

# Journalistic ethics in coverage of Communal issues

( With special reference to Assam)

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## **Abstract:**

With the media's role as an information provider and a watchdog, the freedom of media is considered very important for democratic countries like India. Recognized as the fourth pillar of the democracy, Indian media has been playing a decisive role in keeping the masses informed and aware, right from the days of British rule. Being one of the most powerful tools for shaping public opinion, Indian media shoulders a tremendous responsibility towards the people of the country. And like any other power in the world, it needs to be regulated or controlled to ensure ethical gathering and distribution of non-misrepresented content for the enlightenment of the masses.

Journalistic ethics or media ethics act as important guidelines for media persons to self regulate their behavior to ensure that the only the truth reaches out to the people . However, with the emergence of new media in the scenario of journalism, the face of media has completely changed. New media

empowers anybody in the world to broadcast any kind of information to the masses not only within the country but also throughout the world. This now poses a major challenge for media to remain truly "ethical". In sensitive state like Assam, where regional media is not so advanced, the local as well as social media have been found to disseminate information about incidents which regional media have not been able to cover and some of the consequences of this uncalled for spread of information have been downright disastrous. The researcher in this research will discuss unethical practices by local media and social media while covering some communal issues of the state. The research paper will also give insights about the consequences of such unethical practices of media. The researcher focuses on the need to devise strategies to counter the propaganda that is carried out by the media. Different measure to control the use of such media must be carefully considered against the need for the freedom to express and communicate.

**Keywords: Media Ethics, Assam, Communal issues, Media, New media**

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**Introduction:**

Democratic societies represent a wide heterogeneity among the citizens and communities in terms of diversity in cultures, languages, social customs and religion. As one of the largest secular countries of the world, India is home to a plethora of diversity in caste, creed and religion. There are more than one thousand of different communities which represent India as a unique and the most culturally diverse country in world. But India also has had a sad history of communal violence among its various communities. From time to time, such clashes amongst communities have earned India the dubious distinction as the fourth worst communally sensitive nation of the world.

The conflicts which include riots and other forms of violence between different communities of different religious faith or ethnic origins are known as communal violence. The Indian law defines communal violence as, "any act or series of acts, whether spontaneous or planned, resulting in injury or harm to the person and or property, knowingly directed against any person by virtue of his

or her membership of any religious or linguistic minority, in any State in the Union of India, or Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes within the meaning of clauses (24) and (25) of Article 366 of the Constitution of India". One of the most diverse regions of the country, the north eastern region of India is has had its past history of ethnic conflicts or communal clashes.

With the media's role as an information provider and a watchdog, the freedom of media is considered very important for democratic countries like India. Recognized as the fourth pillar of the democracy, Indian media has been playing a decisive role in keeping the masses informed and aware, right from the days of British rule. Being one of the most powerful tools for shaping public opinion, Indian media shoulders a tremendous responsibility towards the people of the country. And like any other power in the world, it needs to be regulated or controlled to ensure ethical gathering and distribution of non-misrepresented content for the enlightenment of the masses.

Basically the term media includes all the different types of medium which covers television, radio, cinema, social media photography, newspapers & magazine etc. However many of these media are often known as Mass media because of their huge reach to the different sections of the society and the world.

While some media are intended to reach only a limited or small audience, no one can deny their importance. If spreading facts leads to awareness amongst masses, spreading rumors and lies on the other hand, has an adverse effect on people's minds. History has a lot of prove where media has played a pivotal role in fomenting communal violence. The political ambitions of unscrupulous individuals aid in the spread of communal feelings in the society which at times affect the media as well resulting in biased reporting. In the context of communal violence, media has a strong pull on mass awareness. Instruments of media at times end up playing very crucial roles for spreading communal propaganda and persuasion-messages. Newspapers in India have been accused of directly and repeatedly implicating in the entire process of aggravating communal violence.

Journalistic ethics basically comprises the principles of ethics and of good practices as applicable to specific challenges faced by the journalists According to Pavlik (2008) in journalism and media ethics usually indicates a set of practices, a code of things that journalists and other media professionals should or should not do. It is a normative concept. These codes are helpful and important but they are not sufficient.". Journalistic ethics or media ethics act as important guidelines for media persons to self regu-

late their behavior to ensure that the only the truth reaches out to the people. However, with the emergence of new media in the scenario of journalism, the face of media has completely changed. New media empowers anybody in the world to broadcast any kind of information to the masses not only within the country but also throughout the world. This now poses a major challenge for media to remain truly "ethical". Also with the cut throat competition among the news media, maintained ethics in covering of various issues has become a big challenge.

Known for the most ethically and linguistically diverse regions in Asia, north eastern part of India is the land of unique cultural diversity. Cultural diversity means a mixture of variety of cultures within a society which differs entirely from north to east and the east to west. Apart from the rest of India, the North Eastern region is the native land for more than three hundred fifty ethnic groups and every group has their own unique culture. Therefore, within a small geographic area there are many different languages and cultures in North East. A place renowned for its magical natural beauty and bewildering diversity, North East India is the home to more than 166 separate tribes speaking a wide range of languages. The state of Assam, which is recognized as the gateway to the north eastern region, has limited reach of the national media and the regional media is still

at its nascent stage, .In the past, the local as well as social media have been found to disseminate information about incidents which regional media have not been able to cover and some of the consequences of this uncalled for spread of information have been downright disastrous. The researcher in this research will discuss unethical practices by local media and social media while covering some communal issues of the state. The research paper will also give insights about the consequences of such unethical practices of media. The researcher focuses on the need to devise strategies to counter the propaganda that is carried out by the media. Any measure to control the use of such media must be carefully weighed against the need for the freedom to express and communicate.

#### **Objectives:**

The basic objectives of this research paper are-

1. To study the journalistic ethics to be followed while reporting in communal issues
2. To study the role of media in coverage of communal issues in Assam
3. To study the consequences of such cover age

#### **Research Methodology:**

The researcher has implied qualitative method. Therefore the researcher used only secondary data for this research paper. Here the secondary data included only the media cover-

age of the various communal and ethnic issues of Assam which are available on various books, magazines, research paper and internet. The researcher will select all the different types of media while covering these various issues. Through the content analysis the researcher tries to find out how local media and social media of Assam presented the various communal or ethnic issues. The researcher in this research will discuss unethical practices by local media and social media while covering some communal issues of the state. Apart from that researcher through this research paper will also give insights about the consequences of such unethical practices of media.

#### **Media in Assam-**

In Assam, print media has been playing a pivotal role in socio political condition of the state. The vernacular newspapers played a significant role in the development of the state. In the aftermath of the pioneering efforts of Dr. Nathan Brown's Orunadoi which was a periodical by nature, many newspapers publications came into being. Though some of them lasted only for a short while but all them have contributed in spreading awareness amongst Assamese society. The 'Assam Mihir' is considered the first known weekly newspaper in Assamese language. It was first published in 1872. The first daily newspaper of Assam was "Batori" which was founded as a weekly in 1929. In 1935,

it became a daily and came to be known as 'Dainik Batori'. During 1935-1940, many weekly newspapers appeared in Assam. They were short lived but have played their respective part in the progress of Assamese journalism. Many newspapers in Assamese languages were published but they have all ceased to appear. Journalism in Assamese language has not developed for want of literacy and financial support. However, now Assamese people have begun to take great interest in their language. At present many newspapers and periodicals are published from Assam in different languages. Among the English daily newspapers "The Assam Tribune", "The Sentinel" and "The North East Times" are popular. Among the Assamese dailies "Dainik Asom", "Aagir Batori", "Danik Janmavumi" "Aji", "Ajir Ahom", "Amar Ahom", "Assamiya Khabar", "Assamiya Pratidin" and "Danik Agradot" are popular. Some Bengali dailies are also published from Assam. These are "Dainik Jugasankha", "Dainik Sonar Cachar", "Samayik Prasanga", "Silchar Times" and "Gati". "Purbanchal Prahari" and "Sentinal" are the Hindi newspapers published from Assam. Asomiya pratidin is the highest circulated daily newspaper in the Assamese language. The Assam tribune is the highest circulated English daily from Assam. Apart from these two newspapers, there are more than fifty newspapers which are published from Assam.

The entry of All India radio in Northeast has happened only after the independence of India. The first radio station of this region was commissioned on 1st July 1948, simultaneously from Shillong and Guwahati. Now there are total 10 AIR stations in Assam. The entry of television was quite late as compared to the rest of India. The region got its first Doordarshan Kendra in the year 1985 and it was set up in Guwahati. After the great historic judgment of Supreme court citing Airwaves are public property, Assam launched its first regional television channel NE TV in 2003 which was followed by several other regional channels like News live, DY 365, Asomiya protidin, Assam talks, News 18, Prag news, Time 8 and so on.

Even with so many news channels in Assam, it is very sad that the overall quality of journalism is below par. There is barely news broadcasted through all the private news channels which is not sensationalized in a bid to earn better TRP. In short, news is more 'entertainment' than facts. Incidents of lesser importance become the talk of the day with the channels showing diverse images of the same issue while news 'worth greater importance but lesser TRP' is totally ignored. The news of the both private news channels and newspapers in Assam is totally urban-biased or metro centric. The regional news channels focus most of their news based on happenings in and around

Guwahati, the premier city of the northeast. When it comes to Ethnic or communal issues, apart from few newspapers and news channels, most other media attempt to present the facts in a sensationalized way and end up manipulating the reality.

### **Journalistic ethics while reporting the communal issues**

According to Webster's New World Dictionary, "ethics" is a system or code of morals, of a particular person, religion, group, profession, etc. In the modern times, when the "business" angle is gaining priority in the newspaper industry, it requires quite an effort on the part of a journalist to function in accordance with the ethical norms of the profession. In 1991, at the Stockholm Symposium, an International Code of Ethics was drafted and adopted, which applies to everyone working for the press and other media. It is not a legal document and some countries may view some matters differently, according to their legal peculiarities and provisions. One of the important objectives of this international code of ethics was that a journalist has a fair, accurate and unbiased story.

The Chairman of the Press Council of India, Justice R.S. Sarkaria suggested that the code of ethics is a statement of broad moral principles which will aid and guide the journalists, and which will help them in the process of self-appraisal and self-reg-

ulation. Press, being the conscience-keeper of the public, must be safeguarded, and the codes are an exercise in this direction. It is in this spirit that different codes were framed. In 1968, the All-India Newspaper Editors' Conference (AINEC) formulated a code of ethics. Other codes such as the Parliamentary Code (1976) and the International Code (1991) were also proposed to give direction to the press which was to serve more as guidelines rather than cast-iron rules.

PCI guidelines for covering the communal or religious dispute or clashes-

- i) Only after proper verification of facts one should publish communal or religious disputes/clashes news or views. Also it should be presented in such a manner which is conducive to the creation of an atmosphere congenial to communal harmony, amity and peace. Sensational, provocative and alarming headlines are to be avoided.
- ii) Journalists and columnists owe a very special responsibility to their country and they can help in large extent in moulding the feelings and sentiments of the society at large. It is, therefore, they should use their power with circumspection and restraint.

- iii) The role of media in crisis situations is to be peacemakers and not abettors, to be troubleshooters and not troublemakers. Media play their noble role of promoting peace and harmony among the people in times of crisis in the country

- iv) While the role and responsibility

of the media in breaking down communal fences and promoting harmony and national interest should not be undermined it is also essential to allow the citizens their freedom of speech.

v) Media should not publish any fictional literature distorting and portraying the religious or well known characters in an adverse light offending the susceptibilities of large sections of society who hold those characters in high esteem, invested with attributes of the virtuous and lofty.

vi) It is the duty of the media to ensure that the news should not be objectionable, provocative, against the unity and integrity of the country, spirit of the constitution, is seditious and inflammatory in nature or designed to promote communal disharmony.

Even for broadcast media, the ministry of information & broadcast-ing (India) has laid down similar guidelines for TV channels to ensure that their content does not incite disharmony, animosity, conflict, hatred or ill will between different religious, racial, linguistic groups, castes or communities. Moreover, the audio visual content should be dealt with a lot of care.

However coming to new media, there is no such fixed code of conduct or ethics is decided till now. Many International and government authorities raised this issue of new media and ethics from time to time but till

date there is not a single universally accepted law or ethics for new media. What makes the imposing of regulations more challenging is that new media is not only in the hands of the journalists, but with the masses as a whole.

### **Media in coverage of communal issues in Assam**

From time to time, the state of Assam has bore witness to several communal and ethnic clashes. During British rule, Assam was poorly integrated with all the other northeastern states. The first hill tribes who broke with Assam and demanded autonomy was Nagas. .In a span of 15 years starting from 1972, the original state of Assam was divided into seven separate federal states. The demand for the creation of more states and union territories is a burning issue in Assam. Ethnicity is a potential “Political Resource” of movement for reorganization of Assam and it has also become a cause of conflicts among different ethnic groups in Assam

Some of the conflicts worth mentioning are- the ethnic clashes between Bodo and Santhals in 1996, the conflicts between Karbi and Kuki tribal groups in KarbiAnglong district in 2003, violent clashes between the Dimasa and Hmar tribes again in 2003, The conflict between the people of the Garo and Rabha community January, 2011 is also a remarkable one. In addition, time to time clashes

of different communities with the illegal migrants from Bangladesh have resulted in communal disturbances in the state. Several prominent newspapers, as well as local 24 hour news channels, have given extensive coverage to all these conflicts. However with the advent of multiple regional news channels in Assam, incidents of such magnitude are dealt in simple words "sensationalized". In the name of breaking news, the news channels have given the violent incidents in the live coverage which has made such happenings open to interpretation of the masses, thereby jeopardizing the peace and harmony of the people at large.

During such times of crisis, people in the state have depended solely on the media for receiving updates on the happenings. This is a common trend observed by conflict-resolution professionals in other conflict situations, and Assam is no exception. It has been observed by leading social scientists that the way of reporting such incidents can highly polarize people and may escalates conflicts further resulting in renewed clashes. As an instance, the coverage in the national media during the militant group ULFA attacks on Hindi-speaking people in Assam, in the month of November 2003 was directly responsible for the spread of violent incidents in Bihar. While the BBC website reported: 'More than 17,000 people have fled their homes in northeast India's Assam state to escape attacks

on Hindi-speaking settlers by Assamese mobs and rebels' ( BBC on Feb.25, 2013), the national newspapers and news channels mis-reported this as clashes between Assamese and 'Bihari' people. This stresses on the fact that coverage of such incidents involving certain communities can be improved if media agencies use local journalists who can represent facts in a neutral manner. This may require a change in the existing framework of media coverage but it is worthwhile to consider, keeping in view the peace and harmony of the people of the state.

In mid 2012, there broke out riots between indigenous Bodos and Bengali-speaking Muslims. The first incident was reported to have taken place on 20 July 2012. As of 8 August 2012, 77 people had died and over 400,000 people were taking shelter in 270 relief camps, after being displaced from almost 400 villages. In this context, it is worth mentioning that the leading newspaper of the state, The Guardian had once reported that that violence sparked when unidentified men killed four youth in Kokrajhar. In retaliation, armed Bodos attacked Muslims, suspecting them to be behind the killings and then started the carnage with each community attacking the other resulting in torching of several villages, more corpses and hundreds of people in Government relief camps. While the media reported on the immediate reasons that had led to the

violence, none brought out the perennial unrest, experienced in the Bodo dominated areas for more than a couple of decades resulting from the illegal immigration of scores of Bangladeshi nationals. People of the locality have a different story to tell about their glorious past and how the root causes of the conflict have been ignored by both central and state governments, over a period of time. In 22 July 2012, The Assam Tribune reported that tension prevailed in Kokrajhar, following group violence resulting in the killing of at least 9 people. When indefinite curfew was imposed in the area, the newspaper headlines ran '9 killed, curfew clamped in Kokrajhar' were the headlines. The same newspaper also projected 'Shoot at site order in Kokrajhar'. The next day another leading newspaper of the region posted 'Kokrajhar burns, 4 dead in police firing'. The paper also projected the attack on 'Rajdhani Express' and that army's help was sought to tackle the situation (Seven Sisters Post, 25 July 2012). Another article on Seven Sisters Post (26 July 2012) projected the chronicle of deaths so far. This created a sort of fear psychosis among the people and spread panic amongst them. Several villages were burnt in Kokrajhar in the aftermath. Fears of persecution engulfed even the people in the concentration camps. When things were gradually starting to improve, some fresh incidents of violence were reported where the bodies

were recovered from the border of Kokrajhar and Chirang districts. Seven Sisters Post, (August 06, 2012) reported that violence had started again and the area had become tense. Subsequently, the same newspaper carried the headline 'Mumbai burns over BTAD riot' which mentioned about the circulation of MMSes and CDs to provoke minorities to retaliate (Seven Sister Post, 12 Aug 2012). Even The Telegraph, (17 Aug 2012) reported 'violence spreads outside Bodo Belt' which created a lot of panic amongst people living outside Bodoland. Meanwhile, the local politicians tried to cash in on the situation providing more fuel to the riots which eventually resulted in the arrest of BPF MLA. The party supporters blocked road and rail services in a bid to demand the release of their leader and claimed that the arrest could only aggravate the situation. The Telegraph, (25 Aug 2012) wrote that curfews and indefinite strikes had affected normal life in the area. 'Violence hits Kokrajhar' was the title given by The Telegraph, (28 Aug 2012) which further elaborated the killing of three persons in Kokrajhar district and that 30 houses were torched by the miscreants. As it is evident from the facts described above, the importance of peace initiatives was completely ignored by the media during the course of the violence. The mainstream media failed in their social responsibility to protect the masses

and were merely tools of reporting the general narratives such as to who were responsible for the ethnic conflict and who were the victims of it. The portrayal of one side as the righteous, and the other as the evil has to only contribute to escalation of hatred between the two communities. In the meantime, local parties continued to use this situation to their advantage to further their propaganda

While making the masses aware should be an important objective for the media, it need not be the sole objective. Media needs to be very much in line with ethics while reporting about disturbances at the scale as mentioned above. It has been observed that during such incidents, the headlines of any media focus mainly on number of people killed, houses burned, and vehicles torched supporting with images. While these types of news items and images make people aware of what is happening but they also project the area as a violent zone and it often ends up instigating people, belonging to a certain community, in other parts of the state or even within country to retaliate in their locality. In most of the cases, the motivation to engage in violent acts comes as a result of panic and fear which aid in strengthening notions of "pro-active" self-defence to feel secure. More is the coverage of the media; more are the chances of the spread of violence. In this context, the electronic media

has been found to be more influential than the print media, due to three reasons:

- a) Time factor allows people quick access to up-to-date information. As panic sets in, people start losing patience and try to lay their hands on the most easily accessible bit of new item available to them.
- b) Printed materials are longer and require more attention span and focus.
- c) Moving images are always more attractive and are more trusted by even by the masses who cannot read. Dependence on electronic media can have its own consequences. Where the focus is to provide news at a faster pace, not sufficient priority may be given to the personal, relational, structural and cultural transformation of people and institutions. In other words, ethics can get compromised. In the context of the Kokrajhar riots, the researcher would like to give an example in terms of social media.

In August 2012, several of Northeastern Indians living in the urban areas of Mumbai, Pune and Bangalore, and to a lesser degree, Chennai, Hyderabad, and Mysore had started departing to their local states. This exodus was the result of panic spread mass instant messages (using mobile phones) which cautioned of imminent conflicts as retaliation to the Muslim-Bodo riots in Assam. And second medium was through the online networking stages of Facebook and Twitter – where individuals

quickly took to communicating their shock at this treatment against the people from the Northeast spreading the panic further. While there were isolated incidents of getting death threats by some people, most of the news fed on rumors of possible attacks that on the people from the Northeast. Government reactions included efforts to cut down spontaneous substance on the web by serving notices to middlemen for instance, websites, which are authentic business concerns. The whole event also took on a highly political form, and this can of course be located in the Northeast where political parties spared no efforts to portray each other in a bad light highlighting the security of the North-easterners. The bulk texts and contacts on Facebook and Twitter probably originated in the Northeast and it helped aggravating the feelings of insecurity which lie dormant in the minds of the North eastern people owing to their distance, both physically and psychologically, from the rest of India. There is therefore likelihood that that the level of panic and fear of persecution that was displayed in response to the supposed violence had much to do also with the feeling of marginalization that is associated with the region.

#### **Conclusion-**

The foremost pillar of media ethics is accuracy. This requires the coverage to not restrain itself only to official sources but also to explore alternative

sources in conflict situation. This can make a story more balanced and provide a better understanding of conflict. The Sources from civil 206 society groups or NGOs are highly encouraged in this regard. To maintain high professionalism and ethical considerations, journalists should be trained by short-term professional but specialized courses on conflict reporting to transform people into conflict sensitive journalists who can understand broader historical context of a conflict and are competent enough to take care their personal traumas which can blend into their way of reporting.

While Media becomes very active during the occurrence of violent incidents, once the violence de-escalates, they disappear from the scene with a feeling that their 'mission is accomplished'. However they also have a responsibility to find out, like a) what happens to the victims post violence and b) how can a damaged relationship be restored amidst the warring communities. It is during peace time that media are in a better position to carry out their social responsibilities of personal, relational, structural and cultural transformation of individuals and institutions which could facilitate overcoming some of the core issues of the conflict to address people's grievances and to spread the message of peace. Only then can the media ensure that the conflicted region limps back to normalcy and the affected can live secure

and happier lives.

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