



# A Study of Conventional Media Representations and Reporting of Violence in Assam

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## Abstract

Media with the potential to widen horizons, focus attention and raise aspirations in society many a time pose conflicts with the responsibility in representation, regarding professional ethics and propriety while communicating and representing the facts which may be seen as "symbolic manipulations". Being 'agents of social change', media effectiveness and appropriateness of conventional representation of violence in reference to Assam, a typical context of multi-cultural heterogenic society in India, requires to be articulated.

An exploratory inquiry into procedures and criteria of news production; strategies employed to make relevant judgments about information collection, production, projection and presentation formats; and various aspects related to violence representation was conducted with respondents from media fraternity and media consumers. The interview transcripts served as primary sources of data for content analysis which was inductive and took a Grounded Theory approach with the transcripts emerging into categories on their own. The study deployed theoretical/purposive sampling based on the knowledge of the likely to be respondents' population and the purpose of the study.

Prevailing media scenario of patterned media reporting of violence is scrutinized under Johan Galtung's models of news framing: War and Peace journalism. Commodification of news is evident in homogeneous media products. Two strong driving forces of media production, are media commercialization and dominant ideology.

The study focuses on media reporting of violence and patterned presentation in regard to professional competence and media functionality. The paper highlights the relevance and applicability of conflict journalism in various media representations by drawing upon certain examples from Northeast India. It also draws attention to understand the residents of the region, their aspirations

and representation in media; to appropriate positive identity, motivate self and for others to express their being. Such media coverage needs to be looked into in current context of increasing market influence and commercialization.

**Keywords:** Media representation; Violence reporting; Conflict journalism; War and peace journalism; Commercialization and commodification of news; Assam; India

## Introduction

Media and entertainment industry may be said to be one of the most flourishing sectors in India which has grown immensely in last few decades. And moreover the media industry, mainly after liberalization of the media sector, is a developing sector with developmental works, and newer methods applications and of technologies. This has raised business opportunities in Indian media and entertainment industry enormously, leading to extended scopes and areas of academic study in the field.

With the potential to widen horizons, focus attention, raise aspirations of people, media possesses immense power to rein on public, create public opinions, perceptions, faiths and beliefs. But it is questionable if media disposes enough responsibility that comes with the immense power, to handle serious social issues, to take human emotion further to social development without hurting sentiments and not enraging people.

Thus it becomes important to study the effectiveness and appropriateness in various representations in media. Elements responsible to make effective media communication which possess the power to affect people and shape ideologies may be a specific area of study in media studies with specific reference to Assam, a typical context of multi-cultural heterogenic harmonious society with great variations in the production groups as well as audience groups.

In the present scenario, media products, especially news with the basic motive of information communication, are often a glimpse of the actual (people, places or events) most of

it is either unknown or not represented except the sensational part which is capable of attracting a large varied audience.

News about violence has become a priority in media communication, especially in reference to Northeast India as a whole and the state of Assam in particular, where stories in long existing trend of media representations, have been projecting and propagating the region in negative light to the rest of the nation and beyond. Thus there is a constant pressure for the journalists working in the region, to focus and highlight on stories of violence and unrest to survive in the highly consumerized and competitive media industry.

The study focuses on media reporting of violence and patterned presentation in regard to professional competence and media functionality. It looks at an analysis based on the observations on these groups of ambiances, through various methods of representation ideologies being framed and perspectives created. In this study, an attempt is being made to determine which features of incidents of violence in Assam in particular make them receive more media attention and what process goes behind the media representations of Assam with elaborate study of media practitioners from the region.

## Methodology

In an attempt to understand the media producers' intentions in communicating instances of violence in Assam, media experts from the region and people working in media and outside media were interviewed. Based in Guwahati, four regional television channels - News Live, DY365, Frontier TV and Doordarshan Northeast; and four newspapers- The Telegraph, The Times of India, The Sentinel and The Seven Sisters Post, have been surveyed. The television channels are selected based on highest viewership among the rest of the regional channels of Assam.

Whereas The Telegraph and The Times of India are national news dailies having regional editions, The Sentinel and The Seven Sisters Post are regional newspapers, all published in English are selected with circulation even outside Assam so that responses would be not confined to local views and aspirations. From the industry, respondents were interviewed from each media house (4 television channels and 4 newspaper organizations). Interview material collected was compiled and the common facts summarized. Thus the enquiry strategy was framed, people interviewed. The categorized summary of the responses are given below.

A total of 90 respondents were asked to cite five incidents or issues from Assam, which had gained media attention beyond regional boundaries, national coverage. The question was initially asked about the state of Assam, but as the respondents were seen to have a tendency to talk about certain incidents of others Northeastern states as well clubbing all the eight states of the region, and were unable to pronounce five events only from Assam; the boundary was extended to all of the northeastern states including Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh

and Tripura. Their responses were categorized, accordingly ranked and presented in **Table 1**.

**Table 1:** Responses to choose five Reports from Northeast gaining national coverage (respondents 90, responses 450).

Sl. no	Incidents recalled by respondents	No of responses	Rank	Category of news
1	GS Road incident July, 2012	28	3	Violence
2	BTAD riots in 2012 (Kokrajhar, Chirang, Dhubri Violence)	46	1	Violence
3	Ganeshguri serial blasts on 30 October 2008	31	2	Violence
4	Irom Chanu Sharmila's fast/anti-AFSPA campaign in Manipur	28	3	Protest
5	Brahmaputra dam issue/protests/KMSS protests	3	18	Protest
6	NSCN talks	2	19	Peace talks
7	Rhino poaching	7	14	
8	Agitation against Lower Subansiri Hydro Electric Power Project	2	19	Protest
9	Thangjam Manoramam's killing and subsequent protests in July 2004	11	12	Protest
10	Bhupen Hazarika's death on 5th November 2011 funeral/cremation	6	15	Culture
11	Underground outfits in Northeast/Terror attacks	27	4	Violence
12	Ethnic riots/Communal violence	22	6	Violence
13	Brahmaputra floods/2004 floods/2012 floods	7	14	Flood
14	Beltola violence of November 2007	17	9	Violence
15	Nude Woman strike in Manipur against rape	14	11	Protest
16	Gamosa making Guinness World Record	1	20	Achievement
17	Mahendra Das hanging order	7	14	Judicial
18	Japanese official in Assam looking for their forefather's remains of WWII	1	20	International Relations
19	Elections	4	17	Political
20	2011 KMSS protest at Dispur/Akhil Gogoi Protest	10	13	Protest
21	Anti-dam protests	3	18	Protest
22	Arunachal CM helicopter crash	5	16	Accident
23	Rape highest report in Meghalaya 2013	5	16	Gender issues
24	Matrilineal culture of Meghalaya	3	18	Culture
25	Save Loktak lake' campaign in Manipur	1	20	Protest
26	Garo – Rabha conflict along Assam – Meghalaya border	21	7	Violence

27	MLA Rumi Nath abused by public	4	17	Political scandal
28	Assam Agitation/Signing of the Assam Accord	1	20	Protest
29	Nellie Massacre	5	16	Violence
30	The Chinese attack on India	1	20	Violence
31	Insurgency/Infiltration/D- voters issue in Assam	17	9	Insurgency
32	Mass Exodus of Northeast after the ethnic violence in BTAD areas	20	8	Violence
33	Mary Kom winning a Olympic Medal	4	17	Sports
34	Dhubri boat accident in April 2012	3	18	Accident
35	Hindi speaking people attacked	22	6	Violence
36	Arabinda Rajkhowa/ULFA leaders	6	15	Insurgency
37	Naga Peace talks with NSCN (IM)	4	17	Peace talks
38	Peace talks with ULFA leaders	4	17	Peace talks
39	Asian car rally	1	20	International Relations
40	Homecoming of Ranjan Daimari, NDFB chief	2	19	Peace talks
41	Sarada fraud case-involvement of ministers	5	16	Political scandal
42	Bandhs/strikes	16	10	Protest
43	Separate state demands in Assam and Nagaland/related violence	23	5	Violence
44	Total number of responses	450		

Out of total 20 categories of responses that respondents picked up on their own it was found that of the top 10 ranking categories, eight were of violence. Individually out of total 450 responses, 263 (58%) were of the category representing direct violence. Respondents' unanimously referred to Northeast India in general and Assam in particular as always been neglected by mainstream or national media, with various subjectively significant issues and developments being missed out from public knowledge.

**Table 2:** Profile of the Respondents from Media Houses (N=112).

Television/Electronic Houses	Media	Newspaper Media Houses		Freelance Persons	Media	Total Respondents
n=59		n=28		n=25		N=112
		English language Press	Vernacular language Press			
		21	7			
n= Sum total of respondents from various Media Houses N= Sum total of respondents						

## Methodology Specifications

1. Qualitative research: Content analysis.

Though the region does not find place in national media much, apparently the major issues, events and situations which have figured in media mostly are in sync with the known presumptions and projection patterns of the region. Thus it was seen in media archives and responses that the issues which have gained media attention are events affecting larger number of people.

Echoing the collective feeling a respondent had rightly opined, "Regional conflicts, attacks by extremists and floods feature prominently in national newspapers and TV news channels". The responses confirmed representation of violence in media for further study which was elaborately carried on 112 respondents as the main research work.

An exploratory inquiry into the procedure and criteria that goes behind the production of news content representing Northeast; criteria and strategies that media practitioners employ to make relevant judgments regarding information collection, production, projection and presentation formats, was conducted.

In-depth personal interviews were held to get firsthand information from 112 respondents, over a span of five years (2010-2015) from the media fraternity and the consumers of media as a researcher as well as working journalist. These interview transcripts served as the primary sources of data for content analysis.

The analysis process was inductive and took a Grounded Theory approach with the interview transcripts emerging into categories on their own. A survey of producer's intentions in communicating certain social violence in Northeastern part of India, and receiver's perception creation as per acceptance of the information through representation in media and impact of media violence was carried out.

## Interview Methodology

The study deploys theoretical/purposive sampling based on the knowledge of the likely to be respondents' population and the purpose of the study. In-depth personal interviews with 112 respondents (59 from nine electronic media houses, 28 from 13 newspaper media houses and 25 freelance media persons) were held (**Table 2**).

2. Data collection, sampling, coding, analysis, writing, design regarding the representation pattern of violence in media with reference to Assam.

3. Method of data collection: In-depth personal interviews (problem centered interview, expert interview, online interviews) with media persons from different media houses- electronic and print, and freelance media persons; students, academicians, local residents (media consumers) serves as the primary data for the present study. Along with interviews (verbal data) Visual data (selective media texts collected from selective media houses and archival information) and Mediated data (available documents, news reports and other representations in media on violence in media in Assam) were also used for study.
4. Resources available: media houses of the region, senior journalists, experts on media in region, academic media institutions, local residents as well as non-residents of Assam. The population from which data are drawn include:
  - People employed in media houses
  - Owners of media houses
  - Students
  - Academicians/experts
  - Local residents
5. Boundaries of the analysis are:
  - Locale: Assam in particular with specific references clubbing Northeast as a whole.
  - Media houses with head offices located in Guwahati, Assam (mostly operating for all the seven Northeastern states from a central office based in Guwahati, Assam).
  - Respondents (media producers and media consumers).
6. Comparative analyses of Representation trends followed by media houses and individual journalists, with reference to specific location, events and people of Northeast in general and Assam in particular has been done.
7. Sampling: Theoretical/Purposive sampling.
8. Aim of data analysis: To find out the representation patterns of violence in media with specific reference to Assam and Northeast India as a whole, purpose and intentions.

Through the process of qualitative content analysis the present study aims at analyzing not only the manifest content material but also the latent content as themes, ideas and contexts of the derived texts (responses).

## Results and Discussion

Based on the responses and the supporting archival evidences produced by the media houses, it was found that focus and emphasis throughout media houses has been given on violence incidents, generalizing Northeast and Assam. Understanding of violence may be divided broadly into two major categories- individual violence and collective violence, depending upon the number of people involved in the act. Most identified instances of media representation of violence in regard to Assam and the Northeast were instances of

collective violence going by the following definition: "Violent form of collective behavior engaged in by large numbers of people responding to a common stimulus. Collective violence can be placed on a continuum, with one extreme involving the spontaneous behavior of people who react to situations they perceive as uncertain, threatening, or extremely attractive. Riots and random youth gang fights are examples of spontaneous collective violence. At the other extreme are the organized forms of collective violence. These include coups, rebellions, revolutions, terrorism, and war" [1].

Therefore the rest of the interview schedule was designed focusing on violence, specifically considering collective violence; and thus exclusive situations of individualistic violence have been kept out of the scope of the study. For the purpose of the present study the term "media" is broadly used to mean traditional news organizations- newspapers; and news and current affairs television channels.

### Media representation against reality

Northeast India has always been represented in media in violent images, usually through stereotypical projection. And moreover the region is believed to have been denied due space and time in the so called mainstream media. To grab quick attention, events with sensational images are mostly represented, which create negative impact of the region and people among a wider audience. Through media representation the positive identity and positive impression about a particular person place or event, should be communicated rather than reinforcing prejudices and emphasizing stereotypes. Over time it is seen that most of the incidents of violence in the Northeast have attracted media attention. Available literature suggests that media text on and from the Northeast mostly tends to define the region as per the saleable value of news content which reinforces the prejudiced perceptions leading to even stronger perception creation.

This examines the current functioning of media in portraying the region and specifically deals with patterned projection of Northeast India and studies the role of media to project motivating images of the local being. It looks into few selected instances of representation of Assam in news and how it affects the local imaging based on a survey on local respondent's perceptions and aspirations. Students from selected academic institutions (representing local as well and nationwide views) of Guwahati and media industry representatives' views were taken into consideration to figure out the present state of the region and the reflected reality in media. This calls for relooking into the media format of stereotypical projection of the region that has been neglecting many other facets of reality.

The projection of the north-eastern region and its people in the media may be said to be in sync with the 'popular culture' which cannot be taken as complete reality. Over time it is seen that most the incidents of violence in the Northeast which have attracted media attention (mainstream as well as locals) are understood to be either politically charged; or are by some militant or ethnic group to either grab attention, show

strength, sustenance and growth or to scare people and government. Violence featured in media are mostly politically motivated violence such as demonstrations, arsons, riots, and clashes with police etc. which affect a larger section of masses, rather than those of crime. As violence has more news and visual value, often political and extremist groups resort to violence to get noticed by mass media [2].

It is also seen that representations in media of northeast mostly revolve around the issue relating to ethnic identity which the media has been highlighting in certain negative light focusing on the violence. Content analysis proves that media texts on Northeast India define the region by bomb blasts, terrorism, infiltration and tribes. If not for out of control massacres, riots, curfews, agitations and other incidents of violence eruption, Northeast remains unnoticed and neglected [3]. Such coverage's which have over the time proved to be very money-making as well as well-accepted are report stories about acts of violence and the Northeast is used as a fertile plot for such marketization.

Extensive isolation and neglect mainly due to location and poor connectivity with the rest of India have all played a part in creating this scenario and generating the perception. Many believe the region lacks the sense of belonging and inclusive national identity. *Similarly, with the emphasis on violence, conflict, and projection of white male prime-of-life power, media consumers develop a sense of denial. Viewer sections who find neglected place in media or minorities in media who see members of their own group underrepresented but over-victimized develop a greater sense of apprehension, mistrust, and alienation* [4]. *This holds true for the Northeastern region as well. For example ethnic separatists' movements have affected Assam, Manipur, Mizoram and Nagaland to a large extent. These, similar to the movements occurred in Kashmir and Punjab, are only different in the sense that Northeastern movements have not received media attention like the others* [5].

The role played by media has been enormous in shaping up Northeast to what it is today [5]. Various media intrusions into the political in social scenario are affecting the people and the region as a whole and even outside the boundaries. These include representations in stereotypical manner of brutality, extremism, emphasizing certain ideologies etc. which in many cases might be different from what it was expected to be like; and branding most of the conflicts of the region as ethnic. The role of media in the region along with many other parts needs to be redefined, if the media in Northeast needs to function for the wellbeing of the society or for dissemination and promotion of ideologies or for disseminating terror in the region and about the region outside. It draws attention to look into the ground realities, what is being projected by media and how much of it is justified.

### Projection versus reality: Media marketization

The present situation in terms of media representations can be said to be only selective and patterned which is basically due to the pertinent commercial attitude. In case of Northeast the discriminatory behaviour of the mainstream media can be

seen on the way representations of the region in media has been restricted to specific issues and nature. The issue that has often escaped academicians and industry is that how far is media being used as a medium to communicate reality and how much is to earn TRPs only; and if at all it is being used as communication with commercial gains, is it justifiable to give in to the aspirations of individuals or groups to gain TRPs at the cost of the identity of the whole region and its people. It needs to be re-looked into whether the media representations really go along with aspirations and life philosophy of the locals; how much of what is shared to the other parts of country and beyond is the true prevalent picture. The role of media highly plays significant in defining the region, mainstream attention towards only saleable sensational issues from Northeast (national as well as local media) only results in not-so-true Northeast being defined to media consumers, masses.

### Conflict reporting and peace journalism

Usually in conflict reporting what gets projected through media is only the conflict and attempts at resolution, politically or mass movement etc. People on the other end get to know only of the conflict and its results in terms of damage, deaths, disruption of daily life and fear. Afghanistan, Pak-Afghan border, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, or conflicts in parts of India many Asian countries have been areas of conflict in the last few decades, where conflict reporting was by and large practiced. In conflict reporting media producers, journalists especially have the perception that the role of media is just to report events, and never play a part in resolving conflicts. Contrary to this school of thoughts is another school of thinkers who look beyond fact representation and believe media coverage of the background and causes of conflict can lead to rapid resolution and normalcy in the affected conflict areas. From this emerged the concept of peace journalism, which is seen as an alternative to war reporting. It may be said that with studies arguing the setbacks of typical practices in conflict reporting, the concept of peace journalism came into being. The concept of peace journalism emerged in the 1970s, and was first suggested by Johan Galtung, a Norwegian sociologist and a pioneer in peace and conflict studies. This tries to overcome the traditional journalistic value of objectivity looks at conflict resolution to be a major function of media. Whereas war journalism is violence-oriented, propaganda-oriented, elite-oriented and victory-oriented; on the other hand peace journalism provides a broader perspective of reporting on conflict. Peace journalism proposes media should tell the complete story about conflict truthfully with more informed discussion of significant issues like causes and resolution of the conflict [6].

Kirsten Schwartz Sparre, points to another aspect of conflict journalism, the norm of social responsibility, which was laid down on the British media in the aftermath of the Second World War. This is to provide to the masses with accurate up-to-date information with explanation and comments and with clear separation of fact from comment [7]. Sparre believes that a real possibility of media lies in the social contract between the media and society. Media should ensure that their impact

is positive while keeping the spirit of the social responsibility theory. Denis McQuail in his book *Media Accountability and Freedom of Publication* [8] furthers the concept of media accountability. Talking of media in conflict situation, McQuail suggests that media has two fold functions- firstly media content and format can be crucial for transforming the conflict into sustainable peace and secondly, a balance between media freedom and social responsibility can effect post-conflict situations as well [8].

### Media representation and reality in Assam

Northeast India is referred to as the “paradise in peril” [9]. Out of everything that happens in the region only selective negative aspects and conflicts of the region get reflected in the media and percolate into public consciousness beyond local boundaries. Coverage of violence appears to be motivated by the profit margin, and often bends on the sensationalist ones. People living outside these regions have a mediated and largely distorted picture of the region and the people. *The region gets least projected in the mainstream media and whatever little is adopted by the media are very selective aspects of the region. Local media of the region have also not been able to satisfy the needs of the region and the people in improving the media scenario.* Infact inappropriate representation of facts by the media can be identified as one of the major causes of furthering the conflicts and tensions in the multi-ethnic settings of the Northeast [10].

As was found from literature survey, it became more evident from the responses obtained from the survey population that through representations of facts and figures of violence the image of the region and society as a whole has been projected to the audience in a vulnerable state. The major intention of the media producers behind the patterned projection of Assam (as a part of the larger Northeast) through violence was apparently rooted to the commercial motive. One aspect contrary to the popular belief of the respondents of audiences outside the region to be disinterested and negligence towards Assam was found to be the misrepresentations that have created tainted perceptions about the region in the minds of people, media consumers. Little attempts made in focusing on other aspects of Assam, Northeast as a whole seem to have been accepted well by media consumers far and wide. Extensive violence reporting for long from the region seems to have created a perception of isolation of the region from mainland consciousness which only media has the potential to change and rectify with immense power of media representation. It was also confirmed that most of the decision making and production procedure of news about Assam especially on content and context exhibit homogeneity. While “herd mentality” of media practitioners is found to be a significant instrument in churning out similar patterned media products from the region, the constant “outlet pressure” under which journalists have to perform may be seen as another explanation for the same [11]. Apparently there is limited room for experimentation with newer content, as deviating from the existing trend and topic is seen as a threat to existence and excellence in the commercialised media industry.

Worth mentioning is the mainstream media attitude towards the northeast. In informing the public as what media producers convincingly describe as serving the society by informing about happenings from remotest part of the country what national media is usually found to be doing is serving only a particular section of the population-target audiences, with certain kind of information, selected and patterned in accordance to existing trends and generalised interest areas. This attitude, mostly in mainstream media, may be criticised as serving only to a specific regional mindset, mainland India concentrating on metros which does not accommodate marginalised region or people in media terms and also does not look beyond boundaries of content and context.

Analysing responses, views gathered from available literature and selected archives confirm that journalism in Assam has been more or less reporting of violence with emphasis on facts and figures. Surviving in the competitive media industry becomes more important than following individual desires and expectation from media to work towards the social responsibility. As experts have pointed out earlier, with data and analysis, how ostensibly objective journalism helps to collectively promote the what may be said to be the “predominant perception of a violent reality and the encoding of an entire narrative of violence for social consumption” [12]. Respondents even subtly pointed at hidden political agendas which work behind specific patterned projection of the region.

In the present day context, more than content, visionless is given importance in news selection and representation, clubbed with emotions and conflict. “What is selected and presented as news is driven by pictures and their perceptual and iconic power” [13]. Similar views were also reflected in survey responses as well, the emphasis on reporting with self-explanatory images and visuals seemed to be preferred to background research or follow-up stories of violence.

The challenges that reporters always face in news business are “time pressure and deadlines”, and with improving technology providing “news instantaneously to a wide audience has become even more important” [14]. Furthermore with such work environment and industry demands what apparently looks lucrative for media practitioners from the region is to practice and follow the popular trend of reporting of violence to earn living and gain popularity in media. On the other hand geographically and also psychologically it is considered difficult by the mainstream media practitioners to reach the location to explain events and explore region. This leads to patterned representation of selected instances of violence. The cause of selective and limited coverage of the region as evident from the responses and available literature echoes Rajdeep Sardesai’s (Editor-in-Chief of Indian media house, IBN18 Network) views that the entire North-East seems to suffer from the “tyranny of distance”, which makes it difficult for media to reach the exact location of violence on time, thus enhancing possibilities of missing out details, misunderstanding and misrepresentation of violence [15].

An important aspect of journalism practices in the Northeast and the mainstream media intervention is overcoming the distance from the mainland India and gather information and project it back. Mainstream media houses work on extensive second-hand information of the incidents and work upon preordained knowledge of the region as a whole to produce acceptable news stories. In the regional field as well there are very limited numbers of media representatives spread across the region and thus only few travel and compensate the insufficiency of professionals. As a result many times reporters or stringers reach the spot only after the flare of incident has already finished. This not only does delay information, but it also gives scope of lot of word of mouth facts to be taken as facts. Moreover the decision making powers lie upon media persons in head offices and not the ones in field collecting information or shooting visuals. In this media scenario individual prejudices and organisational ideology play vital role in shaping up of the story angle, identifying the perpetrators and victims and also judgmental media passing fundamental verdicts in case of conflicts and violence.

### Northeast India: Prevailing media practice

Coverage of violence appears to be motivated by profit margins, perceived populist appeal and often bends on the sensationalist representation. Some such coverage which have over time proved to be very well accepted and saleable as well as money-making are report stories about acts of violence especially on innocent and vulnerable individuals or groups, human rights violations, and the failure of the relevant official bodies to address the matter or to deliver justice, sufferings and terror struck people. Responses confirmed the need to control negative imaging and the way Northeast is being represented and portrayed to the world outside the region through selective reporting of violence. People living outside these regions have a mediated and largely distorted picture of the region and the people. Over the ages the militancy angle, the unrest and the distressed people are the only focus of media in the northeast and also outside, in the mainstream media. And as these have become the only projected issues outside the region, even if the media is not providing the bias; most of the times the media is just stirring up the prejudices that lie deep within people. And undoubtedly the media coverage of some of the events in the Northeast raises worrying questions about objectivity and responsibility of the media.

The media perspective in reporting violence exclusively and extensively from the region may be scrutinised under the ethical framework of "utilitarianism" to satisfy a majority of media consumers. Entire Northeast in the mainstream attitude is apparently marginalised. In this context media texts are designed in such a manner that they comply with the popular perceptions of the mainland media as well as mainland India. Responses further conform the existing trend of representation of violence as media makers' quantitative reporting of violence and alleged media trails and verdicts are less concerned about media consumers enlightenment or societal benefits but primarily focus on individualistic gains.

### Popular industry belief and stereotypical projection

Another peculiar aspect of news reports from the region was that the media often portrays the incident of violent acts and situations with facts and figures, but rarely does it do the follow-up stories that focus on the consequences of violence. Impact of violence is only shown as human victimization. Life coming back to normalcy in affected areas is apparently never a part of media content. The probable explanation for media being so selective and limited about violence reporting from the region, especially television news with rarely reporting on the consequences of violence may be attributed to be the popular industry belief that audiences prefer only such stories. Especially news reporting media practitioners have their own criteria for judging what is worth covering and in what magnitude.

There are also ways of judging how much of the covered is worth representing, in what format and with how much intensity. To acquire maximum consumer attention and thus forward commercial gains, media needs to frame the issues in appealing ways. The media like stories with conflict, human interest, novelty, or superlatives is already established as apparent stereotypical projection rules the media world. It is derived that freedom completely lies in the hands of the media makers' and it apparently is their prerogative to mention any detail or leave out on selective contexts while filing their story. To at all carry it in news bulletins and newspapers or not again lies the choice of the decision makers of the media industry.

### Occupational stress and negativism

Responses have confirmed that here is a constant pressure for the journalists to focus and highlight on stories of violence and unrest, which are in tune with the popular perception and popular culture of news consumerism of the state and outside, where the mainstream thrives for negative portrayal. The mental pressure to work against their will is also very high. Every individual journalist when confronted regrets the state in which the region is being and has been projected in the media for the people to know it as an unrest and violent place, unlivable with violence happenings being a part of life here. Most of the journalists working on field, especially the locals working in their own home region, do not like to represent Northeast in and through violent light. But they are either forced to do so or have less of choice. In practice everyone follows the unsaid practice of following the popular culture reinforcing the prejudices and stereotypes about the region. This mental stress and anxiety apparently affects the working and productivity of the journalists in long run.

Furthermore with specific reference to Northeast work environment for media practitioners, a known fact is the working conditions are very harsh. Responses even made clear that the safety measures are equally less for working journalists. As per the South Asia Media Monitor 2012 report, Jammu and Kashmir, Jharkhand and Northeast are the conflict zones in the whole of India where "media persons were

targeted by non-state actors, enjoying support of extremist elements” [16]. Distinctively “threats of murder and death sentences in the northeast and conflicting pressures from militants and official agencies elsewhere made their jobs extremely difficult” (51) further states the report. Statistics reveal that in the last 24 years, 23 journalists have been killed or have gone missing from Assam only, mentioned a respondent- leading columnist associated with The Indian Express. Tremendous work load, low returns in terms of salary and other legitimate facilities and ongoing unrest in the region puts tremendous challenges to the working journalists; making the work field increasingly dangerous is the subjection to numerous threats from insurgents, surrendered militants and even the anti-insurgent security personnel at times. Despite a phenomenal growth in the media, journalists have to put up with poor wages and working conditions, and the hazards of working in a troubled state.

In respect to reporting of violence in Assam (generally clubbed into northeast as a whole and not as an individual state by respondents from the media industry and outside) there are two specific instances. One where the northeast as a whole goes unreported and the other is only information representing violence in the region (authenticated as well as misreported) gets projected as news. Moreover with the mainstream accepting reports of violence and the only way to showcase credibility and appreciation is to lead up to the mainstream expectations, the pressure on media practitioners retain focus on stories of violence and unrest is extremely high. The mental pressure to work against their will is also found to be equally high working under refrains meeting deadlines. Every individual journalist when confronted regrets the state in which the region is being and has been projected in the media for the people to know it as an unrest and violent place, unlivable with violence happenings being a part of life here. Most of the journalists working on field, especially the locals working in their own home region, do not like to represent Northeast in and through violent light. But they are either forced to do so or have less of choice. In practice everyone follows the unsaid practice of following the popular culture reinforcing the prejudices and stereotypes about the region. Whereas the violent media representation is mainly due to the media houses’ sale concerns, the compromise seems to be on other sentiments.

### Lack of trained reporters

Another noteworthy mention is the hierarchy pattern and background of the media practitioners of the region. In usual practice most decision makers in media houses of Assam are senior journalists, most in their mid-fifties by age with no formal media education and training but work experience in journalism. Institutions departing media education formally have been set up in the late 90s in the region with Tezpur University and Assam University departing formal education in mass communication and journalism since 2001 and 1996 respectively. Thus journalistic practices in the region apparently had begun without professionally trained personnel. Now though various private institutions offering courses in journalism have mushroomed in the region their

credibility remains yet to be tested. And with the media industry growing, the media houses have been rampantly hiring professionals without formal professional training. As a freelance journalists is seen expressing her concern about lack of “specialist reporters in the region, while most media personnel are untrained and underpaid” [17]. Even Sanjoy Hazarika identifies the gap as though “Northeastern faces are easily recognizable among media crews, fashion industry and in media... but few have received professional counseling in conflict-ridden areas such as Nagaland, Manipur, Assam and Tripura” [3]. This only aggravates the situation of unprofessional media practices in the region. There is also negligible local representation at the mainstream media, especially in powerful positions, so as to rectify misunderstandings, mis-representations and bring to fore issues other than violence in the mainstream consciousness.

### Innovative experimentations against violence representation practice

As for Stuart Hall meanings are generated through representations done by individuals or groups [18]. And according to his model of encoding and decoding, the intended meaning of a text as encoded by the producer may be way different from the perceived message by the consumer upon decoding the media texts. Thus extending the concept of an active audience still further comes in the Reception Theory of media. It becomes equally crucial to understand how the consumers of media interpret media texts [19]. The process of interpretation in this context is defined as the process of negotiation between media texts and media consumers “situated within specific social and cultural contexts.” (245). As studies reveal as against the popular perception of audiences beyond the region not interested in news from Northeast and violence and conflicts is all they want to know in stories and follow-up stories, media consumers are actually open to experimentations and welcoming to news from the region other than violence. Though the traditional mainstream media is found to ignore such revelations and carry on with customary representations, it is seen that some individual media houses and individual journalists are considering the importance of consumers’ feedback. Apparently efforts are seen being made by mostly non-profit initiatives like Jeevan Magazine, Eclectic Northeast and The Thumb Print: A magazine from the East to deviate from the presiding norms of media representation with focus on violence, conflict and distress only; and are attempting to portray the region in better way, adverse to the popular beliefs of the region.

It may be apparently articulated that representation of violence in various forms of tragedy, conflicts, displacements etc. is expected to attract the media consumers. Media houses and practitioners often are seen profiting off of the fear and entertainment value that such stories of sensationalized reports of violence perpetuate. Certainly the impact of violence in any society in respect to profit, politics, power, expectations and civilization may not be ruled out of preferred representation in media. But the broader issue of violence with reference to reporting of violence in Assam needs to be



relooked into with defined role and scope of media for distinctive regional issues to be properly addressed and represented for the entire consumer world to benefit from. The objective of media ideally is to inform people, not create prejudices and stereotypes; neither to provide tainted views to its consumers' thought only partial projections; and also not to confirm and reconfirm notions. So if Northeast has been branded wrongly and has been brought to limelight, though in less than expected number of times, for all the inappropriate and negative reasons the status quo needs to be changed. Media practitioners and others (all who were surveyed) believe that media has the potential to do so, and they are also eager to see their working context in this light. It may be serious area of concern and action for media houses and individual media practitioners, working in and for the region to deploy media representations to generate means and methods through the locals aspirations that can be used for a positive imaging of the place and community in media attempting overall benefit and development as well as wellbeing of the media practitioners working in the field and provide them with better work environment. There is a lot of scope in the region for media education, training, skills development, understanding media, responsible journalism, utility aspect of media and improving information availability in content and context, rather than preordained concentration on reporting of violence only.

## Conclusion

There has been considerable amount of academic research carried on in the field, regarding violent media content, impact of media violence on consumers, media violence evaluation and improving practices, but the question prevails, if all the researches, findings, discussions and recommendations on media violence and have changed the actual journalistic scenario and the process of violence representation in media. There has been significant academic work on media and Northeast though scant. Most of them identify the region to be neglected by the mainstream media and fault the violence oriented reporting pattern much in accordance with available literature. In the thesis survey, respondents were in consensus to media depicting the state of Assam and the whole of Northeast in general terms as violent, unsafe and terror prone. Apparently coverage of violence that often is criticized of inappropriate representations of instances of violence seem to be motivated by the profit margin. These negative stories of explicit reports on violence have been on only because it does not defy the long existing trend and practice. Some such coverage which have over time proved to be very well accepted and saleable as well as money-making are report stories about acts of violence especially on innocent and vulnerable individuals or groups, human rights violations, and the failure of the relevant official bodies to address the matter or to deliver justice, sufferings and terror struck people.

As a critical approach to media representations this paper is an attempt to figure out how stories about conflicts from the region are framed and what intensions of the media makers work behind the patterned media representations. It may be

said that two strong driving forces of media production, deciding upon content and representation boils down to primarily two concepts-media commercialization and dominant ideology. Confirming the theory of News Framing and the dominant hegemonic perspective is the fact that media, local as well as mainstream, is found to select content and context of reporting, construct representations considering demands and popular beliefs of the dominant section of society. As widely understood in India most mainstream media houses are either controlled by (if not directly owned) the large political party at power or by the opposition at the centre, reflecting either groups' popular ideology or propaganda through definitive media representations. Moreover in respect to violence from the north eastern region making to the mainstream media, reports often are given strong political connotations. This may also be seen as a likely explanation from the media point of view of the peace efforts not extensively covered by mainstream media instead focusing on reporting of violence.

The rapid growing media industry in India has contributed considerably less to the coverage of so called "non-mainstream' regions and issues that apparently are unnoticed, under-represented, mis-represented or fabricated by media. Assam has by large been considered only a part of the entire northeast along with the other seven states and has never enjoyed that separate entity in media and national consciousness. The mainstream national media, based in the metropolitan cities of the nation, with its understanding of news values and newsworthiness has required drastic events with massive figures from the region to make it to the news space and time. The most common easily accepted representation in media of the region has been media reports on incidents of violence- conflicts, massacres, ethnic clashes and insurgency largely; followed by natural calamity, politics, corruption and gender related violence. Other issues usually do not make it to the mainstream and resultantly remains missing from the public awareness. The regional media with proliferation of 24 hours news and current affairs channels, newspapers and current affairs news magazines over the past decade has failed to bring to notice of the global audience the accepted peripheral region, the Northeast as a whole and desired representation. Moreover the regional media houses thrive to serve to the demands of the national mainstream media houses' with wider reach and influence, to promote organizational and commercial motives, leaving aside the social responsibility of media.

In understanding the effectiveness of media communication to represent real Assam through its salable contents as perceived by selective media experts and local residents, it was found from the opinion survey that the prevalent system of representing the region in media is through a predetermined representation method of sensationalizing violence. Views gathered on media violence pointed at the necessity of media being consensus towards images of violence projecting the state of the region to a broader world. Though in practice the role of mediation of news was found to be that of production of a commodity for mass consumption with exceptional preference to violence from the region; in

contrast to the rein of media violence some media practitioners also emphasis on the need of positive imagination as further exploration for the media industry.

This prevailing media scenario of patterned media reporting of violence in Assam may be scrutinized under Johan Galtung's models of news framing: War and Peace journalism. The prevalent practice confirms the conflict oriented model of War Journalism being followed as against the solution oriented model as in Peace Journalism. Media representations with reference to reporting of selective instances of violence in Assam may be attributed to media commercialization. The patterned representation of the region through preordained portrayal of people associated with violence may be attributed to the TRP/circulation hungry media in the highly profit-oriented media industry. So much so that apparently media also is condemned of being insensitive to the mass sufferings, in its glorification and sensationalizing of violent instances from the region and unobstructed reality constructions. As derived from responses and literature the regional and the mainstream media while working in collaboration often tend to highlight ethnicity issues while dealing with violence. In all reports of violence from the region the media intensely tries to identify the victim and the perpetrator. All representations are preordained in attempt to glorify the conflict, sympathize with victims and blame the perpetrators.

Northeast east as an entire region which has been experiencing life through reigns of terror, also apparently is a place of equally dangerous work environment and experiences for journalists covering such incidents and issues of conflict and violence? Dangers of practicing journalism as it is in a volatile region are though well-known is less attended to. And work load and work environment as against constant pressure of commercialization has been disturbing factors for practicing free and fair journalism in the region. Respondents apparently agree constant are usually pressure being levied upon by the state authorities, the extremist outfits and the popular public demand. Under these circumstances the media practitioners come under scrutiny for providing the public with patterned projection of the region which in most cases is against their own perceptions and desires. Moreover with the growing media industry in the region amateur journalists are seen contributing towards conflict reporting as a result factual accuracy or social relevance are often compromised in media representations.

It is a concern today that if media disposes enough responsibility that comes with the immense power, to handle serious social issues, to take human emotion further to social development without hurting sentiments and not enraging people. Thus it becomes important to study the effectiveness and appropriateness in various mass scale productions of homogeneous media products. Time has come to rethink the role of media; to create hope to the local residents and creating positive image of the society over the boundary of the region to nation as well as beyond.

Before the situation further aggravates, the media especially in Northeast India, must take adequate steps to reduce violence in its content. The concern should not only be what is

being projected but also on how it is being projected. Taking inputs from researches being carried on in the academic field, relevant recommendations and rectifications might be made to the representation content and context. Probably the quantity of violent content and the nature of representation both needs to be equally monitored. Perhaps a kind of violence rating system may be established by which media content can be monitored. Media needs to method ways of representation and perhaps look for innovations not only in presentation styles like it has been in most experiments in media industry and news but also needs to work upon strategies that would improve the content and quality of media.

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