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From Marginalisation to Stereotypes — ‘North East India’ in Indian Media: Evidences from Focus Group Discussions in Manipur

Shipra Raj

Previous media studies have noted that India’s North East often remains absent from the mainstream media. As news media plays a formidable role in minorities recognition and representation and it is important to ask how media represents the North East.¹ Building from the role of media in democracy this paper analyses how media reports the North East. The traditional journalistic ethics of fair, balanced and truthful does not mean that everybody gets equal representation. Three Focus Group Discussions were held in Manipur which involved 30 participants through purposive and snowball sampling technique. This paper analyses how and when the North East gets space in mainstream media. Participants noted that the coverage of Manipur in the mainstream media has widely been negative and their issues and interests are underrepresented. Majority of the participants noted that the coverage of mainstream media has often been incorrect and subject to stereotypes and has largely been focused on insurgency and conflict.

Keywords: Media, North East, Stereotypes, Marginalisation, Representation, Insurgency, Conflict

Introduction: North East and the Indian Media

Studies have established that the North East is marginalised as well as stereotyped in Indian media. As Arijt Sen in his research notes, (Sen, 2011):

And often, the coverage of the Northeast remains trapped in stereotypes. With its conflicts, its tribes and its underdevelopment, this is India’s area of darkness, an area of little interest to the media and to those responsible for governance and more generally in the greater cultural space of the country. In metropolitan India, the dominant image of the Northeast still remains that of a wild frontier. For most Indians, and, in effect most of the Indian media, this characterisation is not even regarded as insensitive.

The events from North East find very little space in the mainstream media. The

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mainstream media remain aloof of the important happening in this region. Even the little coverage that they get is stereotyped. The violence related stories are often highlighted whereas other important stories from this region are downplayed. The negative representation creates a negative image about this region in the minds of the 'mainland people'.² Media by constantly reporting negatives has led to stereotype of this region. Walter Fernandes points out that (Fernandes, 2008) in the rest of the India the image of North East is of land of violence and conflict. The stories of violence and unrest are always highlighted without even checking the facts. The North East faces the problem of authentic and credible information of the issues concerning the region. The issues of importance to this region are never mentioned in the mainstream media.

People from North-East India are considered alien in Mainland India. Indians (belonging to mainland India) identify them as Chinki, Chinese, Nepali, mongoloid eyes and foreigners. Slur like chinki is used by mainland Indians to categorize the North Eastern people. People from North East experience racism in their own country and are missing from the national discourses in media (McDuié-Ra, 2012). People of North-East have been living in the violent armed conflict from last five decades. Women protesting against Indian Army for the rape of Manorama Devi in 2004, the ongoing fast unto death against Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) by activist Irom Sharmila, protest against death of Nido Tania in Delhi in 2014 or the images of United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) camps are although different in nature but they are painted in the same color by the Indian media. Even while talking about the insurgency of the North East, the media often paints it with the same brush and compare it with the insurgency in other parts of India. While the insurgency of (Hazarika, 2010) North East has nothing to do with the lack of development it cannot be denied that the insurgency in the North East is fostered by lack of development. "This is often where the media fails to make the connection-insurgency and bad governance are part of the same coin, the same story-and often misses the point that lack of services exacerbates alienation."

Zarir Hussain³ points out that the North East region is 'underrepresented as well as misrepresented' in the Indian mainstream media. They only get a slot when there is a major violence and only the conflict related news are highlighted from this region. He identifies the perception of the management of the media houses and the editors a reason for such unbalanced representation. Most of the major English newspapers have very few and most of the times they have only one journalist covering the entire North East region. They don't have permanent reporters they only keep a stringer to provide them the information. A story from North East never makes a headline because the coverage is not enough. Journalists acknowledges the need of greater representation of North East in the media. Esha Roy, another Journalist based in Imphal accepts that there is under coverage of the news from the North East:

Like if Irom Sharmila is released then someone from CNN-IBN or NDTV will come down from either Guwahati or Calcutta or from Delhi. But they don't have any one stationed here. There are no full time correspondent on the pay roll in these states so that can lead to under-coverage. I don't really exactly know why one has to fight so much harder to get their stories from the North East published than any other part of

the country. But it is harder.⁴

India's North East: An overview

India's North East region also called North East India is the eastern most part of the country and is comprised of eight (including Sikkim) states commonly known as seven sisters. Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura and since 1990, Sikkim also constitutes as a part of the region. Ethnically and linguistically, it is one of the most diverse regions of India and has a high concentration of tribal population. Region has 4,500 km long international border with five foreign countries namely Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar, China and Nepal. It is connected with the rest of the country by a 22 km land corridor also known as 'Chicken's Neck' through Siliguri in the eastern State of West Bengal. The region accounts for 7.97 per cent of India's geographical area (262,179 Sq. kms as per *2011 Census*) and 3.07% per cent of country's total population (45,533,982 as per *2011 Census*). The entire North East region can be geographically divided into two parts: plains and the hills. A majority of people living in the plains of the region identify themselves as Hindus and Muslims and an overwhelming majority of hills people inhabiting the States of Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland are Christians.⁵

North East has witnessed large scale conflict that started with the (Shimray, 2004) 1950 Naga Insurgence which led to the formation of various extremist organizations. Even after 69 years of independence the region is still tormented by widespread insurgency. The demand of these insurgent groups vary from demanding greater autonomy to secession from the Union of India. For long time, the policy makers in Delhi has seen the North East region from the prism of national security. North East region is primarily looked as a buffer zone and is of strategic importance for the security of India. When it comes to exclusion, (Bijukumar, 2013) North East has seen a multi-dimensional exclusion. North East has been facing an economic challenge, and lag behind most of the Indian states on almost all accounts. Acknowledging the special need for the North East region, Government of India set up Department of Development of North Eastern Region in September, 2001 and upgraded it to a Ministry in May, 2004 which is committed to the development of North East Region. Its vision statement states:

The Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region is responsible for the matters relating to the planning, execution and monitoring of development schemes and projects in the North Eastern Region. Its vision is to accelerate the pace of socio-economic development of the Region so that it may enjoy growth parity with the rest of the country.⁶

It acknowledges the need for inclusion of the North Eastern states in the development program of the country. In a research paper Namrata Goswami, have identified the lack of development in the region as one of the drivers impinging upon the conflict of the North Eastern states. Transport and Communication and economic backwardness is more glaring in these states than the rest of the India.⁷ It will not be

wrong to say that the North East region has been subject to exclusion not only in media but also from the development vision of the Government of India.

Conceptual framework and Methodology

This paper was born out of the research project “Minorities and the Indian Press: Marginalization and Exclusion in the News Media”. This study is funded by Indian Council of Social Science Research and has been carried out at Centre for Culture, Media & Governance, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi. The objectives of this research project is to study the portrayal of minorities in the Press which is subject to under-representation, distorted or negative coverage, stereotyping and exclusion and also to investigate into the reasons for such stereotypical, distorted and under-representation of minorities in the media. Empirical data was collected through extensive field work in three states of North East from February to March 2015.

Three Focus Group Discussions were held in two different districts in the state of Manipur. A number of stakeholders were identified using the purposive sampling method. Participants were solicited through a snowball technique. The researcher through her network identified some key people who could then connect to the target group. The average number in each FGD was 8-12 participants which was large enough to express views and small enough for every participant to participate in the discussion. The group represented both males and females. Though it did not represent the equal numbers but there were enough number of representatives from both the genders. The participants represented the age group between 21 to 45. The minimum qualification was a graduate so that they could express their views. A varied group of participants included Journalists, Activists, Students, Teachers, Corporate employees. Semi-structured questions were used in each FGD. Open ended questions allowed participants to express their views in a descriptive manner. The discussion ran between 60-90 minutes. Each discussion was recorded using audio recorder. The photographs were taken using a digital camera. Same approach was used across all FGDs. The researcher began each discussion by explaining the topic of the discussion and purpose of the discussion. The participants were informed that these discussions are purely academic in nature and will be used for academic purposes only.

Description of the research setting

Manipur also known as Shangarila for its natural beauty is a hilly state in the North East India. Manipur is bounded by Nagaland in the North, Mizoram in the South, Assam in the west, and it shares international borders with Myanmar. Manipur occupies 0.67 percent of India's landmass and only 0.22 per cent of country's total population. Geographically, it is divided into two distinct physical regions an outlying area of rugged hills and narrow valleys and the inner area of flat plains. The capital of the state is Imphal. The area of the state is 22,327 sq.km and is divided into 9 districts. The districts are Bishnupur, Chandel, Churachandpur, Imphal East, Imphal West, Senapati, Tamenglong, Thoubal and Ukhul. Manipuri is the official language of the state and 29 different dialects are also used widely in the state. Five dialects

which are Tangkhul, Hmar, Paite, Lushai and Thadou/Kuki are recognized as medium of instruction in schools up to fifth standard in the state.⁸ Sangai Express, Kangla Pao, Poknapham, Imphal Free Press are some of the regional newspapers of Manipur.⁹ Two FGDs were held at Imphal and one at Senapati District. In Imphal one FGD was held at Manipur University (March 01, 2015) and other at JYL Paona Bazar (March 02, 2015) and in Senapati at Senapati District Student's Association Office (March 03, 2015).

Voices from the Periphery:

Media's indifference towards 'Zomia'

Recent earthquake in Manipur was not reported adequately by the mainstream media. Along with loss of lives, many people have been displaced by the earthquake and some termed it as the biggest earthquake in Imphal. Yet, the media sidelined this news.¹⁰ This is not one of an instance where national media downplayed the stories from the North East rather it is a normal practice by the majority of the news media houses. Mainstream media (Muralidharan, 2013) with its advertisement driven revenue model excludes the stories from Kashmir and North-East. These socially and economically disadvantaged zones of the country do not get reported as it does not interest the advertisers. Despite, media (Meyers, 2010) being vital to the democratic societies the credibility and trustworthiness of media is declining. North East remains largely absent in the mainstream media reporting. Many young Manipuris shared their views on the issue of under-representation and marginalization of the North East in the media, for most of them they are not there in the minds of the people so the question of marginalization and exclusion does not arise. A social activist expressed her concern over the alienation of Manipur and the North East region in India and in Indian media "What I would say is that I think the North East is not in the national consciousness. It may not be conscious or intentional but since we are not in the sub-conscious they tend to forget about it." (FGD JYL Paona Bazar)." Another participant expressed his disappointment from the media in these words "They are not interested in North East. It is not in the national interest so they are not reporting North East." (FGD Manipur University). On asked why do they think the media does not cover North East adequately a young man working in an advertising agency added "May be they are lethargic to come here, it is very far off, they also have the same psychological impression that every mainstream person has. It is far off, there is a bomb blast, and there is insurgency why I should go there to risk my life. This basic impression is there in the journalist also" (FGD JYL Paona Bazar).

They feel excluded from the national discourses. The region as diverse as North East remains absent in the mainstream reporting. A survey conducted by North East India Image Managers revealed that 87 percent of the respondents could not name all the States of the North-East.¹¹ They are considered aliens in the mainland India. They do not see themselves reflected in the media and that perpetuates the feeling of marginalization. Participants unanimously agreed that there is a marginalization of North East in the mainstream media. People lack knowledge about this region ex-

plains a young participant:

When we go outside and say we are from Manipur they don't know about us they think we are from a foreign country. Even though they are studying that India has 29 states they don't know about us. I think because we don't have much, good media coverage. They only think about North East as insurgency and it is not safe. They think it is not safe so they don't try to know about North East (FGD Manipur University).

The media houses do not have their bureaus in this region could be one reason for the marginalization suggested one of the participants "There are no Bureaus, no Bureau Chief. They are not interested in North East. It is not in the national interest so they are not reporting North East." (FGD Manipur University) The important stories do not find place in these papers. Even if they find a space the stories are placed in a corner in small box. They never make a national headline. Participants identified the reasons for the marginalization, they think that they are not only marginalized but also excluded in the news media. Within the states there is a sense that there is communication gap. The participants of the hill district voiced their views on further marginalisation of hill district in the state.

Senapati is always missed. The hill districts are totally ignored by the media though all the major things are happening in this part of the state. People only read negatives about this region as this is what is reported in the media. They consider the people of this region as a foreigner. The media failed to educate people about this region. While media reports other states like Jammu & Kashmir, this part has been totally ignored by the media. There is no contact between this part and the national media (FGD Senapati).

From rapes to forced disappearances to extra-judicial killings Manipur has suffered all kind of human rights violation. When it comes to media reporting of such gross human rights violation media is once again accused of being insensitive. The reporting of cases of human loss and violation has also been minimal. According to a survey by the Morung Express (Nagaland Regional newspaper) 84% of the participants believed that the national media reporting of North East is further alienating the people of North East. The national media even remain insensitive towards the draconian law like Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA). Mainstream media is quick enough to report the violence related stories whereas when it comes to reporting the other side of the story they hide the facts. A participant recalled one of the instances where the media did not report the wrong doing of Army. One of the participants express her anger on the issue "When the Assam Rifle Major was caught with the drugs and all that I wonder how many national media carried that news. Because if it becomes the national news many people will react and will speak against AFSPA then who will do the trafficking of arms, drugs and also people? Many media house will not tell you that." (FGD JYL Paona Bazar) Another participant cited the

insensitivity of the government and mainland people who remain indifferent to them:

Because we are more concerned about the rights of the people, we are concerned about the fundamental human rights we think that the AFSPA should not be there. But it has not been the same thing with them because they are showing our picture as a state where everyday bomb blasts is happening, everyday people are shooting one another. They will definitely feel that AFSPA should not be there (FGD Senapati).

Media's Evil Doing: Obsession with Violence and Conflict

Media is obsessed with the news of violence insurgency of North East region (Sengupta, 2007). The issues important to them are not highlighted or are downplayed while negatives are highlighted. As they are largely excluded from the media reporting it perpetuates the feeling of us vs them. One of the participants shared his views on the role of media and the reason why media has been projecting the violence related news "So they bring out something which is very controversial that so they report the news about something which people want to read. To put it very bluntly I think they have lost the real objective of why the media came into being they have become like business setups and like the educational institutions we have." (FGD Senapati) In all the groups, participants identified a number of stereotypes that they see in media. According to the participants, a common stereotypes comes from the coverage of conflict related stories from Manipur "North East region is not portrayed in a good way it is about militancy, conflict, crime and killings and all these things." (FGD Manipur University) Another participant echoed the same view "For negatives they have chosen North East and for other news they focus on other cities. They don't report the environmental issues. Media has marginalized the North East." (FGD JYP Paona Bazar). North Easterners were seen to be depicted as a foreigner who do not contribute to the nation building as suggested by another participant.

That is the mindset. That always happens to the marginalized people. We feel that we are colonized here. It is not people's fault it is political will that has to change. Obviously if there was a true nation building where the North East people were also a part of it then probably like Gujarati knows who is the Mallu, if we would have been part but that never happened so we are left out. So people who are the part of the mainstream India who think they are the part of the nation they think we are the foreigner. That is why there is discrimination" (FGD JYL Paona Bazar).

The mainstream media has not been able to break the stereotypes and continue to report negative and stereotypical images from the North East region. (Sadokpam, 2010) The North East is covered mainly for insurgency related stories and the national security related stories. Many of the respondents felt that even when it comes to conflict they portray it is a law and problem where as it is a political problem and fight for self-determination which media deliberately does not show to its audiences. "India's reports always say that it is a law and order problem this is our internal thing also. We know of many news houses which do not carry these news even if they have

been covered because they don't want to put their company's reputation in it because the government will not take it nicely." (FGD JYL Paona Bazar) The presentation of news and images from this region has an impact on the psyche of the readers of the mainstream media. The portrayal of only one kind of stories creates a negative images in the minds of the people. They do not find many stories of North East in the national papers. Even if there are any it is widely related to violence or insurgency said participants. Pointing out this a participant described it in a following manner "If some friends want to come to NE first the first thing they will ask is, 'Is it safe to come here.' So this is the psychology they have. So how does this all impression come about? It is obviously the media who shows us in that light" (FGD JYL Paona Bazar).

North East is not only about violence, conflict and insurgency. (Pattnaik, 2015) The public discourse about North East has largely been dominated by ethnic conflict, separatist movements and widespread insurgency. The North East is one of the most troubled and backward regions in the country, the problem of corruption, environmental issues, protests and demonstration do not find space in the mainstream media. Media only reports negative from this region. They should also report about protest about environmental issues. Investigative reporting should be done. People from this region when they go to other town in search of jobs or better education are often racially abused. Media has not been consistent in covering such issues. Participants tended to feel that they are being stereotyped in the media. All the reporting from this region has been negative, it is always the violence or the conflict that gets the coverage, and the other human interest stories never find a place in the mainstream media said one of the participants:

I think it is very true that how we are mis-represented or mis-interpreted. It is always about the negative news about our place. It is very unfortunate that there is only negatives from our region while there are so many things that exist in our state. In terms of richness of our place, the good things that could have been reported. In field of sports, music, entertainment the North East has done pretty well. It is very unfortunate that those things have never been the main concerns of the media in terms of coverage. (FGD Senapati)

Media is powerful in a way that they are the essential source of information. (Hamelink, 2011) Hence, it has an important consequence on the media audiences. The problem with media is of selective coverage. It means that the selection of stories is based on 'convergence of factors, such as political pressures, economic drivers, personal preferences, professional styles, and mechanisms of human perception.' It is through the Media that the mainland Indians get the sense of North East. Media is now operating as a business set ups. (Fairclough, 1995) Media are essentially a profit-making institution and they try their best to achieve the highest readership in case of the print media and highest TRP's in case of the television. They will only select those stories who catches the attention of its readers. Insurgency, violence and conflict is an interesting story to sell.

Conclusion

Media is responsible for the images of North East that they present to its readers. It is through media reporting that the negative images of North East has been created in the minds of the people of mainland India. It is through media that the readers and audiences know about the insurgency of the North East. Media was perceived to have the power to perpetuate the stereotypes and negative opinions amongst its audiences. Media by reporting negatives or by selective representation has a negative effects on the minds of the larger masses. Most of the participants said that they don't see themselves reflected in the mainstream media. Across all groups, participants felt that they are underrepresented as well as misrepresented in the mainstream media. When representation does occur, most feel that it is bracketed either into conflict and racial discrimination. The problematic representation of the North East by the Indian mainstream media can be summed up in one of the participant's views: "It has always been portrayed as a state where there are lot of problems, insurgency and economic and social problems and negativity about our place. We can very bluntly say that our side of the state has been ignored by the mainstream media" (FGD Senapati).

Notes

¹ 'Mainstream media' is used for English media, as it has a wider reach and access and have pan India reach. 'North East' though is a region which is consists of 8 states (including Sikkim). A region as diverse and heterogeneous as NE cannot be clubbed under one umbrella but this is the term which is being used by the academia, journalists and scholars.

² 'Mainland people' people belonging to rest of India (excluding the NE)

³ Zarir Hussain: Chief Managing Editor, News Live in an interview to the researcher on Feb. 25, 2015 in Guwahati, Assam

⁴ Esha Roy, Correspondent, Indian Express in an interview to the researcher on March 01, 2015 in Imphal, Manipur

⁵ North East Division, Retrieved February 23, 2016 from Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region: http://www.mha.nic.in/northeast_new#b

⁶ Official Website of Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region - <http://mdoner.gov.in/>

⁷ An occasional paper Namrata Goswami – "India's North East 2020: Four Alternative Scenarios, Published in July 2010. Document downloaded from the website of Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi - <http://www.idsa.in/profile/ngoswami>

⁸ Ministry of DONER (Development of North East Region) - <http://mdoner.gov.in/content/manipur-4>

⁹ Registrar of Newspapers for India - http://rni.nic.in/display_state.asp

¹⁰ In an article 'To mainland Indian Media, Manipur is not part of India,' says MLA Biren by Wahengbam Rorrkychand. Retrieved March 10, 2016 from Nelive.in: <http://www.nelive.in/manipur/news/%E2%80%98-mainland-indian-media-manipur-not-part-india%E2%80%99-says-mla-biren>

¹¹ In an article 'People have negative perception about North-East, reveals study'. Retrieved March 11, 2016 from The Hindu: <http://www.thehindu.com/todays->

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