

MEDIA & NORTH-EAST: ALIENATION OF THE SEVEN SISTERS

by

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Abstract: *News from North East does not make national headlines. Certain news like the recent Chandel ambush of Manipur or mob lynching in Nagaland have undoubtedly been well covered by the national media. But when Tripura recommends and subsequently Armed Forces Special Power Act is lifted from Tripura, it reins unnoticed by and large. The pressing issues plaguing this region mostly go unreported. This paper is an attempt to trace out the reasons as to why North-East fails to attract the attention of national media from the perspective of a practicing journalist.*

Key words: *Gavin Young, insurgency in North-East, Chandel ambush, Anna Hazare and social icons of North-East and media ethics*

Introduction:

The ‘seven sisters’ has always failed to hog the attention of mainstream media. But this scenario has changed a little bit and for this credit should be bestowed on the shoulders of ace boxer from North-east Mary Kom and AFSPA crusader the ‘Iron Lady’ of Manipur Irom Sharmila. The striking part of the tale is that both these ladies are from Manipur— one of the restive states of North-East.

Terrorism has become a global problem. Today no part of the globe is safe. The whole world is witnessing the menace of terrorism. Israel and India are the twin states which are encountering foreign bred terrorists. While saying so one might counter this observation by claiming that compared to Jammu & Kashmir, in North-East the dreaded militant outfits are not being exported rather they have been raised in India. Of late many reports have indicated that the militants who are operating in North-East which is considered to be India’s troubled periphery are getting tacit support from our neighbouring countries. Let’s not get into this debate.

The thrust area of this paper is to trace out the reasons as to why North-East fails to attract the attention of mainstream media because even after 68 years of independence India's troubled periphery is still witnessing bloodbath. Disillusioned sons of the 'seven sisters' are picking up guns at a time when they are supposed to pick up pens. Have we ever tried to find out the reasons?

Various parties have ruled the country. Doles after doles have been announced for North-East. The sordid tale of 'Seven Sisters' is continuing unabated. Rampant corruption has become an order of the day in North-East. Unfortunately these pressing issues of India's alienated child fail to become the headlines of the so-called national dailies.

Ace TV journalist and the former president of Editor's Guild of India, RajdeepSardesai when asked about this insipid attitude of mainstream media towards North-East he said, "This is mainly due to tyranny of distance." Can this statement be accepted as an excuse?

It would be apt for us to revisit the year 1961. In that year British journalist Gavin Young of 'The Observer' fame visited India to report on the unreported war between the Nagas and the Indian army. Prior to his arrival, Delhi as reports indicate never allowed any journalist to report on this 'hidden war'. Now, the question that impinges in our mind is to why the authorities in Delhi become so tensed when they are asked to talk on North-East.

It is undoubtedly true that the Chandel ambush has once again put North-East in mainstream media but unfortunately for the wrong reasons. For decades India is bearing the brunt of terrorism in Jammu & Kashmir. The state has failed to rein in the Pakistan sponsored terrorists. Compared to Jammu & Kashmir, Tripura is now a terror free state. Tripura has shown and proved that terrorism can indeed be uprooted. Has the counter insurgency operations of Tripura ever dominated the space of the so-called national media? Tripura counter insurgency operation can be considered as a model because it also carried out cross-border operations in neighbouring Bangladesh like the recent cross border operation carried out by Indian army just after the Chandel ambush.

The separatist leader of Jammu & Kashmir MasratAlam became the darling of the mainstream media after his release from jail. But the 'Iron Lady' of Manipur who has been fighting against

the draconian AFSPA sees her name in national media only when her case is heard. Is it not alienation? North-East is a land of diverse cultures, ethnic tribes.

North-East represents heterogeneity at its extreme with high level of ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversities; the ethnic conflicts in the region are a reflection of innumerable reasons. This is reflected in the patterns of conflicts which are varied in their nature and it remains divergent and ever changing. These range from secession to autonomy, movement against illegal-immigrants, ethnic conflicts and the perceived sense of isolation from mainstream India which has resulted in violence and mass mobilization.

To drive home this point let us recall the horrific riots that took place at BTAD. The rioters have claimed many innocent lives. Compared to Godhra carnage the BTAD riots failed to evoke response from the far-flung areas of India and the reason is it didn't get enough coverage. Is it not an example of alienation?

Much water has flown through the Brahmaputra River but nothing has changed till date. North-East is still considered a buffer zone by national media. The national media has been reporting on North-East's conflicts, tribes, under development since years. The time has come to come out of this ghetto. The time has come to shed this habit of providing stereotype reports. This will no longer attract the readers and viewers. Apart from North-East's restive past, this region has enough potential to fill the coffers of Delhi. North-East has the blessing of Mother Earth.

Moreover, it also can't be denied that North-East is a strategically important region. The region shares a porous border of at least 4,500km with Myanmar, Bangladesh, Bhutan and parts of China. The rebel outfits have used this geographical position to the best of their ability. They have set up their camps in the dense forests of Myanmar.

North-East also acts as a lynchpin between Southeast Asia and East Asia. In the year 2008, just a month before the Mumbai attack, Assam witnessed a terror attack. At that point of time nine serial blasts took place and it claimed the lives of 100 innocent people. Basically North-East is considered to be a region which is at war with India. If we look at the history of North-East then we will find that in the last 60 years this region has witnessed the birth of 117 rebel outfits. Out of these at least 20 rebel groups are still carrying out their operation.

By turning the pages of the list of Union Home Ministry we find that across India out of 35 militant outfits which have been banned under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (1967), 11 outfits are from North-East itself. Out of these banned militant outfits three are from Assam, six are from Manipur and two are from Tripura.

In a bid to end insurgency the Union government has engaged itself into a dialogue with 15 rebel groups. But sadly the talks have not reached its logical conclusion because the demands of these rebel groups are very complicated. The lone aim of these militant outfits is to secede from India. This demand if met then India would become a balkanized nation. But this bitter feeling for the Indian state has not grown in their minds all of a sudden. The sheer neglect of Delhi towards North-East has given birth to this bitter attitude. The great famine of Mizoram gave birth to Mizo National Famine Front in 1966. In Assam United Liberation Front of Assam came into being in protest against illegal immigration. But Delhi's insipid approach towards these crises has provided opportunities to these dreaded outfits on a platter and as a result today North-East has cropped up to be a disturbed region.

Reasons for this feeling of alienation

Since times immemorial Northeasterners have been alleging that they are being treated like a step-child by Delhi. In this context it would be apt to recall the views of historian LokendraArambam, a former president of ApunbaLup (a conglomerate of 32 civil society organizations in Manipur) who has taken a potshot at Delhi by saying that when it comes to North-East, the Central government is interested only in the land and not in the people. Arambam's remark to a certain extent has received the support of American diplomat Henry V Jardine.

Jardine after coming from his Manipur visit sent a detailed and confidential cable to his superiors based in Washington DC. His cable reads as, "Manipur is less a state and more a colony of India. The general use of AFSPA meant that the Manipuris didn't have the same rights of other Indian citizens and restrictions on travel to the state added to a sense of isolation and separation from the remaining parts of mainland India."

This statement of the US diplomat will come as a shot in the arm of the Manipuris who have been alleging that the Indian state is not providing them equal rights. This statement will also justify their allegation that Delhi considers Manipur to be its fiefdom.

The media should also be blamed for it. Probably those who are dealing with North-East are aware of the 68-day economic blockade that brought Manipur to its knees. But mainstream media chose to ignore this ‘crucial news’ for reasons best known to them. For 68 long days Manipur remained cut-off from the rest of the country. The media broke their slumber after 68 days.

National channels and national dailies didn’t feel it the necessity to report on this significant event. The national channel CNN-IBN organized a panel discussion on this economic blockade under the banner— Is Manipur part of a mainland India? The striking part of the tale is that the Editor-in-chief of CNN-IBN had to convince his producer for this panel discussion who asked him a bit surprising question— why do you want a panel discussion on Manipur? This question itself reflects the attitude of mainstream media towards India’s alienated child.

Unheard social activists of North-East

IromSharmila has been conferred the title of ‘Iron Lady’ by the people of her state. Many might think why the sub-head reads as ‘unheard social activists of North-East’ knowing fully well that Sharmila hails from Manipur. Actually these social icons should not be looked at from the prism of a particular state. They are representing the entire region.

Anna Hazare the Gandhian of 21st century became the headline of both national and international media for his crusade against rampant corruption that has engulfed the world’s largest democracy. He demanded for an anti-corruption legislation and to be very frank Anna even brought the political leadership to a standstill. But away from the hustle and bustle of a city life, a crusader in IromSharmila has been fighting for the revocation of AFSPA for the past 11 years have failed to attract the attention of national media. Why is it so?

There is no denying the fact that Anna has indeed placed a genuine demand before the political class. Corruption has taken the nation into its clutches. In hindsight can we afford to keep aside the struggle of this spirited woman? We should ask this question to ourselves.

The Chandel ambush has been given coverage because it is related to adventure. The national media has given good coverage to the cross-border military operation. But what happens to them when a 32-year-old woman, ThangjamManorama is allegedly raped by paramilitary forces. They miss the news and wake up only when the mothers of Manipur voice their protest. We the students of journalism have been taught that media sets the agenda. But in the case of North-East, it seems that media has no agenda at all.

Ethics of media comes under scanner while reporting on NE

The Chandel ambush has compelled us to raise this question. To make this dangerous operation spicy, some channels claimed that Indian security forces killed 38 militants. This is really horrifying. Such operations do not call for chest thumping rather they demand cautious reporting. Just to increase the 'TRPs' such sensationalism can't be allowed. Media should have exercised restraint after all they are not the elected lots and are not required to score political brownie points.

Important events go unreported

A few years back Nagas clashed with Kukis. Armed Naga men killed 105 unarmed Kuki men, women and children. Unfortunately this ghastly act went unreported. Why this happens with North-East? It is mainly because the national media's presence in North-East is very dismal. In case of a significant event they parachute their reporters who are called off after their mission is over. This mindset needs to be changed.

Conclusion:

North-East needs attention not only of the ruling regimes but also of the national media. The kind of coverage which they provide to terror prone states like Jammu & Kashmir, the Northeasterners also expect the same kind of attention. In fact, the menace of 'Red Terror' at Bastar (Chattisgarh) has also not evaded the eyes of the national media. Then why this same kind of attention is missing in North-East. The answer to this question lies in the womb of time. Simply by allotting doles will not serve the purpose of North-East. This is India's complicated zone. This region is marred by ethnic and cultural clashes. The authorities need to tread their path very cautiously and media has a crucial role to play.

Though the local media are trying its best to cover the news of their backyard but they don't have a presence in mainland India. Unless and until North-East gets the attention of national media its sordid tale will not reach the ears of the high and mighty based in Delhi. The 'Fourth Estate' is expected to voice the grievances of the teeming denizens of North-East. The Nellie massacre is still afresh. The infamous 'Assam Agitation' till date continues to ring a bell. At a time when Indian media is following the tricks of corporate world, commerce is indeed playing a crucial role. KishalayBhattacharjee has rightly said, "Media as a business, as a reverse force multiplier or an instrument to propagate agenda has become more potent since the days of Assam agitation only because there is so much media and there is no quality or ethical control over them."

Teresa Rehman, a senior journalist from Assam feels that the regional media is still at a fledgling state. But she is optimistic that things will change in the near future. She has reason to think like that because now a days many newspapers in different dialects are hitting the stands in North-East and this clearly shows that the ethnic communities in North-East want to create a space for themselves. This also shows that they are no longer interested to depend on the mainstream media because for years they have been hoodwinked by the national media. Rather they have now made up their mind to become the eyes and ears of their respective communities. This is a positive sign because slowly and steadily North-East is rising. It's a wake-up call for national media. North-East is a part and parcel of India and it certainly can't go unreported. The Chandel ambush stands testimony to this observation. Hopefully the Northeasterners will not have to wait for Chandel like incident to occupy the space of the big national channels and dailies.

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