

## ***Chapter Five***

### ***Media Polarisation and the Rise of Hindu Nationalism in Northeast India***

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This chapter starts with a historical description of the rise of Hindu nationalism; as an outcome of the assertion of Hindu nationalistic identity; which has had the effect of disrupting the status quo of regional identity assertions; which had been the norm in this region viz. Northeast. The sections that follow, contextualise the findings from the field and try to put them in perspective under various themes that have been designed based on the theoretical frameworks that have been discussed in chapter one, section 1.5 Theoretical Frameworks for the Study. As the interviews in the field were also conducted with the underpinning of the theories mentioned in the said section, the data was coded based on the repetitive themes that evolved out of the same theoretical foundations.

While the unique elements of the different states warranted the need for the accommodation of state specific themes, there was a general pattern that was followed and as such will be reflected in the sub-sections within the states being discussed in the subsequent sections. Broadly, the themes include: Representation and Proliferation of Political Interests (by various groups in the respective state); Overview of the Print Media (in the respective state); Representation of various actors (in the newspaper selected for the study in the state); Advertising Revenue and Media Discourse (in the respective state); Ideological Position of Newspapers (in the state considered for the study); Inclination of Political News (in the newspapers of the respective state); Polarisation and Print Media Discourse (in the state under consideration); and other themes as required in the context of the respective state considered for the study.

The Northeast of India is one of the most diverse regions in the country that various ethnic groups from different racial stocks inhabit (Thapa S. , 2022). In terms of the religious demography of the region, while the most of India has a majority Hindu population, with 79.80% Hindus, followed by 14.23% Muslim, 2.30% Christians etc (Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, 2011), the eight states in North-East India are different – while Assam and Tripura are Hindu majority, the rest of the states in the region have either Christian majority or tribal religious affiliations (Singh D. , 2023). While the image carried by the BJP, as a party that promotes Hindu Nationalism is evident from the nature of its politics in other parts of India; in the North East, the outreach of the party and its affiliates like the RSS have encouraged tribal and Christian candidates to win seats in constituencies,

dominated by populations who are either affiliated to tribal religions or Christianity (Nehal, 2022).

While the history of RSS in the Northeast is much older, the footprints of the BJP in North-East India, should be traced in light of the establishment of the Ministry of Development of the North Eastern Region (DoNER) by the then Atal Behari Bajpayee led National Democratic Alliance Government in the year 2011 (Singh D. , 2023). The Ministry was exclusively established to facilitate the “...matters relating to the planning, execution and monitoring of development schemes and projects in the North Eastern Region” (Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region, 2023).

Traditionally, the regional parties in North East India, when in power, are inclined to support the party that is in power at the Centre owing to the reliance on central funds for the effective functioning of the states (Bhuyan, 2017). The rise of the Modi led BJP at the Centre in 2014 led to cascading effects on the politics of the North-Eastern region. Starting with the 2016 Assembly elections in Assam, the BJP has made great inroads into the politics of the region. In 2016 they dislodged the firmly entrenched, Tarun Gogoi led, Congress party government in Assam, after a period of 15 years. Again in 2018, the BJP managed to extricate the left from Tripura after a period of 25 years. Until recently, the BJP, either directly or by alliance was part of the government in all the eight North-Eastern states in India; the election of the Zoram People’s Movement in Mizoram, the elections to their Legislative Assembly in November 2023 altered the earlier state of affairs.

Another factor that must be considered to understand the rise of the BJP in Northeast India is Himanta Biswa Sarma. A former Congressman, he switched over to the Bhartiya Janata Party owing to his differences with Sonia Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi, who are among the most influential members of the Indian National Congress. What a long list of RSS prachaks<sup>32</sup> could not do in the region, Himanta Biswa Sarma provided the organisation with a bedrock for the propagation of its vision and mission after he became the Chief Minister of Assam after the 2021 Assembly elections in Assam (Nehal, 2022). While The BJP and the RSS are separate organisations, with the latter going all out to support the electoral aims of the former on only two occasions (Mishra, 2018) in the context of the whole of India, but

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<sup>32</sup> An individual who is inspired by the mission and objective of the Sangh and dedicates his full time to carry forward this mission is known as Pracharak in the RSS parlance. (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2017)

in the Northeast the RSS, has been consistently supporting the proliferation of the BJP in the politics of the region (Nehal, 2022).

The RSS entered the milieu of the society in the Northeastern region with a handful of prachaks who came to Assam on October 7, 1946. RSS shakas<sup>33</sup> were then established in Guwahati, Shillong (the then capital of Assam) and Dibrugarh. The first RSS shakha in Assam (Bhattacharjee, 2016) and probably the Northeast was on launched on the grounds of Shukreshwar temple, beside the Brahmaputra River on 28 October 1946. Education has been one of the primary thrust areas of the Sangh in the Northeast. The Sangs' penetration in the region could be attributed to the various welfare activities especially in the field of education through its Ekal Vidyalaya (different from Eklavya Vidyalaya) and the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram (Bordoloi, 2023; Chishi, 2022). While the nature of the activities of the RSS is overt and associated with proud displays in most parts of India, in the Northeast the activities are relatively very low key in nature, primarily limited to providing service ('seva' in the RSS parlance). Longkumer (2022, p. 36) discusses this phenomenon in his seminal work in the area, 'The Greater India Experiment: Hindutva and the Northeast' in which he borrows on James Scott's idea of 'infrapolitics' to describe the nature of the working of the RSS in the region as infrapolitical which allows them to be "more amorphous and bending according to the nature of the host."

With reference to the state of Assam, the RSS, through its organisational affiliate comprising students, the Akhil Bhartiya Vidyarthi Parishad (henceforth, ABVP), was also involved in the Assam Agitation that led to the Assam Accord of 1985. While the All-Assam Students' Union campaigned for the removal of all names of Bangladeshi immigrants, irrespective of religion from the electoral rolls in Assam, the Sangh was keener on diverting the attention to only the Muslims immigrants on the rolls (Zahan, 2022). In Meghalaya, the Sangh claims to work towards educating the indigenous community about the problem of illegal immigrants marrying local women to take advantage of the existing matrilineal system in the Khasi and Jaintia communities, to access business and economic opportunities in the region (Gupta S. , 2018). Identity assertions in the state of Sikkim are situated in the dichotomy of the 'Sikkim subject' versus the others, evident in the context of new Income

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<sup>33</sup> The term shakha is Hindi for 'branch'. Most of the organisational work of the RSS is done through the co-ordination of the various shakhas, or branches. These shakhas are run for one hour in public places (Basu, Datta, Sarkar, Sarkar, & Sen, 1993).

Tax laws that had extended tax benefits to the ‘Sikkimese’, a collective identity different from ‘Sikkim subjects’ and ‘Certificate of Identity’ holders (Press Trust of India, 2023); In Tripura the same dichotomy is in the context of the tribal versus the non-tribal identities (Ghosh, 2003); with limited emphasis, yet not non-existent, on the assertion of religious identity.

In all cases, the conflicting identities could be seen through the frame of the autochthonous versus non-autochthonous assertions, which is the common element in the four states selected for the study. The subsequent sections and sub-sections will put forth the detailed findings from the research setting considered for the study. It starts with the state of Assam, followed by Tripura, then Sikkim and finally Meghalaya. The sub-sections in each of these sections dedicated to the respective states have been conceived from the thematic categorisation of interview data and the frequency of repetition of the same. There has been an effort to maintain a consistency in the thematic categorisation, which is again based on the filters of Herman and Chomsky’s propaganda model (1994) which has been discussed in section 1.5 Theoretical Frameworks for the Study. There are unique sub-sections that have been added to the respective sections as a means to accommodate the exclusive issues that entail the discourses surrounding media polarisation and the assertion of ethno-religious identities in the English print media of Northeast India, which is the research setting for the study.

### **5.1. Politics of Identity and Rise of Hindu Nationalism in Assam**

Assam’s struggle with its identity is rooted in its history. Assam became part of British India only in 1826 through the Treaty of Yandaboo (Boland-Crewe & Lea, 2003, p. 56). Overwhelmed by the problems of influx and demographic change, identity is one of the core elements in the politics of Assam (Weiner, 1983). Myron Weiner in ‘Sons of the Soil: Migration and Ethnic Conflict in India,’ had, in 1978, pointed to the rise of nativism and ethnopolitics in India, having conducted a thorough analysis of their origins and characteristics and this was just a year prior to the Assam Agitation which led to the Assam Accord in 1985.

Sanjoy Hazarika<sup>34</sup>, as was reported by a Times of India (2015) article, quotes the Asom Sahitya Sabha in defining the Assamese identity; Assamese are those who, “irrespective of community, language, religion and place of origin, accept Assamese as their mother tongue or their second or third language”. The shortcoming of this definition is that, it does not consider the aspirations of the various disparate ethno- linguistic communities in Assam.

The result of this is politics on ethnic lines that culminated into the Assam Accord in 1985 and as such was visible from the general disapproval and widespread protests, against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). The evolution of a an ‘immigrant-induced’ identity creation process could be categorised into three stages, as defined by Nani G. Mahanta – (1) ‘Immigrants vs Nationals’ during the Assam Agitation period from 1979–1980 onwards, (2) Jati-Mati-Bheti or ‘Last Battle of Saraighat’ from 2014 onwards and (3) ‘Clash of Civilisation and Culture’ from 2019–2020 (Mahanta, 2021, p. 302). Again, all rooted in the autochthonous versus non-autochthonous discourse.

In contextualising Identity and politics in Assam, even before BJP’s victory in the 2016 Assembly elections; was a result of BJP’s success in garnering the support of regional forces like the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), the Bodoland People’s Front (BPF) and the Raba, Tiwa and other plains tribal organisations (Misra, Victory for Identity Politics, Not Hindutva in Assam, 2016); the RSS had been aware that the subject of nationalism was not merely related to citizenship and in many ways different from the rest of India by virtue of its association with the ‘ascribed’ nature of identity discourse, as was understood here. It was therefore challenging for the RSS to negotiate between rallying local support; by associating with the parochial nativist discourse; and fulfilling its nationalist agenda. It did so by amalgamating the national and regional identity assertions which as, Sethi & Shubrashtra (2017) articulated, was by labelling the assembly elections of 2016 as the ‘Last Battle of Saraighat’<sup>35</sup>.

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<sup>34</sup> Sanjoy Hazarika is a columnist and specialist commentator on the Northeast and its neighbouring regions, Hazarika has written and published extensively on the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, the Eastern Himalaya and freedom fighters from the Northeast. (Pan Macmillan, 2022)

<sup>35</sup> The last battle of Saraighat was a naval battle fought between the armies of the Mughal rulers of India, representing Muslim overlordship, and the Ahom Kingdom, representing native overlordship in the year 1691. In the battle, the underdog Ahoms, defeated the Mughals and this is relevant in the context of portraying ‘the Muslim’ as the other by the BJP with the aim to sideline the Bengali Muslims, who have had a history of migration, form the polity. The manifestation of this came in the form of Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019.

Interestingly, the enforcing of the Citizenship Amendment Act, prior to the 2021 assembly elections, which came into effect from 10<sup>th</sup> January 2020; the momentum from the protests, against the act, disrupted by the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic; did not seem to affect the results of the elections in which the BJP came out victorious in the majority of the seats. The Citizenship Amendment Act, was pushed by the BJP at the Centre to fast track the citizenship applications of certain religious identities who were perceived to be oppressed in India's neighbourhood (Bhat, 2019). The grounds for the protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act, henceforth CAA, were different in Assam and the rest of India, while the protests in Assam were against the inclusion of any religious groups in the act and thus making it a protest against the act itself, the protests in the rest of India where because of the exclusion of Muslims on the basis of religion (Dutta P. K., 2019). The National Register of Citizens (henceforth, NRC) on the other hand which aimed to create a list of genuine Indian citizens, as per provisions of the Assam Accord of 1985, was seen as a welcome step by the regional forces in the state of Assam (Singh B. , 2019) which was again opposed by protestors in other parts of India.

One of the reasons for the support of the NRC and opposition to the CAA is: the existence of an ethnic fault line between the Assamese and the Bengalis, who have been at odds owing to the troubled colonial history which led to the 'insider-outsider' discourse after the partition of India and creation of East Pakistan in 1947. The demand for the NRC in Assam originates from the perceived need to document the foreigners in Assam, who might endanger a hegemonic Assamese identity of Assam. Mahanta (2021, p. 2) affirms this hegemonic Assamese identity when he writes, "I am trying to project the argument that Assamese nationality, if it wants to maintain its hegemony in Assam...". The situation becomes more complex when there is a history of the existence of the subservient separatist tendencies in the form of armed struggles, the face of which was United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) (South Asian Terrorism Portal, n.d.).

Since the CAA allows for fast-track citizenship of minorities from certain countries in the Indian neighbourhood and this includes Bengali Hindus (Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019); many of whom have settled in Assam even after 1971 which was the cut-off date as per the 1971 Assam Accord (Baruah S. , 1986); it nullifies the Assam Accord by extending the 1971 cut-off to 2014. Even so, the victory of the NDA, led by the BJP suggests that there might be a paradigm shift in the politics of Assam, which this study has attempted to explore. The victory of the BJP led NDA in Assam in two consecutive state assembly elections has

brought about certain changes to the political and hence the discourse in the print media in Assam. This section will explore the ethnic and religious fault lines and how they shape the media discourse in the English print media in the state of Assam.

### **5.1.1. Representation and Proliferation of Political Interests in Assam**

To understand the various political interests in the state of Assam, it is imperative that the various interest groups are described. Historically, it is the politics of ‘identity’ that influenced the discourses with reference to the representation and proliferation of political interests in the milieu of Assam. It is this assertion of a separate ‘identity’ that has, from time to time, influenced the political events in Assam with major markers like the ‘Assam Agitation’ that eventually led to the signing of the ‘Assam Accord’ in 1985. The Assam Agitation, henceforth without quotes, was a movement that was spearheaded by organisations that espoused to protect the legitimate rights of the autochthonous groups of Assam through ‘detecting, disenfranchising, and deporting the illegal aliens’ (Baruah S. , 1986). The aftermath of the 1985 Accord, saw the rise of the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), which represented the rights of the groups that perceived themselves as ‘autochthonous’ to Assam (Routray, 2016) and had managed to dislodge the incumbent Indian National Congress government of the time that had over the years ignored the issue of illegal immigration to the state of Assam from nearby East Pakistan and later Bangladesh (Banerjee, 1985).

While the politics of identity in the state of Assam has played itself out on the dichotomy of the ‘Assamese’ versus the ‘non-Assamese,’ the researcher, is consciously not compartmentalising the identities simply as ‘Assamese,’ with the ‘Assamese’ identity being perceived as the identity of the autochthonous groups, and ‘non-Assamese,’ because, it is the assertion of the distinct identities in the state of Assam that has defined the politics of the state. In this context, Vendekerckhove (2009) argues that the -

“... sons of the soil conflict that we see today in regions like Assam... are not reactionary outcry against the de-rooting of identity ... but the result of too powerfully territorialised (ethnic) identities and the enduring but highly selective reaffirmation of natural geo-cultural links- promoted by state and local political agents – between ethnic groups and territory.”

This means that aligning with and opposing various interest groups is a matter of convenience and acceptable as long as it would entail electoral benefits for the political



agents. As such, the ‘autochthonous’ nature of the ‘Assamese’ identity has indeed remained intact, but the ‘autochthonous’ groups that constitute the ‘Assamese’ identity have been evolving over time. As such, prior to the rise of the AGP, the political stakes in the state of Assam had been historically dominated by the Indian National Congress which had been banking on the votes of three major groupings, that are perceived to be ‘non-autochthonous’ to Assam. In this regard Sethi and Shubhrastha (2017, p. 96) writes about the ‘Ali-Kuli-Bengali’ politics of Assam.

“... Ali stands for Bengali speaking Muslims settled by the British along the riverbanks, mostly for paddy and vegetable cultivation. Kuli refers to Adivasis brought from central India to work in tea plantations and as loggers for the timber trade. The British relied on ‘Bongalis,’ or Bengali Hindus, for clerical jobs and petty trade. The Congress had mastered the electoral strategy of making itself the sole electoral choice for these segments of society by politically nurturing them over the years ... Together, these communities have dictated the outcome in ninety of Assam’s 126 assembly seats. Bengali Muslims hold sway over forty seats, Adivasis in thirty, and Bengali Hindus in ten.”

Among the regional parties, as has been described, the AGP is a party that was set up with the aim to champion the rights of the “genuine residents of Assam,” there are also other parties that advocate for the rights of various other interest groups. The All-India United Democratic Front (AIUDF), for instance, a party that is known to voice the concerns of the Bengali Muslims of Assam, has also been at the forefront of the identity discourse. There are also other parties that represent the interests of various other small ethnic communities who have a stronghold in the constituencies that constitute the communities that they represent. These are parties like the Bodoland People’s Front and the United People’s Party Liberal that are both headquartered in Kokrajhar, a district in Assam. The votes of the ‘Adivasis’ and those of the Bengali Hindus have, from time to time, gone to various parties as there are no exclusive parties that represent the interests of these groups. As Assam’s population constitutes thirty-four percent Muslims, with the percentage of Assamese speakers dipping to below fifty percent (The Economist, 2016), the AIUDF has managed to command sway over a considerable number of constituencies that are majorly dominated by the Bengali Muslims.

The rise of the BJP, therefore, could be articulated through the argument that there has been a consolidation of votes on the basis of religion, in this case Hindu votes, as against a perceived threat from the consolidation of the votes of the Bengali Muslims, towards the AIUDF. Again, the electioneering acumen of the BJP stalwarts who had pitched the 2016 Assembly elections in Assam as the ‘Last Battle of Saraighat’ had reaped its rewards by dislodging the firmly entrenched, Tarun Gogoi led, two term Indian National Congress Government. The BJP had won sixty seats in the state’s legislative assembly and formed the government; along with its alliance members; with Sarabananda Sonowal as the Chief Minister. In 2021, the BJP again managed to retain power with Himanta Biswa Sarma as the Chief Minister. The BJP had won 60 seats and along with 15 more seats from its alliance members, formed the government. With reference to the 2019 general elections to the lower house of the Indian Parliament viz. the Lok Sabha, the BJP managed to win nine seats which was higher than its earlier tally of seven seats, the INC won three seats and the AIUDF one seat (Chief Electoral Officer Assam, 2016; Chief Electoral Officer Assam, 2021).

### 5.1.2. Overview of Print Media in Assam

As per the Press in India (Registrar of Newspapers for India, 2020-21) report, the total number of registered publications in Assam is 884 of which only 133 publications filed their annual statements. This constitutes 160 dailies, 25 bi/ tri- weekly, 279 weekly, 97 fortnightly, 217 monthly, 49 quarterly, 24 annual and 33 others.

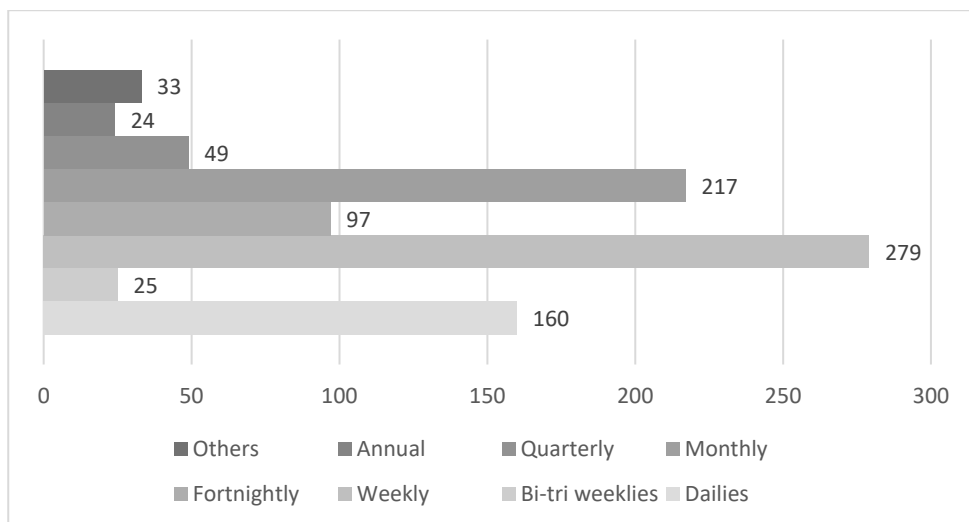


Figure 8: Registered Publications in Assam

Source: Data from RNI, illustrated by researcher

Of the 133 publications that filed their annual statements 62 were dailies, 44 weeklies, 2 fortnightlies, 13 monthlies, 1 quarterly and 11 from others. The total circulation of all registered publications in the state of Assam is 24,24,745 which constitutes 15,00,401 for dailies. Sadin, an Assamese publication from Kamrup, has a total claimed circulation of 69,371 per publishing day.

With reference to the English Press, of the 143 registered publications, 41 were dailies, 5 bi/tri weeklies, 26 weeklies, 14 fortnightlies, 37 monthlies, 7 quarterly, 9 annuals and 4 others. 23 of the 143 registered publications filed their annual statements. The total circulation of the respective 23 publications is 4,81,058. Of the many newspapers that exist in Assam, some of the most prominent ones include - The Assam Tribune and The Sentinel. The Assam Tribune was founded in the year 1939 with Radha Govinda Baruah as the founding editor. It is one of the highest circulated English dailies in the state of Assam and is published simultaneously from Guwahati and Dibrugarh. The Sentinel was established in the year 1983 with Dharendra Nath Bezbaruah as the founding editor. It started publication from Guwahati in the state of Assam in India and currently has four editions – Guwahati, Dibrugarh, Shillong and Itanagar.

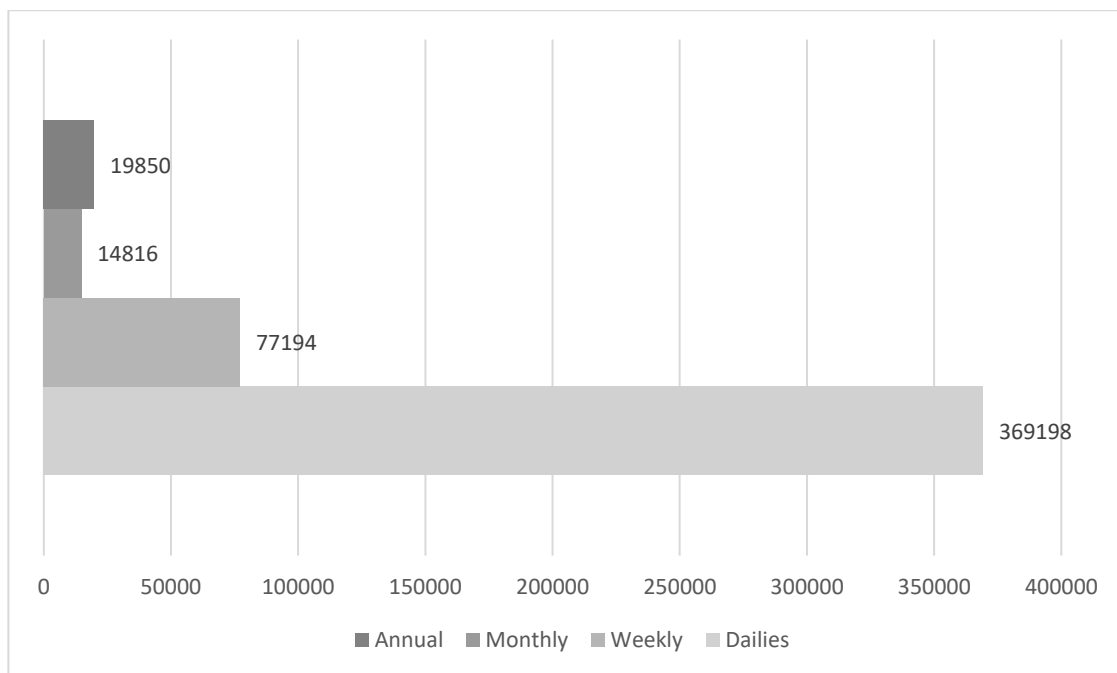


Figure 9: Circulation Figures for registered English Publications in Assam

Source: Data from RNI, illustrated by researcher

### 5.1.3. Representation of various actors in ‘The Assam Tribune’

The direct quotes by pro-ruling party actors which includes the BJP and its allies constituted 33.54% of the total number of quotations. The indirect quotes by pro-ruling party actors constituted 37.54% taking the total percentage of quotes by pro-ruling party actors in The Assam Tribune to 71.08%. Again, the opposition party actors which includes the opposition party and its allies constituted for 28.92%; 18% direct and 11% indirect; of the total number of quotations that were used in the respective articles in The Assam Tribune. A visual representation of the same is as under:

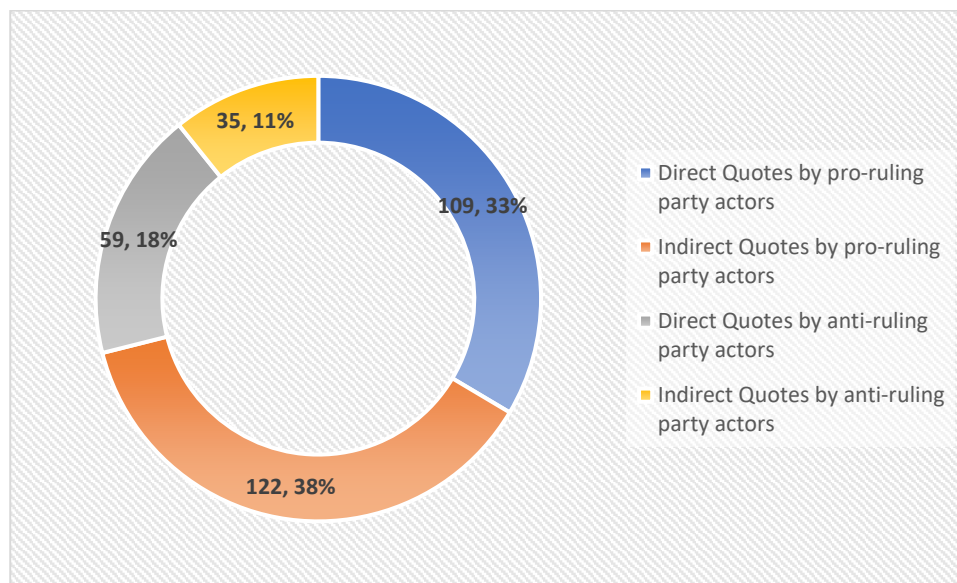


Figure 10: Representation of actors in The Assam Tribune during 2019 elections

Source: Primary data, illustrated by researcher

While the higher number of quotations from the pro-ruling party actors in one of the major English dailies in Assam might not indicate a conscious decision of the respective media organisation to allow more opportunities to the ruling party actors to set the agenda but the ruling party actors do get more importance by virtue of their sheer involvement in the news-making process which would include instances such as launch of government projects, policy decisions etc. Even so, it is important to note that there are higher instances of indirect quotes in comparison to direct quotations which is indicative of the role of the concerned reporter in infusing their perspective or the perspective of the media house in the respective news articles or editorial pieces that are published and thus it is essential to explore the in-house policies of the respective media houses which would also reflect in the reportage. As such the same has been discussed in subsequent sections that deal with the influences that

the media organisations have to navigate, in order to inculcate the in-house policies that they might espouse, in their reports and sometimes, in their employees, who write those reports.

#### **5.1.4. Advertising Revenue and Media Discourse in Assam**

On the policy level, the Government of Assam has a very well-defined policy for advertising, with advertising rates that correspond to the rates provided by the agencies of the Government of India, who advertise through the Central Bureau of Communication. The interviewees, who were interviewed in this regard, hold the general view that the media organisations primarily depend on Government advertisements and other sources of advertisements, to subsidise the cost of their newspapers for the consumers. This has a positive effect on the circulation of the paper owing to the affordability. In this regard, a point of view that emerged was that, in the state of Assam, the Directorate of Advertising and Visual Publicity (DAVP), now subsumed under the Central Bureau of Communication<sup>36</sup>, which is a central government agency responsible for the dispersion of government advertisements, had minimal role in the dispersion of advertisements to media houses in Assam while also highlighting that the media houses do receive more advertisements primarily because the governments need the media houses for various reasons, including the dissemination of information. An interviewee, as such notes,

“Press survives because of the advertisements from departments such as the DAVP but in the case of Assam, that is not the case ... at least that was how it used to be earlier. Now days, the government needs the media which is why they will have to give advertisements to the media.”

Although the same respondent also pointed out that while the DAVP was not as involved in the dispersion of advertisements, the Directorate of Information and Public Relations (DIPR) was dispersing more advertisements, as there are more state government advertisements and hence the greater role of the DIPR, as it is the agency responsible for the dispersion of advertisements of the state government.

“DAVP is only the Central Government advertisements while the DIPR is the state government advertisements. These days the number of state

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<sup>36</sup> Central Bureau of Communication (CBC) is a unit of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, provides communication solutions to Ministries, Departments, Public Sector Undertakings (PSUs), and autonomous bodies (Central Bureau of Communication, 2017).

government advertisements are way higher than the central government advertisements.”

While this might indicate that the Central Government is not involved directly in the dispersion of advertisements, which is true as per the information provided by a representative of an eminent media house, the State Government, being a BJP led NDA set-up, the role of the Central Government, which is also a BJP led NDA set up, in the promotion and propagation of the ruling party discourse, cannot be ruled out.

#### **5.1.5. Ideological Position of Newspapers in Assam**

The newspapers in Assam gained prominence through the inhouse policies they took during the Assam Movement, leading to the Assam Accord of 1985. As such the in-house policies of the newspapers were geared towards promoting the interests of the indigenous communities of the state of Assam but as has been described in this thesis, ‘autochthonous’ communities. The field study entails that the foundation for the idea that categorises certain communities as indigenous to Assam was based on ethnicity and while there were complexities regarding defining the idea of ‘Assamese’ in the context of Assam, there is an underlying understanding among the journalists reporting the news, that the identity is defined based on ethnicity. Evidence of this parochial understanding among journalists was also evident from an incident that took place while the Government of Assam was demolishing the illegal settlements on government land (Baruah S. , 2021).

The researcher at the time of this incident was conducting field interviews in Shillong; the capital of Meghalaya; and among the journalists and academics alike, the ghastly action of Bijoy Bania; documented in a 72 second viral video; jumping on the body of one of the illegal occupants of government land, who happened to be a Muslim of Bengali origin; shot by the police, was an action, which was a clear articulation of the parochial mindset influencing Bania’s understanding of the definition and assertion of identity. While it would be unjustified to generalise that the action of one, Bijoy Bania, it is reflective of the nature of the assertion of identity among Assam’s general masses, including journalists, it is nonetheless an offshoot of the discourse on identity assertion and as such will be visible in the subsequent sections. In the context of such a discourse, an interviewee speaks about the existing dichotomy of trying to maintain balance in their reportage while also adhering to the in-house policies that warrant the protection and promotion of the rights of the indigenous or autochthonous.

“We are a very balanced paper. We do not believe in any ideologies of so-called parties but our ideological inclination would be I would say that – we represent the indigenous groups of the state of Assam.”

In essence, the interviewee, seems to be stuck in a dichotomy of what the nature of identity, in Assam, should be: ‘ascribed’ or ‘achieved’? Further, while Hindutva as an ideology intends to unify the adherents of Hinduism with limited room for the accommodation of sub-servient identity assertions, the accommodative nature of the proponents of Hindutva in the Northeast, the RSS, becomes a unique phenomenon, warranting scrupulous reflection. Longkumer (2022, p. 16) makes note of this while also arguing that in the Northeast, the proponents of Hindutva are on the receiving end. The journalists and editors who are the agenda setters and act as the gatekeepers also make reference to this when they mention their need to maintain a balance while also accepting that there is a constant pressure from the state apparatus to promote a discourse which is more friendly towards the ruling party actors, which would in turn have the effect of increasing the acceptability of ideologies such as Hindutva which would at other times be in contest with the existing ethnic identity assertions. A journalist who was interviewed for the study points to this dichotomy while articulating on the direct link between the rise of the BJP; at the Centre in 2014 and then again in 2019 with the simultaneous rise of the BJP in Assam in the year 2016 and then again in 2021; and the consistent efforts to manage the media discourse. He notes,

“I have been here for 21 years but I have not seen any kind of political leaning on the part of the Assam Tribune. But yes, depending on whatever party is in power there is a tendency of newspapers to lean towards the ruling party and more so with the BJP, both at the centre and the state. They are consciously trying to influence the media.”

There was a consensus among the interviewees who were interviewed for this study that the newspapers in Assam seemed to have a ‘ethnic-right’ stance which, as the researcher understands meant that the newspapers were geared towards the preservation and promotion of autochthonous interests and therefore; it could be argued; involved in the assertion of an ‘ascribed’ understanding of identity, predominantly ethnic.

#### **5.1.6. Inclination of Political News in Assam**

Another perspective that emerged from the interviews was of the greater role of the ruling party in the process of news creation by virtue of simply being in the government. This was

repetitively described as a reason for the higher coverage in the media in general and print media in particular. Lewin and Tao's (2013) had also noted that the media tends to represent the opinions of the powerful and disenfranchise those who are perceived as weak. With reference to the representation of the ruling party in the print media of Assam, an interviewee mentions,

“... the ruling party has a lot of dominance over the affairs of the government and that is the reason why newspapers also look at the attitude of the ruling party. So, the political news is based on the government and the ruling party and very less on the others – even at the time of elections.”

Given that, this is the nature of news coverage even during the time of the elections, it gives undue advantage to the incumbent in the context of having the capacity to exercise control over the discourse in the media but the means of it, is through providing more financial incentives in the form of higher advertising rates, as indicated by Narisetti (2021, p. 164). The other interviewees also maintained that there is a tendency for the print media in Assam to lean towards the ruling party and the news is also primarily related to the ruling party. The analysis of quotations that are used in the news articles in the ‘The Assam Tribune’ also indicate that there is higher representation of the ruling party actors. There a possible link between advertising revenue and the discourse in the news that is published by the newspapers but this also indicates that the discourse is not party centric which also means that party ideology or support for it plays a secondary role to monetary implications. As such an interviewee articulates:

“It is true that print media does give priority space to the ruling party – whatever be the party. Even during the Congress rule also, they have again linked it with their government advertisements. It is not stated openly but they create a situation where the newspapers also have to create the space for the ruling party. They at least get their share of the advertisement from the government.”

It would therefore be appropriate to convey that politico-economic considerations have a bearing effect in determining the nature of news that is published in newspapers; the Government and its ideological state apparatuses, and other sources of revenue, exercise control over the allocation of advertisements along with timely disbursement of payments, which is also a significant factor in persuading news organisations to maintain a positive



portrayal of the respective interest groups in their reportage. An interviewee laid emphasis on the year 2014, when there was a shift in the way media was being managed,

“... the discourse started changing from 2014 onwards... the propaganda blitzkrieg<sup>37</sup> that the BJP had launched all over the country; the media here was no exception in providing space for the media hype around the campaigns. Media also took part in manufacturing consent.”

There was also emphasis on the year 2016, when the BJP managed to dislodge the Tarun Gogoi led Government in Assam which had been ruling the state for fifteen years. The Indian National Congress, henceforth INC; Tarun Gogoi was affiliated to the INC; was reduced to 26 seats from its earlier tally of 86 seats (Chief Electoral Officer Assam, 2016).

### **5.1.7. Polarisation and Print Media Discourse in Assam**

Carrying forward the argument from the previous section on the ‘Inclination of Political News in Assam,’ 2014 was a year when persistent discourses promoting the idea of Modi as the prime minister were perpetuated by the national and the regional media (Chhibber & Verma, 2014). As such, it also laid the roots for the polarisation of media discourse. In the case of Assam, along with the obvious pointers, the interviewees, interviewed for the study, linked the phenomenon of the polarisation of media discourse with that of the phenomenon of the polarisation of society with roots in the history of the state. Polarisation on ethnic lines had always determined the idea of the ‘foreigner’ in Assam but the same would be essentially modified, through the implementation of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), to include the adherents of Hinduism within the fold of the native populations sidelining the essence of the Assam Movement which had demanded the expulsion of foreigners, irrespective of the religion that one followed.

The politics revolving around the CAA and the National Register of Citizens (NRC) became a polarising factor in Assam and played a considerable role in polarising the society, while the NRC was welcome, the CAA was not; especially in, but not limited to; the Brahmaputra valley where various civil rights groups espoused the rights of the native populations; autochthonous groups; and this was in contestation with the native interests being promoted

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<sup>37</sup> A type of warfare introduced by the Germans in World War 2, characterised by sudden and intense attacks on the opponent; best symbolic representation is a lightning; in this context is to do with intense media reportage covering Modi, BJP’s electoral candidate.

by various other groups in the Barak valley, another geographical region in Assam which is primarily inhabited by an ethnic Bengali population (Barbora & The India Forum, 2020). This is the predicament that had shaped the politics leading to the 2019 Lok Sabha and the 2021 Assembly elections. An interviewee, who was interviewed for this study took note of this when he pointed out,

“Polarisation in Assam has its roots in history and the social problems we are facing here, whether it is demographic or ... you are already aware of the foreigner’s issue. So, this is a problem that hangs as a Damocles sword. Most of the questions of polarisation comes from ... you see we now have a government that openly says that they are pro-Hindutva and all that ...they are not hiding anything.”

The disruption of the social fabric among the people in Assam, which was a result of the polarised nature of the discourse perpetuated by the various interest groups in the state of Assam, had its effect on the print media discourse as well. While evidence suggests that polarisation of news in the print media when compared to the electronic media is relatively less; individual tendencies of professionals do play their role in determining the course of discourse on published news. An interviewee, while dwelling on a dichotomy between good and bad media, noted that polarisation had indeed been progressively percolating into the electronic media but in the context of the print media, he asserted that there is also a deliberate attempt to create a perception that the discourse is polarised which in his opinion is not true.

“I still believe that there is a good media and like in any profession there are bad elements but especially in English print media, being a part of it as a journalist ... Some perception of the sort has been created also. Yes, I do believe that certain media houses especially television ... I do believe that print media has not been polarised to the extent of the perception that is being created”

Another dichotomy that emerged from the discussions with an interviewee was between editorial policies and the individual values of media persons working for the respective organisations, which he stated could be very contrasting. While literature suggests that journalists tend to embody the values of the organisations they work for and by espousing those values they perpetuate the power of the news organisation (Fairclough, 2015, pp. 78-

79); they have to, however, at times negotiate with powerful sources of news that are perceived as credible, to mitigate the costs their organisation would incur if it pursued “...careful checking and costly research” in order to avoid litigation pertaining to lack of objectivity (Herman & Chomsky, 1994, p. 19). While sharing an amusing anecdote, the interviewee expressed his predicament,

“I found it very strange that- among their 6 reporters – one was known, open Congress supporter. Two or three were openly known AGP supporters. The person who was a Congress supporter was later appointed as a Congress spokesperson also. He resigned the job and became a fulltime spokesman.”

Evidently, dichotomy between editorial policy of an organisation; which might be geared towards being neutral; and individual values; which might be consciously or sub-consciously biased towards the selection of certain voices in the news reports; in negotiation with each other, influences the discourse in the media. This, therefore indicates to an interplay between organisational values, individual values and factors relating to revenue generation; advertising and others; in the complex process of the creation of discourse in the media. The various considerations, therefore exert their very own sway on this push and pull dynamics; contributing their bit to the phenomenon of the polarisation of discourse; characterised by a strong difference of opinions that is visible in the published news reports; as discussed in section 1.1 Background of the Study; on the respective media whose modes of revenue generation could be linked to particular entities that have an involvement in their political economy.

#### **5.1.8. Citizenship Amendment Act and the Indigeneity Question**

The NRC and CAA, as mentioned in section 5.1.7 on Polarisation and Print Media Discourse in Assam, disrupted the social fabric in the state of Assam creating a dichotomy on the what constituted autochthonous interests; the Brahmaputra valley, dominated by those that identified themselves as autochthonous Assamese while the Barak valley, dominated by those that identified themselves as autochthonous Bengalis, espoused their respective interests; based on community and geographic specificities. While the passing of the CAA led to widespread protests in Assam owing to the sidelining of promises made in the Assam Accord of 1985, it had limited effect on the results of the 2019 Lok Sabha elections and also the 2021 assembly elections in Assam. The passing of the CAA should have in fact effected the fortunes of the BJP, in the subsequent elections that followed but as articulated in section

5.1.3 on Representation and Proliferation of Political Interests in Assam, the party showed noteworthy performance in both; indicating a shift from the traditional assertions of ‘ascribed’ identity, based on ethnicity to the new ‘achieved’ identity, based on Hindu nationalism.

It was as though there was a fomenting of a unified Hindu identity discourse, with both the groups, the ones who identified as Assamese and those that identified as Bengali, voting for the BJP. The polarisation of the political discourse on religious lines, moving away from the traditional ‘ascribed’ identity discourse, had worked. Even in light of the fact that, the number of Assamese speakers in Assam had reduced; as per the census of 2011 (Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, 2011), had dropped to forty eight percent, with a rise of the Bengali speaking population to twenty nine percent; the politics of ethnicity seemed to wane away. The Bengali Hindus were anyway inclined to the BJP, the Assamese Hindus also sided with the BJP with some voting for the Ahom Gana Parishad (AGP), which had also aligned with the BJP (Parashar & Naqvi, Voting on religious lines, Bengali speakers may help BJP, Congress win in Assam, 2019). While the AGP, as a political party had emerged at the aftermath of the Assam Accord and had therefore espoused the rights of the indigenous population of Assam through the implementation of the Assam Accord (Baruah S. , 1986), the alliance with the BJP could be seen as the endorsement of the BJP’s re-definition of who the ‘Foreigner’ was. As one of the interviewees noted,

“Earlier we could see that the foreigners coming from Bangladesh- they belonged to both Hindus and Muslims, isn’t it? But now in the demographic mathematics or the electoral politics of the BJP – mostly BJP – they are trying to combine Assamese Hindu communities along with the Hindu Bengali groups. They say that – you follow the same religion. They have been trying to do that mathematics.”

It is perhaps because of this reason that majority of the respondents interviewed for the study held the view that the CAA could not play a spoil sport in determining the election outcome in favour of the BJP. An interviewee, who had been interviewed for the study pointed out that the shift from politics based on ethno-linguistic identity to religious identity was primarily because of perceived threat from both a linguistic assertion and a religious assertion. The Assamese community having to make a choice, he articulates, chose to become a linguistic minority.

“... I think the BJP managed to play down the Assamese identity politics ... There is a genuine threat that in perhaps the next 50 years, the Assamese may not be a majority group linguistically. At the same time, it is also a fear that religiously too it will not be a majority group. It is a choice between the two, you either become a religious minority group or a linguistic minority group. So, I think the Assamese people are tilting towards becoming a linguistic minority.”

The media persons who were interviewed for this study, in general, maintained that their aim has been to espouse the rights of the autochthonous communities, as is the in-house policy of their organisations. The ascent of the BJP in the politics of Assam and its assertion of the Hindu nationalist identity added to the ambiguity of the autochthonous communities and as such was also reflected in the articulation of the issue of the NRC and the CAA, among the reporters who displayed a confusion with reference to their ascribed and achieved identities.

## **5.2. Tripura: That which happened on a March, from Left to Right**

The kingdom of Tripura merged with the Indian Union on the 15<sup>th</sup> of October 1949, after having signed the Tripura Merger Agreement in September 1947; Bir Bikram, the last king had died on May 17, the same year; in the backdrop of a rumour suggesting a conspiracy to merge Tripura to East Pakistan (Haokip T. , 2012). While Tripura has seen violent flare ups among various communities inhabiting the state, from time to time, the underlying cause of the sustained discord has been a result of the domination of the autochthonous tribal communities by a perceived illegitimate elite, the Bengalis. In this context, Bhattacharya (1989), on Tripuri nationalism notes,

“... Tripuri national identity formation took the form of a nationalist doctrine formulated by a group of dissatisfied indigenous Tripuris who sought to articulate mass grievances against Bengali domination.”

The implementation of the Sixth Schedule that led to the formation of the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council (TTAADC)<sup>38</sup> was aimed towards providing relative

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<sup>38</sup> The Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council (TTAADC) was established through an Act of the same name in the year 1979, passed by the Indian parliament as a result of populist movements launched by the Indigenous people of Tripura. This was in accordance with the sixth schedule of the Constitution of India.

autonomy to the autochthonous tribals of the state of Tripura and protect their areas and way of life from encroachment by migrating populations (North Eastern Council, 2023), in this case, primarily from East Pakistan. Partition of; migration to; and protection of; land, in the context of the history of Tripura has led to distinct distribution of its demography across the state. The hill regions, which fall under the administration of the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council (TTAADC) and are primarily populated; 83.97% of the total population in the TTAADC areas (Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council, 2023); by the 19 different ethnic groups who are labelled as the ‘tribal’ communities. The general areas, primarily inhabited by the ‘non-tribal’ population; Bengalis being largest among the constituent communities and 69% of the total population of Tripura (India TodayNE, 2020); lies in the geographical plains.

While the tribal communities, see themselves as autochthonous to the state of Tripura; the Bengalis are descendants of the internally displaced population of the areas that fell under the administration of the erstwhile kingdom of Twipra but because the migration was internal, from ‘Chakla Roshanabad’, in present-day Cumilla district of Bangladesh, to their current locations in Tripura (Ghoshal, 2010), they too claim to be among the autochthones (India TodayNE, 2020). The population of the state are majorly concentrated in the general areas with relatively lower population density in the TTAADC areas. Figure 11 depicts a map of the TTAADC for reference. While the capital of Tripura is Agartala, which lies in the general areas, the headquarters of the TTAADC administration is at Khumulwng, 26 kilometres from Tripura (Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council, 2023).

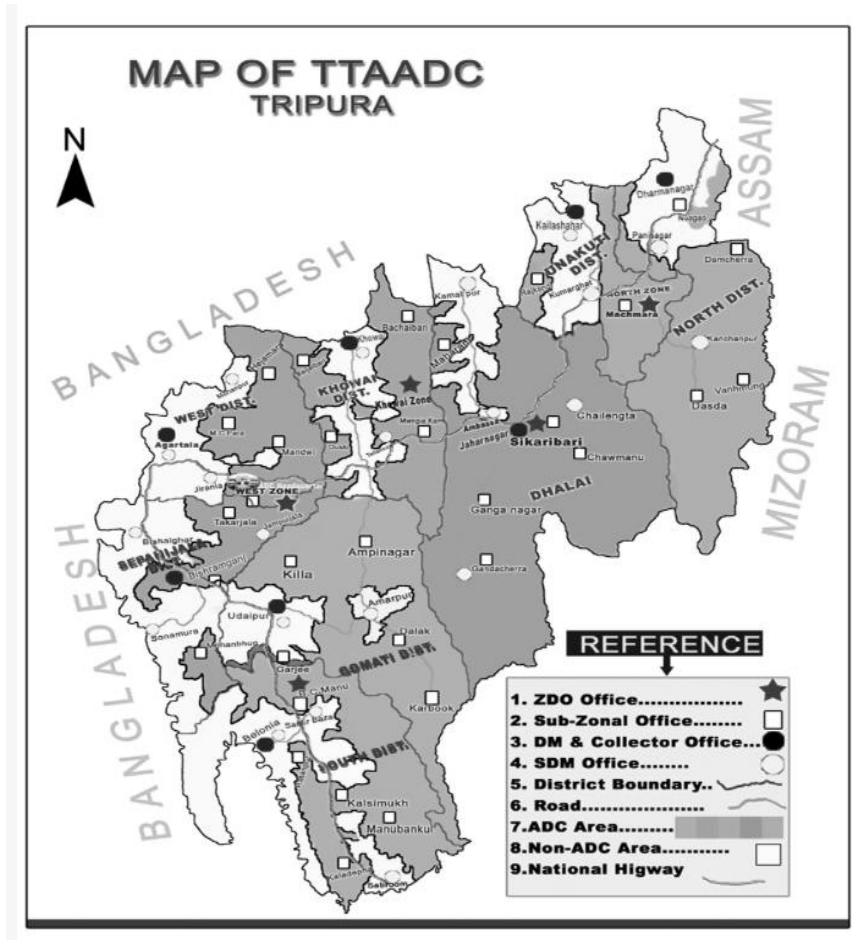


Figure 11: Map of Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council

Source: (Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council, 2023)

Electorally, Tripura is a curious case: the BJP; known to be on the right of centre on the spectrum of ideology (Banerjee, 2005); managed to come out victorious against an incumbent; Manik Sarkar led, left front<sup>39</sup> government that had been in power in the state since 1993; in Tripura for a period of 25 years. 2018 brought about a radical shift in what had been known as a ‘red holdout’ (Chatterjee, 2018). The BJP had won 36 seats with 43.5% of the popular vote (Election Commission of India, 2018); Biplab Kumar Deb took charge as the Chief Minister. Again, recently in 2023, the BJP again came out victorious, with the highest number of seats to its credit, relative to the other parties but relative to its previous tally of 36, it lost four seats which brought its share of seats in the legislative assembly to 32 (Election Commission of India, 2023). The entry of the Tipra Motha Party, TMP, led by

<sup>39</sup> A political alliance of parties in the state of Tripura that constitutes Communist Party of India (Marxist), Communist Party of India, Revolutionary Socialist Party, All India Forward Bloc.

Pradyut Deb Barma; head of the erstwhile royal family of Tripura; could be seen as a counter assertion to the Hindu nationalistic assertion of the BJP: TMP espouses the rights of the autochthonous tribal groups of Tripura through their demand for ‘Greater Tipraland’<sup>40</sup> (Parashar, 2023). While this is an extension of the ideology of the IPFT, Indigenous People’s Front of Tripura which is, with its one seat, in alliance with the ruling BJP; the TMP did win more seats in the 2023 elections. In the 2019 general elections to the lower house of the Indian Parliament, BJP won both the seats representing the respective parliamentary constituencies (Chief Electoral Officer Tripura, 2019).

### **5.2.1. Representation and Proliferation of Political Interests in Tripura**

The diverse concentration of population in different parts of the state as described in the introduction to this section, 5.2, has also had an effect on the political economy of the print media in Tripura. The head offices of the major print media organisations in Tripura are primarily concentrated in the capital city, Agartala. The coverage in the print media, therefore, is predominantly of issues that concern the general areas, where the majority of the scarce resources; viz. correspondents, reporters etc.; are concentrated by the various print media houses. The resource constraint in the areas under the TTAADC leads to limited coverage of the area, by the Agartala-centric print media houses.

“I would say that the print media in Tripura is indeed Agartala centric ... This is probably the reason why the indigenous people left out of the media discourse primarily because they are generally based out of the hills.”

An editor of an English daily although asserted that the print media houses do try to cover the different parts of Tripura through various means but the nature of the distribution of news gathering agents makes the news from the areas around Tripura, more readily available.

“... media in Tripura is mostly Agartala centric. It is a small state after all but yes, I will not agree to you when you say that this might lead to some groups being left out of the discussion because the big newspapers that exist, they

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<sup>40</sup> A separate state for the autochthonous tribals of Tripura under provisions laid down by the Constitution of India.



generally make sure that there is representation from different groups in their organisations, even in the remote areas.”

Adding to this discussion, it was also pointed out that the readership of the English print media is higher among the tribal population, given the higher pervasiveness of English education among them. However, this claim could not be verified owing to the paucity in the availability of district wise circulation data.

“... the next generation tribal boys and girls who are mostly into the western culture, they prefer English newspaper. Most of them are also educated in English medium schools – like Don Bosco, Holy Cross, Auxilium, Montfort among others. These areas are located both in the city areas and in the rural areas which includes the hills.”

By virtue of the geographical location where the major print media houses in Tripura are based out of, there is also a disproportionate number of media owners who primarily belong to the non-tribal community, in this case the Bengalis; the context has been explained in the introduction to this section; and as pointed out by Herman & Chomsky (1994), the ownership pattern of the media tends to direct the course of the discourse in the media. As such, has been articulated by an academic who notes,

“If you look at the Sonam Patrika, it was a Bengali Newspaper, owned by a Bengali; Tripura Times, Bengali; Desher Katha, Bengali ... Even the owners are all Bengalis ... There are certain issues like the case of CAB (Citizenship Amendment Bill), like NRC (National Register of Citizens) ... the tribal people oppose it but the media in Tripura would try to antagonise the protestors rather than balancing it.”

These are issues of political significance in which the interests of the autochthonous tribals are antagonistic to the interests of the non-tribals; who also consider themselves as autochthonous but are largely understood as claims; who share emotional and at times even filial bonds with the migrants who might benefit from the implementation of the Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019 and might suffer from the execution of the National Register of Citizens. On the other hand, the autochthonous stand to lose out from the implementation of the CAA and withholding of the execution of the NRC, already being demographically outnumbered when compared to the populations, they consider non-autochthonous.

### 5.2.2. Overview of Print Media in Tripura

As per the Press in India (Registrar of Newspapers for India, 2020-21), the total number of registered publications in Tripura is 170 of which only 52 publications filed their annual statements. Of the 170 registered publications, there are 44 dailies, 93 weeklies, 12 fortnightly, 13 monthlies, 5 quarterlies, 1 annual and 2 other periodicities.

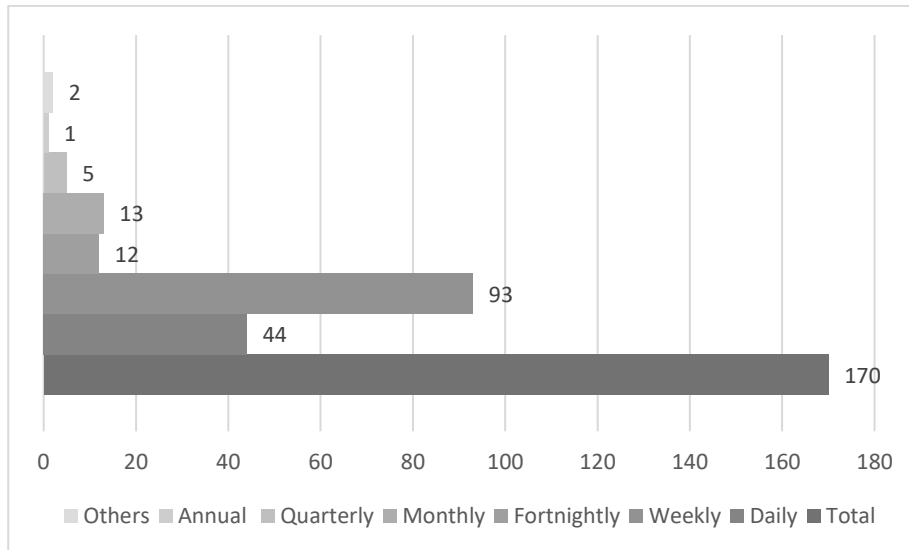


Figure 12: Registered Publications in Tripura

Source: Data from RNI, Illustrated by researcher

Of the 133 publications that filed their annual statements 23 were dailies, 26 weeklies, 1 fortnightly and 2 monthlies. The total circulation of publications that filed their annual statements in the state of Tripura is 6,52,867 which constitutes 4,63,504 for dailies. Dainik Sambad, a Bengali daily from West Tripura, has a total claimed circulation of 61,490 copies per publishing day is the highest circulated.

With reference to the English Press, of the 20 registered publications, 8 were dailies, 6 weeklies, 3 fortnightly, 1 monthly, 1 quarterly and 1 of another periodicities. 7 of the 20 registered publications filed their annual statements. The total circulation of the 7 publications is 1,21,271, which is the second highest after Bengali.

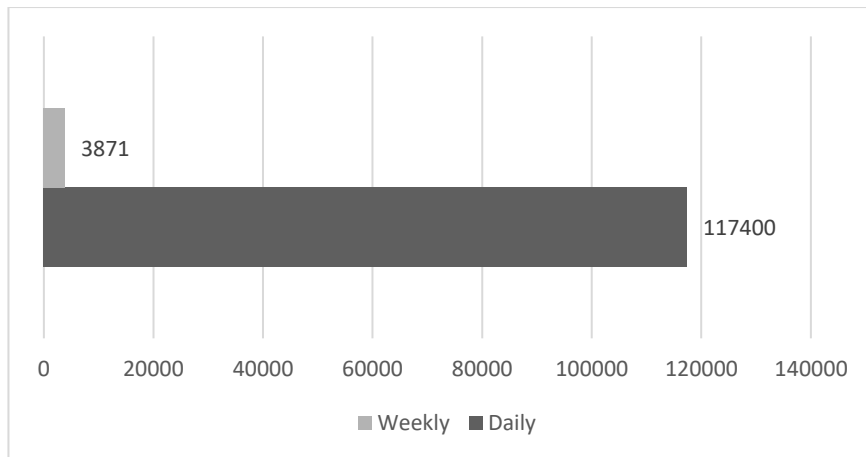


Figure 13: Circulation Figures for Registered English Publications in Tripura

Source: Data from RNI, illustrated by researcher

### 5.2.3. Representation of various actors in ‘Tripura Times’

As in Figure 14, the direct quotes by pro-ruling party actors which includes the BJP and its allies constituted 33.69% of the total number of quotations. The indirect quotes by pro-ruling party actors constituted 38.71% taking the total percentage of quotes by pro-ruling party actors in The Tripura Times to 72.40%. Again, the opposition party actors which includes the opposition party and its allies constituted for 27.60% of the total number of quotations that were used in the respective articles in The Tripura Times.

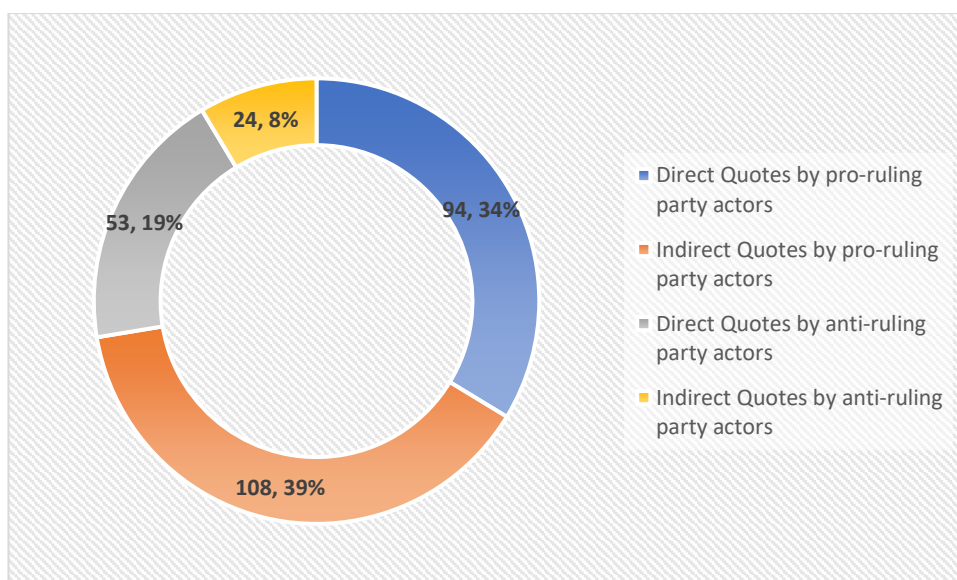


Figure 14: Representation of actors in Tripura Times during 2019 elections

Source: Primary data, illustrated by Researcher

As is the case in the state of Assam and as is suggested by existing literature, incumbent legislators do have an advantage over challengers in the representation that they receive in local news and higher representation is also relinked to higher re-election numbers (Schaffner, 2006) but the higher number of quotations from the pro-ruling party actors do not conclusively indicate a conscious decision to allocate more space to the ruling party actors by the respective media houses but as a consequence of the same, the ruling party actors do enjoy more space on the newsprint.

One of the reasons which seems to be is probable; also agreed upon by the interviewees who were interviewed for the study; is that the ruling party actors are involved in policy making decisions as well as the launch of various projects initiated by the government. Again, this also brings into question the role of the reporter who makes conscious choices of the actors they quote for their articles and for what purpose. The involvement of the reporter introduces a human angle to the process of the generation of news which introduces the scope of the inclusion of the biases and perspectives; as has already been discussed in section 1.5 Theoretical Frameworks for the Study; that are unique to the individual reporting the news.

Additionally, the gatekeepers and other members; often called the institutional collective (Fairclough, 2015, pp. 78-79); in the respective media houses also play a role in the decision-making process on the kind of news that is transmitted through the respective media. As the media in Tripura is primarily dependent on Government patronage, as such the push and pull factors that influence the discourse emanating out of the media organisations have been discussed in the subsequent sections. While the editor of an eminent daily, who was interviewed for the study maintained that "... some other papers, some other media, maybe, I am not sure but as far as English newspapers are concerned, it is not like that, we never felt any kind of coercion" but as also proposed in the work of Althusser (1970), the nature of coercion is not always overt, there are other considerations that have their influence in the print media discourse and the researcher has made an attempt to articulate the same in the subsequent sections.

#### **5.2.4. Advertising Revenue and Media Discourse**

The deficiency of sources of funding; this includes industries, organisations etc. who are willing to pay to advertise; in the state of Tripura, Government patronage becomes an essential element for the survival of a publication house. An interviewee, in this regard, problematised the limitation that media houses face, while also criticising an evolving

revenue-centric mindset among certain media professionals, which, according to him, has been responsible for hampering the quality of the news content. While there is the problem of personal values there is also the fear of ‘flak’ (Herman & Chomsky, 1994) which the journalists might have to face if they do not toe the line,

“... with reference to the media, the Government patronage is very vital. If there is no Government advertisement – it is very problematic... there is a section in the media whose main yet hidden agenda is to earn money ... the other section do not like such things but are scared because the media industry here is dependent on Government patronage.”

While there is an existing policy document that outlines the regulations for the distribution of advertisements, the state Government in the state of Tripura; as stated by an interviewee; does not disburse advertisements. He asserted, however, that it is an obligation on the part of the government to distribute it; the study of the policy documents could not find any such regulation that compels the government for the same; as the survivability of the media in Tripura depends on assistance from the government. Certain media houses; in their nascent stage and lacking patrons; need the government to facilitate an environment for media organisations to thrive in Tripura; which would smoothen the dissemination of information, even to the fringes of this country, efficiently. It is, however, a general practice of the governments; at least at the level of policy; to contribute to advertising revenue as it enhances the capacity of smaller media houses to survive which would otherwise go out of business and Tripura does have a robust policy which categorises newspapers into various categories in terms of the fixed rates the government of Tripura pays for advertising on the respective papers; the policy has been attached in the annexure(s) section of this thesis. An interviewee, in this context hoped for the government to issue advertisements to them regularly as the government also needs the various media as much as the media houses need the government, irrespective of the party in power.

“It is not that it can just avoid us ... you must give these advertisements to us and we are getting advertisements. During the rule of the left wing also, we were getting advertisements and there is not much change”

However, the current situation is not that promising and as such was articulated by another editor who provided very particular details, with reference to the dissemination of advertisements by the Government of Tripura, at the time when the interview was

conducted. He articulated the state of two newspapers, one that had just been launched and another that was an established one. While the names of both the newspapers figured on list of approved newspapers, for the dissemination of advertisements, they had been struggling.

“North East Colours<sup>41</sup>, they do not get any government advertisements yet. Tripura Observer<sup>42</sup> is also getting very negligible number of advertisements – these are very small and negligible number of advertisements but the Government must- according to their policy”

Speaking on the existing issues with reference to the disseminating agencies for disbursing the advertisements, an interviewee pointed out that the central agencies, in this case the Directorate of Audio-Visual Publicity (now rechristened as the Bureau of Communication), did not take to local considerations while distributing the advertisements; the agencies of the state government however were not actively engaged in advertising in the newspapers. While, independent verification of this detail could not be done through the analysis of official documents, this was however, a repetitive articulation on the part of the journalists who had been interviewed for this study. The editor of an eminent English daily, in this regard, noted,

“... we are not getting that many advertisements from the State Government. We are getting some advertisements though – most of our revenue comes from the DAVP and other companies... DAVP is indeed an organ of the Government but it does not consider these local considerations because this is a very old newspaper – it has got its own weightage over there – in Delhi.”

### **5.2.5. Ideological Position of Newspapers in Tripura**

As has been discussed in the introduction to this section, the nature of politics in the state of Tripura might seem peculiar for someone viewing it from the outside; a state which had seen the dominance of the politically left-leaning parties from 1978 to 1988 and again for a relatively longer interval from 1993 to 2018, switched to the BJP; an incredible shift from the political left to the political right, is also indicative of a radical shift in the public

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<sup>41</sup> North East Colours, an English daily, launched by the publishers of ‘The Dainik Sambad,’ Tripura’s highest circulated newspaper, at the time of conducting the fieldwork for this investigation. North East Colours had just launched and while the researcher had the opportunity to meet the editor of the paper; for a casual discussion; an interview could not be scheduled, which, in hindsight, the researcher thinks would have been an interesting opportunity.

<sup>42</sup> Tripura Observer is another English daily having substantial circulation.

discourse. While the electoral results might be indicative of a shift in the public discourse, the same cannot be said for the media and as one of the interviewees mentions, it is tough to pinpoint that there is a drastic change in the discourse. Even so, the remnants of the erstwhile communist situation manifest; with newspapers having a tendency to be pro-left, in the state of Tripura; the examples cited in the view expressed under are: the ‘Dainik Sambad’ and ‘Daily Desher Katha’ – while ‘Dainik Sambad’ is a Bengali daily which is one of the highest circulated newspapers in the state of Tripura as per data that was procured from the Department of Information and Cultural Affairs, Tripura and attached in the annexures of this thesis, ‘Desher Katha’ is the daily publication of the state committee of the Communist Party of India, Tripura.

“... unless there is a drastic change in the discourse you cannot really pinpoint on this because in Tripura, the newspaper that people generally read is Dainik Sambad ... I would agree that Desher Katha is generally a pro-left paper and the discourse is generally towards that side.”

The existence of an exclusive propaganda machinery, being run by the erstwhile left-front dispensation was also acknowledged by another interviewee, who described it to be ‘quite formidable’ and was also diligently engaged in the circulation of the party publications in the urban and rural extremities of the state. The extent of the proliferation of their ideas is evident from a statement that he made - “CPI(M) did have a party organ that belonged to it and would widely circulate the publications ... just by writing ... you could not do much to the CPI(M).”

This widespread proliferation of the ideas espoused by the ruling dispensation had its own set of influences on the print media discourse which is described by an interviewee who was interviewed for this study, “... when this new Government came to power – during the leftist regime, almost all newspapers were anti-establishment because it became natural for so many years.” The ascension of the BJP at the helm of affairs in Tripura elicited a predictable response from a media apparatus that had been cultivated by the erstwhile regime in the state; this had been to oppose the policies of the new party that had come to power. Even so, an editor who was interviewed articulated that; through his paper, which is also one of the highest circulated English dailies in Tripura; he does not want to constantly maintain an anti-establishment stance as is the case with a newspaper like ‘The Telegraph’ which is evidently, as Sharma (2020) notes, “Tough on Modi, soft on Mamta”. However, the case of Telegraph

does point to a link between the place where ‘The Telegraph’ is headquartered; Kolkata; and its soft stance on Mamata Banerjee; Chief Minister of West Bengal and affiliated to the Trinamool Congress; and why it is at loggerheads with the Prime Minister of India; from the BJP; Narendra Modi. The editor of an eminent English daily in Tripura notes,

“We are critical but yes, we do not want to be another ‘Telegraph’... our paper is conservative in its outlook ... We are not into a campaign; we are not going to make this a campaign against the government because the government has not shown anything that is very problematic.”

He also noted that there is barely any attempt by the ruling party actors in the state of Tripura to influence the discourse in the media. As such, owing to the higher readership of the Bengali language newspapers, there is an existing dilemma if the ruling party actors in fact take the English newspapers seriously because, as he asserts, they play a limited role in the creating opinions. This seems to be in contradiction with the survey findings, from the state of Tripura where students in higher educational institutions seem to read more English newspapers in comparison to news published by the language press. While the data presented in the annexures is a composite representation of all the states selected for the study, in Tripura, the readership of the English language publications among the respondents surveyed was significantly higher; with 51.3% indicating preference for the English language and another 41% indicating preference for both English and local languages. While this finding cannot be an indicator of the capacity that the English print media has, in fomenting particular ideas and opinions, students do act as opinion leaders, being experts in the domains of their study, the sample having been selected accordingly and as described in section 4.5. The editor had articulated,

“In Bengali newspapers, maybe there are some influences, in electronic media, maybe there are some influences but as far as English newspapers are concerned as has been mentioned by the other two editors also, we do not really come under that much influence. In fact, I am not sure if they take us very seriously or not because we do not really create any opinion.”

Again, a point of view that emerged in another interview was the lack of ethical foundations among certain media houses in the state of Tripura. While the precarious situation of the remuneration of media professionals is a matter of concern; another effect that the same has is a deterioration in the quality of journalistic practice which is completely dependent to the



source that would pay them and therefore susceptible to external influences; it could change the course of the discourse.

“The media in Tripura must be interested in money – it is a ‘have to’ scenario and they must depend on it and this is the reason why they tend to support the party that is in power. It is not about the party that is in power- it is about the party that pays.”

While saying that media professionals have a tendency to run after sources of revenue, might be a very superficial comment to make, it does open doors to pursuits that would entail a thorough understanding of the motivations of journalists to compromise on the quality of their journalistic practice; this would in fact have policy implications.

#### **5.2.6. Polarisation of Print Media Discourse**

The state of Tripura, as has been discussed, is unique with reference to the shift in the political discourse in the state. While one could look at this phenomenon in line with the assertion of the politics of Hindu nationalism; the rise of the BJP at the centre and subsequently in Tripura in the year 2018; but informed opinions in Tripura along with electoral circumstances in the 2023 state assembly elections might indicate otherwise; the rise of the Tripura Motha. The polarisation of the public discourse on religious lines, as stated by an interviewee, was not as plausible as it had been in other parts of the country. While the BJP did dislodge the long reigning left-front government but the effect of religious polarisation on the outcome of the assembly election results of 2018 and then again in 2023 was, as much as the anti-incumbency sentiment against the left front.

It would be worthy, in this context, to note that the lead up to the assembly elections, most importantly in 2018 and then again in 2023, did not have any recorded instances of religious violence. In fact, since 1947 and up until 2021, there were no reported incidents of violence on Hindu-Muslim lines, with conflict being limited to only tribal versus non-tribal (Samrat X, 2021); autochthonous versus non-autochthonous. It was only in 2021 that there were reported incidents of an outbreak of violence that led to the destruction of mosques and this was fuelled by communal incidents which had taken place in neighbouring Bangladesh (Chakrabarti, 2021).

As such Tripura has seen conflict in relation to an existing dichotomy between the tribal versus the non-tribals which is endorsed by various interest groups who have also been

known to contest elections. In this context ‘tribals’ would mean the indigenous communities in Tripura who see themselves as ‘autochthonous’ to the land and the ‘non-tribals’ who are primarily Bengalis and have a history of migration from the plains adjoining the hills of Tripura, although some of the ‘non-tribals,’ are also ‘autochthonous’ to the land yet the perception of being a ‘non-autochthonous’ group overshadows the few who should also be considered natives to the land. As has been discussed, the problem could be triangulated to the complexities that the partition of India brought with it, the migration of people being only the tip of the iceberg. The economic and cultural links that the partition severed have been the prominent reasons for the existing conflicts in the state of Tripura. Considering these existing conflicts various interest groups perceive a need for consolidation and the vociferous proliferation of interests by political as well as other means. With reference to the propagation of political interests, the existence of ‘Amra Bangali’ and the ‘Tripura Motha,’ in the state of Tripura, with the ideas they espouse, of separate homelands for the respective communities that they represent (Colney, 2021; Roy B. , 2008) indicate a clear divide that exists on lines of the ‘identities’ they champion.

With reference to the print media in Tripura, there seems to be a perception among the academics and editors of newspapers, interviewed for the study, who believe that the ethnic polarisation is not as evident in the print media discourse but as discussed in section 5.2.1 Representation and Proliferation of Political Interests in Tripura, the print media in Tripura is primarily owned by the ‘non-tribals’ which creates scope for sidelining the opinions of interest groups that espouse the interests of the perceived ‘autochthonous’ identities, in this case tribal communities. As such it is only plausible that the existing ethnic divide is not visible in the media discourse. However, the editor mentions,

“...there is very little ethnic divide when it comes to reportage. In terms of religious divide, I would also say that there is very little religious divide that exists primarily because Tripura has very limited number of Muslims, the percentage of Muslims is very less. The Muslims are always an oppressive majority and a turbulent minority.”

The interviewee, in his articulation, mentions that there is limited polarisation on religious lines in the print media in Tripura primarily because Tripura has few Muslims which reduces the scope of conflict as they are not perceived as a threat as such, although he does make a passing note of the Muslims being a turbulent minority. While the statement itself seems to

be a generalisation drawn out of existing perceived realities, there might be a fault line that might be surfacing here. Likewise, a connect between Christianity and ethnic polarisation was also drawn by another interviewee who pointed out, "... due to the influence of the church through English education, the sentiment among the tribals, is polarisation on ethnic lines." While this might seem to be a discursive utterance, that connects English education to Christianity and as such to ethnic polarisation, it does hint towards an attempt to foment the creation of a unified identity in the face of an existing hegemonic cultural identity, which is the identity of the perceived non-autochthonous, the 'non-tribals.' The case of the creation of the Mizo identity, comes to mind here, in which Pachau (2014) delineates the nature Mizo identity while associating it with vernacular Christian forms; while this is a case of a different community in another state, outside the purview of this study; it is nonetheless an critical point of reference to contextualise the case of Tripura, which is in a phase of identity formation. It would be interesting here, to note that Tripura did have a history of Christian Militantism in the form of the National Liberation Front of Tripura that was involved in a violent struggle against primarily the Bengali Hindus (Jeroen Adam, 2007).

Another interviewee, enunciated that it would be a 'drastic' statement to call the media biased and that, there is indeed a conscious attempt to maintain a balance in the reportage but he also did not dismiss the influence of commercial elements in inducing a particular narrative; also been discussed in section 5.2.4 on Advertising Revenue and Media Discourse; in the state of Tripura.

"... it would be a very drastic statement to say that they are biased. I believe that there is still a semblance of balance. If you look at it from purely a commercial point of view then yes there can be a tendency for newspapers to be influenced."

Another point of view that emerged through the interviews was about the ownership pattern of the newspapers in the state of Tripura. While a dominance of 'non-autochthonous' groups with reference to ownership of newspapers have been discussed in section 5.2.1 viz. Representation and Proliferation of Political Interests in Tripura, there are a few publications that are owned by politicians of the previous dispensation, that was in power prior to the rise of the BJP in Tripura making it susceptible to; as has been recorded by Herman and Chomsky (1994); the influences of the politico-economic factors that might influence the discourse. He goes on to also state that 'Danik Sambad,' is relatively free from influences

induced by politico-economic factors, owing to size of the organisation and its potential to generate substantial revenue on its own.

“... some newspapers like Desher Katha are owned by the left leaning politicians – the CPI(M) to be precise and if you look at Sonder Potrika – it stands somewhere in between but it also goes for where it sees its benefit and ‘Dainik Sambad’ – it is a big media house so it has its own stand.”

The role of ‘Daily Desher Katha’<sup>43</sup> was highlighted by another interviewee, who pointed out that ‘Daily Desher Katha,’ being published by the state committee of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) has its discourse streamlined in a particular way. Likewise Headlines Tripura, which is an electronic media outlet, does tend to glorify certain politicians. Even so, he maintained that newspapers in Tripura do not have the tendency to promote a respective political party.

“I do not think any newspaper in Tripura is strongly committed to one political party. There is indeed Desher Katha and Headlines Tripura but Headlines Tripura never speaks about religion. Headlines Tripura has generally tried to glorify individual politicians but as a group, Tripura is a small state which is not that much polarised.”

### **5.2.7. Regionalism and the Media in Tripura**

A perspective that evolved out of the discussions with individuals in relation to this study was a dichotomy with reference to the readership of English newspapers. An editor who was interviewed in this regard pointed out that, although Bengali newspapers are more eminent in the creation of public opinion, English newspapers do enjoy higher readership in the areas that are demographically dominated by the ‘tribals’ which in this case would mean, the perceived ‘autochthones’ of Tripura. He notes,

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<sup>43</sup> During the time of the fieldwork for this study, ‘Daily Desher Katha,’ the mouthpiece of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) had, had its registration by the Registrar for Newspaper in India, on flimsy grounds and this was also protested by the Editors’ Guild. While this is a very small incidence of personal observation, it is nonetheless, noteworthy as it indicates a repressive measure taken by the Ideological State Apparatus against a media organisation that they saw, opposed to their ideas. Likewise, when the advertising rates were collected from the Department of Information and Cultural Affairs, it had the name ‘Daily Desher Katha’ struck out from the list by with ink; document provided in annexure. The policy document was collected sometime in late October in 2018 and the BJP had come to power in Tripura in the beginning of March of 2018.

“Public opinion is made mostly by Bengali newspapers. The thing about English newspapers is that – I can say that especially for my newspaper that we are very popular in tribal areas.”

As has been discussed in the previous section, the association with English language and together with-it Christianity, among the ‘tribal’ groups seems to indicate a creation of a unified identity that would act as a push factor against the assertion of the Bengali language and culture through media that is again primarily owned by the Bengalis, who are seen as a ‘non-autochthonous’ group. The ownership pattern which is listed as a filter in the works of Herman and Chomsky’s propaganda model (1994) has been known to exercise considerable influence on the discourse emanating out of the media houses. While the English media is also primarily dominated by the ‘non-autochthones,’ the association of the ‘autochthones’ with the English language press seems to be a result of the English education that has proliferated in the areas that are demographically dominated primarily by the ‘tribal’ groups. As such an interviewee articulates,

“... the next generation tribal boys and girls who are mostly into the western culture, they prefer English newspaper. Most of them are also educated in English medium schools ... If you go to Jampui hills, you will find a huge readership base for the Tripura Times.”

### **5.3. BJP and its Sikkim Conundrum**

Sikkim is the smallest; with an area of 7092 square kilometres (Sikkim Biodiversity Board, 2015; Singh & Singha, 2016, p. 226); and yet one of the most peaceful states among the collective viz. Northeast India (Chettri & McDuie-Ra, 2018; Singh & Singha, 2016, p. 242). Sikkim, until 1973; when India took control of it after riots against the Chogyal<sup>44</sup> ensued; was an independent kingdom ruled by the Namgyal dynasty that had been ruling the territories of the kingdom since 1642; on 26<sup>th</sup> April, 1975 it was constituted as the twenty second state of the Indian union through a referendum that resulted in a merger (Pradhan, 2008, p. xxviii). While Sikkim was territorially integrated to India, the nuances of India’s

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<sup>44</sup> Chogyal is a title used by the former monarchs of Sikkim who belonged to the Namgyal dynasty and ruled Sikkim from 1642-1973.

democracy; embedded in its political culture; was alien for a population that had been missing such an experience for all the time they had known in their recent existence<sup>45</sup>.

Sikkim had received guarantees of sovereignty from the British; same transferred to India after its independence (Ram, 1974) and hence been ruled by a native king; unlike other parts of India which had seen numerous rulers come and go, mostly imperialists. In essence, the subject of Sikkim<sup>46</sup> and the citizen of India had barely anything in common and this, even now, has been manifesting in the form of a dichotomy of the insider versus outsider. However, unlike most other states of the Northeast; where the insider-outsider dichotomy is a norm; that have seen militancy at some point in the history of their existence, Sikkim has been rather peaceful (Singh & Singha, 2016, p. 242). That said, Sikkim too has its own autochthonous versus non-autochthonous discourse; mostly in the context of extending state benefits to the autochthonous groups; the constituents of which would inadvertently evolve, as other groups aspire to become parts of it (Singh & Singha, 2016, p. 240).

Sikkim's merger with India had been conditional to the extension of certain special provisions; Article 371F, which allowed autochthonous groups generally understood to be the Bhutia, Lepcha and Limbu communities (Chakraborty & Chakma, 2016); to Sikkim with the intention to protect; along with the powers over the administration through reservation; their land and resources from others, perceived as the non-autochthonous encroachers (Singh & Singha, 2016, pp. 237-241); but the implementation of these was more problematic than pragmatic, subject to legal challenges from time to time<sup>47</sup>. An interviewee in this context had mentioned,

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<sup>45</sup> From an interview transcript conducted with a faculty of the Department of Political Science, Sikkim University.

<sup>46</sup> As per judgement in case (State Of Sikkim vs Surendra Prasad Sharma, 1994), passed on 19 April, 1994, a Sikkim Subject is "... every person domiciled in the territory of Sikkim immediately before the commencement of the said Regulations (Sikkim Subjects Regulations, 1961), viz. 3<sup>rd</sup> July 1961 was declared to be a Sikkim subject". As per Sikkim Subjects Regulations (1961), a Sikkim Subject is one who is – (a) Must have been born or ordinarily resident prior to the law. (b) Must have been ordinarily resident for a period of fifteen years. (c) Is the wife or minor child of such a person. (d) Has ancestors who were Sikkim Subjects prior to 1850. (e) A foreign woman married to a Sikkim Subject. (f) Has made an application for naturalisation to the Chogyal.

<sup>47</sup> For instance, the legal challenges posed by (R.C. Poudyal And Anr. Etc. Etc vs Union Of India And Ors. Etc. Etc, 1993) to reservation of the Bhutia Lepcha communities and the allocation of an exclusive seat for the Sangha electorate, in the Legislative Assembly of Sikkim.

“In Sikkim two seats are reserved for the Bhutia-Lepcha community. One is for the Sangha – the monks. This was challenged in the Supreme court on the ground that it is unconstitutional but they lost the case.”

The existence of the 371F, therefore, has protected Sikkim from outside influences that seek to alter its underlying distinct identity and as has been put out by another interviewee; the public seems to be aware of it; responding with electoral verdicts against forces that seek to alter this situation. He notes,

“The provisions of 371F that exist for Sikkim, the Centre will not encroach on it. The people are not out on the streets, yet, because of such assurances. If tomorrow the central government signals on implementing such a regulation the outcomes might be detrimental. In 1994 when the Bhandari government fell in Sikkim, it was because of income tax exemptions being provided to tribal communities like the Lepcha and the Bhutia and not the Nepalis who constitute the majority in Sikkim.”

This section, in the subsections that will follow, attempts to contextualise Sikkim’s preference for regional parties, that espouse regional interests; some of these interests also rooted in more economic than identity considerations; with its attempt to preserve its distinct identity in the backdrop of the polarising rhetoric of Hindu nationalism, which, the researcher argues, has had the effect of further deepening already brewing divides.

### **5.3.1. Representation and Proliferation of Political Interests in Sikkim**

Sikkim’s political history, post its merger with India; and as is also evident from an official description of the Assemblies since elections were conducted (Department of Information and Technology, Government of Sikkim, 2023); has seen leaders that have been in power for multiple terms, sometimes irrespective of party affiliation. Here it would be noteworthy to point out that, the first elected leader of Sikkim; Nar Bahadur Bhandari, elected to office for the first time in the year 1979 (Press Trust of India, 2016); stayed in power; after his second election to office; from 1985 to 1994; serving as a member of the Indian Parliament for a brief period in 1984, as an independent<sup>48</sup>, when B.B. Gurung had taken over from him; simultaneously heading the Sikkim Janata Parishad which was later dissolved to form the

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<sup>48</sup> Not affiliated to any political party.

Sikkim Sangram Parishad, henceforth SSP. Sikkim Democratic front; henceforth SDF; under Pawan Kumar Chamling dislodged the SSP, to be elected as the Chief Minister of Sikkim and stayed in power until 2019 when he was unseated by Prem Singh Tamang aka PS Golay of the Sikkim Krantikari Morcha (SKM); a party that formed as an outcome of a picnic in 2009 in which Golay was also present; founded on February 4<sup>th</sup> 2013 (Bhutia, 2022; NEA News Service, 2021); who has been in power ever since. An important inference that could be drawn from this political history of Sikkim is that, it has a preference for regional parties; SSP, SDF and SKM (Election Department Office of the Chief Electoral Officer Sikkim, 2023; Gurung, 2014); that espouse regional interests. In this regard, an interviewee who had been interviewed for this study, noted,

“Sikkim has gone through a process of territorial integration as you know, but not really integration of that (Indian) political process or that political culture. So, in that sense it remains a sanctuary where the politics is determined by some kind of insider-outsider dichotomy... there are some tax exemptions for people of CoI<sup>49</sup> origins”

While the interviewee indicated towards the existence of an autochthonous versus non-autochthonous discourse, there was also limited mention of the benefits that are enjoyed by the residents of Sikkim, who are holders of the Certificate of Identity, henceforth CoI. While CoI is offered to residents of Sikkim as per provisions of the Sikkim Citizenship order of 1975, Sikkim subjects are governed by the 1961 regulations of the same name. The difference is in the nuances of the respective acts and what their implementation entails; later generations of the holders of CoI would no longer be recognised as Sikkimese and therefore not enjoy the state benefits that their forefathers were promised in the merger agreement; as the Sikkim subject register is no longer being updated (Eden, 2015). The implementation of this anomaly was put on hold by legal recourse provided through contestation in the court of law; however, the Supreme Court observed that the Sikkimese Nepali<sup>50</sup> were immigrants which again triggered protests in the state of Sikkim (Khan, 2023). As evident from the discourse on the new Income Tax laws; that had extended tax benefits to the ‘Sikkimese,’ a collective identity different from ‘Sikkim subjects’ and ‘Certificate of

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<sup>49</sup> The Certificate of Identity is a legal document equivalent to the domicile certificates that are issued in other states of India. CoI is necessary to avail various benefits extended by the state of Sikkim within its jurisdiction.

<sup>50</sup> The Nepalis are an ethnic community that are spread across the Himalayan ranges and while they are predominantly residents of Nepal, there is considerable population who are Indian citizens.



Identity’ holders (Press Trust of India, 2023); identity assertions in the state could be situated in this dichotomy, ‘Sikkim subject’ versus the others. As evident, there seems to be a brewing divide in the context of the Sikkimese Nepalis and other Nepalis; the undercurrent among the other communities, viz. Bhutia and Lepcha, is that while the Sikkimese Nepalis are part and parcel of the ‘Sikkimese’ identity, the other Nepalis are not<sup>51</sup>. In his articulation about the identity discourse on the same, the interviewee noted,

“If you trace the history of everyone, somebody has come from Darjeeling, somebody has come from Kalimpong, somebody has come from Siliguri. Though, now there is a conscious process of weeding out these as outsider but they did have something important to contribute – which now, I would say that there is collective amnesia and so people keep forgetting.”

The BJP, on its own, has not been able to proliferate; they have never been elected to power but by other means they have managed to; yet they have been able to appropriate regime change marked by the members of Legislative Assembly in Sikkim switching over to the BJP from the SDF. The political space in Sikkim had been, for a very long time, dominated by the Sikkim Democratic Front (SDF) which has come to power in the year 1994 with Pawan Chamling as the Chief Minister and won consecutive elections till 2019 when it lost to the Sikkim Krantikari Morcha (SKM). While in the 2019 Assembly Elections in Sikkim, SDF had won 15 of the 32 seats, making it the opposition at the time, 10 moved over to the BJP, while 2 others to the SKM and 2 others had to vacate their seats for other reasons making Pawan Chamling, who is also the leader of the SDF, the only member of the SDF to be part of the Legislative Assembly (Hindustan Times Correspondents, 2019). While the reasons for the post-election shuffle, arising out of the dissident tendencies, was not particularly clear, in the words of the editor of an eminent English daily in Sikkim, “...BJP is the bigger ‘gunda’<sup>52</sup> in the block and hence this switch happened.” With reference to the elections to the Lower House of the Indian Parliament, the Lok Sabha, the SKM came out as victorious on the only seat that has been allocated to the State of Sikkim.

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<sup>51</sup> This is from conversations in the field about existing conflicts between the three major communities and while the interview protocol led to conversations on this inter-community conflict, the data was not thematically codified towards documenting this as it is outside the purview of the objectives of the study. However, at this instance, the researcher found it imperative to articulate this observation.

<sup>52</sup> A colloquial term in Hindi, for a goon.

### 5.3.2. Overview of Print Media in Sikkim

As per the Press in India report (Registrar of Newspapers for India, 2020-21), the total number of registered publications in Sikkim is 120 of which only 17 publications filed their annual statements. Of these 120 publications, there are 23 dailies, 2 bi/ tri- weeklies, 81 weeklies, 1 fortnightly, 6 monthlies, 3 quarterlies and 4 other periodicities.

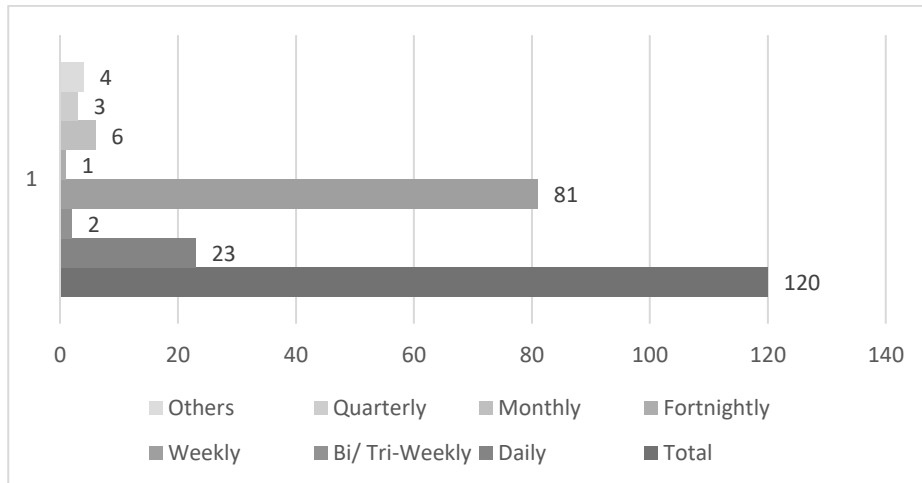


Figure 15: Registered publications in Sikkim

Source: Data from RNI, Illustrated by researcher

Of the 17 publications that filed their annual statements 15 were dailies and 2 weeklies. The total circulation of all publications that filed their annual statements in the state of Sikkim is 2,46,437 which constitutes 2,44,087 for dailies and 2350 for weeklies. Sikkim Express, an English daily, headquartered in Gangtok, with a total claimed circulation of 37,492 copies per publishing day is the highest circulated newspaper of Sikkim. With reference to the English Press, of the 25 registered publications, 10 were dailies, 6 weeklies, 1 fortnightly, 3 monthlies, 3 quarterlies and 2 other periodicities. 5 of the 25 registered publications filed their annual statements, which were all dailies. The total circulation of the English dailies is 92,222.

The interviewees who had been interviewed for this study in the state of Sikkim, highlighted certain unique features of the print media in the state. As has been highlighted in the previous section 5.3.1 on Representation and Proliferation of Political Interests in Sikkim, the residents of Sikkim who hold the Certificate of Identification, owing to their privileged access to benefits extended by the state, do not prefer a career in Journalism, owing to the lack of attractive incentives that pursuing other avenues would entail.

“...For journalism, the people who are locals from here, CoI holders do not prefer it because of low salary. This industry is not robust and the incentives are not incremental in nature – this profession in Sikkim.”

Consequently, this also influences the ownership pattern in the print media of Sikkim. The major newspapers are owned and run by individuals who are not native to Sikkim and irrespective of the duration of their residency, are not eligible for certain benefits extended by the state, which has the effect of the creation of a dichotomy with reference to the interests that the autochthonous and non-autochthonous groups espouse. Interviewees who were interviewed for this study spoke of distinct newspapers and the ownership pattern.

“... it is worthwhile to note that since 70s it is mostly outsiders who have come to Sikkim and engaged in this profession ... the owner of Sikkim Express... primarily because there are no people from Sikkim who want to engage in journalism ... the working population is from outside the state. Another example of this would be Hamro Prajashakti’s Anjan Upadhyay – even he came here from Assam ...”

On similar lines, another interviewee echoed analogous views, while also adding about the political affiliation of the editor of Hamro Prajashakti. However, the claims could not be independently verified.

“... are privately held by individuals and yes, given the nature of ownership. For instance, Sikkim Express and other newspapers are second generation – Amit Patro, his father was also a journalist, who had come to Sikkim. Prajashakti, which is a Nepali newspaper run by Anjan Upadhyay, who is a journalist but came to Sikkim as a Communist party worker – he is a commie. Although his paper is not left-leaning. He is a journalist by training and the publisher now.”

In the brief transcriptions above, the newspapers that the interviewees mentioned were Sikkim Express; English daily; and Hamro Prajashakti; Nepali daily; which are among the highest circulated newspapers in the state of Sikkim. However, ‘Hamro Prajashakti’ was being paid higher advertising rates by the erstwhile Directorate of Advertising and Visual Publicity; and now by the Central Bureau of Communication than the amount paid to Sikkim Express (Central Bureau of Communication, 2021). This, at the same time when Hamro Prajashakti was being denied advertisements by the SDF government. The higher rates

indicate a better position being attributed to the respective newspapers; reasons could vary. Another detail that emerged from the interviews was that the ownership of the print media is primarily individual with only a few owned by organisations.

“Ownership is largely individual. If you look at Anjan Upadhyay’s newspaper, he owns it. If you look at Sikkim Express, Amit Patra and his family owns it. With reference to Summit Times, Pema does not own it ... There is also a magazine called Talk Sikkim, owned by an individual. Only Sikkim Herald is owned by DIPR and they publish it every month.”

The Government of Sikkim publishes the Sikkim Herald which is published bi-weekly; it is a mouthpiece of the Government of Sikkim (Government of Sikkim, 2023). As revealed in Jeffrey’s (1993) analysis of the Hindi print media in India, newspapers are generally driven by the need to generate revenue; when the language of the publication caters to a greater percentage of the population in a language they are proficient in, the circulation is higher which leads to better advertising rates, thereby enhanced profits; but this is not the case with Sikkim Herald which publishes in languages like Limbu, Rai etc. indicating the intent which is either inclusivity or the state’s projection of its underlying identifying character.

Although Sikkim is one of the most peaceful states in the Northeast, it has had its fair share of violence that was used to threaten journalists who had been reporting against the erstwhile SDF government and evidently there was a spat between the media organisation and the incumbent government. There is though, an underlying perspective in this regard; SDF espoused the rights of the autochthonous communities of Sikkim and their leader; even after being relegated to the opposition; speaks of the alienation of the rights of the Bhutia-Lepcha community; but the SKM, after the Supreme Court recognised the Sikkimese Nepalis as immigrants, came out in protest, against the observation, hinting at the interests that they espoused. The editor of Hamro Prajashakti, with his origins in Assam might have been at the receiving end of an insider-outsider discourse, not because it was consciously done but because the reportage of his paper favoured the SKM, which has been known to champion the rights of all of Sikkim’s residents, including the Nepalis. The attack on the Hamro Prajashakti and Sikkim Express; both run by individuals having origins outside Sikkim; was described by an interviewee as under:

“... there was a total of three attacks on journalists. A journalist of Hamro Prajashakti was attacked and the office was attacked. The printing press of

Sikkim Express was also attacked ... Some of these attacks though, were more on a personal level. There was some news published about some panchayat and this resulted in the attacks.”

The interviewee goes on to articulate that the perpetrators of the violence were prosecuted and this does indicate that the incumbent government was steadfast in its action against miscreants but it does not explain the prejudice against Hamro Prajashakti in terms of advertising with them. As an interviewee points out,

“At that time, it was not the entire political party that came after them but only the respective person against whom the report was published. The ruling party at the time shrugged off the responsibility for the action by saying that the attacking person was not a member of their party. Even in the case of the Sikkim Express incident, it was the same thing. The attackers were convicted and punished too but yes there is one thing that needs to be noted here ... the attack that happened at the office of the Prajashakti, the perpetrators came wearing masks and it is an open secret who had done that attack.”

### **5.3.3. Representation of various actors in ‘Sikkim Express’**

Figure 16: Representation of actors in Sikkim Express, indicates the percentage of direct quotes from individuals who belonged to ruling party or its allies; was 32.42%; stated as the pro-ruling party actors. The percentage of indirect quotations was 39.06%. Likewise, for the opposition party actors, the percentage of direct quotes was 17.97% and indirect quotes was 10.55%. The analysis of the sources in the content published on Sikkim Express indicate that number of quotations that were procured from the actors that belonged to the ruling party were higher than the opposition party actors; with higher percentage of direct quotes. As is the case with other states that are part of the investigation, there is a considerable higher representation of the ruling party actors in the print media. A perspective; from the interviews; that emerged in this regard was the use of press releases for writing the news reports, “... but if you look at the sources of the news, these are all press release based, largely. So, a reporter going out and covering the news, the proportion is very less.” This is again, as Herman and Chomsky (1994, p. 19) suggest a reliance on sources that are part of the power elite, ensuring perceived objectivity and credibility; avoiding litigation; without investment in meticulous research, thereby maximising profit. The aim therefore, as also suggested by Jeffrey (1993); in the context of the language press in India, he noted “...

though most owners will proclaim their desire to serve the public, their main goals are power and profit”; is to maximise the revenue of the newspaper.

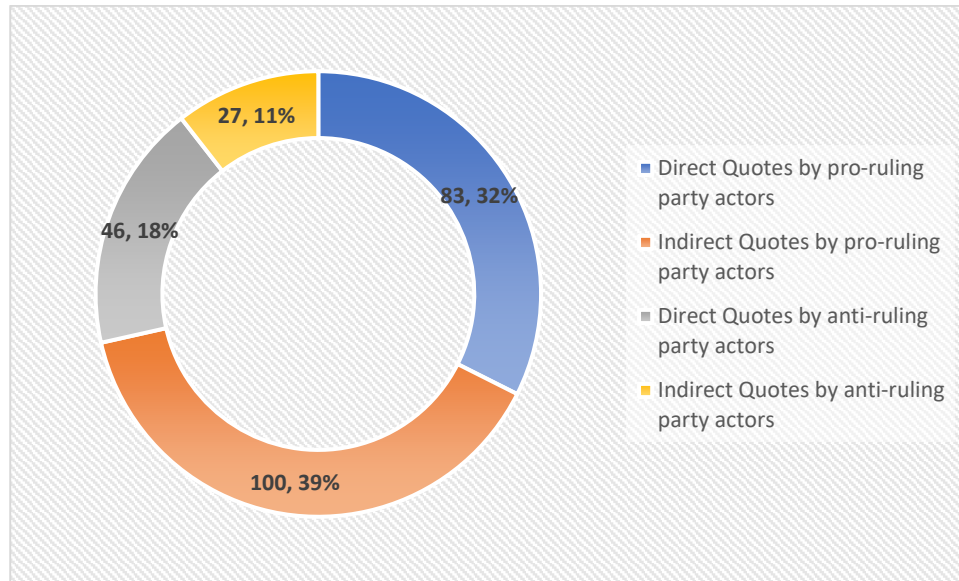


Figure 16: Representation of actors in Sikkim Express

Source: Data from RNI, illustrated by Researcher

While press releases do entail accurate dissemination of information, there is also a problem that is a consequence of the same viz. higher representation of the Government in the news reports and as such is also evident from the analysis of the sources of content in the news reports, during the duration that was the reference for this study. There is also a lack of investigative journalism as a result of limitations placed by funds that prevents reporters from covering news in person, as such has also emerged from the interviews conducted for this study. These are all factors that have been suggested by Herman and Chomsky (1994) in their media filters; particularly sourcing the Mass-Media news; and thereby also manufacturing consent for the government.

#### 5.3.4. Advertising Revenue and Media Discourse

An editor who was interviewed in this regard pointed out that Sikkim is a state that does not have very big organisations that would be able to provide advertisements as an alternative to the larger concentration of government advertisements. This, therefore puts the print media in Sikkim in a ‘uncomfortable space.’

“... with reference to any big media organisation, their major advertising revenue is from the private sector. It is only the small newspapers that must be totally dependent on the Government advertisements ... For the big media

houses, the government advertising revenue cannot dictate their terms... Media in Sikkim does not really have the private industry to support it. This puts the media in Sikkim in an uncomfortable space”

Consequently, in the state of Sikkim, the Government being a major funder, through its advertisements, ensures the viability of publishing newspapers. The survival of the print media, therefore, is based on the issuance of government advertisements. As such newspapers do not go to the extent of vehemently criticising the government even if there is ground for such criticism.

“... a huge number of newspapers, survival is based, not on circulation but totally on government advertisements ... in such situations, they cannot afford to go against the government.”

Anecdotal evidence in this regard was provided by another interviewee who spoke about ‘Hamro Prajashakti’ which is among the newspapers with higher circulation relative to most other newspapers in the Sikkim and enjoys a rather high rate per column centimetre for advertisements that are published on the newspapers, as per data from the Central Bureau of Communication, enclosed in the relevant Annexures in this thesis and as also described in a quotation from the interview transcription.

“Hamro Prajashakti, ... started in the year 2004. Till the SKM government came to power, they had never received any advertising revenue from the state government ... They had been blacklisted because they used to publish reports which were anti-establishment and because they used to give coverage to the opposition. This was a paper which I would say, was totally against the government but in terms of business, the DAVP, which is controlled by the Central Government would give them advertisements and a few private entities. They used to have one of the highest circulations in the market, people used to read it.”

Here, it would be interesting to note that the Sikkim Democratic Front (SDF) used to be a member of the North Eastern Democratic Alliance (NEDA), led by the BJP, since 2016 and even so central agencies were providing advertising funds to the local media houses in Sikkim, irrespective of party affiliation. While this act defies existing literature that reiterates the role of politico-economic factors in influencing the media discourse – in this case the plausible explanation for the continued funding to ‘Hamro Prajashakti’ could be a result of

the limited role that local considerations play in influencing the decision making in the central agencies with reference to the distribution of advertisements. Although, the BJP did align with the Sikkim Krantikari Morcha eventually to become part of the ruling alliance. As for the opposition, only a solitary SDF member, Pawan Chamling, who was also the longest reigning former Chief Minister, was part of it and this after 10 members of the SDF quit the party to join the BJP, earlier, which had made the BJP the single largest party in the opposition without having to contest any election (Hindustan Times Correspondents, 2019).

Another interviewee who was interviewed for this study did point out that, owing to the long term that the SDF government being in power from 1994 to 2019, under Pawan Chamling, the media scene in Sikkim had become rather partisan with certain publications being entirely pro-government while others being anti-government with anti-government publications being completely cut-off from the government advertisement roster. This, again fits with the ideas of Herman and Chomsky's (1994) propaganda model that outlines the effects of advertising revenue on the discourse in the media. In this context, the interviewee's articulation is as under:

“In the previous regime's time, yes, there were clearly pro-establishment and anti-establishment publications. They did not care for the value or authenticity of the news. The anti-establishment newspapers were completely denied any advertisements. They were completely cut-off from the government advertisement roster.”

In the same context, an interviewee also listed two incidents of violence against respective media houses which had taken place during the tenure of the SDF government as a measure to discourage reporters from publishing news against its incumbent members in the government.

“From 1994 till up to 2015, I think there were at least two incidents when major newspapers were attacked – which is still not okay but comparatively better. But yes, they would use everything else right because they would deny you advertisements and there would be defamation cases – they are within their rights to fight court cases.”

Another perspective that emerged from another interview sheds light on the delay in payments from the government agencies for the advertisements that the newspapers publish. While it is not legally mandatory for newspapers to publish government advertisements,



they continue to be one of the only sources of revenue for smaller newspapers but owing to the delay in payments for the advertisements, several newspapers go out of business. An interviewee mentioned of the case of Sikkim Now, a newspaper that had to be shut down owing to recurrent losses induced by delay in payments that was owed by government agencies. The editor of an eminent newspaper who was the founder of the newspaper; Sikkim Now; that had shut down, expressing his predicament stated,

“Sikkim Now had to be shut down because of the lack of money and one of the major reasons was government advertisements – the money was not coming in. The private advertisements were not coming in and the bottom fell out.”

Election time, as mentioned by an interviewee, was one of the best times for generating advertising revenue owing to the upfront payments that newspapers receive to publish their advertisements. Here, the dichotomy between the revenue generated through advertisements from respective political parties and the advertisements from the government apparatus is visible. While the political parties, in this case, are competing for space, the advertisements from the government apparatus are not; they are more sustaining over a longer period which gives them more leverage to the extent of even fixing rates beforehand which might not be possible otherwise. Also, the problem of delayed payments, has been highlighted, in the case of advertisements from the government apparatus.

“Election time was good in this regard because political parties were advertising so they were paying upfront. If you again looking at numbers, I am sure the government advertisements with all the tender notices that they must put out will be more than private advertising but this just on your account books and the government does not pay on time. You have bills stuck for years at end and the files go missing. We are talking about small bills like 15000 and all - this all adds up. So, if you look at the number of ads a newspaper gets – it might seem like a lot and if you calculate the column centimetres – you would think that the government is spending a huge amount of money but the government is not actually spending any money because they do not really pay on time.”

In all the comments that have been mentioned above, the intent of running the newspaper seems to be revenue driven which is in consonance with Jeffrey’s (1993) finding in the same

context in a different setting. While profit is essential for running an enterprise, in places where there is a paucity of sources of revenue, the pro-active involvement of the government apparatus would encourage the survivability of smaller news organisations, which tend to be the voice of smaller communities.

### **5.3.5. Regionalism and the Print Media in Sikkim**

Sikkim, as against the nature of politics in the other Northeastern states, does not have an acute ethnic divide among the dominant communities that inhabit the state; while it does not manifest in the form of physical acts of violence, nonetheless it does exist. An academic, who was interviewed in the state of Sikkim, in this regard noted,

“... there is no inter-community conflict that exists, but yes in certain places and this is because of the Chogyal regime which lasted 333 years; so, their community became an elite community and that is the case even now, economically. They also enjoy the ‘tribal’ status and the facilities that come along with it. Other communities like the Bhutias have access to reservation, based on community, even in the assembly ... Also, the community that stayed in power for 333 years, they insist that the Nepali community, are from Nepal. They are migrants and they are ruling over us. These are feelings that exist but this is not visible on the surface. I like to refer to this as pedestrian cynicism but it does burst out at times.”

While there is an existing autochthonous versus non-autochthonous discourse and the crux of the problem lies with the idea of defining the ‘Sikkimese identity,’ which allows for preferential treatment of the autochthonous groups with reference to the access to resources; there is enough ambiguity in the policy which in turn does not allow for the consolidation of interest groups which would otherwise espouse ethnocentric positions<sup>53</sup>. There is although simmering discord among certain sections about the preferential treatment of other groups. In recent times this discord became evident from violence that ensued after the Supreme Court had instructed the Government of India at the Centre to modify the definition of ‘Sikkimese’ in Section 10 (26AAA) of the Income Tax Act of 1961 to extend tax

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<sup>53</sup> Ethnocentric positions in this context entails sub-nationalistic aspirations which might manifest as violent struggles for a separate national identity, as had been and to certain extent is, the case with the other states of the Northeast like Assam, Nagaland, etc. that have ongoing insurgencies that seek an independent national identity, different from the Indian national identity.

exemptions to all Indian citizens domiciled in Sikkim on or before the merger date of April 26, 1975. While the Government of Sikkim had already filed a review of the order; while also protesting against observations made by the particular Court about Sikkimese Nepalis being immigrants; there were isolated incidents of documented violence reported in Sikkim in January 2023 (Press Trust of India, 2023) to which the former chief minister of Sikkim reacted lamenting that Sikkim had become the most ‘unpeaceful’ state (Sikkim Express, 2023). While this dichotomy in discourse does exist, the print media in Sikkim has been able to avoid ‘nativist’ discourse in their publications, as has been highlighted by an interviewee, who also points out that the discourse in the print media of Assam, has the problem of toeing on the lines of nativism<sup>54</sup>.

“...Assam Newspapers are very in your face – ‘Assamese’ need to be protected, almost xenophobia right. They almost take that kind of a position, so you do not see that much in Sikkim. If you look at some of the older newspapers which were run by locals, there we see a very strong slant towards local protection and things like that. For instance, Sikkim Observer, by Jigme Kazi – the newspaper does not exist anymore but I think he has blog going in which he has a lot of the pieces that he has written. He is not xenophobic; I am not saying that but he very often returns to issues of local identity and local protection.”

In the above extract from the transcripts the interviewee makes an inadvertent link between ownership pattern and the discourse that is proliferated in the media outlets and this is very important to note; an advertent inference from this, therefore, would be that: in Sikkim, the lack in the number of newspapers owned by autochthonous communities has the effect of the lack of discourses that concern the autochthonous. While the insider-outsider dichotomy is a part of pedestrian discourse, it does not show up in media discourse; the reasons are in the ownership. This is again in line with the various theoretical frameworks that have been used in this study; in this case particularly Dijk’s (2008) ideological square as in section 1.5.

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<sup>54</sup> Nativism is a complex concept, particularly characteristic of societies that have faced some form of colonisation: it is essentially a desire to return to practices that would be considered indigenous. Nativism is unpopular in post-colonial societies because of two overarching reasons; possibility and desirability to return to native practices; in the context of the current usage of the term was necessary to contextualise ‘xenophobia;’ mentioned by the interviewee; as this is a concept that has not been described in the chapter delineating core concepts in this thesis.

### 5.3.6. Inclination of Political News

The interviews that were conducted for the study highlight that the lack of resources and revenue act as a limitation for covering the various dimensions that could otherwise develop as a result of thorough investigation and reportage. While the print media in Sikkim is not deliberately inclined to any political party and would therefore not go out of their way to report against a certain political dispensation like the way, for instance ‘The Telegraph’ does (Sharma A. , 2020), the print media in Sikkim does disproportionately rely on press releases and this results in a discourse that is pro-government. As has been described by an editor of an eminent newspaper in Sikkim,

“... I would say that they are pro-government to the extent that newspapers do not go out investigating stories against the government but that is not so much because of an editorial policy on behalf of the government but a sheer lack of resources... So, if you see that newspapers do not invest too much time or resources in picking up stories; yes; if there would have been instances when newspapers would have buried stories (with intent), critical of the government, I do not think so.”

An exception to the perceived neutrality of the newspapers in Sikkim, the case of ‘Hamro Prajashakti,’ as has also been discussed in section 5.3.4 Advertising Revenue and Media Discourse comes up. The newspaper had been at the receiving end of the erstwhile incumbent SDF Government, who had restricted advertising on the newspaper. ‘Hamro Prajashakti,’ had been writing against the incumbent SDF government and this was also influencing the other print media houses to write against the incumbent. As the ouster of the SDF came, as one of the interviewee notes, the print media had in fact played a role in preserving anti-incumbency against the SDF.

“... when Prajashakti started writing, the other newspapers followed suit too. So, collectively whatever the voices of the opposition were, you could get it only in the newspapers. There was zero dissent in the Assembly ... when Golay came out of jail or when he was put in jail were all covered by the local papers ... I would say that the newspapers were instrumental in preserving anti-incumbency.”

In this regard, the entry of the BJP to the politics of Sikkim which had happened after the State Assembly Elections in Sikkim, conducted on 11 April 2019, did not find space in the

news reportage of the time. The major issues were limited to the contest between the SDF and the SKM although the BJP managed to acquire power simply through the migration of ten; already elected; members to the party, as they became: the largest opposition party in Sikkim's Legislative Assembly (Pisharoty, 2019). BJP eventually shifted to aligning with the SKM and hence becoming part of the ruling coalition.

### **5.3.7. Polarisation and Print Media Discourse**

As is the case in most other states of the Northeast, the issues that relate to the autochthonous versus the non-autochthonous groups takes precedence over the issues of polarisation on religious lines and as such has also been noted by the interviewees, who were interviewed during the course of the conduct of this study. As has also been discussed in section 5.3.1 Representation and Proliferation of Political Interests in Sikkim, a major problem with reference to the print media in Sikkim the ownership pattern, in which the media is primarily held by individuals who do not belong to any of the autochthonous groups in Sikkim but this does not have an impact on the discourse that emerges out of the newspapers in Sikkim. Two opinions articulated in this context:

“I do not really notice any polarisation on religious lines ... It is kind of like the North-East where the local and the non-local issues are very pronounced and even that is not so much among the media as it is among the people ... in Sikkim, most of the journalists ... have been from the neighbouring areas, Kalimpong, Darjeeling etc... the local-non local divide that exists among the people, it is not projected as much in the newspapers.”

“Coming to the discourse in the media, I do not think the discourse has ever been about the entry of Hindutva ... Even if the BJP has presence in some way today, in Sikkim – the discourse I do not think is Hindutva versus non-Hindutva force ... even though much of the population is Hindu, here.”

As suggested in the second view above; a probable reason in this context for the absence of the polarisation on religious lines is the demography of Sikkim which is majorly Hindu (Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, 2011). While the ‘Chogyal’; as an absolute monarch from 1642-1973 and the constitutional monarch from 1973-1975, replaced through a referendum by the people of Sikkim to join India in 1975; had ruled Sikkim as a Buddhist kingdom (Erschbamer, 2021), the integration with India necessitated the adoption of a system that would accommodate the aspirations of the erstwhile ruling

elite while also respect the mandate of the referendum. Article 371F allowed for the continuation of the old laws of Sikkim, that were in existence during the time of the ‘Chogyal’ and as a consequence the practice of electing a monk or a nun to the legislative assembly of Sikkim, from an electorate that constitutes the members of the 111 registered monasteries of Sikkim, continued (Thapa & Inbanathan, 2022). Gupta (2019) describes this practice as a “perfect example of the states’ unique political process to protect minority rights”. While there was an attempt made to do away with this reservation of a seat in the legislative assembly of Sikkim for the Sangha; through legal challenge (R.C. Poudyal And Anr. Etc. Etc vs Union Of India And Ors. Etc. Etc, 1993); the arguments did not stand in the Supreme Court of India which ruled in favour of retaining the Sangha seat.

As Buddhism, is a religion, whose origins could be traced to the Indian sub-continent, along with Hinduism and Jainism constitute what is collectively known as the Indic fold of religious traditions (Sharma A. , 2001) are acceptable within the idea of ‘Hindu Rashtra’ proliferated by the RSS (Gupta S. , 2014). Consequently, the nature of the Hindu nationalist ideology, as espoused by the RSS, in the Northeast, which is less rigid in comparison to the rest of India but the proliferation, nonetheless, not wholly desired (Longkumer, 2022, p. 86) does not leave any scope for the polarisation on religious lines to take place and although BJP managed to enter the echelons of power without really contesting in any election, they did not face widespread criticism as was the case in many of the other states, where they had been accused of indulging in ‘horse-trading’<sup>55</sup>. As the society itself is not polarised, the print media also seems to be therefore free from polarised discourses on religious lines but the same cannot be said for autochthonous versus non-autochthonous discourses.

#### **5.4. Meghalaya: Contest between the Regional and National Interests**

On March 4<sup>th</sup> 2020, the Governor of Meghalaya Tathagata Roy while addressing newsmen in Shillong, the capital of Meghalaya in India made a controversial statement,

“I saw the need to repeatedly talk to ministers and senior civil servants of the State. The non-tribals in the state were in a thoroughly demoralized state and I got the impression their position and status are something like that of the

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<sup>55</sup> In India, the practice of luring members of a rival political party to join another party, post-election, with the intention to achieve a majority in the house and form the government (Deccan Herald Web Desk, 2023).

Kashmiri Pandits of 1991 when they had to leave the Kashmir valley.”

(Karmakar, 2020; India Today NE, 2020)

Meghalaya has had a history of physical violence between the majority tribal; henceforth interchangeably used with autochthonous; the Khasis, Pnars and Garos; and the minority non-tribal; henceforth interchangeably used with non-autochthonous; people belonging to primarily the Bengali, Nepali and the Hindi speaking communities since 1979 (Haokip T. , Inter-ethnic relations in Meghalaya, 2014; Singha & Nayak, 2015). There have been numerous small-scale incidents and limited large scale ethnic violence that was perpetuated on the respective communities. The first conflict happened in 1979, in which the Bengalis were seen as the rivals (Times News Network, 2022). In the following flare-up in 1987, the Nepalese became the new rivals (Menon, 1988) and this was followed by the Biharis and Marwaris in 1992 (Haokip T. , Inter-ethnic relations in Meghalaya, 2014), for which the B.N. Sarma Commission was also instituted for the investigation.

The continued violence, over the years has led to an exodus of people belonging to respective ethnic communities from Meghalaya. In 1979 approximately 20,000 Bengalis were displaced from Meghalaya (Times of India, 2012; Dutta A. , 2018) which continued through the following decade with estimates ranging from 25,000-35,000 having permanently left Meghalaya by 1991 (Phukan, 2013). There have also been literary references to the violence that was perpetuated against the non-tribals in general and Bengalis in particular. Mahua Sen in ‘Chronicles of A Death Untold’ from Insider Outsider: Belonging and Unbelonging in North-East India, writes,

“... In the majoritarian spectrum, if Kashmiri Pandits are the acne of secular India, the Bengali Hindu of Shillong is the genital wart. Nobody knows you have one.” (Sen, 2018, p. 102)

While the total figures of the tribal versus non-tribal population did not show any anomaly, registering growth, in the areas affected by the disturbances, an interesting observation that was made by the B.N. Sarma Commission report (1992) was that there was a percentage fall in the population of the non-tribals in the same areas. The change in population from 1971 to 1991 have been indicated in Figure 17, which has been sourced from the B.N. Sarma Commission Report. Similarly, the percentage change has also been specified in Figure 18. Again Sarmah (2019) reaffirms this continued exodus with more recent data with figures of

the non-tribal population having declined from 14.47% in 1991 to 14.1% in 2001 and to 13.9% in 2011.

FOR THE STATE OF MEGHALAYA		
Year	Total Population	Total Non-tribal Population
1971	10,11,699	197459
1981	13,35,819	259474
1991	17,74,778	256851
FOR GREATER SHILLONG		
1971	122751	71852
1981	174703	88870
1991	223366	104694

Figure 17: The Change in Population from 1971 to 1991 in Meghalaya

Source: B.N. Sarma Commission Report

MEGHALAYA AS WHOLE		
Year	Tribal population	Non-tribal Population
1971	80.48%	19.5. %
1981	80.58%	19.42%
1991	85.53%	14.47%
GREATER SHILLONG		
1971	41.47%	58.53%
1981	49.13%	50.87%
1991	53.13%	46.87%

Figure 18: Percentage Change in the Population from 1971 to 1991 in Meghalaya

Source: B.N. Sarma Commission Report

#### 5.4.1. Politics of Identity and the Ethnic Faultline

Meghalaya became a full-fledged state on January 21<sup>st</sup> 1972 after having been granted the status of an Autonomous State on April 2<sup>nd</sup> 1970, having been carved out of Assam. (Government of Meghalaya, 2023). The capital of Meghalaya, Shillong, which has been so



since 1972, was also the provincial capital of Assam since 1864, giving Shillong its mixed ethnic composition (Lyngdoh & Gassah, 2003).

For reasons pertaining to the specific limitations of this study that lay the ground for this investigation, some of the causes of the disturbances, as was suggested in the Sarma Commission report (1992) were – “religious bigotry and intolerance on part of a section of the local youth;” “Growing parochialism and regionalism among the younger generation;” “Lack of necessary follow-up actions in the criminal cases arising out of such disturbances in the past resulting in the failure in all such cases.” Lyngdoh & Gassah (2003) also observe “xenophobia of dangerous proportions” among the youth, who have become victims of the lack of opportunity because successive Governments in Meghalaya have been incapable in generating employment opportunities. Anecdotal evidence from September 2023 that also points to this inaction towards the creation of employment opportunities is evident from the fact that 427 candidates turned up for 9 sanctioned posts for multi-tasking staff(s) at the Meghalaya Pollution Control Board resulting in the cancellation of the interviews as the same was not possible by a four-member selection committee that was tasked for it (The Meghalayan Bureau, 2023). This cue towards an economic perspective for the disturbances has also been discussed in a paper by Singha & Nayak (2015) where they support their arguments with data and even posit the inter-tribe conflict of interests between the Khasis and Garos to economic reasons.

Lyngdoh and Gassah (2003) also admit to the existence of a belief among the local populace in Meghalaya that the non-tribals; viz. non-autochthonous; are taking away the rights and privileges of the tribals; viz. autochthonous. While there could be multiple reasons for the existence of such a belief but data suggests otherwise. Being the seat of power, Shillong, which is in the Khasi Hills region, the Khasi tribe, who are the primary inhabitants, have historically enjoyed substantial benefits from the government establishments who have set up their offices in the hill town from time to time. A statement showing community-wise representation in Government departments from 1923 as quoted in Kar (1990, p. 155), illustrated in Table 1: Community-wise representation in Govt. Departments in 1923, gives an indication of the number of government posts that a community was entitled to calculated on the basis of their percentage constitution in the population and the number of positions held by them.

Table 1: Community-wise representation in Govt. Departments in 1923

<b>Communities</b>	<b>Posts entitled</b>	<b>Posts held</b>
Bengali Hindus	39.64	106
Assamese Hindus	47.3	41
Muslims	64.82	32
Ahoms	7.09	0
Khasis	7.09	33

While the number of government posts held by the members of a respective community cannot suggest that the community is better-off on socio-economic indicators, such statistics could suggest that the respective communities had access to decision making bodies. As such, after the statehood of Meghalaya in 1972, Gupta (2004) also suggests that there has been a gradual increase in the allocation of contacts, for supply to Civil and Public Works Departments, to Khasi firms. Although, the Khasi tribe; evident from Table 1; seems to have enjoyed a substantial portion of the economic benefits owing to the regions' place in history; its parochial assertion of identity seems incomprehensible and probably to rooted in something other than just mere economics.

Saikia (2005) points out that the fertility rate of the Khasi tribe is among the highest in the country and the same has been consistently above national average. The high fertility rate has thus resulted in a high decadal population growth in Meghalaya, which in the latest 2011 census, stood at 27.95% which is substantially higher than the national average of 17.70% (Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, 2011). As per the NFHS - 5, the total fertility rate in Meghalaya was recorded at 2.9 children which is a little over the national average but what stands out is the fertility rate of Hindus which is at 0.82 children, then Muslims at 1.4 children and Christians with 3.2 children (NFHS, 2019-20). The Christian population in Meghalaya is primarily tribal (Centre for Policy Studies - India, 2016) and therefore it could be argued that the highest fertility rate is still among the tribal population of the state. While the argument to attribute this conflict to economics is sound, it is imperative to also consider existing cleavages in a multi-ethnic society, as is the case in the city of Shillong in Meghalaya, where most of the disturbances have taken place. McDuire-

Ra (2007) in the context of Meghalaya comments “...opposition to development projects has little to do with development itself, or with environmental concerns, and far more to do with ethnic identity politics.” It is therefore argued that, it is this politics that prevents the creation of opportunities that could cater to the needs of the growing population.

Another perspective that could be highlighted, also part of the Sarma Commission report (1992), about the failure of the machineries of the state apparatus to contain these flare-ups from time to time as has been also identified in a working paper by Apurba K. Baruah. Baruah (2004) attributes the failure of the police to preserve law and order in two instances owing to pressure tactics of traditional administrative bodies who – “play an important role in bringing an ethnocentric perception to administration at the local level”. These traditional bodies are a result of provisions laid down, under the Sixth Schedule, to facilitate the protection and preservation of the rights of tribal communities, who are regarded as backward on established parameters used to gauge development (Sixth Schedule, 2023). In his paper, Baruah (2004) describes at least two instances in which the police force had to give in to the coercive devices of the ‘Dorbar Shnongs’<sup>56</sup>

Building on the idea of infusing an “ethnocentric perception to administration,” it is interesting to look at the findings of Gupta (2004), who points out that there seemed to be the existence of an underlying idea of a ‘Khasi Nation’ which exists in the minds of the Khasi educated leadership of regional parties in Meghalaya. Her study asserted that the regional parties in Meghalaya have espoused the “specificity of tribal culture” and pit it against the argument for the assimilation with mainstream Indian culture but according to her, these actions do not pose a threat to the ‘Indian Nation’ because the Khasi regionalism is a creation of the Khasi elite who perceive the association with India as beneficial to the regional identity.

#### **5.4.2. Representation and Proliferation of Political Interests**

The National People’s Party (NPP) is currently in power with Conrad Sangma as the Chief Minister. The NPP is in alliance with the Bhartiya Janata Party which has two Members of Legislative Assembly (MLA) in the state legislature. The NPP itself is the single largest party with twenty-six seats. The United Democratic Party has twelve seats, the All-India

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<sup>56</sup> “*Dorbar Shnong* means the traditional village institution of the village of the Khasis and composed of all Khasi inhabitants of not less than 18 years of age, where the prevailing age-old customary and traditional governance and adjudication are carried -out.” **Invalid source specified.**

Trinamool Congress and The Indian National Congress has five seats each. The Voice of People's Party has 4 seats, the Hill State People Democratic Party and the People's Democratic Front hold two seats each. Two seats are also held by independent candidates (Election Commission of India, 2023). With reference to the 2019 general election to the Lok Sabha, which is the lower house in the Indian Parliament, one seat was won by Indian National Congress (INC) and another by the NPP (Election Commission of India , 2019).

55 of the 60 seats in the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly are reserved for the tribals of the state, and the elected representatives of the 5 seats that are open-category seats are also mostly occupied by members of the tribal community (Election Commission of India, 2023). So, effectively in the current house, there is barely any members belonging to the non-tribal community in the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly. Gupta (2004) also takes note of this gap in representations and the same is also reiterated by Baruah (2004).

On the representation from various interest groups in the media, the interviewees who were interviewed for the study had a consensus that the skills associated with journalism were more important over prioritising the representation from various interest groups. While there is effort to have a balance but being able to have representation from all interest groups is a momentous task and while it is idealistic, it might not always be possible.

“... we do not have representation of all groups...It is not possible because you generally do not get that kind of people. Journalism is not simple; you need to be qualified. It is important to have people with skill, interest and then other things follow.”

Another interviewee also pointed out that, trying to represent every interest group might not always be economically viable indicating the profit driven business ventures that newspapers are; as suggested in Jeffrey (1993); he articulates,

“In an ideal situation representation from every community must be there for the voices of every community to be represented but that is a very idealistic situation, it does not work in the current economics of media houses...”

One of the primary reasons for the assertion of regionalism; viz. assertion of autochthonous identities; is the prominence of ethnic nationalism in the discourse. As is evident from the extract from an interview below, the feeling of regionalism seems to be fuelled by a sense of fear of being overwhelmed by non-tribal populations from other parts of the country.

“... in Meghalaya, the discourse that is more prominent is ethnic nationalism, we want ILP, we want to protect our land, we want to see that our tribes survive. So, what is so wrong with that? The outside world, though, thinks that – this kind of a thought that comes up in the newspapers is criminal but can you call this criminal if I feel that I am going to be decimated.”

It is this fear of outsiders that media in Meghalaya seems to prey on. Therefore, in Meghalaya, there seems to be an essentialist understanding of identity; associated with the ‘ascribed’ nature of identity; that prevails. Situating this in the context of Bauman’s ideas (Bauman & Vecchi, 2004) on identity; which is inclined more towards the constructivist ideas of the ‘achieved’ nature of identity; as described in section 2.1 Conceptualising Identity; the nature of the assertion of identity in Meghalaya seems to be in contradiction with the ‘achieved’ nature of Indian nationalistic identity; further the proliferation of the ‘ascribed’ nature of the Hindu nationalistic identity; currently the more prominent and yet different from the Indian nationalistic identity; is oppositional to and hence threatens the existence of the sub-nationalistic identities that prevail in Meghalaya. In this context, an academician who was interviewed for the study points out that the local media in Meghalaya rakes up emotional quotient of tribals. As, will be explained in detail in the section on the Ideological Inclination of newspapers, certain individuals do make a difference, yet, there seems to be a consensus that the media in general and print media in particular tends to tilt towards the demographic majority viz. the tribals.

“...Media has always favoured the local tribal communities and this is across all newspapers. In my interactions with my colleagues, we regularly do discuss how the local media rakes up the emotional quotient of the tribals.”

Another perspective that was evident from the interviews was the role of “parallel governments” that exert pressure on the ruling government. This phenomenon has also been discussed in a previous section where reference was made to Baruah (2004) who has also documented the workings of traditional bodies in influencing the state apparatus in its functioning.

“...In Meghalaya there are many pressure groups and then there are parallel governments that run here – the student unions, Dorbar Shnongs, Rangbah Shnongs – they are all parallel government. The government in power has realised that you cannot offend them and then keep ruling – this is what is

my observation is. So, whatever suits the agenda of the local or the parallel government also suits the agenda of the ruling government.”

One of the interviewees also pointed out that civil society organisations which includes churches and other NGOs, have been able to carve an image of being champions of discourses on indigeneity and therefore enjoy widespread support making it extremely challenging for ruling governments to push for policies that would go against the agendas of these organisations. She articulates,

“... When I say civil society bodies, it includes all these NGOs and churches and all that and these are also the people who have come out as saviours of the culture. They have promoted themselves as the preservers of the culture or the preservers of the identity and that is something that is very hard to dislodge.”

In this context, the anti-development agenda, as described by McDuie-Ra (2007), which is essentially ethnic politics in disguise, has the effect of keeping opportunities away from the people of Meghalaya. The civil society bodies rely on this ethnic politics to stay relevant and popular in the politics of Meghalaya. This puts the government in power, in a complicated spot, as it is stuck between appeasing the civil society bodies by not going through with development projects and thereby failing to provide economic opportunities to the growing population which is a factor that enables the proliferation of a perception that opportunities are being grabbed by non-tribals from the tribals. Since the civil society bodies enjoy widespread public support, going against them, the ruling governments would go against their own vote-bank. It could therefore be argued that, in an effort to preserve order, law becomes the casualty. It is probably a culmination of such reasons that Meghalaya is counted among poorest states in India (The Hindu Bureau, 2023).

#### **5.4.3. Overview of Print Media in Meghalaya**

As per the Press in India (2020-2021) report published by the Registrar of Newspapers for India (RNI), the total number of registered publications in Meghalaya is 119 of which only 13 publications filed their annual statements. This constitutes 24 dailies, 1 tri-bi-weeklies, 36 weeklies, 14 fortnightlies, 21 monthlies, 13 quarterlies, 3 annuals, and 7 of other periodicities.

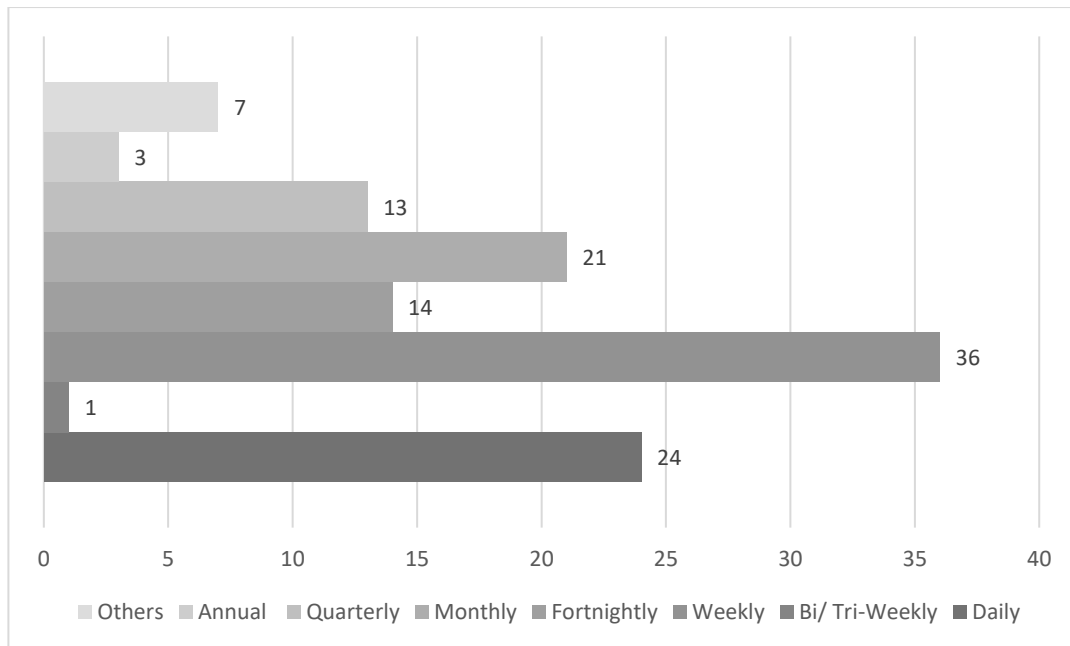


Figure 19: Registered Publications in Meghalaya

Source: Data from RNI, illustrated by researcher

Of the 13 publications that filed their annual statements 11 were dailies, 1 weekly and 1 monthly. The total circulation of all publications that filed their annual statements in the state of Meghalaya is 1,79,311 which constitutes 1,748,11 for dailies, 4,200 for weeklies and 300 for monthlies. Mawphor, a Khasi daily with a claimed circulation of 37,000, is the highest circulated newspaper.

With reference to the English Press, of the 36 registered publications, 11 were dailies, 7 weeklies, 3 fortnightlies, 7 monthlies, 3 quarterly, 2 annuals and 3 other periodicities. 5 of the 36 registered publications filed their annual statements. The circulation of the English language publications in the state of Meghalaya is the second highest at 71,738. This includes 4 dailies with 67,538 and one weekly with 4200 copies.

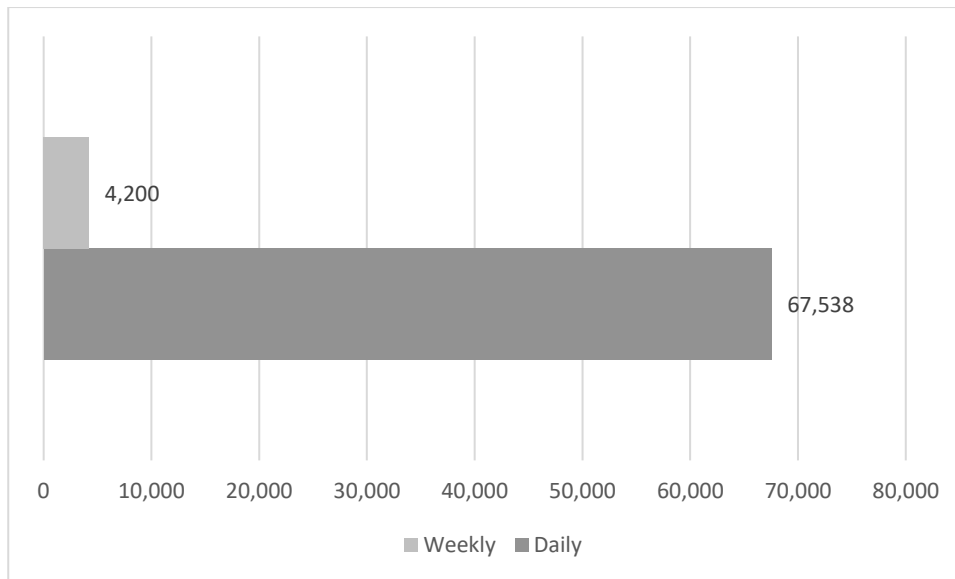


Figure 20: Circulation Figures for Registered English Publications in Meghalaya

Source: Data from RNI, illustrated by Researchers

Meghalaya is quite unique among the four states that have been selected for the study. Unlike the other four states where English Press has the highest per capita circulation, meaning, relative to the number of publications the circulation per publishing day of those publications was much higher for the language press in comparison for the English press. Even so, as it is visible in Figure 7 in section 4.3, the difference in the values is not as stark as some of the other states, namely Manipur and Mizoram where evidently, the average circulation of the respective local language publication is much higher.

#### 5.4.4. Representation of various actors in ‘The Shillong Times’

The direct quotes by pro-ruling party actors which includes the BJP and its allies constituted 34% of the total number of quotations. The indirect quotes by pro-ruling party actors constituted 29% taking the total percentage of quotes by pro-ruling party actors in The Shillong Times to 63%. Again, the anti-ruling actors which includes the opposition party and its allies constituted for 36.95% of the total number of quotations that were used in the respective articles in The Shillong Times. The visual representation of the same is as under:



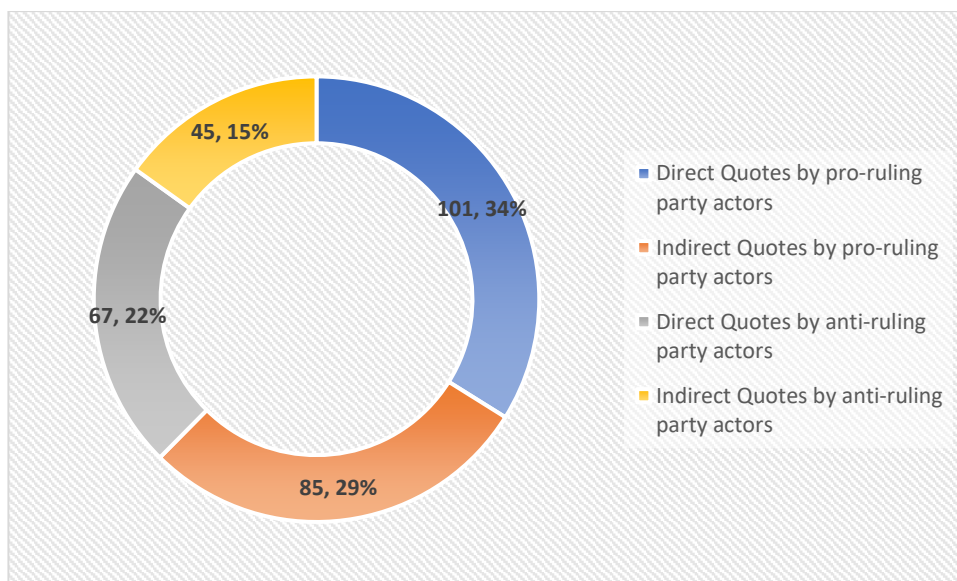


Figure 21: Representation of actors in The Shillong Times during 2019 elections

Source: Data from RNI, illustrated by researcher

As is suggested by the analysis of sources, in the case of Meghalaya there is tendency of the ‘The Shillong Times’ to draw more from sources that are affiliated to the ruling party actors, that are part of the government. The researcher, in the context of Meghalaya is inclined to associate this with the tendency of newspapers to provide more space to the ruling party as compared to the opposition party on the newsprint as also suggested by Prasad and Kumar (1991) on their study of election news and opinion moulding by the press, not with politico-economic factors but with the fact that ruling party actors are in news because their actions are more newsworthy. As a passing reference, the researcher would like to make a note here that the owner of The Shillong Times used to be a member of the legislative assembly of Meghalaya on a Congress ticket; and first in 2013 and again in 2018; lost to Sanbor Shullai, a candidate who had contested on an NCP<sup>57</sup> and then on a BJP ticket in 2013 (Chief Electoral Officer Meghalaya, 2013) and 2018 (ECI-IT, 2018) respectively, in the same constituency. Lwin and Teo (2013, p. 61), as also discussed earlier have insisted that news outlets; to increase the credibility of their reports; tend to only quote people in power thereby shutting out the opinions of the less powerful. Since the regional parties in Meghalaya are led by the elite (Gupta S. S., 2004), it is only the elite perceptions that are represented in the media discourse, in general and English print media, in particular.

<sup>57</sup> Nationalist Congress Party; having no direct association with the Indian National Congress.

#### 5.4.5. Advertising Revenue and Media Discourse

On the effect of advertising revenue on media discourse, there seemed to be a consensus that ad revenues do not have an impact on the kind of discourse that is there in the print media in Meghalaya. While this might be true for the popular newspapers, the same seems to be contentious for newspapers with a smaller reader base. One of the interviewees mentioned that established papers did not require government patronage. On the other hand, as the government uses the media to reach the public, they cannot curtail advertisements.

“With reference to the ad revenue, I am not sure if there is some pressure exerted from the government. If it is an established newspaper, it is not so easy to curtail advertisements, they may not be given special treatment but they cannot be curtailed either.”

There was also a general opinion that, there is not much need for the newspapers to depend on government support as they are able to get substantial advertisement support from the readers of the newspaper; this does not fit into literature that suggests that the main source of revenue for newspapers are advertisements (Jeffrey, 1993); and from other commercial sources<sup>58</sup>. The interviewee also suggested that his newspaper was ‘the best’ paper the other papers ‘mediocre’ but data from various sources could not make an independent verification of the claim; this includes data<sup>59</sup> from the Registrar of Newspapers for India, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India as well as the documents from the Directorate of Information and Public Relations, Government of Meghalaya. Nonetheless, the only inference that the researcher could draw from this was that popular newspapers with alternate sources of revenue could sustain without advertising support from the government but the same might not be true, in general, for all newspapers.

“In order to keep the cost of our newspapers low, we do get a lot of ad support from commercial sources. We also get a lot of ad support from our readers. Of all the local newspapers, we get the highest number of classified ads. The readers use our press because we have the largest readership – so, if you want to buy or sell anything or recruit or hire somebody then you will go to the

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<sup>58</sup> The interviewee suggested that that the newspaper he is associated with generates substantial profit from advertisements from commercial sources that are not affiliated to the government.

<sup>59</sup> Press in India report from the RNI; Advertising rates paid by Ministry of Information and Broadcasting; Advertising policy of the Government of Meghalaya.

best paper. So, they have no choice but to come here. You will not spend your money and go to a mediocre paper; you know what I mean.”

Highlighting the effect of the pandemic on the print media in Meghalaya, one of the interviewees pointed out that while there might not be control exercised by the Government on the media houses but if there were some kind of dependence that did exist, it was only fair in light of the ill effects of the pandemic on the print media and its need for the survivability of the respective newspaper.

“... all media organisations these days display government advertisements. The government does use the media to reach people – so, I cannot really say that political news is tilted to the ruling party. Although even if such a dependence does exist, I do not think I will be against it – especially after what the media industry had to go through during the pandemic.”

#### **5.4.6. Ideological Position of Newspapers in Meghalaya**

On the Ideological Position of Newspapers in Meghalaya, an interesting point of view that came across was that “Newspapers are not neutral, no newspaper is neutral. The news is neutral.” While media outlets and professionals working in such outlets might have a certain ideological inclination, the news that they publish is neutral. This is an opinion that was also shared by another interviewee who also mentioned,

“...which then moved to Patricia Mukhim- she is not one who can be manipulated. She maintains neutrality. Her own position is that, she is anti-BJP. Professionally she does her job...”

One of the reasons that newspapers might not be neutral, as was expressed by an interviewee, was that, newspapers, especially in North-East India were established to proliferate the culture and identity of people of the region; to contextualise this it could be said that the print media was established with an intent to proliferate the identity expressions<sup>60</sup> of the region and this is a perspective that emerged even in the context of Assam where an eminent editor, speaking on the inhouse policy of his paper, articulated similar views; but there is a thin line between expression and assertion.

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<sup>60</sup> Different from assertion, which is coercive.

“... If you look at all the newspapers in the North East – most of them did not start with the intention of giving objective news but to focus on our culture, on our identity, on our history and to further that.”

An academician who was interviewed in this regard; while highlighting that the media in Meghalaya might not be ideologically inclined; seemed to affirm of the existence of an ethnocentric discourse in the media. This could be contextualised through the frame provided by Dijk’s (2008) on the assertion of identities in discourse; the ideological square; in his articulation, he noted,

“The media in Meghalaya is not ideologically inclined. Yes, the discourse is ethno-centric and very rightist and status-quoist. It does not have any left or radical inclinations. This applies to both ethnic and economic issues. The media in Meghalaya cannot be termed as progressive in any sense.”

Other opinions also pointed to the nature of the society and therefore the readers of the respective newspapers. In other words, there is an indication that the news outlets must cater to their respective audience; in this case Fairclough’s (2015) ideal subject. As most of Meghalaya is dominated by the respective tribal populations; viz. autochthonous; there seems to be an existing consensus that the media owners, journalists, and editors cater to the needs of the dominant population and as such certain negotiations may be made but, in this regard, the quality of the individual also matters. Extracts from two separate interviews express this line of thought:

“...depending on the kind of society that exists – it is reflected in the media as well. So, yes, it cannot be the way it is in the rest of India because the society here is different; ethnicity, here, matters. A person like Manas Chaudhari might not be tribal but he cannot overlook the reality of this place that he must work in an environment where people are ethnically minded. So, even with issues of religion and others, you cannot totally neglect ethnicity; only thing that is there can be a kind of balance.”

“...a non-tribal owning a newspaper in a tribal area and working here, there will be negotiation and this gets reflected in the writings also – of course individuals also matter. Patricia Mukhim as an editor matters a lot to bring balance. Although she is a tribal and a Christian, she is not a fanatic and she

does stand for the rights of the non-tribals and the people of minority religions.”

While journalists in Meghalaya must negotiate with certain pressures from various aspects of the society; the case of Patricia Mukhim stands out; having stood for the rights of minority religions and the non-tribals; viz. non autochthonous groups; in Meghalaya, she had to face intimidation at the hands of unknown miscreants who hurled petrol bombs at her home (Choudhury R. , 2018; Sitlhou, 2018). While a first information report was filed against her, it was quashed by the Supreme court, where she had appealed after an unfavourable outcome from the Meghalaya High Court (Patricia Mukhim vs State of Meghalaya and ORS, 2021).

#### **5.4.7. Inclination of Political News**

Irrespective of the party that is in power, newspapers in Meghalaya tend to represent the ruling party in the news more often as compared to the party that is out of power. While this might seem to indicate an influence of the advertisement revenue on the news that is published, it might not be always true, which is also the existing consensus, as has been highlighted in the section on advertisement revenue and media discourse. Ownership patterns of the media houses also seem to be a factor in determining the inclination of political news stemming out of the respective media houses, however, there are also certain contradictions. Establishing a link between the political elites of Meghalaya and the media of the state, an interviewee articulates,

“...owned by people in Government; ... will tilt towards the government. You will not find stories that are critical of the government in that portal. So, in the same way there could be, there is a possibility that some media house might tilt towards the ruling party...”

There was another interviewee who also mentioned that the party that is in power has the mandate of the people and hence, by providing more space to the ruling party, the media houses represent the pulse of the people. Here the researcher would like to make a note that there is a possibility that news editors might not also be influenced by politico-economic factors in selecting the sources of news. As is the case with this articulation, the interviewee suggested a unique perspective; which would require further exploration; that the ruling party is the pulse of the people and hence should be accorded more space. While an elected government reflects the “...pulse of the people,” there is the problem of majoritarianism that is being ignored and for a society that is polarised on various lines, this would only have the

effect of shunning the perspectives who might not be able to appropriate power owing to the ‘tyranny of the majority’<sup>61</sup> that majoritarian politics entails. Comments of the interviewee: “... by convention, yes, the media does give more space to the party in power because it is in administration. It is the pulse of the people.”

Building on this perspective, there is also an element of geography that comes in – the fact that newspapers from a particular region do stick to certain biases is also to hold relevance among its readers – this perspective has also been discussed in a previous section on the 5.4.6 Ideological Position of Newspapers in Meghalaya.

“...There are couple of factors why the newspapers from a certain geographical location stick to certain biases. There are economic factors because you do have to keep a paper running. There are certain people who are buying the paper and they want a certain discourse.”

#### **5.4.8. Polarisation of Print Media Discourse**

To understand the findings from the field, a background from the case of Meghalaya must be thoroughly investigated. It is a state where the contestation between the parochial identity assertions, that are a matter of examination of this study, are; in the view of the researcher; the most prominent; Hindu nationalism is at loggerheads with regional identity assertions. The researcher therefore argues of the existence of a dichotomy of Christian and Hindu religious assertion.

Although power is vested at the hands of the tribals in Meghalaya, the arguments for the frequent instances of inter-community conflict in Meghalaya has been an argument of being oppressed by the ‘outsider’ non-tribal – the tribals being backward and hence requiring protection under the provisions of the Sixth Schedule. Lyngdoh and Gassah (2003) acknowledge the existence of such a perception when they say,

“There is also a general belief among a large section of the local populace that the non-tribal population is depriving the tribals of their rights and

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<sup>61</sup> Tyranny of the Majority was an expression used by Alexis de Tocqueville in his description of American democracy in his magnum opus, *Democracy in America* published in two volumes, the first in the year 1835 and the second in the year 1840.

privileges. This belief has been strengthened by political parties who play on the tribal versus non-tribal card for electoral gain.”

The researcher agrees to this assertion that there is an underlying element of electoral gain involved in pushing for a polarisation on ethnic lines. While the case for ethnic polarisation is quite evident, the case of religious polarisation is subtle but evident in public discourse. While most of the sources describe the nature of this conflict as primarily ethnic, there is Mazumdar (2020), who, drawing on the B.N. Sarma Commission report, has stressed on a religious angle to these conflicts that ensue from time to time. Also, the disturbances in 1979 did start with the desecration of an idol of Goddess Durga<sup>62</sup>. The Sarma Commission Report (1992) pointed to “religious bigotry” as one of the reasons for the violence perpetuated against the Hindi-speaking communities in 1992. Although it would be an overstatement that there exists a religious angle to the conflicts but it is true that the tribals; viz. autochthonous; in the state of Meghalaya are primarily Christians with a miniscule number adhering to their indigenous religious practices (Centre for Policy Studies - India, 2016) while the adoption of Christianity has not been so widespread among the non-tribals viz. Nepalis, Bengalis, Marwaris Biharis (ANI, 2023). There are also a sizeable population of Sikhs, who identify themselves as Dalit Sikhs, who have also, from time to time, faced the wrath of violent flare-ups (Sarmah, 2019).

Interestingly, the church appears to champion the political interests of the tribals in Meghalaya. In more recent instances the Catholic Church, which is the largest denomination in the state of Meghalaya, has expressed its displeasure over the Central Government's initiative to seek for suggestions regarding the implementation of the Uniform Civil Code (UCC)<sup>63</sup> which is enshrined in Article 44 of the Constitution of India or the Directive Principles of State Policy. While the democratic process in India facilitates the involvement of religious organisations in policy making, the reasons outlined by the Catholic Church is not limited to espousing the rights of individuals who are Christians but extends to espousing the rights of tribals in the state of Meghalaya and their indigenous customary practices (ANI, 2023; The Shillong Times, 2023; Jyrwa, 2023). It is therefore argued that there seems to be an amalgamation of Christian and tribal interests and this makes sense when we look at the

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<sup>62</sup> A Hindu Goddess who is primarily worshiped in eastern India.

<sup>63</sup> Uniform Civil Code has been proposed to institute a common set of laws governing personal matters such as marriage, divorce, adoption, inheritance, and succession for all citizens of India (Jahnavi, 2023).

religious demography of Meghalaya; the tribal population in Meghalaya is 84.43% Christian (Centre for Policy Studies - India, 2016) as per the 2011 census.

The implementation of the UCC, on the other hand, is in the manifesto of the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) since its inception, which is also the largest party in the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) that runs the Central Government of India. This push for the ‘one-nation, one law’ idea, pits the political interests of smaller communities in India that wish to follow their own customary laws and this goes against the electoral commitments of the BJP to bring in a common law for all (Rajesh, 2023) which is a legislation aimed at appeasing the majority community in other parts of India who perceive the existence of separate civil laws for different communities as preferential treatment. In the state of Meghalaya, the implementation of the UCC, in effect, would challenge the ascendancy of traditional customary laws leading to the dilution of provisions laid down under the Sixth Schedule and the same has been highlighted by the Catholic Church in its expression of displeasure on the implementation of the UCC (Jyrwa, 2023; The Shillong Times, 2023).

Since the commitment of the tribes of Meghalaya to a united India is neither “spontaneous nor a product of emotional attachment” and is completely based on situational expediency (Gupta S. S., 2004), there seems to be a conflict of interests between the national and regional perception of what benefits the respective communities with reference to the implementation of the UCC. On the other hand, the non-tribals, majority of whom are covered under the various laws<sup>64</sup> instituted for the practitioners of Hinduism and are not the beneficiaries of the provisions of the Sixth Schedule under article 244(2) and 275(1) (Sixth Schedule, 2023), do not stand to lose anything with reference to the implementation of the UCC and therefore have no reason to come out in protest against it, at least that is what seems to be from current public discourse. Essentially, the political interests of the tribals and non-tribals, in this regard, seem to be different and hence a contributor to the existing ethnic and religious cleavage.

The newspapers in Meghalaya are polarised on tribal – non-tribal lines and this means that the discourse is polarised on ethnic lines. While there is no contestation on the discourse on

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<sup>64</sup> For instance, Hindu Marriage Act, the Hindu Succession Act, the Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act, and the Hindu Adoptions and Maintenance Act.



religious lines, there is barely any representation of non-Christians either in political or media discourse. One of the interviewees highlights -

“It (Print Media Discourse) is polarised along the tribal-non-tribal divide. I do not quite see any trend towards religious polarization. It is a Christian majority state, and the state patronizes Christianity. In such a scenario, other religious denominations have neither any political space nor can they influence the discourse in the media in any way. The religious discourse here is simply unipolar.”

The state patronage of Christianity is also evident from over-representation of Christian religious entities in programs organised or sponsored by the state. An example would be the “Special Program of Prayer by the Government of Meghalaya” which, although had representation from various religious groups, there was an abnormally high representation of Christian entities. The program schedule of the event has been shown as under.

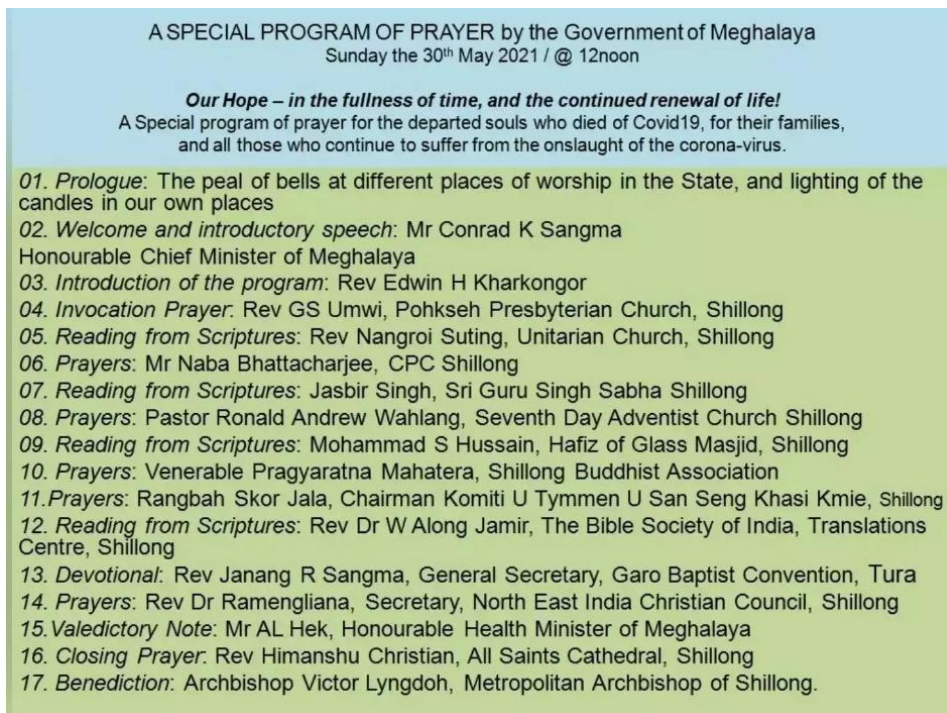


Figure 22: Program Schedule of the Special Program of Prayer

Source: (Kharsohnoh, 2021)

While the western idea of secularism is predicated on the separation of the state and religion, in India, the same idea has transformed to – all religions shall be treated equally (Roy H. , 2006). This means that while it is acceptable for any state within India to patronise various

religions, it cannot show preference to one. In showing preference to a particular religious denomination, the public discourse as well as the media discourse sidelines certain other religious groups and hence it could also be argued that there is a subtle yet evident religious polarisation – the players in this case become different.

### **5.5. Summarising Comments**

This chapter dealt with state wise analysis of the findings from the field. It started off with a general overview of the rise of Hindu nationalism in the Northeast and as the chapter progressed, there was an attempt to posit it in the context of the existing regional assertions. The next chapter in this thesis will attempt summarise and discuss the findings from the field. This will be followed by concluding remarks, the limitations which will lead to future directions which could be pursued.