

# Stories of Resilience

MEDIA VOICES FROM INDIA'S NORTH EAST



## Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative

The Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI) is an independent, non-governmental, non-profit organisation headquartered in New Delhi, with offices in London, United Kingdom, and Accra, Ghana. Since 1987, it has worked for the practical realisation of human rights through strategic advocacy and engagement as well as mobilisation around these issues in Commonwealth countries. CHRI's specialisation in the areas of Access to Justice (ATJ) and Access to Information (ATI) are widely known. The ATJ programme has focussed on Police and Prison Reforms, to reduce arbitrariness and ensure transparency while holding duty bearers to account. CHRI looks at policy interventions, including legal remedies, building civil society coalitions and engaging with stakeholders. The ATI looks at Right to Information (RTI) and Freedom of Information laws across geographies, provides specialised advice, sheds light on challenging issues, processes for widespread use of transparency laws and develops capacity. CHRI also reviews pressures on freedom of expression and media rights while a focus on Small States seeks to bring civil society voices to bear on the UN Human Rights Council and the Commonwealth Secretariat. A growing area of work is SDG 8.7 where advocacy, research and mobilisation is built on tackling Contemporary Forms of Slavery and human trafficking through the Commonwealth 8.7 Network.

**CHRI has special consultative status with the UN Economic and Social Council and is accredited to the Commonwealth Secretariat. Recognised for its expertise by governments, oversight bodies and civil society, it is registered as a society in India, a public charity in United Kingdom and a Company Limited by Guarantee in Ghana.**

Although the Commonwealth, an association of 54 nations, provided member countries the basis of shared common laws, there was little specific focus on human rights issues in member countries. Thus, in 1987, several Commonwealth professional associations founded CHRI.

Through its research, reports, advocacy, engagement, mobilisation and periodic investigations, CHRI draws attention to the progress and setbacks on rights issues. It addresses the Commonwealth Secretariat, the United Nations Human Rights Council members, media and civil society. It works on and collaborates around public education programmes, policy dialogues, comparative research, advocacy and networking on the issues of Access to Information and Access to Justice.

CHRI's seeks to promote adherence to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Commonwealth Harare Principles and other internationally recognised human rights instruments, as well as domestic instruments supporting human rights.

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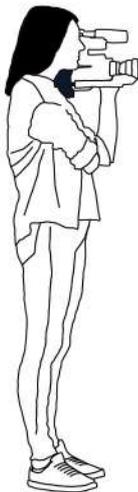
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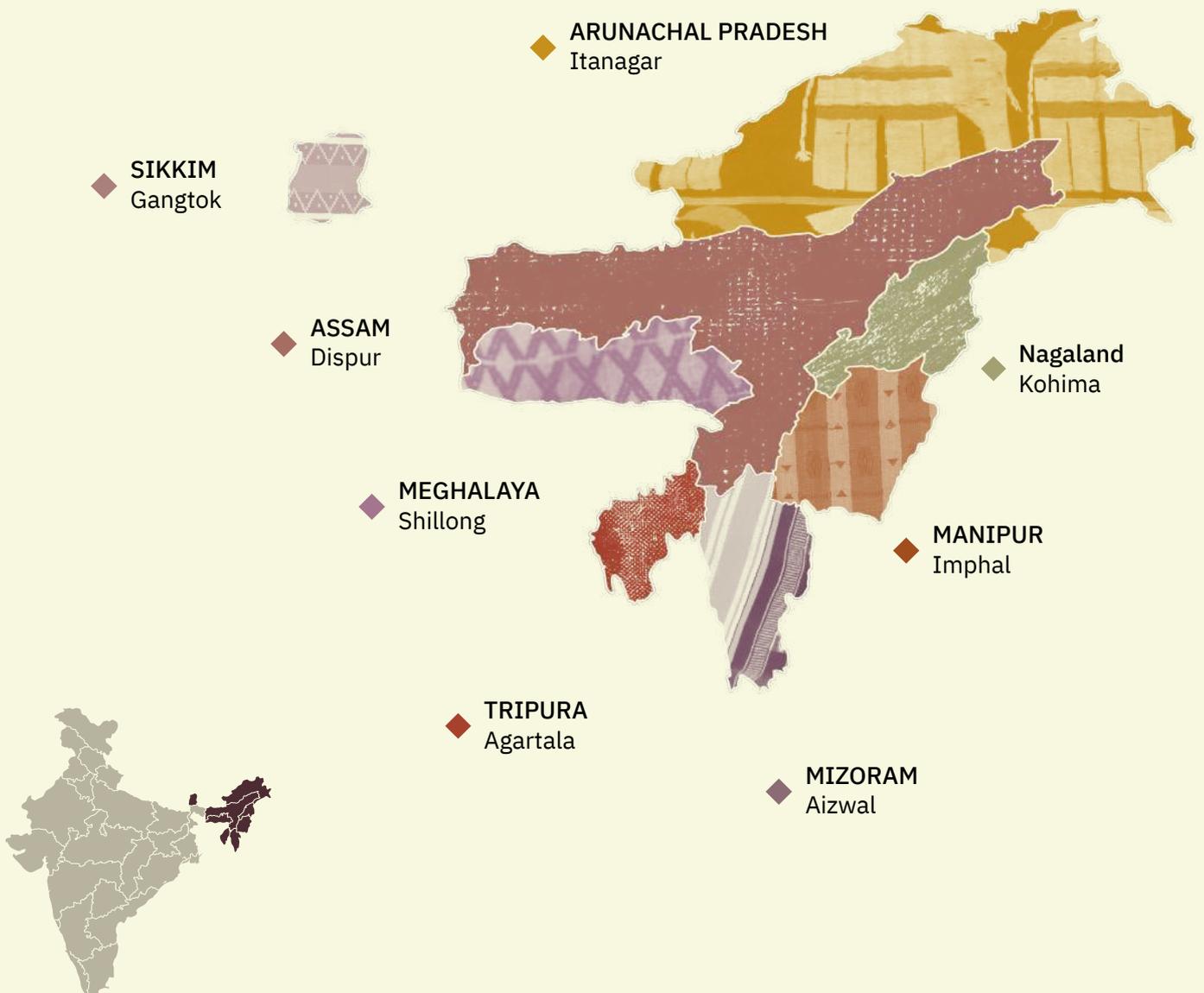
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# Stories of Resilience

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## ABOUT THE REPORT

North East India, comprising of eight states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura, Sikkim and Nagaland, is home to over 250 unique ethnic identities and cultures.



Owing to low public accountability and pressures on media, complex issues of the region, ranging from ethnic mobilisation and identity concerns to environmental degradation, climate change and social movements rarely make it to the national agenda.

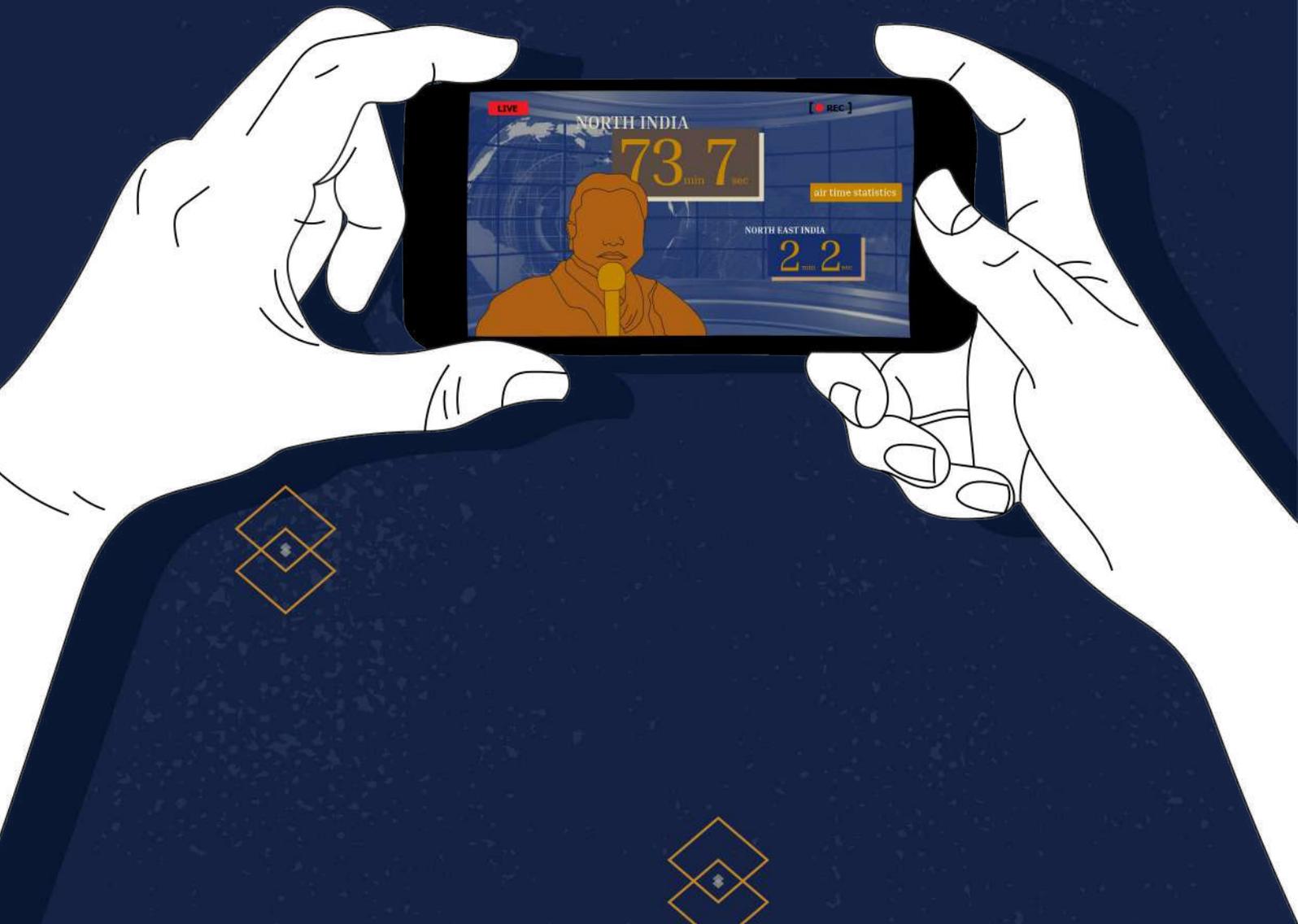
The arbitrary use of laws and muscle power have emerged as visible threats to journalism and media in the region, despite the growth of new media<sup>1</sup>, and information technologies. Amid financial, political, legal, physical and psychological pressures at work, editors, reporters and media persons have been targeted, kidnapped, injured and even killed. This report builds narratives out of these patterns of harassment, attacks and intimidation that continue even today and places them in the global context.

The COVID-19 pandemic has emphasized and magnified these crises that portend the right to report freely - independent, assorted and trustworthy information. Structural factors that impede freedom of the press are both internal and external. Challenges and pressures are created by authoritarian regimes, lack of infrastructure, disregard for mental health, inclusive and stable workspace, gender disparity, inadequate security and constitutional safeguarding. Today, such pressures are threatening the work being done by journalists in North East India more than ever before. More journalists are being systematically dispossessed of their freedom, harassed, terrorized, online and offline, even killed.

This report identifies and assesses challenges faced by local media in the region, through the narratives and lived experiences of journalists. These stories document the exceptionally tough circumstances and pressures under which journalists and media practitioners work in the region. The report stands as a first of its kind publication on local media from one of the most challenging regions for journalism in the world – one marked by insurgencies, political and ethnic strife, conflict and citizenship exercises.



Digitisation has radically transformed the way news and information is consumed worldwide.



## INTRODUCTION

“Getting the right message delivered to the right person in the right place at the right time is nothing less than the Holy Grail in this information age<sup>2</sup>”. The Indian news media industry has grown dramatically with the advent of new medium and formats for content dissemination and consumption. Today’s landscape was unpredictable until a decade ago.

While several digital trends picked up over the years, web search has been a vital part of the internet since its introduction in 1995

1995

“To establish a sense of timeline, it was only around 2004-2005 that some of today’s prominent digital platforms came into being. It was less than 10 years ago that streaming services, apps, and a more evolved digital world emerged<sup>3</sup>”. While several digital trends picked up over the years, web search has been a vital part of the internet since its introduction in 1995. **The Hindu is the first E-newspaper in India which was launched in 1996, developed by Summit Information Technologies Ltd.**

Launch of India’s first E-newspaper, The Hindu

1996

Some of today’s prominent digital platforms came into being

2004-2005

As per the 2019 KPMG report India’s Digital Future, digitisation and development of consumption habits have had a huge impact on society. “On the lesser penetrated rural markets and with regional markets also emerging as the next growth frontier, there is an increasing demand in terms of media consumption across both traditional and digital media<sup>4</sup>”. The report stated that the growth of digital media does not spell doom for traditional media, given the vast demographics of the country. Indeed, it foresaw a possibility for harmonious existence, with an estimated higher focus on monetisation of digital business models, promising regulatory and operational scenarios across traditional businesses. **The media and entertainment industry in India is likely to “continue soaring with an expected CAGR of 13.5% over FY19-24, to reach a size of INR 3.07 trillion<sup>5</sup>”.**

481 million internet users in the country

Dec 2017

## SIZE OF INDIAN MEDIA AND ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY

Industry Performance - Historical

Overall Industry Size (INR billion)	FY15	FY16	FY17	FY18	FY19	Growth in FY19 over FY18	CAGR (FY15-FY19)
Digital	47	65	86	121	173	43.4%	38.5%
TV	490	552	595	652	714	9.5%	9.9%
Print	268	288	308	319	333	4.5%	5.6%
Films	127	137	145	159	183	15.1%	9.6%
Animation and VFX	47	53	62	74	88	18.7%	17.2%
Gaming	24	28	32	44	62	41.6%	26.4%
OOH	22	26	29	32	34	5.0%	11.2%
Radio	20	23	24	26	28	6.2%	8.6%
Music	10	11	13	14	17	15.3%	13.0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>1055</b>	<b>1183</b>	<b>1295</b>	<b>1440</b>	<b>1631</b>	<b>13.2%</b>	<b>11.5%</b>

Source: KPMG in India analysis, 2019

The unparalleled scale of digital advancement can be assessed by the number of internet users in the country, which was projected to reach 500 million in June 2018 from 481 million in December 2017, as per the Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI-Kantar IMRB) 2017 Report. Additionally, with more audiences choosing digital medium, broadcasters are taking the essential steps to acclimatize to the changing content consumption system. Several prominent broadcasters in India have their own mobile apps, where anybody with a smartphone can consume content that is otherwise mainly telecast or printed. Prominent apps include BBC News, CNN-News18, The Hindu, Times of India, NDTV, Dainik Jagran, among others.

Wide-ranging digital growth, inclusive of advances in web search engines, has initiated a paradigm shift in the manner in which the media and entertainment industry in India function. **“However, as a country with over 1.3 billion people, there is still a significant amount of population relying on traditional media<sup>8</sup>”**. A section of the Indian populace continues to rely on newspapers and magazines for information, even though several media publications have moved online, especially during the pandemic. Owing to cultural and linguistic diversity, regional media, continues to hold its own special place in the media ecosystem.

Journalism and media, as an industry and a profession, are characterized by ever-growing turmoil and change. Profound alterations have necessitated the redefinition of the institution: the circumstances and self-understanding of its practitioners; its capacity to work as a watchdog; its commitment and relationship to its audience as well as its future prospects. Nevertheless, by disseminating information, creating public opinion, and holding up public authorities to scrutiny (or not), journalists and media continue to play a pivotal role in societies. They have a social responsibility to critique those in power on behalf of the people<sup>9</sup>. The flourishing practice of journalism in informing and educating the public, as well as guarding the interests of the people<sup>10</sup> are signs of a thriving democracy. With the emergence of the

devices and application development ecosystem, majority of the media consumption is taking place on digital platforms. “India has around 300,000 app developers and is already the second-largest Android developer community in the world after the US<sup>12</sup>”. Even as digital news is penetrating the market, India continues to sell the highest number of newspapers in the world. “The Indian Readership Survey (IRS) data released for Q1 of 2019 showed that the overall readership of newspapers had grown from 407 million readers in 2017 to 425 million readers at the end of the first quarter of 2019<sup>13</sup>”.

The North East of India comprising of the eight states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Nagaland, Tripura, Meghalaya, Mizoram and

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**“It comes as no surprise then that journalism’s foundation has begun to change with the latest medium – the Internet. The unique Internet attributes of interactivity and multimedia are forcing significant evolutions in journalistic culture as the basic mission of the reporter has evolved for the digital world.<sup>11</sup>”**

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information era (and electronic journalism), journalists’ roles have moved from information communication to information processing.

In the last decade, media ecosystems in India have experienced a transformation that has overturned traditional ways in which news is produced, consumed and circulated. With enhanced networks, better access to the internet, multimedia service, hi-tech mobile

Sikkim is one of India’s most ethnically diverse and culturally rich regions. The media landscape of the region has witnessed rapid development from print, radio and television to digital media. In the 19th century, American Baptist Christians Missionaries were credited for ushering in journalism in the region, with the launch of the first Assamese-language paper, a monthly named *Arunodoi*, meaning Dawn. Following the publication of *Arunodoi* in 1846, other

Despite the paradigm shift in the media ecosystem, some key concerns continue to trouble media professionals.

## Between 1992 and 2021, 52 journalists and media professionals were killed in India<sup>15</sup>.

In 2015, a Reporters Sans Frontières (RSF) report stated that India is “Asia’s deadliest country for media personnel, ahead of both Pakistan and Afghanistan”. Of the 110 journalists killed globally that year, the report says, most were in “countries at peace<sup>16</sup>”. The RSF ranking placed India right behind Syria and Iraq in the global tally.

newspapers emerged such as *Asam Bilasini* in 1871, *Goalpara Hitshadini* in 1876, *Assam News* (an Anglo-Assamese weekly) in 1885, The Assam Tribune in 1939, The Shillong Times in 1945, *Dainik Manipur Patrika* in 1933 (Manipur), *Ni Tin Chanchinbu* in 1939 (Mizoram), and *Jagran* in 1954.

Technological advances have consistently pushed changes in media and journalism across the region. New publications have hit the newsstands regularly over the past decade. The Imphal Free Press and the Sangai Express are the most popular dailies in Manipur today which enjoy a wide readership<sup>14</sup>. **The Doordarshan North East, which was the first government channel to go on air in 1994 following the boom of satellite technology, is among numerous TV channels today, including several recent private ones.** It continues to remain among the few government channels at a time when many channels have proliferated in the region. Numerous online news portals to have

mushroomed. Prominent ones include Eastmojo (mobile-first platform), the Thumbprint, *NEzine* an online magazine and InsideNE.

**According to the study *Getting Away with Murder*, in India, “there were 40 killings of journalists between 2014-19. Of these, 21 have been confirmed as related to their journalism<sup>17</sup>”. It also underlined that between 2014-2019 there have been more than 200 serious attacks on journalists in India.**

In North East India, the scenario is even more fraught. Senior journalists from the region face an unnerving range of challenges when reporting. Assault, death threats and murder are among the dangers which they face. In addition, management is not supportive and instead have “preferred not to renew the job contracts of reporters and editors coming under attack or discouraged them to report on ‘sensitive cases.’ As a result, a large number of journalists avoid key stories, particularly investigative ones

involving powerful ministers and bureaucrats and security forces<sup>18</sup>. In Tripura, two journalists were killed in similar contexts. One stabbed to death, one shot at point-blank range – both in 2017 itself. In 2019, Naresh Mitra, an environment and wildlife journalist from Assam, was assaulted while returning home from work at night<sup>19</sup>. Dwijamani Nanao Singh, working as a stringer camera person for Prasar Bharati, was murdered on the second day of a strike called by the protesters asking for action against an NSCN-IM leader (Livingstone Anal) in December 2012<sup>20</sup>. The leader was accused of molesting a Manipuri film artiste. In September 2012, Raihanul Nayum, a reporter of Gana Chabuk, published from Dhubri, was killed by a mob that grew after a theft was reported from a temple<sup>21</sup>. A UNESCO report states that aggression against the press is at a record high owing to political criticism of the media, which commonly translates into attacks against media professionals. The violence that journalists face in these conditions is predominantly from State powers, who use “non-lethal” power to hurt, along with other strategies such as “doxing while criticizing individual journalists over their coverage of protests<sup>22</sup>”. North East India has witnessed the killings of 25 journalists between 1992 and 2011<sup>23</sup>.

Besides the pressures from state and non-state actors, diversity in the newsroom is also increasingly becoming a concern in the region as well as across the globe. This has raised questions about the composition of the newsrooms – in both print and electronic media. Do they mirror the diversity of the country in terms of caste, gender, ethnicity and creed, or are they largely dominated by people from the higher classes and caste? The lack of recognition of the diverse identities of journalists is certainly unhealthy for journalism.

For instance, in the United States of America, “the Kerner Commission of 1968, found that the media had failed to report on the causes and consequences of civil unrest that had sparked riots across the United States, and on the underlying problems of race relations in the country. The commission advocated for assimilating newsrooms<sup>24</sup>”. But 50 years later, media outlets are still far less diverse in comparison to the society they report on.

Journalism is a special kind of cultural conversation, wrote communications theorist James Carey. However, Mary Lynn Young, a professor at the University of British Columbia, says that much of “that conversation is absent, because too many voices, from too many cultures, are not being heard<sup>25</sup>”. Building a newsroom that is comfortable to all its affiliates, including minority journalists, thus is not merely a moral imperative but is a necessity for good journalism.

North East India, with its plethora of languages and ethnicities and complex socio-political history, presents a terrain that is difficult and expensive to navigate. Within this space, journalism is often stereotyped and homogenized by metro media despite the variety in diversity.

### **The question then arises: who can better narrate the stories of the people of North East?**

Chief Reporter at The Dawnlit Post in Arunachal Pradesh, Ranju Dodum says, “I am a proponent for the vocal for local...journalists, from the region, people who know the place. Not to disregard or take anything away from journalists who do come in from outside. But my goal is always to try and harness local

talent, that is people who are from the place and who can understand the nuances of the issues in a more in-depth and better manner<sup>26</sup>”.

The recent surge in regional language news channels, mobile journalism, new media initiatives, and ‘citizen journalism’ is enabling many local journalists to highlight the lived realities of people in the North Eastern states. When Assam was devastated by the annual floods in the summer of 2020, newspapers like the Assam Tribune, *Asom Pratidin* and *Amar Asom* and news broadcasters like News18 North East, Prag News, and DY365 did extensive coverage of the situation while metro media was found absent from the scene<sup>27</sup>. Many in Manipur are wary of citizen journalism and mobile journalism enterprises, arguing that ethnic and political loyalties can influence the coverage of events. Research shows that people in Manipur question the inclusivity of any new community or local media organisation and its ability to cater to people across ethnic lines<sup>28</sup>. Patricia Mukhim, Editor of the Shillong Times, adds “The point is that one has to create the space for every region, with stories that are eminently readable”. These challenges are further exacerbated in the context of India which currently ranks 142 out of 180 in the Press Freedom Index.

The importance of a thriving local media ecosystem has been globally reiterated by scholars<sup>29</sup>. This interest in local media has highlighted concerns regarding infrastructure and job security of journalists. Local media initiatives, particularly those which exist digitally, are constantly fighting financial hardships to stay afloat<sup>30</sup>. During the pandemic, even as readership witnessed an increase, the advertisement revenue of news organisations went down with a simultaneous increase in layoffs of journalists<sup>31</sup>. **It was soon after the**

pandemic that in May 2020, The Telegraph based in Kolkata “shut its operations in the North East and consequently laid off 10 staffers<sup>32</sup>”. Assam’s largest newspaper, *Asomiya Pratidin* has seen a steady waning in readership<sup>33</sup> over the years. This decline in readership of regional dailies implies job losses, and shelving of matters such as insurance, legal aid and minimum wages for journalists. In a report titled ‘Assam: Journalists Living on the Edge,’ Rupam Baruah the President of Journalists’ Forum, Assam, said: “Media persons in Assam have to work with a salary starting at even Rs. 2000<sup>34</sup> with absolutely no job security. Many times, journalists (including editors) are used by media proprietors for their business (other than media) interests. So, in such a chaotic situation, we can hardly expect fair journalism in the State<sup>35</sup>”.

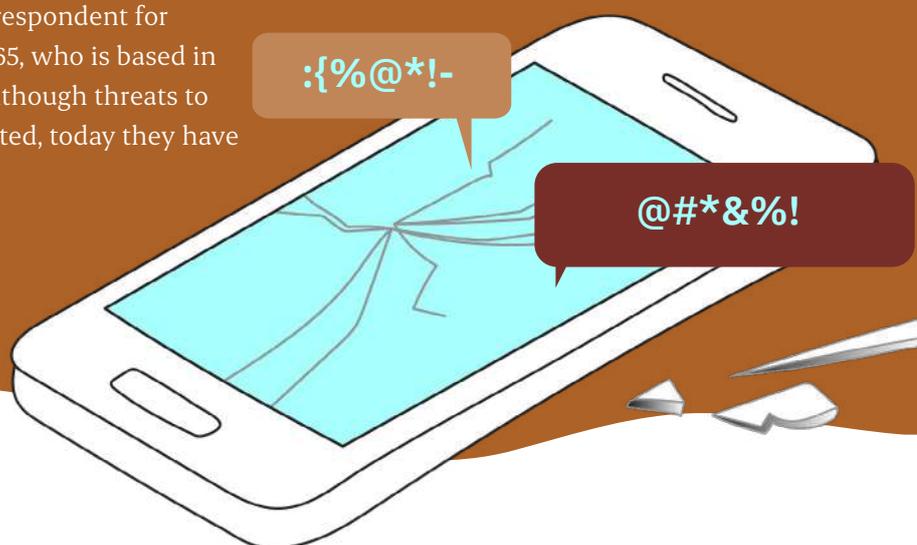
While the shift in the media ecosystem has opened up opportunities for journalism, the digital space has brought in new challenges. Mukul Pathak, a Senior Correspondent for regional news channel DY365, who is based in Arunachal Pradesh, says, “Although threats to journalists have always existed, today they have taken a different form<sup>36</sup>”.

**A study by Eyewitness Media Hub highlighted that 52 per cent of journalists said they were exposed to traumatic user-generated content (UGC) several times a week, with 12 per cent of them seeing traumatic material daily.** “The frontline is extended,” says Sam Dubberley, co-founder of the Eyewitness Media Hub, adding “You don’t choose to be on the frontline, but you are on the frontline and you’re seeing so much more”. Journalists are unprepared for ‘digital dangers’; they are not trained.

In 2013, the UN High Commissioner for Human

# While the shift in the media ecosystem has opened up opportunities for journalism, the digital space has brought in newer challenges.

Mukul Pathak, a Senior Correspondent for regional news channel DY365, who is based in Arunachal Pradesh, says, “Although threats to journalists have always existed, today they have taken a different form<sup>36</sup>”.



Rights reported “an increase in online attacks on journalists, including ‘illegal hacking of their accounts, monitoring their online activities... and the blocking of websites that contain information critical of the authorities<sup>37</sup>’”. Today, it is easier to browbeat reporters with legal threats, online intimidation and censorship. Freedom House indicated that by mid-2014 at least 400 websites “circulating economic and political content were censored without following any legal procedure. Those practices continued, and in 2018, Freedom House added to the list of limitations: Internet shut-downs, failures, restrictions to access social media, illegal detentions, and attacks against journalists<sup>38</sup>”

In light of the above developments, the mental well-being of journalists has emerged as a significant concern<sup>39</sup>. However, some are at a

greater risk than others. People in conflict areas and those who suffer physical or emotional abuse are predominantly susceptible, noted the World Health Organisation<sup>40</sup>. In comparison to other professions, mental health of a journalist appears to be a more serious concern in journalism as it is one of the most strenuous and demanding professions in the world, more so with the advent of digital media. Journalists hold a distinctive place at the juncture of news, mental health and societal customs. Despite that, they are not trained to deal with mental stress and depend on their own understandings and abilities to traverse the flood of emotions that accompany the profession<sup>41</sup>. Research suggests that there is a complete denial or lack of acknowledgement of the psychological impact of exposure to work-related distress among journalists.

**Around 80-90% of journalists experience**

**profession-related trauma by witnessing events like war, murder, mass casualties, and natural disasters<sup>42</sup>.** While journalists also suffer from mental distress due to threats received from state and non-state actors, this barely makes news. In recent times, the pandemic has further rekindled the debate on the mental well-being of journalists. “A significant number of journalists reporting on COVID-19 show signs of anxiety and depression, according to the early results of a survey into the current state of journalists’ emotional wellbeing<sup>43</sup>”, stated a survey report by Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism and The University of Toronto. **Journalists in North East India face mental health issues not only as a part of their professional experience of reporting crime, calamities, violence, and disasters. Their trauma is exacerbated by intimidations from state and non-state actors.**

**Stories of Resilience** weaves the narratives and lived experiences of five acclaimed journalists from the region to address key concerns many journalists have been facing. In the essay, *The Predicament of a Trade*, threats to journalism in North East India have been discussed through the lens of Patricia Mukhim, Editor, The Shillong Times. Technological and socio-political changes have had consequences on the safety—or lack thereof—of journalists. Instances of intimidation, abuse and violence against journalists have not only disturbed targeted journalists but also had a bearing on society as a whole. The judiciary has failed to address these issues. One impact emerging from this is that “society loses confidence in its judiciary system which is meant to protect everyone from attacks on their rights<sup>44</sup>”. Fundamental freedoms of expression and opinion, access to information have faced serious pushback too<sup>45</sup>. This is despite the fact that the United Nations Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity

recommend building a free and safe ecosystem for journalists and media professionals, both in conflict and non-conflict circumstances, intending to reinforce harmony, democracy and progress worldwide<sup>46</sup>.

The second essay *Journalism and Resilience* maps the concerns of the mental well-being of journalists through the story of Tongam Rina, Deputy Editor of the Arunachal Times and Former President of the Arunachal Pradesh Union of Working Journalists. Journalism in North East India has remained a perilous endeavor as speaking truth to power, probing delinquency and corruption, holding governments to accountable, and reporting from diffident environments commonly carry dangers of violent retribution, harassment, or indiscriminate imprisonment.

The heart of the third essay *Navigating Identities and Diversity in Journalism* lies in whether gender identity, religious identity, caste, class, and ethnicity matter while navigating the field as a journalist. “Journalism has always been imbued with a sense of the personal<sup>47</sup>”. These concerns are addressed through the narratives of Teresa Rehman, Managing Editor of the Thumb Print and Author of the Mothers of Manipur and Bulletproof.

“The role of a newspaper reporter is the sixth most demanding job in the world<sup>48</sup>,” says one study. It is not only physical threats or mental health concerns that challenge journalists. Research reveals that a career in journalism is relatively more vulnerable than other professions in the context of job insecurity, lack of infrastructure, financial instability coupled with turmoil in personal life<sup>49</sup>. The fourth essay, *Vulnerable Careers*, unravels these vulnerabilities through the journey of Diganta

Sarma, an award-winning investigative journalist and author of *Nellie 1983 -- Narrative and Truth of Nellie Massacre*.

The rise of digital media over the years has played a pivotal role in changing the way news is reported, disseminated, and consumed. The Internet has emerged as a magnificent transformative power, building a new environment wherein, societies shift to a digital or knowledge-based society. Along with the opportunities, there are growing threats confronting media professionals using the digital medium. The fifth and final essay, *On the Digital Frontlines* looks at these opportunities and pressures through the life and learnings of Pradip Phanjoubam, Editor, Imphal Review of Arts and Politics and author of 'The Northeast Question: Conflicts and Frontiers'.

The stories in this report on the state of media in North Eastern states of India has helped highlight issues like lack of appropriate training when faced with legal challenges, threats and difficult reporting environments.

In India, where rights and freedom of journalists are not specified in any constitutional provisions and continue to be integrated within Freedom of Expression laws which cater to all citizens in general, journalists are often uninformed of legal remedies available to them. When threatened with legal action, journalists with inadequate legal awareness and apprehension of high legal fees, which their local media house may be unwilling or unable to cover, sometimes choose to self-censor, undercutting the quality of journalism.

It is evident that to in order preserve and maintain the quality of journalism, capacity-building initiatives which positively influence the ability of media organisations in the region

to sustain themselves economically are imperative. "Studies conducted in the UK found that fall in revenue and subsequent layoffs are often coupled with local news organisations relying heavily on state sources and press releases. This dependency on single sources, uncritical reporting of events, and absence of corroboration by local activists or impacted groups suggest an under-sourcing of news and the inability of local news to incorporate diverse voices. This impacts local media's role as a watchdog to hold state actors accountable<sup>50</sup>". Journalists in the North East interviewed for this report noted a similar scenario in the region. They claimed that heavy dependence on government sources can further become disadvantageous as government officials with personal and political grudges can exclude journalists from press conferences and releases. Following reports which show the local government in a negative light, officials can often retaliate by refusing to provide quotes and information to journalists.

Collaborations between local newsrooms and larger media organisations have proven successful in helping local journalists circumvent some of these challenges. Aatreyee Dhar, a freelance journalist based in Guwahati, says "If you have to go to a remote location in a geographically complex region like ours, and you don't have the budget for travelling, a good network helps. I feel networking is a necessity, in mitigating these issues, especially for someone who is living on a meagre freelancer pay<sup>51</sup>".

Such partnerships connecting the knowledge of local journalists with the metro media can be mutually beneficial and provide a possible future model of collaboration.



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## 02

### THE PREDICAMENT OF A TRADE

Reviewing threats and intimidation in journalism, through the narratives of Patricia Mukhim

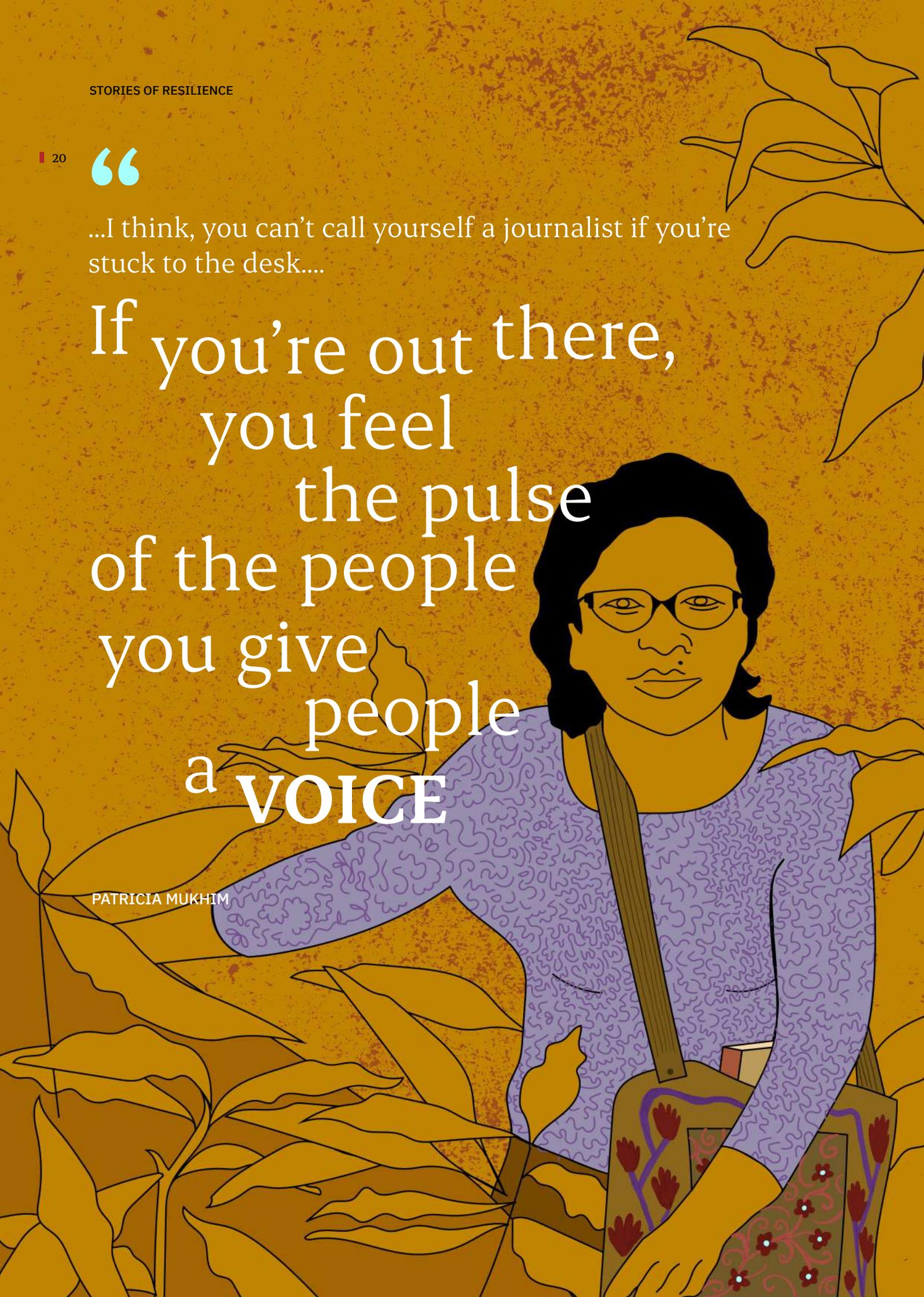


“

...I think, you can't call yourself a journalist if you're stuck to the desk...

If you're out there,  
you feel  
the pulse  
of the people  
you give  
people  
a **VOICE**

PATRICIA MUKHIM



# THE PREDICAMENT OF A TRADE

Reviewing threats and intimidation in journalism,  
through the narratives of **Patricia Mukhim**

EDITOR, The Shillong Times

**In April 2018, my house got petrol bombed... I suppose what troubles them (family) is these physical attacks, they are worried about my life. And I'm staying here only with my house help. Now of course, after the bombing attempt an FIR was filed, I've seen that the State Government has put some CRPF personnel around my house. I feel very bad about that..., I've told the police here that it is not a nice feeling to be guarded like that...They said, 'No, no, we have assessed the security threat and we feel that you need this' – PATRICIA MUKHIM**

**IN** THE LAST DECADE, media ecosystems in India have experienced a transformation that has overturned the traditional ways in which news is produced, consumed and circulated. With enhanced networks, improved access to the internet, “multimedia service-capable mobile devices and application development ecology, media consumption has witnessed a sharp rise on digital platforms. India has around 300,000 mobile app developers and is already the second-largest Android developer community in the world after the US<sup>52</sup>”. Technological and socio-political changes have had consequences on the safety—or lack thereof—of journalists. Instances of intimidation, disparagement and violence against journalists have had a bearing on society as a whole.

Society is slowly losing confidence in its judiciary system due to in-action and delayed action on attacks against the rights of persons, who it relies for credible information<sup>53</sup>”.

World over, and increasingly in India, fundamental freedoms of expression and opinion, democracy and access to information have faced serious pushback<sup>54</sup>. The United Nations Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity, a guiding document that includes measures and recommendations to build “a free and safe atmosphere for journalists and media professionals, both in conflict and non-conflict situations,” worldwide, continues to be not fully implemented by the UN or complied with by

member states<sup>55</sup>. Chandan Pandey, a journalist at EastMojo, a digital media outlet based in North East India, recalls “instances in (the state of) Tripura” where he received calls and messages asking him not to report on a story. “But then I think it’s a part of our work. So we deal with it. And we keep on moving, he says<sup>56</sup>”.

**Some proposed Actions by the UN Plan of Action on Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity:**

- strengthen UN mechanisms and strategies on the issue of safety of journalists at country level,
- assist member states to develop legislations and mechanisms guaranteeing freedom of expression and information,
- assist member states to fully implement existing rules and principles on safeguarding journalists and media professionals,
- encourage member states to prevent attacks against journalists, and prompt action in response to attacks,
- encourage members to comply fully with UNESCO General Conference Resolution 29 on condemnation of violence against journalists<sup>57</sup>.

In India, “there were 40 killings of journalists between 2014-19. Of these, 21 have been confirmed as related to their journalism<sup>58</sup>”. Other sources claim that there have been more than 200 serious attacks on journalists in India. The upsurge of authoritarian governments and the challenge posed by internet censorship have further intensified pressures internationally as well. Approximately 300 journalists have been killed in more than 40 countries in the past decade, a report by the Committee to Protect Journalists revealed<sup>59</sup>. India, Mexico, Pakistan, Brazil and Russia have dismal records, apart from countries at war, according to the report. An additional danger to this profession in India has come from populism<sup>60</sup>.

**India ranked 12th on the list with 17 unsolved murders of journalists in the CPJ’s 2020 Global Impunity Index<sup>61</sup>.** It has been listed on the Index 11 times. A recorded sharp rise in “criminal cases lodged against journalists in India for their work...has contributed to the deterioration in the climate for free speech in India<sup>62</sup>”.

Tongam Rina, Deputy Editor of the Arunachal Times and Former President of the Arunachal Pradesh Union of Working Journalists was “chucked off” her job for “writing against the government” when she was still in the early years of her career. “I was still very young, didn’t know much,” she says. Rina says that in cases of crime against the journalist, “You don’t get the support of the judiciary or the police. That’s very disappointing. My case has been dragging on for so long. So has the office assault case. Sometimes you need closure. I want to know what happened and then move on<sup>63</sup>”.

In North East India, the scenario is more fraught. Senior journalists from the region and media professionals face a wide and daunting range of challenges while reporting from conflict areas. Assault, death threats and murder are among the dangers which they face. Besides, management is not supportive and instead have “preferred not to renew the job contracts of reporters and editors coming under attack or discouraged them to report on ‘sensitive cases.’” As a result, a large number of journalists avoid key stories, particularly investigative ones involving powerful ministers and bureaucrats and security forces<sup>64</sup>.

**In Tripura, two journalists were killed. One stabbed to death, one shot at point-blank range – both in 2017 itself.** Shortly before the state election of 2018, a 27-year-old, Santanu Bhowmik had gone to cover a political rally. “His body was recovered three, four hours later with several cut wounds. The other person who went

to report inside a TSR camp, was shot dead and his body was not found till all the reporters went in...and coerced the government to give the body” says, Debraj Deb, Senior Copy Editor at The Indian Express, who is based in Agartala.

The situation was especially grim during the pandemic. **Rajiv Sharma, a journalist with a local TV channel in Assam, was arrested in July 2020 by the state police after reporting on alleged rampant cattle smuggling in Dhubri district<sup>65</sup>.** Terming the arrest as ‘unfortunate’, the Guwahati Press Club had asked state Chief Minister Sarbananda Sonowal to intervene. With a rise in such cases, in July 2020, the Editors Guild of India even wrote a letter to the chief minister, voicing concern about rising attacks on journalists in the state. “They have been subjected to mob attacks, intimidation, and threats, which is vitiating the environment necessary for the functioning of an independent and vibrant media. While we appreciate your firm condemnation of these incidents, the situation demands your urgent intervention to assure the media that they are safe to report without fearing retribution from the criminal mafia,” the letter<sup>66</sup> said. “It’s not easy to do journalism in North East India, because you are, in a conflict situation, in fact, in very radical kind of conflict situation where radical ideologies are clashing with each other, the state as well as non-state,<sup>67</sup>” says Pradip Phanjoubam, Editor, ‘Imphal Review of Arts and Politics’ and author of ‘The Northeast Question: Conflicts and Frontiers’.

It was at the turn of the century, at a time when media in the North East was still an emerging force, that Patricia Mukhim entered the field of journalism. She switched professions for the kind of freedom one gets in journalism to “chase the stories you want, to write about things you are passionate about.” She had been a school teacher for 22 years. Her journalistic career

began in 2000-2001, as she started contributing for The Shillong Times, The Telegraph, The Statesman and The Assam Tribune. She formally joined The Shillong Times as the Editor in 2008. A Padma Shree awardee, Mukhim is also the recipient of the Chameli Devi Jain award in 1995. The Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) conferred on her their FLO award for excellence in journalism in 2008 and in 2011 she was selected for the Northeast Excellence Award.

As the editor of The Shillong Times, Mukhim is not stuck to the desk, is very active on social media and navigates these spaces with ease. She remarks: “To me, it comes very naturally. Because I think, you can’t call yourself a journalist if you’re stuck to the desk. If you’re doing only the supervisory work, you’ll never know what exactly the reporter is bringing to your table. If you’re out there, you feel the pulse of people, you give people a voice. A lot is happening in rural Meghalaya, in rural North East India which we are not writing about. I think this is a great pity as we are too focused on urban centres and politicians<sup>68</sup>”.

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**“With the kind of cases being filed, anti-national, sedition and all, you can’t even say what you think is the right thing. We may all be wrong. But after having done a lot of research, a lot of homework, a journalist brings out a piece of certain news. And then for pursuing a story, you’re called anti-national or seditious.”**

PATRICIA MUKHIM

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Fearless journalism in the country is often met with the mobilisation of domestic laws to restrict and repress media independence<sup>69</sup>. In a career spanning more than two decades, Mukhim has been witness to a lot of rough times. “I remember following this story of Moni Kumar Subba, former Member of Parliament from Assam,” she recalls. “He allegedly used to be the lottery don and he wanted to come to Meghalaya. We knew that he wasn’t looking at a fair business; he was looking at just making money. So we were trying to stop him but it seemed too difficult. So we dug for his dossiers. He soon filed a defamation case, that too in North Lakhimpur in Assam. But, as we were able to get all these documents, he dropped the case and didn’t pursue it anymore”. Patricia’s experience with Subba was just one of the cases that highlight the concerns of being subject to such practices for these can have a chilling effect on free speech and its advocates and also result in self-censorship.

More recently, an increasing number of journalists in the North East have been targeted for their reportage. Pursuing stories on issues such as terrorism, gang violence, state corruption or human rights abuse, or being critical of the government, public officials makes journalists susceptible to different forms of attacks<sup>70</sup>. For instance, on January 2021, an **Assam Rifles soldier was booked for assaulting Ashok Dasgupta, a reporter with a local news channel in Tripura. The journalist had filed a “complaint against Ranjan Nandi, an Assam Rifles personnel, and Sanju Nandi for wrongful restraint and physical assault when the former was on duty on January 27<sup>71</sup>”**. In yet another incident Paojel Chaoba and his senior, editor-in-chief of The Frontier Manipur, Sadokpam Dhiren, were detained by Manipur police, under the Unlawful Atrocities (Prevention)

**Act (UAPA) and Section 124A (sedition) of the IPC, for publishing an article on January 8 that allegedly “endorsed revolutionary ideologies and activities<sup>72</sup>”**. They were released after the police kept them in custody overnight. In March 2021, Chaoba and The Frontier Manipur were first to receive a notice under the recently introduced Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021<sup>73</sup>.

In May 2021, journalist Kishorechandra Wangkhem and activist Erendro Leichombam were charged under the National Security Act (NSA) over their Facebook posts over the deaths of two prominent figures in the state. In these posts, Wangkhem and Leichombam made fun of the use of cow urine as a cure for COVID-19. This is the second arrest for both within a span of two years. Earlier, the Manipur police in 2018 had charged Wangkhem under the NSA for criticism of the government, while Leichombam was charged with sedition.

**Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules 2021** has been framed in exercise of powers under Section 87 (2) of the Information Technology Act, 2000 and in supersession of the earlier Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines) Rules 2011. “The New Intermediary Rules have been introduced to increase accountability of Intermediaries and regulate the publication and transmission of online content. The Rules lay down stringent requirements that must be complied by social media intermediaries, particularly significant social media intermediaries such as WhatsApp or Facebook thereby substantially increasing compliance costs<sup>74</sup>”.

Mukhim recollects, “I remember writing about Hagrama Mohilary (former Chief Executive Member of the Bodoland Territorial Council) of Bodoland because I visit Bodoland very often. I wrote about his alleged wealth accumulation, he filed a defamation case in the metropolitan court in Guwahati. When I had filed enough Right to Information (RTI) requests on how he got the land, especially revenue land, he went completely silent. Now the case is just hanging. There are so many cases like that. But we’ve fought every case, and to the credit of The Shillong Times they have always been with me in all these cases”.

**Section 499 of the Indian Penal Code:**

“Whoever, by words either spoken or intended to be read, or by signs or by visible representations, makes or publishes any imputation concerning any person intending to harm, or knowing or having reason to believe that such imputation will harm, the reputation of such person, is said, except in the cases hereinafter expected, to defame that person.”

**Section 500 of the Indian Penal Code:**

“Whoever defames another shall be punished with simple imprisonment for a term which may extend to two years, or with fine, or with both.”

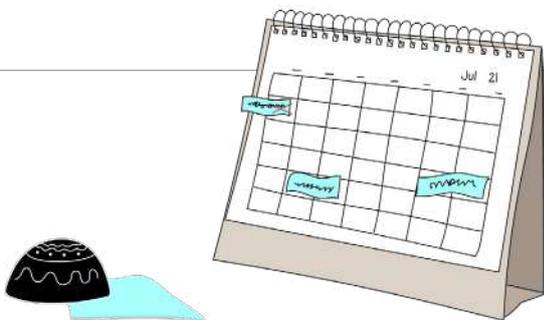
**Civil vs Criminal Defamation:**

In civil defamation case, a person who is defamed can move either High Court or subordinate courts and seek damages in the form of monetary compensation from the accused. In criminal defamation case, the guilty is punished with imprisonment, or with fine or both. The guilty in the latter can move higher court challenging the judgement.

There are few prospects for legal redress in criminal defamation cases. The lawsuits are strategic – by filing defamation suits, the subject matter immediately becomes sub-judice, meaning that media outlets are not allowed to continue reporting on it. Subsequently, the story gets buried<sup>75</sup>. For instance, in 2019 a district court in Guwahati declared former editor of The Sentinel guilty in a defamation case and sentenced him to one month in jail and a fine of Rs 5,000. The case was filed by senior BJP leader and Assam minister Himanta Biswa Sarma in 2010 when he was a minister in the Tarun Gogoi-led Congress government. Fundamentally, defamation amounts to the action of injuring the good reputation of a person. According to section 499 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) defamation is considered a misdemeanour. “If seen the other way in general terms defamation is the publication of a false and defamatory statement concerning another without just cause or excuse, whereby he suffers an injury to his reputation. Further, with the media law, the question arises as to which production of news amounts to defamation and which holds the protection of freedom of speech and expression<sup>76</sup>”.

Defamation, in India is recognized as a civil and criminal offence. Although the civil law is not codified, criminal defamation is codified under Section 499, punishable under Section 500 of the Indian Penal Code, 1860. “In 2014, several writ petitions were filed under Article 32 of the Constitution of India challenging the constitutional validity of Section 499 and 500 of the Indian Penal Code, 1860 and Section 199(1) and Section 199(4) of the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973 (Subramanian Swamy vs. Union of India, Ministry of Law & Ors). However, the Court upheld the constitutional validity of Sec 499 and 500 of the Indian Penal Code and Section 199 of the Code of Criminal Procedure<sup>77</sup>”.

Mukhim cites an example: “That case of the First Information Report (FIR) filed against me for a Facebook post where I said we want the rule of law to prevail in Meghalaya and people can’t just be beaten up and then you can’t find the culprits. I called out the Chief Minister, the DGP, the *Dorbar Shnong* (traditional administrative institution) in it. The Dorbar Shnong took offence, although I don’t think the DGP or the Chief Minister took offence. They filed this FIR nevertheless. My lawyer, Kaustav Paul asked me not to worry and took up this case on my behalf in the High Court. But the High Court refused to quash the FIR saying this lady is trying to create communal tension where there is none. Such falsity. So then we had to take the case up to the Supreme Court. Vrinda Grover took up the case, she also said she is going to do it pro bono<sup>78</sup>”. Eventually, on 25th March 2021, the Supreme Court quashed the FIR registered against Mukhim. “The bench comprising Justices L. Nageswara and S. Ravindra Bhat noted that the Facebook post was directed against the apathy shown by the Chief Minister of Meghalaya, the Director-General of Police and the Dorbar Shnong of the area in not taking any action against the culprits who attacked the non-tribal youngster<sup>79</sup>”.



**The delay in the delivery of justice, pending court cases, does not allow journalists to move on.**

Distressed over the publication of two articles in *The Shillong Times*, the Meghalaya high court in 2019 had held its editor Patricia Mukhim and publisher Shobha Chaudhuri guilty of contempt and imposed on them a fine of Rs 2 lakh each<sup>80</sup>. “The Supreme Court stayed that, we didn’t have to pay the fine but that case is still pending. One does want closure so that one can move forward with a clear mind. But then you know how it is with cases, they take their own time. The Supreme Court had asked the High Court to respond to the queries that they raised on that contempt of court case... but the judge who had raised the contempt of court case had retired, the day he passed the judgement. So they probably didn’t care anymore to respond to the Supreme Court. The case just gets delayed,” says Mukhim.

In certain cases, journalists also feel the burden because of identity markers such as ethnicity, minority status, religion, sexual orientation or gender<sup>81</sup>. Tongam Rina, Deputy Editor of the *Arunachal Times*, recounts, “Maybe because I’m outspoken...so people do not appreciate it. There is also a culture where you don’t see many outspoken women. So, it can be difficult, but I just do whatever has to be done within my limitations<sup>82</sup>”.

The same experience resonates with Mukhim when others attack her personal life. “They will call me and say, oh, her husband is a non-tribal that’s why she’s always taking the side of non-tribals. I was married to this person from South India, an Air Force Officer. We are divorced now. But that doesn’t make me anti ‘something.’ The Khasis think I am anti-Khasi just because my father was a non-tribal and so was my husband. In Meghalaya, the discontent between tribal and the non-tribal populace has a long-drawn, painful and tragic history”.

**“Social media has changed the whole idea of a free press because it’s unmediated, it’s unedited, it’s raw, and it’s put out there. It can lead to any kind of conflict, it can lead to tragedy, it can lead to anything.”**

PATRICIA MUKHIM

Along similar lines, Teresa Rehman, Managing Editor of the Thumbprint, and Author of Mothers of Manipur recounts, “It’s a very tricky thing, especially in the North East, this strong identity politics goes on. I was even questioned: how did you write about our Manipuri mothers; why don’t you write about your Muslim women? That is when I realized that I’m also a Muslim and that my religion matters”.

Challenges of gender discrimination in media persist in the region, despite the North East doing better than other parts of India on the representation of women in newsrooms. Editors like Patricia, Teresa, Monalisa Changkija and others have led newsrooms in the region with the same calibre, skills and courage in the practice of good journalism as their counterparts across India. However, an entire generation of journalists in North East India like Priyanka Deb Barman, who is with the Hindustan Times, Agartala, continue to fall into gaps, unaware of those who have set past examples. She says women journalists are still very rare in the

local media ecosystem of Tripura. Recounting from her decade-old experience of working in the local media of Tripura before shifting to metro media, Deb Barman makes it clear that women journalists still aren’t given important assignments, unlike men counterparts. They are often relegated to less important desk jobs, and even exposed to harassment without legal, emotional, mental or logistical aid, she adds<sup>83</sup>.

**“In the age of social media, they write such awful things about me. Of course, they don’t target my children. But they’ll write such awful things about me that the children automatically feel enraged”**

PATRICIA MUKHIM



The Internet has had a tremendous influence on societies, giving new or better voices to community media, so-called ‘citizen journalists’, bloggers and as well as professional journalists. But, the digital space has also emerged as the new frontline for journalists. India stands close to China, Russia, Iran and Saudi Arabia in the 2020 Reporters Sans Borders (RSF) list of companies and government organisations which use digital technology to spy on and harass journalists<sup>84</sup>. Through the digital platforms news producers have access to sizeable audiences, and search engines and social media help to reach worldwide audiences at extraordinary speed. “This explains the success of internet news outlets such as Upworthy, BuzzFeed and Vox, which mastered the art of creating viral content. As a result, news consumers have access to an unprecedented array of content. Indeed, consumers can now become producers, as seen by the emergence of terms such as *prosumer* and *producer*<sup>85</sup>”. The growing digitisation of journalism has ushered in profits to both producers and consumers of journalism by increasing the flow and scale of the exchange of information, more readership and feedback. However, disturbing trends have also developed in this space. The threat originates from numerous cradles ranging from state actors to third parties<sup>86</sup>. The RSF 2020 list, which was released to mark World Day Against Cyber-Censorship, exemplified a “clear danger for freedom of opinion and expression, which is guaranteed by Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights<sup>87</sup>”. Based on the nature of activities the list categorized the digital predators into four groups:

- HARASSMENT
- STATE CENSORSHIP
- DISINFORMATION/SPYING
- SURVEILLANCE

**“Harassment:** Social media insults, calls for rape and death threats, spreading false reports and videos, publishing personal information

**State Censorship:** Blocking websites and messaging apps, online selective access and control; blocking news websites, platforms and apps such as Telegram, Signal, WhatsApp, Facebook and Twitter.

**Disinformation or spying:** Spying on social media, producing and spreading false information

**Surveillance:** intercepting phone calls and emails, Surveillance and intrusion software used to get access to apps and personal data on smartphones, including chats, photos and GPS data<sup>88</sup>”

Certain media actors are being specifically targeted for their online journalism. From 2011-2013, 37 (out of 276) murders condemned by the UNESCO Director-General were of journalists who were associated with or wrote for internet-based platforms. The Committee to Protect Journalists reported in 2017, “that in at least 40% of the cases that it had reviewed, journalists who were murdered had received threats, including online before they were killed. The same year, two women journalists on opposite sides of the world were murdered for their work within six weeks of one another: celebrated Maltese investigative journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia and prominent Indian journalist Gauri Lankesh. Both had been the targets of prolific, gendered online attacks before their murders<sup>89</sup>”. Safety concerns today have merely been reassigned from the offline to the online realm. Death threats are sent via emails, journalists are trolled and even receive rape threats online<sup>90</sup>.

**Article 19 of the Universal Declaration**

**of Human Rights:** Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; it includes freedom to hold opinions without intervention and to seek, receive and communicate information and ideas through any media and irrespective of boundaries.

Journalists' and media organisations are of the opinion that self-censorship has become pervasive as journalists, and others who principally articulate themselves via Internet sites or social networks, dread physical or legal vengeance for what they write, say or report. Tongam reaffirms that part of the problem is that there are no "procedures in place." "One of my female colleagues was bullied online on Instagram. There isn't a robust mechanism in place to deal with such cases, apart from reporting to Twitter, Facebook or whichever platform. The cyber-crime cell is not very robust in North East India.<sup>91</sup>" She further adds, "I had written about the rise in cases of wildlife hunting in Arunachal Pradesh during the COVID-19 lockdown. I have been trolled for doing that story. My morphed pictures were circulated. It affected my children, cousins, nieces and everybody around because they are very active on social media. They knew what is happening". Similarly, Irani Sonowal Lepcha from Eastmojo, based in Arunachal Pradesh, recalls an incident where her report on an international issue led to trolling that was triggered by the denial of the report from the Indian Army<sup>92</sup>.

Set in this milieu, Mukhim argues: "Dealing with social media in this country, especially, because we have religious differences, we have caste, we have race differences ... is a big challenge. But you cannot also curb the freedom of social

media. It is present there and how we negotiate it is very important. But for those in power, it's kind of a make and break platform. Once something gets out on social media, opinions are formed".

This reinstates the ideas that without conducive working conditions, journalists cannot report freely and autonomously. The safety of the media professionals is a prerequisite for free media, especially in the North Eastern region. The capacity of journalists and media organisations to exercise their right under Article 19(1)(a) has also been constrained by laws and activities on the part of state and non-state actors. Seditious charges, defamation lawsuits and pressures to suppress critical media coverage as well as intimidation and threats by non-state groups, impose new restrictions on freedom of expression and the free flow of information. These have muddled the media landscape in the region. **In September 2020, Manipur journalist Kishorechandra Wangkhem was charged with sedition, stimulating hostility between different groups and intent to provoke a community to commit a crime against another, and under the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act and National Security Act (NSA).** "This happened in connection to a Facebook post by a woman who wrote about a state minister's wife, who was from a minority tribal community. Wangkhem, while referring to the post that had gone viral, had written about the political implications of the statement for the minister<sup>94</sup>".

Mukhim, while highlighting the absence of a law in India to protect journalists, raises some serious concerns for the consideration of civil society and media organisations, especially as the demand for such legislation has only increased in recent times. "We have the Editors Guild of India, but it hasn't pursued this matter



**“Freedom of the press is nowhere defined in the Constitution of India but what is mentioned is only freedom of speech and expression which is defined under Article 19(1)(a) of the Constitution. The chairman of the Drafting Committee Dr. BR Ambedkar, made clear that there is no need to mention the freedom of press separately because freedom of the press and an individual or a citizen were the same as their right to expression was concerned<sup>93</sup>”**



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Some laws that are used to target journalists with legal action:  
Section 499 of the India Penal Code (Defamation), Section 124 A (Sedition) of the Indian Penal Code, Disaster Management Act Section 54 (spreading false panic), Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act 1967, SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, National Security Act (NSA), Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021.

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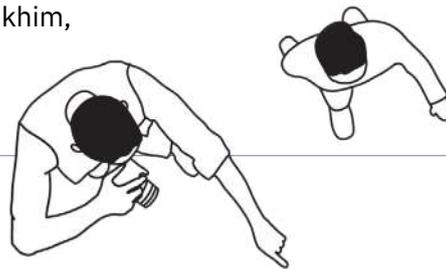


(for the need of legislation) at all. We keep following other people's stories, but we never have time to do anything for ourselves. We are fragmented. It's wrong to say fragmented fraternity, it's a paradox, but we are very fragmented," she says.

Mukhim had resigned from the Editors Guild of India in November 2020, claiming that the highest journalists' organisation "defends" only celebrity journalists. "I come from the fringes both geographically and my status in an association, I consider hierarchical by its very composition. I had shared this High Court order with the Guild hoping that it would at least give out a statement condemning it but there was and has been complete silence from the executive<sup>95</sup>," she notes. These cracks within the fraternity are counter-productive making it difficult for a journalist to deal with legal threats and litigations. If veteran journalists are faced with such tribulations, what are the challenges before new entrants? The statement from the Editors Guild of India came days after Mukhim,

the editor of The Shillong Times and a winner of the Padma Shri, resigned from the association. "She had raised questions on why the guild chose to react to the arrest of Republic TV Editor-in-Chief Arnab Goswami but not for her, calling it a case of "selective discrimination<sup>96</sup>".

"Maybe because the competition is so high amongst us that we all the time look at each other as rivals and never have time to come and think of ourselves on a common platform. But that is the need of the hour," she adds. While the Editor of The Shillong Times has been an active advocate for laws and policies to protect the rights of journalists, she is unsure of how and who will introduce them. After all, "state protection also means that one is then under state patronage."



**“For us, journalists, we just want to be able to do our work without any obstruction. If the obstruction comes from non-state actors, then we can ask the state to protect us. But what if the state is the violator? Then who do you look to for help?”**

PATRICIA MUKHIM

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## 03

### JOURNALISM AND RESILIENCE

Addressing concerns of mental well-being of journalists, through the narratives of Tongam Rina



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We ought to  
be **OPEN**  
about the  
mental health  
of journalists.

TONGAM RINA



# JOURNALISM AND RESILIENCE

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Addressing concerns of mental well-being of journalists,  
through the narratives of **Tongam Rina**

DEPUTY EDITOR of the Arunachal Times  
FORMER PRESIDENT of the Arunachal Pradesh Union of Working Journalists.

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**“I think it’s only young people, young journalists who are talking about their struggle with mental health. For others, who have been in the field for a longer time, they don’t talk about it. We ought to be open about the mental health of journalists. I keep talking about mental health because I know the discrimination. In smaller cities and towns, when you have mental health issue, it is not the same as physical health issue” - TONGAM RINA**

**WITH** A CAREER SPANNING OVER A DECADE, she has not seen any support group that looks out for the mental health of journalists. Yet, Tongam Rina asserts that she continues to raise awareness about it in “groups,” online and offline. “It’s important for journalists to share,” she adds.

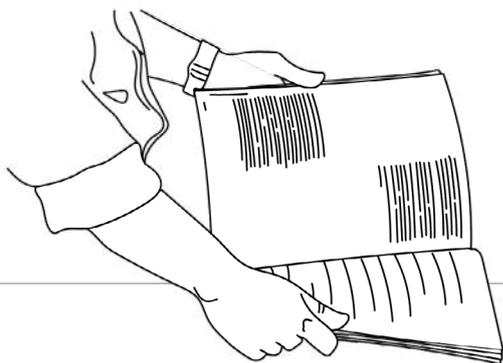
Research suggests that there is a complete denial or lack of acknowledgement of the psychological impact of exposure to work-related distress among journalists. Around 80-90% of journalists experience profession related trauma by witnessing events like war, murder, mass casualties, and natural disasters<sup>97</sup>. While journalists also suffer from mental distress due to threats received from state and non-state actors, it is barely making news.

Mental health at workplaces is a global concern today<sup>98</sup>. Mental health conditions can affect an individual anytime in life. However, some individuals are more at risk than others. People in conflict areas and those suffering from physical or emotional abuse are principally vulnerable, noted the World Health Organisation<sup>99</sup>. In comparison to other professions, mental health appears to be a more serious concern in journalism as it is one of the most strenuous and demanding professions in the world. October 10 marks World Mental Health Day and the theme for 2020, developed by WHO, United for Global Mental Health, and the World Federation for Mental Health, acknowledged that “investment in mental health did not match rising global awareness about the scale of the problem in contemporary times. The

campaign slogan— ‘Move for mental health: Let’s invest’—called the world to action and, for the first time, was accompanied by a global online advocacy event<sup>100</sup>”.

Although good journalism relies on healthy journalists, news organisations and media ecosystems, the mental health of journalists is seldom spoken about – even within their own community. The notion that since journalists are observers, reporting on the distress of others is their job. This renders their own distress extraneous. “There is a serious need to build a vocabulary around trauma in Pakistani newsrooms,” says Sehrish Shaban, who has worked in newsrooms in the United States, Pakistan and India. She is now a media consultant and is also studying to be a counsellor herself<sup>101</sup>.

In an scenario where senior journalists and newsroom managers give negligible attention to the emotional well-being of reporters, it is



no surprise that very few come talk about their problems<sup>102</sup>. A noteworthy effort in this area was made in 2014 by the Journalism and Psychology departments at the University of Peshawar. Recognizing the needs of hundreds of journalists in the besieged region of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa and the tribal zone, a Competence and Trauma Centre for Journalists was established in collaboration with DW Akademie, a German media company. “The centre received referrals for journalists who wanted counselling through the Peshawar Press Club and the Khyber Union of Journalists. Therapy is free for journalists. We were not expecting more than four or five people in the first month of operation,” noted Professor Altafullah Khan, Chairman of the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Peshawar. So, when 40 journalists came through the doors in 2015, those involved with the centre knew they were making a difference. “We were pleased to see some senior journalists breaking the stigma and coming forward<sup>103</sup>”, said Professor Khan.

Samrat Choudhury is a journalist and author, and editor of the Mumbai edition of *The Asian Age*. His first novel, *The Urban Jungle*, was published by Penguin Books in 2011. He says that he heard about concerns over the mental health of

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**There are so scarce benefits available for journalists working in the North East region, that tertiary benefits like mental support systems, legal support systems or emotional support mechanisms are utterly unheard of in the media ecosystem<sup>104</sup>**

journalists in India for the first time in a group discussion organized by CHRI.

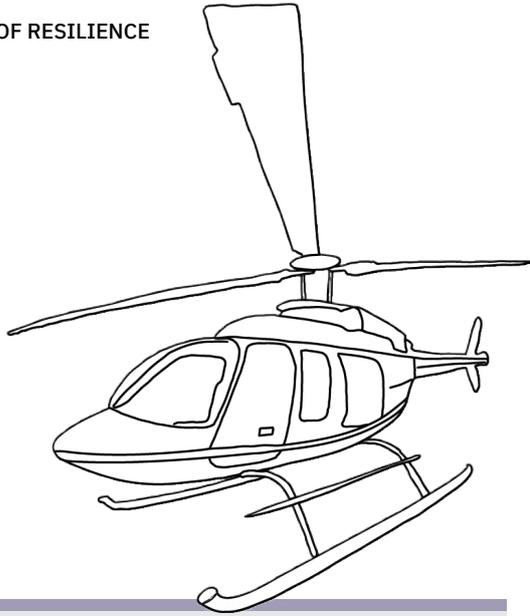
The Indian media industry has developed enormously since the 1990s. There are over 100,000 registered magazines and newspapers, over 400 news channels in several languages, around 150 news channels are awaiting authorisation from the government. In an industry understrength, and disparaged from both banks of the political divide, the journalistic philosophy of heading unreservedly to cover disorder and danger has rammed with exhaustion and trauma. **“The stigma of admitting a mental health challenge runs deep among people who view their work as a calling. They are known more for forgetting problems at the after-work bar than addressing them in the therapist’s office<sup>105</sup>”.** Mental health condition is often attached with shame. Hannah Storm an American journalist serving as the anchor of ESPN’s Sports Center Face to Face, says: “In my experience, there’s also a real fear that an admission you are suffering will compromise your career. Time and again colleagues have told me they keep quiet for fear of missing out on a particular assignment. Ours is a macho industry, one where being tough is the default<sup>106</sup>”. Rina, who has emerged as a strong advocate for the cause of better mental health of journalists, **“keeps tweeting about the anxiety or depression”** that she faced. “I do it with a purpose. I want people to know that these are issues we need to be talking about. More needs to be done. **Reporting can be very lonely and very traumatic at times,” she confesses.**

Even though the murders of foreign correspondents garner some degree of international attention, it is overpoweringly the local journalists who are battling the intimidations from state and non-state actors alone<sup>107</sup>. The former is killed while reporting on

local issues of war, corruption or crime, the latter suffers alive – bringing back memories of horror, fear, and despair for them. This trend holds true across the globe, but even more so in the North Eastern region of India. Political organisations, military officials, insurgent outfits, and criminal organisations have openly targeted and pursue to silence the voices of journalists. Shantanu Bhowmick, a young reporter from Tripura, covering a clash between two tribal rights’ groups was kidnapped and beaten to death by some protesters. **Some cases of killings of journalists that need to be highlighted include the killing of T Brajamani Singh, editor of Manipur News, an English daily. He was shot dead in 2000 by unidentified gunmen. Then there was the case of Kongsam Rishikanta Singh, a reporter with the Imphal Free Press who was shot dead in 2008; the murder of Yembem Megha, a correspondent with North East Vision; Khupkholiyon Jimte, editor of Lentai magazine; and RK Sanatomba, editor of Kangla Lan Pung<sup>108</sup>.** These killings, or any other form of assault or intimidation, physical and digital, gravely impact families, especially children. They suffer equally as a result of this.

Data available from various sources like media reports and journalist associations in the North East show at least 31 journalists have been murdered – 24 in Assam, six in Manipur and one in Tripura – in the past 30 years<sup>109</sup>. Several hundred continue to be legally threatened, physically assaulted or mentally abused.

Journalists face mental health issues not only as part of their professional experience of reporting crime, calamities, violence, and disasters. The trauma that intimidations from state and non-state actors bring in has been untold. In the



Arunachal Pradesh has a history of chopper crashes. 'Bad weather' is often identified as the cause<sup>111</sup>. Since 2010, over 40 people have lost their lives in helicopter crashes in this North East state alone.

context of North East, the situation is grim. Globally journalism remains a perilous business as speaking truth to power, speaking truth to power, probing delinquency and corruption, holding governments to accountable, and reporting from diffident environments commonly carry dangers of violent retribution, harassment, or indiscriminate imprisonment<sup>110</sup>.

Rina began her career in journalism with the Echo of Arunachal Pradesh in 2003. She recalls her first story which was on the Siang river and flooding. "As a field reporter, I had many opportunities to travel. That was my first exposure to Arunachal. Before that, I had not travelled within the state. I think it was in my initial few years as a journalist, I fell in love with my state. I witnessed so many things, which otherwise I would not have been exposed to," she says. Since then, there has been no looking back for Rina. She is a resilient voice from Arunachal Pradesh continuously battling threats from State and non-state actors. "At

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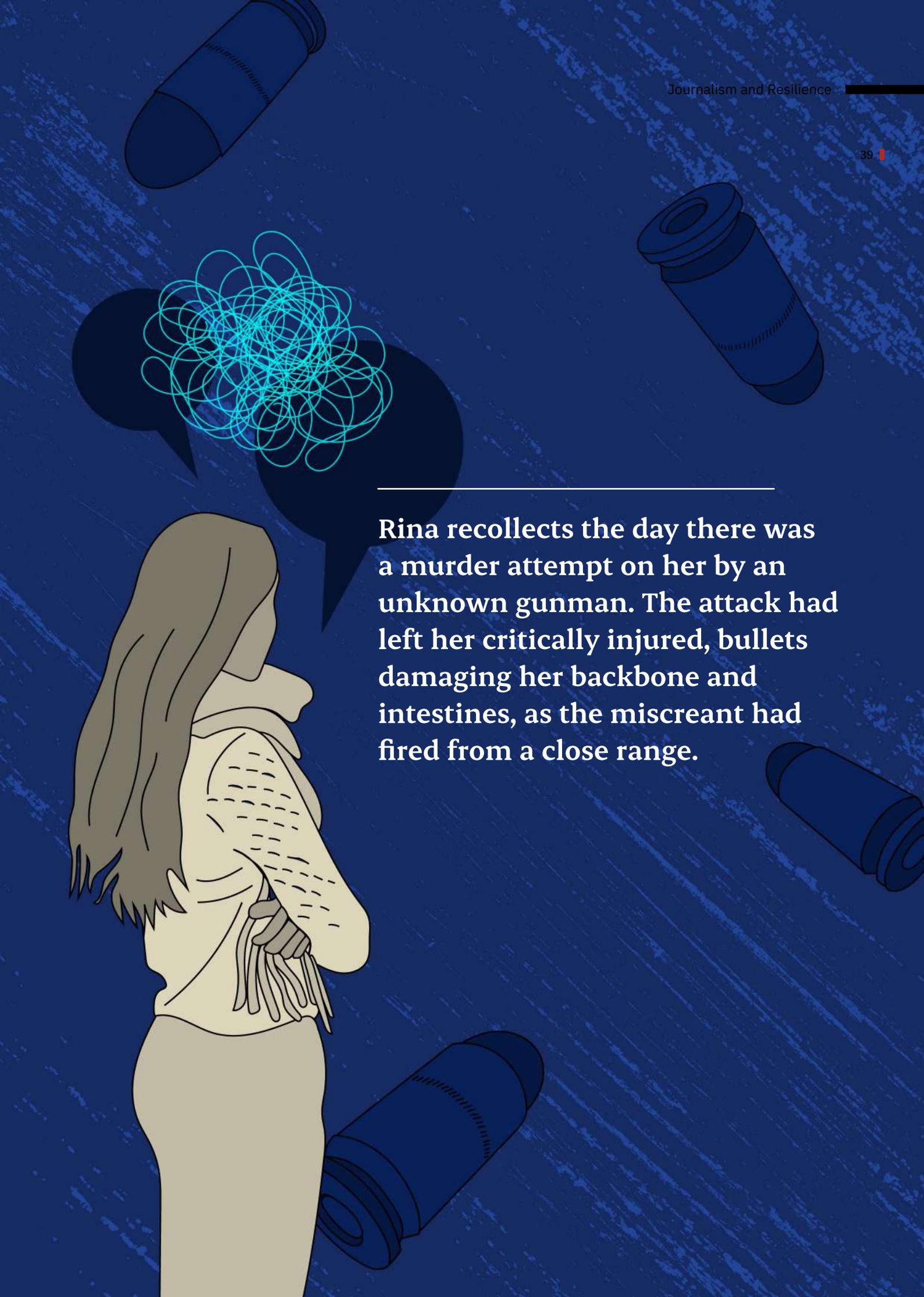
"I remember a chopper ride, these horrible chopper rides, especially during monsoons. It wasn't the most pleasant thing but then you had to go from one place to the other and hop into a chopper, just travel, there were no roads, once you're stuck, you're stuck, you can't come back"

TONGAM RINA

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some point, I'll have to stop whatever I'm doing. I do not know when. I get very anxious. For health reasons, I will have to stop. But it is the people of Arunachal that inspire me. The state is very beautiful. There are so many things that a journalist can report on. It just inspires me in so many ways."

Rina recalls the day there was a murder attempt on her by an unknown gunman. The attack had left her critically injured, bullets damaging her backbone and intestines, as the miscreant had fired from a close range. "It was a Sunday, July 15, 2012," she says, attempting to recollect her memory from that unfaithful day. "As I was entering the office of the newspaper, I saw a man. The next thing I know... I thought someone had hit me with a stick. I never imagined that there will be a gun. It has been nine years. I am lucky to be alive, but (the) case is still pending. And I must grapple with that. I wish the investigation ended soon." Nine years since the murder attempt, justice



**Rina recollects the day there was a murder attempt on her by an unknown gunman. The attack had left her critically injured, bullets damaging her backbone and intestines, as the miscreant had fired from a close range.**

eludes Rina, who has continued to report and write on children’s issues, environment, gender, and politics. She fondly remembers a little girl whom she met in an orphanage “where children who have been assaulted or face child labour are kept.” “There was this girl who didn’t go to school, but then she was able to draw a picture of an apple, but it looked like an orange. When I asked her what it is, she said this is a bit orange and a bit apple, and she laughed so much. She didn’t say I don’t know how to draw.”

The police and the judiciary have not been able to provide closure to Rina’s case<sup>112</sup>. Troubled at the way the case has been handled, she says, “It has been very slow, not only my case, in others as well. Attacks against journalists must be fast-tracked, any assault should be fast-tracked, particularly for journalists. There are so many cases that have not been solved. Many journalists have lost their lives in the region. I do not know if there has been anything conclusive in their cases. The police are not professional. I do not understand why it takes forever.” At least 31 journalists have been murdered in the North East in the past 30 years<sup>113</sup>. **However, justice is difficult to come by, even in the most prominent of these cases. The daylight murder of Parag Kumar Das, executive editor of Asomiya Pratidin, in Guwahati in 1996 has not seen a conviction<sup>114</sup>.**

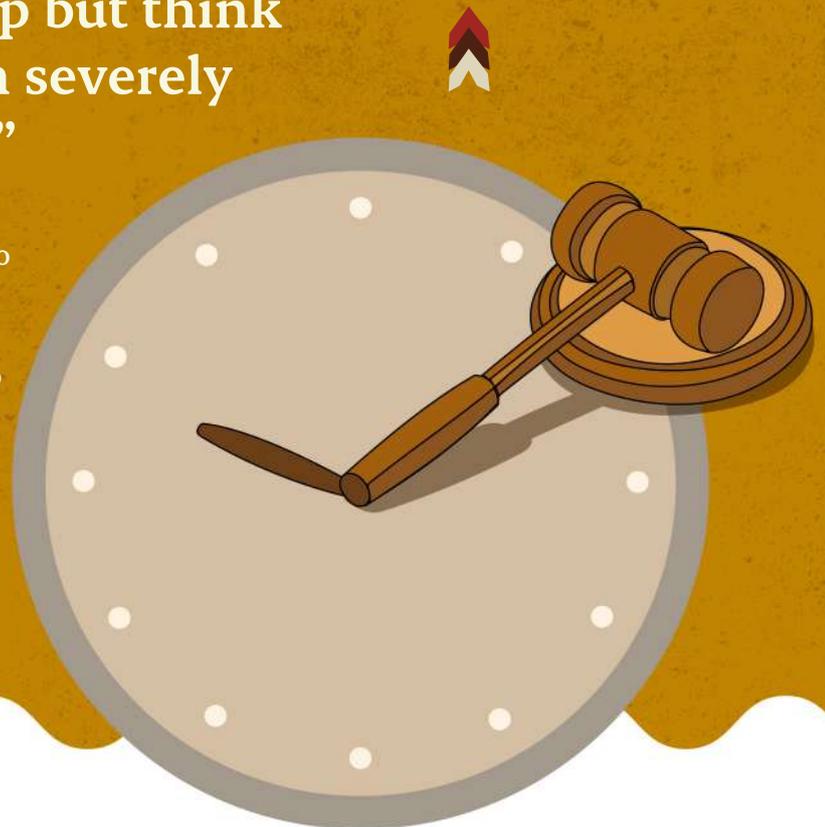


**Parag Kumar Das was shot by unidentified gunmen in Guwahati in Assam.** “Das, the editor-in-chief of the daily *Asomiya Pratidin*, was picking his son up from school when three men drove up in an automobile and opened fire. Das was shot at least eight times. Das was also General Secretary of the Assamese human rights organisation Manab Adhikar Sangram Samiti (MASS) and publisher of its monthly newsletter, ‘Voice of MASS<sup>115</sup>’

Apart from concerns about physical protection, journalists also work under significant psychological stress. While some are worried about job security, others journalists are working under the stress of covering stories from across domains. Freelance journalists are particularly susceptible in terms of physical and psychological safety, since often they do not have access to the resources and support that staff journalists enjoy<sup>116</sup>. Rina says, “There should be something called a ‘Protection of Journalists’ group or something like that. Maharashtra, I think has one. This must exist in other states too; a nationwide act or policy. Journalists are attacked everywhere: the state attacks them, the non-state actors too, everybody. We have been targets everywhere.” **Her story of resilience reiterates the reality that after a story is published and voices are heard, journalists are left alone to fight their battles.** Mental wellness among journalists is a concept that seldom finds mention anywhere. Patrica Mukhim of the Shillong Times echoes Rina as she recalls the troll army that comes down heavily on her and her journalism. “We need mental health support, which is something that every journalist is struggling with now. If your story is trolled, if your story is debunked,

**Rina says that endless legal battles create inherent tension and distress because there are days when “one cannot help but think about it, which in turn severely affects mental health.”**

For her, there are two possible reactions to such a situation. “Either I write more or I just shut myself. These things affect a lot. I have reached a point where I am used to disappointments. So, I take each day as it comes,” she says.



it leaves you with so little self-esteem. How do you move forward in life in that situation?<sup>117</sup>”

Journalists often are the first responders and bystanders to violent news events that could cause them severe psychological stress. Stress can adversely affect the lives of people. It can induce physical symptoms such as headaches, digestive issues, sleeping disorders, psychological and emotional strain, including confusion, anxiety, and depression. The American Psychological Association states, that untreated chronic stress, or stress that is constant and lasts over an extended period, can result in high blood pressure or a weakened immune system<sup>118</sup>. In certain cases, journalists also find themselves burdened

with the outcome of a story they reported, which further adds to the trauma they may already face. Teresa Rehman recounts during an interview, “I broke a story about a fake encounter in Manipur. That was a story that led to a civil uprising in Manipur. I was grilled by the Central Bureau of Investigation, the Special Investigation Team, and the judicial commission. The summons used to arrive at home. When the judicial Commission’s hearing was held in Guwahati at the Manipur Bhavan, a small bus full of journalists from Manipur had come. Those journalists would just say ‘Are you, Teresa Rehman? You broke this story?’ I was very uncomfortable at that. I was pregnant at that time, and I used to pray that this should be over soon. There are these moments when you do

not enjoy such recognition, but you must answer when you are grilled. They had this whole team who had come, and they grilled me very badly, and I was not prepared in that sense.”<sup>119</sup>

Chandrima Sircar of East Rising Agartala, who says that journalism is still largely “a hobby” as much as a profession in Tripura, underlines that legal support systems, mental or emotional trauma support are unheard of in the local mediascape in Tripura. Journalists are not extended professional facilities like health benefits or provident funds<sup>120</sup>.

Highlighting her experiences of reporting from Arunachal Pradesh, Rina also reiterates the need for support from employers and other organized groups. “I have spent a lot of time with lawyers. Many of my colleagues are also mentally very stressed out about a lot of legal cases on them. We encourage them to seek help. The administration (of Arunachal Times) does help in that regard. Psychiatric support, medical support you know whenever needed, if someone has to take off from work, they are encouraged to do so,” she says. This reflects the urgent need to shift focus on the mental health of journalists, for they often remain oblivious to their own problems and challenges.

For a very long time, Rina was not aware that she was suffering from mental distress. “After I reported from Dhemaji (in Assam), it took me a long time to figure things out. I covered the tragic bomb blast in 2009-10 on Independence Day. I remember it was in a school. I saw so many people dead, so many young people injured. In the trauma recovery room of a hospital, I saw a lot of dead children below 13-14 years of age. That room was completely silent, nobody said a word. Dead bodies with their eyes open were just staring blankly at you,

and that image keeps haunting me even today. Sometimes even when I am walking, that image comes to me; it disturbs me a lot. Many are going through the same kind of situation. But we do not discuss it and just accept this as a part of (our) profession,” she says.

Rina adds that mental distress as a professional hazard is fed to journalists. She believes if mental distress is left unaddressed “it is not only going to affect the quality of your life but the quality of journalism too.” “I wish that journalists could just take a break, but I do not think that is possible. There is always this fear and pressure, right? Of losing one’s job,” she says.

**Researchers in the domain of traumatic stress in the West have begun to study the toll the profession of journalism has on the mental health of journalists only recently. “It was not until 15 years ago that Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) was acknowledged in the field of journalism — one of the last professions to recognize the serious disorder. In 2013, the American Psychiatric Association specifically included to its definition of PTSD work-related, repeated, and indirect exposure to distressing material<sup>121</sup>”.**

During the pandemic, notably, deliberations on the mental health of journalists as frontline workers found solid grounding. To support journalists globally in enhancing their safety (physical and mental health) while reporting on the pandemic, UNESCO, in association with the World Health Organisation and the Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas launched a Massive Open Online Course on this subject. It has so far registered around 9,000 journalists and media workers from 162 countries<sup>122</sup>.

Even though journalists like to imagine that they are invulnerable to the effect of intimidations, violence and disaster, the reality offers a different picture. Few journalists can build a vigorous surviving mechanism to handle the mental effects of their line of work over a period, while those, who are more vulnerable, suffer in silence. The latter is afraid of being judged by their peers and superiors and try to process the emotional state and feelings on their own, which may be counter-productive at most times.<sup>123</sup>

Mrinal Kanti Banik, a journalist from Tripura, says “that lack of resources in most local media organisations is a major inhibitor. Legal, mental and logistical support systems should be introduced in the local media as journalists need to feel safe while working<sup>124</sup>”.

Rina recollects that once she had written a report about her struggle with mental health in the Arunachal Times. “I was surprised at the response I received. I got several calls, text messages reaching out to me out of concern: some 600-700 messages. I was not able to cope with the thought of it. So many of them said, ‘we are dealing with the same issue, but then we don’t know who to approach.’ We journalists do not know, and our readers do not understand this. People are willing to open up, it’s just that we have to listen.”

But, the problem does not end there. She adds that there are poor facilities for treating mental health issues and that trips to the hospital for counselling are also expensive. “There aren’t many mental health practitioners too, especially in our part of the country,” she says.

Tongam Rina continues to vociferously speak about mental health issues across many platforms, from Twitter to the social groups of

which she is a part. That is her way of raising awareness and contributing towards the challenge of mental wellness. However, she asserts that “some issues can get very personal” and thus dealing with them requires professional help even beyond personal coping strategies.

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**“Some strategies include: stepping away from a big story, revitalizing for a day, leaving the cellphone and laptop in another room while going to bed. Dealing with physical and mental health can be very difficult at times. I have been overwhelmed so many times. There are these moments, I just feel like giving up. I have seen people giving up because it’s challenging, both at the personal and professional level,”** Rina says. However, hope, love for journalism and the passion to tell stories from Arunachal Pradesh keep her on the move. **“A demotivating thought comes across for a second, and the next moment I’m back to work.”**



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## 04

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### NAVIGATING IDENTITIES AND DIVERSITY IN JOURNALISM

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Understanding  
intersections of self and  
society in journalism,  
through the narratives  
of Teresa Rehman

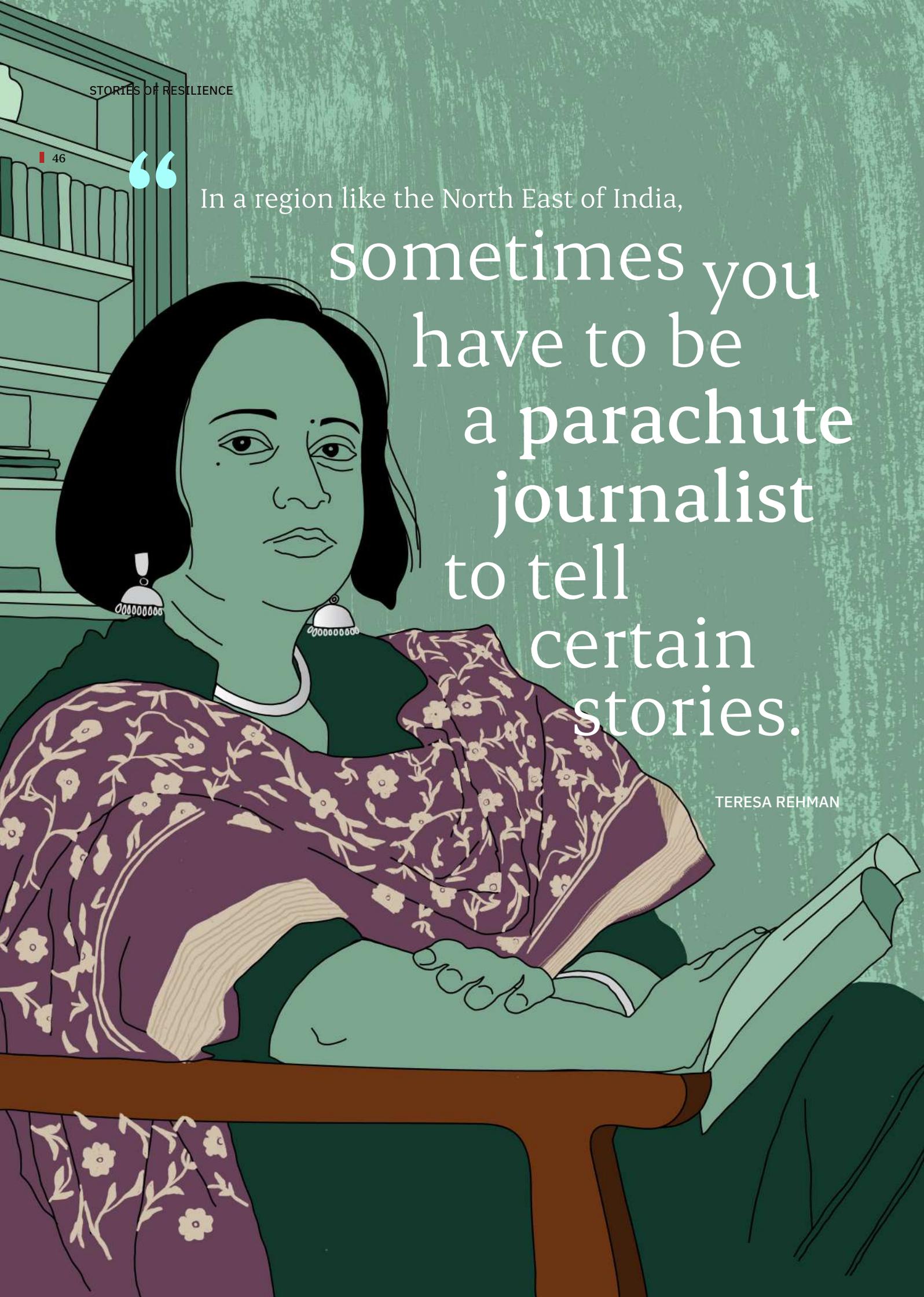




In a region like the North East of India,

sometimes you  
have to be  
a parachute  
journalist  
to tell  
certain  
stories.

TERESA REHMAN



# NAVIGATING IDENTITIES AND DIVERSITY IN JOURNALISM

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Understanding intersections of self and society in journalism,  
through the Narratives of **Teresa Rehman**

MANAGING EDITOR The Thumb Print

AUTHOR OF The Mothers Of Manipur, and Bulletproof

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**“When I went to Manipur, I was very careful not to wear a salwar kameez, but to wear trousers or jeans only to ensure my features didn’t stand out. In Manipur, I would travel in an ambulance when it was dark. We would switch on the lights inside the car so that security forces can see who is travelling. Danger and fear are lurking everywhere when you are reporting conflict. I remember when I had gone to meet a militant leader in the Assam-West Bengal border, I wore a scarf, full sleeves even though it was warm... tried to cover myself, somehow it came naturally to me. These are things which I did not think deeply about when I was on the job”.** – TERESA REHMAN

**AT** THE HEART OF THIS ESSAY lies the question of whether gender identity, religious identity, caste, class, and ethnicity matter while navigating the field as a journalist. The profession of journalism has always been infused with a sense of the “personal<sup>125</sup>”. Journalists depend on social connections with people—witnesses, experts, government officials, and the public to procure evidence for their report. These interactions are not possible unless the sources believe that the journalist owned professional ethics and character, along with the capability to infer impartially the evidence given to them. “The acceptance of this subjectivity as part of the journalistic process has positioned journalism as a “special” profession, granted a degree of reliance on

personal relations and, especially, allowed to utilise personal observations and experiences to create what audiences accept as a “true” representation of the day’s events<sup>126</sup>”. Teresa Rehman, Managing Editor of the e-magazine, The Thumb Print, shared her own experiences and reflected on those of other journalists from the North Eastern region in the context of these larger global concerns. She is also the author of two books The Mothers of Manipur, and Bulletproof.

Rehman recollects how she paved her way in a male bastion while covering a sports story in Guwahati in 2006. “There was a person on the sports desk whose father had passed away. I was suddenly assigned to cover the story on his

behalf: a local football match in Nehru Stadium in Guwahati. I did not understand football. I got the contact number of a person, whom I met in the stadium. He sent me straight to the press box. I went up to the press box, and I saw two-three male reporters sitting there. When I sat near them, they looked amused. This was a time when there were very few women who were reporting sports in Guwahati. When I enquired how many goals had been scored, they just looked at each other and smirked. I somehow managed some details and filed the story.”

Journalists’ professional identity and the way they practice journalism relies on a collective understanding of identity, values and strategies<sup>127</sup>. They are shepherded by expansive structural factors such as society, economy, culture, media organisation, history, and politics. They are also swayed by personal subjectivities like background, education, commitment, participation, gender, ethnicity, age, class, colour, and caste. How the public views the journalist in the field and the response to a certain story is guided by these factors as well. Additionally, such concerns also impact how a journalist navigates her or his way through a newsroom.

In India, the Dalit community stands underrepresented in the newsrooms. Caste representation has been skewed, with evidence from as long as 2006, where upper castes comprised the overwhelming majority in English print and TV media<sup>128</sup>.

Language too plays an important role in the field. It becomes a key tool for a journalist to traverse the field and cut across ethnic, religious and gender biases. Debraj Deb of the Indian Express, speaks about navigating the field in the cultural milieu of Tripura: “Most of us speak Hindi, English, maybe Bengali and, one or two tribal

languages. Speaking to the local people (for a reporter coming from other states) necessarily means that you must get an interpreter, which is not always possible. More importantly, when there is strife, a certain amount of distrust emerges between communities. So, when a journalist from a non-tribal community goes to speak to the tribal populace, it is not always readily possible<sup>129</sup>”.

Yet, for journalists like Teresa Rehman, it is the gender aspect in the discourse on diversity and identity in newsrooms that most affects them. Why has the representation of women in newsrooms historically been skewed? “Women are not ascending to the top jobs in any media sector at anywhere near the rate they’re entering the journalism school pipeline<sup>130</sup>”.

**The 2011 International Women’s Media Foundation Report** found that “in Asia and Oceania regions, only 1 in 5 people working in media was a woman. While women comprised about half of management positions at U.S. and European companies, in Asia and Oceania that figure was 12.9% and only 27% of reporting positions<sup>131</sup>”

Women thus are marginalised in multifarious ways including their representation in the news media content (which is a debate that needs separate attention), the opportunities given to them professionally as well as the challenging experience of navigating the field as a woman. They are sidelined in the unions that represent them<sup>133</sup>. **However, it is worth mentioning that in North East India, women hold senior positions in newsrooms, though the number is small.**

**THERE ARE RELATIVELY FEW WOMEN WORKING IN ASIAN MEDIA (in percent)**


The United Nations in its 2019 report stated that the number of women in highest management spots in Indian newsrooms was at **13.6%** for magazines, **20.9%** for TV channels, **26.3%** for digital portals and less than **5%** for newspapers. In terms of news articles, the report revealed a skewed proportion of male and female writers. Among English dailies, out of nearly 3,000 articles surveyed, only **20%** of articles were written by women. Out of the 6,806 articles surveyed in Hindi newspapers, only **11%** were authored by women<sup>132</sup>.

Results for 82 news organisations in 10 countries and regions in Asia and Oceania

Source: 2011 International Women's Media Foundation Report

- **Monalisa Changkija**, Founding Editor and Publisher, Nagaland Page
- **Nanni Dai**, Editor, Echo of Arunachal
- **Patricia Mukhim**, Editor, The Shillong Times
- **Tongam Rina**, Deputy Editor, The Arunachal Times
- **Iban Mawrie**, Managing Editor, The Northeast Today
- **Teresa Rehman**, Managing Editor, The Thumb Print
- **Afrida Hussain**, Founder and Editor,

Rehman began her career in journalism with India Today in 1999, after graduating from the Indian Institute of Mass Communications in New Delhi. She joined Tehelka magazine later at the turn of the century which allowed her to pursue reporting on conflict and develop her interest in investigative reporting. "In my journalistic career, I have travelled all across the North East and met some of the top militant leaders including Thuingaleng Muivah<sup>134</sup> (NSCN IM). All the ULFA leaders, except for Paresh Baruah<sup>135</sup>. Leaders of the NDFB – I have been to their camps; the Adivasi Cobra military group and some other small outfits as well," narrates Rehman.

While she has had the opportunity to take up serious assignments, other journalists from the region say that gender discrimination acts as a barrier. Priyanka Deb Barman, a journalist with Hindustan Times, explains the challenges of gender discrimination in the workspace. She says women journalists are still very rare in the local media ecosystem of Tripura. Recounting from her experience of decade working in the local media of Tripura before shifting to larger media, Deb Barman adds that women journalists are not allowed to take on important assignments as against their male counterparts. They are often relegated to less important

the context of gender bias in workspaces where women journalists are often not given “tough assignments<sup>138</sup>”. In the present times, when the media world is still grappling with the issue of inclusivity in newsrooms, Rehman says that her focus always has been to get into the depth and details of a story. In retrospect, she agreed that she should have been more careful while traversing the field.

Women journalists in the North East have been known for their feisty approach and commitment to the profession. For instance, Tiamerenla Monalisa Changkija, the only woman

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**“I was very young and for me, getting the story was very important. I was passionate about my work. I never really thought about personal safety or security. When I got the tip that I could meet Muivah (General Secretary of the National Socialist Council of Nagalim), I went and stayed in a hotel in Dimapur for several nights, till I got what I wanted. When I look back, I should have been more careful. I never really cared for personal safety, either physical or mental”**

TERESA REHMAN

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desk jobs, exposed to harassment without legal, emotional, mental or logistics aid<sup>136</sup>. As journalism grows into a hybrid digital-print version of itself, with advanced information-presentation tools, and shifting to more open and inclusive platforms, acknowledgement of such barriers is critical.

“Gender being one among many, including caste – needs to be key in equalising the balance of voices shaping content”<sup>137</sup>. Chandrima Sircar of East Mojo, who has been working for over 15 years in the region, spoke of similar concerns in

editor, proprietor, and publisher in North East India is known to have brushed up the wrong side of non-state actors after Nagaland Page published an anonymous opinion piece titled ‘State is a reality and sovereignty is a myth’. Some insurgent outfits took cognizance and commanded that she divulge the name of the writer. Changkija declined and was threatened with calamitous consequences, wherein the state government had to intervene and guard her with armed bodyguards for more than a year<sup>139</sup>. Work done by the likes of Changkija is motivating for young journalists. Despite such stories of

**“Sometimes I feel as a woman; we’re not taken as seriously as men.**



I did not face outright discrimination. But I recall an incident when I approached an officer. When I walked into his office, he started shouting at me and said why are you disturbing me.

**So, it came into my mind, if it were my fellow male colleagues would he have spoken in the same way?”**

courage, motivations to speak truth to power and role models, it is worrisome that women journalists continue to face discrimination and backlash in the region, even if subtly.

In a more recent incident, The Editor of Shillong Times was branded as a Jezebel witch, a biblical figure synonymous with evil, on Facebook. A poster was posted online where she was depicted as Jezebel. This smear campaign came because The Shillong Times published news pieces and editorials on the functioning of the church in Meghalaya, its malpractices and the rampant corruption therewith<sup>140</sup>. But such an episode hasn't garnered much attention, despite a senior journalist being called an "evil witch".

**Nevertheless, the number of women journalists in the North East has risen over the years. The rise in new technology has widened to include women journalists in different media platforms. From Homai Vyarawalla, India's very first woman photojournalist, to Teresa Rehman and more contemporary Tora Agarwala of The Indian Express, who is based in Assam, women journalists have been paving their way into journalism steadily. However, this does not imply that barriers and obstacles have been surmounted with success.**

Rehman says that being an old school journalist, the battle for her is a continuous one; sometimes the question of identity hits hard. "After I wrote my book *The Mothers of Manipur*, a section of people from Manipur abused me. I was accused of stealing their stories," she said. Given the geographical and socio-political diversity of the region, journalists are compelled to travel long distances, often at short notice. She added that "in a region like the North East of India, sometimes you have to be a parachute journalist to tell certain stories. For instance,

with the fake encounter story in Manipur<sup>141</sup> (where a youth was shot for allegedly pulling a gun), a local journalist would have found it difficult to pursue. I could do it because I was based in Assam. There are certain stories, which only a parachute journalist can do in North East."

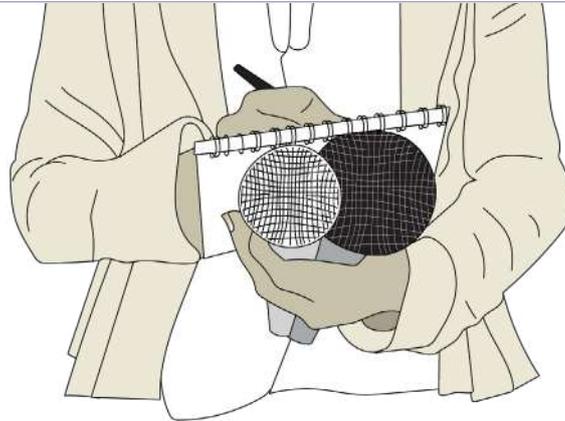
**"A Parachute Journalist** is a reporter who drops into a country or region for a relatively short period of time, files a story or handful of dispatches, and then leaves<sup>142</sup>"

Rehman believes that someone has to take the onus of telling the story, it takes courage to travel to another state, which has different languages, different ethnicities, different sets of social and political problems, and to be able to tell a story without any bias. "I don't mind if people point out flaws in my story. But to point out my ethnicity or to blame my location? This is a very tricky thing, especially in the North East, these strong identity politics go on".

"The whole concept about being Muslim is new to me now. It was never a part of me, it was always there in one of the layers of my identity beneath my skin. But now every day I am made to realize that. So I'm also trying to explore what we could do, the different ways in which we are the same or we are different being a Muslim," she says.

**"People even asked me, how did you write about our mothers in Manipur, why don't you write about your Muslim women? That is when I realized that, Oh, I'm also a Muslim, that my religion also matters".**

Along the lines, another example of a woman



“When I went to meet Muivah (General Secretary of the National Socialist Council of Nagalim), I think it was an advantage for me as a woman. I could truly step into the kitchen and talk to the women present, other than the female cadres. This is something a male journalist will not do, especially when you’re reporting conflict or defence or politics”.

TERESA REHMAN

and Muslim journalist being steadily attacked is Rana Ayyub, a Washington Post columnist who lives with threats of life-threatening violence and, sometimes resorts to therapy to deal with them<sup>143</sup>.

Nevertheless, Rehman says that ethnicity or location does not matter, if an ‘outsider’ can narrate the story objectively. “The book, Mothers of Manipur is an important document because it keeps the narrative alive. I managed to give a face, an identity to the mothers who protested nude<sup>144</sup>. Maybe 100 years down the line, it turns into an ethnographic source. Maybe a local person would have done a better job, I had to take an interpreter as I did not understand the language. But someone had to do it.” Rehman’s book is based on the striking statement of

solidarity that women displayed, protesting against the alleged brutal killing of 34-year old Thangjam Manorama by the Indian army<sup>145</sup>.

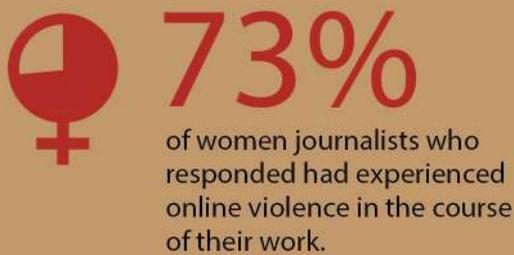
**Gender Inequality in Indian Media, 2019**, a report by Media Rumble in collaboration with UN Women points out that women till day are assigned what is essentially “soft” beats like lifestyle and fashion, leaving the “hard” beats like politics, economy, and sports for men. “By thus marginalising women’s voices and perspectives, the Indian media denies nearly a half of the population a chance to influence public opinion. This runs in opposition to the principles of fairness, equality, and democracy<sup>146</sup>,” the report said. It is not the only marginalisation that women journalist faces in the newsrooms, but concerns have also been



According to the report *Surge in Harassment of Indian Reporters Over Coronavirus Coverage* by Reporters Sans Frontières, 15 cases of intimidation and harassment were reported in only one month. Considering the hostile environment for journalists in the country, the Press Freedom Index rates India 142nd out of 180 countries.

In 2020, The Coalition For Women In Journalism has documented at least 33 cases in India. While at least seven women journalists were attacked or impeded in the field, three were subjected to sexual harassment last year. We are closely monitoring the ongoing protests in India with great concern. Many women journalists continue to face relentless attacks and harassment on the ground<sup>150</sup>

Online Violence Against Women Journalists 2020 Report<sup>151</sup>



raised about their safety in the field. Rehman narrates that even while meeting militant outfit leaders she would be on the lookout for women in the camps and if she could locate a story, despite being a hardcore conflict reporter. “I realized that they used to get women cadres just to make me feel comfortable. I never faced any hostility as their publicity wing had public relation officers who would move around and give the perfect answer to your questions. So one had to be clever not to get into their propaganda and ask those difficult questions as well”.

Momentous improvement has been made in recent years in women joining the war correspondents club, formerly the realm of men. Though this is welcome change, employers ought to consider the additional dangers faced by women in conflict zones. Along with being subject to the same dangers as the male counterparts, women also face additional threats of sexual violence, intimidation and gender discrimination. In recent times, the pandemic has unfurled new challenges for journalists.

**In India, several women journalists have been laid off or have taken pay cuts. In May 2020, Guwahati-based journalist Ranjita Rabha was compelled to resign from her position in Prag News, where she had been working for 14 years.** Rabha had claimed that it was the Prag News CMD, Sanjive Narain, who told her that the organisation had “no facilities for maternity leave and no salary will be paid<sup>147</sup>”. Network of Women In Media, India (NWMI); National Commission for Women and the Rabha Development Council intervened for Rabha’s case. “The NWMI deplores the manner in which a media organisation, the primary duty and responsibility of which is to uphold the principles and standards of a democratic and just society, respect for the rule of law and the

rights of individuals and institutions, has failed to provide a basic right to its employees that they are entitled to under the law of the land. The Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act, 2017 provides for paid maternity leave for women for 12 weeks, in addition to paid leave and extension of leave without pay or work from home facilities<sup>148</sup>,” said NWMI. The pressure from the recent fallout is such that many continue their work for fear of losing whatever is left of their jobs<sup>149</sup>.

Additionally, press freedom did not look predominantly great long before the pandemic hit, and its arrival has made things worse for women journalists.

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**Navigating the field as a journalist while negotiating one’s identity as a woman or a minority is a challenge even veterans did not foresee. This open up questions that need further deliberations -- Is the media diverse in North East India? Does it consider all the components of the society and if so, to what magnitude? Has media failed as the fourth estate of democracy?**



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## 05

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### VULNERABLE CAREERS

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Recognising the need for job security and financial stability in journalism, through the narratives of Diganta Sarma





I believe I will survive this situation.

But  
I wonder  
when will  
the situation  
**CHANGE**  
in this  
profession.

DIGANTA SARMA



# VULNERABLE CAREERS

Recognising the need for job security and financial stability in journalism, through the Narratives of Diganta Sarma

HUMAN RIGHTS JOURNALIST

AUTHOR of Nellie 1983, Bodo-Adivasi Ethnic Conflict and its Aftermath and others

**'In August 2004, Sadin, an Assamese newspaper from Guwahati hired me as a reporter. Until then I was writing for them as a freelancer and would get Rs. 150 as an honorarium. I moved to Guwahati with a salary of Rs. 2000. Even though it was impossible to survive in this city with a meagre salary ... I took up the job as it was a good opportunity. I rented a bamboo hut on a hill. I did not have any amenities except for a bed and a water bottle.'**

**THOUGH** HIS CAREER SPANS two decades, Diganta Sarma did not foresee, let alone prepare for, a life in the world of journalism. Sarma grew up in Joypur, a small village 70 km from Guwahati in Assam's Darrang District, and completed his education with difficulty. "Till today there are no *pukka*<sup>152</sup> roads in my village. I come from a humble background; my father worked on a city bus to support our family. I studied in the village lower primary school, which was 5 km away from home. I would cycle 17 km up and down to Shipajhar Multipurpose School, from where I completed higher secondary education," he says.

For Diganta, the publication of a news article he wrote in Dainik Asam, one of the oldest

Assamese newspapers to date, about his home village of Joypur was the stepping stone to journalism. This was a story Sarma had written in June 2000 while volunteering as a science teacher in a venture school in his village. He fondly recalls, "The story was about a school in my village which was in a very bad condition; it did not receive any grants from the government. I was not even aware that the piece was published as we did not get the newspaper in our village. An uncle from our village read the news in Guwahati and the word spread. That is how I got to know about it." Since then, there has been no looking back. Sarma began writing as a freelancer on the socio-economic conditions of his village and neighbouring areas. Initially, he sent his stories

to the paper in the good old-fashioned way -- by post. In 2003, Dainik Asam hired him as its local correspondent. Sarma's journey helps us discuss the vulnerabilities in the profession as seen through the eyes of this three-time winner of the Assam Tribune Best Journalism on Human Rights and Civil Liberties.

Journalism has never been an easy, effortless, and unproblematic profession. Many journalists go to great lengths to report on sensitive and contentious issues which they regard as being of public interest.



**“The role of a newspaper reporter is the sixth most demanding job in the world<sup>153</sup>”.**

It is not only physical threats or mental health concerns that challenge journalists. A study titled *Vulnerable careers: Analysis of Media Layoffs as a Turning Point for Journalists*, states that a career in journalism has become susceptible in the context of job insecurity, lack of infrastructure, financial instability coupled with turmoil in personal lives.

Voicing similar concerns in the context of salary and job security of journalists, Pinaki Das, Correspondent Asian News International (ANI), said that “money matters everywhere and in journalism, there is always an uncertainty looming large. This uncertainty affects the family as well, and so it is important to have a working partner, one who has an assured job. Other than the inherent instability owing to low salary, poor infrastructure, we also lose our jobs due to political reasons<sup>154</sup>”.

If the existing circumstances were not already grim enough, the COVID-19 pandemic created more challenges for journalists. Journalists have been working on the frontlines reporting about the situation, without adequate safety kits or guidelines. “Journalists covering the COVID-19 outbreak have found themselves on the frontlines of what is perhaps one of the most dangerous assignments of their lives<sup>155</sup>.” The pandemic has had a disquieting casualty rate across newsrooms in India, with barely any major publication left that has not laid off or found a nicer sounding euphemism to sack journalists. By June 2020, 410 journalists had been laid off from several media houses across India<sup>156</sup>. “Of the total number of journalists laid off, 18+ journalists were from The Times Group; 46 reporters, six cameramen, and 17 producers from India Today; 15 journalists from News Nation; 45 journalists from The Quint were asked to go on leave without pay; 100+ journalists from the Hindustan Times and Mint; 50+ journalists from Sakal Times; 13 journalists from Gomantak Times; 100+ journalist were asked to resign from The Hindu<sup>157</sup>”. This data represents mostly metro media, while data for local media, especially in the North East, is not readily available.

In July 2020, dozens of journalists led by the

Federation of Nepali Journalists staged a protest at Maitighar, Kathmandu, holding placards that read that journalists must not be laid off using the pandemic as a pretext. “The demonstration, according to the federation, was staged in the wake of an increasing number of journalists facing termination, furloughs and pay cuts<sup>158</sup>”.

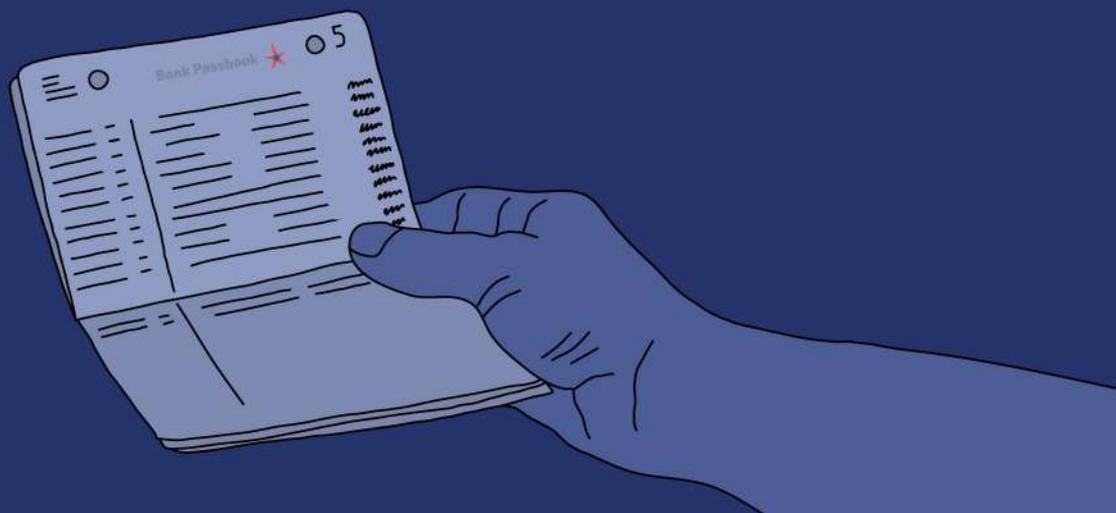
There is selective attention on the issue of job security for journalists. There is often a greater focus, although relatively, on issues such as the safety of journalist from threats posed by state actors and non-state actors, tackling impunity for crimes against journalists and access to legal remedies<sup>160</sup>.

Tongam Rina, Deputy Editor The Arunachal Times and Former President Arunachal Pradesh Union of Working Journalists, says, “There is absolutely no job security in this profession. First, you are not paid well, there is no medical insurance, provident fund, etc. You can be hired and fired arbitrarily. Management of the media organisations has to find a way to do it.” Rina said that the minimum wage law needed to be implemented for journalists.

“Journalists need to be given medical insurance. The low salary that one gets, is not even a salary. One cannot write in peace if constantly

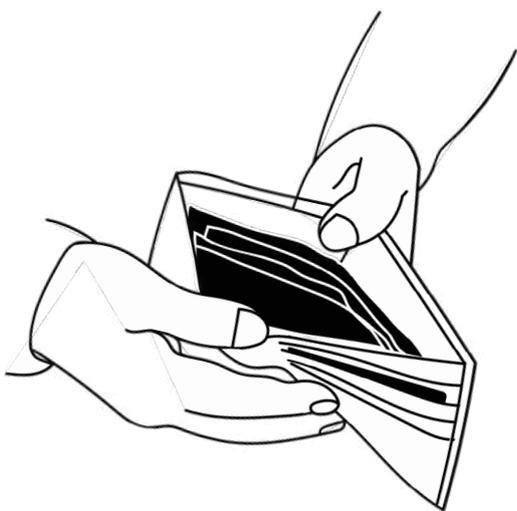
## COVID-19 pointed to growing vulnerability of journalism as a career. Cyril Sam, an independent journalist, listed a few observations in India<sup>159</sup>:

- Several journalists and staff were laid off (ranging 50-100 for select organisations) across The Hindu, Mail Today, Business Standard, The Indian Express Group, Scroll.in, Mid-Day, The Federal, MSN India, Hindustan Times, Network18 Group, ABP Group, among others.
- Operations were suspended or shut for select print or web editions, city editions, as well as news bureaus, in Hindi and English news organisations, across the Business Standard, The Telegraph, The Times of India, Outlook Publishing Group among others.
- Salary cuts, delayed payment of salary or non-payment of salary was recorded across The Deccan Chronicle, Outlook Group, Outlook Publishing Group, Economic and Political Weekly, India Today Group, Network18 Group, Patrika, The Times of India, The Caravan, The New Indian Express, NDTV, The Quint, among others.
- The Wire, Scroll.in, The New Indian Express, Ananda Bazar Patrika vacated their rented offices or a part of it, in one or more cities, due to high rentals.



consumed by the worry of running your home<sup>161</sup>”. In May 2020, similar concerns regained prominence when Prag News, an Assamese News Channel, ordered its reporter Ranjita Rabha to quit when she was pregnant. “She alleged that her request for maternity leave, even without pay, was flatly denied<sup>162</sup>”.

Media persons are deprived of basic economic benefits, besides, many journalists work without an official appointment letter issued by the employer. Insurance coverage for media persons remains virtually non-existent. In a report, ‘Assam: Journalists Living on the Edge,’ Rupam Baruah the President of Journalists’ Forum, Assam, said: “Media persons in Assam have to work with a salary starting at even Rs. 2000 with absolutely no job security. Many times, journalists (including editors) are used by media proprietors for their business (other than media) interests. So, in such a chaotic situation, we can hardly expect fair journalism in the State<sup>163</sup>”.



Diganta Sarma recollected that in 2005 he became a permanent staff reporter with Sadin with a slight increase in his salary from Rs 2000 to Rs 3500. How could anyone survive on that, let alone a journalist who needed to spend considerable time in the field for reports? Specializing in human rights and gender reporting, Sarma is a self-taught journalist, whose learning has been in the field.

He adds, “I manage to have a roof over my head in Guwahati since a cousin brother gifted me a plot of land to build a house. The roof is made with tin and for the past 15 years, I am residing here. Whatever journalistic work I have been doing, it is under the protection of this house.”

However, the issues surrounding job security continue to worry journalists and require serious deliberations from both civil society and governments. Pradip Phanjoubam, editor of the Imphal Review of Arts and Politics<sup>164</sup>, says “it is quite unfortunate that the only thing being spoken about in the pandemic is about the frontline workers in health and defence. No one is talking about journalists. A journalist’s salary is very low. That itself is a big burden on them and their mental health. Insecurity is caused by the condition that they do not have a very comfortable livelihood. This takes a toll on the confidence of the journalist and I think it is to their credit, that they can still be mentally fit”.

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**Diganta Sarma recollected that in 2005 he became a permanent staff reporter with Sadin with a slight increase in his salary from Rs 2000 to Rs 3500.**

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Sarma's story shines a light on a simple fact: While India has legal guidelines to secure journalists and journalism, conditions remain grim. How relevant are these laws if they are not being implemented?

Some of the key laws include **The Working Journalists and Other Newspaper Employees (Conditions of Service) And Miscellaneous Provisions Act, 1955**, which seeks to regulate certain conditions of service of working journalists and other persons employed in newspaper establishments<sup>165</sup>.

The First Press Commission of India in 1952 had found that journalists were paid unsatisfactorily. The Commission felt the need to fix a minimum wage for journalist employees. The Working Journalists and Other Newspaper Employees (Conditions of Services & Miscellaneous Provision) Act, 1955 made the Industrial Disputes Act, 1947 applicable to working journalists. The Act also made the Industrial Employment (Standing Orders) Act, 1946 and the Employees Provident Fund Act, 1952 applicable to every newspaper establishment employing twenty or more employees<sup>166</sup>. More efforts are needed to expand the scope of this Act to include the realities of the digital space.

In 2019, the West Bengal government had decided to bring legislation before the Assembly to ensure the job security of Journalists in the State. "(Chief Minister) Ms. (Mamta) Banerjee sought suggestions from Kolkata Press Club on the issue. She also announced sanctioning of land for a housing complex for journalists besides a second campus of the Press club in the city<sup>167</sup>". But has this been followed up and implemented, and to what degree? Another significant issue is whether other states will take similar initiatives.

#### **The key provisions of The Working Journalists and Other Newspaper Employees (Conditions of Services & Miscellaneous Provision) Act, 1955:**

- Payment of gratuity.
- Hours of work.
- Leave and earned leave on full wages.
- Fixing or revision of rates of wages in respect of working journalists.
- Enforcement of the recommendations of the wage fixation machinery like wage boards and wage tribunals.
- Employees Provident Fund
- Recovery of money due from the employer

In a landmark move, in March 2021, the Election Commission of India (ECI) granted postal-ballot services to media persons (under essential services voters' category), ahead of the Assam elections<sup>168</sup>. Journalist bodies including Journalists' Forum Assam had been demanding for postal ballot facilities to media persons for years, on grounds that media employees could not cast their votes as they had to work on the day of polling. Yet, the primary issue of salary, better infrastructure and pension remains outside the larger discourse. Sarma, who won the Laadli Media and Advertising Award for Gender Sensitivity 2020 (Eastern), for the news report '*Samajik Badha Atorai Linga Samatar Bheti Nirman (Establishing Gender Equality by Breaking Social Barriers)*' published in *Saadin*, says that low salaries apart, facilities like training or workshops are also not provided by media organisations.

He visits libraries to explore academic content, international laws and policies on his subject of interest. “In Guwahati, reporters find it difficult to talk or interact with people who stay in isolated places, like riverbeds, or slums. They lack the skill to approach the field, how to talk to people, stay with them and get a conversation started. The lack of primary knowledge and skill becomes very difficult for field reporting. Failures are bound to occur in its absence.”

## “How can you expect good journalism without job security, basic social security, training and access to resources for journalists? For how long?”

DIGANTA SARMA



In 2016, a survey by Roy Morgan, an Australian market research company headquartered in Melbourne revealed that “21% of journalists and writers surveyed said they did not have the confidence that their roles would remain safe, making them the second-lowest level of employment confidence<sup>169</sup>”. The Columbia

Journalism Review says that more than 3,100 journalists lost their jobs in 2019. Arguing along similar lines, Rachel Glickhouse a journalist at ProPublica writes, “It’s not just that journalists are losing their jobs. It’s also (that) the journalists are forced to work freelance, part-time, as contractors, or in temporary fellowships, as they struggle to find or stay in staff positions that offer stability and health benefit<sup>170</sup>.” Despite such circumstances in journalism worldwide, journalists like Sarma continue to lead from the front. “You can find more than 70% newspaper employees in Assam, who are deprived of basic minimum facilities such as an appointment letter, leave, provident fund, ESI etc. There is no other way out but fighting for our dues as recommended by the statutory wage board,” said Hiten Mahanta, a senior journalist based in Guwahati<sup>171</sup>.

Sarma, the author of *Nellie*<sup>172</sup> 1983, believes in collecting stories from the locations where they have played out. Over the past 20 years, he has travelled all over Assam covering a wide range of stories, from issues like ethnic conflicts, riots, human rights violations, and gender concerns. “I have written about the incidents of massacres in Dhemaji district and Chaulkhowa in Assam. Between 1996-1998 Kokrajhar<sup>173</sup>, Baska, and Bongaigaon districts witnessed conflict between the Adivasis and Bodos<sup>174</sup>. Ironically, more people died in the relief camp due to improper food, lodging and lack of proper treatment,” he says.

“More than 50,000 people have lost houses, land and were living in the forest and deserted areas. This ethnic conflict has shaped many political agendas, but the conditions of the victim never improved. In the ethnic riots, people did not even get clothes. At night when the kids would sleep, the father would use the dhoti as a sheet and that is how they would survive in the camp.”

Sarma has lived with the Adivasis in the forest to know their story. “I went there during winters,” says Sarma, adding that they stayed up in such extreme weather with fewer clothes and no food. “I even came across families who in the cold nights would take leaves and start covering themselves, and some would cover themselves with hay. I worked for five years to know how their rights are violated and have been writing about these issues.”

Winner of the Pabindra Nath Sarma Memorial Award for Best Reporting on Human Rights Issues<sup>175</sup> 2020, Sarma also lost his job in *Sadin* during the pandemic.

He narrates “the newspaper was stopped during the pandemic, though I was certain that it would reopen since it was an established name. But on 4th May 2020, the owner called for a meeting and terminated me along with 8 other colleagues stating they would not run the paper any longer. Three months’ compensation was promised to us. Some provident fund money would be deducted they said but the money hasn’t been deposited yet”. Reportedly, after more than 1,000 journalists lost their jobs across India and the government remained silent on it, on 9th July 2020, journalist unions across India observed Press Rights Day<sup>176</sup>. “Most journalists who lost jobs had to go ‘without even the retrenchment benefits prescribed under the Working Journalists Act or the Industrial Disputes Act’. Since the lockdown, the media owners have unleashed severely exploitative attacks on workers in this sector<sup>177</sup>”.

One cannot be sure how many journalists and media professionals from the region may have lost jobs, as not much is being spoken about.

Sarma remarks, “I believe I will survive this situation but I wonder when will the situation change in this profession. I have built my foundation and I keep motivating myself; hoping that maybe the next generation would get more motivated.”

Author of four books<sup>178</sup>, Sarma’s spirit remains indomitable in the face of adversity. He believes that since he came into this profession, his friends and family call him a journalist which gives him a sense of pride. At this juncture, if he thinks of changing the profession, then all these years of learning and foundation as a journalist would be wasted.

He reiterates, “Since I have a foundation in this field I should continue this. During the pandemic, when the office work stopped, I became very sentimental and burnt many important documents as I thought I would have to change my career. But soon I realized this outburst is of no use, I must give my service to the society”. Sarma has started working on another book on stateless people in Assam, but he remains deeply concerned about his livelihood and the future of journalism.

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**“Journalism is my profession and whether I get money or not, I have to take it forward”.**



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### ON THE DIGITAL FRONTLINES

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Mapping the challenges and opportunities of digitisation in journalism, through the narratives of Pradip Phanjoubam

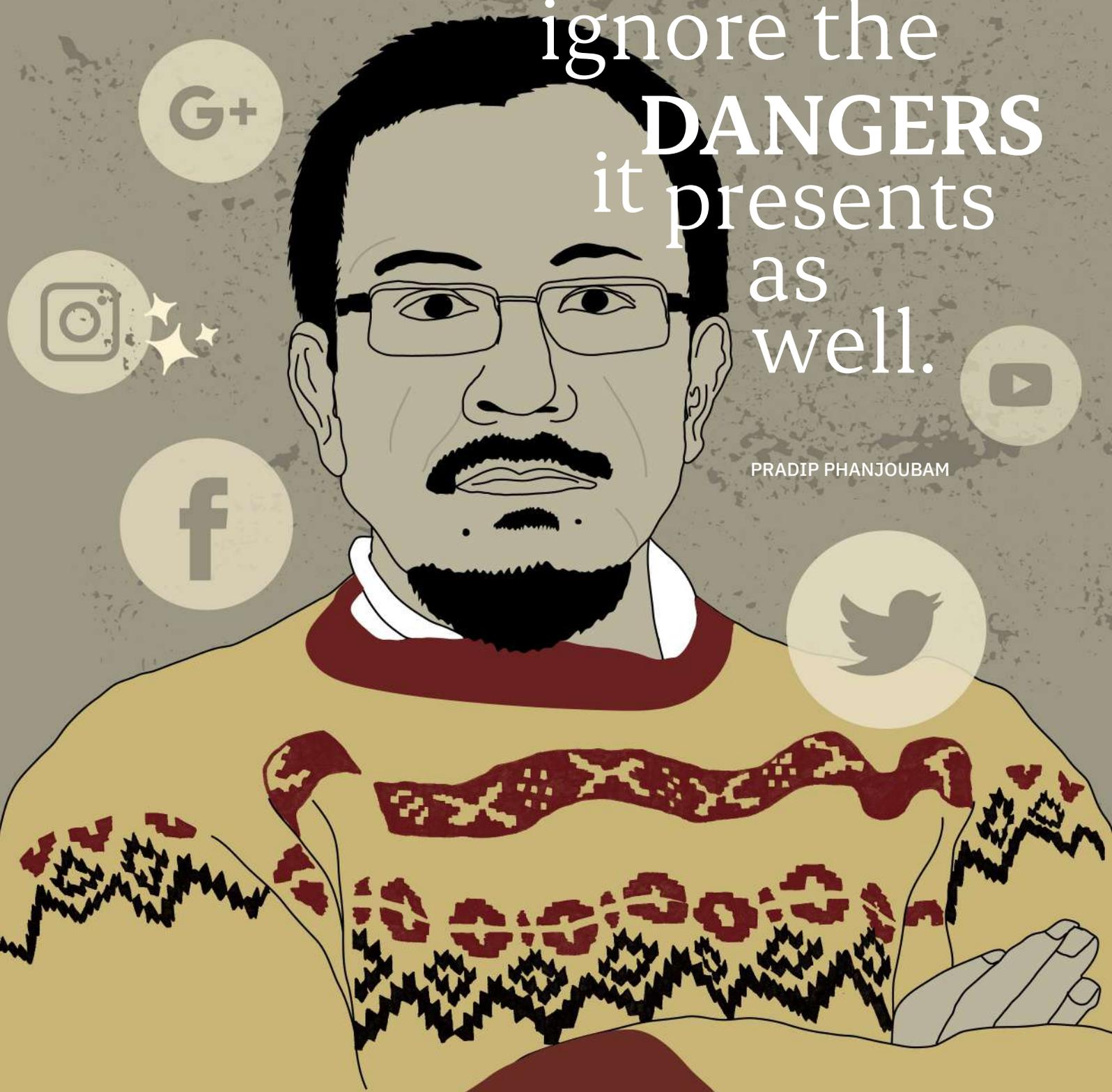




Digital media has opened unimaginable opportunities for telling out stories. However,

We cannot ignore the **DANGERS** it presents as well.

PRADIP PHANJOUBAM



# ON THE DIGITAL FRONTLINES

Mapping the challenges and opportunities of digitisation in journalism, through the Narratives of **Pradip Phanjoubam**

EDITOR, Imphal Review of Arts and Politics

AUTHOR of The Northeast Question: Conflicts and Frontiers

**“Though the internet is a dangerous space, it is flattening out the playing fields in many ways. People with money can come out with a good media setup, which I think is the future. Traditional media ultimately will be the one that suffers” - PRADIP PHANJOURBAM**

**THE** INTERNET HAS EMERGED as a magnificent transformative energy, creating a new environment wherein, societies become a digital or knowledge-based society. “The vertical and unidirectional communication model (we talk, you listen), a legacy of the old ‘media-centric world, is being replaced<sup>179</sup>”. Digital media is a blend of technology and content, comprising news, literature, social media, advertising in audio-video formats<sup>180</sup>. The digital boom is seen as a estrangement of the mass communication model of the industrial age. Rosental Calmon Alves, Director of the Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas, said that in the “new ‘me-centric world, mass media is being replaced by a mass of media, in which traditional media outlets are only one of many. This is a clear disintermediation process<sup>181</sup>”. The rise of digital media over the years has played a pivotal role in changing the way news is reported, disseminated, and consumed.

#### Internet Users in India:

- There were 624.0 million internet users in India in January 2021.
- The number of internet users in India increased by 47 million (+8.2%) between 2020 and 2021.
- Internet penetration in India stood at 45.0% in January 2021<sup>182</sup>.

Along with the opportunities, there are growing threats confronting media professionals who use the digital medium. In 2013, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights reported an increase in online attacks on journalists, including “illegal hacking of their accounts, monitoring their online activities...and the blocking of websites that contain information critical of the authorities<sup>183</sup>.”

The UNESCO 2015 report, *Building Digital Safety for Journalism*, also points out that “some media actors are being killed for their online journalism<sup>184</sup>.” Tongam Rina, Deputy Editor of *The Arunachal Times* believes that digital media is the new frontline for journalism and journalists. “It can be quite horrid in the online sphere. There are online threats and trolls constantly coming at you. People are even getting killed. This also takes a severe mental toll,<sup>185</sup>” she says. There is a global phenomenon of silencing journalists on social networks through **threats and abuses**, emerging from ordinary **trolls** or from professional ones.

“Harassment and false information can be spread by bots in synchronized attacks. Posts can appear to be originated by genuine grassroots participants (this technique is called “astroturfing”). There are companies that sell retweets and assist with email bombing. Hate messages tend to be viral, and fake news spread more rapidly than real news. Sometimes a post by an account with many followers is enough to start a mass attack. Insults sometimes follow non-insulting attacks by officials or politicians. Online harassment of journalists is a problem even in the countries which are best ranked in the World Press Freedom Index. Social network polarization contributes to the problem<sup>186</sup>”.

With a career spanning over three decades, Pradip Phanjoubam has been witness to the transition sweeping across media in the North East during a digital revolution. Having spent his childhood in Imphal, Phanjoubam completed his schooling across two states – moving between Darjeeling in West Bengal and Shillong in Meghalaya. With the completion of a diploma

course under the Times Research Foundation Institute for Social Journalism, Phanjoubam’s media career began with the *Economic Times* in 1987. He worked with the *Times of India* as a sports reporter and was subsequently attached to the regional bureau, where he was responsible for covering the North East from Delhi. In 1989, he was associated with the *Business and Political Observer*. Pradip recalls, “I was in a launch team of the *Business and Political Observer*, but it never launched and so I decided to leave by the end of 1989 and started doing my own thing from Guwahati”.

Phanjoubam’s career is an amalgamation of journalism, entrepreneurship, and academia. After moving to Guwahati in 1989, he launched *Orient Feature*, a news service, that provided news stories on subscription. This was a time when several metro media outlets like *Sunday Mail*, *Midday*, *Sunday Observer* among others sought news from the region but did not have a correspondent of their own.

“There was no email or mobile phones, so dependency was on the landline phone. I had to physically travel to all the North East states to get stories for the 11 subscribers (news organisations) I had. I was charging Rs. 1500/- per month from the *Telegraph* in 1989, which was quite a lot of money. *Calcutta Telegraph*, for instance, offered to pay Rs. 6000/- per month for exclusive stories for their edition,” says Phanjoubam.

With the advent of digital media, “news organisations have discovered a plethora of new opportunities in information delivery<sup>187</sup>”. Digital journalism has become the most extensively used and common driver of news consumption in contemporary times. Phanjoubam recalls being in the centre of this transition in the

## Digital Security Recommendations for Journalists

- Avoid being separated from your mobile/laptop in public, especially when travelling
- Don't download any files or click on any links sent to you from unknown sources
- Carefully check the email address of anyone who shares a link with you
- Use a webcam cover
- Use 'two-step verification' to protect your email account
- Remember to log out/disconnect from online platforms and websites
- Regularly delete cookies on web browser
- Prefer the use of encrypted instant messaging apps and email services
- Turn off geolocation in your apps unless you need to use it.



North East and being forced to consider the practicalities of his profession. “I wanted to go back home (from Guwahati). My parents wanted me to come to Imphal. But I could not do what I was doing from Imphal. Communication facilities were poor, you had to physically travel to all the places for stories. In that way, Guwahati was geographically central. I could go to Aizawl or Shillong; anywhere I want. So, eventually, I did close down the service and joined The Telegraph as their correspondent”.

The emergence of new media technology has transformed the face of journalism. Every new technological expansion in this world has altered the way consumers receive information. The digital space despite all its pitfalls opens up a greater avenue for writing and provides far greater reach than traditional media. Camera phones and ease of internet access enable ordinary people in remote location to document a newsworthy incident and report it to a large audience.

Author of *The Northeast Question: Conflicts and Frontiers*, Phanjoubam sought to work independently, despite the challenges in the

region - difficult terrain, poor connectivity, and socio-political turmoil. However, his parents wanted him to be in the Manipur civil services. “I did appear for the exams and even cleared the prelims. But somehow I knew I did not want to be there. I had a choice, so I came out of that. I wished to be more independent; be able express myself, and tell stories, without being told how to tell it.”

He recalls, “When I came back to Manipur from Guwahati, there was no offset machine, we were still dependent on old machines to print material. In the Times of India in Delhi, I had seen the offset, but in North East, these things were not available. We were still stuck with the old machine. Today, digital media has opened unimaginable opportunities for telling our stories. However, we cannot ignore the dangers it presents as well.”

The Imphal Free Press, an English-language daily, was launched by Phanjoubam in partnership with a businessman in 1996. Imphal Free Press<sup>188</sup> (IFP) is an independent, dependable and unbiased public service that provides quality content with a special focus on

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**“Closer to the turn of the century, it was still very difficult to print pictures in Imphal, Manipur. It was easier to print text. There were hardly any pictures in the newspapers – one on the front page, and that too not very good quality.**

**In the North East, the technological shift, especially in journalism, was sudden, a quantum jump from one thing to another. It was not a slow kind of evolutionary process”**

Manipur and its neighbouring states in North East India, while it also keeps the public abreast with top news of the country and the world. “That’s how I became an independent journalist to some extent. Of course, I was still tied to a newspaper. It is your own, and one cannot do anything and everything. We had to maintain the discipline of a newspaper,” he says, pointing to the arbitrary nature of things in media today.

In March 2020, Pradip launched the Imphal Review of Arts and Politics in an effort to move away from the daily rush of journalism and dive deeper into social issues.

In the context of digital media, Phanjoubam feels that journalism should not be open to everyone, especially online journalism. Internet is too quick and unregulated, he says.

“Journalism, once upon a time, had a filtering process with the sub-editors and editors at work. In the digital space, everybody is becoming a journalist, editor and publisher because everything is out there. This makes it difficult to understand what is true or untrue. For instance, the context and leanings are clear in the case of newspapers, which is not the truth at least in the case of digital media. Newspapers had those filters, and it also gave the readers an idea of the leanings of those papers. What leaning does Hindustan Times, The Hindu or the Economic and Political Weekly have? What kind of media we are dealing with? These were important questions to ask. But on the internet, that thing is completely lost because of the massive amount of information coming in and going out.”

In earlier traditional media ecosystems, media organisations simply gave out information and readers ‘consumed’ it by reading. Patricia Mukhim of the Shillong Times says “This seemingly tried-and-true method is

transforming. Simply making information available is not enough for today’s public”. She believes there has been a massive impact of digital media on journalism. “We must compete in the digital space, or we are out. Digital means 24x7 presence, people do not



**“Today’s audiences expect to be able to choose what they read, and most believe they should be able to contribute content and opinions, too<sup>190</sup>”.**

wait for the paper to come out the next day. Readers do not like what they have seen on the digital media to appear again in print, so it’s double work,<sup>189</sup>” she says.

For the Chief Reporter of Dawnlit Post in Arunachal Pradesh, Ranju Dodum, digital advancement in the media space means that newspapers may soon be forced to make the online shift. “People like me who are writing on paper will have to develop certain different skill sets, including multimedia talent to survive the changes brought in by the digital wave.<sup>191</sup>” Journalist and founder of independent online news portal Eastern Himalayan News Service

based in Sikkim, Nitesh R. Pradhan says, “Digital media has opened up doors for mobile journalism and mushrooming of news portals from the region, giving scope for people to tell their own stories<sup>192</sup>”.

In the era of the digital boom, Phanjoubam has taken the plunge into the domain by starting the Free Press School of Journalism<sup>193</sup> (FPSJ) in 2013-14, which now also runs the Imphal Review of Arts and Politics. For long he had desired to engage in reflexive writing. “I was in Shimla as the fellow of the Indian Institute of Advanced Study between 2012-14, where I got all the space I wanted to think over what I wanted to do. It was difficult for me to come back to the same daily newspaper, same short deadlines. I had become addicted to longer deadlines and doing deeper research for stories. I was motivated to find a midway, a kind of passage between journalism and academia. We started the Imphal Review of Arts and Politics with a web edition and soon after the print edition was also rolled out”. The journal and the school<sup>194</sup> are related but different entities. “The journal is the training ground for undergraduate students who enlist for media skill training under Rashtriya Uchcharat Shikshya Abhiyan (RUSA),” says Phanjoubam.

The prospects offered by digital media is immeasurable and well-established. However, for the domain of journalism, the creditability of online news is questionable. Taba Ajum of the Arunachal Times says, “With the advent of social media platforms including Facebook and YouTube, there have been a lot of changes in the media landscape in general and the state particularly. But, I am proud to say that the print media is still more accountable to their readers<sup>195</sup>”.

‘News Credibility Index’ 2020 survey, highlights that “61% of news consumers see fake news as a major concern. Concerns related to fake news have been a topic of discussion globally, as well as in India, and the problem of fake news seems to be getting bigger with every passing month. I do not doubt that print will continue to be the most credible media for many more years to come. When you see it in print, it is the most curated and verified reporting,” says Shailesh Kapoor, founder & CEO, Ormax Media<sup>196</sup>. Furthermore, social media has changed the idea of a free press as these platforms deliver unmediated, unedited, and raw content. Its nature and functionality have influenced the kind of content that is consumed and produced as well as human sensibilities and emotions.

Patricia Mukhim says that unmediated and edited ‘reporting’ “can lead to any kind of conflict or tragedy. How do you negotiate with fake news? By the time one checks with the newspapers or any other platform, the news is already out there online, and the damage has been done. The pace of the digital space is a big challenge”<sup>197</sup>. Similarly, Dichen Ongmu, Senior Reporter, Sikkim Express, says that “There has been a transformational shift from print to digital media, which has created a level playing field for all. However, the audience is not in a position to distinguish between various sources of news. What is fact and what is fake<sup>198</sup>?”

Although Phanjoubam accepts that every period has its hurdles and that he “would not idealize the past,” he worries about current and future conditions. The independence and space that digital technologies provide to news and media platforms have come at a high price: their integrity, gravitas and institutional weight.

“There has been a transformational shift from print to digital media, which has created a level playing field for all. However, the audience is not in a position to distinguish between various sources of news.



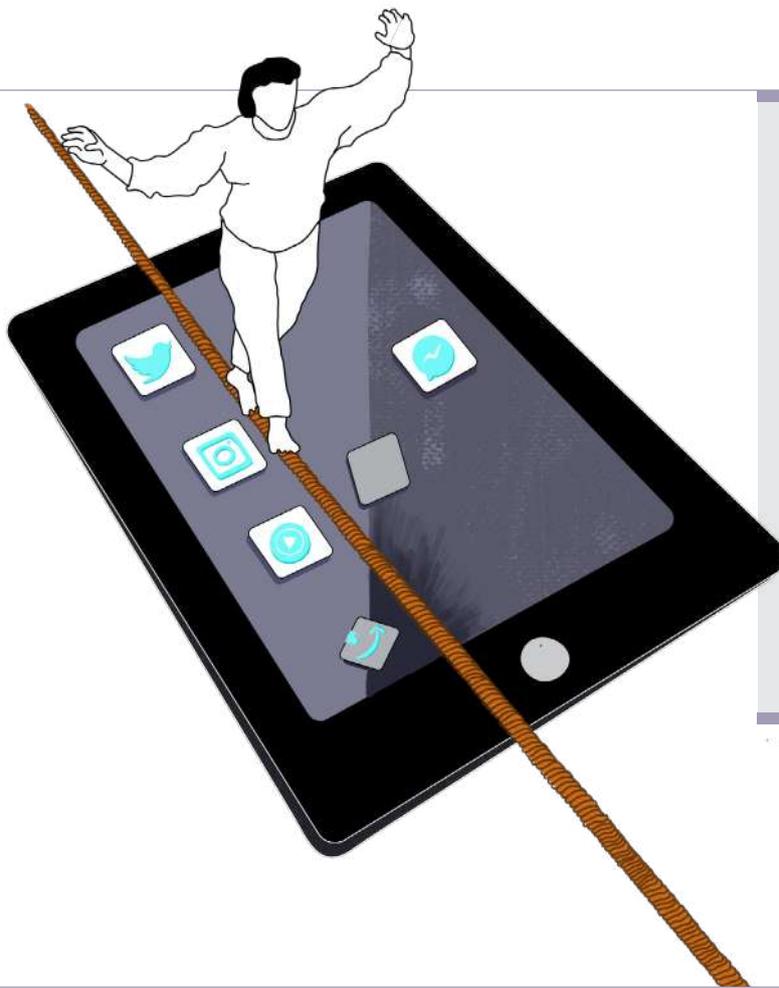
## What is fact and what is fake ?”

DICHEN ONGMU, Senior Reporter, Sikkim Express

“We were trained in an idealistic surrounding in the institutes. We were trained to be independent. Business interest and editorial interest were not supposed to be mixed at all. Back in the days, we had very powerful editors. When I joined the Times of India, Girilal Jain was the editor and Dilip Padgaonkar joined a little later, and then Arun Shourie was there. All of them were very independent people and with them around you got space to work. But that has worn out and more so with digital media,” he says.

The expansion and diversity in today’s media landscape, in the absence of strong committed editors and publishers, has invited several kinds of dangers for journalists.

One of the new challenges digital media presents is online intimidation. The report titled *Online Harassment of Journalists: The Trolls Attack* by Reporters Sans Frontieres sheds light on some of these dangers. “Threats and insults on social networks are designed to intimidate them (journalists) into silence. The sources of these threats and insults may be ordinary ‘trolls’ (individuals or communities of individuals hiding behind their screens) or armies of online mercenaries. Harassing journalists has never been as easy as it is now. Freedom of expression and bots are being used to curtail the freedom to inform<sup>199</sup>”. Dealing with the former has increasingly proven difficult as arguments against trolls, memes or any opinion are pitted



**Targeted online? Here's what you can do:** Access Now, a non-profit organisation with a mission to extend digital rights of people around the world, operates its Digital Security Helpline around the world. It works towards keeping individuals and organisation safe online, improve digital practices and provide rapid-emergency assistance. Email your request and security question: [help@accessnow.org](mailto:help@accessnow.org)

“Practicing journalism has not been easy, it is a tightrope walk. That is a reality that we all have to face. We have a journalist organisation called Manipur Working Journalists Union, and the Editors Guild Manipur, which primarily negotiates the challenges posed by state and non-state actors. Individually, it is difficult to confront death threats or legal sanctions. Dealing with the state in many ways is easy because you know whom to approach, there is a court and legal procedure to follow. But when you're dealing with the non-state actors it is a little more difficult because you do not know whom to approach, they are not there in the open. And the digital media deepens the trouble”.

**Reporters Sans Frontieres’s recommendations to deal with online harassment of journalists:**

**For Government:**

- a) Strengthen laws authorizing prosecution for online harassment of journalists.
- b) Strengthen the responsibility of online platforms in regard to content shared on their networks.
- c) Implement systems for alert and rapid intervention in harassment cases.
- d) Guarantee that the rules for fighting hateful content are applied fairly and consistently.
- e) Implement recovery procedures for cyber harassment victims.
- f) Prohibit resorting to online influence and destabilisation agents – trolls – in order to manipulate public opinion and harass journalists.

**For Media Organisations:**

- a) Acknowledge the threat and learn to anticipate attacks.
- b) Encourage the creation of networks to exchange best practices by developing a holistic approach.
- c) Make online harassment of journalists a major issue<sup>200</sup>.

against constitutional guarantees.

There are multi-dimensional challenges to journalism more so with the digital revolution, says Phanjoubam.

Disturbing trends of intimidation and harm have surfaced along with the mounting digitisation of journalism, which brings extraordinary profits to both producers and consumers of news. Electronic news media, social media handles of media professionals, and other people or groups distributing information are being targeted. The threat stems from different

bases ranging from state-based actors to third parties. “There is digital surveillance that goes beyond international standards on privacy and freedom of expression. There is hacking of data and disruptive attacks on websites and computer systems<sup>201</sup>”. In April 2017, the Council of Europe published a survey of harassment against journalists in its 47 member countries. Of the 940 journalists polled, 40% said they had been subjected to forms of harassment.<sup>202</sup> In 2017, the Committee to Protect Journalists also reported that in at least 40% of cases, journalists who were killed had received intimidations, including online threats. The same year, two women journalists were killed for their work within six weeks of one another: renowned Maltese investigative journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia and prominent Indian journalist Gauri Lankesh. “Both had been the targets of prolific, gendered online attacks before they were killed<sup>203</sup>”.

In the milieu of the challenges and opportunities thrown up by the digital revolution, Phanjoubam feels that “much idealism still exists in journalism in the region and elsewhere because of the basic need for communication. Communication itself is a basic need, journalism is serving that need,” says Phanjoubam.

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**“People like Yuval Noah Harari<sup>204</sup> have said that we as a human race have gone through something, he calls cognitive revolution, where you suddenly become conscious of space and time, and your limitation within it”.**



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- 204** Prof. Yuval Noah Harari is a historian, philosopher, and the bestselling author of *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*, *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*, and *Sapiens: A Graphic History*. His books have sold 27.5 Million copies in 60 languages, and he is considered one of the world's most influential public intellectuals today, <https://www.ynharari.com/about/>

## CHRI PROGRAMMES

CHRI seeks to hold the Commonwealth and its member countries to a high standard of human rights, transparent democracies and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). CHRI specifically works on strategic initiatives and advocacy on human rights, Access to Justice and Access to Information. Its research, publications, workshops, analysis, mobilisation, dissemination and advocacy, informs the following principal programmes:

### 1. ACCESS TO JUSTICE (ATJ) \*

\* **Police Reforms:** In too many countries the police are seen as an oppressive instrument of state rather than as protectors of citizens' rights, leading to widespread rights violations and denial of justice. CHRI promotes systemic reform so that the police act as upholders of the rule of law rather than as enforcers of a regime. CHRI's programme in India and South Asia aims at mobilising public support for police reforms and works to strengthen civil society engagement on the issues. In Tanzania and Ghana, CHRI examines police accountability and its connect to citizenry.

\* **Prison Reforms:** CHRI's work in prisons looks at increasing transparency of a traditionally closed system and exposing malpractices. Apart from highlighting systematic failures that result in overcrowding and unacceptably long pre-trial detention and prison overstay, it engages in interventions and advocacy for legal aid. Changes in these areas can spark improvements in the administration of prisons and conditions of justice.

### 2. ACCESS TO INFORMATION

\* **Right to Information:** CHRI's expertise on the promotion of Access to Information is widely acknowledged. It encourages countries to pass and implement effective Right to Information (RTI) laws. It routinely assists in the development of legislation and has been particularly successful in promoting Right to Information laws and practices in India, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Ghana and Kenya. In Ghana, CHRI as the Secretariat for the RTI civil society coalition, mobilised the efforts to pass the law; success came in 2019 after a long struggle. CHRI regularly critiques new legislation and intervenes to bring best practices into governments and civil society knowledge both at a time when laws are being drafted and when they are first being implemented. It has experience of working in hostile environments as well as culturally varied jurisdictions, enabling CHRI bring valuable insights into countries seeking to evolve new RTI laws.

**\*Media and Freedom of Expression:** CHRI documents, researchers and advocates for media freedom, rights of journalists and free expression. The programme focuses on a range of issues such as dis/misinformation, local media capacity building, safety and security of journalists, media independence, among others. While building networks of support, it also documents and reviews attacks on media professionals. The South Asia Media Defenders Network (SAMDEN), founded in 2017 and anchored in this programme, has a membership of more than 60 media professionals across South Asia. It has supported media workers by helping them work securely while pressing for greater openness and accountability. The North East Media Collective, founded in 2021, is a pan-Indian group of journalists that is anchored in the Media and Freedom of Expression programme. It works to strengthen local media capacity for better reporting from this region.

### **3. INTERNATIONAL ADVOCACY AND PROGRAMMING**

Through its flagship Report, *Easier Said Than Done*, CHRI monitors the compliance of Commonwealth member states with human rights obligations. It advocates around human rights challenges and strategically engages with regional and international bodies including the UNHRC, Commonwealth Secretariat, Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group and the African Commission for Human and People's Rights. Ongoing strategic initiatives include advocating for SDG 16 goals, SDG 8.7 (see below), monitoring and holding the Commonwealth members to account and the Universal Periodic Review. We advocate and mobilise for the protection of human rights defenders and civil society spaces.

### **4. SDG 8.7: CONTEMPORARY FORMS OF SLAVERY**

Since 2016, CHRI has pressed the Commonwealth to commit itself towards achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) Target 8.7, to 'take immediate and effective measures to eradicate forced labour, end modern slavery and human trafficking and secure the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labour, including recruitment and use of child soldiers, and by 2025 end child labour in all its forms.' In July 2019 CHRI launched the Commonwealth 8.7 Network, which facilitates partnerships between grassroots NGOs that share a common vision to eradicate contemporary forms of slavery in Commonwealth countries. With a membership of approximately 60 NGOs from all five regions, the network serves as a knowledge-sharing platform for country-specific and thematic issues and good practice, and to strengthen collective advocacy.

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