



ROLE OF MEDIA IN PORTRAYING THE PLIGHT OF WOMEN IN CONFLICT: A STUDY IN ASSAM

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ABSTRACT:

Assam along with the entire Northeastern region is inhabited by several ethnic groups. They have been living in harmony since a long period. But sometimes, this peaceful region turns into turmoil and these ethnic groups and communities involve in violent ethnic conflict. Such conflict breaks social bond among the communities and destructs infrastructure, social order, economy, livelihood, education and legal system. Women and children are vulnerable towards conflict situation. Post conflict period has adverse effects especially on women. As media is the informer about the society, the role of media is crucial at times of emergency situation like war and conflict. This research paper tries to assess the role of print media in Assam in portraying the plight of women in conflict situation. The study has covered the ethnic conflicts occurred in Assam during the period of 1996-1998 and the area of the study is confined to Kokrajhar district of Assam.

KEY WORDS: ethnic conflict, woman, community, media, society.

INTRODUCTION

Media is an influential medium in shaping the attitude of a society through conveying information. The prime responsibility of media is disseminating information. Media can play a powerful role in a democratic country. The function of media is to inform, entertain and to inculcate people with the values, beliefs and codes of behavior that will incorporate them into the institutional structures of the larger society. It is an influential medium of reflecting the society to the common masses and the policy makers. With the advancement of science and technology, the impact and popularity of media are increasing day by day. A large number of the masses rely on media and are influenced by the contents disseminated by various forms of media. In today's world, the role of media is omnipresent for all positive and negative changes in the society. Media has the capability to affect any social development or to get affected by the factors of social change. Media has the power to intervene in any incident and to drive the attention of the masses. It is the responsibility of the media to carry the information of an event or happening to the public. According to Malcolm X, "The media is the most powerful entity on earth. They have the power to make the innocent feel guilty and the guilty innocent and that's the power, because they control the minds of the masses."

The role of media is very crucial in emergency situation such as at the time of any conflict, massacre and any type of disasters. At that time, the public become highly dependent upon media for receiving any information. Media has always been a crucial element in conflicts of every nature and intensity. It has developed as a dominant factor in shaping up, managing and conflating them and ultimately deciding the fate of nations. The representation of media in times of critical situation is very important in shaping public opinion and in building the views of public towards an incident. Media plays a tremendous role in molding the perception of the masses towards an incident or situation. When a conflict situation arises, media has the responsibility to provide the real picture of the situation by disseminating true information to the

masses. Women suffer most than men in a conflict situation due to some physiological differences and social bindings. From time to time, ethnic conflicts hit some specific areas in Assam and the women have been left helpless after these conflicts. They become alone after losing their husbands or other family members. Media can play a significant role in portraying such conditions faced by women. Media can help these victims by focusing the attention of the government to support them.

This research paper tries to examine how print media of Assam covered the incidents of conflict and specially the portrayal of the conditions of women at times of conflict. The study is confined to the ethnic conflicts between Bodo and Adivasi community in Kokrajhar district of Assam in the years of 1996 and 1998. In the months of May-June, 1996, violent conflict took place at Salekati, Cherfanguri and Gossaigaon area of Kokrajhar district between Bodo and Adivasi people. Both communities were affected in this conflict and about 250 people lost their lives and about 3 lakh people were displaced. In 1998, communal clash between Bodo and Adivasi community again hit the district and about 200 people were killed.

SIGNIFICANCE:

Although several studies on the impact of conflict on woman in Assam have already been published, yet not much work has been done about the role of media in conflict situation particularly in the context of media portrayal on women in conflict. Therefore, it is expected that, the study intends to come out with some new understanding with the area that will be helpful for researchers and policy makers. The study will be significant to know how the print media of Assam covered the conflict situation specifically the problems faced by the women in such situation. It will be helpful to understand how media intervene in conflict situation of Assam and whether media covers the adverse conditions of conflict affected women or not.

METHODOLOGY:

Both qualitative and quantitative methods have been adopted in this research study. The data have been analyzed through content analysis to understand the contents being conveyed by the news published. Two leading daily newspapers titled *The Assam Tribune* and *Asomiya Pratidin* have been selected for the study. As a part of the qualitative method, the content analysis of these two newspapers has been conducted to examine the role of media in covering conflict and specially the plight of women in conflict situation. *Asomiya Pratidin* has been selected as it is the highest circulated daily newspaper in Assamese language and *The Assam Tribune* is the highest circulated English daily newspaper in Northeast India. Quantitative method has been used to arrange the data accessed from content analysis in a statistical manner.

PORTRAYAL OF MEDIA ON THE PLIGHT OF CONFLICT AFFECTED WOMEN:

To find out the media coverage of the selected ethnic conflicts occurred in Kokrajhar and specifically the portrayal of the conditions of women at times of conflict, all the issues of the two selected newspapers from the commencement of conflict and subsequent two to four months have been scrutinized depending on the availability of the issues.

The Assam Tribune is composed of sixteen pages. After scrutinizing the issues of the selected period, the content analysis is divided into two sections. One is nature of coverage and the other is based on the subjects covered by the newspapers. The nature of coverage section deals with the form of coverage such as news, editorial, letter to the editor and photograph. The subjects section is divided into four parts. These are coverage of the incident, conditions of the shelter camps, woman issues and children issues. The coverage of the incident portion includes the coverage of the incidents of conflict, enquiries about the incidents, rehabilitation during conflict, protest against such incidents etc. along with the editorials, photographs and articles. The news covering the problems and issues related to the shelter camps are considered under the conditions of the shelter camps. Any news covering the conditions of women and children are included under woman and child issue section in the table. The study is done on 150 issues of five consecutive

months of May, June, July, August and September of 1996. The coverage of the newspaper of the selected conflicts is displayed in table-1.

Table 1: Coverage of Bodo-Adivasi conflict by *The Assam Tribune*, 1996

Subjects	No. of news	Nature of coverage	No. of news
Coverage of the incidents	44	News	39
Conditions of the relief camps	4	Editorial	3
Woman issues	0	Article	0
Child issues	0	Letter to the editor	0
Total coverage	48	Photograph	6
		Total coverage	48

Source: Content analysis of *The Assam Tribune*

To find out the coverage of *The Assam Tribune* on the ethnic conflict between Bodo and Adivasi community in the year 1998 in Kokrajhar, 120 issues of four consecutive months from May to August are scrutinized. The data have been displayed in table-2:

Table 2: Coverage of Bodo-Adivasi conflict by *The Assam Tribune*, 1998

Subjects	No. of news	Nature of coverage	No. of news
Coverage of the incident	19	News	13
Conditions of the relief camps	0	Editorial	0
Woman issues	0	Article	0
Child issues	0	Letter to the editor	0
Total coverage	19	Photograph	6
		Total coverage	19

Source: Content analysis of *The Assam Tribune*

The content analysis of *Asomiya Pratidin* is done in the same pattern of *The Assam Tribune*. 120 issues of *Asomiya Pratidin* from the month of May, June, July and August have been scrutinized to find out the coverage of this newspaper on the Bodo-Adivasi conflict of 1996. The data are analyzed in table-3.

Table 3: Coverage of Bodo-Adivasi conflict by *Asomiya Pratidin*, 1996

Subjects	No. of news	Nature of coverage	No. of news
Coverage of the incident	45	News	43
Conditions of the relief camps	3	Editorial	1
Woman issues	2	Article	4
Child issues	2	Letter to the editor	0

Total number of coverage	52	Photograph	4
		Total number of coverage	52

Source: Content analysis of *Asomiya Pratidin*

To study about the coverage by *Asomiya Pratidin* on the ethnic conflict occurred in 1998, the contents from 90 issues of this newspaper from the month of May, June and July have been scrutinized. The data found from this study are displayed in table-4.

Table 4: Coverage of Bodo-Adivasi conflict by *Asomiya Pratidin*, 1998

Subjects	No. of news	Nature of coverage	No. of news
Coverage of the incident	28	News	31
Conditions of the relief camps	5	Editorial	1
Woman issues	0	Article	1
Child issues	1	Letter to the editor	1
Total number of coverage	34	Photograph	0
		Total number of coverage	34

Source: Content analysis of *Asomiya Pratidin*

RESULT AND DISCUSSION:

Media can play a major role in shaping the perception of the society towards women. Media can be more than news. It can contribute to gender equality and peace building in several ways. Women suffer most during conflict induced displacement and displacement is inter-related with any conflict. Women experience gender-based violence, loss of home, family separation, health problems, trauma during and after the period of conflict. Their negotiated position in society may diminish which will be achieved after a long time. Hence, media has to play a crucial and significant role in presenting conflict stories with gendered perspective incorporating with the changed circumstances of women. In most societies, access of some rights by women are limited. Women lose their access to property and resources during displacement. Media should highlight their rights and proper understanding of their conditions during displacement and aftermath. Women face problems at the shelter camps regarding sanitation and hygiene. These issues should be highlighted. The loss of social status of women after conflict due to several factors such as loss of income, lack of access to resources need to be reported. Media should portray the deterioration of health status of women at the time of conflict and displacement. The psychological complications faced by women due to separation and breakdown of family and other factors should be presented by media.

From the above content analysis, we have found that, the print media of Assam gave ample space to the incidents of ethnic clashes occurred in Kokrajhar district of Assam in the years 1996 and 1998. But it is seen from the above tables representing the statistical analysis of the data, the coverage of these two selected newspapers regarding the conditions of women during conflict is quite dissatisfactory. The content analysis of these newspapers reflects a gloomy picture on the coverage of the plight of women in conflict situation. The analysis proves that these newspapers did not try to highlight the problems of women they face in conflict situation. Regarding the conflict in 1996, *Asomiya Pratidin* published only two coverage related to the conditions of women out of the conflict related total coverage of fifty two. One of the coverage depicting the condition of women in conflict was a photograph captured by Chinmoy Roy published on 11th of June in 1996. It portrayed a Bodo woman with a new born baby in her lap which she gave birth at

the relief camp amidst the terror of death caused by ethnic violence. The joy of having a baby was not expressed on her face. Her face tells only the terror and pain caused by violence under which she compelled to live her uncertain life. The photograph was captioned as— *The 14-days-old baby which was given to birth by Chonima Basumatari at Kokrajhar Bidyapith relief camp amidst the death terror (Mrityu bibhishikar majotei Kokrajhar Bidyapithor sahajyo sibirot Chonima Basumatariye jonmo diya 14 diniya sishuti)*. The other coverage was a news item which depicted the contamination of several infectious diseases at the relief camps of Kokrajhar and the disastrous conditions of women at those camps who suffered most by these diseases. This news was published on 15th of June in 1996 under the title-*Spreading diseases at shelter camps (Ashroy sibirot rog biyopise)*. The news reported that, several infectious diseases such as Diarrhea, Malaria, Gastroenteritis and Dysentery are breaking out due to lack of cleanliness and unhealthy conditions of the shelter camps of Kokrajhar and Gossaigaon. These diseases would form in epidemic without providing proper and immediate medical facilities. The most delicate victims of these diseases were women and children. More than hundreds of inmates died, and several had been suffered from these infectious diseases at the shelter camps. The conditions of pregnant women and children at these shelter camps were indescribable. Several diseases created panic at almost all the shelter camps, but the condition at the Adivasi shelter camps becomes more deplorable. The administration faced problem in providing regular medical service at the shelter camps due to the excessive and increasing number of inmates. It also depicted the sufferings of the pregnant women at the camps due to lack of medical care. *The Assam Tribune* did not publish any coverage on the plight of women in conflict situation occurred in 1996 and 1998.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION:

The patriarchal attitude of media all over the world in covering woman issues is also reflected in print media of Assam. The newspapers selected for content analysis covered various incidents and aspects of the ethnic conflicts such as factual information about the occurring of the conflicts, problems of the shelter camps, rehabilitation, child issues etc. The coverage of the selected conflicts by print media of Assam is satisfactory as found in the analysis. But on the contrary, media has failed in covering the problems of women affected by conflict. Assam along with the North Eastern region is prone to ethnic conflicts as it is a homeland of several ethnic groups. Hence, media in this region has the consequential responsibility at the time of conflict. Women are the worst sufferers during conflict and they face many challenges in such situation due to biological, social and psychological factors. The problems and effects of conflict on women may last for a long period. Though there are innumerable issues regarding the conditions of women in conflict to be highlighted, but media use to avoid these. In a democratic country like India, both man and woman should be given equal importance in all spheres. Media is like a mirror of a society as it has the responsibility to bring to light the happenings of a society among the public and the policy makers. Media should focus on portraying the struggling lives of the woman victims of conflict. Media should highlight the plight of women in conflict situation so that the administration, associations and organizations can adopt necessary steps for the bereaved and distressed women affected by conflict to recover from their trauma and to lead a new life.

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