



ROLE OF MEDIA IN SHAPING COUNTER INSURGENCY STRATEGIES IN NORTH EAST INDIA

Author- Satya Prakash Majhi

*(PhD)Research Scholar, P.G Department of Political Science, Berhampur University,
Berhampur, India*

Co-Author- Dr. Saroj Kumar Jena

*Assistant professor, Department of political science, Niranjan Govt. Women's College,
Aska, Ganjam, India*

ABSTRACT

The media's portrayal of insurgency and counter-insurgency in Northeast India has historically been limited and biased, leading to significant implications for policy formation and public perception. This study explores how media narratives shape counter-insurgency strategies, focusing on recent ethnic **violence in Manipur**¹ between the Meitei and Kuki-Zo communities. Drawing from *Arjit Sen's (2011)*² research on media coverage in Northeast India, particularly the marginalization of conflicts such as the **Indo-Naga war**, this study highlights the ongoing challenges of selective silence, stereotypes, and misrepresentation in mainstream Indian media. Sen's work discusses the underreporting of critical insurgencies in the region, starting from Gavin Young's reportage on the Indo-Naga war in the 1960s, which broke through an enforced media blackout. This lack of coverage has persisted, with modern conflicts often presented through the lens of exoticism, othering, or negative stereotypes. The selective media engagement in Northeast India contrasts sharply with extensive coverage of conflicts in other parts of the country, contributing to the region's characterization as an area of darkness. This perpetuation of colonial narratives through media biases, as seen in the portrayal of the recent Manipur conflict, affects both public perception and the formation of counter-insurgency policies. By analyzing

¹ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/imphal/one-year-after-manipur-violence-what-the-state-has-gone-through-since-may-3-last-year/articleshow/109807727.cms>

² Sen, Arjit. (2011). *Marginal on the map: Hidden wars and hidden media in Northeast India*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford. Sponsored by Gerda Henkel Foundation.

contemporary media narratives surrounding the ethnic violence in Manipur, this research aims to understand how media influences both policy formation and the social construction of insurgencies in Northeast India. It examines how limited and skewed media coverage reinforces ethnic divisions and affects counter-insurgency strategies. The study also addresses the broader implications of this media disengagement on governance and the integration of Northeast India into the national consciousness, concluding that a more balanced and nuanced media representation is crucial for effective policy responses and conflict resolution.

Keywords : Media Narratives, Counter-Insurgency, Northeast India, Perception and Policy Formation, Ethnic Conflict

Introduction

Northeast India encompassing approximately 262,179 square kilometers, includes the states of Assam, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh, and Sikkim. This region shares borders with several countries- China, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Nepal, and Bhutan- creating a unique geopolitical context. The connectivity to mainland India is constrained by a narrow land corridor known as the "chicken neck." The area is characterized by its rich tapestry of diverse ethnic groups, each with distinct languages, customs, and traditions due to historical migration patterns.

Historical Context of Insurgency

Since India gained independence in 1947, Northeast India has experienced numerous separatist conflicts and violent uprisings. While the motives behind these movements have shifted over time a common thread remains, the pursuit of a unified homeland. These sub-national movements arise as responses to the Indian State's oppressive assimilation policies, which often overlook the region's cultural, historical, and social diversity. The State's attempt to forge a singular national identity often clashes with the local populace's desire to preserve their unique identities, leading to an enduring sense of resistance. Chatterjee's critique of Indian nationalism highlights the multiple "**coexisting national voices**" in the region, including those of various ethnic groups, which complicates the narrative of a unified Indian identity. This diversity fuels a collective challenge to the legitimacy of Indian nationhood, rooted in a strong sense of local identity and loyalty.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To analyze the portrayal of ethnic conflicts, by national and regional media outlets in Northeast India.
2. To examine the influence of media narratives on public perception and how these narratives shape government policy responses toward counterinsurgency strategies in Northeast India.
3. To compare the role of social media and traditional media in framing ethnic violence and conflict situations in the region, highlighting their impact on public discourse.
4. To assess the impact of media-driven perceptions on the effectiveness of counterinsurgency strategies and conflict resolution efforts in Northeast India.

5. REVIEW OF EXISTING RESEARCH

In "**Voices from the Frontlines: A Comparative Study of North-eastern Insurgency in India and Bangladesh's War of Independence (1971)**," Nadeem Ahmad provides a nuanced exploration of two significant South Asian conflicts, highlighting the underrepresented perspectives of those directly affected. The paper emphasizes that while both the North-eastern insurgency and the Bangladesh war stem from desires for autonomy and the consequences of oppressive governance, the narratives of families, rebels, and marginalized communities, particularly women and children, are often overlooked by mainstream media. This absence diminishes the understanding of these conflicts' complexities. Ahmad's comparative analysis of literary works serves to amplify these silenced voices, revealing themes of cultural hegemony, familial bonds, and the ethical dilemmas faced by individuals on both sides of the conflict. By focusing on personal experiences and emotional landscapes, the study enriches the discourse around counter-insurgency strategies and policy formation in Northeast India. This research aligns with the aim of examining media narratives and their role in shaping perceptions and policies, suggesting that incorporating diverse narratives can lead to more informed and effective counter-insurgency approaches in the region. **Bhagat Oinam's (2003) article "Patterns of Ethnic Conflict in the North-East: A Study on Manipur"** provides a nuanced exploration of the ethnic conflicts that plague Manipur, highlighting the complex interplay of identity and political dynamics. The study reveals that conflicts are not rooted solely in primordial identities but are significantly shaped by political motivations and administrative choices. Oinam discusses the Naga-Kuki and Kuki-Paite conflicts, illustrating how disputes over land and settlement are intertwined with deeper fears of identity erosion. This perspective is crucial for understanding the media narratives surrounding these conflicts, as they often reflect and amplify these fears, influencing public perception and policy formation. By framing ethnic conflicts as a matter of identity preservation, media narratives can inadvertently bolster counterinsurgency strategies that may prioritize certain groups over others, further complicating the already tense sociopolitical landscape. Oinam's research underscores the importance of critically examining media representations to grasp their impact on conflict dynamics and policy responses in North-East India, making it a vital reference for studies on media narratives and counterinsurgency strategies in the region.

Kabi and Nayak's (2019) study, "Media, Gender and Peace Initiatives in Northeast India: An Analysis," provides a critical examination of the media's role in conflict resolution and peacebuilding in Northeast India, a region marked by persistent violence and social upheaval. The authors employ content analysis of six newspapers across three states, revealing how print media navigates narratives surrounding conflict and peace initiatives. Their findings underscore the media's significant influence on public perception and policy formation regarding counterinsurgency strategies. The study highlights the interplay between gender and media narratives, illustrating how women, as the most vulnerable demographic, are often disproportionately affected by conflicts. The authors argue that the portrayal of women in media narratives can either reinforce stereotypes or contribute to peacebuilding efforts. By analyzing journalists' perceptions of print media's role in conflict situations, Kabi and Nayak emphasize

the necessity for more nuanced and responsible media representations that can foster dialogue and understanding among conflicting communities. This research is pivotal for understanding the dynamics of media narratives in shaping counterinsurgency policies and community perceptions in Northeast India, aligning closely with the objectives of my study on the influence of media on conflict resolution strategies in the region.

In "**Citizens, the Smoking Guns of AFSPA and Bare Life in Northeast India**," Arora (2020) explores the complex dynamics of state violence and governance in the context of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) in Northeast India, particularly focusing on Manipur. The study critiques the biopolitical control exerted by the Indian government, which has established zones of exceptionalism that marginalize the region's ethnic nationalities. By drawing on Foucault and Agamben, Arora highlights how the state's unchecked sovereignty perpetuates a regime where certain citizens live in a state of 'bare life,' subjected to violence and coercion without the protections of democracy. This research is particularly relevant to my study on media narratives and their influence on counterinsurgency strategies in Northeast India. Arora's findings underscore how media representations of violence and legality can shape public perception and policy formation regarding insurgency and state control. By integrating ethnographic accounts, the paper emphasizes the everyday realities of those affected by AFSPA, illuminating the disconnect between state narratives and lived experiences. Thus, understanding these narratives is crucial for analyzing how media influences counterinsurgency strategies and the broader implications for policy development in the region.

In "**The shadow of 'the boys': rebel governance without territorial control in Assam's ULFA insurgency**," Waterman (2022) presents a nuanced exploration of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) and its unique form of governance during a pivotal period in Assam's history. The article emphasizes the significance of social embeddedness and media influence in shaping ULFA's 'parallel government,' which, despite lacking territorial control and formal institutions, managed to exert substantial influence over Assamese public life from 1985 to 1990. Waterman argues that ULFA's governance model challenges conventional notions of insurgency, revealing that effective governance can occur without traditional territorial dominance. This perspective is particularly relevant to the study of media narratives and their role in counter-insurgency strategies in Northeast India. By examining how ULFA engaged with media discourse to bolster its authority and manipulate state perceptions, the article highlights the interplay between rebel movements and media representations, which ultimately inform public perception and policy formation. The insights provided by Waterman contribute to understanding the complex dynamics of insurgency and governance, suggesting that counter-insurgency strategies must account for the media's role in shaping narratives surrounding rebel groups, thus influencing both public opinion and state responses in conflict zones.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study primarily based on an qualitative research approach by adopting the descriptive and analytical method under this study various books and journal and various government data has been used to gather relevant information .

Theoretical Perspectives on Insurgency

Various scholars have approached the North-eastern insurgency through multiple analytical frameworks:

- **Historical and Migration Factors:** T.S. Murthy, Amalendu Guha, and Hiren Gohain examine the impact of British colonialism on migration patterns in Assam, arguing that the influx of migrants from Bengal led to fears among local populations of being marginalized. This fear catalyzed the formation of new identities and, ultimately, insurgent movements.
- **Language Politics:** Sanjib Baruah emphasizes how the imposition of the Bengali language on indigenous groups fueled ethnic tensions and movements. The struggle for language recognition is often tied to broader demands for political and cultural autonomy, as seen in Udayon Misra's assertion that Assamese nationalism is closely linked to the recognition of the Assamese language.
- **Marxist Perspectives:** Marxist theorists attribute the root causes of conflict to colonial policies leading to underdevelopment and class fragmentation. Ethnic tensions are perpetuated by privileged elites competing for resources and power, highlighting the clashing interests among different ethnic groups.

Counter-Insurgency Efforts

In response to the insurgency, the Indian government has implemented various counter-insurgency measures, including military operations and development initiatives aimed at addressing grievances. However, these efforts have often faced criticism for being heavy-handed, leading to further alienation of local populations. The effectiveness of counter-insurgency strategies remains a contentious issue, as they frequently fail to address the root causes of insurgency, such as economic marginalization and cultural suppression.

MEDIA NARRATIVES AND THEIR INFLUENCE³ ON COUNTER-INSURGENCY IN NORTH-EAST INDIA

The media plays a pivotal role in shaping narratives around conflicts, particularly in regions like Northeast India, where a complex tapestry of ethnic diversity and historical grievances fuels ongoing insurgency and violence. The relationship between media and conflict in this region is particularly significant, given its history of instability and the multiple layers of socio-political tensions that define it.

³ Kabi, K., & Nayak, A. K. (2019). Media, Gender and Peace Initiatives in Northeast India: An Analysis. Media Watch,10(2), 223-343. <https://doi.org/10.15655/mw/2019/v10i2/49624>

Media's Role in Situations Conflict

Media acts as both a reflector and a shaper of public discourse surrounding conflict. In Northeast India, where conflicts often arise from ethnic, cultural, and political factors, the portrayal of these issues in the media can influence public perception and governmental response. The inherent news value of conflicts makes them prime subjects for coverage, leading to a cycle where sensational reporting can escalate tensions or exacerbate existing conflicts. The prevalence of 24/7 news cycles emphasizes “breaking news,” often prioritizing immediate narratives over nuanced understanding, which can lead to misrepresentation of the issues at stake. As a powerful agent of public opinion, the media can either escalate conflicts through sensationalism or contribute to conflict resolution by promoting dialogue and understanding among conflicting parties. This dual role raises critical questions about the responsibility of media outlets in how they cover conflicts, particularly in regions as sensitive as Northeast India.

The Nature of Conflicts in Northeast India

The Northeast region, comprising states like Assam, Manipur, Nagaland, and others, is characterized by a multitude of ethnic communities and languages, leading to a unique set of conflicts. These range from insurgencies and ethnic clashes to tensions with the government and issues related to immigration. The Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) has been a point of contention, often resulting in heightened tensions between local populations and state forces. As reported, insurgency-related incidents in states like Assam, Manipur, and Nagaland highlight the ongoing violence. The media's portrayal of these incidents shapes not only public perception but also government policy and response strategies. The narratives constructed by the media can frame these groups either as terrorists or as legitimate voices of dissent, influencing the broader socio-political landscape.

Media's Influence on Women in Conflict

In conflict situations, the representation of women is often marginalized. Women in Northeast India, particularly those connected to armed groups or peace movements, face unique vulnerabilities. Media narratives frequently overlook their roles as peacebuilders or human rights defenders, focusing instead on sensationalized accounts of violence. This lack of representation can perpetuate stereotypes and hinder efforts for gender-sensitive conflict resolution. Women often bear the brunt of violence and displacement during conflicts. Their stories and experiences are critical for understanding the full impact of conflict, yet media coverage often fails to acknowledge their contributions or plight. Recognizing and amplifying women's voices in media narratives is essential for a comprehensive understanding of the conflict dynamics in the Northeast.

Challenges Faced by Media Personnel

Journalists in Northeast India operate under extreme pressure, often facing threats from both state and non-state actors. The dangers of reporting in a conflict zone can lead to self-censorship or biased reporting, affecting the quality and integrity of media coverage. Instances of media outlets facing backlash for perceived biases illustrate

the precarious position of journalists. The silence of media on certain issues, driven by fear of reprisal, can also perpetuate a cycle of violence and miscommunication.

FINDINGS

Some of the key finding of this study include how government imposed advisories to media on sensitive coverage of live issue as like the Information and broadcast ministry has issued an advisories asking media platform such as TV channels online platform to stop the rapid real time coverage on certain security or defence operation such as movement of force on going counter insurgency operation as eventually this will help controlling irresponsible or premature dissemination of sensitive information

At the same time it is also witnessed that there are often use of print and electronic media by the government for the development of various counter insurgency narrative as like the government use state broadcasting (All India radio, Doordarshan) public service announcement, audio-visual publicity (through DAVP,etc) and print media to publicize peace agreements.

CONCLUSION

This research is expected to yield a nuanced understanding of how media narratives shape public perception and influence counterinsurgency strategies in Northeast India, particularly during the recent ethnic violence in Manipur. By identifying key themes and biases in media reporting, the study aims to reveal the disparities between national and regional portrayals of conflict, highlighting how these narratives affect community relations and government policy.

The significance of this research lies in its potential to inform policymakers, media professionals, and scholars about the critical role of media in conflict situations. Understanding the relationship between media narratives and public perception can lead to more responsible journalism practices that foster informed public discourse and contribute to conflict resolution. Moreover, the findings could guide government strategies to better engage with affected communities, ensuring that counterinsurgency efforts are sensitive to local realities and perceptions. Ultimately, this study aims to contribute to the development of more effective and empathetic policies that address the root causes of conflict, promote social cohesion, and enhance the role of media as a constructive force in society.

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LINKS & WEBSITES

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