Chapter VII
Conclusion

The present thesis progressed on a trajectory to study the relation between media and reporting of violence in general and reporting of violence during Assam agitation in particular. Media, as a powerful force in reporting, disseminating information on acts of violence in the present world often takes sides and is instrumental in shaping public opinion. In the process media constructs powerful ideas on nationalism and identity. Media often serves the interests of a particular class as much as it seeks opportunities for its own economic benefits. The economics and politics of media affect the lives of many people. In the process media often compromises on ethics in the name of “freedom of press.” The present study makes an attempt to look into some of the conflicting terrains and examine the role of the Assamese print media reporting on violence in Assam during the Assam movement.

The focus of the study has been reporting of the Nellie violence of Feb 18, 1983 in which hundreds of people lost their lives. Nellie violence took place within the time frame of the Assam movement and the movement was instrumental in the occurrence of the event. The arguments for the thesis have been backed up with interviews of journalists who witnessed the event and did newspaper reportage on Nellie violence during the period. Particularly, the nature of reporting of two prominent Assamese regional dailies i.e. Dainik Asom and Dainik Janambhumi was crucially important in propagating the ideology of Assamese nationalism from the inception of the Assam movement since 1979. The regional newspapers were nurturing a sentiment that later on gave credence to regionalism and contributed to the growth of sub nationalism.

For the purpose of my study, I had to rely on secondary sources viz. newspapers from the archives of 1979 to 1983. An elaborate content analysis of the newspapers was done for the period before, during and after the 1983 election, when most of the violent incidents took place. The analysis was further engendered with the information and observations of journalists who were witness to the event and also wrote about it.

The study establishes the relation between violence and media by analyzing how the Assamese regional print media reported violence of the Nellie
killings of 1983. For that, the inter-relation between media and society has been
discussed in the initial chapter to showcase how media plays an increasingly important
role in modern society. Detailed discussion on aspects of freedom of expression and
freedom of the press proves to us how these aspects demonstrate a clear bearing on
development, democracy and dialogue. These bring about a paradoxical yet interesting
position where on one side the media has all the necessary space to contribute to
dissemination of information but on the other the media also indulges in partisan
politics compromising media ethics. Ethical and professional standards are prerequisite
for good journalism. A key issue in this context is the way media deals with conflicts.
While reporting instances of conflict/violence the media must adhere to high ethical and
professional standards. However, we have terrifying examples of how the media had
functioned in an inciting and inflammatory manner in the past and contributed to
communal passion during violent events in the country.

Any discussion on ethical standards of news reporting brings in the issue of
messages and the role that mediated messages could play in any form of
communication. Particularly, in the process of mediated communication, meanings are
encoded in an institutional and social context transferred by technical means and
decoded in another context. Each moment in the process has a bearing on the other
moments, but no moment dominates the other completely. Thus, the media refers to
social processes of transferring and circulating meaning. This process matters because it
shapes how we understand the world and our relationships with others. The process of
sharing meaning is intrinsic to the exercise of power. Those who have the material and
cultural resources to control, organize and regulate the sharing of meaning can shape
how the flow of information and relationships between people are organized. The media
not only informs and educates us, but also indoctrinates us. Assamese readers during the
Assam movement showed the desire to be informed about political issues, particularly
local and regional politics. That became the key for inducing people to become regular
newspaper readers and buyers. It was visible that ownership patterns, structures and the
kind of commitment to journalism characterize and differentiate one newspaper from
another.

Since the 1950s and 1960s, the Indian news media has followed a set of
guidelines formulated by the Press Council of India, a quasi-judicial watchdog
organization, which has been stipulating that the identity of victims or attackers should
not be mentioned in news reports to prevent further escalation of communal violence.
The guidelines were drawn up against the backdrop of India’s partition into independent India and Pakistan in 1947 and the tense Hindu–Muslim relations that accompanied it. There was no television, and, until the transistor revolution of the 1970s, even radio was confined to the affluent sections of society. When Gandhi was shot dead on 30 January 1948, the second sentence on All India Radio’s news bulletin was that the killer was not a Muslim. The editor of the bulletin wanted to nip any rumour in the bud, and the speedy announcement that Gandhi’s assailant was not a Muslim prevented attacks against the millions of Muslims that had chosen not to migrate to the new (Islamic) state of Pakistan. But the ban on naming communities in the news media never really worked. The identity of the victims and attackers was all too evident when news reports used euphemistic phrases such as “members of a particular community” or “members of the minority community” (meaning Muslims) or “members of the majority community” (meaning Hindus). For decades, both the privately-owned press and the Government controlled electronic media adhered to these guidelines. Varadarajan argued that the convention of not identifying communities “works to increase the sense of suspicion and anxiety amongst ordinary citizens not just in riot-affected areas but also elsewhere in the country...people tend to assume that the victims are ‘their own’ while their attackers are ‘the other’ (Varadarajan and Sardesai 274) This idea of “otherness” is central to sociological analysis of how majority and minority identities are constructed. This is because groups that have greater political power control the representation of different groups within any given society. Until the elections of 1983, the Assamese had been agitating against the existence of large numbers of illegal immigrants from Bangladesh in their midst. The Assamese, the Bengalis and the tribals were all separated by chasms of anger and virulent hatred. A movement that had remained largely non-violent and secular for more than three years had been transformed by the elections into one of history’s bloodiest confrontations, and the foreigner’s issue was swept aside.

One of the most outstanding writers, Mark Twain in his witty cynicism once observed, “To a person with a hammer, the world is a nail.” Sometimes media institutions display this tendency only to end up in encouraging conflicts. Their own biases and commercial interests dominate the reporting and comments. The media in reporting conflict ought to be acutely aware and insightful about the issues and the inter linkages that shape the dynamics of the conflict. This understanding comes only when the journalists understand the nature of the conflict clearly and also wish to build public
opinion in favour of peace and justice (Thukral 83). There are two contradictory pressures on journalists: One the one hand, they are subjected to the attention of the lobbyists and publicity seekers who not only want their stories to be told but also want their own slant on it; on the other the policy of the publishing houses deciding where their interest lie, thereby controlling and regulating the reportage. This is an ethically fraught area especially when the lobbyist happens to be also the owner of the newspaper. Further there is a lot of journalism that consists of discovering and printing information about something or some situation that those involved in would rather keep secret. So, journalism is just a job in a market economy in which the usual pressures of work discourage practice based on ethical principles.

Nellie violence was one of the most horrible violent incidents in terms of human tragedy in post Independent India. Thousands of Assamese Tiwa tribesmen swooped down on a cluster of Bengali immigrant Muslim villages in the southwestern edge of Nagaon, Morigaon subdivision. Tiwas are also called ‘Lalungs’ which is an old, pejorative term ascribed to the Tiwas. Prior to colonization, there existed a Tiwa kingdom called Gobha, which was located between Guwahati and the town of Nagaon. Nellie was close to the erstwhile capital of the kingdom and thus there was a substantial Tiwa population in the area. In 1905, before the immigration started, the Tiwas comprised more than 10 percent of the population of the district (Kimura 91). The main crops grown in the district were jute and rice and both were cultivated predominantly by the Muslims of the East Bengal origin. Their numerical strength in the district came from a long, well documented colonial policy that was enacted by the British in the early 20th century. The northern part of Nagaon district, south of the Brahmaputra river, was one of the first places where the Muslim immigrants settled. When the Muslim population increased due to the fresh immigration and natural increase, they slowly started to settle in the southern part of the district. The villages that were targeted during the Nellie violence were in a grazing reserve that the neighbouring villagers used for the grazing cattle until the beginning of the 1940s. The area is adjacent to the Kopili river and very prone to flood. This area was dereserved in order to settle immigrants during the Muslim league’s regime, which facilitated the “Grow More Food” scheme (Kimura 71-72).

Before the attack in Nellie, the entire Nagaon district was in turmoil due to AASU’s attempt to block access to polling stations in order to boycott the election. Group clashes took place between different ethnic, religious and linguistic communities. In
Nagaon, the Muslims were supporters of the Congress party and before the incident, Congress’s top leaders visited minority areas and delivered provocative speeches. (Mehta Commission Report 47). According to a report by the Lalung Durbar submitted after the Nellie violence, the Tiwas were attacked by the Muslims in the area, north of Nellie. There was a report that several Tiwa children were killed and disposed of just before the Nellie incident. In the southern part, the Muslims who were outnumbered by the Hindus felt threatened and had reported the possibility of an attack to the police several times before the incident. Some police officers visited the Muslim village and assured them of their safety but did not leave a patrol due to lack of personnel. In the Nellie incident both the victims and the perpetrators were rural peasants (Kimura 72).

In the worst holocaust of Assam on Feb 18, 1983, the administration was totally engrossed in holding elections and they were caught unprepared and it took more than 24 hours for news of the massacre to reach the district headquarters of Nagaon. Assamese animosity towards the Bengali Muslims has historical roots. The latest frustration of the plains tribes triggered due to the election and its related issues. Land pressure and the passions aroused by the elections easily led to the permanent state of hostility between the Assamese, the Bengali Muslims and the tribals. There was an apprehension among the Assamese-speaking people that they were being minoritized in their own state. Particularly during the Assam movement (1979-85), various arguments were advanced on the cause of the increase of immigrants where a section of press also published data provided by the student leaders. In 1981, the census was not completed in Assam as the movement leaders were opposed to its enumeration. But, several other estimates existed as Myron Weiner cited and paged the number of illegal migrants at 19.9 million (Weiner 286, 291). AASU leaders calculated that there were at least 4.5 million foreigners in Assam. In a pamphlet circulated by the Union, it stated:

“A conservative estimate of the infiltrators’ number is over 45 lakh of whom over 15 lakh have entered their names in the electoral rolls, thus causing serious demographic imbalances” (Kimura 62).

Throughout the Assam movement there was indeed an assertion of the upper caste Assamese Hindus to perpetuate their hegemony by whipping up traditional fears about a huge influx of Bangladeshis and their assorted crimes, particularly through manipulation of the press and news reports in the regional press. The editorials cited many instances in Tripura and Sikkim where indigenous section of the people became
minority by the influx of the “outsiders.” The press which was sympathetic to the movement also came under the scanner of censorship during the period of the Assam movement. According to Mrinal Talukdar, a senior journalist from Guwahati, “to beat and assault a ‘miya’ was like a ritual during the Assam movement.” It was a matter of pride for the locals if someone attacked a Bengali immigrant Muslim. According to him, the Nellie violence haunted a large section of the Muslims in Assam. It was only after the Nellie violence that there was a split in the AASU over the question of leadership and the violence. Even Tiwa students’ union got separated from the AASU. Talukdar recalls, “Press during the Nellie incident has failed terribly” (Personal interview 12 December 2016). He added that the few newspapers Kalakhar and Janakranti were mere opinion pages but not regular dailies. The regular dailies mostly Dainik Asom and Dainik Janambhumi, reported biased news and a tone down version of the Nellie event. Journalism, according to him, started in Assam only after 1991. It was The Sentinel in 1985 who first questioned the establishment regarding a foreign trip of then Chief Minister Prafulla Kumar Mahanta. There was no questioning ability from the journalists in Assam before 1985; it was all about the service for news dissemination before that. There was not even proper field reporting done during the Assam movement. Talukdar concluded by saying about Nellie violence that, in one day and in one place alone, killing over 3000 people was unmatched. He also regretted the lack of follow up stories of Nellie violence in the regional press of Assam except a few by Utpal Bordoloi on the abandoned houses of Tiwas regarding the politics of relief materials (Interview with Mrinal Talukdar 12 December 2016). Basically, this was something long-rooted as there were newspapers viz. Dainik Batori, during 1935, did not support the Non-cooperation movement initiated by the Congress party. Rather, it stood for the ideology of “Assam for the Assamese.” During the Assam movement of 1979-1985, the regional newspapers championed linguistic identity of the state exclusively and started ignoring other diverse constituencies within the state of Assam. The conflict started between the Assamese speaking Brahmaputra valley and the Bengali speaking Barak valley after the Government’s language policy. Here, the language press continued to have an ambivalent position regarding the state policy and the way the Government handled the tribal issue. And finally, during the Assam movement the subdued Assamese nationalism triggered and made Assam a violent space during 1983.
A look into the reportage by various regional newspapers during the Assam movement would showcase how the vocabularies and the terms used by the regional press before, during and after the elections and the Nellie violence provoked the local people. Further, there was also an attempt to remain mute on the attacks performed by the indigenous people of Assam on the Muslims. In this regard, Prof. Monirul Hussain, author of the book *Assam Movement: Class, Ideology and Identity* (1994) mentioned about the *labeling theory* where the majority Assamese labelled the minorities by certain terms and the same was propagated by the local media. Expressions such as “illegal migrants”, “miscreants”, and “outsiders” were attributed to label the community by the press. According to him, the dominant media bore ideological bias and also pointed to the decisions of the editorial boards that contributed to the volatile atmosphere generated by the local press (Telephonic Interview 24 April 2017).

Particularly during this period, the regional dailies of Assam unanimously remarked against the Government pointing out the lack of necessary political will to face the foreigner’s issue and thereby adopting divisive politics. They particularly focused on the election as an “illegitimate election” and mentioned about the communal politics triggered by the Congress (I). The regional press blamed the Government of controlling the National media by using AIR, and urged the people of Assam to listen to BBC instead. According to the Assamese press, the credibility of the National media was lost in case of reporting about the Assam movement and the violence that followed. Quite interestingly, the newspapers in Assam associated themselves wholeheartedly with the resolution passed by the Parliament condemning the unprecedented killings and riots in Assam and appealed for peace and brotherhood among all sections of people. But hardly any daily Assamese newspaper looked critically at the role played by AASU and AAGSP during the movement. In a series of editorials, *Dainik Asom* refused to recognize the Congress (I) ministry as the representative of the people and wanted the Election Commission to declare the poll null and void. Moreover, after the Nellie violence in 1983, there was a significant visible difference in the print media in reporting and differentiating between the “insider” and the “outsider.” The editorials were speaking more on the attacks on indigenous people rather than on the so-called “outsiders.” While according to the official report, there were more Bengali Muslims who were killed. On the other hand, a National newspaper like the *Telegraph* on 21 February 1983, reported the killing count as 600 according to official figures but did not speculate on non-official figures. Udayon Misra in a column in *The Sunday Observer*
(February 27, 1983) wrote: “Apparently the Assamese tribals decided to retaliate in full fury and the Nellie bore the burnt of the attack because it is here that the Lalung tribals are best organized and concentrated. Strangely, during the raid of February 18, 1983 most of the menfolk of the immigrant villages were away, possibly on raids of their own. This partly explains the enormously high causalities among the aged, women and the children. There was almost no resistance to the attackers.” He added that the Lalungs had been demanding an autonomous region with Assam comprising of Lalung areas in Nagaon, Kamrup and Mikir hills. They had been giving unstinted support to the AASU-led movement seeing it as their last struggle for survival. The attacks on Muslims villages resulted in fast mobilization of the Lalungs who were bound by strong kinship ties and viewed the attacks on their village as a declaration of war on the entire tribe. They launched the attack with all ferocity on Nellie villages where even children were not spared.

The national media on the other hand, covered a series of stories in *India Today*, *The Telegraph*, *Statesman*, *The Indian Express*. Seema Mustafa of *The Telegraph* reported in detail about the Gohpur and the Nellie violence. In a column dated February 20, 1983, titled “Assam: The Long Knives Are Still Out”, she analyzed about the heavy death toll and the destruction of properties along with the bitter relationship between the Assamese and the immigrant population. She brought out the fact that the incident also reflected the partisan role of the police, the doctors and the so-called intelligentsia. The Assam police, according to Seema Mustafa, was totally involved in the movement and did not hesitate to take sides. The doctors were also found bringing relief only to the Assamese villagers. The Nellie violence had reinforced the line dividing the Assamese and the non-Assamese to a point of no return. Even *India Today* in a feature article titled “The Nellie Nightmare” published a detailed report on the stories of the survivors and the ruthless attackers. The future of the survivors stood uncertain, according to the report. Many newspapers used the words “Holocaust” and “Genocide” to describe the Nellie violence. The national media also mentioned that the Nellie killings were a terrible retribution by the Lalung tribe who were usually a very docile lot. One newspaper reported a very tragic story of a dead mother with a baby in her arms, her hands folded in supplication possibly to her attacker. Most of the victims of Nellie violence were women, children and the old people; presumably they could not run fast enough to escape.
However, among the regional dailies, one very prominent newspaper Sadiniya Nagarik, edited by Homen Burgohain, took a democratic and secular position unlike the other newspapers. There was a Letter to the Editor of the newspaper on 30 July 1981 stating that only Nagarik could hold to the composite culture of Assam in the face of the mayhem. This proved that there was a section of people who understood the politics of a section of Assamese media to divide the composite culture of the state by citing only the immigrant issue.

When a section of the regional press showcased its sympathetic attitude towards the movement and attempted to silence the attack by the Assamese on the Bengali Muslims and the tribal population in Silapathar, Nellie, Chaolkhowa, Goreshwar, Gohpur the question that was asked was: what purpose did it serve? It was quite obvious that the media played an important role in shaping public opinion, since what was read in the newspapers had an impact on what people believed. The dominant group in the society through their control of the communication network influenced the reading public on political issues. Since the press in Assam was the single source of primary information during the Assam movement, therefore its control by a particular class of people provided them the advantage of influencing the masses through stereotyping a particular community. This exercise by the press was not only unethical but also verged upon sensationalization with an objective to provoke. Whatever the public desired to read was provided often with fictionalized facts before the public. And that is how a considerable number of reading public was created providing economic benefit to the media houses during the Assam movement. Interestingly, though one local journalist from The Assam Tribune witnessed the Nellie violence, yet the very next day, there was hardly any report regarding the event. Thus, it becomes evident that the editors during those times hardly wanted to take a tough stand against the ongoing movement.

Today in public memory, this violence is just reduced to an event and it holds little or no significance. To tell this story, Subasri Krishnan produced one documentary for PSBT titled “What the Fields Remember.” In the film, she attempted to answer the nexus of questionable political decisions, an ineffective legal system, an indifferent media and the lack of political representation for Bengali Muslims in Assam. The film revolved around the Nellie violence, and looked at the relationship between large-scale violence and collective memory. And to look at it as a traumatic collective memory the fact cannot be ignored that in 1983, the Tiwari commission was set up to enquire into
the matter. It submitted a report of its findings in the month of May 1984 to the State Government. But the report was never made public. Except for few civil society organizations which obtained copies of the report through RTI, this 600-page document remains out of public consciousness till date. The survivors formed groups and filed petitions seeking compensation and reopened criminal cases in the Guwahati High Court and the Supreme Court of India. But all cases have been dismissed so far. Therefore, neither the civil society nor the press speaks about the present status of the victims and survivors of Nellie violence. The memories are in a very subtle way tried to be conveniently forgotten. And maybe at a point of time in the future, the violence and the histories of the people who suffered due to the violence will be chosen to be forgotten.

Thus, to conclude, it can be argued that the news media selects and explains the events that comprise the “news” and in this process it also influences public attitudes and opinions. Journalism combines social, cultural and political functions by providing information about events beyond the immediate experience of readers and audiences, effectively constituting a “window to the world.” In this way, news media constructs rather than simply reflects upon events (Jemphrey & Berrington 128), while interpreting and reconstructing incidents to create a distinctive ‘media reality’ (Jemphrey & Berrington 128). Much journalistic practice is routine, with stories sought and reported in accordance with pre-constructed news templates; only the names, dates or locations change. Journalists routinely face and pass trying professional tests—writing a story that will be read, taking a photograph in an instant, and interviewing a person who is not prepared for the emotional stress of such contact. Although they make some mistakes, but a huge number of journalists regularly do their work with a high standard of ethical and professional excellence.

**Summary Templates of the Study**

1. Nellie violence took place at the backdrop of the Assam movement.
2. Media, by exercising its power, produced and managed ideologies, hegemonies and discourses, where identity was produced in the representations of media.
3. Ownership patterns, structures and the kind of commitment to journalism, all count to characterize and differentiate one newspaper from another.
4. The tone of the Assamese regional press as the champion of Assamese nationalism and identity resulted in a fractured view as they did not take a constructive stand on large-scale violence as in case of Nellie and in other parts of Assam from time to time.

5. The supposedly non-violent and secular claim of the Assam movement ended up with ruthless violence as displayed during the elections of 1983.

6. The regional press reinforced the idea of “otherisation” and promoted stereotyping of certain communities by showing sympathy towards the movement leaders.

7. The press in Assam took an ambivalent position between supporting Assamese nationalism vis-à-vis maintaining its commercial interests.

8. The regional daily press did not provide space to the marginal and minority voice.

9. There was an attempt to stop the counter voices in the published opinion pages and newspapers, thereby silencing the actual facts of the Nellie violence.

10. The reporting of Nellie violence by the regional press was devoid of journalistic ethics and objectivity.

**Implication of the study**

I have attempted to present the nature of reporting by the regional press before, during and after the Nellie violence. Although we can’t say that the press in Assam during Nellie violence was biased, but the ambivalence of the regional press towards the victims of the Nellie violence seemed very clear. The commercial interests of the press were promoted at the cost of its ethical responsibilities. The announcements, official circulars and other information offered by the leaders of the movement were always published without any editing in the regional dailies.

Thus, my thesis points out the ethical question of journalism in relation to the regional press in Assam during the Nellie violence of 1983. This study attempts to consider theoretical perspectives of violence vis-à-vis the nature of information dissemination by the press. There was an ambivalence of the regional press in maintaining the notion of Assamese nationalism and identity as its focus. Later on, when organizations like ULFA continued to spread violence after 1985, the relevance
was lost. The press continued to indulge in blame game, citing the Government and the
election of 1983 as primary causes of the Nellie violence. The illegal immigration issue
was at the centre of discussion for the media even during the recently held elections in
2016.

The violence of Nellie still haunts many. But fortunately, the communities have
reconciled themselves with the changing reality and apparently returned to normal
activities in Nellie and elsewhere. There had been a lot of infrastructural changes on the
highway leading to Nellie from Guwahati in the last 30 years, but the conditions of the
survivors and victims are not in a very good shape. Some of them are still awaiting
justice from the court and the Almighty.

A sustained study on the theme is necessary as Assam is witness to many events
of violence like Nellie such as the 2012 Kokrajhar violence. It would surely provide an
interesting perspective by studying the growth of the regional television network, the
print media and the rise of the Internet and how these medium of the mass media, both
old and new, produce the content in reporting communal violence. The electronic media
has more power than the print media in terms of its reach and visual presentations.
Violence will continue to haunt a communally and ethnically divided state like Assam.
In that context, the media in Assam needs to be more sensitive and responsible towards
the vulnerable sections of the society.