

Perceptions on Freedom to Report among Manipur Newspaper Journalists

¹Wahengbam Rorrkychand Singh, ²Dr Varghese PA

¹(PhD Scholar, Journalism and Mass Communication Department, Kuvempu University), Jnanasahyadri, Shankaraghatta, Kuvempu University, Shimoga, Karnataka 577451, Email- rorrky@gmail.com

²(Professor, Journalism and Mass Communication Department, Kuvempu University), Jnanasahyadri, Shankaraghatta, Kuvempu University, Shimoga, Karnataka 577451, Email- pulivarghese@gmail.com

Abstract: This paper looks at the journalistic freedom in Manipur, one of the Northeastern states of India. The State is one of the most hazardous terrains for journalists in the country. The political, armed conflict and social unrest in the State have largely influenced the freedom of journalists. As this context is one of the most under-researched and less documented one, this paper looks at how journalists look at the situation.

Keywords: Manipur, print media, media freedom, Media in Manipur.

1. INTRODUCTION

Manipur, once a princely ruled state was merged to the Indian Union on October 15, 1949. Manipur became a Union Territory in 1956 and a full-fledged state of India on 21 January 1972 (Pandey, 2013).

According to Sharma (2011), printing started in the State in 1910 and started printing publications from 1918. The hand-stenciled and cyclostyled journal *Meitei Chanu* published by Jan-neta Hijam Irabot Singh in 1925-26. He also started a hand written journal *Meitei Leima* and it was published from Cachar in Assam in 1917-18. T Gokulchandra Singh started publishing the first daily *Dainik Manipur Patrika* on 23 March 1933 (Pandey, 2013). According to Department of Information and Public Relations (DIPR), there are 35 dailies and 9 weekly journals in Manipur publishing in local dialects as well as in English.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The freedom of expression is the condition or right of being able or allowed to do, say, think, etc, wherever you want to, without being controlled or limited, (Cambridge Dictionary, 2008). While the term, freedom of the press is the right to circulate opinions in print without censorship by the government. Freedom of press applies to all types of printed and broadcast material, including books, newspapers, magazines, pamphlets, films and radio and television programs (Sadual, 2015).

Freedom to report fearlessly and fairly is central to journalistic profession. The Vice President of India, M Venkaiah Naidu said "Democracy needs information; for a democracy to thrive, free flow of information is essential," (The Hindu, 2017). He also observed that businessmen and politicians getting into media and distorting facts to further their interest has become a major threat to free and fair press in India (Indian Express, 2017).

Information and Broadcasting Minister Smriti Irani in her address at the valedictory of the golden jubilee celebrations of the Press Council of India on National Press Day, said, "voices of media shouldn't be suppressed and constitutionally it is our responsibility to ensure that media has the freedom to speak, even if politically I may not agree with these voices" (The Hindu, 2017)

The concept of freedom of the media arose in England and France in the 17th and 18th Centuries to combat feudal despotism and feudal ideas (Katju, 2012). In India, the beginning of the struggle for free press date back to 18th century

British India. The history of the freedom of press in India is inseparable from the history of nationalist movement (Zafreena, 2013). The existence of a free, independent and powerful press is the cornerstone of democracy and an effective instrument for building public opinions and views on various issues (Sadual, 2015). Freedom of the press is the means by which people receive free flow of information and ideas, which is essential to intelligent self-governance, that is, democracy (Katju, 2011).

Thus, freedom of the press is regarded as the mother of all other liberties in a democratic society. The prime purpose of free press is regarded as creating a fourth institution outside the government as an additional check on Executive, Legislative and Judiciary, (Zafreena, 2013).

Indian Constitution guarantees media freedom (Article 19 (1a) also laying down reasonable limitations to the freedom of expression (Article 19 (2) in matters affecting sovereignty and integrity of the state; security of the state; friendly relations with foreign countries; public order; decency or morality; contempt of court; defamation and incitement to an offence (Kumar, 2009).

Press freedom in Manipur:

From the colonial days to even today, the press in Manipur is being targeted by politicians, business people and interest groups. Even the first daily had to stop printing due to government control (Sharma, 2011). The presence of conflicts among and between various tribes, underground groups about 40, military activities under Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) - 1958 makes the State one of the conflict ridden region in the country (AMWJU, 2014).

State, and central governments, tribal leadership, underground groups and the army use press as a strategic weapon to highlight their achievements such as guerilla warfare, display of arms captured during operations and cleared insurgents. Journalists of Manipur, who are underpaid, overworked and semi-skilled, are caught between the interests of armed insurgent groups and armed military forces.

During the 70s, when the underground movement began to spread, seizure of press materials and arrest of journalists were routine. Salam Bharatbhusan, former editor of *Hueiyen Lanpao* and Meinam Mithai, Editor of *Matam* were booked under National Security Act and imprisoned for 6 months (Singh, 2017).

There were 32 incidents where journalists were either assaulted or humiliated at reporting sites, on their way back to home from newspaper offices and even at or in front of their newspaper offices by security personnel and unknown miscreants. Ten journalists were either arrested or detained by security forces in eight different incidents on the flimsy ground of either having nexus with the armed activists or publication of seditious news. Publication of newspaper and transmission of news by local TV channels were banned on six different occasions by militant outfits, state administration and civil society organisations in Manipur. There were also 2 incidents wherein the journalists were warned by state police with lodging FIRs against 7 local dailies in the first incident and against 6 dailies in second incident for publishing news and photographs of proscribed organisations (Sharma, 2015).

In a “conflict torn” state like Manipur life of journalists is full of troubles and difficulties, said Karam Shyam, Minister, Government of Manipur recently during the National Press Day celebration at Banquet Hall of 1st Manipur Rifles, in Imphal.

He also acknowledged “journalists were sometimes threatened for publishing as well as for not publishing certain news items in Manipur and it is difficult for media persons to carry out their duties fearlessly in Manipur.” Despite of discharging their duties as the fourth pillar of democracy “selflessly” to bring a positive change in the state, journalists in the state are facing greater risks compared to their counterparts in other states (*The People's Chronicle*, 2017).

Media faces various kinds of pressures in insurgency-afflicted Manipur. Press in Manipur function under police guard and newspaper establishments in the state resemble like war offices, with heavily armed police guarding them. The managements have engaged on a permanent basis private security men to guard the main gates and the offices. Editors and high profile journalists are avoiding public appearances and almost of them have changed their mobile numbers clandestinely; they talk over telephone only when the caller's identity is established (Laithangbam, 2012).

In protest against the dictates from various armed groups, journalists in the state staged various protest demonstrations and left editorials of newspapers left blank. In order to safeguard the freedom of the press, All Manipur Working Journalists Union (AMWJU) has adopted a 15-point Journalists' Code of Conduct on 19 June 2005. The Code of Conduct includes

the editor’s right to censor/delete partly or as a whole any report or press release or interview or press conference which could create communal tension or group clash (Chhakchhuak, 2005). The Union also observes that in almost all cases of atrocities against journalists, no progress is recorded in investigations.

3. OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

The objective of the paper was to analyse the freedom enjoyed by newspaper journalists in the state of Manipur and their perceptions regarding freedom to report. Based on a survey conducted among 30 randomly selected working journalists; 5 reporters from each 6 (Six) dailies namely *Poknapham*, *Sangai Express*, *Hueiyen Lanpao*, *Naharolgi Thoudang*, *Sanaleibak* and *Imphal Free Press*; the data was gathered and analysed.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Nature of Freedom

Majority of the respondents opined that journalists in Manipur enjoy less freedom than their counterparts working in other states of India. The armed forces violate freedom of press, but there is a mix response to the statement that freedom of the press reduces after the imposition of Armed Forces Special Powers Act- 1958 in the state. Almost half of them (43 percent of the respondent) agreed to the statement and 7 percent of them strongly agreed to the statement. While other half of the journalists have the strongly disagree to the impact of AFSPA on journalistic freedom. The responses also revealed that journalists in Manipur respond immediately when their freedom is violated. There were no comments ‘undecided’ or ‘strongly disagree’.

Table 1: Nature of Newspaper Freedom

Statements	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Total
Manipuri journalists enjoy lesser freedom than other journalists in India.	20	57	23	100
Journalists in Manipur face obstacles	20	57	23	100
Armed Forces violate press freedom in Manipur	17	70	13	100
AFSPA reduces Journalistic freedom	7	43	50	100
Manipuri journalists are concerned when their freedom is violated.	7	93	0	100

2. Pressures on Journalists

In the last 5 years a total of 36 percent of working newspaper reporters said that they had felt their journalistic freedom is violated 3-5 times. The journalistic freedom of 23 percent of them was violated more than 5 in the last five year. During the period, 7 percent of the journalists were felt that their freedom was violated twice, while the freedom of 17 percent was violated atleast once. Another 17 percent responded that during the last five years they have not felt like their journalistic freedom was never violated in the last five years.

Table 2: Pressures on Journalists

<i>Problem/question</i>	<i>Never</i>	<i>Once</i>	<i>Twice</i>	<i>times</i>	<i>>5 times</i>
How many times you had felt that your freedom is violated in the last five years	17	17	7	36	23
Have you received any threat from any underground groups (UGs) operating in Manipur in the last five years?	27	7	30	23	13

Fig.5: Showing pressure on working newspaper reporters. All figures are in percentage.

Regarding the threat received from any underground groups (UGs) operating in Manipur in the last five years, 30 percent of the journalists have received threats twice, while 23 percent, 13 percent and 7 percent have received more than 3-5, more than 5 times and once during the last five years respectively. The responses from the working journalists of the state also suggest that 27 percent have not received any sort of threats is violate from underground groups operating in the state and 17 percent of the newspaper reporters never felt that their freedom.

Table 3: Source of Pressure

<i>Pressure from</i>	<i>Regularly</i>	<i>Sometimes</i>	<i>Rarely</i>	<i>Never</i>
Local/regional/state politicians	0	23	44	33
Underground Groups	60	27	13	0
Army	13	34	53	0
Civil society Organisations	0	0	70	30
Police	0	0	90	10
Business group or mafia	0	0	80	20
Media organisation	50	33	17	0

Altogether 44 percent of journalists in Manipur has the opinion that politicians rarely give indirect pressures on them, while 23 percentage of them also opined that the indirect pressure are made by politicians sometimes. But, 33 percent journalists said that politicians never give indirect pressures to them.

The responses from the journalists also suggest that underground groups operating in the state are giving indirect pressures to them. 60 percent of the journalists responded that underground groups give indirect pressures to them on regular basis, while, 27 percent and 13 percent of them have the opinion that underground groups give indirect pressure to journalists in Manipur sometimes and rarely respectively.

The responses from the journalists also suggest that Army personnel in the state are giving indirect pressures to them. 13 percent of the journalists agreed to the statement that army give indirect pressures to them on regular basis, while, 34 percent and 53 percent of them have the opinion that Army personnel deployed in Manipur give indirect pressure to journalists in Manipur on sometimes and rarely basis.

Civil society organizations based in Manipur does not give indirect pressures to journalists of the state on regular basis, however on rarely basis which 70 percent of the journalists responded. However, remaining 30 percent of them responded that civil society organizations do not give indirect pressures to journalist's fraternity in Manipur.

According to the responses 90 percent of journalists said that police give indirect pressures to them on rarely basis, while 10percent said that police had never gave indirect pressure on them.

The business groups/mafia in the state has also give impact to the journalistic freedom in Manipur. According to the responses of the journalists, 80 percent of them responded that business groups/mafia give indirect pressure to them on rarely basis; while the remaining 20 percent said that business groups/mafia never give indirect pressure on them.

The media management gives indirect pressures to their employees. 50 percent of the journalists said that they receive indirect pressures from the management on regular basis, while 30 percent and 17 percent of them said that management gives indirect pressures sometimes and rarely basis respectively.

3. Nature of atrocities against journalists

Majority of the journalists have the opinion that dictates to shut down press is the main factor for violation of press freedom in Manipur, while physical attack to the pressmen is second most threat perceived by journalists in Manipur. Breaking of equipment, life threat and indirect pressures are also the common forms of journalistic freedom violation in the state.

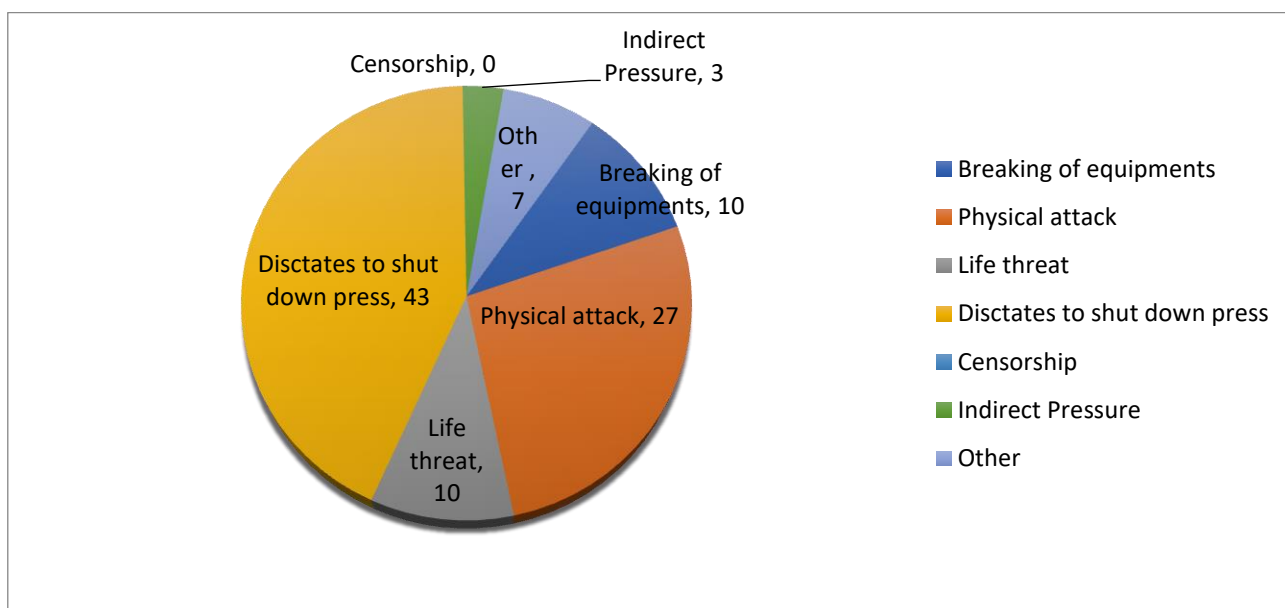


Fig 1: Nature of atrocities.

Table 4: Reporters' awareness of attacks on their colleagues

Colleagues are . . .	NO ONE	1 PERSON	2-3 PERSONS	>3 PERSONS
Physically attacked	70	27	3	0
Verbally abused	20	33	43	4
Killed	100			
Tortured	97	3		
Bomb threat	94	6		
Threat calls	83	14	3	
Disappeared	100			
Kidnapped	100			
Illegally detained	80	20		
Hoax calls	97	3		
Harassed	94	6		
False FIRs	83	17		

The above figure indicates that 27 percent of the respondent said that 1 person was attacked physically during the last 5 years, while 3 percent of their colleagues from their organization were physically attacked. Verbal abuse is like a common attack to the freedom of the press among the working newspaper reporters of Manipur. 33 percent of the respondents said that 1 person each from their organization was verbally abused, while 43 percent and 4 percent of them have the opinion that atleast 2-3 and more than 3 persons from their press were verbally abused. Among the respondents, 14 percent of the reporters said that one working journalists from their press received threat call, while 3 percent of the reporters have the perception that 2-3 person from their organization have received same phone call in the last five years. Besides, 3 percent of the working journalists in Manipur have received hoax call. During the period, 17 percent of the journalists working in different newspaper organizations in the state were charged with false FIRs.

In the last 5 years, none from their press were killed, disappeared and kidnapped. One person each was tortured and even received bomb threat.

Table 5: Personal experiences in the last five years

Nature of attacks	Never	Once	Twice	3-5 Times	>5 Times
Physically attacked	80	17	3	0	0
Pressure to publish	0	23	17	30	30
Pressure not to publish	0	23	17	30	30
Denied publication of sensitive story	73	27	0	0	0

According to the responses of the journalists, in the last five years 17 percent were physically attacked once and 3 percent was physically attacked twice during the period. During the last five years 53 percent were pressurized to publish a story 3-5 times, while 44 percent and 3 percent were pressurized to publish a story twice and once respectively.

During the last five years 30 percent each were pressurized not to publish a story more than 5 times and 3-5 times, respectively while 23 percent and 17 percent of newspaper reporters were denied to publish a story twice and once respectively. It is found that journalists working in Manipur were pressurized not to publish story during the period.

Out of the total respondents, 73 percent of them said that their sensitive stories were not denied for publication while remaining 27 percent said that they were denied to file sensitive stories once in the last five years.

4. Journalists nature of relationship with various stakeholders

The relationship of journalists with army is mostly in the professional manner, majority of the journalists (77 percent) have professional relationship with Army, while 13 percent respondents have friendly relationship. Only 10 percent of the journalists have hostile relationship with army in Manipur.

Table 6: Nature of relationship with state and non-state actors

Group	Friendly	Professional	Hostile
Army	13	77	10
Police	30	17	53
Underground groups	3	90	7
Civil society organizations	23	60	17
Public	87	13	0

Unlike Army, the state police has more hostile attitude with the journalists of Manipur. Instead, 53 percent of them have hostile relationship and 30 of them have friendly relationship with police. Only 17 percent of the newspaper reporters have professional relationship with state police.

The relationship between the journalists and underground groups in Manipur is mostly professional, 90 percent of the respondents have professional relationship with underground groups operating in Manipur, while 7 percent and 3 percent have hostile and friendly relationship respectively.

The relationship of pressmen and Manipur based civil society organizations is mainly professional, but they have hostile relations with media too. The data shows that 60 percent of them have professional relationship with civil society organization based in Manipur while 23 percent and 17 percent have friendly and hostile relationship respectively.

The relationship of journalists with the public is friendly or else professional. A total number of 87 percent of the respondents (26) have friendly relationship with the public while remaining 13 percent have friendly relationship with the public.

5. Journalists’ reaction to threats

If any untoward event happens to the journalistic freedom, 93 percent discuss it in the office, none of them would report it to police, only seven percent report it to Press Club. While 70 percent told they would stand firm and fight, 30 percent stated that they might yield to pressure.

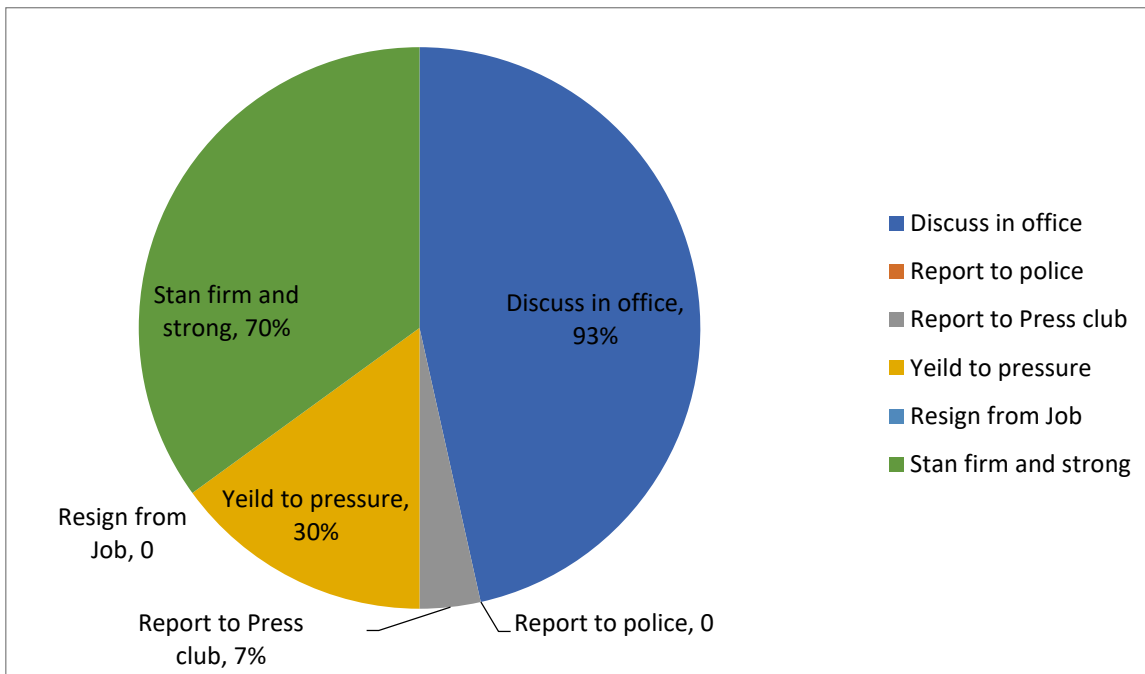


Fig 2: Showing how journalists respond to pressures.

It is also responded that when they were pressurized journalists generally discuss in office or report it to the press club. Majority of the journalists 93 percent of them discuss the issue and 7 percent responded that they report to the press club when they were pressurized. When pressurized journalists stand firm and strong, said 70 percent while 30 percent of them yeild to pressure.

	Always	Sometimes	Never
Follow rules	97	3	0
Befriend attackers	0	10	90
Seek police protection	73	17	10

Fig. 11: Showing how journalists avoid pressure and attacks. All figures are in percentage.

97 percentage of the respondents (29) follow rules to avoid pressure and attacks on them while few 3 percent follows rules sometimes. Majority of the journalists in Manipur, 90 percent never befriend to avoid pressure and attack. While 10 percent of the journalists sometimes befriend to avoid pressure and attack on them as to avoid pressure and attack. Among the newspaper journalists, 73 percentage of them always seek police protection and 17 percentage sometimes seek police protection while 10 percent (3 respondent) never seek police protection to avoid attack.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From the above, it is observed that the safety and security of the journalists in Manipur is seriously endangered. The freedom of the journalists is violated by both state and non-state actors. Armed underground groups, and the security forces are also not left behind from violating journalistic freedom in Manipur.

Due to the prevailing ‘dark and confusing’ situation for journalists of the state, balancing of news is sometimes impossible. Armed groups and their factions continue to use media as their “notice board” for their “propaganda warfare” as one journalist opined.

Direct and indirect threats by tapping “public phone/mobile numbers” of journalists; interrogation of journalists for publishing news of non-state actors and pressurizing media to disclose the details of sources are common in the journalistic environment of Manipur is also a serious violation of media freedom.

A proper separate and special regulation is needed to protect the rights and freedom of journalists working in sensitive zones like Manipur.

Awareness and sensitization programmes on human rights, media freedom and risk alleviation should be created among the government authorities, security forces, non-state actors like banned underground, media persons and the public. This will help in creating a safe and secure ambiance for the journalists while reporting in armed conflict zone like Manipur.

There is also a need to check infiltration of anti-national elements to independent media in the guise of journalists. Along with proper understanding of the historical background of the troubled region to equip journalists with the background of the problem, journalists must observe the law of the land and professional code of ethics.

Besides, unity among the journalist fraternity, strengthening journalists’ union/association and maintaining proper co-ordination among regional, national and international journalists’ bodies is highly required to fight against anti-social elements and threat to freedom of speech and expression.

Report to the authority and seek immediate protection is another way to mitigate/avert untoward incidents, when a threat is received. Even the PCI has code of conduct for journalists; the local adjustment is the main principle.

The last mechanism to protect freedom of the press in the state is resorted to the general public. Press is the oxygen of democracy; one cannot survive without the other. Press is for the people and people should decide what is wrong and correct. Everybody needs news and the news is very important to one and all. So, the people are the only mechanism to fight against the groups that dictate the press and give threats. The public need to appeal to the underground groups not to give any hindrance to the work and professional lives of journalists in the state and allow free flow of information and ideas which is essential in a healthy democracy.

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