



Resisting Stereotypes, Countering Violence—An Analytical Study of Selected Women Journalists of India's North-East

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Abstract

In spite of being rich in natural resources and ethnic culture and diversity, the Northeastern region of India has been trapped in a tangled mess of hostile internal politics, economic backwardness and the discriminatory policies of the central government. Many social scientists claim that the very concept of Northeast India is a colonial construct and its issues and problems are more heterogeneous than homogeneous. Unfortunately, these issues have not been addressed in appropriate ways, for which the region has been suffering from a set of perennial problems.

Media has a crucial role to play in addressing these issues in a result oriented approach. While the media faces real challenges, and is at the constant risk of facing the ire of the government and the miscreants, it is heartening to see that a number of women journalists have been working at the forefront to raise the voice of the people of Northeast and build up an atmosphere of constructive journalism. It is in this context of journalism and the burning issues of Northeast India that this paper proposes to make a study of the contributions of three women journalists from the print media of different generations from this region. These women journalists are, Sabita Goswami, Patricia Mukhim, and Binalakshmi Nepam. These journalists have bravely swam against the current in their pursuit to publish true information and thereby in creating a realistic picture of the region, devoid of any glorification or distortion.

Key words: *Journalism, Cultural prejudice, Stereotyping, Violence, Peace-building*

Introduction:

A baffling range of linguistic, ethnic and cultural diversity has lent North -East India the character of a miniature subcontinent, as components from Tibetan, Burmese, Aryan, Mongoloid and other streams of culture have built

up a great confluence here. Cartographically, this region appears to be precariously suspended from the map of India, while geologically it belongs to a hyper sensitive seismic zone—politically too it remains ever volatile and vulnerable. For though it became a part of the Indian State after 1947,



many issues had been left unresolved and in the following decades, this led to a series of violent inter and intra ethnic conflicts along with movements for separate and sovereign states. It is as true as the evocative picture of an idyllic landscape and a 'composite culture' that it outwardly presents.

A quick glance over the representative texts about the North- East first brings to our mind Hem Barua's *The Red River and the Blue Hill* (1954), in which Barua glorifies the history, cultural practices and natural scenery of Assam and its surrounding hills districts: "The main reason that Assam is little known outside i.e., in the rest of India is perhaps her remoteness from the centre of national life. She is known, outside her borders, mostly as a land of witchcraft and magic, animism and wild tribes. Here the hills are impenetrable and many, forests are luxuriant, rivers are numberless, and nature is prodigal." (Barua 3) Barua's purpose of writing the book was to present a happy picture of the North- East to the outside world and therefore, North East remains confined to tableaux and picture frames here.

It was Verrier Elwin who first resisted the Central Government's approach to the North Eastern people as museum specimens: "... the belief in the happy care free Noble Savage is a myth, except perhaps in the South Seas long ago. In NEFA at least the people had not enough food....their life was distracted by war, slavery and cruel punishments...the humanitarian ideals of a welfare state no longer permit the neglect of any section of people...And no one (least of all the scientist) wants to keep the tribal people as museum specimens for the benefit of science." (Elwin 47)

Elwin tried to break the myths around tribal lives and came up with suggestions for a practical approach to them so that they can live a life of dignity in a modern, democratic nation state. However, things moved in a very slow pace and in a bid to make themselves heard, almost all the small and big ethnic groups took up arms against the entire mechanism of the Government of India. In the context of this Gordian's knot situation of centre versus North-East, the media has a very important role to play, which can facilitate a positive interaction between the ends and both can work together for economic development of the region and political integrity of the state. Though the media (especially the print media) from this region was constantly blamed for misrepresenting the issues of the North-East on the national platform, it is observed that in recent years, the media has woken up to the cluttered scenario in the region and there has been a change of approach to the problems of discrimination, stereotyping, exotification and mythification of the North-East in the post-Independence India. The most important point to note here is that, a number of women journalists from this region have been working relentlessly in making people aware of the real situation and against making false reports pertaining to the political issues of North-East India.

Three women journalists from North-East are selected for this paper to highlight specific aspects of their contribution in shaping the true image of the region on the national and international platforms. These women journalists have shown deep understanding of the complex ethno-cultural-political texture of the region and have gone deeper into the problems to create awareness at



all levels – the government, the people, and the media. They have been doing it consistently instead of mythifying or glossing over the facts, which, otherwise, would have aggravated the situation. The women journalists selected for this study are, Sabita Goswami from Assam, Patricia Mukhim from Meghalaya and Binalakshmi Nepram from Manipur.

Objectives :

The objectives of this paper is to study

1) The contribution of the women journalists from the North-East in presenting the real situation of the region

2) How these journalists have protested all forms of violence

3) How these journalists have kept their professional ethics intact, even while working under multiple pressure

Materials and methods :

The methodology of this paper is investigative and analytical, based on the lives and works of the selected women journalists from the North-Eastern region of India. The materials used in this study are books, memoirs, journals (both print and the web)

Discussion :

The abovementioned North-East versus centre tussle is usually marked by “neglect narrative” (Dutta 178) and is further aggravated by insurgency and the insurgent groups’ links with the neighbouring foreign states. Noted journalist and conflict management activist Wasbir Hussain notes that the problem of insurgency has been boosted by cross border infiltration and “trans border linkages” (Hussain 110). Hussain further notes that “This region of 263,000 sq. kilometers

share a highly porous and sensitive frontier with unpredictable China, blow-hot-blow-cold Myanmar, semi-friendly Bangladesh and traditional ally Bhutan. That the region is indeed strategically located is seen by the fact that it shares a 4,500 kilometre-long international border with the four South Asian neighbours, but is connected to the Indian mainland by a tenuous 22 kilometre-long ‘Chicken’s Neck’-land corridor passing through Siliguri in the eastern state of West Bengal.” (Hussain 110)

No wonder, such a region marked by segregation and lost in internal strife would be stereotyped and misrepresented in the media and the mainstream mindset. Northeast India still hangs precariously on that (in) famous ‘chicken neck’, but in recent years, there seems to have been a change of attitude towards its people due to media’s new awareness regarding the cluttered realities of this part of India. Very significantly, many a number of women journalists from this region have been working relentlessly in bringing a change of perspective in handling the issues concerning North-East India. First, we can take up the contributions of Sabita Goswami in publishing eye witness reports in the national and international print media during the Assam Movement that shook Assam during the 1980s.

The issue of Assam Movement is one of the most highly contested topics of the history of Assam. On the one hand, it united the majority section of the Assamese society against the illegal infiltrators, and it divided the same society like never before. It divided the common people, it divided the intelligentsia, it separated the neighbours from neighbours, even it divided the families. While a



section of intellectuals lent unconditional support to the movement, another section voiced their opposition to it. It is in this context of some leftist scholars like Hiren Gohain's opposition to the movement, Nani Gopal Mahanta calls him "the staunchest critic of the Assam Agitation" (Mahanta 275-276). Mahanta rues over the fact that Hiren Gohain never tried to understand the cause that had fuelled the revolution, "It is really unfortunate that Professor Gohain could never appreciate the fact that immigration has remained the single most crucial factor for the identity threat of Assamese people since the dawn of colonial politics in Assam. For a smaller heterogeneous composite Assamese nationality, the immigration and ever-increasing cohesive and homogeneous Muslim population remain the single most important identity threat." (Mahanta 2021) Mahanta further states that the agitation had nothing to do with Hindu-Muslim or mandir-masjid issues and he is correct to a great extent. Yet, even without the leadership's intention, as Mahanta has pointed out, the agitation took a communal turn and became hostile to any settler coming from places like Bihar, Rajasthan, West Bengal, etc. The leaders lost control over many violent situations, as a result of which a number of conscious citizens (including intellectuals, journalists, etc.) withdrew their support to the movement.

Veteran journalist Sabita Goswami is remembered for the role she played during the Assam Movement days in fielding impartial reports to the BBC, *Blitz*, *India Today*, etc. Her grit, assertiveness and intelligence are proved in the success of her professional career. For, she remained unchallenged in her position in the highly competitive job of a journalist and she retired only

voluntarily as a professional journalist for the BBC and other important news agencies. In this age of glamour and self promotion, it is difficult to imagine that Goswami kept herself anonymous as the only woman field reporter in Assam for a long time, and nobody knew that she worked for the BBC. Her memoir *Man Gangar Tirat* (2017) shows her passion for journalism and also her belief in her work ethics. While almost all the local newspapers published reports in favour of the Movement either overtly or covertly, Sabita Goswami's reports were detached accounts of first hand experience, and perhaps, for this detachment, she remained the only reporter to the BBC from the region to cover the news of the movement. Her ideological and emotional detachment and her professionalism made her a reliable source of information for one of the world's most reputed broadcasting agencies.

Sabita Goswami covered some of the most gruesome incidents of violence during the Assam Movement; for instance, the massacres of Nellie and Chaulkhowa Chapori. Since the ideology of the Movement was non-violent and since it received mass support, many violent incidents (unleashed upon religious and linguistic minorities) went unreported. Sabita Goswami was one of the reporters to go to Nellie and other places and collect the first hand report herself. Journalist Sanjoy Hazarika mentions his journey to Nellie with Sabita Goswami and others, "On 20 February 1983, I travelled with four other journalists to Nellie. We represented different newspapers and news agencies: there was Nazmul Hasan of Reuters (later killed in a mine explosion in the Iran-Iraq conflict), Satish Jacob of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Anand Sahay



of *The Times of India* and Sabita Goswami of *Blitz*.” (Hazarika 49). Later on, in several interviews, she recounted the horrific experience of counting six hundred and seventy four dead bodies there.

Besides working as a reporter for the BBC, *The Daily* and *Blitz*, Sabita Goswami also published a weekly tabloid called *The North East Times*, which was a family venture. As she writes in her memoir, she tried to include news from all the seven Northeastern states. She recollects how, after collecting the news, she prepared the survey in three different ways for three different forums – while writing for the BBC, she had to be mindful of the international importance of a news, she had to change her style of presentation and perspective while writing for the national and the regional weeklies respectively. Though she does not mention the details of how she did this. Apart from that, Goswami also wrote for a news agency called ‘Agence France Presse’ (shortly AFP), a leading global news agency with its headquarters in Paris, which also happens to be the world’s oldest news agency; she wrote fortnightly ‘panorama’ for AFP on the texture of ethnic diversity of Assam and Northeast India and the socio-economic condition of the region.

Goswami’s memoir is a passionate recounting of her involvement in reporting the events of the movement; she also recalls how she made it a point to remain straightforward and matter-of-fact in her approach. She mentions that later on, when she covered some news from Manipur, the former chief minister of Manipur Rishang Keishing did not like her “aggressive straightforwardness”. (Goswami 101)

Patricia Mukhim is a senior journalist based in Shillong and currently she is the editor of *The Shillong Times*. Mukhim, has been playing a very significant role in raising the crucial issues concerning Northeast India and bringing them to the national platform. Mukhim has remained a severe critic of the prejudiced and discriminatory attitude of the central government and mainland Indians towards the people of North-East India. In her essay “Where is this North-east?” Mukhim offers a critical as well as an introspective analysis behind the causes of this discrimination along with the other unique problems faced by the North-Eastern states of India. First of all, Mukhim questions the myth of ‘Unity in Diversity’ on which the Indian nationhood is built. Mukhim notes the fact that the Northeastern region became a part of India only by force and not voluntarily. And those who got power in New Delhi continued to approach the North-Eastern region like colonizers. Therefore, Mukhim believes that the transfer of power in New Delhi did not bring any change to the people of Northeast India. Mukhim expresses her resentment over the imposed homogeneity over the inherently heterogeneous region. She also criticizes the common Indian people’s prejudice against the people of North-East India and how their prejudice is based on judging people by their looks.

However, Patricia Mukhim’s criticism is always double-pronged. For, while critiquing the general attitude of the people of India towards North-East India, she also throws some introspective glances into the problems of the region created by its own unique situation. For this, Mukhim’s is a well known voice against narrow nativism and reverse stereotyping. She



says that the Northeastern people are mostly insecure, for their history is shrouded in mystery, their travel history and travel routes are unknown. Their access to modern education is very recent and, as a result, in front of a people with the history of five thousand years, they feel inferior and insecure. In her article “Politics of Identity and Location”, Mukhim questions the way the people of North-east India treat outsiders and criticizes the Khasi Students’ Union, the self-styled guardian of the Khasi society, “And in this horrifyingly complex situation we have the non-tribals who have lived in the region for three to four generations and have contributed their mite to the local economy. In Meghalaya, in late 1970s, the Khasi Students’ Union – a body that is anything but student-like and has in its fold members who have either dropped out of school or are too long in the tooth to be considered students – launched an insidious attack on the Bengalis living in Shillong. Their reason for doing so is simplistic – the non-tribals are responsible for all the ills that afflict the Khasi society. So attractive was the slogan “Khasi by birth, Indian by accident” that the words were splattered across public walls in the city.” (Mukhim 2014)

What Shruti Pandalai comments regarding Mukhim’s stance on this outsider phobia of the Khasi people in particular and the indigenous population of North-East India in general is noteworthy, “The ‘othering’ of identities and perceptions, however, goes both ways and is not often reflected in the media discourse. In an eye-opener of a piece in *The Hindu*, Patricia Mukhim, the Editor of *The Shillong Times* questions eloquently that while the people from India’s

North East face severe discrimination in Delhi and elsewhere, has anyone asked how the northeast treats the ‘outsiders’? She makes a case for the unreported incidents of attacks and discrimination faced by non-tribals struggling to survive in the North East. It is a dismal picture, starkly different from the flattened construction of a homogenous North East that is repeatedly manufactured in our public consciousness.” (Pandalai 2014) Thus, Mukhim is not only averse to NCERT’s inclusion of chapters on this region as supplements, but also to the intolerance showed by the people of the region to the outsiders. The special quality that marks Patricia Mukhim’s journalism is that she comes out of her own frame to look at it from a distance. Mukhim is averse to the tendency to stereotype- either on the part of mainland India or on the part of North-East India.

Binalakshmi Nepram’s is a well known face in international forums for conflict management, and her essays, reports and research papers have received serious attention in the academia and the media in India and abroad. She has been carrying on her journalism and activism on multiple spheres, especially in peace- making in violence ridden Manipur, reporting on drug smuggling in Northeast India and protesting the stereotyping of Northeast India in national media or in central India. She writes in an article that like many young women from the Northeast India, she too became a target of racial and sexual abuse while she had been living in Delhi as an undergraduate student. In an interview to Apekshita Varshney Nepram tells that though she grew up in violence ridden Manipur, only her bitter experience of being abused as a *chinki* (Nepram 2019) motivated her to take up



activism seriously. Nepram has written four important books, namely, 1. South Asia's Fractured Frontier – Armed Conflict, Narcotics and Small Arms Proliferation in India's North-East, 2. Alien of Extraordinary Power: An Indigenous Woman Human Rights Defender from Manipur and Story of Activism, Exile and Survival, 3. Where are Our Women for Decision Making, and 4. Deepening Democracy, Diversity and Women's Rights in India.

While raising her voice against stereotyping of North-East India and writing about the political issues of the region in national and international media, Nepram has divided her work on two levels in her home state Manipur- one, rehabilitating the gun survivor women of the state and two, prevention of drug smuggling through Manipur. In her essay "Ethno-Nationalism in India's Northeast", she casts a deep insight into the intricate problems of this part of India which is summed up in this poignant statement, "While attempting to address conflict resolution measures in the Northeast, one should constantly keep in mind the "War within War" syndrome, so typical to the region. One tribe's "Freedom Fighter" becomes another tribe's "Terrorist Group". In a bid to assert that certain Kuki inhabited parts of Manipur State are 'Naga' territories in the 1990s, many Kukis were slaughtered by the Naga insurgents. Similarly, many Santhals were slaughtered in the Bodo dominated areas of Assam" (Nepram, *Order in Chaos*, 159) Being a survivor of gun-violence herself, Nepram has set up the "Women Gun Survivors' Network" of Manipur; these women are mostly surrendered militants or widows of militants. First of all, her

aim is to de-weaponise the Manipuri society, then to provide education and stability of life to the children of these women and also to give them a life of independence and dignity. Nepram is also Oxfam's consultant on narcotic drug abuse.

Findings and conclusion:

Shoma Chatterji, in her article "Indian Women in Journalism" notes that in spite of increasing participation of women in the media, it is predominantly a male occupied territory so far as decision making is concerned. From the above study of the three women journalists, namely, Sabita Goswami, Patricia Mukhim and Binalakshmi Nepram, from the North-Eastern region of India, we have found that these journalists have created their own space in the domain by choosing to make their solitary journeys in the field of journalism and have significantly contributed in shaping the right image of the region in the media. They have worked in different circumstances, on different platforms and for different media houses; but from their own individual positions they have recognized the multi-ethnic composition of the region and reiterated their view that violence is not the key to any solution. They have warned that ethnic clash, arms trade, guerilla warfare can only harm the people of this region, instead of guiding them towards development. They have resisted against xenophobia and cultural hegemony and have been working for a multi-cultural cohabitation and peace-building in the context of a cosmopolitan culture and a globalised economy. They have faced all challenges and have guided themselves by conscience and intuition rather than by trepidation and indecision. Certainly, they have



created a positive atmosphere in which constructive journalism can thrive in North-East India to resist prejudice, stereotyping and violence.

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