Conceptualising Identity and Conflict through Mediatization : A Case Study of Bodoland Movement

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Communication technology has evolved significantly, thereby bringing about a change in the processes of identity formation, conflict and conflict resolution. Global news networks that broadcast live from all corners of the world, making use of satellite and internet technologies, provide immediate access to unfolding events and under certain conditions, influence the course of events. In the present times, means of communication technology, be it, print, audio visual or social media, form an integral part of an individual's life. Media plays a multifaceted role, acting as a major source of information, entertainment, news and public opinion, influencing perceptions, choices, attitudes and behaviours of individuals. This paper deals with two such roles played by the media, i.e., portrayal of conflicts and identity construction, in the context of Bodoland Territorial Area Districts (BTAD). Assam has a long history of conflicts and BTAD has been one of its worst conflict-affected districts. Historically, the media

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has played an important role in reporting and coverage of conflicts, thereby presenting a visualised account of happenings. This has become all the more relevant with the advancement of technologies in print and digital mediums. The increased accessibility as a result of emergence of multiple media platforms such as mobile messaging services, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter amongst others, has affected power relations with respect to information sharing. In today's time, with the technological developments in media, it can be claimed that individuals are seemingly better placed in making use of their agency. However, the effective use of these technologies for identity construction as well as conflict resolution needs a critical assessment, which this paper endeavours to look into.

1.   Introduction

Communication Technology influences the society and has a major role to play in the exchange of ideas and information among the members of a society. The means of communication can vary from print to multimedia, audio-visual, internet among others. Communication technology has evolved significantly. At present times, digital media technologies have become an important element of the society and affect the life of people in multiple ways. Among the new technologies, the ones that have achieved popularity are mass media and social media. These mediums serve as an important platform from where people can gather information as well as voice out their personal opinions. Appadurai opines that electronic media transforms everyday discourse and provides :

> ...[r]esource for experiments in self-making in all sorts of societies, for all sorts of persons... Because of the sheer multiplicity of the forms in which they appear (cinema, television, computers, and telephones) and because of the rapid way in which they move through daily life routines, electronic media provide resources for self-imagining as an everyday social project (Appadurai, 1996 : 3-4).

The onset of new technology such as mobile phones and internet which provide access to social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, etc., have brought in a new sense of speed based communication among human beings which enables the process of dissemination of information fast and far reaching, thereby enhancing the possibility of building "networks between the local and the global" (Gurumurth, 2006 : 611). As Drache argues, "new

forms of communication and political activism causes one to rethink the dynamics of power and the way that digital technology enables power and authority to diffuse from the elite few towards the many" (Drache, 2008 : 7). New communication technologies have connected not only people but also the way things operate and function, thereby changing the way people interact. Modern information and communication technologies have seemed to have created a "global village", thereby providing people with the opportunity to communicate with anyone across the world as if they were living next door. Along with evolving significantly, communication technology has also brought about a change in the processes of identity formation, conflict and conflict resolution. Global news networks that broadcast live from all corners of the world, making use of satellite and internet technologies, provide immediate access to unfolding events and under certain conditions, influence the course of events.

As such, media is evolving and considerably changing the way things functions and operates. The media plays a multifaceted role- acting as a major source of information, entertainment, news and public opinion, influencing perceptions, choices, attitudes and behaviours of individuals among others. This paper deals with two such roles played by the media, i.e., portrayal/visualization of conflicts and identity construction, in the context of Bodoland Territorial Area Districts (BTAD). In doing so, this article aims to analyse in the context of the Bodo Movement how the process of identity formation and articulation is an on-going and open-ended process along with highlighting the role media plays in ethnic conflicts and examine if it constructively plays any role in conflict transformation both in promoting peace and inciting violence.

2. Identity and Conflict : Comprehending the Terms

Identity can be defined as attachments that people have- to communities, ways of life, set of beliefs or practices, all of which that play an important role in formulating an individual's conception of self and belongingness. It denotes a person's distinctive character or affiliation shared by the members of a particular social category. Individuals can occupy different places in a society - student, sportsperson, politician, farmer, and so on. Some of those places are exclusive, occupied only by a small number of people. All these

different roles and positions a person occupies form their personal identity while defining the collective.

Identity can also be related with space. As such an individual's location to a larger extent also influences their beliefs about themselves. Thus, the place an individual occupies guide their ideas and as it is also shared with other people, to an extent, it also defines their relationships with others. This aspect of identity seems evident when one talks about group identity and also the essence of co-existence of collective identity along with personal identity. The idea of place can extend beyond the physical understanding. In fact, individuals and groups have often defined their sense of belonging-ness to issues related to tradition, culture, gender, religion, class, ethnicity, place of origin and shared history so on and so forth. Thus, an individual can find different ways of defining their sense of belongingness. For instance, a student can define their identity in a different ways- they can belong from a neighbourhood in Delhi, while also being an Indian and further also having a a specific family history. Thus, the parameters of defining one's identity can vary. This article concentrates particularly with the idea of ethnic identity.

3.   The Idea of Ethnicity and Assertion of Ethnic Identity by Groups

Ethnicity frames one of the most important criteria for mobilising people to achieve collective goals. It can be considered as an important part of one's identity whose membership is determined by attributes associated with or believed to be associated with descent and shared history. Tracing the usage of the word through the pages of history highlights that - "the term 'ethnic' was used in the early 19th century to refer to the study of the origin, characteristics and progress of the world's different 'people' marked by differences in religion, behaviour and lifestyle" (Wolfgang, 2006 : 86). Hutchinson and Smith identify six characteristics of classifying an 'ethnie' :

> …a common proper name that reflects the essence of the community; myth of a common origin in time and place; shared memories of a common past including heroes, events and their commemoration; one or more elements of a common culture such as religion, customs or language; a link with a homeland, basically implying symbolic attachment to the ancestral land; and a sense of solidarity on the part of atleast some sections of the ethnie's population (Hutchinson and Smith, 1996 : 6-7).

These features are more or less to be found in almost most of the definitions put forth by many other scholars in the terms of defining ethnicity and ethnic groups. All these features may be said to fall within the realm of socio-cultural attributes with a hint of symbolic attachment to them which then becomes a defining feature of a particular ethnic group. Thus, ethnicity can also be defined in terms of shared genetic, racial and linguistic traits. Gilley, while defining ethnicity states, "…that part of a person's identity which is drawn from one or more 'markers' like race, religion, shared history, region, social symbols or language" (Gilley, 2004 : 1158). This points out that although an individual is undoubtedly important, but only so far as they identify themselves to the collective identity. Thus, in referring to ethnicity, the connotation is basically in terms of a collective identity. The members of these collective necessarily need to have a shared ancestry, follow a particular tradition, culture and speak a similar language. Similarly, even in Northeast India, ethnicity has mostly been regarded to be reliable index for understanding group identity (Gohain, 1996). This is a region where multiple ethnicities reside and every ethnic community has a history and shares a cultural memory distinctive from the other. This idea of a collective sense also actualises to the cause of a homeland, where groups resort to using ethnic symbols for identity assertion (Smith, 1999).

Ethnic identity cannot be considered as static concept. It varies, and various factors can be held accountable for the formulation of an ethnic identity, be it migration, ethnic assertion etc. Thus, ethnic identity could be considered to be a flexible concept where there is a possibility of both assimilation as well as multiplicity or separatism in course of contact and communication across ethnic groups. Goswami in this context tries to contextualise that between these polarities of inter group interface, there lies another potential, i.e., it may lead to identity transformation and the formation of an interethnic identity. Thus, ethnicity might be characterized as a comprehension of the progression of social characterization taking into account ethnic group identities and also entire array of fundamental themes such as social movements, nation-formation, nationalism, conflict etc. Further, an important premise essentially associated with it is the sense of common recognition which unites the individuals and forms the basis for origination of a collective protest or movement.

However, it is important to understand that development of political consciousness in an ethnic group does not essentially lead to

ethnic conflict. But, it is actually in the context of contestation with other ethnic groups in a region or in its method of intercession with the state for gaining access to political and economic resources that conflict arises. This can be characterized as an ethnic clash or conflict.

4. The Dimensions of Ethnic Conflict in BTAD : The many reasons for it

Conflicts can be intrastate as well as interstate. Although interstate conflicts have considerably decreased since the end of Cold War, intrastate conflicts still plague the society. For instance, in 2008, twenty-one states were involved in major armed conflicts out of which twenty were internal ones. States such as Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Sri Lanka, Yemen and many others are afflicted by such conflicts (Jesse & Williams, 2011 : 1). Ethno-nationalist violence involving minority groups have become an important topic of discussion, precisely because of the prolonged nature of these conflicts based along ethnic lines which have claimed lives and disrupted stability in states. There is also the issue of varying power relations which operate between the ruling political ethnic elites and the other ethnic groups, which further increases the conflicts. Pahi Saikia illustrates how 'ethnic protest and mobilization have often led to situations of violence between ethnic groups (Saikia, 2011 : 1).

Ethnic conflicts have been a recurrent problem faced by Northeast India since independence. Assam has a long history of conflicts and BTAD has been one of its worst conflict-affected districts. Respondents assert that what is unfortunate is that huge losses occur in terms of life and property in the re-occurring conflicts, and this has forced the people to question the doubtful role of the Government of Assam and the ruling political ethnic elites of BTAD to address the killings.[1] An ABSU booklet entitled *The Killing Enigma in BTAD* published in 2008 gives a detailed account of the number of deaths that have occurred in the year 2008 in BTAD and states :

> It is found that within a year 82 innocent people reported to be supporter either of NDFB, BPF, BPPF, BPF (youth) and ex-BLT had to embrace in the meantime their untimely death leaving a frail of fear psychosis among the public as to when, where and who will be the next victim of the situation even Teachers, Lecturers, Peace Activists and Journalists were not spared. The Parties or organizations are alleging each other for the killing... (ABSU, 2009 : 3).

In terms of reasons for conflicts, respondents pointed out the reason for the conflict to be related to land and the demographic changes that have occurred due to movement of people from the different parts which has led to an imbalance and rise in encroachment issues.[2] One of the respondents points out "…not exactly territory, but land is very important for expression of identity. And so, when land is threatened there is emergence of conflict."[3] This is precisely what happened in the 2012 conflict between Bodos and Bengali Muslims, "...the Bodos felt targeted in their region and in retaliation to it they chose this method as a solution to stop it. You see they fight back for their survival."[4] The factor of identity crisis occurring mainly due to immigration and the callousness on the part of the Indian government to find a long-lasting solution to conflicts was also stated to be a reason. Land or territory which forms an important factor in terms of preserving and protecting one's identity is under threat and that is why conflicts take place. The major objection that the Bodos have was the encroachment of land, as land was a major source of identity portrayal. Thus, any threat to land was considered as a threat to ethnic identity. Besides the growth of population owing to demographic change and pressure on available resources, land alienation is the main contention behind the conflict between the immigrants i.e. the outsiders and the inhabitants who fight for the same geographical space to protect and preserve their identity and culture. Conflicts results in internal displacement of population which give rise to some other problem like poverty, unemployment, security problem etc. One of the respondents while highlighting the reason of conflicts, pointed out that conflict takes place because of the issue of survival. Land forms an indisputable source of life for the tribals and as such the struggle the Bodos have is mainly for the protection of their land and identity. It also pinpoints to the incapability of the ruling political ethnic elites to safeguard the defining elements of an ethnicity whereby the groups threatening an intrusion into their ethnic communities thus fight back to maintain their ethnic boundaries.

Insurgency is another factor which is to be blamed for these conflicts. The insurgents take advantage of the situation of misunderstanding and distrust among the groups to instigate people. Respondents state that the sense of mutual distrust which existed among the communities are put to use by militant groups to incite feelings of distrust among communities.[5] Also, the inability of

the government to initiate methods to deal with unresolved issues leads to further alleviation of conflict.

Amongst other factors, media also plays an important role in terms of conflicts. In fact, media plays a pivotal role in terms of visualisation of a conflict and thus also transforms the nature of ethnic conflicts in that process. The role of media is evident before, during, and after an ethnic conflict. A brief analysis of reporting done by print media and audio visual and social media will bring forth the picture how media at time also acts as a reason for conflicts. An analysis of the 2014 conflict[6] highlights the importance accorded to the incident by *Amar Asom* and *The Assam Tribune*. While *Amar Asom* published 377 news item and *The Assam Tribune* published 228 articles (Fernandes & Borgohain, 2017 : 116). Respondents pointed out that at times, it is the repeated telecast of the news regarding conflicts that instigates violence.[7] One of them pinpointed to the fact as to how the repeated telecasts of the instances of violence actually plays the role of a catalyst or instigator as people get depressed or angry watching the rampage caused by the conflicts.[8]

Nevertheless, it is important to state here that conflict is not always seen as a pre-planned act depriving it of its spontaneity. However, there are strong reasons to believe that unrest in society is a result of the structure within which it occurs. Therefore, this framework helps us to understand that conflict in the region is not just based on a superficial idea of assertion of identity, but rather a culmination of different variables at play.

5. The Multifaceted Role of Media : An Identity Articulator and an Ethnic Conflict Transformer

5·1 Media and the Changing Aspects of Identity

An important part of identity construction is how one identifies the self and this process of identification is to a larger extent influenced by media. Media influences our thinking patterns to an extent. Individuals are mostly surrounded by mass and popular media. Media can be a site of change and at the same time perpetuate ideologies and norms. A sense of representation is used by media where - images, words and characters or persona are put to use to convey ideas to individuals or groups. These ideas and the values attached can have an intimate relationship with ideology. Further-more, identity can be multidimensional and its nature undergoes a

change over a period of time. Thus, identity can transform and change depending upon the need and situation. Nevertheless, it is necessary to interpret the reasons for formulation of a collective consciousness among the people and how over a period of a time it can change. As such, it won't be wrong to argue that individuals want to be part of a community, but also be visible as an individual at the same time. In this context, Bennett points out an interesting assessment in terms of social movements and declining group loyalties :

> ...social fragmentation and the decline of group loyalties can rise due to various reasons in a social movement which in turn have given rise to an era of personalized politics in which individual expression displaces collective action frames in the embrace of political causes (Bennett, 2012 : 37).

Thus, to draw from Bennett, the nature and issues of a social movement may change over a period of time. As such, individuals who are a part of a social movement can over a period of a time feel disconnected with the sense of the collective with which the movement began. This sense of detachment over the course of the movement, can lead to emergence or re-emergence of a sense of individual identity which was subsumed under the idea of the collective identity. This individualized form of identity and political participation can be seen in large number of rapidly forming political participation in recent times, be it be a political party or a candidate, corporations or brands and transnational organizations. Nevertheless, this does not mean that group-based identity politics has diminished, but the nature of mobilization has changed. Individuals now are mobilized around a variety of issues- personal lifestyle values to economic justice (fair trade, inequality, and development policies), environmental protection, and worker and human rights amongst others.

This shift to a personalized level of political participation can be marked as a defining change in the nature of political culture. It highlights how although individuals may be at the centre of their own universe, this universe can have a variety issues due to the social networking potential of global communication technologies. This large scale personalized and collective action is mostly managed through digital media technologies. These new media technologies are at times coordinated by organizations who played an enabling role, and sometimes with crowds who used layers of social media to

coordinate action. Digital media technologies nowadays, occupy a significant space in the society and affect the life of people in multiple ways. Thus, at present, research studies discussing the nature of the technocratic citizens, technocratic state mediated by new technologies has gained importance. The case in point, the Bodo identity movement also have its share of individualization of identity, which has existed since the beginning of the movement itself. It was the idea of a distinct individual identity which brought the larger tribal society together to collectively raise their demand for recognition of a distinctive Bodo identity. However, over a period of time as the movement transforms itself, the idea of the Bodo collective can become overpowering. In such a scenario, social movements may fail to represent the aspirations of the different levels of ethnicity, not necessarily hierarchically placed. Thus, we need to understand and analyse a social movement marred by fundamental flaws that lead to its failure in rising above a 'dominant-subjugated identity binary'. In fact, a major discontentment among the people with the Bodo movement is the corrupt notion of hegemonic power developed in the erstwhile elites. Individuals partly blame this to be a reason for fading of the actual cause of the movement, thereby paving the way for the emergence of development of a sense of individualism.

In social media, the Bodo identity is mostly a user driven digital identity based on explicit cultural and political principles which allows an individual an opportunity to assert their distinctive identity and also negotiate the differences between the Bodo and the Non-Bodo in the online world. The Bodo identity presented online is not a static identity based on certain fixed principles. Thus, apart from emphasising on issues related to language, rituals, attire, the demand for a separate statehood, the presence of the Bodo community online is distributed into various streams. Thus, although there is a lot of information and news related to conflicts and the political demand for a separate state, there is a considerable amount of discussion online highlighting on different aspects of the community's cultural practices ranging from music to food habits and fashion. In fact, respondents pointed out that analyzing an individuals' association to the movement necessitates engaging with different perspectives and not only the community. It would be a major drawback to identify the people only through the community lens as people associate with multiple issues.[9] This is where we can notice the emergence of an idea of an individual identity, which at times may differ from the

collective. Digital world has opened up new opportunities for individuals where they can negotiate with a variety of issues, thereby signifying a chance for negotiation, transitions and transformations, unique to the digital paradigm.

As such, it can rightly be argued that social media has emerged as a medium which primarily allow individuals to explore numerous possibilities of engaging with new ideologies and move beyond the monolithic sense of group identity. Thus, technology assists in the process of transformation of identity, where it can move away from the idea of the group identity into a notion of individualized identity.

5.2 Role of Media in Ethnic Conflict Transformation in BTAD

Media's role in conflict management, resolution, and prevention is evident, however its role in terms of conflict transformation needs to be examined. Media reports have the capacity to influence the attitude and perception of the audience and this can affect their behaviour towards the conflict. As such, media (be it print or social media) needs to be extremely sensible and aware while reporting conflicts, especially when it based on ethnic lines so that it does not escalate the conflict. In fact, an unbiased and authentic reporting of events can actually aid in the process of peace and reconciliation.

An analysis of the media-reporting of the 2012 and 2014 ethnic conflict, specifically by newspapers highlights various aspects that media deals with while covering up stories on ethnic conflicts. A positive aspect of such reporting on conflicts by newspapers highlights the various initiatives taken by conflicting parties, government, and NGOs for discussion and reconciliation measures. By venturing into sensible reporting, articles were also published which aimed at establishing the actual reasons for the conflicts. For instance, the 19th August, 2012 issue of *The Assam Tribune*, published an article on the 'causes and implications of BTAD violence' by Dr. Pahi Saikia. This article gave a detailed analysis about the underlying factors, responsible for the conflict in BTAD. Further, it can be seen that print media also publishes articles about efforts of political actors, NGOs and also different civil society groups to solve the conflict. Such articles, aims at fostering peace and confidence among the members of the society. Nonetheless, one cannot disagree that at times media also acts as a catalyst when certain articles which are published incites a sense of conflict. There are certain articles

published by the print media where they highlight the actors involved and the conspiracies by different groups and communities. Even though no explicit claim is made about any particular community or individual, it can create a sense of fear and mistrust among members of communities

Media has the power to influence emotions and thinking of people iresspective of their age group, religion, ethnicity, gender so on and so forth. Most of the respondents pointed out that media indeed has a significant influence in their everyday life. Although all forms of media(be it print, electronic or digital) are quite popular but, the applicability and use of social media for information dissemination is more effective. However, the accessibility and influence of social media is quite limited and it is mainly used by youth, academicians and journalists. Respondents admitted that during conflicts, media becomes quite active and does daily reporting of events.[10] This daily reports and articles published can influence either in promoting peace or inciting violence. Individuals can decipher about the intensity of the conflict and any progress is made in terms of negotiation and reconciliation, through media reporting. Further, it was also agreed upon by a majority of the respondents, that media focused on the immediate events and outcomes than long term resolutions and human rights concerns and carrying out.[11] Thus, to draw from such narratives, media is yet to play a valuable role in terms of ethnic conflict transformation in BTAD. A significant number of respondents pointed out that media has not been able to successfully highlight the causes of the conflict or initiate any substantiate any valuable dialogue for reconciliation. Nonetheless, there is no agreement on whether media projected a particular community as the cause of the conflict or not. Further, media also plays a questionable role at times, as in some instances divergent information and contradictory statements on the same issue have been published. Although people agreed to the fact that media have the power to build confidence and facilitate inter-community unity, but media failed to examine the role of leaders and administrators to productively alter the situation of the conflict.[12]

Furthermore, the post conflict role of media is questionable, although they are active during the violence , their activity after the de-ecalation of the conflict disappears. Thus, the need of hour is to ask certain pertinent questions - what happens to the victims after the violence ends and how can the strained relationships among

communities be restored. It is during the prevalence of peace and stability that media can effectively carry out the responsibility of rebuilding personal, relational, structural and cultural relations of individuals and institutions. Rebuilding these relations can prevent future instances of violence taking place.

6. Conclusion

Digital technology has indeed changed the way and means of identity articulation. To argue in terms of Cerulo :

> ...they have reframed the generalized others and the "generalized elsewheres" (Meyrowitz, 1989) from which the self takes its cues. they have reframed the generalized others and the "generalized elsewheres" (Meyrowitz, 1989) from which the self takes its cues (Cerulo, 1997 : 397).

The mode of communication technology(be it print, electronic or digital media) enables a wider level of participation and and collective mobilization and also facilitates newer modes of communication to provide information. These newer modes of communication also allows the opportunity to modify existing patterns and formulate a new environment for self-development and identification. Online communities not only provides an opportunity to reshape the collective but also considerably impacts an individuals personal identity construction. Individuals become a member of a multifaceted virtual community, where they interact and negotiate with different conceptions of identities. Similar to the print media which facilitated a sense of emerging consciousness for nationalistic aspirations among the citizens, the medium of digital technology enables a new level of consciousness and connectivity at a transnational level.

These virtual public spheres create an opportunity for undistorted communication and formulating democratic social change, mediating social relationships and creating the conditions for formation of alternative political opportunity structures that have implications for the transformation of the society. As such, the role of media(both print and social media) is vital, be it in terms of identity articulation or conflict management. Media can formulate public opinion and as such can influence the attitude and behaviour of individuals. This opportunity can be put to use by media to promote development and peace in the locality and eliminate structural and cultural violence by fostering inter-community unity for bringing

lasting peace in the society. An analysis of media's role in BTAD'S ethnic violence still falls short of acting as a powerful agent to bring in substantial change. Hence, the need of the hour is a changing set of power relations in the days to come where effective reconciliation measures can be introduced.

Notes

1. Respondents here refer to the people interviewed in Kokrajhar District of BTAD.
2. Information gathered during an interview with a civil society worker, Kokrajhar.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Information gathered during an interview with respondents from villages in Kokrajhar
6. This paper specifically discusses the 2012 and 2014 conflict that took place in BTAD.
7. Information gathered during an interview with respondents from villages in Kokrajhar
8. Information gathered during an interview a respondent of Titaguri Village in Kokrajhar.
9. Information gathered during an interview with respondents in Guwahati.
10. Information gathered during an interview with respondents in BTAD.
11. Ibid.
12. Information gathered during an interview with respondents in Guwahati.

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