

# Mapping the Roles of Media in Shaping the Misrepresentations and Misconceptions about the Muslim Community in Manipur

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## Abstract

Manipur lies in the easternmost part of India, comprising of different cultures and religious communities. In some major issues like the impingement of Ikop Lake (the second largest lake in Manipur) some Manipuri Muslim youths are linked with Al-Qaeda, a terrorist organization. Media played a crucial role in spreading such conceptions about the Muslims creating a gap in the relationship between the Muslims and other communities particularly Meitei community (local community). Though Muslims in Manipur have been living in Manipur since seventeenth century, local news talk about Muslims in Manipur as slaves and illegal immigrants, who have originally, come from Bangladesh to serve the Maharaja of Manipur. This seminal study is an attempt to trace the advent of Muslims in Manipur, their sacrificing roles in the society, culture, economy and polity. It traces the role of media in shaping the misconceptions and misrepresentations about the Muslims in Manipur and creating a rift between the Muslims (Meitei-Pangals) and local community; and possible role of media for building an atmosphere for communal harmony.

**Key Words:** *Media representation, community rifts, Muslims.*

## Introduction

Before tracing out the roles of media and its functions in creating the misrepresentations and misconceptions about the Muslim community in Manipur, it is necessary to have a brief panoramic overview of Muslims, media and Manipur along with the origin of

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Muslim community in Manipur since the inception of the seventeenth century. After this, three different misinterpreted issues by the Media are explored in detail with regard to the perceptions of Media towards the Muslim community in Manipur, followed by a detailed analytical framework emphasizing the roles of media in shaping the stereotyping about the Muslims in Manipur.

Media play an important role in the fields of politics, economy and socio-cultural perspectives. It is one of the high-powered tools of communication. Like all other social institutions, it must be borne in mind, the media institutions too have been shaped by social actors and influences and therefore any understanding of the nature and role of media institutions will have to be situated within that particular societal dynamics. It can earth the many rights and wrongs of the socio-political structures happening in any country. It means that it is very important to have good media and which can tell to the public the ground reality faced by the people particularly in the remotest areas like the area I am just considering and the three different issues happening in Manipur.

Despite the role of the media in articulating a plurality of opinions and the playing the role of a critical watchdog, the media themselves have neither exercised real power on their own, nor are they independent sources of power. Like all other institutions in society, they too are related and dependent on the holders of real economic and political power. Given these conditions or existent reality, can media institutions really be 'independent' and 'neutral' apparatuses 'involved in the discovery of truth' and reflecting on reality? Or do they reflect reality and fix the public discourse in

such a way that the overall interpretation they provide will in the long run be the most advantageous and beneficial to the real holders of economic and political power? There is increasing evidence that the media more often than not, serve the interests of the powerful, 'especially when the powerful are in a position to use the media institutions to further their interests' (Mc Quail, 1994, p. 381).

A lot of commentators are becoming to acknowledge the significance of the media in shaping and informing public views of political violence (Lewis, 2005, p. 5). It means that it plays a significant role in the process of 'meaning-making' through the politico-cultural scenario. In this context, the issue of three different case studies of Manipuri Muslim community as marginalized community within the state as shaped by media particularly the press one is discussed here exhaustively. To deal with these issues effectively, it is now important to notify and examine the origin of Muslims in Manipur since the inception of seventeenth century with an emphasis on how they came from Sylhet (now in Bangladesh), their sacrificing roles for the territorial integrity of Manipur and their roles in the society, economy and cultural spheres.

The origin of Muslim community in Manipur is clouded by sizeable controversy. The origin of Muslim community in Manipur is basically ascribed to two points in time: one group of scholars claim that they started their settlements in Manipur before the seventeenth century and the other group of scholars who dispute

the first assumption, argue that they came from Sylhet, now in Bangladesh in 1606 AD and started their inhabitants in Manipur. No substantial evidences have been made as far as the origin of Muslim community in Manipur before the seventeenth century is concerned. The significant landmark was 1606 for the settlement of Manipuri Muslims. It was 'sanongba higaiwa' (the event of hiring boat for boat race which will be analyzed in the coming section) which opened the sluice gate for the origin of Muslim community in Manipur. The epoch-making event of hiring boat for boat race (hiyang tannaba in Manipuri language) by prince Chingsomba from his youngest brother, prince Sanongba of the reigning king Khagemba (1597-1652 A.D.) in which the boat broke down due to collision at Leishangkhong, created the instrumental tool of Muslim settlement in Manipur. Sanongba was instructed to accept the pleadings of Chingsomba, either the repaired or the new one, but he necessitated his own boat firmly due to the instigation of his mother Luwang Changpombi due to which Sanongba along with his mother and other followers fled to Cachar. He requested the Cachari king Dimasha Prataphil to invade Manipur in order to enable him to become the king of the state as a tributary ruler under Cachar who, later on, assorted joint invasion of Cachari and Muslim forces under the leadership of Yakharek, Bhimbal and Prasena (a leader of the Muslim mercenaries of a locality known as Taraf in Sylhet somewhere near Habigonj in Eastern Bengal) (Acharya, 1984; Habib, 1982; Rafayattullah, 1929; Singh & Khan, 1973). Discerning with grave concern the geographical plights and the military statesmanship of king Khagemba, he, in consultation with

Sanongba, determined to clasp the help of the Nawab of Taraf, Muhammad Najira who conceded their request and lengthened his collaboration and federation in waging war against Manipur by supplying 7000 soldiers including the leaders of Muhammad Sani (the commander-in-chief of the contingent), Shah Kusum, Sheikh Juned, Kourif Sheikh (his younger brothers), Akon, Alup, Shuleiya, Nampha, Phaitong, Tumiya, Khamilya, Aman, Khela, Aqya, Khamba, Punom, Kashra, Munon Khan etc. (Rafayattullah, 1929; Singh & Khan, 1973). But, little evidence is presented to justify the view. Moreover, cautiously and acutely, it is examined that the number of soldiers slain in the battle are not clear, no primary or secondary literature is available. After the defeat of the Meitei forces against the combined forces of Cachari and Muslim in 1606 A.D, all the groups brought concurrences through three conditions signed between the king of Manipur, Khagemba and the Qazi Muhammad Sani for the settlements and inhabitants of Muslims in Manipur permanently whose conditions are given as:

The first condition was that Islam should not be looked down upon and Muslims should not be humiliated and treated with respect. The Judge (qazi) will be given a free hand. The second condition was that Muslims would be allowed to live by the rules and regulations of Shariat. Muslims and their descendants would never be expelled from Manipur. If any unavoidable circumstances demanded an expulsion from Manipur, then the shares entitled to the mother of the Muslims would be granted. The third condition was that the Manipuri women who have already performed -

nikah- would be granted property rights. One transcript which embodied such legal treatises was confined at the court and another copy remained with the qazi. Such three conditions played a crucial role for the inhabitants of Muslims to settle in Manipur (Rafayattullah, 1929).

They did not return to their mother country and opted to stay as indigenous people in different sectors like the local community, who were presented local ladies to marry, servants, and land for sustenance and livelihood by the king Khagemba. They played an important role in the politico-administrative affairs of the state through setting up of institution of Mangkangshang (Mughalshang) and Pangal Shanglen. They participated and helped in many military invasions against the invading forces of Tribes at Ukhrlu, Burma at Kabaw, Burma in the Seven Years Devastation known as Chahi Taret Khuntakpa (1819-1826 AD) and British at Khongjom War 1891 during the reign of different rulers for the territorial integrity of Manipur (Khan, 1972; Rafayattullah, 1929; Shah 2008; Sharma & Badaruddin, 1991; Singh & Khan; 1973). Manipuri Muslim men and women also took part in the most respected war “Nupi Lan” of 1939 to preserve the territorial integrity of Manipur and to prevent human rights violation (Irene, 2010; Shah, 2008). Finally, the first Chief Minister of Manipur after achieving statehood in 1972 was Mohammad Alimuddin whose contribution to the state is still worth mentioning such as Manipur University, Regional Institute of Medical Sciences (RIMS), Board of Secondary of Secondary Education Manipur (BOSEM), Manipur Public Service Commission, etc. (Khan, 2016). Such major evidences available in

the primary source books and other secondary literary texts show clearly that Muslims participated in different politico-military affairs by playing some crucial and responsible assignments for the territorial integrity of Manipur.

Besides the politico-military contributions of Manipuri Meitei-Pangals, they also functioned and executed in the socio-cultural and economic benefactions in the Manipuri society through Language, Paddy Transplantation, Revenue, Games and Sports, Manufacture of Paper by Sheikh Juned, Weaving, Carpentry, Tobacco Plantation, Use of Bengali Script etc. (Khan, 1972; Khan, 2014; Parratt, 1998; Rafayatullah, 1929; Sanajaoba, 1988; Shah, 2008)

But, some scholars in the media particularly in the local newspaper namely Naharolgi Thoudang stated that Muslims staying in Manipur are the slaves and Bangladeshis who came to Manipur around eleven persons to serve the Maharaja of Manipur (22nd July 2014) which is linked to the event over the issue of encroachment of land belonging to Muslims by some Meitei's whose details are outlined below. Such kind of historically distorted news as constructed by the media about the Muslim community in Manipur especially their 'propaganda,' which is filtered out to suit the dominant interests, impinge the relationship between the Muslims and Meitei communities and may create a rift in the coming generations. It is matter of concern with great necessity. Now, the perceptions of media in constructing the misrepresentations and misconceptions towards the Muslim community in Manipur can be visualized undoubtedly by studying

three different cases taking place not long ago in various areas of Manipur.

**A Case Study of Linkage of Manipuri Muslims with the Al-Qaeda**

One of the major issues with regard to the misrepresentations and misconceptions constructed by media about the Manipuri Muslim community is the linkage of some Muslim youths with the Al-Qaeda. Firstly, such news came out in the Delhi based news magazine 'First Word', with the startling report about 17 youths from Manipur joining Al-Qaeda, the most dreaded global militant Islamist and Wahabist organization founded by Osama bin Laden, Abdullah Azzam and several other militants. Such kind of news was again reported in the national newspaper *The Times of India* on 8<sup>th</sup> October 2013 by saying as:

*'Manipur Police is verifying an intelligence report that said at least 20 Manipuri Muslims recently left the state to train under Al-Qaida. However, it is not clear which country they have gone to. The youths belong to Imphal East, Thoubal and Chandel districts. Manipur director general of police M K Das said the intelligence report is yet to be officially verified and that the security forces have so far not found any concrete evidence of the presence of any Al-Qaida operatives in the state. However, the police have been on a sharp vigil since they received the report, he added. "We will take all-out action once the intelligence inputs are corroborated," the state police chief said.'* ("Manipuri Muslims in al-Qaida", 2013)

Even the national media is not an exception to make a stereotyping remark against the Muslim youngsters under the umbrella of any terrorist group. It is surprising in one sense and



pathetic on the other hand to the whole Muslim community in Manipur. In this context, investigations have been done by the Police department, intelligence wing, and many local clubs and organizations including Manipur Muslim Online Forum, (the registered body of Manipuri Muslims), Joint Committee on Muslim Organizations' of Manipur, (a conglomerate of ten organizations) organized a public meeting at Lilong Bazar (Thoubal District) on this matter. The Joint Committee vilified such fraud news by deciding jointly to extend help to the bereaved family of the (L) Md. Altaf (Altap), to produce the final fact finding report on or before 10th October, 2014, to continue agitation and other steps democratically to enable to get the right decision from the government on or before 10th October, 2014 and to file defamation charges against the Magazine (First Word) and the owners of the News Papers which carried the false and malicious reports. Further, the Committee notified by declaring a statement after the said meeting that a memorandum had been put forward to the President of India, 21 MPs and Government of Manipur against such fake news reports (Memorandum submitted to the President of India on 2<sup>nd</sup> September, 2014 mainly led by the Popular Front of India, Manipur). However, no information has been there from the side of Government of Manipur, yet, it has been pointed out that when the matter was raised in the Manipur Legislative Assembly, Deputy Chief Minister Gaikhangam who is the in-charge of Home Department, had stated that the Government of Manipur was profoundly dealt with the issues of this wrong news report and

conducting an investigation pertaining to the verification of the news report which was being executed. He further opined that the news was baseless and wrong. Even the Convener of the Committee made a remarkable statement that 'Our survey yielded that the reports published in the First Word, The Imphal Free Press and The Hindustan Time were fictitious; the names, father's names, addresses, etc., of the persons mentioned in the reports were not matching and some are non-existent.'

That is why, Indian media persons play a critical role in spreading out the distorted news so that it makes a gap among the communities in any place of the world particularly the clear evidence from the above case study of Manipur. It does not mean that Indian media are not highly sensitive and bias on some contentious issues, but what I mean to say here is that before publication of any news, though the news is either correct or wrong, it should be made necessary to deeply analyze any event so that there might be a chance of stopping any communal venom or whatever be the event in the future perspective.

### **A Case Study of Arbitrary Acquisition of Land in the name of National Sports University**

Media played a responsible role in the case of arbitrary acquisition of land in the name of National Sports University at a place called *Loushi Loukol* near *Yaithibi* Mountain in the Thoubal District, Manipur. The generous amount Rs 100 crore funds from the Centre is now on its way to buy the said land which has been sharing a platform by three major communities- Meitei, Naga and Muslims since the early period. It affected mostly the Muslim community

staying in Sora village. Such proposal was announced by the Chief Minister of Manipur, O. Ibobi Singh, on 24<sup>th</sup> August 2014 without communicating the villagers. There was a conflict between the Government of Manipur and these communities followed by protests.

In this context, media's perception about the Muslims was biased, it never explored the real matter and only gave coverage to the Government's point of view and sidelined villagers' point of view and proposals regarding the establishment of National Sports University in this proposed area. The villagers were not completely against it, but the Government of Manipur portrayed it as acts against the principles guaranteed in the Constitution. The Government of Manipur has ignored in accordance with the provision guaranteed under Sec 4, Sec 5, Sec 6 and Sec 7 of the Right with Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act, 2013. Further, it defies the principle of Natural Justice, Manipur Conservation of Paddy Land and Wetland Act, 2014, (made chiefly to nurse the paddy land and wetlands for boosting the agricultural products in the state), Article 371C of the Constitution and the subsequent Presidential Order issued on June 20, 1972 called the Manipur Legislative Assembly (Hill Areas Committee) Order, 1972 which stated that the use of land and allotment of land in the Hill Areas of the state of Manipur is absolutely within the purview of the Hill Areas Committee and rule and law of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 and its rules as the

Forest Rights Committee (Noorshafi, 2014; “Sports university at yaithibi”, 2014).

Moreover, some villagers donated land to the government of Manipur to set up the said Sports University at different places namely Koutruk villages and surrounding areas (Imphal West), Haraoching Chingkhong free of cost. But the question comes as to why the government declined to accept the offer for the proposed National Sports University by these villagers. What are the real motives of the Government of Manipur behind the decline of setting up of such National Sports University at these places instead of establishment at *Yaithibi Loukon* with particular reference to Sora village, Muslim dominant area? But the media never unveiled the matter to the public arena. Why is it so? Why did media never reveal and demonstrate to the Government of Manipur with regard to the actual matter about the launching of National Sports University? Even, during the protests, the police tore the pages of the *Quran*, the sacred book of Muslims inside the Mosque in the name of trying to stop the protests. Subsequently, some persons strongly claimed that Manipuri Muslims do not want development to become a civilized nation. The fact that the construction of the university would displace people particularly the Muslim community (around 1402 families among the different communities) at *Yaithibi Loukon* was completely ignored. On the contrary in the discussion hour of Impact News Channel, some leaders of local community energetically opined that the National Sports University should be built at *Yaithibi Loukon* at any cost. Leaders never discussed the expansion of Sora Muslims population,

settlements, means of livelihood and other related issues. It may be remembered that the proposed agricultural land where National Sports University was to be established was the one and only one means of survival as far as the large-scale population of Sora village and other surrounding areas especially Muslims are concerned. 'If it is not built at this place, there would be a dreadful consequence which is to be brought by the Muslim community especially to those Muslims staying in Sora village in future' (Sports University Row in Manung Hutna- Impact TV News Channel on 7<sup>th</sup> November, 2016). Such dialogues by the local people of Manipur are available at the *Manipur Times* Facebook wall as:

*'Muslims as drug traffickers, thieves, uncivilized persons, signs of devastating, uncivilized Bangladeshis descents. Some persons said that you Muslims are uncivilized people 'shame on you people who do not want development and tell me a name of single place, state or a country, where Muslim happily co-exists with other community' ("Manipur Times - 48-hr NH 102 bandh concludes peacefully... | Facebook," 2014)*

### **A Case Study of the Impingement of *Ikop* Lake by some Meitei in the Name of Religious Place**

A very graphical episode of encroachment of some parts of *Ikop* Lake (the second largest lake in Manipur) by some sections of local community in the name of religious place spearheaded the process of communal tendencies mostly triggered and accelerated by media persons. Few youths of Uchiwa Nastao, a village in Thoubal District but within the jurisdiction of Mayang Imphal (Imphal West

District), complaint to the Secretary of UKALCFCO society (Uchiwa Khelakhong Awang Leikai Collective Farming Co-Operative Society, hereafter referred to as Society) that some trespassers have demarcated the *pat* or the farming area of the Society with flags that belong to local community. He told the youth to remove the flags. Another local community group came by shouting commandingly as “Run fast, kill Pangals (Muslims).” Muslims were fighting against this illegal encroachment of land by these Meiteis in the name of religious place. The local community strongly claimed that the place belonged to the sacred site of a local sylvan deity, Ikop Ningthou Maru Nongshaba but the land was allotted to the society some thirty years back and was the *patta* land owned by the Muslims. Even the police took side in favor of the Meitei group (Khan, 2014).

But the incident was flared up by many Meitei civil organizations by releasing press note based on one-sided account. The first press note released by a relatively unknown organization, Kangla Khunthokyai Apul Luplel (KAKHAL), instead of condemning trespassing and firing, provoked many other Meitei organizations by citing distorted historical facts that accused Muslims living in Manipur as illegal migrants, and a laughable account of Muslim settlement was presented as a group of 11 people who were given some piece of land out of affection just like an officer does to a servant which was mentioned earlier pertaining to the history of the arrival of Muslims in Manipur. KAKHAL infuriated Muslims by saying that all Muslims should leave the state when their Masters say so (*Naharolgi Thoudang*, 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2014).

Such communal press release was not opposed by any so-called civil organizations of Manipur working for territorial and ethnic integrity, rather more press releases reiterating the same retrograde mindset appeared in the local newspaper thereby hurting the sentiments of whole Muslim community.

These three different case studies of Manipuri Muslims in different contexts constructed by media show how Muslims were reported just not out of context but also in a new biased context. Distorted news about Muslims, misinterpreted Muslim situations and twisted or misinterpreted events all led towards a climate of suspicion and mistrust.

### **Conclusion**

It can be safely concluded that the role of media including the electronic and press in constructing the misrepresentations and misconceptions about the Muslim community in Manipur was nothing but negative, bias and was filtered out to suit the dominant interests. Muslims were marginalized and portrayed as extremely backward, who are reluctant to progress and development. The issues were never analyzed deeply. Muslims settlement in Manipur in the beginning of seventeenth century was distorted in the media to portray them as slave and illegal. The Muslims of Manipuri were portrayed as they are usually portrayed in the western media with bias and without giving any thought to the hatred and divisions created by their calculated moves.

Media need to tackle the issue of Muslims with greater understanding and sensibility rather than simplifying the issue to

an extent of distorting of facts. Even Manipuri Muslims need to urgently ponder and address these issues as they are the victim of the mindset. Manipuri Muslims need have a better professionalism, a sound economy, a good amount of leadership, the removal of identity crisis among the Muslim leaders, trained journalists, efficiency in language problem and a dialogue with the religious leaders.

The way an event, an individual, or a group or a community is illustrated in the media is often the way the same is perceived by the people be it the direct or indirect implications. For this reason, Media particularly the press should be positive and free from bias in dealing with any issue related to community, group, individual or whatever may be the matter with the hope of bringing the ethos of development and modernization as it reflects and changes the local society to the globalized society.

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