ROLE OF MEDIA IN ENHANCING MULTICULTURALISM IN ETHNIC DIVERSITY OF MANIPUR

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ABSTRACT

Home to more than 33 ethnic communities speaking 29 different dialects, Manipur, one of the seven-sister states in northeast India, is a cultural mosaic and a mini India. Despite being rich in ethnic plurality, Manipur has been grappling with ever increasing ethnic conflicts and insurgency in quest for ethnic and regional identities since the last few decades thereby fomenting a climate of insecurity and mistrust at the cost peace and progress of the state. Besides, the issue of Manipur’s territorial integrity, and demand for Greater Nagaland are causing uneasiness on the relationship between the Meiteis and the Nagas while the demand for Kuki homeland is compounding the complex political issue despite the fact that the state’s ethnic plurality is inescapable. This is where the paradigm of multiculturalism becomes significant and desirable for all the groups in the state. Since mass media play a crucial role in a culturally diverse society the increasing multiculturalism in Manipur poses a great challenge for journalism. This paper seeks to outline the backdrop in which journalism paradigm can initiate dialogues and assist multiculturalism in addressing ethnic conflict thereby helping the preservation of the multicultural heritage of Manipur.

KEYWORDS: Multiculturalism, Journalism, Ethnic conflict, Insurgency, Greater Nagaland.
INTRODUCTION

With around 1,618 languages and 6,400 castes belonging to six major religions of the world, India is a multicultural nation which has diverse cultural but political unity and stands as an example of unity in diversity. Home to more than 166 tribes speaking various dialects, the northeast India with distinct demographic characteristics and cultural diversity is as varied as the country itself. Manipur, one of the seven-sister states in northeast India, is a cultural mosaic and a mini India with more than 33 ethnic communities speaking 29 different dialects. Despite being rich in ethnic plurality, Manipur has been grappling with ever-increasing ethnic conflicts since the last few decades fomenting a climate of insecurity and mistrust in the region. While insurgency in quest for ethnic and regional identities has cost peace and progress of the state, major clashes between the Meiteis and the Pangals in the valley and between the Nagas and the Kukis in the hills in the early 1990s showed vulnerability of being a multi-ethnic society. Besides, the issue of Manipur’s territorial integrity and the demand for Greater Nagaland are causing uneasiness on the relationship between the Meiteis and the Nagas while the demand for Kuki homeland is compounding the complex political issue. Nevertheless, the ethnic plurality in Manipur is both inescapable and desirable for all the groups in the region. This calls for ushering in a long lasting peace and its sustenance in the state can only be possible through sharing of power and resources among the different ethnic communities instead of their contestation for the same. This is where the paradigm of multiculturalism becomes significant. By addressing the issue of ethnic equations in Manipur, multiculturalism can contribute to the peaceful co-existence of the different ethnic groups while the right step to achieve this is through dialogues. Mass media, being pervasive in the society, can play a potential role in enhancing multiculturalism through promotion of cultural practices of constituent groups in the society. But media do not see every one equally. The dominant and influential constituents get more attention while others get little attention that too often negative and demeaning. At times journalists commit mistakes of negative stereotyping and broad generalisation of minority communities due to lack of background information on their part. This would lead to formation of low minority cultural status in media. Since media contents influence construct of cultural identities, mass media play a crucial role in a culturally diverse society. As such, the increasing multiculturalism in Manipur poses a great challenge for journalism in the preservation and enhancement of the multicultural heritage of Manipur.

MULTICULTURAL MANIPURI SOCIETY

With a total geographical area of 22,327 sq.km inhabited by a population of 27,21,756 (Census of India-2011) belonging to 33 ethnic communities, Manipur is a mini India showing wide scale diversity of cultural mosaic. Besides the four major ethnic groups- the Meiteis, the Meitei Pangals, the Nagas, and the Chin-Kuki - there are Nepalis, Bengalis, Marwaris and other Indian communities settled in the valley. The five hill districts are inhabited mainly by ethnic tribal communities including the Nagas, the Kukis, the Paites etc. Comprising about 60 percent of the total population of the state, the Meiteis are distributed throughout the valley. The Naga comprises Zelianrong, Tangkhul, Mao, Maram, Maring and Tarao. Zelianrong consists of three sub-groups including Rongmei, Liangmei and Zemei. The Chin-Kuki group consists of Gangte, Hmar, Paite, Thadou, Vaiphei, Zou, Aimol, Chiru, Koireng, Kom, Anal, Chothe, Lamgang, Koirao, Thangal, Moyon and Monsang.
Manipur is also plural in religion. The people of Manipur follow several faiths and religions. The Meiteis follow Hindu Vaishnavism while the Chakpas and other Scheduled Caste Meiteis follow the traditional faith Sanamahism. Though many of the hill tribes have converted to Christianity, majority of them still observe the customs and festivals of their traditional religion based on animism. The Meitei Pangals follow Islam. Meiteilon is the mother tongue of the Meiteis and Meitei Pangals. Besides Meiteilon, there are 29 different dialects spoken in Manipur.

Because of the diverse population having different cultures and ethnicity, Manipur experiences an endless competition over control of power and resources among the people of the different cultural groups. The genesis of these conflicts is attributed to attitude and perceptions shaped by biased prejudices and hatred existing among the various communities thereby prompting a contest for space and power in assertion of their respective identity and culture. Besides, violent assertions are made from time to time by over 28 insurgent outfits which have invariably organized themselves on the basis of their community’s identity. Though the outfits claim to have been fighting for secession from Indian union due to their polarisation on ethnic lines, their involvement in ethnic issues has worsen the ethnic tension in the state. That is evident from the fact that the contest for space and power among the ethnic groups has transcended from electoral processes to even the level of insurgent groups. Since majoritarian culture dominates the public space in a democracy, the minority ethnic cultures feel being subjugated by majority culture making cultural identity an issue in the contestation of space and power in the political arena of Manipur. This compounded the ethnic tension.

MULTICULTURALISM INITIATIVES IN MANIPUR

Owing to improved transportation and communication technology, the world has virtually been shrunken into a global village enabling people of different cultures to come closer and share a common space. Manipur too has been witnessing increased social interactions among members of different communities in a democratic political set up. However, democracy talks about majoritarian choice which is determined by the majoritarian culture that in turn dominates minority cultures. In the public space of the state the minorities do not enjoy equal opportunity for representation in the social, educational and employment sectors. In the absence of a space for minorities to assert their identities, tension among ethnic communities in the state is inevitable. And fear for subjugation and homogenization looms large over the ethnic relations leading to the differences among the cultural groups. Thus, the issue of ethnic exclusion from the larger cultural space has been one of the major challenges in Manipur with ethnic plurality and diverse cultures.

Manipur being multiple and diverse in the social and communal relations, the issue of social and ethnic equations cannot be resolved through paradigms like assimilation, integration and segregation. Multiculturalism is fundamental to the belief that all citizens can keep their identities, and take pride in their ancestry with a sense of belonging. Though sometimes blamed of being divisive, the multiculturalism paradigm can be seen as a viable pragmatic approach to address the issues of conflicts among the different ethnic groups in Manipur. Recognizing the differences among the cultural groups, multiculturalism seeks to address the issue of exclusion and providing a space to assert their identities so that the minorities could be well represented in the public space of the state. The approach of multiculturalism will help in initiating the process
of political recourse in addressing the contestation of space and power. This is all the more needed with increasing intensity of ethnic tension in the state.

Thus, Manipur saw multicultural initiatives to inculcate a multicultural attitude to promote the idea of diversity of cultures for peaceful co-existence among communities sharing politico-cultural space. However, not all institutions have contributed equally to the multiculturalism initiatives and there is no wholesale commitment to multiculturalism. As such discrepancies between rhetoric and exclusion of minorities continue to exist. To address the issues a process of dialogue between different cultures either through the intervention of the state or the civil society is urgently called for. In this direction media can play a key role through encouraging members of various communities to integrate into their society and take an active part in its social, cultural, economic and political affairs.

MEDIA IN MANIPUR

As in other socio-political settings, the media in Manipur reflect the social, economic and political relations of the state. Hijam Irabot’s hand-stencilled and cyclostyled journal Meitei Chanu published during 1925-26 is regarded as the forerunner in the history of Manipuri print journalism. Since its early days, the media in Manipur has undergone a tremendous change over time thanks to the advancement in printing technology. Subsequently, the newspapers and the electronic media in the state have flourished well. Today, Manipur has about 30 dailies and journals. English dailies published at Imphal include the Imphal Free Press, the Sangai Express, the Manipur Mail and HueyenLanpao. The HueyenLanpao and the Sangai Express have Manipuri editions also. Poknapham, Sanaleibak, Ireibak and NaharolgiThoudang are vernacular dailies published from Imphal. A few dailies in tribal dialects are also published from different hill district headquarters of the state. Some of the other existing newspapers are KangleipakkiMeira, Gosem (Thadou/Kuki Language Daily), Zalen Banner (Thadou/Kuki Language Weekly News), AJA (Tangkhul Daily), Manipur Express (Paite Language Daily), Lamka Post (Paite Language Daily) etc. Besides, national newspapers published in other cities of the country also have their limited circulation in the state. These include the Telegraph, the Times of India, the Hindustan Times, the Statesmen etc. Besides, there are some correspondents and stringers for various national and international news agencies, newspapers, magazines and electronic media houses.

Electronic media in Manipur include the All India Radio, Imphal, AIR Imphal FM and AIR Churachandpur FM. Manipur has only one television service- Doordarshan Kendra, Imphal while there exist some local cable television networks such as Information Service Television (ISTV), Image Cable TV, Hornbill Cable Network, Laizan Cable Network and Tribal Cable Network. Satellite television connectivity is available in almost every household of the urban areas in Imphal.

JOURNALISM PARADIGM IN MULTICULTURALISM IN MANIPUR

The various communities inhabiting Manipur had struggled against neo-colonial subjugation in one or other way but there is no mutually acceptable process for public sphere. Besides, the existing horizontal inequalities have turned the struggling communities into conflicting
communities. Moreover, the contesting elites are politicalising ethnicity making it an ideological tool for political mobilisation in an attempt to realise their political space defined by religion, clan and culture. To achieve their imagined goal they would evoke history, ideology, identity, religion, ethnicity etc. But the overlapping of political space produces a conflict situation resulting into retarded growth, underutilisation of human resources and poverty trap.

Though multiculturalism is for realising a just society it is in principle and not in wholesale practice in the state. Civil society organisations have been making efforts to address the hill-valley divide. Organising even public feasts for members of various communities on occasions of festivals, efforts are made to foster communal harmony in Manipur. But media has not kept pace. Though media are considered a sort of mirror of society they provide images through which a large part of the social world is interpreted. Minority communities frequently complain about biased and partial reporting which is one-sided and often discriminatory. News coverage is often described as favouring majority groups over ethnic minorities. Journalism is blamed for presenting minority as “others” using the division of “us” and “them” which can reinforce prejudice among public. If the prejudice is widespread in society and among journalists then media are likely to reflect the prejudice. As various groups do not interact daily their knowledge about the other are shaped by media. While journalism seems to have an ambivalent role in ethnic relations, biased news and opinion widen gaps. As a result the disadvantaged position of minorities and ethnic prejudices are attributed to media while journalists defend their objectivity.

Even as the relationship between the mass media and various segments of society is very important, mass media professionals play a crucial role in a culturally diverse society like Manipur. In the absence of coverage by national mainstream media the increasing multiculturalism in Manipur proposes a challenge for local journalism. Voices against the local media bias would make one wonder if the ethnic divide and prejudice have crept in local media and if the local journalists have succumbed to inherent sentiments of “us” and “them”. If it is so this local media tendency would be problematic for the multicultural Manipuri society. One of the reasons for stereotyped media portrayal of ethnic minority may be the low representation of working journalists from the ethnically minority communities in the composition of media houses and newsrooms besides their being in non-directive roles.

Journalism has the potential to enhance communal harmony and multiculturalism by strengthening the bond of brotherhood and national belongingness among the ethnic groups while it also has the power to feed in differentiation and separation. These facts make it vital to examine how news media cover ethnic issues.

Journalists can be a community of peace and confidence builders among the conflicting communities. Since journalistic writing has the power to perform the role of mediation, media can act as mediator between conflicting ethnic groups. The problem of prejudice and discrimination within media houses should be addressed. Journalists should be trained to understand the conflict, and make them aware of the deeper responsibilities and constructive possibilities in reporting on conflict in society which in turn should reflect through their writing.
The government and civil society organisations should take initiatives to form journalist-mediators who might catalyse a paradigm shift in their profession of journalism. Journalists can be educated on the dynamics of conflict and the importance of looking beyond the superficial factsthrough workshops, externships and publications. As journalists intervene to report on conflicts, deepening of their self-awareness is crucial for looking at the practical ways in which journalism can promote conflict resolution.

CONCLUSION

Owing to the varied ethnic composition of Manipuri society, cultural plurality in the state is inescapable. More than mere toleration is needed to address the problem of cultural difference among the different ethnic communities in Manipur. There is a need to respect the cultural diversity through the tenets of multiculturalism. To make the paradigm of multiculturalism fit into the reality of Manipur interactions among the ethnic groups are called for. Dialogue allows different cultures to address their differences leading to conflict resolution. Hence, in Manipur there is an urgent need to initiate a dialogue on issues related with contestation of space in assertion of identity and cultures across the different ethnic communities.

A multicultural perspective with media as mediator between conflicting ethnic groups is the right response in addressing the ethnic equations in Manipur for ushering in peace and ensuring a fair equation for the ethnic diversity. For achieving this multicultural goal, journalists through their writings should perform the role of mediation by catalysing a paradigm shift in the profession.

REFERENCES


