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Media and marginality in modern Mizoram

V. RATNAMALA, AMY FELICIA DANIELLE and LALNUNKIMI COLNEY 

Media content shapes our perceptions of the world. The media are a vital source of information for people to learn about their country, and what the media define as public awareness shapes our attitudes and beliefs. Media content is the only form of depiction that some people see, and it may not be accurate. The erroneous and negative stereotypes about minorities can promote misleading narratives and hinder their opportunities. News coverage can be considered important because it mirrors what is significant to a society. The media play a large part in the construction of positive and negative images and self-images of minorities. News representing minorities can certainly be relevant to the entire society (Dijk, 2000).

Mizoram, located in the North-eastern tip of India, became the 23rd state of India in 1986. The Mizo Hills is in the Southeast Asian massif of Zomia, a name derived from *zomi* or highlander in many Chin, Mizo, and Kuki languages spoken in Burma, India, and Bangladesh (Schendel, 2002, p. 653). Diversity, more than homogeneity, is the hallmark of Mizoram, the hilly Zomia. Scott's (2009) description of Zomia presents a perfect image of Mizo hills. Mizoram, including the North-eastern population, is much more scattered and culturally diversified than mainland India. The social structure of Mizoram is more fluid and egalitarian than that of hierarchical, rigid caste-ridden

mainland India. Mizo hills have actively resisted integration into the classical state, colonial state, and independent nation-state frameworks. The Mizo hills are not only a place of political resistance but also a place of cultural defiance (Scott, 2009). It is therefore fascinating to investigate how Mizoram, which is in the periphery of Indian state, represents its own marginal ethnic communities in media.

The Mizo is a generic ethnic tribe that encompasses members of subtribes like Mara, Lai, Hmar, Zomi, and Chin and are grouped under the umbrella term *Zo-fate* (Zo family). Orality is the essential feature of Zomia. Colonial modernity standardized Mizo language with a script. The advent of print led to the construction and strengthening of Mizo identity. The missionary magazines were not meant for any particular tribe or village; their target readership was the entire hnam or minam variously called "Zo," "Zofate," or "Mizo" (Zou, 2010). Print technology therefore led to the imagined Mizo hnam nation. The communities that are not part of this Zofate (especially the Chakma, the Bru, and the Gorkha) form a minority population in Mizoram but are considered non-indigenous (Pachau & VanSchendel, 2015). This means that communities outside Zofate are not part of the imagined Mizo hnam nation.

The Mizos have ousted the differences created by the significant other (i.e. the Indian state) and

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turned them into agencies of identity creation. The Mizo identity, intricately associated with territorialization and vernacular Christianity, has become a tool to resist the views of the Indian state and organize their ethnic identity (Pachau, 2014).

Christians constitute 87.16% of Mizoram population. The collective consciousness of the Mizos strongly promotes a Mizo Christianity. "Mizos are not just 'Mizos', but *Mizo Kristian* or 'Christian Mizos'" (Pachau, 2019, p. 295). Religion plays a major role in the formation of Mizo identity. Hardly any scheduled tribe working journalists can be seen in mainstream Indian media but the scheduled tribes in Mizoram own and run the entire media in Mizoram.

Minorities in Mizoram

In Mizoram today, non-Mizos are seen with scepticism. Concepts of citizenship and indigeneity marginalize and exclude minorities (Chakma, 2017). Minorities in Mizoram differ from the major Mizo tribe in terms of language and religion. The state has seen unabated tensions between the Mizo majority and the non-Mizo minority.

Sajal Nag's Mizo peace audit analyses the victory of the Mizo story and reveals the social costs of upholding cohesion as well as the cracks that continue. This fissure is obvious in intra-Mizo relations and the inclination toward xenophobic violence against the non-Christian tribes like Brus, Chakmas, the co-ethnic Myanmar-Chins, and other outsiders (Nag, 2015).

The hegemony of the "*Nexus of Patriarchy*" exhaustively dislocated women and the marginal from the space of power and authority. The continued victimization of women and the marginal echoes gendered biases and human rights situation in Zo/Mizo society (Chakraborty, 2008).

Chakmas are the second largest ethnic scheduled tribe of Mizoram (i.e. 8.46% of Mizoram's total population). They are ardent followers of Theravada Buddhism, and they speak Chakma that has adopted the Bengali script. The Chakma Autonomous District Council was formed under

the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India on 29 April 1972.

Ethnic tension between the Mizo and Chakma communities has steadily risen in dispute over indigenous identity of the minority Chakma community. The past policies implemented by the British differentiate the two communities along ethnic lines, simultaneously recognizing Mizo as indigenous and Chakma as foreigner or settler (Roluahpuia, 2016).

The Bru tribes, a non-Mizo and non-Christian tribal community, have faced the brunt of the majoritarian Mizo communities' exclusionary politics, social discrimination, and victimization (Nag, 2015, p. 175). The Brus are also known as Reangs but Mizoram refers to them as Tuikuk (a derogatory term). More than 40,000 Brus are living in the four districts of Mizoram, while about 32,000 internally displaced Brus from Mizoram are permanently settled in Tripura. Following clashes with the Mizos in 1995, the Brus were removed from Mizoram's electoral rolls. This removal sparked an armed rebellion by a Bru group and more than 40,000 Brus fled to Tripura as refugees. On 16 January 2020, a quadripartite agreement signed in New Delhi enabled 35,000 displaced Brus from Mizoram living in Tripura refugee camps since 1997 to settle permanently in Tripura (Karmakar, 2020).

Gorkhas have been a part of Mizoram since the colonial era. The Gorkhas were employed as soldiers by the colonial government and most of these soldiers stayed on, accepting Mizoram as their adopted home. Mizoram became largely ethnocentric, resulting in intolerance for the Gorkhas and other non-Mizo communities. The Gorkhas of Mizoram are fighting for their rights and demanding Other Backward Class status which will facilitate their increased representation in education and employment (Singh, 2012).

Media representation of minorities

The United Nations Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of

Minorities essentially defines minority as a group numerically inferior to the rest of the population of a State. A minority is also said to be in a non-dominant position as its members are nationals of the State who have ethnic, religious, or linguistic characteristics different from the rest of the population (Capotorti, 1979).

Campbell (1995) said that one of the reasons for the negative image of African Americans in the media stems from the fact that the community was primarily covered by white reporters for white audiences. On the other hand, a study by Vergeer et al. (2000) revealed that exposure to a newspaper's negative reporting about ethnic crime encourages people to view ethnic minorities as dangerous.

Meanwhile, the Israeli press perceives Israel's Arab population from a Jewish perspective. The newspapers' headquarters in Tel Aviv, Israel's capital, have shaped peripheral coverage patterns. Avraham (2003) found a link between a group's social-political standing in the state and media coverage patterns. It appears that organizations with closer social-political closeness to power centers received more positive publicity.

Prejudice against any social group is a hostile or negative attitude toward that group and it results in discrimination. Muslims are underrepresented among the newsmakers, specialists, and citizens featured in the media. If and when they do get covered, they are portrayed negatively (Kumar, 2011). The lack of representation of various minorities leads to a kind of "groupthink" in the media with only the viewpoints of the privileged being projected (People's Democracy, 2016).

Yuval-Davis et al. (2017) examined the political and media discourses on Roma in Hungary, Finland, and the United Kingdom (UK). Studying the discourses of both "left" and "right" mainstream newspapers in these countries, Roma people in all three countries have been racialized and "othered." The most frightening but predictable conclusion is that racialization and criminalization are increasing exponentially, with more exclusion and less collective identity (Yuval-Davis et al., 2017).

An examination of news reports regarding Muslims and Islam in Chinese state-run media over a 10-year period reveals that Chinese news stories portray Muslims in a predominantly negative way. A non-Muslim Chinese populace was subjected to an implicit association test, which revealed negative prejudices toward Muslims. Furthermore, a survey of Chinese Muslims found that they perceive a negative portrayal of Muslims and Islam in Chinese media, and that such unfavorable stereotyping may lead to real-life discrimination (Luqiu & Yang, 2018).

Jiwani and Al-Rawi (2019) studied the Canadian news reportage on Canadian youth of Somali origin. It appears that 56 news stories in *The Globe and Mail* are negative toward the Somali-Canadian community, concentrating on radicalization and terror, immigration and belonging, gang violence, and surveillance and safety. There are only a few positive stories. Images that do not represent everyone and uphold the power structure are worrisome because they legitimize the inequalities of society (Betancourt, 2020).

Galantino (2020) said that the rhetorical construction of causal relationships linking refugees and migrants to acts of terrorism is a crucial step during social construction of migration as a threat. This study enables a deeper comprehension of how migrants are socially constructed as threatening entities.

Sumra (2020) investigated Muslim/Islam antagonism which can be regarded as Islamophobia in the Indian English newspapers. According to the findings, the Indian media largely portray negative images of Muslims and Islam attempting to remold public opinion (Sumra, 2020).

Deb and Charvak (2015) found that the media coverage of *Tripura Times* and *Dainik Sambad* on Chakma migration from Bangladesh resulted in ethnic stereotypes that embrace great possibility of influencing the relationship between citizens and Chakma refugees.

A study also found that the Young Mizo Association (YMA) dominates all areas of Mizo society and the media are supportive of the NGO's

stance. The local media validated the YMA as an authority and did not critically analyze the organization's questionable activities (Ratnamala & Malsawmzuala, 2021)

The study on the representation of Brus in the Mizoram newspapers found that Brus are stereotyped as illegal and negative. The media also depict Brus as problematic, outsiders, and different from the Mizo community and show subtle racism in the media (Ratnamala & Ralte, 2016). The study of Paul et al. (2020) on the Bru-Mizo conflict concluded that there is "othering" of the Bru community while legitimizing the Mizo identity in the news coverage.

The available literature reveals that the racial minorities, refugees, and immigrants are negatively portrayed by the media and excluded from the privileged spaces of newsrooms, decision-making, and media ownership. The social power of a group is inversely proportional to the attention they receive from the media.

Conceptual framework

Representation in the media world indicates social existence; absence' means symbolic annihilation. Being hit by events and victimized by people signifies social impotence; Molding the media world has a meaning on its own. The groups that dominate the social order gets a bulk share of representation. The social groups that can shape events about, to act freely, boldly, and effectively is a mark of dramatic importance and social power (Gerbner & Gross, 1976).

The conceptual framework of the study is of pluriverse. It means "a world where many worlds fit." – "multiple, interconnected worlds and knowledges otherwise." It is "constructed on the basis of different ontological commitments, epistemic configurations, and practices of being, knowing and doing."

Part of it, media pluralism is considered significant in terms of media policy since an independent and accessible media landscape with multiple viewpoints and ideas is a vital feature of

any democratic society. Pluralism in a broad sense refers to diversity. When discussing the concept of pluralism, two perspectives must be considered: internal and external pluralism. Internal pluralism refers to how social and political diversity is reflected in media content. External pluralism refers to the number of owners, media companies, independent editorial boards, channels, titles, or programs. This type of pluralism is also known as the "plurality" of suppliers (Media Monitor, n.d.).

The Media Monitor employs a model to study the media markets that consider all stages of the media production process to further break down media diversity. The value chain is shown as having five components: source (supplier), content in terms of content creation, content packaging and content delivery and consumer (audience) (Media Monitor, n.d.). The present study analyses the coverage of minorities in the Mizo media in terms of symbolic annihilation and media pluralism.

Research methodology

This study determines whether the print media in Mizoram give priority to minority communities and analyses how their issues are covered, how exactly are their issues portrayed, and how much space is given for them. The method of content analysis was employed to study the coverage of minority communities in the print dailies of Mizoram. To study the inclusion and exclusion of minorities in print media, both the English and Mizo dailies from Aizawl city were selected for the study. The English daily *Newslink* and the Mizo daily *Vanglaini* were selected as sample dailies for the study. They were selected on the basis of their popularity and large circulation. February 2019 was purposively selected as it fell on the Parliament election period. It was timely at the time to know how the minorities were covered during the elections. March 2021 was selected purposively to know whether conflict is a major theme of news coverage of minorities as the Bru Mizo conflict was solved in 2020. The content regarding the minority communities (i.e. Bru, Chakma, and Gorkhali) was identified for the study. All the

Table 1.
Frequency distribution of minority news stories in select Mizoram newspapers.

Newspaper	Frequency (Feb 2019) Days = 24		Frequency (March 2021) Days = 27	
<i>Vanglaini</i>	6	25%	3	11.11%
<i>Newslink</i>	6	25%	4	14.8%

articles, editorials, photographs, and letters to the editor regarding the minority communities of Mizoram were the unit of analysis. Five content categories were developed based on previous studies. The content analysis identified the content categories and variables. The content categories were frequency of news, space, placement, themes, and frequency of photographs.

Results

Table 1 shows that newspapers have given less coverage to minorities. *Vanglaini* and *Newslink* published only six news stories on minorities during February 2019. The coverage of minority issues was fewer in March 2021, with only three news stories published in *Vanglaini* and four in *Newslink*.

Table 2 shows that all newspapers have not published any article regarding Gorkhalis. *Vanglaini* and *Newslink* published four news articles on the Brus. Both *Vanglaini* and *Newslink* published two news articles on the Chakmas. March 2021 analysis shows that no news report was published on Gorkhas or Brus. The four articles in *Newslink* and the three articles in *Vanglaini* were concentrated on the autonomous district councils.

Table 3 shows that all newspapers have published most of the articles regarding minorities on the front page. *Newslink* published all six news articles on minorities on its front page. *Vanglaini* too mostly published on the front page and 33.33% of articles on the second page of the newspaper. March 2021 data show that while *Newslink* published all its articles on the front page, two articles in *Vanglaini* were published on the second page, and one article on the front page.

Table 4 shows that all newspapers have published most of the articles regarding minorities in 1 column and between 2 and 4 columns. Both *Vanglaini* and *Newslink* published only one article on minorities in 5 columns and above space. March 2021 data shows that the newspapers have published three articles in 1 column, three in 2–4 columns, and one in 5 columns.

Themes of the news stories

Five themes were listed for the category, namely – conflict, election, politics, repatriation, and reservation because after analyzing the media content, there was no need to add other themes. When it comes to covering minority issues in the Aizawl district of Mizoram, repatriation was the most covered issue, along with election-related contents followed by political contents (see **Table 5**).

Space given for photographs in news items

Out of the six news items in *Vanglaini*, it has published two colored photographs on the minority issues on the front page. *Newslink* published only one photograph during the sample period of February 2019. In 2021, there was only one photograph regarding minorities (see **Table 6**).

Conclusion

The content analysis reveals that minorities in Mizoram are underrepresented and largely absent from the newspapers. As Chakmas and Brus have ongoing conflicts, we can see few negative news reports on them.

As regards limited coverage, the Bru community got more coverage because of the parliamentary polls in March 2019. The issue then between

Table 2.
Percentage distribution of articles on minorities.

Newspaper	<i>Vanglaini</i> February 2019 (6)		<i>Vanglaini</i> March 2021 (3)		<i>Newslink</i> February 2019 (6)		<i>Newslink</i> March 2021 (4)	
Bru	4	66.66%	0	0	4	66.66%	0	0
Chakma	2	33.33%	3	100%	4	33.33%	4	100%
Gorkhali	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Table 3.
Placement of minority news stories.

Placement	<i>Vanglaini</i> February 2019 (6)		<i>Vanglaini</i> March 2021 (3)		<i>Newslink</i> February 2019 (6)		<i>Newslink</i> March 2021	
Page 1	4	66.66	1	33.33%	6	100	4	100
Page 2	2	33.33	2	66.66%	0	0	0	0
Others	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Table 4.
Distribution of space given for minority news.

Space	<i>Vanglaini</i> February 2019 (24 days)	<i>Vanglaini</i> March 2021 (27 days)	<i>Newslink</i> February 2019 (24 days)	<i>Newslink</i> March 2021 (27 days)
5 column and above	1	0	1	1
1 column	1	1	5	2
Between 2 and 4 columns	4	2	0	1

Table 5.
Frequency of minority news themes.

Themes	<i>Vanglaini</i> February 2019	<i>Vanglaini</i> March 2021	<i>Newslink</i> February 2019	<i>Newslink</i> March 2021
Conflict	0	0	0	0
Election	2	0	1	0
Politics	2	3	3	4
Repatriation	2	0	2	0
Reservation	0	0	0	0

Table 6.
Frequency of photographs about minorities.

Newspaper	No. of photos February 2019	No. of photos March 2021	Color February 2019	Color March 2021	Black & White February 2019	Black & White March 2021	Columns February 2019	Columns March 2021
<i>Vanglaini</i>	2	1	2	1	0	0	3	2
<i>Newslink</i>	1	0	0	0	1	0	3	0

the Bru and Mizo groups was whether the former living in the refugee camps of Tripura can vote in the parliament elections.

Among minorities, Chakmas have their own autonomous district councils and there was scant reporting. Elections, politics, and repatriation were among the themes of the reported news about minorities. As a result, Brus and Chakmas received little coverage in the press. It is disappointing to see that Mizo newspapers did not represent the Gorkhali minority. Many Gorkhalis live in and around Aizawl but there is not a single news report about them. Since there are no reported conflicts between Gorkhalis and Mizos, the Mizo society considers them as a non-threat and media do not give them much importance.

Based on the data, minorities are hardly seen through photographs in the newspapers. The Mizo newspapers neglected Brus, Chakmas, and Gorkhalis and rendered them invisible. There were no reported major conflicts during the period in review, a major reason for underrepresentation of Bru and Chakma. Past studies showed how conflicts between Mizo and minorities received more attention by the Mizo newspapers. Media in Mizoram are also predominantly of the Mizo, by the Mizo, and for the Mizo.

The study reveals that news about minorities is largely absent in the Mizo newspapers. Minorities in Mizoram lack social power and are at the margins of the Mizo social order. The media also ignore them. All media houses are stationed at Aizawl, the administrative and cultural capital. Chakmas live in the Chakma autonomous district council in the south of Mizoram. Brus are scattered in other districts of Mizoram. Gorkhalis are

dispersed in and around Aizawl. The minority communities of Mizoram are thus located at geographical margins.

In the case of Mizoram, the content analysis confirms the absence of internal pluralism. The content regarding minority communities and their political aspirations is largely absent in Mizoram newspapers. The minorities of Mizoram do not have enough resources to run their own media and are thus missing parallel coverage. There is no daily newspaper in Chakma, Bru, and Gorkhali languages. There is only one bi-weekly newspaper in Gorkha language named *Nighalo*, and it is published from Lunglei. The word "*Nigalo*" means bamboo shoot. This newspaper serves as a messenger amongst the Gorkhali community of news and information within and outside Aizawl.

When it comes to content creation, all the journalists are Mizos. There is no single journalist from Chakma, Bru, or Gorkhali communities. Moreover, the public sphere has been deeply patriarchal since the pre-colonial period in Mizoram. The traditional Tlangau (village crier) and other communicators are predominantly men. The Gorkhalis and Brus do not have their own public address systems and they access YMA's Tlangau. In all three autonomous district councils, the Lais, Maras, and Chakmas have their own public address systems. The latter are therefore exclusive for the communities and the indigenous media are largely exclusionary.

During the colonial period, the Christian missionaries were men. Contemporary media persons are predominantly men as well. The main voices are almost always male. Mizo men continue to possess enormous control in news selection and

reporting. The data of the Mizoram Journalists Association show that only six women out of its 144 members are accredited journalists. At television and radio stations, women are working as news anchors, radio jockeys and news readers. Only a few female journalists are in the field. Men are the editors and owners of the media houses in Mizoram. We can infer that Mizo women are still a minority in media houses. A Mizo woman has limited access and participation in conventional media, including print, television, and radio. Additionally, the LGBTQ is also symbolically annihilated from the media. The content analysis reveals that there was not even a single article representing the women from minorities of Mizoram. Mizo women and minorities are marginalized in Mizo society.

The media should educate and empower all members of society irrespective of their gender, age, religion, and ethnicity. The news media should promote inclusive news coverage, recognizing problems of discrimination and marginalization of minorities, and ensuring equal human rights.

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