

## **INTERROGATING BANALITY: THE ROLE OF MEDIA IN THE PEACE PROCESS OF NAGALAND**

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### *Abstract*

*Media plays a vital role in conflict situation. North East in general and Nagaland in particular feel a sense of alienation when it comes for news reporting. Several peace talks have always attracted the attention in the academic discourse but remain untouched in the media discourse. Being considered as the fourth pillar of democracy, media has an active role in peace building process. Nonetheless while implementing the role of media in the North East setting, particularly in Nagaland, a sense of banality is found in reporting. The regional media in Nagaland is at its infancy. The press primarily has been and remains to be the most popular means of communication. Being a conflict ridden region since independence, Nagaland needs more focus and effort on peace journalism. Media as known can work both ways that is to ignite violence, conflict and to settle peace and normalcy. The present study aims to explore with a theoretical perspective that what lead to banality and how does it provokes in conflict and also tries to way out some alternatives for the role of media in the peace process of Nagaland.*

*Keywords: Banality, Conflict, Peace, Peace Process, Peace Journalism, Mainstream Media.*

### **Introduction**

Peace is necessary for individual well-being but it is often misunderstood as the absence of war. If peace nourishes, sustains and enriches life, war destroys, impoverishes society and ravishes

natural resources. In parlance of insurgency affected regions of India such as the states of North East or Kashmir, peace is simply interpreted as the absence of conflict or its final resolution. As Johan Galtung observed that absence of war or violence “should not be confused with the absence of conflict: violence may occur without conflict and conflict may be solved by means of non-violent mechanisms.”[Galtung: 1968]. But conflict arises only when people are not satisfied with their present condition or they compete for incompatible set of goals. Dissatisfaction can lead to annoyance if the goals remain unmet for long time. In such a situation if annoyance is politicized, conflict becomes vehement and meets with its deadliest end. Some thinkers define conflict as a state of mutual antagonism or hostility between two or more parties, while others think conflict is a condition of incompatibility of interest or values. If a state fails to respond its people, conflict can take violent form. Having said that, conflict cannot be taken as negative always, as conflict always germinates out of some issues or ideas.

Amidst the hilly terrain of Northeast India, the landlocked state of Nagaland represents a divergent social and cultural dissimilarity. The state is characterized by socio-cultural and political unrest since independence. The word ‘Naga’ has its Hindi root “Naga” meaning naked. The Nagas belong to the Indo-Mongoloid group and speaking the Tibetan-Burma dialects of the Sino-Tibetan family. The earliest presence of Nagas appears to have been noted in Yajurveda about thousands of years ago. [Kotwal: 2000]. The Nagas are divided into various tribes, sub-tribes and clans with varying customs, traditions and cultures. Prior to the advent Christianity, the Nagas mostly followed the animistic religion residing in the hilltops. The Naga conflict has a long term debate. The discourse of these conflicts has created much attention in academic debates but the host of conflicts and insurgencies are routinely ignored in the discourse of ‘national media’.

Media, as regarded as the ‘Fourth Pillar of Democracy’, presents not only the facts but also interprets facts to formulate public opinion and to propagate new ideas and opinion. This may hold true in case of conflict situation of Northeast India in general and Nagaland in particular. The free flow of information is an important precondition of conflict resolution. It is opined that media could mould public opinion and belief. It is also often argued that, if media could support forces that lead to conflict, it could also contribute towards mitigating conflict and foster peace in the region. [Pegu: 2014]. While underlying the role of media in conflict resolution Mr. Maarten

Lak, Head, Policy Planning Staff at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, opined that today there is a general consensus that media can play a significant role in conflict situation, not only in provoking hatred and killing, but also in promoting conflict resolution, peace building and reconciliation. [Kabi: 2012].

The issue of Naga insurgency is even old, as that of the Kashmir issue. Horam observed that, “As soon as Nagas cross Northeast India and ventures towards westwards, he is mistaken for a Thai, Cambodian, Chinese or Japanese and treated as a foreigner. Even Indians fail to recognize them as Indians”. Hence, the sense of alienation grows strong in them. However the same impression could be noticed among the mainstream media house when the issues of North-East comes into question. Prasun Sonwalker points out that, a strong sense of “we” and “they” (a divide) is reflected in the Indian National Press. The journalist regard North East as lower status in news agenda in term of socio-cultural binary which he calls as “banal journalism”. He mentioned the experience of a Naga journalist and human right activist in the following words:

*“Some time ago, we wanted to release a document, where peacekeepers have declared war, detailing events in Nagaland and Manipur as part of army’s counter insurgency operation. We organised a press conference at the Press Club of India in New Delhi. More than 40 people turned up, including seniors of the rank of assistant editors and associate editors, but the next day not a single line appeared in the papers. The national press is not interested in the Naga issue”.*

Sonwalker further explains the experience of three journalists in the newsroom that: *“Right from an early age, we are not made aware of our country’s ethnic diversity. We only know of Bengalis in eastern India, nothing beyond. Most of us will not be able to tell a Naga from a Mizo. The attitude towards the tribes is that they are a necessary evil, so all we have to do is to hold on to them and their territory by force. The feeling is that we are superior—the concept of Aryan supremacy. The image is that people there drink, eat all kinds of meat, they are amoral Christians who believe in polygamy and who fight bitterly. In sum, it is a society we don’t need to know much about. The Indian army is there; give them two slaps and they will be quiet.”* [Sonwalker: 2004]

In Northeast the conflicts are numerous. It is impossible to report without having its basic knowledge. In such a situation where mainstream media and its journalists are showing apathy to cover such news of insurgencies and conflict, manipulation of data and errors in news are obvious. Here lies the biggest challenge, for the journalist and for the balanced flow of information. Such manipulation of facts affects the credibility of media in disseminating, misleading throughout the society. Thus the aim of this paper is to understand what lead to banality and how and how does it provokes in conflict. The paper also tries to way out some alternatives for the role of media in peace process of Nagaland.

### **Media and North East: Exploring through the Agenda Setting Theory**

Conflict is an important component while determining the news value. So the role of media in understanding the nature of the conflict is very essential and should able to contextualize the conflict to aptly present before the public sphere for discussion. Media's role is critical in designing government policies and responses and it is more so in developing countries. During more than a decade long violence in Punjab, the national and international media, despite biases and weakness in its reporting, drew considerable attention to the deteriorating situation and forced the government to take some remedial measures. [Thukral, 2009]

In Indian context, media, especially the print and the electronic media do try to push off their reports in some contexts and thus de-contextualize the genuine issue. Major news agencies of India in order to meet their deadline and to exist in the race of competition, generally forget the actual context of the issue. Sometimes the media organisations promptly decide what to discard and what let to pass. Thus, the world as portrayed in the media becomes an artificial construct of those who run the system. Until the media choose to highlight the particular issue, public debate on matter will never turn up and in doing this media gives an opinion 'what to think about' and 'how to think about'. Thus setting out an agenda as describes by Maxwell McCombs and Donald L. Shaw in 1977.

Most of the Indian newspapers belong either to big corporates, individual business tycoon or families from a political background. Almost all the media organisations have their profit maximisation and political power brokering, with separate editorial policy and queue of decision

makers for selecting and presenting the news and views. The altruistic consideration of presenting wholesome news objectively and honestly is nowhere on the agenda. [Thukral, 2009]

In this context it is imperative to study the role of media in covering the issues of North Eastern states of India. There is a long standing debate on the covering of North Eastern events and issues by the mainstream media. Unless there is any significance, the space given to the national media is relatively small. Out of the eight states only one or two states are covered regularly while the other states remains untouched. Various study reveals that coverage of national media remains stereotypical with the issues of conflict and under development while the issues like politics, crime, insurgency, accident, law and order are hardly in the priority list.

Due to its distant outpost, North eastern states are kept separate from the mainland India and also from the mainstream media. The banality in the news could be spotted when each and every moment when Anna Hazare's *Hunger Strike* was captured by the media along with the foreign media like the BBC, The Guardian, and New York Times but unfortunately media had missed out the protest of 38 years Irom Sharmila of Manipur and her long struggle against the draconian law Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act 1958 or AFSPA to get revoked. She has been in arrest for more than a decade and is everyday forced-fed by the Government through nose tube. Both CNN-IBN and NDTV had covered the issue during the course of Anna Hazare's protest but has got very little importance in other national media.

On the second death anniversary of Manorama Devi, Indian Express wrote about the protest of middle age women who went naked in the street with only a banner '*Indian Army please rape us*' and about ASFPA. Until the anger become appalling, national media did not report it. But unfortunately the demand for the protest to repeal AFSPA went on deaf ears and Manipur again was dropped from the national media cycle.

On October 30<sup>th</sup>, 2009, all the leading satellite channels of Assam interrupted their regular programmes to broadcast live footage of the serial bomb blast accruing on that day, even photographs of the dead bodies of the victim. One of the leading newspaper aired unedited footage of the serial bomb blasts for more than an hour. In the next 24 hours all the channels gave in live coverage of the explosion from Guwahati, Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon and Barpetta.

However the numbers of the killed and injured were not uniform everywhere across the media. The variations of the numbers were visible in both local and national newspapers including news channels. The national newspaper Tribune quoted 61 other news agencies said 64 were killed, while live coverage on the local news channels estimated over 100 dead. [Bordoloi: 2014]

North east got priority in the front page when the insurgents targeted minority Hindi speaking people. Since Hindi is India's national language and Delhi is situated in the Hindi-Belt and has the largest representation in the parliament, attack on the Hindi speaking people got much attention by the mainstream media, as journalists considered the incident as 'attack on us', thus reflect the agenda building role of media.

There is a no denying fact that Sikkim is a peaceful state as compare to other North- Eastern states. So Sikkim remained out of the ambit of the media when young Lepchas of North Sikkim went 34days *hunger strike* in 2007 to protest against the construction of Dams in the region for the protection of their environment. This incident also remained untouched by the national media.

As compared to Kashmir, North-East always remained less priority of the Media because of its detachment from the mainland India. Most of the north-eastern states are landlocked and as a result transport communication is one of the biggest barriers of communication which Rajdeep Sardesai mentions as '*Tyranny of Distance.*' Beside the issues of North- East directly put a question on the Government policies which still remains unsolved for years since independence. The media generally appreciate the region that is worth of coverage only when there is a story that will stir the entire nation. As Sonwalkar describes "the North East has better chances of figuring on the radar of the national press if the news reports are seen as juicy, sexy or erotic" thus conflict between media's social role and commercial commitment results banality in news coverage.

### **Regional Media of Nagaland: A Critical Introspection**

Unlike other states of India, media boom is relatively new in Nagaland. The press primarily has been and remains to be the most popular means of mass communication. By far the most popular form of communication, reaching the highest number of people is the newspaper. [Vero: 2012]. Being an isolated state than any other place in India, the media of Nagaland tries to provide

various kinds of news from both national and international affairs. The most popular and largest circulated English dailies are Nagaland Post, The Eastern Mirror, Nagaland Page, The Morung Express and The North East Herald along with some newspapers in tribal dialects like 'AoMilen', 'TirYimYim' in Ao Language, 'TenyiRalha', 'Capi' in Tenvidie language etc. Among all the English dailies, Nagaland Post is the longest surviving newspaper in the state.

The content of most the leading English dailies encompasses different types of local news as well as the news of sports, commentaries, business, health, entertainment, and travelogue. The English dailies are published mostly in the main town of Kohima and Dimapur and each of them report more or less about the factional fights between the insurgent groups, various political developments as well as various Government groups. The lone Radio and Television stations are Government owned and rather for news and promotion of programmes and policies of the Government. Other than the traditional media, the new media forums such as Facebook, blogs etc. have found popularity among the younger generation and Internet savvy population. [Vero: 2012].

Nagaland is a site of prolonged conflicts for decades, where every group of rebel is fighting for their own causes. The regional media has a crucial role in this turmoil, where it can spread the conflict by disseminating knowledge with its widest coverage among the mass is expected. Though it is believed that it is the regional media which can move the issues to the centre stage or may get obstruct from coming into the purview of people. Communication conflict through media has been divisive because of the diverse stakeholders associated with it viz. affected individuals, social activists and journalists. It may become even more perplexing because each of them have their own unique way of looking at it. It is gauged that media whether print or audio-visual can help mitigate conflict. Yet, in the response to mitigating conflict it has remained under-reported or if covered at all, it is not presented with the full spectrum of facts thus misleading those it is supposed to inform or educate. [Pegu: 2014].

The above perception hold true when the dailies of Nagaland uses various approaches of writing in their editorial along with citizen commentary, op-ed and so on to create a sense of 'Naga Nation'. In an article '*The Making And The Un-Making Of The Naga Nation*', the columnist Impung Chang of Nagaland Post articulates the issues of Naga identity conflict and attempts to

portray how Naga are in fact a nation. [Nagaland Post, Nov.11, 2009, p.7]. Whereas, Morung Express through various articles and columns underline the moral religious dimension by putting question on the failure of Christian paradigm in emphasising brotherhood and peace. The daily also suggested out the need to examine faults within rather than blaming the military forces.

In a state like Nagaland where media scenario is quite recent, journalists need to assess the immediate situation and provide a framework with different perspective. Geoffrey Yaden, editor of Nagaland Post once remarked “Reporters here lack of both a nose for new and analytics skills.” Another important lacunae of the regional media organisation apart from amateur journalism is that there is a huge absence of reporter’s voice and the editors are also not willing to stand up to community heads who cock a snook at the law of the land. Senior journalist Sanjay Hazarika remarked:

*The major insurgent groups use newspapers in Nagaland as platform for their viewpoints, against each other and the central and state governments. The op-ed page would invariably have a graphic of allegations and counter allegations by one group or another, in addition to the letter to the editor, supporting one point of view or another. The papers are seen as a platform for venting political spleen and vendetta and they are expected to carry the statements in their entirety. It is not surprising, therefore that the media should come under such pressure from the militant groups as well as governments and particularly the security forces. Both sides use information as propaganda or vice versa in the battle for minds and hearts.” [Hazarika: 2008]*

If any particular newspaper point out about negative aspects of the conflict it is obvious to receive phone-calls and requests to tone down a particular event or incident. In this situation the natural flows of information is not smooth. If any newspaper boosts its circulation, it is supposed to get reduced by means of ‘gun’. Public Service Broadcasters are also not an exception as they are most favoured targets of the militants or the insurgent groups. In this controversial situation, distortion of information, misreporting and partial information sometimes boosts the conflict. Being the watchdog of society it thus advisable that media should focus more on the Indo-Naga peace process.

### **Towards an alternative way of communication**



With the unbalanced flow of information, the gatekeeping of information and communication causing havoc in the region, an alternative way of communication is the necessity of the hour. Sincere effort from grassroots level is needed. Organization such as the civil society organization, and student groups, independent researchers at individual and university level can be clubbed together to rectify the banality. Therefore, the bottom up approach can play the crucial role of balanced information flow which is the key requirement of the region. The focus of the media should be in the works of the non-state actors which work for peace and reconciliation rather than concentrating more on the negative issues like killings and deaths. The civil societies act as a mediator between the insurgent fractions and also the Government. They conduct football matches, cultural shows etc. between the warring factions, which helps enormously in the peace and reconciliation process. Therefore the media should bring these points to the wider community and contribute to the holistic process of peacemaking. The viewpoints of professors of universities and learned person's including independent researchers should be taken into account. Assistance from public opinion at ground zero level can help understand the scenario firsthand and critically. All these are the amalgamation of track 2 diplomacy, where the non-state actors play their role in bringing peace and normalcy in the region. At universities and research institutes the media literacy programme should be strengthened. Also citizen journalism can play an important and crucial role in the free flow of information either through community radio or community newspaper. Since, lack of originality and the gate keeping of information and communication are some of the cause of endless violence and conflict, rectifying them will contribute to the all-inclusive effort to peacemaking as well as peace building. Staying clear of judgmental representation and description of reality without aggrandizement can make a transition towards peace and democracy.

The communication of ideas is now not only limited to the traditional and conventional media such as radio or newspaper, new technologies, the internet and digital content have already established themselves in the arena of communication.

The local media like the community newspaper in the grassroots level usually has a deeper understanding of the existing political structures, the conflict situation as well as the changes proceeding to the outbreak of violence. One should also not marginalize the fact that media, especially the local media can also work in the negative deviance and escalate violence to greater

levels. As for example, the role of radio in Rwanda genocide between the Hutus and the Tutsis is something which can be called as the dark side of the regional media. But if used in a positive way the local media can be broadly used in conflict-sensitive and peace journalism, peace-promoting entertainment media, media regulation to prevent incitement of violence and peace-promoting citizen media.

Pierre Omidyar, the founder and chairman of eBay and publisher and CEO of First Look Media says, "I believe that social media is a tool of liberation and empowerment, in my eyes, social media is one of the most important global leaps forward in recent human history". Though social media is developing itself from infancy, it already has the world known about its usage for good. Once we truly learn how to harness new technology and new ways of communication, we will feel the full impacts of social media. Taking examples like the Arab spring and the Presidential election in Tehran in 2009, we see what power the social media possesses. Therefore, in case of Northeast India in general and Nagaland in particular where the media is questionably active, social media can have its impact.

Drawing from the concept of "Sishu Panchayat", the younger generation should be given an understanding of media as a tool of communication and its positive roles. Taking lessons from the contemporary society, the understanding of media and how it functions and also its importance is to be brought out to the younger generation. This already can be seen in form of wall magazine, wall papers, comics etc. in schools and various training facilities. The use of video games is also an important but probably less explored arena through which the younger generations can be taught to distinguish between good and bad. The strategic games, in the video game arena can help develop critical thinking abilities which are a necessity to evolve a good citizenry.

Culture and arts based approaches add new dimensions to media for peace building. The media represents a mediator and tool through which the message of peace and reconciliation can reach to the masses and adding a hint of culture and art goes parallel to the sentiments of the people and results in a successful peace-making and peacebuilding process. "*....(T)he largest peace building organization in the world, frequently engages the arts in many of its programs. These*

*methods include participatory theatre, as well as comic books, radio and television” [Cohen: 2012].*

Media, as we have understood, can play a number of role in a number of ways for bringing peace and normalcy in Nagaland. It can act as whistle blower, help in building confidence, facilitate negotiations and also break diplomatic deadlocks [Bratic & Schirch: 2007]. The confidence building, celebration of peace agreements etc. can be brought to the public through press releases, radio programs and even rock concerts, as music can also act as a tool to spread the message of peace.

Media can reach to thousands of people and with an innovative and sincere way media can not only transform conflict and build peace and normalcy, but also sustain peace and normalcy in Nagaland.

### **Conclusion:**

Northeast in general and Nagaland in particular feel a sense of alienation in terms of many things. The neglected and irresponsible attitude towards the region reinforces the idea. The banality of reporting is found in the region, more news on deaths and killings are on focus rather the peace process. The rounds of talks for negotiations between the insurgent groups and the Government, the ceasefire agreements etc. are usually found in the newspapers and televisions, but other steps where the masses come together and demonstrate peaceful rallies, organise football matches and cultural shows are not brought in the spotlight. Even the Hornbill festival (one of the biggest cultural festivals) of Nagaland is known to very few. Hence, we somewhere see that the kind of journalism which brings about peace, is very vaguely present, if present at all. The major news channels in the whole of Northeast are Assam based. The news of other states is brought to the masses routing through the media houses in Assam. Hypothetically it can be questioned that the news of other states may get filtered through this process. As an example, the border issue between Assam and Nagaland, publicised by the Assam based media can be questioned, that, do the media houses involve in banality while reporting? The issue of greater Nagaland can also be brought here and tested through the hypotheses. Nagaland somewhere lacks the originality when it comes to media and reporting. The issue of banality has to pass

through the litmus test. The need of the hour is strengthening the grassroots section that is, empowering the local media by reinforcing the local media and by encouraging peace journalism, citizen journalism, independent research etc. Media being the fourth estate of democracy, certainly has a role to play, either for peace or for conflict, it's up to which side they subscribe to.

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