

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

Conflict Transformation in Northeast India: The Media Imperative

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Abstract:

The contemporary period has witnessed the penetration of media in all realms of society on the one hand and growing number of violence across the world on the other. It could be estimated that more people have lost their lives in various conflicts than in the two world wars. These deadly conflicts have diverse histories and how the world views them depends on how the media project these conflicts to the world. As a result the role of media in a conflict is very vital and obvious. It is evident that media did play an important role in analyzing these issues and projecting it to the public. They have facilitated in solving certain conflicts and at the same time they have also contributed in adding fuel to certain violence. In this scenario, the role of media in conflicts and its transformation have become a complex issue of concern. Media being a powerful agent have got a greater role in transforming these conflicts positively for a better future. Media have the potential to rebuild the lost relationship after the conflict. If journalists can follow the concept of conflict transformation in their reporting, they would be in a better position to create an ambience of peace. The paper would analyze and explore the possibilities for the media in promoting peace in conflict situations with special reference to northeast India.

Keywords: Conflict, Facilitator, Media, Peace, Transformation

1. Introduction

Since time immemorial conflict has been part of human civilization. It is doubtful that whether there is any period in human history where humanity was freed from conflicts between individuals and groups. Until the cold war what was more prevalent was the conflict between nations, but after the cold war the situation has changed and external conflicts are replaced by internal conflicts between groups and communities. It has been estimated that more people have lost their lives due to dreaded internal conflicts than in the two world wars. These deadly conflicts have diverse histories and how the world views them depends on how the media project these conflicts to the world outside. As a result the role of media in any conflict is very vital and obvious. Media is like a knife that is in the hand of a surgeon. It can be used either to inflict pain or to heal. In the same way media during ethnic conflicts can either promote peace or can incite violence. There were cases wherein media incited violence and there were also times wherein media facilitated conflict resolution and transformation.

The available literature on media as an instrument of conflict and peace shows that media often acted as an instrument of conflict. Media's potential for peace building especially in an ethnic conflict is less examined by the journalists and the researchers. Today unlike in the past, media's role in peace building and positive conflict transformation are given priority by the international agencies, media persons, academicians, policy makers and NGOs. Hence this paper would analyze and make suggestions by which the media can facilitate conflict transformation.

2. Conflicts in Northeast India

The region is inhabited by people who are racially distinct from those in the rest of the country. They trace their origin to central and south-east Asia. They constitute a very small population when compared with the rest of India. Further the region shares about 98 per cent of its boundaries with foreign countries and only two per cent with the Indian subcontinent (Mukhim, 2007). Today northeast India is one of the most complex conflict zones in India. Ever since India became independent in 1947, the region has experienced high intensity of ethnic conflicts and insurgency that affected the region socially, culturally, politically and economically. The geographical isolation, illegal immigration, scarcity of collective land, search for identity, economic underdevelopment, resource competition, alleged changes in the regional demographic pattern are seen as some of the major causes of the conflict situations. In northeast ethnic conflicts include intra-ethnic, inter-ethnic and the involvement of insurgent groups. (Hussain, 2005; Kabi, 2012; Borgohain, 2014).

"In northeast India the craze for ethnic exclusiveness and reorganizing space in exclusive ethnic terms has created a tussle between the state and community on the one hand and the community-community on the other hand. The clash over Nagalim or 'greater Nagalnad' and the reaction by the ethnic groups in Manipur, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh; the reaction of the non-Bodos like the Koch-Rajbangshi, the Rabhas, etc. in the Bodo territorial council, the Kharbi-Dimasa clash in Kharbi Anglong are a few examples of such quest for exclusive homeland" (Mahanta, 2007, P, 132). In fact, northeast, India witnessed some sort of ethnic conflicts: Natives Vs Chakmas in Arunachal Pradesh, Naga-Kuki, Kuki -Paite, Naga_Meitei in Manipur and Nagaland, Khasi

Vesug Garo, Khasi Versus Jaintia, Khasi Versus Non-tribals like Bengalis, Nepalese, and Marwaris in Meghalaya, Tribals Vs Bengalis from East Pakistan (Bangladesh) in Tripura are some of the examples of ethnic conflicts in the region. According to Priyadarshini (2006), the root causes of ethnic conflict in northeast are economic, political and emotional and need not be ideological.

2.1. Media in Conflict Situations

Mass media play an important role in today's conflict where media can take two different and opposed forms. Either they take an active part in the conflict and have responsibility for increased violence, or they stay out of the conflict, thereby contributing to the resolution of conflict and alleviation of violence (Puddephatt, 2006). "Media has always been a part of our life. In fact, it is one of the best means of getting information in today's world. Virtually all that we know about the world beyond our immediate experience comes to us through the media" (Dutta, 2012, P,104). Media is considered to be both a friend and a foe to a peace process. It can be a tool for peace and conflict management and also be a weapon of destruction that manipulates groups in conflict with their hidden agendas. Media have the power to influence the psyche of the people by way of doing good or bad before during and after the conflict.

History has shown that the media can incite people toward violence. Hitler used the media to create an entire worldview of hatred for Jews, homosexuals, and other minority groups. Rwanda's local radio RTLM urged Hutus to pick up machetes and take to the streets to kill the Tutsis. Broadcasters in the Balkans polarized local communities to the point where violence became acceptable tool for addressing grievances. The media's impact on the escalation of conflict is more widely recognized than the media's impact on peace-building. It is noteworthy that a large amount of literature already exists on how media promote conflict, but only very little is available on the role of media in contributing to peace-building and reconciliation (Bratic, 2006). But it would be unreasonable to say that media promotes only violence. Media could be a major means to build justice and peace. In northeast India as well media did play an important role in resolving certain conflicts by providing wide coverage for peace processes. Therefore Journalists while reporting conflicts should make use all possible means for peace processes by keeping aside all stereotypes and provide opportunities for dialogue. It is also important that the journalists promote socio-cultural values that can facilitate peace and reconciliation.

3. Conflict Transformation

The past decade of peace and conflict research frequently uses the term 'transformation' that views conflict as a dynamic source of positive change and promises to take peace and conflict research on a new high in this century (Ryan, 2009). Conflict Transformation existed throughout human history though as a field of study it emerged only by the beginning of 1990s. However this field not only incorporates some of the techniques of the conflict resolution approach but also goes one step further focusing on large scale destructive conflicts and how they change so that they are conducted constructively (Kriesberg, 2011). Therefore the major difference between conflict resolution and conflict transformation is that in conflict resolution we are interested only in eliminating the conflict by any means; but in conflict transformation our concern is to find a lasting solution to the problem by patching up broken relationships. Conflict transformation is accomplished by finding ways and means to encourage and motivate the conflicting parties to make peace.

According to Lederach (2003), a transformational approach is based on two pro-active foundations: First a positive orientation toward conflict and second a willingness to engage in the conflict in order to produce constructive change. While conflict often produces long-standing cycles of hurt and destruction, the key to transformation is the potential for constructive change. Hence according to conflict transformation theory if conflict is channelized properly, it can be constructive and may bring about positive peace. Conflict transformation begins with a central goal: to build constructive change out of the energy created by conflict. By focusing this energy on the underlying relationships and social structures, constructive changes can be brought about. The key here is to move conflict away from destructive processes and toward constructive ones. The primary task of conflict transformation is not to find quick solutions to immediate problems, but rather to generate creative platforms that can simultaneously address the peripheral issues and change underlying social structures and broken relationships (Lederach, 2003). Conflict transformation is therefore, a process of engaging and transforming the human relationships and interest that endorse the continuation of violent conflict. Constructive conflict is seen as a vital agent for change (Miall, 2004).

According to Lederach (2003, P.14), "conflict transformation is to envision and respond to the ebb and flow of social conflict as life giving opportunities for creating constructive change processes that reduce violence, increase justice in direct interaction and social structures, and respond to real-life problems in human relationships". Transformation aims for the fundamental changes in conflict situations that go beyond the limitations of traditional approaches. Hence, conflict transformation moves beyond the immediate issues to look at the border ambience within which the violent conflict takes place (Ryan, 2004).

In a conflict situation, conflict transformation can alter the conflict in its totality and restore lasting peace by addressing personal, relational, structural and cultural dimensions. At personal level we try to improve the wellbeing of persons by providing awareness programs, counseling, and ensuring human security. At relational level we improve the interpersonal relationship by improving communication, conducting common programs, and celebrations. At structural level we address the root causes of the conflict and ensure basic facilities, socio-economic equality, and participation in the decision making body. And at the cultural level we address the factors that contributed conflict like searching for identity, traditional values, and thereby respecting the culture and tradition of others as well (Lederach, 2003).

In relation to the transformation of violence and the promotion of just peace, people involved in conflict transformation should be in constant touch with local people in conflict areas to respond to their immediate needs. At the same time they should also engage in dialogue and discussions which might solve their problems and satisfy human security which is very much applicable in a

conflict situation (Mahanta, 2010). That is to say conflict transformation tries to overcome structural and cultural violence thereby attain positive peace.

"It should be noted that conflict is not bad or destructive per se. It can be an explicit way to resolve tension between parties, prevent stagnation, stimulate interest and curiosity; it can be the medium by which problems can be aired and solution arrived at; it can be the root for personal and social change. Conflict does not necessarily mean a breakdown of relationship or community in which they occur. They are normal and indicative of the fact that real life processes continue" (Kabi, 2012, P. 11-12). The beauty of conflict transformation approach is that it moves beyond the immediate issues to look at the wider environment where people experience serenity tranquility. If people do not experience structural violence, then we can say that the society experiences positive peace which is the ultimate goal of conflict transformation.

3.1. Media in Conflict Transformation

Conflict can be at its worst when it is based on ethnicity. In an ethnic conflict, the relationships are disturbed and needs to be strengthened. It requires dialogue and addressing the core issues of the conflict. Under such circumstances media have ability to influence the minds of the parties in the conflict. It is obvious that media's projection of conflicts and the initiative in peace building affect the behavior of civil society and the policy makers. Many of the conflicts occurred also on the basis of ethnicity. According to Harindranath (2009), People read media texts along ethnically influenced ways and at the same time these readings construct ethnic identities that constitute the conflict.

Media's focus should not be on what went wrong or what had happened in the past, but on what should be done to repair what went wrong to facilitate peace-building. According to Howard (2002), media frames and analyses the conflict, identifies the interest, defuses mistrust, thereby becomes a facilitator of positive social change. This idea is being complimented by Bassil (2014), stating that Journalism is not just about reporting facts. It is about what to report and how to report, keeping high standard of ethics and principles, especially while reporting conflicts. It is the responsibility of the media to know what to select as information and how to present it to the public at the appropriate time.

Today media is considered to be one of the best conflict transformation tools that could build up relationships for a positive change. This is mainly because any form of Communication has become an integral part of conflict. It is through communication that conflict is generated and it is through the same medium of communication that this could be resolved. If the media at any point of time had contributed in escalating conflict, it also has the moral obligation to de-escalate the conflict. It is well known to everyone that the 1994 Rwanda ethnic conflict was incited by the local radio RTLM and after the conflict the same medium was used by some peacemakers to build peace and reconciliation. There are instances wherein media were instrumental in building peace after the conflict. Different media can be used to play a vital role in conflict transformation and peace building.

3.2. Media as Facilitators in Conflict Transformation

It is undoubtedly proved that the media did play an impotent role in positive conflict transformation though the number of times they have done it may not be as equal as inciting violence. In order to achieve these goals, media persons and all those who are associated with them should be willing work hard to achieve this selfless goal. "For the mass media to play a facilitating role in preventing conflict escalation, their primary focus should not be on themselves. The core concern should rather be developing a societal environment within which media can be realistically expected to employ de-escalatory modes of communication" (Hamelink, 2011, PP, 81-82). Therefore the media should focus on positive peace that can facilitate in fostering relationships. It is a universal fact that if 'bad journalism' promotes violence obviously 'good journalism' promotes peace and reconciliation. It would be apt to analyze and suggest how media can facilitate positive peace in an ethnic conflict transformation.

3.2.1. Media coverage: (How to make use media coverage for Conflict Transformation)

- **Increase the quantity and quality of news items.** It is important to increase the number of news items for peace processes by using the concept of conflict transformation; be it in print, electronic or social media. This can be done by providing adequate space, photo prominence, headline weight-age etc. for issues that are related to peace processes and peace building.
- **Address the root causes of the conflict.** It is important to trace out the root causes of the conflict and address them by providing adequate suggestions, and encouraging the conflicting parties and the administration to resolve those issues.
- **Help in building relationships.** One of the most important elements in C.T is to restore the lost relationships between the parties. And media have the potential to patch up the broken relationships. They would be in a better position to transform the conflict for a constructive change.
- **Hope for reconciliation.** It is important to give hope for reconciliation to the conflicting parties even when the conflict is at its peak. One of the means is to project some of the similar conflicts in the past that got transformed and resolved, so that the parties may not lose heart, but might get encouraged to resolve the conflict.

3.2.2. Media, the best mediator: (How can media act as a mediator in transforming the conflict?)

- **Take initiative for dialogue.** It is next to impossible that the conflicting parties may come together for dialogue by their own initiative. It requires some sort of facilitation from some corners. Under such circumstances media persons can act as these counselors/mediators. They can bring together the leaders of conflicting parties on a common forum for dialogue which is one of the steps towards conflict transformation.

- **Build confidence among the parties.** Media also can build confidence among the parties that they would be able to find solution for their grievances. This could be done by organizing workshops, seminars, debates and conferences that can encourage parties to resolve the conflict.
- **Forum for emotional expression and consensus.** Most of the conflicts have their origin on issues that are sensitive and emotional in nature. If people get an opportunity to express their grievances, they get some sort of consolation that can create wonders in solving the conflicts and problems. One of the major tasks of the mediator is to please both the parties and come to a consensus. Media should make sure that both parties end up in a win-win situation.
- **Act as voice of the civil society.** Media have to project the public opinion and will have to become the voice of the voiceless. For example, if the minority is affected and are not taken care of, media should act as their guardian and protector.

3.2.3. Educating people: (What should media do to reach out to the public?)

- **Mobilize public support for peace.** Communication is power. Media have to make use this power to facilitate peace processes to obtain support from the civil society by their reporting and analysis.
- **Help to maintain an environment of peace.** Instead of creating fear and terror by projecting negative news such as comparing the loss of each party, atrocities done by each party, number of deaths, and loss of property, create an ambience of peace by focusing on positive news such as the number of times the leaders came for dialogue, examples of people belonging to conflicting parties supporting each other, humanitarian intervention by UN and other the international communities, NGOs, etc.
- **Let the decisions reach at the grassroots level.** It is not enough that the decision for reconciliation has reached in a news room or conference hall between the leaders. It has to be communicated to the people and they should be convinced. Therefore media have to give wide coverage for peace and reconciliation.
- **Social responsibility of the media.** Though the media in Northeast have given importance to political instability, militancy, and ethnic conflicts, what is lacking is a deep analysis of the causes of these problems that affect the region and suggest solutions for the same. The media shall not only confine themselves to be a channel of passing information, but also should act as agents to interpret social, cultural and political events, that have an impact on the people. They can also organize workshops, conferences, debates, and seminars on conflict management and conflict transformation.

4. Conclusion

Conflict is natural human occurrence for socio, cultural, political and economic change. It is seen in all communities and cultures. At the same time we cannot allow the conflict to escalate and remain in that state. It has to be resolved and transformed at one point of time. It is beyond doubt that media do play a major role in creating an environment for peace processes of any conflict. It is through media that people come to know the progress of the conflict or reconciliation. Any medium that we use in a conflict situation should be used with utmost care and sensitivity. If the media persons can follow the conflict transformation framework while reporting ethnic conflicts, they would be able to achieve positive peace in the conflict ridden society. The same medium that we use both in peaceful time and in a disturbed period has got different connotations. Therefore media persons, state actors and civil society should be highly sensitive in dealing with individuals or groups during the conflict situations.

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