

Roles of Media in Manipur Ethnic Conflict

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ABSTRACT: Mass media shapes perception, disseminates ideas, informs the citizens and influences public opinion. The roles of media are dynamic and carries accountability of the contents which are published having truthfulness and objectivity. This paper attempts to examine the roles of mass media and the ethics of journalism during 2023-2024 Manipur ethnic conflict. In order to examine the objectives, content analysis of few selected international news organisations, national news organization and local media of Manipur was collected and examined. The findings of this research suggests that mass media served both as a vehicle of informing the citizens and also had misleading roles. Misinformation, particularly during sensitive situations like conflicts, can be harmful or even lethal. Thus, studying the interplay between media and these contexts is crucial. This paper highlights the troubling ‘symbolic annihilation’ of Manipur, showing how divisions along ethnic lines have silenced the majority community’s voice in favor of the minority by meticulously utilizing psychological tactics like “framing” and “Kuleshov effect”. This imbalance in representation raises serious concerns about the quality of conflict journalism. To foster understanding and healing, it is essential to prioritize peace journalism, focusing on dialogue and solutions during these sensitive times.

INTRODUCTION

Media as we know is known for being the fourth pillar of democracy. It is known that way so because media acts as a watchdog and a whistleblower in the society. Media has dynamic impacts on the public and therefore on the minds of the people. Media carries the messages of events, incidents and happenings to the large amount of heterogeneous and anonymous audience.

Since the beginning of conflict between the Meitei and Kuki community from 3rd of May, 2023. A lot of messages are mediated across different types of media like in print media, electronic media and on social media platforms. Our society as of now is an information rich society. As most of the citizens of Manipur have access

to Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) and high-speed internet along with functioning local print media and broadcast media.

Journalism being a part of media, it plays a very important roles in mitigating situations and forming public opinion. During a war-like situation, the utmost role of media is “Peace Journalism”. Which is reporting on facts, being objective, fair and impartial. At the same time, in the context of India, adhering to the ethical parameters set by Press Council of India (PCI). It is in this sense (Kurtis, 2018) suggests ‘The media has been seen as a sector that contributes to democracy. The negative impact with regard to this is when the media house omits or commits a deviation by withholding some information from the people. This could have an impact on the public security’.

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Therefore, in this research the researcher has employed content analysis tool of qualitative research methods. To understand the role of media in the current conflict, the researcher has employed to analyse print media publications, broadcast media discussions. This research requires meticulous and careful handpick of published articles and news reports. To remain adhered and have a fair and neutral approach, the researcher has selected contents from national news organisations, local media houses and major international news agencies like Associated press, BBC and Al Jazeera.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The research paper attempts to explore the roles and contributions of media during ethnic conflict. The study is a poignant embark on understanding the dynamism, consequences and effects on the social strata of strife torn state, Manipur. This paper explores how narratives shaped by ethnicity influence the normalization of armed conflict. It also highlights the importance of dialogue in bridging divides and fostering unity. Media cultivates actions, shapes perception and behavior, while signs and symbols mitigates connotative meanings and acts as visual evidence serving as the message of the whole dissecting all the propagandas and agendas set by different parties and organisations. Importance on medium being the message was well given by Marshall McLuhan as termed “medium is the message” (Olos, 2003).

The effect of mass media is significant as it can be both informative and misleading or if it contains fake news and misinformation, it can be lethal. Therefore, it is very important to study the phenomenon of interrelation between media during sensitive situations like conflict. In this sense, Kurtis (2018) says, ‘it is possible to pursue social change either by supporting the forces working in the desired direction or by opposing the forces oriented in the opposite direction. Transferred to a conflict environment, peace and reconciliation in society can be achieved either by countering the actors and processes that fuel conflict, or by supporting their opponents in the peace-movement’.

RESEARCH QUESTION OF THE STUDY

- RQ₁. What are the roles of media during the discourse of Manipur ethnic conflict?
- RQ₂. Does media dictates in inciting more violence or contributes in bringing peace and unity?

OBJECTIVE

The objectives of this research are:

- to investigate the various roles of media during Manipur ethnic conflict.
- to analyse contents related to the ethnic conflict in Manipur contributing in peace or in fueling violence.
- to deconstruct the psychological tactics used by media in propagating its message during Manipur ethnic conflict.

MATERIALS & METHODS

This research is explanatory and exploratory in nature. The researcher has employed content analysis of qualitative research methods. As the study is about media coverage on Manipur ethnic conflict, the researcher has collected published news packages and articles which have been attempted to deconstruct by the uses of words, phrases, sentences, audio-visual elements and the like.

DELIMITATION OF THE STUDY

The researcher has delimited the research with only few handpicked contents, whereas, contents published, aired, broadcasted on Manipur conflict is huge and it is almost impossible to analyse every content one by one. However, though the number of sources is limited, care has been taken to include sources which are popular and wide reach.

Data collection

As the research is qualitative in nature, secondary data has been collected from various news sources and news agency.

RESULT

The content analysis of this research revolves around 14 published contents, out of which 8 are

articles both published online and print media. The other four contents are audio-visual broadcast and social media platforms. The content analysis attempts to examine some key words used repeatedly and visual signs and representation which are evident in shaping a narrative, building up stories and accounting on the events of Manipur ethnic conflict.

The data were taken from heterogeneous sources to maintain a holistic result. The said contents are from:

1. BBC New. Published on 20th July, 2023. (Baker, 2023)
2. The Guardian. Published on 21st July, 2023. (Ellis-Petersen, 2023)
3. Associated Press (published on 5th July, 2023). (Saaliq, 2023)
4. BBC News. Published on 20th September, 2023. (Chakrabarti and Limaye, 2023)
5. Al Jazeera. Published on 5th May, 2023. (Why is there violence in India's Manipur?, 2023)
6. First Post. Premiered on 1st July, 2023. (Sharma, 2023)
7. The Hindu. Published on 5th May, 2024. (Karmakar, 2023)

8. Hindustan Times. Published on 4th May, 2023. (Parashar, 2023)
9. The Telegraph. Published on 17th June, 2024. (Press Trust of India, 2024)
10. India Today. Published on 24th July, 2023. (Mishra, 2023)
11. NDTV. Published on 4th May, 2023. (Upadhyay and Choudhury, 2023)
12. Ukhrul Times. Published on 5th May, 2023. (UT Desk, 2023)
13. Sangai Express. Published on 4th May, 2023. (OSR Correspondents, 2023)

Here are the analysis of the above-mentioned contents:

- Negative reporting: Any form of publication which are biased, partial, sensational, inaccurate, divisive and insensitive in the treatment of news.
- Neutral reporting: Any form of publication which are objective, fair, robust and accurate reporting.
- Positive reporting: Any form of media publication which contributes to the peace, reconciliation and sensitive treatment of news.

TABLE 1
Categorisation of contents

Contents (Headline or title)	Keywords and phrases	Negative reporting	Neutral reporting	Positive reporting
BBC Manipur violence: What is happening and why	"Majority Meitei", "Minority Kuki", "Meitei led Government"	Yes	No	No
The Guardian Manipur: why is there conflict and how is the government responding?	"Majority Meitei", "Minority Kuki", "Meitei controlled government", "Discrimination"	Yes	No	No
AP News Armed mobs rampage through villages and push remote Indian region to the brink of civil war	"Minority Christian Kuki", Hindu Meitei (Religious division)	Yes	No	No
BBC Ethnic conflict and murder grip India's state of Manipur	"Majority Meitei", "Minority Kuki". Visuals of church burned (Religious angle).	Yes	No	No
Al Jazeera Why is there violence in India's Manipur?	Visuals of church burned (Religious angle), Majority Hindu Meitei, interviewee of one community, one voice (Imbalance).	Yes	No	No

Contents (Headline or title)	Keywords and phrases	Negative reporting	Neutral reporting	Positive reporting
Firstpost Why Manipur's History is Crucial to Understand its Conflict Flashback with Palki Sharma	"Meitei community", "Kuki Community", "Unity", "Peace".	No	Yes	Yes
The Hindu Many killed in Manipur riots; State government issues shoot-at-sight order	"Riots", "Majority Meitei", "Peace" "Blamed" "Mobs".	No	Yes	No
Hindustan Times CM blames misunderstandings for Manipur violence, pledges to address grievances	No use of divisive words, focuses on Government's efforts.	No	Yes	Yes
The Telegraph Union Home Minister Amit Shah calls meeting to review security situation in Manipur	"Majority Meitei", "Peace", "Gun culture".	No	Yes	No
India Today Manipur Ground Report: Watch Manipur Locals Talk To India Today About How Has Been The Situation	"Warzone", "Divided people", "protect themselves", "Kuki side", "Battlefield". Inaccurate visual representation.	Yes	No	No
NDTV Manipur Issues "Shoot At Sight" Orders In "Extreme Cases" Amid Violence	Inaccurate visual representation. "The state is divided"	Yes	No	No
Ukhrul Times Death toll in Imphal valley reaches 31	"De-escalate violence", "resume dialogue and negotiations"	No	Yes	Yes
Sangai Express Tribal Solidarity March takes ugly turn; houses, offices, vehicles burnt	The report did not contain any divisive words or phrases. Accounts on incidents were reported both of Meitei and Kuki areas.	No	Yes	No

Media reportage on Manipur ethnic conflict

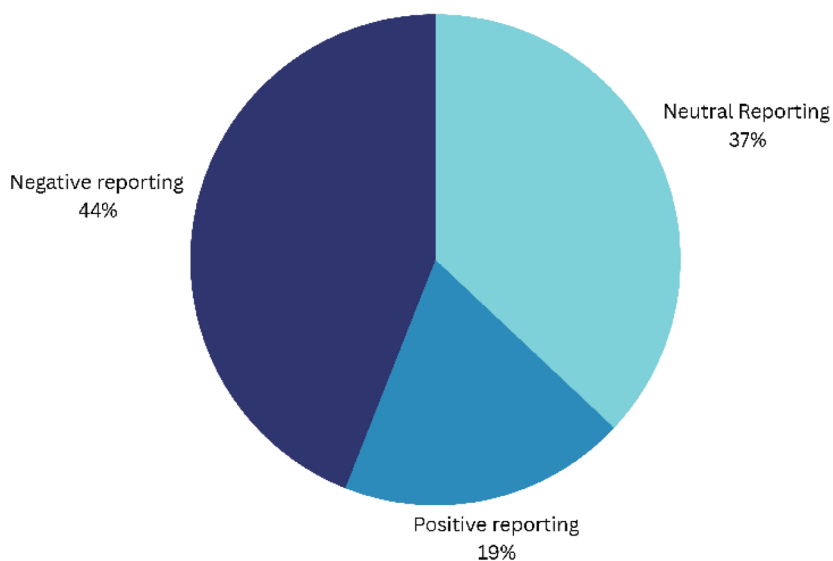


Figure 1: Media Reportage on Manipur Ethnic Conflict

DISCUSSION

The thorough analysis and findings of each heterogeneous media contents all together has resulted 44% of 'media fueling divide and inciting violence'. While 37% of the media contents remained neutral in reporting the events and incidents of this conflict. Only 19% of the media were positive reporting, promoting the peace initiatives by the government and restraining from sensationalizing the incident.

During the analysis of the media contents, it is found that international media has used divisive words such as "Minority Kuki" and "Majority Meitei" which inclines to a narrative of majority dominating the minority. Further, tagging the warring ethnic communities with "Christian" and "Hindu", giving it a religious angle, which reflects the western country's preconception of religious conflicts in India which has also created a vacuum of dissonance among the audience. Manipur ethnic conflict does not have any involvement of religious issues as is confirmed from both the warring communities. The conflict is due to having conflicting political needs and demands between the warring Meitei and the Kuki community.

It is also found that the media propagated "framing" approach in which biased reporting in favour of one community is also evident in the present study. Most of the international media reports on Manipur starts with an establishing story of the Kuki community with more emphasis and screen time (audio-visual) as is evident in the hyperlinks provided above. While, the same hyperlink apparently attempts to maintain a sense of neutrality by adding Meitei community's stories at the later section of the news story with lesser emphasis and screen time (audio-visual). This framing of news reportage contributes to the alteration of perception on the conflict, victimizing one community by giving more emphasis of stories and villainising the other community by giving less emphasis. In this context, (De Vreese, 2005) noted that the variety of definitions of news frames in both theoretical and empirical contributions is considerable. Gitlin (1980) defines frames as 'persistent' patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection,

emphasis and exclusion by which symbol handlers routinely organize discourse.

In the electronic media, which is now considered as one of the most influential media of communication due to the involvement of its characteristics having audio-visual, sight and sound symbols, dialogues and music play an important role. In a short documentary by Chakrabarti and Limaye (2023) for BBC titled "Ethnic conflict and murder grip India's state of Manipur", Kuleshov Effect was carefully used by juxtaposing four different shots. The first shot indicating burning of churches that gives a light to religious angle. The second shot, houses being attacked and vandalized, symbolizing violence. Shot three, car being burned down and the last shot being the punchline of the montage, shot of Kuki's Wall of remembrance symbolizing an altered perception of reality in visual language (Fig.1.1). The juxtaposition of different pictures all together being crafted to validate the news narrative of one community being dominated by the other community. In simple words, unrelated different video footages which when keep in separate gives a neutral meaning of conflict but which when intentionally arranged keep together gives a biased meaning and context. This is a classic example of creating a visual memory of the conflict to the masses by symbolic annihilation and manipulation of motion photography.

It is in this sense, (Wojcik, 2004) reports 'The Kuleshov effect proffers the principle that, in absence of an establishing shot, a viewer will infer a spatial relation between discrete shots. In other words, when presented with a series of shots, viewer assumes or constructs a relationship of space, time and/or narrative among them'.

The national media on the other hand-maintained neutrality and at the same time managed to sensationalise the crisis while reporting in the beginning of the violence which broke out on 3rd May 2023. The prevalence of Right-wing media supporting the ruling government and left-wing media supporting the narrative of Kuki community (being against the ruling state government). It is evident that media polarisation took place, contributing more into the divide and adding up a vacuum to the already segregated wounds of hatred.

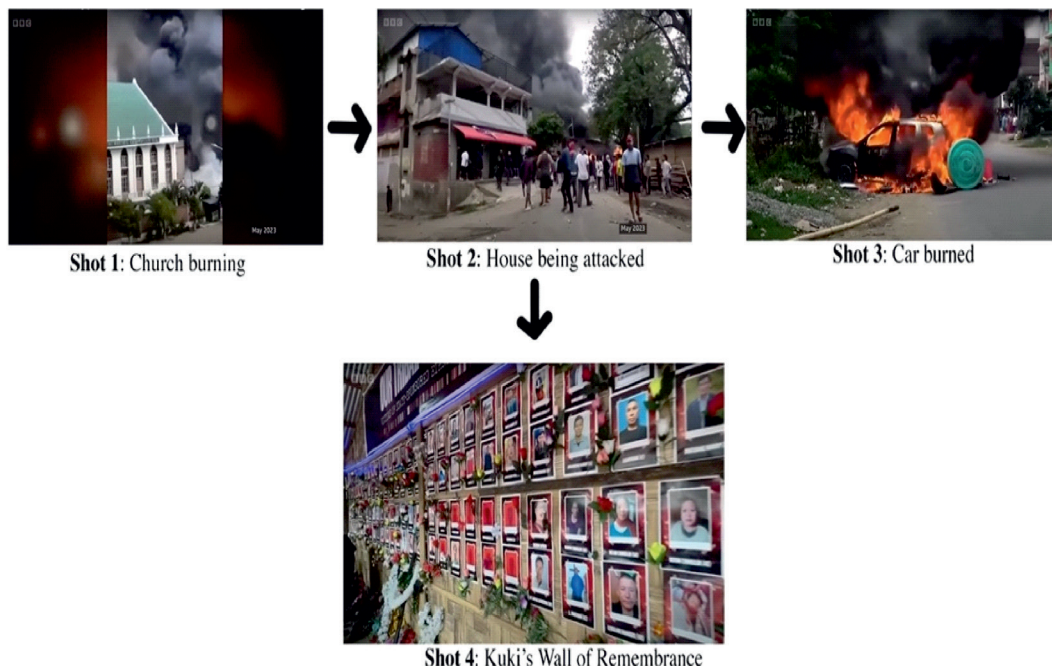


Figure 2: Screenshots from the BBC's Video on Manipur Conflict

The local news media reported in depth on the conflict maintaining balance, truthfulness and objectivity. Although, the imbalance of peace journalism is being overshadowed by agenda driven, propagandist international and national media which resulted in prolonged violence.

Social media on the other hand played a major role in inciting the beginning of the violence by wildfire spread of fake news, disinformation and misinformation of rape and murder in both the communities. Soon after the violence broke out, the Government of Manipur banned the internet. Therefore, social media did not contribute later much during the beginning of the conflict.

It is important to note that, not a single content selected for analysis had used the word “Manipuri”, the idea of being a Manipuri has been diluted down on ethnic lines. The inclusiveness of togetherness and oneness has not been reported on. The symbolic annihilation of Manipuri (Meitei, Naga and Kuki) all as together and one has been taking place. As (Coleman and Yochim, 2008) discusses the “Symbolic annihilation of race” and present its scholarly research uses. Most often, the concept is

used to describe the problematic treatment of racial groups in media. In our review and subsequent analysis of this concept, we observe that “symbolic annihilation of race” is most useful when it is used to note the absence or trivialization of racial groups in media.

CONCLUSION

The findings of the study concludes that the media, known for its importance in the society for informing, educating and persuading the public and guarding the society has been used to disseminate divide, gatekeeping contents according to their agendas and therefore has contributed minimum peace in the conflict.

Broadcast and audio-visual media utilised theoretical and intellectual production and editing process like the “Kuleshov Effect” to alter the narrative on subconscious mind by creating juxtaposition of inaccurate and incomplete footages together.

This finding also reiterates the use of “Majority”, “Minority”, “Hindu”, “Christian” mostly by international news organisations. The use of such

nouns is prevalent in trivialising the Manipur issue by false representation and inaccurate reportage thereby setting a false narrative being catered to the masses.

The findings of this paper further unveil ‘symbolic annihilation’ of Manipuri as a whole by dividing the people of Manipur on ethnic lines. Symbolic annihilation in this particular conflict also happened in a manner that majority community’s voice, representation and stance were muzzled by giving more emphasis on the minority community.

Conclusively, the quality of conflict journalism is subpar. Peace journalism has to be restored once again while reporting conflicts and sensitive issues to promote peace, dialogues and solution amidst a crisis.

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