

Marup an Ethnic Minority Newspaper of Tripura: A Journey to Ethnic Society Revivalism

R.K. Lilapati Devi*

Abstract

Marup is a Manipuri weekly newspaper published from Agartala and widely read among the Manipuri people residing in Assam, Tripura and Bangladesh. Some of the functions of ethnic minority media are to preserve the minority people's cultural identity and language; bring community cohesion and act as a mouthpiece for the minority to the government or the authority. The study has found that Marup possess the characteristics of a literary-cultural newspaper, rather than focusing its contents on socio-political issues which a mainstream newspaper usually does. This newspaper is redefining the normative structure of an ethnic minority media in the midst of the multi-cultural, multi-ethnic state of Tripura, India.

Introduction

Marup is a Manipuri weekly newspaper published from Agartala, India. It completed 46 years of its journey on 8th May 2014. It has a circulation figure of 8000, and it belongs to the category of small newspaper (Press Council act. 1978). This newspaper is widely read among the minority Manipuri community residing in Tripura, Assam and Bangladesh.

Ethnic minority newspapers living in the midst of other dominant media caters its product in a slightly different mould besides just performing the function of dissemination of news and information on varied social, political and economic issues. It usually struggles in many ways in order to carve a place in the media world besides its endearing effort to fulfill the stark, deep objectives of the ethnic community. The objectives are usually non-profit oriented, but a way to fill the gap

between the socio- economic, political and cultural gap evident between the dominant class and the minority group. International organizations like the UNESCO have been promoting cultural pluralism, intercultural education, and knowledge societies through information and communication at various levels. The state also has its policy of multiculturalism and multilingualism. Democracy encourages a plurality of media systems, the varied voices of the people giving varied dimensions of an event or an idea. The Press Council of India believes that there is, indeed, a need to protect and promote the genuine small and medium newspapers in keeping with the country's commitment to establish a socialist society and to encourage plurality of opinion and sources of information to strengthen democracy. The government has its policy toward media pluralism and follows a model of media functionaries.

S.H. Riggins (1992) enumerates some models of media functionaries: the integrationist model, the economist model, the preemptive model, the divisive model, and the proselytism model. The Govt. of India's media policy works on the integrationist model and the economist model. The Press Council's recommendation for small and medium size newspapers are provisions like additional advertisement support to these papers by the government, cheaper newsprint, machinery and equipment at concessional rates, transparency in advertisement empanelment and release, quick clearance of advertisement bills by the DAVP and other advertising authorities, and making separate arrangements for input of information, news materials and visuals through Press Information Bureau (PIB) of the Government of India. Other aids are like offering them subscription support and organizing workshops to nurture local journalistic talent. Minority media being given such subsidies are encouraged to work to be a part of media pluralism and multi-culturalism to this overarching land of unity in diversity.

The minority media like Marup, since its early times, has been through integrating the wide diverse Manipuri ethnic communities living in Assam, Tripura and Bangladesh through publication of cultural activity, literary meet and other conventions from time to time. Being an ethnic minority in these areas, this newspaper with its editorials has been taking up a great role in preserving culture, promoting language and voicing the plights and nuances of ethnic minorities of the state thereby

promoting communal harmony and marching ahead on the path of development. Ethnic minority in a region is not always the original inhabitants of the place. Even though the ethnic groups have settled for a considerable long time and history has imbibed its course in its annals about the ethnic past, it always has its share in the history of the region.

However, the language, culture and heritage associated with the ethnic minority had always been at stake in the midst of multiculturalist society, and especially under the shadow of dominant culture. The push and pull between assimilation and ethnic pride, the more prominent phenomenon of collectivism, efforts of social cohesion or the convergence of language characterize the prism of an ethnic minority. However, on the other side of the coin, the preservation of one's own culture and language is also considered one of the statutory duties of a citizen in a civilized nation. This effort is quite visible in the case of ethnic minority media. Marup has come a long way in disseminating news and information mostly pertaining to the Manipuri society, especially to people residing outside Manipur. The message of this media runs deep on the preservation of culture and language which is under threat by the dominant culture and language of the place. The repressed voices of the minorities and the endeavor for social cohesion characterize the discourse of this newspaper.

Historical Experiences of the Manipuris as Ethnic Minorities in Assam, Tripura and Bangladesh

Manipur was a princely state till it was merged into the Indian union in 1949. In earlier times, it had neighbouring countries like Cachar (a district in Assam), Awa (Myanmar) and Takhel (Tripura). There had been frequent wars and conflicts between the kingdom of Manipur and these neighbouring countries and also between the princes of Manipur over the throne of the kingdom. On many of these instances, members of the royal family and their followers took refuge in the neighbouring countries. The greatest war in the history of Manipur was the war that happened between Awa and Manipur. The Awas, in all their strength, attacked the Manipuris. Huge number of Manipuris fled to the neighbouring countries in Cachar, Assam and Tripura.

They further advanced to different places in Bangladesh like Sylhet, Dhaka, Mymensingh and Comilla. These long years of suffering are

termed as seven years of devastation (1819-1826). Another reason for the widespread Manipuri settlement was the marriage alliances of princesses of Manipur and princes of Tripura, and Cachar and the subsequent settlement of the accompanying Manipuri people in these places (Singh, 2005).

The Discourse on Marup

Marup is a four page weekly Manipuri language newspaper published in Bengali script. In order to study the contents, the issues of the year 2013 and 2014 are taken. The contents are analyzed and categorized into the following genres: society, politics, economics, and culture and literature. It is found that its contents are mostly characterized by reports/articles written on Manipuri culture, language, and endeavors for minority cohesion and social empowerment. A meager amount of news items on political, economic and soft stories are evident. In fact, this newspaper can be described as a socio-cultural-literary newspaper. It is redefining what it means to be a part of a minority media. This is a minority newspaper giving an impetus for contemporary concerns on ethnic identity in the changing landscape of the state's geo-politics in a multi-cultural society.

Marup and Ethnic Culture Preservation

Many sociological studies have investigated minority-majority relations in which minority groups are structurally integrated into the political, social, and economic systems of the host environment (Amersfoort, 1972/1984; Marrett & Leggon, 1982; Spiro, 1955, 1987). The case of assimilation and the effort of remaining a distinct identity and culture in the midst of varied cultures are the two sides of the coin. Manipuri culture, being a minority culture in the state of Tripura, faces a similar situation. An ethnic culture can be regarded as a treasure handed down by the forefathers and meant to be preserved and maintained by generations after generations. The cultural activities such as festivals and their way of life can be regarded as an integral part of a society. They are the essence of the distinct identity of an ethnic group, race or community. The dominant media characterize the ideological complexity of business, besides just doing the function of the dissemination of news and information on various aspects of socio- economic-political and

religion. The content of the dominant media is deviant from the prevalent cultural space that needs to be continually revived from the onslaught of modern day popular culture in the society. When the question of a minority culture's revival or preservation comes, the media's role is to create awareness and value to the significance of the cultural activity done on a collective level.

The mass media play a key role in this dynamic process by defining, preserving, or weakening ethnic (and national) identities. All mass media content could be analyzed from the perspective of what is revealed about ethnicity. The journey of assimilation, acculturation and again back to reclaiming, rediscovering and reviving characterize the annals of an ethnicity. It is taken as a dynamic state.

Ethnicity is not a constant or uniform social experience either for individuals or for groups. Rather, it is a variant, on-going process, and emergent phenomenon and will therefore reveal itself in different forms with varying degrees of intensity in different social settings (Marger & Obermiller, 1987, p. 2).

Manipuri ethnicity has passed through many stages of cultural experiences. The Manipuris staying outside Manipur, being a minority, face the nuances of assimilation, integration, pluralism, separatism and acculturation in the place. As a responsible ethnic member, it is inherent that preservation of one's own culture comes as a statutory duty. Marup has been doing a yeomen work in communicating the ethnic culture. It has instilled a sense of pride in preserving and practicing one's own culture. It has established a distinct and communal system of cultural communicative practices in an adaptive and evolving society. The implicit and explicit messages it gives on the significance of maintaining cultural identity on a collective effort are evident. A sense of transcendence from history and its inseparability of the personal and the social milieu on the pedestal of civilization are implied in the contents.

A report on the performance of 216th Maharasa Dance (a Manipur classical dance) in Tripura, the celebration of *Ningol Chakouba* (a feast arranged for married sisters by their brothers) in Tripura, the celebration of *Bharat Ranga Mahatsava*, a workshop on Manipuri dance and song, a workshop on Manipuri *Rasa Lila*, the celebration of Manipuri festival in Bangladesh, a workshop on *Nat Sankritan*, reports on the vanishing and

unattended Manipuri historical sites situated in Assam and Bangladesh and various activities of socio-cultural organizations based in Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Bangladesh highlight the nuances of cultural revivalism associated with these people in this newspaper. This small newspaper has voiced the need for the preservation of culture among the people residing outside Manipur and has been striving to redefine the original Manipuri cultural identity in the midst of the varied cultures. Minority communities from different ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds living cohesively can tackle problems with their unity, mutual understanding and respect. Mass media play a vital role in disseminating genuine ideas for instilling a sense of unity, cohesiveness, pride and belongingness to the society.

Marup and the Minority Cohesion Endeavour

A minority community, living in another society, needs to stay strong. They need to build a strong community network based on principles of trust and respect for diversity and nurture a sense of belonging and confidence in themselves. The presence of strong cohesive tension ensures less conflict and more progress and development in the society.

Tripura is home to many ethnic groups: Tripuris, Reangs, Chakmas, Kuki-halam, Manipuris and Bengalis. The Bengali community constitutes more than 70% of the population of the state. The remaining ethnic communities remain as minorities in the state. The socio-political structure of the society is largely dependent on the Bengali community and hence the Bengali culture is the statutory dominant culture. The minority ethnic groups in the state have striven for unity and congregated on many platforms for their civil and political rights for development activities. Marup, being a minority newspaper, has done a yeomen work in bringing cohesion of the Manipuri minority community and other minority communities in the state as well. The editorials reflect the cohesive effort to come in unison and voice for equal rights or provision of opportunity for the minorities. The content highlights the changing dynamics of socio-political equations between government and various ethnic communities.

Lack of political participation, the phenomenon of poverty, social exclusion and deprivation have been voiced through the conventions and meetings of these minority groups. The socially disadvantaged groups

come forward and discuss the day-to-day issues, work together and explore new ideas. The support of the minority Muslim's rights under the aegis of Ranganath Mishra commission, the condemnation of deprivation of SC, ST's rights, convention of All Assam Manipur Students' union, mass rally on the awareness and importance of learning mother language, Manipuri, establishment of Manipur autonomous council, matters on reservation of minorities: Jharkhandi, OBC's, SC's, ST's (discussion on present situation and future situations), demand for the provision of learning in mother language medium up to primary level for various ethnic groups - Bru, Mog, Bishnupriya, Manipuri, Halam, Chakma, Jharkhandi etc., coverage of commemoration of high profile leaders of the state like Tripura's first Scheduled Tribe Chief minister, Dashrath Dev who belongs to minority group is a way to give fillip to the youngsters to follow their path to make a difference in the development of the community. Other reports on Tripura minority development council, 7th conference on All Tripura Manipuri students union, minority language development council, demand for reservation of quota for Muslims, conference on Manipuri development council, Assam; demand for 50% reserved seats in state assembly and need for formation of political parties for minorities, mass rally conducted by Tripura minorities language development movement council for awareness and to instill due respect and recognition of article 347 are the prominent news items published in Marup depicting its effort to coerce cohesion of minority groups. These contents and information underlie a collective effort to empower the minority. Actions that pursue political or economic power of the minority are emphasized frequently on the social platforms. Coverage of social activities may trigger incentives to the people to participate in community activities. In this respect, a minority media, Marup has helped in disseminating the ideas of various minorities and their endeavour for unison and strengthening the minority's common platform.

Marup and Cultural Revivalism

The term "minority culture" generally refers to the culture of "marginalized or vulnerable groups who live in the shadow of majority populations with a different and dominant cultural ideology" UNESCO (1995), the "majority culture". The non-dominant position of minority

groups does not always derive from numerical weakness; it often has a qualitative dimension linked to the specific cultural and socio-economic characteristics of the community. Such characteristics can produce value systems and life styles that are very different from or even incompatible with those of more dominant groups in society. Tripura is home to various communities. Each community or ethnic group is striving to preserve its own culture despite the influence of the dominant culture. Cultural festivals, or incorporating cultural programs in any function is one way the people endorse its values.

In fact, art, literature, music and film are easy ways to reach out to the people and connect the aesthetic side of human nature. They have been used as a platform to congregate people of different races, religions and languages. Literary festivals, meets, musical nights, dance performances are held from time to time. Such functions bring together people of different communities in one platform and share the entertainment quotient and spread the message of peace and harmony. These activities help to build a sense of unity, belongingness and pride in their cultural heritage and intellectual stock. Marup has given due importance to these activities. Celebration of birth anniversary of great poets, conference of *Sahitya Parisads*, song competitions, workshops on Manipuri film festival, short story reading competition, conference of writers' forum, memorial function of national award winning great freedom fighters, poetry festivals, memorial lectures on great poets and book releasing functions occupy this newspaper's spaces regularly. This reflects the effort made to unify the diverse communities or people belonging to the same community to stay connected and be a part of the moving society.

Marup and the Minority Media Theory

A medium theory propounds that a society's preferred medium of communication can be related to its cultural characteristics. Ethnic media enhance people's symbolic sense of belonging in an ethnic community (Morley, 1999). Minority media are characterized by an explicit counter ideology in terms of ethnicity. The most obvious level of content consists of information whose function is to empower the minority at the expense of the majority. Empowerment may take the form of a purely symbolic re-ordering of prestige or the actual pursuit of political or economic power (Riggins, 1992). People consume non-ethnic as well as

ethnic media. But ethnic media is something nobody else beyond the ethnic group has. Hence, ethno-centric stories of any kind whether they rest on development or visibility or human rights or soft stories are evident. This small newspaper has done its service in instilling community cohesion, promoting respect, understanding and human values. It has given reports on various activities done by the minority communities. Its editorials has addressed people to come forward, break the barriers, integrate and work on a common faith on the path of progress. This newspaper has acted as a mouth piece of the ethnic group and a strong platform for the minority people's social and political cohesion, promoting culture, art and literature. It throws the ethnic perspective of a minority community living in the midst of a multicultural society.

The ultimate purpose of ethnic minority media is the peaceful preservation of the linguistic and cultural identity of a population that have been endangered by the dominant class and march ahead towards development. Marup has been designed to the informational needs of the minority audience. The genre adopted are mostly of the literature culture, minority cohesive actions, standing for the minority rights, social equality and community goodwill. The ultimate purpose of the ethnic minority media is the peaceful preservation of the linguistic and cultural identity of a population that political and economic factors have put in a threatened position (Riggins, 1992). Marup has been found to undergo this line of convention.

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***R.K. Lilapati Devi**, is an Assistant Professor of Department of Mass Communication Manipur University