

## Journalistic Practices and the Everyday Production of News in Aizawl

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### Abstract

*This article explores how far the state owned (cultural) institution such as the Directorate of Information and Public Relations (henceforth DI&PR) and the state actors are important influencers of Mizo news production<sup>1</sup> in contemporary times. It is argued that the DI&PR is an integral part of the creation of news and have a significant role in shaping the outlook of Mizo newspapers. Here an attempt is made to illustrate the linkages between the journalists and the state actors and how or if such links have determined news /content. The analysis is based on ethnographic materials gathered over a period of two years fieldwork in Aizawl city.*

**Key Words:** Newspaper, Mizo Media, News Production, Journalism.

The emergence of Indian language newspapers was discussed at length in a relatively recent academic debate in India. At the core of these studies were the impact of newspapers as part of the 1990s neo-liberalization, which Robin Jeffrey (2000) has termed as 'India's Newspaper Revolution.' According to him, the massive growth of Indian newspapers is propelled by the successes of the Indian language press which greatly benefitted from the money of the neo-liberal economy. He perceived the newspapers' growth positively and presumed that with its expansion, local affairs become part of newspaper reporting.

In a monograph on Hindi and English newspapers, Ursula Rao (2010)

highlighted how revenue earned from corporate and other forms of advertisement gave newspapers better financial independence. She argues that with this, journalism becomes less subjected to the state and politicians. She observed that the consumer also has control over what they read or see and it included the gradual dissolution between producers and consumers. In another case study of Hindi language newspapers in Madhya Pradesh, Tabrez Ahmed Neyazi (2011) sees 'localization' backed by advertisement at the heart of the growth of regional language newspapers. His case study suggested that the decentralization of news in terms of production, distribution and consumption, from a single urban centre to smaller districts,

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towns and villages have led to more coverage of news with local issues. This, he also argues, has strengthened democracy.

In this article, it is argued that the above assumptions on the growth of the vernacular or Indian language newspapers which mainly focus on the idea of 'commercialization and localization' to my view are not a universal South Asia phenomenon. It does not fully fit the outline of my case study of Mizo newspapers. Here, I explore how far the state actors or a state owned cultural institution such as the DI&PR<sup>2</sup> are important for the production of Mizo newspapers. In my case study, I look at how the DI&PR and the state actors have a significant role in facilitating or shaping the outlook of Mizo newspapers. Here an attempt is also made to illustrate the linkages between the journalists and the state actors and how or if such links has determined news /content.

### **Method**

At the heart of this research work is a qualitative research method. My empirical data are drawn from ethnographic materials I have gathered over a period of two years (2015-2017) fieldwork in Aizawl city. I did in-depth interviews, participatory observations and newsroom ethnography to understand the everyday practices of producing news. I spent time studying the newsroom activities of a major newspaper *Vanglaini* and have visited other newspaper organisations in the city. I choose Aizawl as the site of my

empirical research as it is the hub of Mizo media which serve to produce an image of this city as the centre of Mizo metropolis. I have also looked at grey literature to supplement my ethnographic observations and interviews.

### **News-making**

Aizawl is the capital city of Mizoram in India's North-East. It is an important centre of Mizo media- media produced in a pan-ethnic language of communities subsumed under Mizo. There are over one hundred Mizo daily newspapers, two local cable networks and government-owned TV and radio station. There is also a high proliferation of internet and mobile usage. As such, a pan-Mizoram circulation of Mizo media particularly the news production is centred from the city, making Aizawl the main hub of Mizo media. In Aizawl alone, there are 34 daily newspapers produced and what is unique is that only few of these newspapers are circulated throughout the eight districts of the federal state of Mizoram. (Lallianpuii, personal communication, January 28, 2017)

In Aizawl, journalists are not limited to a specific beat. Reporters cover all relevant news in the city and very rarely outside the city. The everyday practices of local news gathering give importance to news from the state government and state actors. It is also fairly embedded in the culture of press conferences. However, occasionally, reporters from bigger news organisations like *Vanglaini* have used information acquired through the RTI (Right to Information) Act to write

investigative pieces. During my fieldwork I had attended several events and press conferences with journalists in Aizawl. Some of these included events that were attended by the Chief Minister (CM) or other cabinet members such as the Health Minister (inaugural of a polio drive, voluntary blood donation campaign) or the Transport Minister (launch of road safety campaigns) to name a few. Journalists seemed to prioritise news that is attended by heads of the state government.

Let me explain this further with an example. One day I had accompanied a reporter from *Vanglaini* on an assignment to cover a polio-eradication campaign. The event was organised by the Directorate of Health & Family Welfare, Government of Mizoram. It was held at midday at the government-owned hospital in the commercial hub of Aizawl. At the venue I met a handful of journalists from different organisations. I (along with other city journalists) stood outside and chatted for a while. Later reporters went inside to take photos. The photo op was staged after the formal event concluded. On cue from the Public Relation personnel, the health minister who was the chief guest of the event administered a drop to a baby who was held by her mother. At this event I was introduced to three employees of the DI&PR as they handed out information printed on A4 sheets, (outlining efforts taken by the WHO to eradicate polio in Mizoram and the global statistics as well as campaigns to end polio in the state of Mizoram). As we left the venue one of

the PROs had committed to send the health minister's speech to the reporters via email later in the day.

What this event exemplifies is that very often reporters have to attend mundane events where a politician or state actors make appearances but do not have new or profound things to say or share. However such events are also vital, not only for the journalists particularly those reporting on local politics and governance to fill their pages, but also for the politicians to have that platform to build public image or to continuously sought the limelight. What is interesting is that such events and press conferences demonstrate the coming together of reporters and politicians, representing two powerful institutions and what occur in the process of news-making and newsgathering. Here, news can be perceived not just as what is often attributed to 'content.' It is much more. It is (also) what the journalists and state actors do in relation to information.

As I was curious to know how the news was covered, the next day I had checked out the DI&PR website and read few newspapers. *Vanglaini* had carried the news item on the bottom corner of the front page. The coverage was quite similar to the Press Release that was shared on the DI&PR website. Here, I vividly recall what one editor of a local daily had stated in an interview I had on a separate occasion at his small office which doubled as newsroom -cum-printing press in Aizawl. It was that all journalists frequently visit the DI&PR website. He

had asked how else would the (smaller and struggling) newspapers that do not have reporters on the ground manage to run the news business on a daily basis. Perhaps this statement has come from the fact that journalists working in ‘vernacular’ newspaper organisations have to perform multiple tasks. For instance, this particular journalist runs a daily newspaper with one employee. They both engaged in writing, editing, translating, proof-reading, and page-making and so on. In addition to his journalism, he also commercially runs a small printing press and prints at least five newspapers for different organisations. Every afternoon, he regularly checks the DI&PR website, selects the news he wants, edits it and prints it.

It is no wonder that the DI&PR takes the task of writing press releases so seriously and uploading it so promptly on the website. For example, for the month of January 2017, the DI&PR has archived 283 Press Releases. There are months when the numbers are even higher, like in August and September 2017, there were 341 and 335 Press Release (respectively) published in the website. The DI&PR in particular is an important influencer of the news media, through its trained and fulltime-employed public relations specialists (Mizoram Information Services). A former employee (personal communication, October 27, 2016) boldly mentioned that:

no government events happened without the presence of a reporter or a cameraman. I think without such

events newspapers will find it difficult to fill their pages. The DI&PR is the main originator of news and we have the responsibility to deliver message/s we want the public to know. In the past, a reporter used a typewriter in our office and made a copy to share with his colleagues across publications. Easily ten to twelve newspapers carried the same news. Now with new technologies, a press release is circulated using pen-drive or is made accessible on the website. I used to tell my colleagues that if you produce a good press release, then you will have a good coverage.

An employee of the DI&PR also claimed that her department contributed a great deal of news pertaining to the state government. She gave credit to her team of more than twenty people who work in eight districts of Mizoram to highlight the day-to-day affairs of the state government.

In Aizawl, around six Public Relations officials (PRO) work closely with the CM and other heads of the state as they liaise with media relations and act as spokespersons. The employees of the DI&PR networks and builds a rapport with journalists successfully. I can say that almost all government news you read in Mizo newspapers and what you hear on television are from the DI&PR. Journalists who visit Aizawl from other parts of India are often shocked that we share good relations and mutual understanding. In many

states, journalists perceived news from I&PR as state propaganda. Here, it is not the case. The rapport we share with them takes years to build and foster. Today, we have very strong relations with the local media.” (personal communication, September 12, 2015).

### **Linkages**

In *'News as Culture'* Ursula Rao (2010) has argued that “news-making is not always a process of selecting the most important and relevant information, but is also an enterprise in establishing, nurturing and repairing relations.” What this implies is that news evolves out of interactions and relationships. She sees such relationships as having value especially in the context of South Asia. My observation is that when journalists have a relationship with high profile politicians or state actors it symbolises the kind of connections, networks and sources a journalist is able to make and nurture. In a way, news is much more than just the practice of writing, editing, proof-reading, and printing and circulating; it is also about networks, contacts, sources, power negotiations and relationship-building. In media, relationships are important. To be fair, mutual relations work not just for the journalists, but also for the politicians or state actors they cover. They, especially the politicians, use the media to craft their position in the public. The need to have followers and the desire to be seen as the patrons or supporters of the people come into play as they forge and foster relations with the journalists.

In Aizawl I have observed that journalists are closely associated and affiliated to the Mizoram Journalists Association (henceforth MJA). The MJA is a welfare body that was formed by local journalists in 1972. It has been an influential organisation that represents media professionals from different organisations across Mizoram, encompassing print and broadcast. The MJA office is in close proximity to the office of the DI&PR, the Mizoram Assembly house, important governmental offices, headquarters of political parties and dominant local NGOs, to name a few. It is an important site for journalists in Aizawl to convene, work and socialise. It is a place to bond, exchange information, co-ordinate their field assignments and decide or discard what or which news they cover. A lot of the events and press conferences are confined around the area or venues that can be easily reached.

The MJA emerged at the time of armed conflict (1966-1986) between the underground Mizo Nationalists and the Indian state. It was a time when journalists were silenced, monitored and bullied at the hands of two conflicting parties. Back in the days when the MJA was formed, news organisations and journalists did not have the privileges and the leverage it has now. Few journalists have told me that in the past they were largely ignored and undermined. A news editor I met clarified that, “We were rebuked, assaulted and even killed. We were not invited to events. There were hardly any press conferences or press releases.”<sup>3</sup> Since its inception the

MJA had hoped for better working condition, recognition and better infrastructure. In the early days of the MJA, they had asked the state government to provide them an official Press Room and to give them Press Accreditation. It took relentless efforts and lobbying to achieve both. For a short period of time the MJA were allotted a room at the office of I&PR. They had later vacated the office space. (personal communication, December 1, 2015).

Lalkhawliana (2012), the editor of an Aizawl based English daily *Highlander* wrote in an MJA souvenir published to commemorate its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary:

“MJA’s action plans on setting up the Aizawl Press Club took the organisation about 15 years to materialise. The founding president of the MJA and the chief minister of Mizoram, Mr Lal Thanhawla got himself deeply involved in the project. He took a little help from the MJA and had a suitable site located for the Press Club; he helped the revenue pass issued to the MJA and what’s more, he helped provided needed fund for construction of the Club building.”

According to information written on this book, Lal Thanhawla was the chief donor who helped acquired the land/site for the MJA. It is also noted that he had donated funds to start off the initial construction of the MJA building. Lal Thanhawla is one of the most successful politicians in Mizoram. Since his entry

into politics he has been a chief minister of Mizoram for five terms. At the time of my fieldwork, he was the chief minister (for the fifth time). He was also looking after the DI&PR. As a chief minister, he might not have a direct personal link to every member of the MJA, but he is clearly seen as a patron of the MJA, as the founding president of the MJA and as former journalist. It is also documented that three Members of the Parliament (MP) from Mizoram had contributed funds from each Local Area Development Funds respectively.

Interestingly, it was around the same time the MJA was formed, the DI&PR was also started. The Indian state invested on cultural institutions such as the DI&PR. A significant role taken up is to liaise with the local journalists. This department is the ‘nodal and publicity agency’ of the state Government of Mizoram. According to Zirliana (2012)<sup>4</sup> in such capacity the DI&PR helps the state government in credentialing journalists. At the outset what this entails is that every two years, since the implementation of The Mizoram Press Representative Accreditation Rules 1984 which came in to effect in 1986, journalists are given accreditation (selected by State Press Accreditation Committee) in Mizoram. Now the MJA makes recommendations and the DI&PR facilitates the credentialing. Currently, the accreditation is mostly given to members of the MJA. Being accredited has benefits; it recognises and affirms the work of journalists. It also comes with the

possibility of obtaining better access to important dignitaries visiting the state or gaining access to governmental facilities such as guest houses run and owned by the Government of Mizoram in other Indian cities such as Kolkata, Delhi, Mumbai etc. (personal communication, January 28, 2017). According to a Statistical Handbook (2016), there are 192 accredited journalists as of 2015-16. These are just small illustrations of the slight benefits of being acknowledged by the state government, which is the biggest economic engine and a powerful institution.

**Concluding Remarks:**

While the declines of newspapers have been widely reported across the globe, in contemporary Mizoram, newspapers are still an important medium to disseminate news and information. Even as studies and debates of Indian-

language newspapers by Robin Jeffrey as well as Ursula Rao suggested that revenue earned from advertisements gave language newspapers better financial and editorial independence from the dictates of the politicians and state actors my study points out, in the case of Mizo newspapers the state government and its actors are integral parts of the enterprise of producing news in Mizoram. The journalistic practices of news reporting is embedded in the culture of attending press conferences and events that are organised by or attended by the heads of the state government. News in Aizawl is generated by the state government and then fed to the media – of which a large number of newspapers are a part of. It is in such engagements the journalists and the state actors liaison closely, each aware of the power and influence wielded and the need to appease or connect to one another.

**Endnotes & Works Cited**

- 1 I acknowledge the complex existence of dialectical diversity amongst different Zo ethnic groups. However, for the purpose of this study, I will simply characterize Mizo newspapers as newspapers produced in standard Mizo language, which is now commonly considered a pan tribal language
- 2 The DI&PR was started in 1972. Its key function is to build and promote the public images of the state government. The department also takes up the task of imparting information on various activities of the Government using the mass media and other related forms of public communication. It fosters relations and develops networks with the media within Mizoram.

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