

**MEDIA POLARISATION AND THE ASSERTION OF ETHNO-RELIGIOUS  
IDENTITIES IN THE ENGLISH PRINT MEDIA OF NORTHEAST INDIA**

A thesis submitted in part fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

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**December, 2023**

## *Chapter Six*

### *Discussion and Conclusion*

## Discussion and Conclusion

This chapter starts with a discussion on the finding of the field data; attempting to provide a composite overview. This is followed by conclusion and the limitations of the study. This will further lead to the suggested future directions that researchers could take in the pursuit of similar research problems.

### 6.1. Discussion

A composite analysis of the sources of content in the news reports, published in the newspapers, selected for the study; visually represented in Figure 23; indicates that there seems to be higher representation of the ruling party actors in the news reports that were published by the respective newspapers. While the reasons might be varied, it fits in the adopted theoretical frameworks for this study; Herman and Chomsky (1994)'s propaganda filters, Dijk (2008)'s Ideological Square and Fairclough's (2015) ideas on language and power. As has been visually represented, of the total 1158 quotes that were analysed, 387; 33.42%; were direct quotes of pro-ruling party actors, 415; 35.84%; were indirect quotes of pro-ruling party actors 225; 19.43%; were direct quotes of anti-ruling party actors and 131; 11.31%; were indirect quotes of anti-ruling party actors. The analysis of the sources of content, therefore, indicates a preference for the actors of the ruling party viz. the BJP and its allies in Assam, Meghalaya, Sikkim, and Tripura.

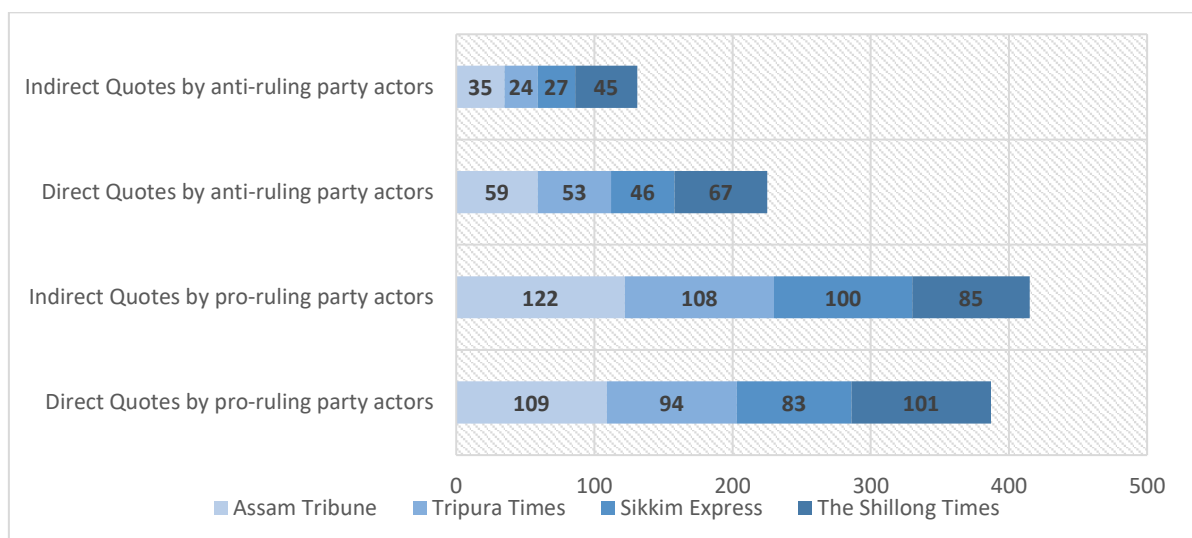


Figure 23: Composite Analysis of the Sources of News

Source: Primary data, illustrated by researcher

The reliance of the print media towards the ruling party actors could also be ascertained from the interviews conducted with the journalists and academicians in the all the states selected for the study. This could be contextualised with Herman and Chomsky's (1994, pp. 18-25) third filter in the propaganda model. The reliance could also be explained with reference to the dependence of the media organisations on the government for advertisements as per, again Herman and Chomsky's (1994, pp. 14-18) second filter in the propaganda model; the Northeast having relatively lesser sources of generation of revenue in the form of industries. In this regard, the rise of BJP at the centre in the year 2014 and in the state of Assam in 2016 was one of the key developments that led to greater control on the kind of discourse in the media. As was mentioned by one of the journalists "...there seemed to be a manufacture of consent that was taking place."

With reference to the state of Assam, one of the major reasons, as was conclusive from the interviews, for the polarisation of discourse in the state; was rooted in history, with the foreigners' issue being one of the major areas of concern. Even so, the agitation surrounding CAA had very little impact on the election results, which turned out in favour of the BJP. The results of the 2021 Assembly elections in the state of Assam, in which the NDA, led by the BJP, came out as victorious, points to a paradigm shift in the politics of Assam. There seems to be a consolidation of the move from the politics of ethnicity to that of religion. This is, in essence, the redefining of the nature of the what constitutes 'autochthonous' identities in Assam. While it was understood that 'autochthonous' in Assam is linked to ethnic identity; with pervasive discriminatory practices against the non-autochthonous which is evident from the existence of designated words for the 'other,' for instance "...bahirormanuh, bidekhi, or deshwali in Assam..." (Hazarika, 2018, p. 173); in the new paradigm, as has been discussed in the interviews, Assam's autochthonous prefer being a linguistic minority over a religious one and hence are willing to approve a party that has been known to espouse Hindu nationalistic identity which; for its relevance; will have to subsume the autochthonous Assamese identity; as it exists in the current form. In doing so Hindu nationalistic identity is squaring the circle and including all Hindus irrespective of their other subservient identities into the Hindu fold, a casualty of which will be the nature of the autochthonous identities as they exist.

While there is an evident shift in the political discourse, the print media discourse seems to be geared, more towards the preservation and assertion of the ethnic identity in the state of Assam primarily owing to the editorial policies that were a result of the consecutive identity

movements in Assam which led to the Assam Accord. The interviewees in the state of Assam and Tripura linked the phenomenon of polarisation in the print media to the manifestation of religious polarisation arising out of the politics of the current times. While there are the issues of ethnicity that do trump the agenda of the newspapers in the respective states, there is also a cautious attempt to manage the public sentiments that exist on ground.

However, the in-house policy of the media houses favours the centrality of ethnic discourses; viz. autochthonous versus non-autochthonous discourses as they exist as of now, primarily decided on ethnicity; the varied situation on ground has the effect of coercing the journalists to maintain a neutrality in the reporting of the news primarily out of commercial concerns, both advertising revenue and revenue generated out of sales. There seems an acceptance that an alliance of different communities that transcends ethnic differences, which does not extend to religious differences, is a matter of convenience on the face of a demographic disadvantage that would eventually lead to sharing of political power, again across ethnic lines but not religious lines; the ethnic communities under consideration here are the Assamese and the Bengalis and the religions under consideration are the Hinduism and Islam. Contextualising it through Bauman's ideas (Bauman & Vecchi, 2004) on identity, there seems to be an attempt to 'square the circle' by including communities on ethnic lines and not religious lines; this act of reconciliation itself indicates the preferred alternative and as such sidelines a certain community from pedestrian and hence media discourse.

These factors have had the effect of ensuring a conscious effort on the part of the journalists in the state of Assam to maintain neutrality as there seems to be a conflict between their in-house policies and their commercial predicaments but conscious neutrality also means that there is a lack of discourses that are critical to the proliferation of Hindu nationalist discourses. This, in effect, is the minimum contribution of the print media in Assam towards the spread of the respective discourses.

With reference to the state of Tripura, there is an evident opposition to ethnic discourses given the structure of the political economy of the print media in Tripura. Most of the established media houses are owned and run by people belonging to populations that are not perceived as autochthonous communities. As a result, there is an existing perception among the academics who were interviewed for this study that minority tribal discourses; viz. autochthonous; are being sidelined. Although an editor of a prominent English daily did mention that sidelining the discourses that concern the tribal groups does not make sense as

the readership of English newspapers is higher among them in comparison to the majority Bengali population, who are more inclined to reading Bengali language press.

Tripura was under the fold of the left-leadership for a period of 15 years before the rise of the BJP in the politics of the state. The RSS claims to have played an instrumental role in the electoral success of the BJP which in turn has enabled for the proliferation of the RSS' ideology in the state which is also evident the increase in the number of 'shakas,' branches where there are meetings of the local members of the RSS. As a bastion of the left, prominent left leaning publications still enjoy substantial readership with a considerable number of journalists who try to maintain the professional conduct in journalistic practice, especially in the English print media. Even so, interviews conducted in the state do indicate a perception that there is a polarisation of the discourse on religious lines which has manifested in the form of electoral results in Tripura. The rise of the Tripura Motha Party, though, indicates a resurgence of sub-nationalistic regional aspirations. The future would therefore entail a contestation of the regional versus national discourse on identity through their assertions. The researcher thinks of this; in a Hegelian sense; a classic example of the thesis versus the anti-thesis which hopefully seeks to attain a synthesis.

In the state of Sikkim, there was a consensus that the discourse in the print media is not polarised on religious or ethnic lines; at least it does not show in the press; with primarily regional issues taking precedence over others. Although there are existing differences between the resident communities, their cleavages do not have the effect of disrupting dialogue between the stakeholders. With reference to the ownership pattern in the press, there is an existing angst among the working journalists; who belong to autochthonous groups themselves; that the prominent print media houses are largely dominated by individuals are from outside the state; non-autochthonous. Unlike the other states in the Northeast, that are part of this study; the politics of the respective states being polarised based on the contestation of identities; Sikkim appears to be embroiled in its own set of issues which are rooted more in economics and the manifestation is in the form of the insider-outsider discourse; income tax laws appeared to be the issue that triggered a debate on who is autochthonous and who is not; hence the entire discussions on the certificate of identity which also took the form of legal challenges and counter challenges. While there is an existing insider versus outsider issue, the absence of violence in the society leads to a more balanced discourse in the state.

The case of Meghalaya is unique with regards to the findings of this study. Demographically speaking, the states' population majorly adhere to Christianity, different from the other three states in consideration where religions that are within the 'Indic fold'<sup>65</sup> are dominant. As such, the political discourse in the state does align towards a Christian outlook while also drawing on the opportunism that ethnic identity assertion provides. In the state of Meghalaya, there is a convergence of religious and ethnic identity which leads to an ethno-religious assertion. As such there seems to be a compulsion to maintain a secular<sup>66</sup> (as is understood in the context of India) character of the identity assertion, religion as a factor always remains as secondary identity to the ethnic identity but is equally important to the creation of a conceived sub-national identity which is different from the Indian identity and limitedly accessible to only certain ethnic communities of the state who consider themselves indigenous and hence categorised as autochthonous.

While the English language press in the state effectively tries its best to maintain neutrality with prominent journalists adhering to the highest standards of journalistic conduct, in a state that is overwhelmed by frequent incidents of ethnic violence, journalists find it difficult to cover such incidents. As such although ruling government sources are more prominent in the newspapers in Meghalaya and while the ruling NPP government is in alliance with the BJP in Meghalaya, it would be an overreach to suggest that there is assertion of Hindu nationalistic ideas through the print media owing to the presence the BJP as an alliance member of the ruling government. In effect, it is this quagmire situation of the involvement of the State Government, the traditional bodies; like the 'Dorbar Shnongs,' which is a parallel governance system; and the civil society at large, which colludes to maintain the charade of the protection of autochthonous rights, which is in fact a brewing underlying sub-nationalistic aspiration, also supported, and preserved by the educated Khasi leadership of regional parties in Meghalaya.

Across the four states, the government seems to have substantial say in the kind of news that is published. This is because government is the primary source of advertisements for the newspapers which allows for the subsidies to trickle to the readers. Since the DAVP; now

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<sup>65</sup> Religious philosophies that have originated in India. That include Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Jainism etc.

<sup>66</sup> While the western idea of secularism is based on the non-interference of the State in religious affairs, in the Indian context, the idea of secularism is based on the idea of 'Sarva Dharma Samabhav' which in essence leads to equal weightage to the practice and promotion of all religious ideas (IGNOU, 2017).

subsumed under the Central Bureau of Communication; and the DIPR are responsible for Central and State advertisements respectively, it does influence the assertion of respective opinions in the print media. As has been discussed in earlier paragraphs in this section, as the political discourses in the four states, in consideration, are different, so is the effect on the advertisements. While the advertisements that come from the Centre have their strings attached to the Central Government in New Delhi, with reference to the respective states, the advertising revenues having been disbursed by the respective state governments have their own set of agendas or no agendas at all. As this study does not analyse the content of advertisements in the print media of the respective states and is completely reliant on perceptions gathered from the interviews across the four states, it would be an overreach to comment that advertising revenue has a direct influence on the print media discourse of this region, although anecdotal evidence does suggest that it does. As such, this is also a delimitation of this study.

On Ideological inclination of newspapers across the four states, most interviewees in Assam and Meghalaya indicated that there was an ‘ethnic-right’ leaning; leaning towards autochthonous interests that are primarily based on ethnic identity; that was prominent in the newspapers of the states. In Tripura, owing to the ownership pattern of the newspapers, the discourse was different. Likewise in Sikkim, the newspapers are owned, primarily by individuals who are not autochthonous to Sikkim and this effects the discourse in the print media. Across the four states, majoritarianism is indeed a part of the newspaper discourse, be it ethnic or religious. Reasons for the same, was highlighted by multiple interviewees. For instance: (a) Newspapers need to accommodate the readers interests; or in this case the ideal reader that is created by the powerful in the media collective as suggested in Fairclough (2015, pp. 78-79); whom they cater to. (b) Problematic perceptions like media should represent the pulse of the people and hence the parties that are in power; which by virtue of being elected are the pulse of the people. (c) The machineries of the ideological state apparatus; simplistically agencies affiliated with the government; also contributes to this by controlling the discourse in the print media through their monopoly on advertising revenue.

Again, across the four states, there is a general perception among the journalists who were interviewed that the newspapers, while reporting political news do try their best to keep it balanced but as data from the survey; even with its limited application; among the informed youth suggests: the perception of the relevant samples does not indicate the same. Likewise, the analysis of the content too suggests that the ‘balance’ that journalists try to uphold, is



not an easy task, there are essential negotiations that must be made in a politically charged environment; the interviews also suggest that the ruling party simply does more things that are newsworthy and hence the higher coverage.

## **6.2. Concluding Remarks**

The findings for this study do tend to concur with the five filters of propaganda as proposed by Herman & Chomsky (2006, p. 1). Briefly, the five filters constitute the ideas of: (i) Ownership, (ii) Advertising, (iii) Sources, (iv) Flak, (v) Marginalising dissenting opinions.

Firstly, ‘ownership,’ in this context means the ownership pattern of the media – with reference to the four Northeastern states considered for the study, the generation of revenue is the primary concern for the proprietors who own the media houses resulting in critical journalism only taking second place. This lays the ground for media organisations to publish news which would be more populist in nature, leading to higher circulation and the generation of more revenue through sale of copies. With reference to the print media, as the advertisement rate provided for space is higher for newspapers with higher circulation, it has the effect of increasing the revenue of the respective newspaper. On numerous occasions the interviewees who were interviewed for the study, in the four states have mentioned that newspapers publish news which would increase the sale of their respective newspapers. This also has the effect of ‘marginalising dissenting opinions’ by representing primarily populist opinions.

Secondly, as the media scenario in this region is not developed to the extent that media conglomerates would play a role in shaping the discourse, it gives additional influence to government bodies who are responsible for disbursing ‘advertisements’ to the respective media houses. In effect, the state government and central government through its various agencies exact a disproportionate influence on the discourse. While the interviewees do mention that there is no overt pressure exerted by Government agencies, the ‘sources’ that dominate the print media discourse are indeed the ruling party actors, irrespective of the reasons for the same.

There have also been instances of ‘flak’ that journalists across the four states have had to face when there were instances when they did not toe the line. While the reasons for such ‘flak’ were tough to determine, on two occasions it was clear that political motives were involved. In the case of Sikkim, media houses that were anti-establishment had to face the flak from the incumbent government through the denial of advertisements. The particular

example of 'Hamro Prajashakti' is notable here: there were attacks on the office of the respective newspaper by masked elements, whose identity could not be ascertained, but the fact that the attacks happened at the office of a newspaper that had been consistently publishing against the incumbent Sikkim Democratic Front government, irrespective of whether there was involvement of the elements in the incumbent government or not, is indicative of the 'flak' that 'Hamro Prajashakti' had been receiving for having exercised their freedom of expression. In the case of Meghalaya, Patricia Mukhim, an editor of a prominent newspaper in the state, was attacked, with petrol bombs being hurled at her residence, owing to her personal stance on a respective issue which went against the populist opinion on it. In this case she had to face the 'flak,' not because of the ruling dispensation viz. the state government, but because of another parallel administrative institution, which also filed criminal cases against her, for which the Supreme Court had to finally intervene (Express Web Desk, 2021).

The sources of news that have been analysed indicate that there has been a greater representation of the ruling party actors in the news reports published in the English print media during the selected duration, at the time of the 2019 general elections to the lower house of the Indian parliament. However, there were indications that there is control exercised by the state apparatus through the various machineries; that ideological state apparatuses have at hand; the same was not explicitly articulated in the interviews; varied opinions on this were shared by the interviewees, who were interviewed as part of this study.

In states where religion has become an element of their unique identity as an addition to ethnicity, both being inseparable from each-other, there is a contestation between Hindu nationalism with existing identity assertions but in states where religious identity and ethnicity are separate factors; has seen an acceptance of Hindu nationalism amalgamated with their respective ethnic identity assertions. As such this contest and interplay of identities has been influencing the discourse in the print media; maybe not consciously; but the need to cater to an audience that is polarised; in the midst of this contest of identities; the media tends to disseminate polarised news. After all; as also established by Jeffrey (1993); engaging content would engage the ideal reader leading to higher circulation and this higher circulation leading to better advertising revenue and this better advertising revenue maximising the profits.

### **6.3. Limitations and Delimitations of the Study**

This study only covers four states in the Northeastern region and while there are attempts that have been made to draw commonalities in between the four states, they are unique research settings with their very own problems. This is in fact a delimitation on the part of the researcher; and probably for all who will pursue such a research problem; that a holistic picture of all the four states; although attempted; is not possible to draw. While the RNI data has been used as one of the sources to choose the states in the research setting; also employing other means to finalise them; the discrepancies in the report are a limitation and a secondary finding which has policy implications and must be pursued. As such, the inconsistencies observed in the advertising policies of the states selected for the study, also need review. The selection of only the English press; for which the reasons and justification was entailed; as well as only one newspaper from the four states was a delimitation on the part of the researcher and could have provided equally interesting perspectives on regional assertions in regional languages. Lastly, with the benefit of hindsight, the researcher would like to point out that the application of Haberman's (1974) idea of public sphere could have enhanced the quality of the investigation.

### **6.4. Suggested Directions for Future Research**

With reference to the application of other theoretical frameworks to investigate similar research problems, the researcher suggests the use of Haberman's (1974) concept of the public sphere to approach such an investigation. Johannessen, Øystein, & Flak (2016) have suggested that,

“...Stakeholders with higher salience are less likely to participate in social media, whereas those who are less salient will use every available medium to gain influence. This challenges the opportunity to create a traditional public sphere in social media.”

A simplistic inference from the above articulation would entail that the weaker in any power equation would be relatively more assertive on social media spaces and this, could be used as a hypothesis to approach a study on these lines; especially in the Northeast of India where dominant and subservient identities keep changing, depending on the context in which they are situated; with the help of relevant methodology that future researchers might deem fit.

On similar lines, the researcher also came across the ‘pyramid of hate;’ another relevant concept that could act as an overarching framework to assess the existence of behaviours that are biased against discriminated groups. The pyramid categorises actions of bias, a discriminated community might face in a society where they are treated as such. As the actions described in the lower stages get normalised, there is a probability for the acceptability of the upper stages. The stages progressively indicate the increased level of violence. As Sayed & Ali (2021) note,

“... not every act of bias may result in genocide, it is important to realize that every historical instance of genocide began with benign jokes and stereotypes and other similar expressions of bias”

Recognition of biases in an early stage could facilitate the creation of policy that would be able to mitigate the proliferation of prejudiced tendencies and hence prevent escalation in such matters.

Another suggested future research direction that would enable effective policy making for the print media in the Northeast would be to conduct an exclusive analysis of policy documents related to the regulation of various policies. In the case of this investigation, the researcher found that there is no consistency in the advertising policies of the Central and State authorities that regulate the print media in the region and hence would recommend a panoptic analysis of all policies associated with the print media, specific to the Northeast.