

## **Media Narratives from the Margins: A Framing Analysis of Press Coverage of Conflict-Induced Violence in Indian State Assam**

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The northeastern state of Assam in India has witnessed long years of armed conflict waged by the ULFA and other militant outfits against the Indian state, and intermittent identity struggles by different ethnic groups and communities demanding greater autonomy and constitutionally guaranteed privileges. The 2000s political landscape of Assam saw several spectacular incidents of violence, of a scale and magnitude that attracted not only national, but also global media attention. This study examines the press coverage of three such spectacular conflict-induced violent events by four frontline English dailies, in order to draw definitive inferences about how the national and the regional press interpreted, constructed and presented these violent incidents in the country's periphery, to their readers. The findings clearly establish the ways in which the press constructs issues from the nation's margins in the way they define events, actors, causes and effects of violent political conflicts.

Keywords: Conflict, cumulative prominence score, media framing, Northeast India

Conflict has become a hallmark of the 21<sup>st</sup> world that draws its sustenance from mediatized information. Information is paramount in any situation of conflict. It is sought, during times of conflict, not only by the involved parties, but also by those outside the affected area, particularly by the government and political parties as well as by the informed citizenry with particular interest in the crisis. Since mass media is often the principal actor in the transmission and circulation of conflict-related information and its subsequent ebb and flow, it is pertinent to explore the nature and type of press coverage of conflict-induced violent events. The assessment of the press coverage of conflicts can help foster greater awareness within the media fraternity regarding their responsibility in defining and interpreting conflict and how the public perceives that conflict.

Within communication research, framing has emerged as an important research area, conceptual framework as well as a methodology, which, according to James Druckman, can be applied to an unlimited range of topics and involves multiple actors and mechanisms. He adds that news organisations choose how to package their stories...while sometimes injecting their own unique perspectives. Putnam and Shoemaker (2009) have stated that framing conflicts highlights incompatibilities, disagreements, or oppositional tensions between individuals, groups, and institutions. Therefore, framing has been increasingly employed in conflict research and consequently media framing of conflicts has become an important topic for investigation within communication research in recent years. In the

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media coverage of conflict, framing is said to have been employed, the moment an event or a situation is defined, contextualized, and presented to the audience. This leads to the creation of a particular discourse moderated by the media. Labeling of events like 'War on terror' to allude to the US invasion of Iraq or 'Surgical strike on black money' to imply the demonetization decision of the Indian government in late 2016 suggest the ways framing is performed and executed by the media. Framing is also performed when some aspects of the ongoing stream of events are highlighted while certain others are ignored or downplayed, thereby conditioning as well as gating the audience's reception of information. This, in effect, influences the opinions they form about happenings in the external reality they are not directly privy to and this eventually colors the conclusions they draw about the world received through the media.

## **Conflict in Northeast India and the Media**

Ever since independence, India's Northeast comprising the eight states of the eastern frontier region has remained one of South Asia's continuing conflict zones. The region has witnessed the spawning of multitude of insurgent groups waging either secessionist or autonomist wars against the Indian state, the genesis of which can be found in the Naga insurgency that reared its head even before India's independence. Long bouts of intermittent violence have held development of the region to ransom. Add to that the long smoldering keg of resentment against 'mainland' India blamed for the economic backwardness of the region triggered by a perceived sense of remoteness, both physical as well as psychological. Amidst these, there are sundry-armed groups too with different ethnic affiliations clamoring for special rights and protection of their distinct identities. The Armed Conflict Report (1989-2006) by Peter Wallensteen and Uppsala Conflict Data Program identified 32 major armed conflicts in the world of which six of them are from India. And four of these six conflicts originate from northeast India, one each from Assam, Nagaland, Tripura, and Manipur.

Assam lies at the heart of the Northeast region and is also the most populous state in the region. Due to its composition of population of diverse ethnicities, religions and languages, it has also resulted in a number of conflicts of varying nature and intensity. It has seen one of the longest students movements in the world led by All Assam Students' Union (AASU) that protested 'illegal immigration' from Bangladesh and a perceived sense of 'step-motherly' treatment by the Indian state. Since the late seventies, it has also seen the rise of secessionist armed militant groups like the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) and National Democratic Front of Boroland (NDFB) that have intermittently challenged the might of the Indian security forces. It has seen ethnic and communal violence caused by competing 'homeland' claims as well as fears triggered by apprehensions of demographic change due to 'unabated' influx of illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. From 'secret killings' to 'serial bomb blasts,' this state of over 30 million people has seen it all. It has also lately witnessed the rise of communal politics leading to communal riots as well as environmental politics led by a farmers' collective resisting the construction of big dams in the state.

Many advocates of conflict prevention believe that the media can intervene in defusing tensions and forging peace. In the context of a conflict-afflicted state like Assam, the role of the media, both regional and national, in the way they represent and interpret the different conflicts, have not yet been adequately studied. There is a feeling among the people in this region that the national media tends to ignore the northeast region in terms of its news coverage, and the little coverage that it does give, is mainly limited to negative

issues like bombing, killings, extortion, insurgent violence, floods, natural disasters etc. There is also a feeling that the national media confine their reporting of conflicts to mere statistics of casualty and fatality figures without really contextualizing the issues that culminated into violent events. Therefore the media coverage of the region by the national media is often sporadic in nature, limiting itself to provide coverage only to violent events, which has unfortunately helped stereotype the entire region as a trouble-torn frontier.

It is in this context that the role of the national media needs to be analysed when it reports about the different conflicts from the periphery of the country, in this case, Assam. In order to do so, the researcher proposes to examine certain key conflict-related events in the recent history of Assam and how they have been presented by two major national newspapers of the country and compare them with the coverage given to the same events by two frontline regional newspapers of Assam applying the theoretical framework of framing to get an idea about the trends in so far as how each conflict-event is 'framed' by each of the newspapers.

The first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century witnessed unprecedented levels of violent incidents in Assam, ranging from militancy-related violence to ethnic and communal riots, to high intensity terror attacks. These events not only created deep fissures in an already fragile society with many fault lines, but also left a festering scar on the collective psyche of the people of an embattled state. For the present study, the researcher has identified three such major violent events, each representing a unique typology of conflict prevalent in Assam that broke out in different time periods since 2004. These three conflict-related events are as follows:

- (i) ULFA-triggered bomb blast in Dhemaji at an Independence Day function on August 15, 2004
- (ii) Mob violence between *adivasi* protesters and local residents of Beltola in Guwahati on November 24, 2007
- (iii) Serial bomb blasts in Assam on October 30, 2008.

### **The Conflict-Induced Violent Events**

On August 15, 2004, the ULFA triggered an IED explosion at the playground of a school in Dhemaji, about 500 kms from Guwahati, where the official celebration of Independence Day was underway. The ULFA had called for a boycott of Independence Day celebrations in the state. Sixteen school-going children lost their lives in the blast and the incident drew worldwide condemnation against the ULFA. Although the banned outfit initially denied their involvement in the blast, they eventually owned responsibility for that action, and several years later the top brass of the outfit publicly sought forgiveness from the people of Assam for their act, which they claim was not intended to cause harm to civilians, far less children.

On November 24, 2007, violent clashes broke out between *adivasi* protestors and residents of Beltola area in Guwahati, during a rally taken out by the All Adivasi Students' Association, Assam (AASAA) in the capital city. The AASAA rally was to pressurize the government to recognize the Santhal *adivasis* and the tea tribes in Assam as Scheduled Tribes (ST). The police action to stop the protestors from advancing further, angered them and they went on a rampage damaging public property and vehicles parked on the streets. Soon enough, infuriated residents of the area came out and started attacking the *adivasi* protestors. In the retaliatory attacks, one person was reported killed and several others were injured. However, in the ensuing violence, the attack and stripping of a 17-year-old

*adivasi* girl by a few local youths on the streets of Guwahati remains the enduring memory of this violent incident that triggered a nationwide outcry over the issue of violence against women.

On October 30, 2008, a series of synchronized explosions rocked different parts of Assam in one of the worst terror attacks to have taken place in the state. The explosions claimed 84 civilian lives and wounded more than 300. Guwahati city was the worst affected as three high intensity blasts ripped off at busy public places causing maximum fatalities and casualties. The magnitude and scale of devastation caused by the explosions attracted worldwide media attention. The government quickly put the needle of suspicion on Bangladesh-based radical Islamist outfit Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (HuJI) but later they retracted and claimed that the Bodo militant outfit, NDFB was behind the orchestrated serial blasts in the state.

## Methodology

The present study seeks to analyze how the media narratives of the same events are framed differently by different newspapers that will help reveal the critical choices that newspapers make while they frame a story in a particular way. The study investigated the press coverage of the above-mentioned violent incidents by four frontline English newspapers for a one-month period since the occurrence of the respective incidents. It examined the framing devices employed by *The Assam Tribune*, *The Telegraph*, considered here as the regional press, and *The Times of India*, and *The Hindu*, considered as national press, in their coverage of the incidents so as to draw empirically backed definitive inferences on the nature of the media coverage of these above-mentioned violent incidents. The results from the study would contribute to a better understanding of how the national and the regional press create media narratives of the violent events occurring in the periphery of the country and the frames they employ to construct their respective discourses.

The study adopts three framing techniques. One of the framing techniques adopted for the study is Shanto Iyengar's classification of news items as episodic or thematic news frames. The use of either the episodic or thematic news frame affects how individuals assign responsibility for political issues (Iyengar, 1991). Besides the model suggested by Iyengar, this study also adopts Semetko and Valkenburg's five generic or deductive news frames. These five generic frames are: (i) Conflict frame, (ii) Consequence frame, (iii) Human-interest frame, (iv) Morality frame, and (v) Attribution of responsibility frame.

James Tankard's (2001) 'list of frames' approach was adopted to empirically study the use of frames in the context of news framing of conflicts. This is one of the most comprehensive empirical approaches of identifying frames where he suggests a list of 11 framing mechanisms or focal points for identifying and measuring news frames (de Vreese, 2005). They are headlines, subheads, photos, photo captions, leads, source selection, quotes selection, logos, pull quotes, statistics and charts, and concluding statements. Seven of these eleven framing mechanisms prescribed by Tankard (2001) were identified and analysed in the present study to arrive at definitive conclusions about the types of frames employed by the sampled newspapers to particular news stories of the violent incidents and their aftermath. These seven framing mechanisms were: Headlines, subheads, photographs, photo captions, lead, source selection and quotes selection.

Each news story was assessed for the presence of different frames. First they were assessed for being either episodic or thematic in their presentation. Second, they were assessed in terms of the five generic frames identified by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000), i.e human interest, conflict, attribution of responsibility, morality and consequence. When

a news story had multiple frames, they were duly coded and their frequencies recorded. Each frame was identified on the basis of the operational definition adopted by the researcher.

Nitz and West's (2004) two-thirds rule was employed for the coding of the news stories for the presence of thematic or episodic frames. The same rule was applied to determine the presence of the generic frames based on the frame emphasis put in presenting the news story.

Additionally, the researcher coded each news story for the presence of conflict or peace frames. The overall tone of each news story was also examined, either as positive or negative. The inter-coder reliability test conducted for this study was established by randomly selecting 10 per cent of the news items. Using Holsti's formula, it was found that the inter-coder reliability for news frames was 0.92. A highly satisfactory 90.6 per cent of the coded frames matched successfully.

## Findings

The aim of this study was to identify the framing devices employed by the respective newspapers in the presentation of news stories related to the conflict events in Assam. Since media has a critical role to play during times of conflict, and its coverage of conflict events contributes to either escalation or de-escalation of the conflict, therefore it is pertinent to identify the specific ways by which they construct, interpret and present these incidents to their respective audiences.

This study examined the characteristics of coverage of conflict events in several dimensions of the news content, particularly, the identification of dominant frames, the episodic or thematic nature of the coverage, use of specific words, phrases and expressions in the headlines and sub-headlines, sources quoted in the stories, photographs and captions used as well as prominence accorded to the news stories in terms of size and placement of the stories in the respective newspapers. These results were then compared between the national and the regional newspapers for all the three sampled conflict events to determine what typology of conflict attracted what quantum of coverage by the respective press and the nature of that coverage. The results show several significant findings. Among the Dhemaji blast of 2004, the Beltola violence of 2007 and the Assam serial blasts of 2008, a combined 1121 news stories were published in *The Assam Tribune*, *The Telegraph*, *The Times of India* and *The Hindu*.

Table 1. Total number of stories on the three conflict-induced violent events

Event	Regional newspapers		National newspapers		Total
	The Assam Tribune	The Telegraph	The Times of India	The Hindu	
Dhemaji blast	75	37	17	14	143
Beltola violence	124	73	22	15	234
Serial blasts	343	157	203	41	744
Total	542	267	242	70	1121
	809		312		

The overall coverage patterns clearly indicate the gradual increase of coverage of conflict events in Assam by the national and regional press. Quite naturally, the regional newspapers gave far greater coverage to the three events than the national newspapers. *The Assam Tribune* and *The Telegraph* combined carried more than 72 per cent of the total stories published in the four newspapers. Among the four newspapers, *The Assam Tribune*

carried the highest number of news stories on each of the events. There was a strikingly high coverage of the serial blasts among the four newspapers. The 2008 serial blasts had 744 news stories combined as compared to only 143 stories that were carried by the same newspapers on the 2004 Dhemaji blast.

An analysis of a grand total of 1956 items of editorial content that appeared in the four newspapers on the three conflict-related events showed that 'news' was the highest content in all the newspapers and 90 per cent of the news was hard news and only less than one-tenth was soft news content.

For the purpose of empirically calculating the prominence of front-page coverage of a news event in a more comprehensive manner, the researcher has developed the 'Cumulative Prominence Score'. This score is a measure of the overall prominence of the coverage of an event based on the size and placement of the news stories within the four quadrants of the front-page of the paper. The study found that the overall prominence given by the print media to conflict events taking place in Assam has increased over time as indicated by the Cumulative Prominence Score. The total prominence given to the Serial Blasts of 2008 was found to be more than three times higher than that given to Dhemaji blast, which took place in 2004. The Cumulative Prominence Score of news stories on Beltola violence was also higher than the score for Dhemaji blast. This is true in case of both regional and national newspapers.

Cumulatively, it is established through this study that the regional press gave four times more prominence to the conflict events, compared to their national counterparts. Within the regional press too, the prominence accorded to conflict events has been progressively increasing since 2004. The reasons may be either improvement in news dissemination technology or a 'metropolitan bias,' since the latter two events involved the capital city Guwahati, which could possibly explain why the Beltola violence and the serial blasts received extensive coverage compared to the Dhemaji blast that happened about 500 kms away from the state capital. Another development that has happened in the intervening period between 2004 and 2008 is that events from the region has began to attract greater attention in the national media landscape, even if only by a modest level. There is clear evidence that conflict events of the region have seen manifold increase in coverage and prominence, particularly in the national media, as the coverage of the Serial blasts of Assam has revealed.

Table 2. Cumulative prominence score of front-page news stories

Event	Regional newspapers		National newspapers		Total Prominence
	The Assam Tribune	The Telegraph	The Times of India	The Hindu	
Dhemaji blast	260	41	7	29	337
Beltola violence	420	203	52	46	721
Serial blasts	578	184	181	111	1054
Total	1258	428	240	186	2112
	1686		426		

Photographs were a major part of the conflict reporting narrative. This study also revealed that every newspaper has its own pattern of publishing photographs related to the events. The Telegraph was particularly innovative and experimental with their photographs, magnifying the emotional appeals of the visual content through big blow-ups and close-ups of 'crying victims' or dramatic action. *The Times of India* too was replete

with visual content and at times it has been seen, the file pictures being used are connected to the story only by 'connotative association' and not by factual connection. The Assam Tribune and The Hindu are traditional and conservative in their use of photographs. Both the newspapers used mostly medium-sized photographs and did not experiment with their layout and placement.

Table 3. Number of photographs on the three conflicts events

Event	Regional newspapers		National newspapers		Total photos
	The Assam Tribune	The Telegraph	The Times of India	The Hindu	
Dhemaji blast	17	19	9	1	46
Beltola violence	31	56	14	4	105
Serial blasts	114	155	173	22	464
Total	162	230	196	27	615
	392		223		

Images are powerful framing tools because they are less intrusive than words and as such require less cognitive load (Rodriquez et.al, 2011). This study surveyed the visual framing techniques and methods that were employed by the four newspapers in reporting the three conflicts identifies and analyzes visual frames in the news. A comprehensive analysis of the 615 photographs published by the four newspapers, led to the categorization of prominent actors and actions that dominated the visual content of the newspapers.

Photographs on the conflict-events published by regional newspapers largely constitute three framing categories. They are the 'establishment' frame of government, political and security personnel, the 'victim' frame of the victims affected by the violence and the 'protest' frame of civil society and organizations that condemn the conflict events for the violence that it unleashes and their call for peace and restoration of law and order. However, for the national press, their visual framing largely centers around 'establishment' frames of government officials, political leaders, police and security personnel and 'victim' frame of people affected by the violence. At the same time, it has to be said that national newspapers also tend to publish provocative photographs that have the potential to escalate the tension that already exists in the aftermath of a violent event.

For example, in the coverage of the Beltola violence, both national newspapers can be flagged for publishing certain photographs of the clashes, of *adivasi* protesters being attacked and beaten up by people, that actually fuelled a lot of protests all across the state and created a nationwide outcry against the violence. The most contested issue however remains the controversial photograph of an *adivasi* girl stripped naked by a few youths during the Beltola violence. Three days after the incident, The Telegraph carried the provocative image on its front-page, three days after the event that turned the very discourse surrounding the event from one being of 'class conflict' to a 'gender-conflict' connecting it to violence against women. *The Telegraph*, while defending the publication of the photograph said in its editorial that the image reflects the deep gender violence that exists in our society and it was necessary for people to know the 'uncomfortable truth' as it exploded the myth that women in the northeast region do not face discrimination or violence in society. Should *The Telegraph* have carried a front-page picture of the *adivasi* girl running unclothed down a Guwahati street after being stripped by rioters? It used black strips to conceal part of her nudity but her face was only slightly blurred. The publication of this photograph raises the ethical journalistic dilemma of whether sensitive information that

has the potential to create further conflict should be published for the privilege of the 'readers right to know.'

Table 4. Visual content of photographs on the three conflicts events

	Regional press		National press		Total
	The Assam Tribune	The Telegraph	The Times of India	The Hindu	
Government/politician/ security personnel	30	50	48	6	134
Victims/relatives of victims	14	35	47	13	109
Civil society initiatives/ citizens	41	26	26	0	93
Protest/peace rally	55	49	33	2	139
Blast site	10	27	23	6	66
Perpetrators/suspected perpetrator	2	16	7	0	25
Religious leader/religious prayers	5	14	9	0	28
Other	5	13	3	0	21
Total	162	230	196	27	615

News stories were coded for their episodic and thematic frames. It was interesting to note that even though conflict stories did include historical context, they were still largely episodic. Both regional as well as national newspapers carried more episodic frames in their stories than thematic ones. It was seen that in the coverage of the Dhemaji blast, the Beltola violence and the serial blasts that all four newspapers delve significantly more on the hard facts related to the events than analyzing it from a thematic perspective. There was focus on the drama and violence of the breaking news, the death toll and most of the sources were official government sources.

The study also reveals the use of conflict as a dominant frame in reporting violent events. According to Semetko and Valkenberg (2000), conflict frames appear when newspapers emphasize conflict between individuals or groups to attract audience interest. This was more evident in the coverage of the Beltola violence and the serial blasts. Both regional as well as national press used the conflict frame more than any other frame in covering these two events. The conflict frame was also used more by the national newspapers than the regional ones. Human-interest frame on the other hand, appealed to the human emotional stimulus of readers by attempting to generate feelings like sympathy, anger, empathy etc. through the news presentation. This was either done by publishing emotionally loaded images, or by taking recourse to a long-form kind of personalized journalism centering on victims of the violence. After the initial coverage of hard news stories on the conflict events, the coverage gradually verges more towards human-interest stories highlighting the personal and emotional accounts from people directly affected by the violence. Consequence and attribution of responsibility as news frames were also evident in the reporting of the Dhemaji blast by the national media, though there were very few human-interest stories on the blast. Overall, it is clear that while the regional media extensively uses conflict and human-interest frames as well as attribution of responsibility frame, the national media focuses on the conflict and consequence frames the most.

Shoshanna Blum-Kulka and Liebes (1993) discuss the importance of the use of language in reporting conflicts and feelings or beliefs it may convey. They say that 'terms of address and reference are well-known linguistic indicators of attitudinal stance.' After a careful scrutiny, the researcher identified certain key terms that were used in the headlines and news story leads in all the four newspapers to describe the three events and the perpetrators of the events. It was found that both regional and national newspapers used nominal terms more than descriptive terms to characterize the events. In case of the Dhemaji blast, all the four newspapers refrained from carrying inflammatory labels in their reporting and mostly used the nominal, value-neutral terms 'blast' or 'Dhemaji blast'. In the coverage of the Beltola violence too, the print media was quite balanced in its choice of words or phrases to describe the event or the perpetrators. However, the reporting of the serial blasts revealed a different story. All the newspapers, barring The Hindu employed a highly sensational stance of reporting, using descriptive terms like 'terrorists', 'jihadis', 'messengers of hell' 'Black Thursday' etc.

The most common template used by all the newspapers to describe the perpetrators of the serial blasts was the descriptive term 'Jihadis/HuJI/SIMI/ISF'. The Assam Tribune used the term as many as 35 times in its headlines and leads during the month-long study period. Among all the other labels, this term was used 31 times by The Telegraph to characterize the perpetrators. Most of the stories in the initial days after the blasts directly blamed Islamic extremism for the Serial blasts. The 'us' versus 'them' dichotomy inherent in the 'war on terror' narrative was clearly evident in the news frames. According to Karim, 2002, it is pretty routine in public discourse as well as in the media coverage to identify Islamic extremism as the enemy in any discussions of terrorism. Its prevalence in coverage of the 2008 Assam serial blasts is somewhat attributable to the assumption that it is a theme that Indian news audiences can easily agree with. It was only after a week of the incident that the Islamic extremism narrative changed when government sources revealed that it was indeed the Bodo militant outfit, NDFB, that had carried out this terror attack.

Hester and Gibson (2003) address the use of tone as an element of attribute agenda setting. They argue that media coverage, particularly the media's emphasis on negative news, may have serious consequences (Hester & Gibson, 2003). Each newspaper story was assessed for its use of positive, negative, mixed or neutral tone. It was found that the overall tone of all the newspapers was largely negative in nature thereby validating traditional notions of news that suggest that the bulk of media coverage will be negative. The study corroborates Hester and Gibson's (2003) argument that media often overemphasize negative news and downplaying positive news.

The study reveals that the press shows a decided tendency to present the news through a combative lens. Three narrative frames—conflict, winners and losers and revealing wrongdoing—accounted for 30 per cent of all stories, twice the number of straight news accounts. Most of the front-page news items in the four newspapers deployed a combative lens, although it was more pronounced in the case of The Times of India and The Telegraph. The statements of government officials were counterpointed with opposing voices and statements.

In the coverage of the 2007 Beltola violence, it was seen that the newspapers, particularly The Times of India employed metaphors such as "beasts" and "battles" and portrayed the issue "as seemingly irreconcilable conflicts between neatly defined, diametrically opposed groups." Differing parties clearly shared no common ground and the stories in The Telegraph and The Times of India focused more on dramatic actions or words. The Assam Tribune, on the other hand refrained from publishing any photograph that captured the violent moments of the clash and by and large framed it as a 'law and

order' situation. The Assam Tribune also blamed the role of the media, in one of their editorials in the way the incident was covered that created nationwide outcry against the Assamese people for the way the *adivasi* protesters were brutally attacked.

The Dhemaji blast carried out by the ULFA proved to be counter-productive for the insurgent group. The death of children in the blast marked a final downslide of public sympathy for the organization, even from those pockets in upper Assam where it used to enjoy a certain degree of moral and ideological support from the Assamese people. The incident sparked off a major public outcry in the state with the government, the civil society and various organizations terming this attack as 'barbaric', 'heinous', 'gruesome' and 'inhuman', and condemned the outfit as a terrorist organization, labeling them as 'killers of women and children'. This major incident however, could not attract much media attention in the national media. A state that has witnessed a series of insurgent violence for the last two decades, the Dhemaji blast also passed off as yet another act of violence carried out by just another militant organization from the 'troublesome' northeast region. The incident was therefore, framed as a militancy related violence rather than a terror attack. The regional media too did not give adequate coverage to the incident and limited its vision to 'attribution of responsibility' and 'consequence frames'. The scarce coverage of the incident by the regional media also reflects a 'state capital' bias in its news coverage. The researcher feels that if a similar incident had happened in the state capital, Guwahati, where school children were killed, it would have invited an inordinately huge extent of coverage by the regional media. Also, other structural, institutional, logistical and geographical reasons may also have contributed to the limited coverage of the Dhemaji Blast, even by the regional media.

In the case of the 2008 serial blasts in Assam, to the contentious issue of who were behind the attacks, the newspapers were found to have followed the brief provided to them by government sources. Government agencies, including the state government, state police, home ministry, army and paramilitary sources indicated the strong possibility of Bangladesh-based Islamist organization, Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (HuJI) to be behind this attack. The media coverage reflected the government's speculation on the probable involvement of 'Islamic jihadist forces' as evidenced by the number of references made about 'jihadis,' HuJI, Islamic Security Force and SIMI in the first-week headlines of the blast-related news items. The ULFA was seen as a strong suspect too by the authorities, and it was duly reflected in the media coverage as well. However, from November 9, 2008, the narrative surrounding the perpetrators began to shift from the 'jihadis' and HuJI to the anti-talk faction of the National Democratic Front of Boroland (NDFB). Ten days into the blasts, the police investigations revealed the involvement of the Ranjan Daimary-led anti-talk faction of the NDFB. On November 9, 2008 the then Assam chief minister, Tarun Gogoi confirmed the involvement of the NDFB in the blasts, based on evidences gathered by intelligence agencies. However, this disclosure, confirming NDFB to be the actual perpetrators of the attack, was given a moderately subdued coverage in the newspapers. Except The Hindu, which extensively reported the new developments on its front-page on November 10, 2008, the other three newspapers reported on the new developments only on November 11 and 12, and except a few stories on the front-page, the successive stories on the fallout of the involvement of NDFB was relegated to the inside pages of the respective newspapers.

The coverage of the 2004 Dhemaji blast and the 2008 serial blasts in Assam reinforces what Moeller (2009) states, that 'while a terrorist attack may be the precipitating event that drives news coverage, the overwhelming amount of attention given to terrorism in the news relates to the political reaction to that event.' The reliance on government/

official sources led the media initially to frame the blasts within the template of 'jihadi terror.' As a consequence, the post-blasts coverage was dominated by stories imputing blame on 'illegal migration, influx and infiltration' from Bangladesh that triggered the export of terror from across the border. It was found that a substantial quantum of post-blasts coverage was devoted to the political squabbling that broke out between the government and opposition parties.

Much of the coverage of the aftermath of the terror attacks centered around political point-scoring, with politicians visiting the blasts sites receiving prominent coverage, post-blasts press briefings by the government spokespersons given mostly front page coverage and opposition parties' press briefings leveling charges of incompetence against the government for their failure in providing security to the people, also getting enough print space. Moreover, an analysis of the sources quoted in the news stories show that two-third of them were either named or unnamed government, political, security and law enforcement officials, clearly vindicating earlier studies that say political establishment sets the term of public debate. The nature of the press coverage, particularly in the immediate aftermath of the incident, clearly privileges the 'politics' frame over other frames. This, however, gradually gives way to a 'human interest' frame with more and more coverage of the terror victims, survivors, eyewitnesses, celebrities, civil society and the odd story of 'providential escape' or 'cheating death' or a 'citizen hero' showing 'courage under fire' gaining prominence of coverage. The 'human interest' coverage of the terror victims also shows an interesting trend. Even while the news stories deal with the 'hard' information related to the blasts investigations, the visual content accompanying the story is often dramatic images of crying women or children, victims themselves or family members of victims of the attacks. Such combination of text with image can lead one to get a sense of how editors and reporters and layout designers frame violent incidents. A rather sexist subtext can be inferred from the news packaging traditionally used by the newsroom; and that is, while text is masculine, image is feminine. Therefore, in increasing number of victim-related terrorism stories, we witness this trend of 'dramatization of evil' expressed through an appetite for 'feminizing grief.'

Most terror news coverage provides often incorrect and varying statistics about the death toll and the number of injured. This was found in the first day's coverage of the incident by all the sampled newspapers. All the four newspapers gave different fatality and casualty figures, as well as incorrect information as to how many explosions actually did take place and the sites of these blasts. The Assam Tribune said 66 people were killed, The Telegraph said 72 people were dead, The Times of India claimed 61 were killed while The Hindu said 62 people were killed in the blasts. This can be attributed to the rather volatile nature of the incident, a synchronized series of explosions at multiple sites that makes it difficult for reporters to collate the details from different sites for an active developing story with multiple angles to finally come to a definitive casualty and fatality figure.

From the foregoing discussion, we may deduce that media provide significant play to 'official versions' to incidents involving spectacular violence. At such vulnerable situations, an anxious general populace looks to the government for information regarding their response to the crisis. And this provides the government the leverage to spin the situation to their advantage and present a 'narrative' that will direct the public discourse.

Government's responses to conflict always get prominent coverage, suggesting a clear 'establishment bias' inherent in the journalistic news gathering practice. As this study also reveals, the government-media symbiosis is a mutually beneficial exercise, particularly if the issue is conflict. The media rely on the government to lend cohesion and

create sense of the violent incidents like terror attacks. And when those authorities speak about an incident, media prominently report their comments. The presence of government sources actually helps the media to lend credibility, authenticity and legitimacy to their own news presentation. This is the 'pro status-quo bias' prominently evident in the coverage by The Assam Tribune, compared to the other newspapers. Even if it is critical of the government and blames it for the lapses that led to the violence, it never goes to the extent of overtly challenging the status quo. The government voice continues to get prominent space in its coverage.

The business dynamics of newspaper operations, the need for government advertising revenues for newspaper's sustenance, the need to have access to government sources for 'official' information, the government support required to carry out its business are all probable reasons for the status quo bias evident in news coverage. These structural factors create, what Robert Entman calls 'cascading network activation' of news, whereby 'information flows, like a waterfall, from the top (administration) through the middle (media) to the bottom (public), with limited interplay up the waterfall.' In this structure, the government administration is in a position of power to swing public opinion in its favor with the tacit support of the media. Therefore, the public debate on civic and political issues is framed by the media, largely dictated by the government, with a rare possibility of being the other way round.

## **Conclusion**

It is established through this study that cumulatively the regional press provided four times more coverage (prominence) to the conflict events compared to their national counterparts. However, it has to be said that although national media coverage of conflict issues from the northeast region of India remains skewed and frugal, events from the region are beginning to attract greater attention in the national media, even if only by a modest level, as the comparative analysis of coverage of the three incidents spanning a time period of five years has revealed. The 2008 Serial blasts in Assam cumulatively saw ten times more coverage than the 2004 Dhemaji blast triggered by the ULFA.

Within the regional press too, the coverage accorded to the three conflict events has reflected a progressive increase since 2004. The reason may be improvement in data transmission technology, easy internet access from remote areas, or a 'metropolitan bias.' Since Guwahati, the capital city of Assam was the epicenter of both the 2007 Beltola violence and 2008 serial blasts, both these two violent incidents attracted far greater media coverage both by the regional and the national press compared to the 2004 Dhemaji blast that took place in Upper Assam's Dhemaji district over 500 kms away from the capital. The tyranny of distance coupled with the unavailability of high-speed data transmission technology way back in 2004 clearly manifested itself in the rather minimal press coverage provided to the Dhemaji blast.

Overall, the findings show that the coverage of the events were episodic in nature, negative in tone, the national media mostly employing 'conflict' and 'attribution of responsibility' frames for their stories while the regional press largely employing 'human interest' frames in their coverage. Both national and regional media continued to give privilege to government sources in their stories, but it was markedly high for the national press. Since the coverage of the Dhemaji blast and Beltola violence by the national press was scarce, it is likely that it produced among its readers, particularly the national audience, an incoherent, de-contextualized understanding of the conflict-induced violent incidents.

Rather, as this study also empirically establishes, the superficial and skin-deep coverage of the complex conflict dynamics of the northeast region by the national media contributes to the misgivings and misconceptions about this region among people from 'mainland' India.

Media, as a site of conflict and as a purveyor of conflict, has a critical role to play in the 21<sup>st</sup> century world characterized by the growing faultlines of nationality, race, religion, ethnicity and language. India's northeast region has been the breeding ground of continued conflicts of various types, and yet this region has remained largely outside the national media radar. The intermittent spurts of attention given to the region by the national media are only during calamities or extremist-related violence. This has created a negative stereotype of this culturally rich yet volatile territory. The thriving regional media has made up for the lack of national media presence in the region, and they have a significant role on what issues the public thinks about and how it thinks about them. The role of the regional media during times of internal strife and conflict cannot be overemphasized. Since they are a part of the socio-cultural milieu, they have a far greater understanding and insight of the conflict dynamics of the region. They also have a far greater sweep in their coverage of conflict issues in terms of space and frequency, to include within its ambit, varied voices, perspectives and angles, that is found wanting in the coverage by the national press.

However, national media also have no less a role to play during violent conflicts in the region. They provide greater visibility to issues happening in the periphery of the country to a national audience as well as to policy makers in the corridors of power in the national capital. Their reportage has a direct bearing on the policy decisions taken by the government to restore peace and development in the region. Therefore, since both national and regional media are crucial for the establishment of peace and harmony in conflict-riddled societies, it is of paramount importance that the respective media institutions engage in a kind of journalism that promotes conflict resolution strategies, encourages diversity of opinions, supply credible information and act as guardians of transparent politics. And this can happen if the national media invest more attention in understanding this region and stop parachute jumping only during times of crisis, the newspaper houses should promote a culture of diversity in their newsrooms, reporters and photographers should be trained on the ethical aspects of covering conflict, regional media should desist from sensationalizing stories involving spectacular violence, greater emphasis on fact-checking of information handed to the press, and a basic level of media literacy among the journalists covering conflicts to understand the political economy of the media. The northeast region of India has been variously described as trouble-torn, restive, remote, conflict-ridden etc. by both the national and the regional media. It is in questioning these 'dominant' frames, employed by media both within and outside the region, which can be the beginning of a process of imagining a new and positive template to characterize the eight states of the northeast region of the country.

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