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## **Role of Media in Assam**

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### **Abstract**

*Media's role has been very significant in the Assamese society. It has always been a very strong critique of the government. Now it has to be more vocal and vigilant about the socio-political conditions so that the state administration becomes more accountable and answerable to the electorate. Media freedom is generally accepted as a corner stone of modern democratic society. However there is also an acute awareness that the media should be responsible in what and how it reports and also clearly distinguish disseminating information from analysis and opinions. Assamese as a community has always been very emotional, getting easily, moved by sentiments. This has induced political leaders and other vested interest groups to easily motivate the masses for their selfish motives. Emotion can be a positive force, if motivated in the right direction. Here comes in the role of the media. To bring this region to the mainstream, more attention needs to be given from cross sections of society as India is moving towards super power. The role of media in times of public crisis — be it disaster management or terror attacks is clearly brought out. In the case of the former the role of media is clear and simple — more information is better as it can only help people who are affected, and help manage disasters more effectively. In the case of terror attacks however, there is a need for moderating the reporting.*

***Key words: Media, Media freedom, democratic society, public crisis, reporting.***

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**Introduction:** The state of Assam is known as the gateway to Northeast India and it has immense significance in terms of Tourism, Agriculture and Industries. It is also a hot bed of political activities. The steady inflow of visitors and tourists throughout the year keep the state busy. Numerous people of diverse culture and community inhabit Assam. All these factors make the state a favourite with the media. The Assam Media with all its forms is working to serve the people with information, education and entertainment.

Media plays a vital role today in any conflict situation. It can play constructive as well as destructive role in the way they present conflict situations and images to the audience. Though in India there have been many conflict situations in the past and present, it can be

said that not much of attempt has been made to study the role of the media, though of late there has been a mushrooming of media houses in the country.

**Literature Review:** In the days of Citizen Journalism when the world has shrunk to wavelengths and information-sharing through the social media has already proved its mettle in bringing about major changes, it is essential to take a critical look at the role and the responsibilities of the media. However, there is also considerable awareness that the media should be responsible in what and how it reports, and how it ought to distinguish between giving information and editorialising.

Media person turned researcher Ratnesh Dwivedi through his writings in book seeks to take a critical look at the aspects of role of media goes on to explore the issue of public accountability of media in the era of “market driven journalism”. The author argues that ‘self regulation’ is possibly the mechanism most capable of striking the right balance between freedom and restraint. Dwivedi touches upon the sensational revelations of Wikileaks and the Radio Tapes and the effect they have had on shaping public opinion. The ethics and morality of phone tapping and ‘listening in’ by governmental agencies are detailed out. Delving deeper into the morality of Wikileaks, the author highlights the dilemma over the right to publish and the need for the State to maintain its secrets. The struggle between freedom of expression and censorship is also dealt with, but the author stops short of coming up with solutions.

The role of media in times of public crisis— be it disaster management or terror attacks is clearly brought out. In the case of the former the role of media is clear and simple— more information is better as it can only help people who are affected, and help manage disasters more effectively. In the case of terror attacks however, there is a need for moderating the reporting, says the author, drawing a parallel between the way the foreign media covered the Mumbai terror attacks with restraint and the way the Indian television channels failed to exercise similar caution. The issue of international terrorism and its spread raises fundamental questions about the right to information of the public, policing by the State and patriotism and loyalty.

**Quality of News in Assam:** Media as we all know is regarded as the fourth pillar of democracy. It is at present the most potent means of communication. It enhances our knowledge about the events taking place all over the world and helps in the exchange of ideas and expression of views at the global stage. However, in the context of the regional media of Assam, it needs to improve a lot. It’s high time that the news channels understood the true meaning of journalism and instead of exaggerating an issue of lesser interest they focused on issues of higher stature. The north-eastern part of India takes pride in its cultural diversity, its flora and fauna, its scenic beauty and as such, it deserves recognition not only at the regional level but also at the national and international levels. But then, the onus is on the regional media to give north-east India the place it deserves.

Mr. Prasant Mahanta in his comments at letters@friedeye.com, dated July 1, 2012, highlighted upon the quality of news the regional news channels deliver. He mentioned that Assam has the highest number of local news channels among all other states of India but it is a pity that the overall quality of journalism in the state is very poor. News in Assam is by

all means sensationalized; it is more 'entertainment' than news, he exclaimed. He cited the Incidents like the GS road episode which became the talk of the day with the channels showing diverse images of the same issue while a news 'worth greater importance but lesser TRP' is totally neglected. According to him, these are a few instances which subtly picture the quality of journalism in the north-east and as a result of which the public remain oblivious of many important events taking place all around the globe. He further added that news in Assam is totally urban-biased or metro centric. The channels make it apparent that Guwahati is the only place in Assam which faces problems. From dilapidated streets to flash floods, from illegal mining to unauthorized felling of trees, from rain to landslides, from scorching heat to bone-chilling cold it seems only Guwahati experiences these all.

Apart from the initiatives from Government, NGOs and other stakeholders, media need to play an active role in Nation building giving importance to the Northeast India, especially Assam. But the fact of the matter is that national media or mainstream media cannot perform much in the region. It only gives attention only when insurgency related issues crop up there. Does it mean that there are no any positive activities? Media coverage of the region, at least, tries to create such an illusion.

Of course, there are many day-to-day activities and achievements, which even can become the leading story in print and electronic media of mainstream. But as it is not highlighted the people of the other region cannot access that news. That is why many people do not know much about the region. In this regard, northeast need to produce professional media persons who can highlight newsworthy developments, which will give positive impact in bringing the region into the mainstream India. To produce professional media persons, it is also required establishing media courses in college and university levels. But the pathetic condition is that there are not much media courses in the entire Northeast. Media, being a professional, course requires huge amount in pursuing the course. So those who cannot afford these fees cannot pursue this course. Ultimately, they cannot fulfil their dreams. In terms of job opportunity, media is a booming sector. So, University Grants Commission and state Governments need to give impetus in establishing media courses in the region. By doing this, more media persons would be coming out from the region and helping in Nation building. In due course, the feeling of alienation would be wiped out from the North-Easterners through media.

Adequate stories of developmental issues, educating the people of their rights and duties, highlighting their problems and prospects, making them aware of their resources and potential would definitely bring in a sea change in the society. Right from the days of the Assam Agitation of early 1980's following all political developments including insurgency, the general psyche of the Assamese community can be studied and the consequents thereafter. Utmost significance here is that of print media. In Assam politics, media has played a tremendous role in the falling and establishment of governments from time to time. Now if media takes on this great social responsibility of creating a sound economy and a progressive social structure, a great positive social change can be predicted. Sensational news has had its share in the society. That media has to serve as a political critique there is

no doubt about it but media should not only limit its role to production of facts but should also be a pathfinder of the people. It should be a party to a developed society. A distinct space should be given to agricultural development issues, discuss problems faced by farmers, their solutions, environment related issues, stories of technological up gradations, thereby making the government more transparent, accountable and answerable to the electorate. Vernacular media has a more significant role to play in rural sector as it speaks the language of the local people.

**Media in Assam– an Analysis:** Print media has been playing a significant role in the socio-political condition of Assam. Media owns a great responsibility to the political developments of the state. Particularly the role of vernacular newspapers are of great significance in this regard. The highest circulated Assamese language daily in the state today in the *Asomiya Protidin*, with a circulation of 1.20 lakh. This newspaper has a wide coverage and has great political impact. It has been very vocal and significant in unearthing various scandals of the government and has great impact on the general public. The daily relies on investigative journalism and stand as a vibrant critique of the government. But it is felt that the newspapers is a bit inclined towards sensationalism. There is more establishment of personal opinion of the reporter than pointing out actual facts. This is a true for most of the vernacular newspapers.

Monoram Gogoi of *Asomiya Protidin* opined, “we deal with stories from the humanitarian perspective. When people are insecured of their lives and property due to insurgents or any other element in society, they turn to the state. But when the state turns-hostile, whom will they turn to. Obviously it is the media whose support they need. We as media persons feel this social responsibility and do stories emphasizing the human aspect of the issues”. The *Assam Tribune* is the highest circulated English daily of Assam. It is also the oldest publishing house of the northeast region. *Assam Tribune* has an all together different perspective of looking at issues. The daily does not believe in creating any kind of sensation but relies more on actual facts. Individual criticism or opinion of the writer is not revealed much. It is reporting of factual details. There are reasons for that. *Assam Tribune* has become the tradition of Assamese life. It has reached such a high degree of popularity that struggle for survival is not the question now. The high quality of news with authenticity and good analysis has earned the faith of the public. Newspaper reading forms a habit of the people and *Assam Tribune* has become that habit now.

Newspaper is a competitive business. The competition within the vernacular press has increased manifold owing to cropping up of numerous regional language dailies in the last few years. Since so many newspapers have come of late, struggle for survival is the need of the hour. It is ostensible that to flourish, sensational news is necessary. Because, it will be an over-estimation to judge every reader to be an intellectual who looks for analysis. Since, most of the regional language dailies have a flourishing rural market, they need to cater to the needs of the rural reader. And a place like Assam where 89 percent of the population resides in villages, it is imperative on the part of the newspapers to satisfy this vast rural

market. Hence, appears this sharp line of difference between the stories of English and vernacular dailies.

National dailies have entered the Assamese life of late. Today, The Times of India, Hindustan Times, Telegraph, The Indian Express and Asian age have come out with four pages of northeast news. But they are a new entrant and yet to gain acceptance of the public. "A local resident of Assam would obviously not read a national daily to get the local news. For that he would read his local daily", views Barun Dasgupta, Special Correspondent of the Hindu, Gauhati.

**Role of Media Vital in Assam:** According to Dr Alok Kumar Buragohain, Vice-Chancellor, Dibrugarh University, journalism in Assam is inseparably linked to literature and the pulse of the Assamese society. He said that Mahatma Gandhi himself was an astute journalist and he could successfully rekindle the spirit of the Indians through his writings in Harijan and Young India. Dr Buragohain added that the press has a greater role to play in India which is going to be the youngest and most vigorous country in the world in the next three years with more than 50 per cent population in between the ages of 20 to 35 years. He said that the responsibility of educating and guiding this teeming multitude of young brigade falls on the teaching community. "If they fail to devote themselves to their job seriously, this demographic dividend will turn into a demographic disaster," he added. He said that the press too should rise to the occasion as the youths when deprived of proper skill and education may turn into a serious threat to the society.

Assam is endowed with rich forest and wildlife resources. It's incredible scenic beauty is yet to be explored. Kaziranga national sanctuary, famous for its one horned rhinos is in a sorry state today. Illegal felling of tree by unscrupulous elements has rendered wild habitat a disastrous effect. Killing and smuggling of animals is rampant. And to top it all is large scale encroachment of forest land by doubtful citizens. Similar is the case with other forests and national parks like Manas, Orang and Laokhowa. Government is giving a blind eye to these issues of great concern. Mere discussions on the potential for tourism development in the state is not enough. Assam's scenic beauty and its wildlife of rare variety need media publicity immensely. A news report on environment and wildlife appears in the dailies only when there is a scandal or a case of absolute disaster happens. National newspaper's role is also negligible in this regard. India's policy of liberalization of the economy seems to have no effect on Assam's starving economy. Investors are reluctant to come into this insurgent infested violent state. Emphasis only on evils of society renders negative publicity to a state thereby bringing disastrous effects to the development of the region. Bringing into limelight the evils of society is also the duty of media. But there has to be a balance. Because in today's global world, media can make or destroy an issue.

**Issues in Ethics:** Ethics is one issue which is always shoved under the carpet. Media has always faced flak for not adhering to ethical journalistic norms when it comes to reporting. The issue of ethics cannot be seen in isolation. With a deluge of newspapers and electronic media, Assam suddenly needed a huge number of journalists and professionals. Most of the

journalists who joined were not trained people. So, for young journalists who joined, the job was a way to get a secure job. Journalism in itself was not the end; there was hardly any security in the job. In the national scene ‘scholars expressed concern over the rise of Hindi newspapers, which became synonymous with ‘Hindu’ newspapers, indicating the orientation of Hindi newspapers in support of the cause of Hindu chauvinist forces (Neyazi, 2010: 914). In case of Assam, Ajit Bhuyan, the editor of a daily was jailed under the National Security Act, and has been charged with burning the national flag. He and the paper’s chief editor, Haider Hussain, have in the past been nominated by United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) to a roundtable to negotiate with the Government of India. In fact, there are a lot of editors and journalists who still sympathize with the banned outfit and pick up cudgels on its behalf. “Localization has also resulted in a trivialization of news that emerged with a simultaneous empowerment of local citizens who cannot be reached by English-language newspapers” (Neyazi, 2010: 921). One of the biggest casualties in the television media is sensationalism of news.

Print media professionals have always questioned the credibility of news of the television media. They accuse the television media to be driven by TRP and consequently advertising revenue, which compromises the quality of journalism. Prasanta Rajguru argues “electronic media is going very high as per as unhealthy practices are concerned. Again the corporate control is coming to the fore. It is all about TRP’s. TRP’s bring revenue so it is encouraged each time.”

Radhika Mohan Bhagwati offers a way out and suggests measures for the media to adhere “there should be some self regulation. Self regulation doesn’t mean that somebody will impose a code of conduct. That code of conduct should come up from us. If we do not ourselves discover a code of conduct then somebody must step in and impose on us.”

**Conclusion:** Today the world has come closer due to communication and technological development. It can rightly be called a global village. So Assam’s geographical distance from the mainland of India can no longer be a justification for its present state of emotional distance from the Indian sub-continent. Lack of initiative of the local people of Assam in expressing themselves in the larger national platform cannot be ruled out. In most cases representatives from Assam in the National level fail to voice their opinion on issues concerning their state and fail to convince the higher order to pursue their objectives. And the public in general lack that jest to work in unison for the development of their state. Professionalism and ambition is lacking in the society. Discrepancies in the government are many and hence scope of reporting. Print and electronic media has to render tremendous service in the development of the state. Assam needs to be explored, its resource potential needs to be glorified. Only such opening up of Assam can build in a new developed Assam. And media needs to take on that responsibility. A state with a literacy rate of 64.3 per cent is sure to go a long way provided the masses are taken towards the right direction. And media is the most potent force to do so.

It is clear that although the first satellite television channel came in 2004, it is only in the last few years that the market is taking shape. New players have started to consolidate and now know better what the people want. The print sector is also getting used to the new order, facing challenges not only in news content and sales but also attrition of senior employees to the electronic media.

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