reject for a fear of being scooped out by the competition.

The ULFA (an Assamese rebel group) military wing chief PareshBarua gave me critical information about fall of his bases in southern Bhutan during the Bhutanese military offensive in December 2003. There was no way I could get this information any faster from Bhutanese or Indian military sources. And all the information turned out to be correct. But, no military commander, rebel or regular army, likes admission of defeat. So why would Barua give me such information? A careful analysis revealed that Barua's disclosures would obviously make headline news and would find its place in many BBC broadcasts including the Bengali evening time news at 7.00 p.m. Indian time. That is one news broadcast all ULFA commanders listen to. Since the ULFA's wireless network suffers from limitations and it is important for the rebels to know which base has fallen and which has not, one of the quickest ways for Barua to inform his people on the ground was to pass on the information to a BBC correspondent. As a reporter desperate to stay ahead of the competition, I am not in a position to overlook such information. So though my broadcasts would prove useful to the ULFA, there was no way I could overlook it or not use it so long as the information was correct.

Scoops and faux pas

On 17 December 1995, an AN-26 transport aircraft flew over West Bengal's Purulia district and dropped a huge consignment of weapons close to midnight. Villagers watching a local ballad saw the parachutes coming down with the deadly cargo. One of them, an avid BBC listener, ran to a telephone booth and called me well past midnight that parachutes with weapons have come down on his village and that he had seen it all. Now West Bengal or even the troubled northeast Indian states, that I have closely covered, had never witnessed anything like this. Villagers like city-dwellers, are prone to exaggeration so this was a story hard to believe, not the least because a villager in Bengal has much less idea about weapons than a villager in Punjab with two sons in the army or paramilitary forces. I could not pass over this potential scoop just because it sounded unbelievable but this was an uncertain "eyewitness" to peg such a story on, even while it was just breaking. So, I asked him whether

there was any police or soldier in the village who could give me details about the weapons that had fallen. He said there was one Indian army soldier, one AmritHazra, who was on leave in the village from his posting in Kashmir. I asked him to get Hazra to the telephone booth double quick and promised to call back.

After twenty minutes, when I called back, Hazra was in the booth with the BBC man. I asked him his service number, which regiment he served (he was in the Jammu and Kashmir Light Infantry, JKLI in the army) and a bit about his army service to “assess” his value as a source on the arms drop story. Hazra impressed me as a valid eyewitness in view of his 12 years of military service and his obvious knowledge of weapons. He would be also less prone to rumor-mongering as well, I reasoned. So, I took down the details he provided on the drop, but at that unearthly hour, there was no official at the Jhalda Police Station (responsible for the area where the airdrop has happened). Those of them who had woken up and rushed to the villages where the parachutes had been sighted.

But, I was satisfied with Hazra’s comprehensive version and broke that BBC’s “two source rule” to report. The BBC Intake editor put a hold on my story because she was not satisfied with “eye-witnesses as primary sources”. “What does the local police or administration say?” she asked. My persuasive skills were taxed to the limit but she finally relented. But, my topline was changed—“Eye witnesses, among them off-duty soldiers, say that a large consignment of weapons have been dropped over villages in the Purulia district of India’s West Bengal state,” was the topline for the Purulia story break that put the BBC right on top of the competition.

The story made it into the morning cycle of BBC news broadcasts and I had clearly scooped the rest of the competition. As had happened so often in my career, the early tip-off had helped us react faster to the story and the first television footage that we got- way ahead of the Indian channels- helped us later when the BBC’s Network East produced a documentary on the Purulia arms drop.

My instinct in cultivating the wide network of BBC listeners- they even have clubs and I have motivated them to come out with a small monthly radio programme – had paid off. The listeners were on the outer circle of my source network-they were not core sources. But, they had time and again tipped me off on stories, particularly in the countryside, west Bengal and northeast India.

So, when 66 school children died when their bus plunged into the Ganges River, I got a call from one of our listeners in Murshidabad. An immediate check of the other channels and I realized I had got it first. But, the BBC is right in insisting on the two-source rule and it is always desirable to get an official version of events, even if the government is not too keen to reveal the stories. It is difficult to peg a story on sources such as rural BBC listener, though a few such people have graduated to emerge as district level stringers.

Few years back, this author was deluged by calls from a wide variety of BBC outlets- and even some other channels- about an air intrusion from Bangladesh. NDTV, AAJTAJ and ZEE were carrying this story about a plane entering Indian air space from Bangladesh, of people in a village in North Dinajpur district hearing a loud explosion and the colour of the pond had turned red. The local police superintendent was the source of the story and he was giving “phonos”, strangely as I found, from his official residence, not from the village where the “colour of the pond had turned red.” On checking, I found that he had not even visited the village. I checked with five sources - the base commander of Indian Air Force at Bagdogra in northern Bengal, the Air Force radar officials, the air traffic controller in Calcutta and Bagdogra airports and a top Signals Intelligence official capable of recording cockpit communication if the plane had flown and eluded the radars.

None of these sources reported any sighting of a low-flying aircraft from across the border. Those who were running the story had not checked with these sources. It turned out that the next day was the Indian Air Force Raising Day; the jet fighters were practicing for a sharp dive and pull up. When the planes dive, they slow down and then go full throttle when they pull up. At that stage, they invariably cross the “sound barrier” resulting in a massive noise resembling an explosion. So there was no intrusion but the journalists had sourced the story to a police official whose knowledge of planes was not much better than that of the panicky villagers who had reported the incident to him. I decided not to file the story at all but when my editor insisted that, “we should have something in the BBC system”, I turned out a small expose of the faux pas.

Often, journalists report hijacks and train accidents without realizing they were in fact reporting a mock hijack or an accident response drill. The only way to avoid such embarrassment is to develop and rely on a network of multiple sources. So, when the AFP reported a “head-on collision between two passenger trains” near Kharagpur town in southern Bengal, I checked with the stationmaster of Kharagpur and found no such thing had

happened. I told him the AFP is sourcing the story to “officials in India’s eastern Railway headquarters.” The station master than revealed that they were part of a mock drill to test the railway’s accident-response mechanism but a test message had mistakenly landed in the railways computer system in Calcutta creating all the confusion.

So, the value of “double check” and “cross check” needs to be emphasized. I realized the value of repeated check during my first faux pas as a reporter in 1988 when I reported the death of a Naga rebel leader in a shootout with his factional rivals who claimed to have killed him. The rebel leader was indeed shot and badly injured but he was mistaken as dead and later rescued by his supporters and taken to a nursing home in Assam incognito. The rebel leader recovered and is now negotiating with the Indian government. The folly of not checking with his family, his close supporters (to whom I had access) and of putting up a death story without the body being recovered has left an indelible mark on my professional consciousness. That was my first and, hopefully, my last faux pas.

Some journalists create scoops and end up creating confusion, even death. A *United News of India* correspondent, towards the end of the Bangladesh liberation war, reported the fall of a Pakistani garrison in Comilla region. The report was carried in All India Radio and some other radio stations. Thousands of Bengali refugees belonging to villages around that garrison immediately left for their villages and ran into a deadly ambush, with trigger-happy Pakistani soldiers shooting them down like flies. At least 600 refugees were killed. The Assam correspondent of a Calcutta newspaper came to the city for an annual reporters’ conference. The army on that day started its first big counter-insurgency operation in Assam. The reporter had no inkling of the move and was caught by surprise. So, in a desperate bid to outsource the competition, he ran a story saying the Indian army moved into a separatist base using tanks and helicopter gun ships. It was a gross exaggeration. The operation was limited to an infantry assault and the ULFA rebels did not exactly stand up and fight. They melted into the jungles only to regroup later.

In a region like India’s troubled northeast, the threat of stringer monopoly is a serious problem. Since the culture of journalist training is non-existent, foreign agencies tend to offer stringer ships to one or two journalists who can write according to the agency’s style. Such journalists tend to end up with a monopoly-- between two or three of them, they report for all the top global agencies, broadcast stations and big Western newspapers. It becomes a bit of a privileged club that “creates” stories by mutual consent and effort. In a remote region like

India's Northeast, such professional "syndicates" have emerged as a major problem. Two or three reporters reporting for a wide range of agencies, papers, magazines and TV channels get a lot of attention from the powers that matters. They use it to blackmail or seek favors and end up destroying whatever is left of professional journalism.

An AP story about 24 militants killed in Dhaka turned out to have been planted on the agency by the police chief just to drive home the point that northeast Indian rebels were based in Bangladesh. That is not a false allegation but the AP stringer got sucked into the India-Bangladesh "media war" on the issue of rebel bases. Both countries have accused each other of sheltering rebels. Interestingly, the allegations of both sides are partly true but much of it is plain propaganda, which journalists need to stay away from.

Many journalists would not run such stories by themselves but often do so under "outlet pressure". They become victims of the "herd mentality". I often get a flurry of calls from several BBC outlets when any agency carries a story. I got scores of calls when AP ran the "24 militants killed in Dhaka" story. The same happened when other TV channels ran the "air intrusion from Bangladesh" story. In an era of cut - throat channel competition, when all reporters fancy breaking news and staying ahead of others, others often blindly pick up a story run by one channel. This happens a lot in remote region like Northeast. So, a peer or two can start a bogus story packaged sensationally and many others just follow them into perpetuating the fraud.

Psyops and force multipliers

The AP story from Guwahati on "24 northeast Indian militants killed in Dhaka" was a classic case of psyops (the abbreviated version of psychological operations). With a huge deployment of army, paramilitary and police forces fighting a host of separatist rebel armies, psyops has become a regular feature of journalism in conflict-ridden zones like India's Kashmir and northeastern states. The army and paramilitary forces, the intelligence agencies and even the state police have their own budgets and dedicated personal psyops. While most organizations use their intelligence units or public relation officials to perform the task. The Indian army has a full-fledged psyops cell in the Directorate of Military Intelligence. Officers working for this cell print visiting cards that proudly declare their identity. Even the Assam police have a dedicated psyops official under the more euphemistic title of "Security Advisor". Bigger intelligence agencies like the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) employ

“media directors”, mostly drawn from the Indian Information Services.

And what do they do? Plant and push stories that run down the enemy line for promoting their own cause and image, cover their tracks on a operation gone bad or killing or blame it falsely on others (routine for them to pass off a secret killing done by their assets as “infighting amongst rebels”) and create a feel good atmosphere about their own operations. It could be a one-off story or a series often designed and crafted to run for a while. Psyops planners carefully estimate and account the capabilities of their “media assets” and the reach of the media they work for and whether the “plant” would hit the target area and have the necessary impact. It is war through the media- whoever said pen is mightier than sword is vindicated- but at the cost of professional journalism. Even fellow journalists shy away from exposing psyops because they would have to expose colleagues.

During the Kargil War, the RAW intercepted a telephone communication between General Pervez Musharraf and his chief of staff, Lt. General Mohammed Aziz. The general was in China and was instructing his chief of staff on deployment of regular Pakistani troops in Kargil. The intercept nailed the Pakistani Army about non-involvement in Kargil, that only “*mujahideens*” were involved in the fighting. The RAW’s chief Arvind Dave, facing a lot of flak for lack of prior intelligence on the intrusions in Kargil, took the intercept to the political bosses. The Foreign Ministers decided to make it public and called in several Western and Asian ambassadors to brief them on the Pakistani involvement. India did score a huge point but RAW officials running the Pakistan and China desks were not amused because their key source of intelligence had been blown. Not the least because SIGINT is the only real source of intelligence on China.

So, they designed a psyops campaign that sought to reinforce a Pakistani stereotype that ran down Indian capabilities. Next day, some India papers ran the story of India actually getting the intercept from the CIA. The story hit the target. The Pakistanis believed it because they like to believe India is not capable of such a big job but then they turned round to ponder why would the CIA pass on such a key to intercept to India. Within three days, Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif asked Musharraf to pull back his troops from Kargil and rushed to the United States to tell President Bill Clinton that his government was withdrawing from Kargil and India should be asked to follow suit. The reporters who ran this psyops material also could not be detected. They were seen as RAW bashers (some of them were but they had gulped the story because they did not want the RAW to get credit for what it had not done),

anti-establishment story exposing an intelligence agency when they were actually promoting one of its key tactical objectives.

Intelligence officers having key media contacts in the battle zone or in big cities where lots of journalists are located and papers and magazines are published, staff the psyops cells in the Military Intelligence. They have a proper knack to cultivate the media, to look after their needs, as they say.

It starts off with the journalist running a psyops material in his or her output, then doing the same for different reasons- the desire to beat competition by securing scoops, small favors and even patriotism. If the intelligence officials realize the journalist has worthy newsgathering capabilities, he/she is slowly turned into a regular asset. Many journalists in India's northeast have found themselves on psyopwork. They are seen both as "sources" and "force-multipliers".

During the two Gulf Wars, the United States had lent respectability to "force multipliers" by formalizing a structure of "embedded journalism". The Pentagon stresses the need to win the "information war" as part of its "Revolution in Military Affairs" (RMA). A Pentagon publication in 1996 defines psyops as "planned operations to convey select information and indicators to foreign audiences to influence their emotions, motives, objective reasoning and ultimately the behaviors of foreign governments organisations, groups and individuals".[2] The NATO has a slightly different definition of psyops that says they are "planned psychological activities in peace, crisis and war directed to enemy, friendly and neutral audiences in order to influence attitudes and behavior affecting the achievement of political and military objectives".[3]

During its long involvement in counter-insurgency where "winning hearts and minds" is seen as a priority, the Indian Army and its paramilitary forces as well as intelligence agencies have quietly developed a culture of psyops by developing "media assets" who are used as "force multipliers". After carefully studying the use of the media by the Pentagon as "force multiplier" in the 1991 Gulf War, the Indian Army initiated a phased army-media interaction seminar at the levels of divisions, corps, and regional command and in the army headquarters in Delhi. Reporters and editors were invited to interact with officers. The army uses the classic teacher-bully combination to find "force multipliers" and willing sources who could then be converted into media warriors.

Many rebel Groups get a lot of local media support, at least in the initial stages of the movement, because local journalists empathise with their cause. But, some rebel groups have developed considerable finesse in handling the media. The Naga separatist group NSCN has done particularly well in cultivating top editors and journalists, even political commentators. They have learnt “to look after” these big media guns when they visit the rebel leaders in Bangkok, Amsterdam or Hague. Air tickets, good hotels, even shopping allowances are provided by the cash-rich NSCN. So, they score on coverage during conflict within the region – influential journalists have even supported NSCN’s key objective of “greater Nagaland” at the cost of Manipur’s interest though the tiny state is likely to lose a huge area if its Naga-inhabited territories are merged with Nagaland.

In North East, the media is often polarized, its loyalty divided between the Indian security forces and the establishment or the Rebels challenging it. It has become really difficult to tread the middle ground to stick to the objective journalism. The journalist needs to engage both sides, or rather all sides, involved in the conflict but engagement is often interpreted as bias – or projected as one by an interested party.

The atmosphere vitiated by psyops prompts the party affected by a particular report to question the credibility of the journalist. Serious efforts are made to undermine his or her credibility. In 2002, Time correspondent Alex Perry exposed the growing presence of foreign *jihadis* in Bangladesh in his now famous “Deadly Cargo” story that talked of the arrival of a large number of Al-Qaeda activists in Bangladesh’s Chittagong Port in the winter of 2001-2002. The Bangladesh government reacted furiously and websites and newspapers run by the country’s military intelligence were quick to dub him as an “embedded RAW journalist”. Perry’s take home salary was four to five times than that of the RAW chief and the British-born reporter had just emerged from a fierce plastering by the Indian establishment for questioning the mental and physical health of the Indian Prime Minister AtalBehari Vajpayee. He had to face trouble in India and the BJP government was upset over most of his Kashmir stories.

Elites and subalterns

Our generation in journalism loved playing the anti-establishment role - adversary to the establishment. The generations before us emerged out of the country’s freedom struggle almost out of it so they identified themselves closely with the politicians who were elected to

govern the country. In two decades however, the fourth Estate had got reasonable disillusioned with the way the country had shaped up and another generation of journalists, the post-midnight children took over the key positions in reporting. The Emergency was the major attack on press in the independence era, when many of the country's senior editors found themselves behind bars and their publications subjected to ruthless censorship. For those of us who came into the profession just after the Emergency, the establishment was a monster out to destroy Indian democracy- so it had to be attacked and exposed and its role questioned at all levels. Since, the profession lacked the financial security and glamor it now has, most journalists of our generation came from some popular anti-establishment movement or at least reflected the anti-establishment value. And most of them were truly middle class people, many from the lower middle class. They knew the plight of the man on the street and went in for journalism at the grassroots.

Now when India is emerging into a new era of liberalization, stock markets booming to unprecedented heights and the professions- journalism included- are go through a salary revolution, the Indian middle class are steadily tamed and co-opted into the establishment. Their taste for "hard news" is waning, they want to read or see the 'soft stuff' more than ever before. A recent audience survey by a leading global market research company, Synovate, has shown that 61 per cent of the consumers in India seek news about entertainment, 56 per cent sports, and 35 per cent current affairs. Politics as a distant genre of news comes way behind with 38 per cent, followed by fashion (21 per cent), business (17 per cent), technology (13 per cent), finance (8 per cent), weather (7 per cent) and traffic (2 per cent).[4]

The anti-establishment attitude of the Indian press has been largely replaced by a new brand of "shoulder-rubbing", celebrity-driven 'feel-good' and 'soft' journalism with something like the Tehelka (famous for an exposé on government corruption) exposé becoming more an exception than a rule. There are TV channels who like to recruit journalists with "appropriate backgrounds" and "with the right connections" What his or her father and mother does is more important than his or her talent. Television thus reduces journalists to byte-soldiers, the real shine and glitter being cornered by the presenters in the studios. That has happened in India.

The establishment thus finds it easy to manipulate the media, particularly television, because very few journalists are interested in exposés and anti-establishment journalism. Toeing the official line, getting the right pictures, rubbing shoulders with the celebrities is seen as the

easier option because there is a perceived lack of market for hard journalism. Trivialisation of the agenda is inevitable. The media is now part of the ruling elite in India, not the one to challenge it. This leaves its inevitable impact on the focus and quality of journalism particularly in situations of conflict like that prevails in Northeast.

Nowhere is the media priority reflected better – and proves how convoluted it is -- than in the way the national media went berserk with the Sheena Bora murder story (covering her Assamese mother Indrani's misdeeds) but all the while neglecting the devastating floods in Assam which had left more than 60 dead. This provoked a cartoon – an Assamese lady stuck in the mud house roof crying loud “ I am Indrani, cover me ”. [5]

ENDNOTES

- [1] *In 1950, the People's Liberation Army entered the Tibetan area of Chamdo. In 1951, the Seventeen Point Agreement was reached affirming Chinese sovereignty over Tibet with a joint administration of the central government of China and the Tibetan government. In 1959, the 14th Dalai Lama fled Tibet and established a government in exile at Dharamsala in northern India. China says that Tibet has been indivisible part of China de jure since the Yuam Dynasty 700 years ago.*
- [2] *Joint Publication, 3-13, 1996, quoted in Philip M. Taylor (2003), Psychological operations: Media during enduring freedom, in DayaKishanThussu and Des Freedman (Eds.), War and the MediaReporting Conflict 24/7, Delhi: Vistar Publications, 2003.*
- [3] *MC-402 of 1998, quoted in Taylor, Ibid.*
- [4] *Please see www.newswatch.in/index.php?itemid=1294*
- [5] *Forgotten floods: Why India cant afford to ignore Assam," BBC article by SubirBhaumik -- <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-34242066>*