Chapter 5

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Media is regarded as an important part of the architecture of society. It plays a major role by creating a virtual space for critical debates on social issues by empowering citizens in their fighting against the State. It has the power to influence political, economic and social changes. With its social responsibility and social obligation, media can make tremendous contribution to the society. But it has shifted its paradigm of social responsibility and obligation to the interest of the dominant classes. Neo-Marxist theorists claimed that media plays tremendous role in the reproduction of social system and culture determined by economic and political elements through ideological commonsense. They view capitalist society as being one of class domination; the media is seen as part of an ideological arena in which various class views are fought out, although within the context of the dominance of certain classes; the ultimate control is increasingly concentrated in monopoly capital; media professionals are socialized into internalize the norms of the dominant culture.

It is regarded as a means of production which produced three forms of products; false consciousness, meaning and consent. It produces false consciousness in the working class by indoctrinating and manipulating which is not immune against falsehood. This false consciousness colonized the mind of the working class by providing monolithic expression of the events and thus leading them to one dimensional society. Meaning is constructed by selecting elements from the raw events and then arranged them in order to produce naturalized meaning. In the process of producing consent, media operates in such a way to reflect that it is free from political and economical control and also at the same time maintains freedom and impartiality. In order to do this, it takes the partial explanation as if it is a comprehensive and adequate one. Its legitimacy depends on that part of the truth for the whole, which is really mistaken for the whole, and presented as general interest of the majority.
Accordingly, media operation is determined by the economic base of organizations as well as by ideological practices. It emphasizes more concentration on maximization of profit by drawing attention to human interest story, for instance sex and violence, and thus taking maximum audiences to the advertisers. But structuralists like Althusser, Stuart Hall and other culturalist-Marxists proposed that the superstructure of media contents are relatively autonomous from economic determination, and rather see priority of ideological determination in the process of social struggle where meaning is primarily determined within the dominant culture. In this process, ideology serves as determining forces in which the constructed ideological subjective position is a function of class position and the dominant ideology in society is the ideology of its dominant class. While disseminating the ideas of the ruling class (especially the State), ideology functions in such a way that it interpellates the subject to the constructed subject position with no sign of opposition. Ideology plays an important role here in constituting individuals to the constructed subject position. It functions in such a way that the representation of media is taken as reflections of reality. It transforms individuals into constructed subjects and leading them to see themselves as self-determining agents. The State, with the help of media as an instrument, infiltrates into the private space of society. Media serves as the mouthpiece of the politicians, especially of the ruling party, in order to promote their agendas. It sets locked into the power structure and operates in relationship with the dominant social institutions like police, judiciary and others and reproduces their viewpoints as obvious and natural. Any viewpoint opposite to the dominant ideology, unpopular and unconventional is avoided.

The present study looks into media coverage of anti-dam movements against Tipaimukh dam and Lower Subansiri dam in northeast India from the neo-Marxists perspectives. Since its inception, major reaction and opposition from peoples’ organizations and environmental experts, local, national as well as international, came up against the projects since its failure to adhere to the legal processes created to safeguard public interest. As per expert advice, the Tipaimukh Dam with its 163 m high will submerge more than 286 sq.km of prime farmland upstream and dry up a huge area of wetland downstream including 90 villages with 1,310 families. While the Lower Subansuri dam is apprehended to have a cumulative impact of different dimensions and magnitudes right from the immediate downstream to the confluence
with the Brahmaputra River, including 271 villages and 6363 families, once completed. The maximum affected area will be Assam.

Transferring of power over common property resources from the indigenous tribal and rural communities to the bureaucracy, public sector companies, and private developers has generated local opposition and fuelled social conflict between a development minded State and the affected local communities. The villagers and activists had their own view of the fate of the dam displacement based on their assessment of the affected people of similar projects like Borlia river, Suklai, Champanadi, military base at Satgaon in Guwahati, Jagiroad paper mill, capital complex at Dispur, NEEPCO Duliajan Project at Kathalguri, Dinjan military base and Numaligarh Refinery project. The affected people of these projects have not been given proper resettlement and rehabilitation as promised by the government.

Review from the earlier works shows that media frames according to the government’s dominant perspectives and its spaces indicate conformity with the hegemonic pro-state voices. It is characterized by lack of inclusion of views held by various stakeholders, exclusion of local communities from natural resources; rather provide more emphasis on economic aspects than social by constructing meaning of the events in a particular way. On the other hand, studies show that people's movements gain victories by forcing some dam projects cancelled, or halted or delayed. Though the movements do not provide a clear picture in order to make a final mark on its success or failure, but a major concern that dominates these movements is the issue of compensation and the unjust and inadequate Resettlement and Rehabilitation (R&R) package proposal which in turn becomes the point of criticism of State’s attitudes towards its subjects.

Looking from the neo-Marxists perspectives, the present study shows that both the newspapers have constructed and projected anti-dam activists, for instance members of Krishak Mukhtisangram Samiti (KMSS) and All Assam Students Union (AASU), as ‘protesters’. Of the 31 articles, 25 articles structured anti-dam activists as violent, anti-development, anti-government and also labeled them as having Maoists link. More emphasis was given to the action of anti-dam activists preventing movement of turbines to the project site, threatening the State government to continue
their agitation, blocking National Highways, creating problems to the State administration because of their agitation and gheraoing the office of National Hydroelectric Power Corporation (NHPC) in Guwahati.

Ideology functions effectively as commonsense in the process of positioning the anti-dam activists as protesters. It is all about social determination of signifying systems (meanings) in the interest of dominant bloc and presenting the constructed meanings as commonsense. This constructed subject position of anti-dam activists is being justified by both the newspapers by focusing on their negative action, selected limited sources as reliable and consistent in reporting their agitations. People who are fighting at the cost of their lives because of the projects are branded as Maoists. As neo-Marxists have asserted, meaning is constructed by selecting elements from the raw events and then structured it as a naturalized meaning. In this process, it pretends to be free from political and economical control at the same time maintains freedom and impartiality. It takes the partial explanation as if it is a comprehensive and adequate one. Its legitimacy depends on that part of the truth for the whole, which is really a mistake for the whole, and presented as general interest of the majority. In the process of portraying this constructed meaning as commonsense, the study has found that both the newspapers are confined to the events and actions of anti-dam activists agitation are selected, structured and then produced meaning about them as violent people who came onto the streets and protest against the State government. The anti-dam movement has a series of history, but the definition of the situation is confined to the agitating action of anti-dam activists against construction of dams in the regions.

The main ideology underpinning in the discourse of the movement is that by structuring anti-dam activists as protesters, media is trying to restructure the society and sustains power relation of the State. Expert studies have shown a clear observation in the social, economic, cultural and environmental impact on the affected people living in downstream areas. Based on the assessment of similar projects, the affected people had their own view the government has failed in meeting rehabilitation towards displaced and affected indigenous communities, rather the affected people and villages ultimately caught up in predicament to co-operate, surrender, or resist. But the meaning constructed by both the newspapers about the relationship between the State government and the anti-dam activists is that, in order
to bring solution to the dam related issues and bring them into the main stream, the State government has invited them for a talk in the midst of their agitation. It further states that anti-dam activists did not respond to the invitation, rather threatened the State government and decided to continue the agitation. Thus the blame has fallen upon the anti-dam activists. Different ideologies have emerged from among pressure groups, indigenous affected people, activists, and government and private companies over the construction of this dam. The government goes with its decision of constructing the dam claiming that it is a national development project and will also bring solution to the problem of electric scarcity in the States of Assam and Manipur as well as for the nation. Thus, media serves as the mouthpiece of the State in order to promote their agendas. It has integrated into the power structure of the State and operates in relationship with the dominant social institutions like the police, judiciary and reproduces their viewpoints as obvious and natural. In the present case, reporting for the welfare of the affected people has become opposite to the State ideology and thus it is underreported.

As Althusser had asserted, media as ideological state apparatus, both the newspapers have carried the ideology of the State by giving more emphasis on development and benefits from the project by diverting the issues to safety of dams as claimed by the State. In order to make commonsense about the State ideology, both the newspapers have framed the issue in such a way that the State of Assam is facing perennial flood problem and power crisis since many years. It said that both the projects will control the flood problem and both Assam and Manipur States will get more share of free electricity from the projects. The Lower Subansiri project is considered as important to the nation as it is one of the national development programmes. It further states that the projects are not the problem, but the problem is with the people. People possess mental illness of ‘fear psychosis’ on the possible effect of the project. The adverse impact of the project has been mitigated by stating that there is nothing to fear for as the projects are being built by National Hydroelectric Power Corporation (NHPC), which means the work of NHPC never fails and can be trusted. The story gives more emphasis on the initiative taken by the State, providing importance to them, in order to remove the fear psychosis from their mind. It tries to impose the pro-people ideology of the government on the society by stating that the State has understood the downstream impact and the project is
implemented after examining its impact, after taking precautionary measures. The story has been framed in such a way that the dam is safe, built by NHPC, examined downstream impact and precautionary measures are taken. It is also scripted to assure that the government is taking initiatives to remove the fear psychosis from the minds of the people. But many studies have revealed that both the projects upon completion will have tremendous social and ecological impact in upstream as well as downstream regions. In the upstream region, it will submerge several thousand of households and will deprive them of their livelihood and as well as in the downstream region.

In the present case, sources from the government officials are taken as reliable. All of their articulations are about the positive action of the State government showing deep concerns for its people in general. Officials from the government have more privilege to have access to the coverage. In most of the cases, the focus of the coverage was not on the issues related to the impact of the projects rather on the ministers and at the same time, on the violent action of the activists and thus de-emphasized impact on human beings. There was no room for the voice of affected indigenous people and thus their problems were marginalized. Assam power minister Prodyut Bordoloi and NHPC spokesperson control the media products by manipulation and distortion of information and creating meaning of events that suit their political agenda. In the process of sustaining its power relations, with the function of ideology, the State government produces and reproduces such a condition suggesting that both the projects will benefit the nation. General public has taken this source as true and thus created consent. Public in general have trust on the State that it will bring welfare to the common man. Thus limited alternative sources create limited alternative experiences of the event.

To the action of the government, the analysis has found that both the newspapers represented that the State government has understood the adverse impact of the dams as raised by various organizations and considered all the measures to mitigate the impact. Representation of the State government in order to mitigate the impact as explained by both the newspapers are: the State government has formed a group of ministers (GoM) to deal with the issues related to dams from all angles like impact on forest and environment, irrigation and water resources, negotiation of power share for the State and fears of impact of the dams in the downstream areas; the
State government has constituted experts groups to look into the structural and seismological aspects of the project; chief minister Tarun Gogoi invites anti-dam activists to have talks about dam issues in order to bring a solution and resolve the problems. But the anti-dam activists are not responding to the invitation, but rather adamant in their decision to continue the agitation; the State government has taken a decision not to harm and affect the sentiment of the people by the projects at any cost. People of the state are blamed for the fears they have. It said that since the project is safe, the problem is not the project but the people. Police are forced to act on the anti-dam activists to maintain law and order in the region. The action of police is legitimized; the voice of the opposition party is regarded as less important and thus marginalized. Social relationship of the State government with the people projected by both the newspapers is a long term power relation by producing condition for existence like claiming solidarity through media. Media has played a great role in disseminating this generalized solidarity. The analysis shows media is not providing equal treatment to all. Since it has locked up with the power structure of the State, it becomes the mouthpiece of the State.

The study shows how media reporting of anti-dam movement is heavily influenced by socio-political factors over a period of time, and has become increasingly affected by political and industry interests and discourages reporting from the multi-faceted dimensions. The emphasis within the coverage has tended to be on mitigation of the great anomalies of the projects. It is seen that ideology functions actively in the process of media constructing meaning and commonsense by crumbling ideological diversity. Reality is being constructed, generating a gap between the State and the affected people/activists and between what exists and what is represented. This ideological commonsense constructs our cultures, affect our thoughts, attitudes and actions and persuade us to act according to somebody’s interest. In response to this context, media as a public sphere should be a platform for expressing pluralism and diversity for both the privileged and under privileged and should function as democratic medium for a democratic country like India. It should fill-up or rather minimize the gap between the State and its people by representing the existing reality. Marginalizing, down-grading or de-legitimitizing alternative constructions should be stopped. Power relation should not be the base for media access. It has to be given equal treatment to all. If reporters were to take a thematic
approach as opposed to an episodic approach to cover the issues, this would lead some way towards improving the situation. It is therefore important to understand media coverage of anti-dam movement because it has the potential to create, re-create and sustain perceptions about the issue. It is hoped that this research will generate new ways of addressing this important and complex issues through which we come to understand one of the most critical issues of our time. A debate on media education (a critical perspective) and cultural analysis (analysis of media texts and institutions within relations of power) will help redefine the relationship between media and society.

Limitations of the study

The major limitations of the present research

- The study is restricted in selecting the numbers of newspapers for analyzing the movement.
- The researcher has selected only the Guwahati edition of The Times of India and The Telegraph for analyzing the movement due to local disturbances.
- None of the local newspapers have been included for the study due to constraints of time and availability.
- The analysis is restricted to news stories only. No editorial, letters to the editor and opinion piece are taken for the analysis.
- The analysis is restricted to ideological perspectives only.
- The study is carried out only qualitative assessment.
- The investigation is restricted to the use of words and sentences structure of the discourse. More emphasis is given in seeing restructuring of the society by analyzing the structure of news story.

Suggestion for further research

The popular movements have their own place in the history of human civilization. The anti-dam movement in Assam and Manipur has its own importance vis-à-vis issues of livelihood and national development. The present study has focused on it only in the Assam and Manipur context and if such movements in other parts of the country are investigated, as covered by both print and electronic media, it will provide an insight into the causes and consequences of similar movements in other
parts of the country. The studies should be expansive by including as many newspapers as possible. Separate studies with regard to the electronic media, social media and other channels of communication should be explored. Similarly comparative studies between media can also be attempted.

The qualitative aspect of content analysis needs rigour and depth, especially with regard to the language parameters, that require further refinement and adaptability. Future research in this area should be of multi-disciplinary approach for a better understanding of the issues involved.