Social Media and Emerging Public Sphere:
A Study of Northeast India

A Thesis Submitted

To

Sikkim University

In Partial Fulfilment of the Requirement for the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By

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January 2023

Date: 25/01/2023

DECLARATION

I Privat Giri, hereby declare that the research work embodied in the thesis titled **"Social Media and Emerging Public Sphere: A Study of Northeast India"** submitted to Sikkim University for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, is my original work and has not been submitted for any degree of this university or any other university.

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This is to certify that the thesis entitled **Social Media and Emerging Public Sphere: A Study of Northeast India** submitted to Sikkim University in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of **Doctor of Philosophy in Mass Communication** embodies the result of bona fide research carried out by **Privat Giri.** This work has not been submitted previously for any other degree or to any other university or institute of learning. It is further certified that the candidate has complied with all the formalities as per the requirements of Sikkim University. All the assistance and help received during the course of investigation have been duly acknowledged by him.

I recommend that the thesis may be placed before the examiners for consideration of award of the degree of this university.

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"Social Media and Emerging Public Sphere: A Study of Northeast India"

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Acknowledgments

This thesis is a tribute to my father Mr. Rom Chandra Giri from his entire family. Although he is not with us presently, he pushed me very hard until his last days which became a major source of motivation for me to complete my work. Many people some way or another have immensely helped me during the process of writing this thesis.

First and foremost. I would like to express my sincere gratitude and appreciation for my supervisor Dr. Pooja Basnett who patiently and consistently guided and encouraged me until the very last day of my submission. When I had to seek an additional one-month extension due to some unavoidable circumstances, the kind of invaluable and unconditional support provided by her is something no individual can forget for life.

My deepest love and appreciation to my family who set me off on the road to this journey a long time ago and who supported me emotionally and financially. Thank you, my beloved mother, Puspa for believing in me and my wife Kalpana and daughter Vidhi for tolerating me. My brother Pranoy not only funded my studies since my Masters but bought me a table and a chair so that I could sit and write comfortably and finally sponsored the printing of this thesis.

A special thanks to Sikkim University and the Department of Mass Communication for providing me with the space and resources to find myself. Thirteen years of my association with the University as a student has indeed shaped and defined me and will do

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List of Abbreviations

AASU	All Assam Students Union
ANI	Asian News International
APST	Arunachal Pradesh Scheduled Tribes
ASGP	Assam Sangram Gana Parishad
BEFR	Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation Act of 1873
BJP	Bharatiya Janta Party
CAA	The Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019
CH	Counter-Hindutva
DIGIPUB	Digital Publication
FP	Failed Policy
HMPL	Heynortheast Media Private Limited
ILP	Inner Line Permit
IO	Original Inhabitant
IPSMF	The Independent and Public-Spirited Media Foundation
IT	Immigrant Takeover
MPPB	Manipur People's Protection Bill
NADCOM	Northeast Association of Digital Communications and Media
NRC	National Register of Citizens
NSCN (IM)	National Socialist Council of Nagaland
PII	Pro-illegal immigrant
PRC	Permanent Residence Certificate
PTI	Press Trust of India

RIIN	Register of Indigenous Inhabitants of Nagaland
RSS	Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh
STPS	Structural Transformation of Public Sphere
TRP	Television Rating Point
TUR	Thma U Rangli Juki
UNI	United News of India
VPN	Virtual Private Network
VHP	Vishwa Hindu Parishad

Chapter 1
Introduction

1.1 Background

This study draws its research agenda from the emerging scholarship on the reconceptualization of the idea of the public sphere beginning in the late twentieth century. The notion of the public sphere has become a subject of broad academic interest in the wake of two major developments. First was the publication of Habermas's "The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere" (Habermas, 1991). Many scholars contested Habermas's formulation of the European public sphere on grounds of pluralism and difference (Dahlgren, 2005; Fraser, 1990; Keane, 1995; Negt & Kluge, 1993). The discontentment was fundamentally on Habermas's idealization and generalization of the European public sphere as a single, unified, integrated, and robust entity. The critiques argued that Habermas's bourgeois public sphere is marked by significant exclusions of other domains of public life including the public sphere of the subordinated groups or the alternative public spheres.

The second crucial development that started taking shape during the same period was the rise of information and communication technologies (ICTs), particularly the Internet. The Internet as a vast repository of information and a colossal network and space of communication is expanding every single second. It has radically transformed the way people access information, communicates, and interact with one another. The Internet has challenged the traditional model of a passive audience of conventional media that mainly

facilitated top-down communication. The most common term associated with the Internet today is social media which includes popular social networking sites such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and others. Grown out of web 2.0 technology, it is now entering a more developed and sophisticated version of web 3.0. Social media is characterized by several interactive features that enhance people's participation and engagement in varying ways. It has a social element that promotes horizontal communication. People can now easily communicate instantaneously across geo-political boundaries, time, or space.

The rise of ICTs has led scholars to ask questions about the impact of the Internet or social media on the public sphere. Observers are particularly interested in understanding the nature of online deliberations and how it affects democracy. There are both positive and negative views on the subject matter. One group of scholars considers the Internet a promising and powerful tool for democracy (Benhabib, 2002; Benkler, 2004; Shirky, 2008; Young, 1997). They argue that social media enhances the freedom of expression by allowing people to create and connect. It brings different groups and perspectives into the public sphere against the dominant discourse propagated by commercial media. The Internet is said to enrich democratic communication by accommodating maximum cultural contestations and giving expression to individual, group, and vernacular narratives. The other group regards the Internet as another tool of capitalist exploitation that trivializes the importance of physical interaction and presence and promotes slacktivism (Dean, 2005; Brabham, 2015; Fuchs, 2014; Morozov, 2009).

The common ground of understanding on the subject matter, however, is the notion of multiple-public spheres or various domains of the public sphere functioning in cyberspace in different shapes and sizes and different social milieux. The Internet has given

facilitated the creation of multiple self-enclosed "public spherules" or "micro-public spheres" that facilitate diverse forms and levels of communication, interaction, and deliberation (Gitlin, 1998; Keane; 1995). One common domain of the net-based public sphere is the realm of online journalism considered to be the core element of the public sphere on the Internet (Dahlgren, 2005). The mushrooming of online journalism may be viewed in the context of changing news consumption habits effectuated by the development of the mobile internet along with the rise of big tech companies such as Meta, Twitter, and Google that serve as distributive platforms. Digital news media including social media has today become an established part of the news media landscape and an important institution of the public sphere in the digital age.

1.2. Statement of the problem

Online journalism has become an established part of the news media landscape and a core element of the public sphere on the Internet. Online journalism is largely practiced through digital media organizations that operate across various online platforms, particularly social media. With the rapid proliferation and development of the Internet and smartphones, the news consumption habits of people are radically transforming (Cornia et al., 2016). Social media has become the most dominant platform and means to access news and views. A recent study on news consumption patterns of English news found that 68 percent of the respondents agreed to use smartphones as their main device to access online news out of which 31 percent claimed to use only mobile phones to access news (India Digital News Report, 2019). The same study found 75 percent and 85 percent of respondents use Facebook and WhatsApp to access news respectively. The function of

social media in respect of the public sphere theory is instrumental for its potential to bring different and alternative perspectives into the public sphere against the mainstream discourse. Its interactive features allow people's participation and engagement which lie at the heart of the theories of the public sphere, deliberation, and democracy.

The "othering", inadequate representation, or misrepresentation of the Northeast of India is the major concern raised by scholars in their studies on the representation of the Northeast. The peripheralization of the Northeast has been another dominant theme of academic discourse on the Northeast. The Northeast of India comprising eight states Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and Sikkim is a geopolitically strategic region. The region shares 98 percent of its border with foreign countries. With the emergence of social media, several Facebook news pages have come up in the Northeast that mainly addresses the people and the region of the Northeast. These pages Northeast essentially function as a micro-public sphere operating at the sub-nation-state level.

Given the above, there is a need to understand the character and functioning of these Facebook news pages in Northeast India. Many such pages serve as the major distributive platform for a digital news media organization. It is imperative to understand how Facebook news pages are organizationally structured and the means and mechanisms of content publication, financing, and control. Subsequently, there is a requirement to examine their aspects of representation, particularly with regard to the salience of issues and framing. Interaction is germane to the public sphere and deliberative democracy, therefore the extent of readers' participation and engagement on the Facebook news pages would provide a glimpse into the possible formation of the micro-public sphere in the

context of most salient issues. The study undertakes an inductive and deductive framing approach as an analytical tool. This research intends to contribute to the development of emerging literature on the theory of the internet and the public sphere. It is the first of its kind to conduct a three-dimensional study of media in the Northeast, including digital news media.

1.3. Conceptual framework

The present thesis employs a wide range of concepts and literature to build a framework of analysis to study social media as an institution of the public sphere in Northeast India. This framework acquaints the research questions and methodology and seeks to draw a relationship among various findings and observations and address the research problem.

1.3.1. Public spheres

1.3.1.1. Public Sphere

The term public sphere generally refers to a discursive space where people from various walks of life come together and discuss matters of common interests. In the process, they form a public opinion which may consequently lead to some form of action or change in decision-making or policy. Media is considered the principal institution of the public sphere (Curran, 1993) Modern research on the public sphere is primarily sparked by

the publication of Habermas's Structural Transformation of Public Sphere (STPS) published in the year 1962 and later translated into English in 1989 (Habermas, 1991).

Habermas defines the public sphere as "a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed" (p.49). The public sphere comes into being when private individuals enter into conservation and express and publish their opinions about matters of public interest. According to Gerard (1994), Habermas's Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere "is concerned with the possibilities of open discussion and deliberation by informed and interested members of the society on the matters that shape the policies and the practices of the culture and the state" (p.71).

Habermas's STPS primarily reflects upon the historical evolution and transformation of the public sphere in western societies mainly France, Germany, and England. He traces the rise and the fall of the bourgeois public sphere between the late 17th and 19th centuries. STPS explores the importance and implications of public opinion in a democracy. Habermas draws the conception of the word 'public' in the public sphere from the city-states of ancient Greece. In the Greek city-state, there were two distinct realms of the "oikas" and the "polis". Oikas was the private realm of an individual whereas polis acted as a common sphere of free citizens who manifested their public life in the marketplace and assemblies. The public sphere was constituted in form of interactions and discussions among citizens regarding the important issues of the day.

Habermas argues that during the feudal society of the Middle Ages in Europe, there was no separate and distinguished realm of the public. The publicness existed in the form of "representative publicness" which manifested in the status attribute of the lords and

kings who represented themselves as an embodiment of high power. This form of representation involved a strict code of noble conduct constituted by personal attributes such as insignia, dress, demeanor, and rhetoric. Representative publicness reached its highest form at the French and the Burgundian courts in the late fifteenth century after which it slowly lost its significance.

Habermas argues that the representative public sphere was replaced by the development of a new kind of public sphere in early modern Europe. He calls it the bourgeois public sphere. Habermas traces the birth of the bourgeois public sphere during the sixteenth century when the early capitalist commercial economy began to evolve. The bourgeois public sphere is said to have developed during the period of transition between feudalism and early capitalism. The important factor that led to this transition was the growth of long-distance trade which created new social order and relationships. Trade opened up space and opportunities for large-scale exchange of commodities. The expansion of markets necessitated the constant need for information to access and monitor distant events. As a result, news traffic developed and the great trade centers also became the center of the news. The press was gradually institutionalized facilitating regular contacts and communication.

According to Habermas, during the 18th century, the private and public spheres separated when the main representatives of the representative public sphere namely the feudal powers, the Church, the prince, and the nobility spilt into two distinct entities- the private and the public. "Now for the first time private and public spheres became separate in the specifically modern sense" (Habermas 1991, p. 11). The nobility "no longer had to represent its own lordliness" (p.10) and public authority increasingly began to be related

to the activities of the emerging state systems and not courtly life. The term public began to be referred to the state or state-related whereas private was understood to be something outside the domain of the state. The state servants were known as public persons and the bureaucracy, military, and legal institutions increasingly asserted their independence from the princely court.

However, contends Habermas, there were also private individuals, private offices, private businesses, and private homes. Private individuals made up the public body, although excluded from the public authority, became a concern of public interest. (p. 52). The genuine area of private autonomy developed into a sphere of bourgeois society that stood apart and in opposition to the state (p. 51). The bourgeois public sphere of the bourgeois society were "private individuals assembled into a public body" that confronted "public authority on the general rules of social intercourse in their fundamentally privatized yet publically relevant sphere of labor and commodity exchange" (p.52).

According to Habermas, the bourgeois public sphère emerged from the aesthetic and literary discussions of various institutions of the public sphere which included coffeehouses, salons, and table societies across Europe. Education and property were the two main criteria to enter into this literary sphere. Here, private individuals rationally discussed and argued about literary and aesthetic matters without any personal interests. However, when these private individuals communicated as property owners to influence authority and secure their common economic interests, the literary public sphere functioned as a political public sphere. "The bourgeois public sphère was a place for educated and economically invested individuals to exchange views on matters of public life and, thereby, to form a public opinion that was to be taken seriously for shaping the ways in which these

matters were disposed" (Gerard 1994, 72). The bourgeois public sphere, Habermas contends, was very instrumental in shattering the feudal foundations of power and the development of the nation and territorial states.

Habermas traces the evolution of media as an influential institution of the bourgeois public sphere in the second half of the 18th century. According to him, literary journalism posed a serious challenge to existing newspapers that merely published notices. The development resulted in the transformation of newspapers from mere institutions which published news to carriers of public opinion. Several newspapers associated with political groups and organizations practiced this brand of journalism across Europe. Although the press was operated commercially, it remained a public institution.

In the latter half of Structural Transformation of Public Sphere, Habermas talks about the degeneration of the bourgeois public sphere. By the 19th century. Habermas contends that the control and influence of rising capitalism over the public sphere led to the gradual demise of the rational-critical bourgeois public sphere. The public sphere was increasingly commodified- dictated by the rules of the market where information was considered a commodity and citizens as consumers. The commodification of the public sphere had strong implications for the understanding of public opinion. Public opinion became a product susceptible to manipulation by the state and market to legitimize action. The public sphere no longer served as an arena of rational discussions and consensus building. Rather it became the site of propaganda where only those information and ideas having an economic and political value gained impetus. The control over the public sphere was largely materialized through the control over the media. Media as a powerful

institution of the public sphere was heavily commercialized and dominated by private interests.

1.3.1.2. Multiple-public spheres

The notion of the multiple-public spheres as a concept developed over the years against the backdrop of Habermas's formulation of the public sphere. Many scholars have challenged the idea of a single, unified, integrated public sphere in the wake of technological and cultural change. The concept of a unitary public sphere is considered to be obsolete (Keane, 1995) and contested on the grounds of pluralism and difference (Dahlgren, 2005). Different political ideologies and interests, cultures, sex, ethnicity, and region need distinct spaces where the issues concerning them are addressed and deliberated upon (Dahlgren, 2005).

One of the earliest scholars to critique Habermas' formulation of the bourgeois public sphere was Negt and Kluge (1993). Responding to Habermas's theorization of the public sphere, Negt and Kluge argue that Habermas does not acknowledge the existence of the "proletarian public sphere" in form of popular working-class movements of the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries. Fraser (1990) further developed this argument by questioning the inclusivity of the bourgeois public sphere. She regards the bourgeois public sphere as characteristic of a "number of significant exclusions" (p.59). She highlights the importance of multiple publics in an egalitarian and multicultural society and criticizes the bourgeois public sphere for excluding the members of the subordinated social groups-women, workers, peoples of color, and gays and lesbians. According to Fraser, these subordinated groups functioned as "alternative publics" and constituted what she calls " subaltern

counterpublics" (p. 67). The subaltern counterpublics ran parallel to the bourgeois public sphere and operated as a discursive space where people of subordinated groups talked about matters of their interests and created counter-narratives and counter-discourses. Habermas himself later revised his notion of the public sphere (Habermas, 1991). He admits the presence an alternative public spheres made up of diverse and internally differentiated mass public who may resist the mass-mediated representations of society and create its narratives.

The notion of multiple-public spheres has received an enormous boost in media scholarship with the advent of new information and communication technologies, particularly the internet. As Keane (1995) opines, the internet has brought about "the development of a multiplicity of networked spaces of communication which are not tied immediately to territory, and which therefore irreversibly outflank and fragment anything formerly resembling a single, spatially integrated public sphere within a nation-state framework" (p.) The internet has decentralized the media and made them more accessible and responsive to citizens. It facilitates communicative heterogeneity by expanding the available communicative spaces for politics at the local, national, and global levels (Dahlgren, 2012).

Addressing the question of multiple-public spheres, Dahlgren (2012) provides five different domains of Net-based public spheres. The e-governance domain- where government representatives and citizens interact and exchange information with each other. The advocacy/activist domain- organizations with similar values and interests engage in discussions and seek political interventions. Civic forums- they consist of a diverse space where citizens exchanges and discuss opinions on civic matters. Parapolitical domain-

social and cultural topics having to do with common interests and/or collective identities are deliberated upon. And journalism domain- includes traditional news organizations, internet-based digital news media, alternative news organizations, and personal blogs. Dahlgren considers the online journalism domain as a core element of the public sphere on the Internet.

1.3.1.3. Micro-public spheres

The concept of the micro-public spheres employed in the present study is drawn from Keane (1995) who revises the understanding of the contemporary public sphere given the changing culture and technology of communication. He argues that the development of a multiplicity of networked spaces of communication has fractured the public sphere. The public sphere in recent times is heterogenous that emerges within differently sized milieux within the nooks and crannies of civil societies and states (p.8). Keane (1995) distinguishes among three types of the public sphere.

a. Macro-public spheres. The macro-public spheres function at the global or regional (SAARC) level. It involves the interaction of millions and even billions of people around issues at the supranational and global levels. Marco-public spheres are mainly facilitated by transnational media that often transcends national boundaries. The internet has enormous implications for the macro-public spheres with its capacity to bring people from all walks of life together from across the world and make a meaningful intervention on important global issues such as environmental sustainability, economic and social justice, human rights, and many others.

b. Meso-public spheres. Meso-public spheres consist of millions of people interacting at the level of the nation-states but may occasionally also extend to neighboring regions. It is primarily supported by the national media systems. Meso-public spheres "thrive upon media that appeal to particular national or regional language groupings, and which have well-established and powerful production and distribution structures that sustain their proven ability to circulate to millions of people certain types of news, current affairs, films, and entertainment that daily reinforce certain styles and habits of communication about matters of public concern" (Kean 1995, 11-12).

c. Mirco-public spheres. The micro-public spheres are local spaces where dozens, hundreds, or thousands of individuals interact with each other at the sub-nation-state level. In the process, people forge local identities and talk about local issues and resist the dominant discourse propagated by national and transnational media. Micro-public spheres are instrumental in facilitating bottom-up communications and are an important part of social movements. The internet, mainly social media, by facilitating small-group interaction makes a massive contribution to the micro-public spheres.

1.3.2. Dahlgren's three dimensions of the public sphere

Dahlgren's "three dimensions of the public sphere" (2005) is widely used by scholars as an analytical tool to study the public sphere. It provides "an analytical starting point for examining the public sphere of any given society or analyzing the contribution of any given communication technology". Dahlgren's concept allows researchers to examine the three fundamental elements of a communication process- the sender, the message, and the receiver.

According to Dahlgren, the public sphere consists of three essential dimensions: structural, representational, and interactional. The structural dimension relates to how any communicative space is organized. While studying the media, this dimension examines its institutional features which include the relationship of media with varied political and economic institutions, modes of financing or revenue generation, patterns of ownership, and internal and external mechanisms of control and regulation. The structural dimension allows the researcher to address the inherent questions concerning the democratic media theory. This includes issues related to freedom of speech, information access, and unrestricted and diverse availability and flow of information and viewpoints. A healthy institutional structure for the public sphere is contingent upon the absence or presence of strong democratic values and tendencies (Dahlgren, 2005). According to Habermas, the mid-nineteenth-century public sphere was largely weakened because of the influence of market capitalism and the state over the structure of the media (1991). He considers media as an important institution of the public sphere.

The representational dimension concerns the content of the media. The representational aspects of a public sphere are highly determined by its structure. A free and inclusive structure is a requirement for a healthy and representative public sphere (Batorski & Grzywińska, 2017). Therefore, this dimension evaluates the output of the media in terms of objectivity, pluralism, ideology and power, agenda setting and framing, and others. The interactional dimension interrogates the discursive practices involved during the process of people's interaction with the media. This dimension shifts its focus from what media do to the individual to what the individual does to the media. Dahlgren talks about two aspects of interaction. The first aspect encompasses the interaction of

citizens with the media. It includes how an individual interacts with the media content and interprets it. The second kind of interaction takes place at various sites and spaces between the people themselves which may include interpersonal or group interaction.

With regard to new communication and information technologies, particularly the internet and social media, the structural dimension looks at how these spaces are organized and configured. Representation in the online public sphere becomes a subject of great interest because of the increasing accessibility of information in the digital space. While studying social media, the representational dimension may examine how public discourse is represented online and whether online space serves as an alternative or a counter to the macro public sphere supported by traditional media. In terms of the interactional dimension, one may study whether participants of the online public sphere engage in an exchange of opinions or whether their discussion is one-sided and limited to a group of people and media that have the same views.

The present study looks into three dimensions of Facebook news pages. The structural dimension assesses the institutional character of the Facebook news pages, whereas the representational and interactional dimension studies the aspects of media content and readers engagement respectively.

1.3.3. Space of opinion as a public sphere

The present study considers the space of opinion as an intelligible analytical object and a useful entry point into the study of the public sphere. This research agenda is mainly drawn from the pioneering work of Jacobs and Townsley on opinion journalism in the

United States (2011). Their findings show that opinion spaces attract a great diversity of voices and perspectives from an array of institutional settings, including universities and colleges, advocacy groups, think tanks, law firms, publishing, and a variety of political consultancies and polling organizations.

Jacobs and Townsley argue opinions and commentaries are significant because of their influencing power and ability to shape the collective representation and opinion formation in democracy. They consider opinion space as a diverse space of argument having enormous implications in political debates around issues. It is here, the citizens talk and rationally argue about matters of common interests and defend their arguments against criticisms and alternative positions. Jacobs and Townsley call the space of opinion the "democratic attention space" and a "critical element of the communicative network that comprises the public sphere" (pp.12). It is through this space all potential issues of public concern passes after critical reflection and scrutiny. The opinion in the media is argued to have a significant impact on policy-making and determining the agenda of political debate.

With the internet, the space of opinion or democratic attention space is thought to have radically transformed. Digitalization has facilitated an instant feedback system and unlimited space thereby providing expanding space for both writers and readers to engage and participate in diverse and meaningful public deliberation (Manosevitch & Walker, 2009; Rosenberry, 2005). It has blossomed opinion journalism where loads of online platforms have come up which give prominence to opinion content. More and more platforms have opened up which give space to peripheral opinions and discussions, making media more decentralized and participatory, thereby increasing the democratic involvement of an individual (Dahlgren, 2012).

1.4 Theoretical framework

1.4.1 Framing theory

The theory of framing provides researchers guidance to study the three fundamental components of the communication process; sender, message, and receiver. The present thesis borrows the theorization of framing done by Entman (1992) and Gorp (2007). Framing as a theory to study communication media developed during the latter half of the 20th century. Framing has become one of the preferred research approaches adopted by scholars doing media and communication research.

Entman (1992) is primarily accredited for conceptualizing framing in communication and media studies. He defines framing as "to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation" (1992, pp.52). He assigns four functions of a frame. They define the problem by expressing the nature of the problem in terms of common cultural values. They identify the causes- factors responsible for creating the problem. They assess the causes and justify their consequences and effects. Frames suggest solutions and remedies to the problem. A single communicating text may contain all or more than one or none of the above framing functions.

According to Entman, frames make a certain piece of information more noticeable, plausible, or memorable thereby enhancing the likelihood of the message being accepted by the audience. It gives prominence to some aspects of reality and simultaneously dismisses or diverts attention from other aspects. Frames are defined by the exclusion or

inclusion of information that may give meaning to a particular problem definition, causes and justifications, consequences, and solutions. The application of a culturally familiar symbols frame activates the schemata of the readers. Schemata is defined as "a collection of organized knowledge, develop gradually, become more complex, and are related to personal experiences and associated feelings (Gorp 2007).

Entman discusses at least four locations of frames. First, frames are located in the source. Communicators knowingly or unknowingly frame the matter as per their beliefs and values. Second, texts contain frames in form of the presence and absence of certain signs, symbols, and words. Third, frames are located in the receiver's mind who interprets the text according to his or her thought process which may or may not agree with the framing intention of the source. Finally, culture stores a stock of commonly applied frames.

Gorp (2007) has further conceptualized the cultural stock of frames to formulate the theory of media framing. He defines culture as "an organized set of beliefs, codes, myths, stereotypes, values, norms, frames, and so forth that are shared in the collective memory of a group or society" (Gorp 2007, pp.62) Gorp puts forth the idea that multiple and alternative frames are available in the cultural stock of frames and the choice of a frame applied by content makers and receivers determines the definition and interpretation of topics, issues, and persons. Framing analysis is considered a useful means to identify the dominant frames applied. Acknowledging frames to be part of the culture, Gorp regards the text and frame as being independent of one another. He argues that the cultural phenomenon enables the frames to be hidden or subtle and their application normal and natural. He regards the interpretation of media content as a cultural process. Frames as such are static or something which changes gradually. Gorp considers framing as a dynamic

process as having its essence in social interaction among content makers, receivers, and other actors and sources of information and knowledge in the public sphere.

1.5. Objectives

This research studies social media as an institution of the public sphere in Northeast India with the following objectives:

a) To study the nature and function of social media as an institution of the public sphere in Northeast India

b) To understand the institutional characteristics of select Facebook news pages of the Northeast

c) To analyze the representation of the dominant political discourse in Northeast

d) To assess the nature of readers' participation and engagement

1.6. Research questions

The dimension-wise research questions are as follows:

Structural dimension

a) How are the Facebook news pages of Northeast India organizationally structured?

b) What are their various means and modes of content gathering and publication?

c) How do they financially manage and sustain themselves? What are their sources of revenue?

d) Are they subjected to any form of regulation or control? If yes, what are the various means and mechanisms?

Representational dimension

Note: Immigration was found to be the most dominant discourse during the process of data classification. The details are outlined in Chapter 3.

a) What are the different frames of representation of the immigration issue in Northeast India?

b) How do these frames function in terms of the problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation?

Interactional dimension

a) What is the nature of readers' engagement in opinion articles on immigration?

b) To what extent the representational frames are found in the reader's comments? What are its characteristics?

c) Do we find any new frames from the reader's comments? If yes, what are its characteristics?

d) What is the frequency and nature of interactional sequences from the reader's comments?

1.7. Operational definitions

Social Media

Social media is "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p .60). Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Weibo are popular examples of social media.

Public Sphere

The concept of the public sphere generally refers to the space or platform where individuals come together and exchange information and discuss matters of public interest. While doing so, they form a public opinion that is regarded as an important ingredient of democracy particularly in terms of decision-making and policy change. Media including social media is known to be the principal institution of the public sphere because of its power to facilitate public interaction and the exchange of ideas and information among and between people and institutions.

Northeast India

Northeast India is an administrative and geographic unit located in the easternmost part of the Indian Union. Presently, the region comprises eight states- Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and Sikkim.

Facebook news pages

Facebook news pages in the present study refer to news media run by individuals, groups organizations on Facebook. Facebook provides an interactive platform through Facebook pages which allows news media to share content and readers to give feedback in form of comments, shares, and likes. Both exclusively online news media and traditional media operate on Facebook. Facebook news pages considered for the present study are all online news media that fundamentally engages in the publication of news and views. Facebook news pages and digital news media in the context of the Northeast are used synonymously in this thesis.

Digital news media

Digital news media are organizations that engage in online journalism. The editorial content is distributed via the internet as opposed to publishing via print or broadcast. Digital news media operates across various online platforms mainly through websites and social media where they engage in cross-posting content. Digital news media and Facebook news pages in the context of the Northeast are used synonymously in this thesis.

Legacy media

Legacy media are referred to as conventional news media such as radio, television, and newspapers.

Framing, Frame, and Framing analysis

The present study regards framing as a process. It is a process of selecting "some aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation" (Entman, 1992, pp.52). As per the above definition, there are many aspects of reality and different individuals may perceive different aspects of reality. A "frame" is one such aspect and "framing" is the process of constructing that aspect of reality. And framing analysis is an effort to deconstruct different frames or aspects of reality concerning a particular matter. Framing theory in this sense takes a social constructionist approach viewing reality as an outcome of construction during social interaction.

Framing devices and reasoning devices

Framing devices identify within the text the metaphors, historical examples from which lessons are drawn, catchphrases, and depictions whereas the reasoning devices examine explicit and implicit statements that deal with problem definition, causal interpretation, consequences, and solutions.

Opinion articles and commentaries

Opinion articles and commentaries are used synonymously in this thesis. They are essays or articles published mainly published in news media that reflect an opinion or perspective of the writer about a particular subject.

1.8. Limitations of the study

This thesis has taken into consideration only those digital new media organizations or Facebook news pages that use the English language as the primary medium of communication. There are many vernacular or multilingual news media in the Northeast, particularly those operating exclusively on Facebook or other social media. However, comprehensive data is available on the same. Also, only those Facebook news pages engaging in pan-Northeast coverage are studied. Numerous Facebook news pages operate that cater to a specific region or community within the Northeast. The thesis has not considered the aspect of the digital divide.

Only opinion articles were examined. There are other online media formats available. Among the opinion articles, only articles on immigration are analyzed for the reason that the said issue was found to be the most dominant. The classification of data has revealed other dominant political discourses. They have not been considered for the reason that the scholar was interested in conducting an in-depth investigation. An additional focus on the writers or contributors of opinion articles could have given more weightage to the dynamics of the nature of structure and representation. Concerning the readers' engagement, it may be noted that digital news media publishes content across multiple online platforms. The study has only considered readers' engagement data from Facebook. Readers' engagement data from the website of the organization and other social media handles could have given additional insights and inputs. A detailed analysis of the aspects of financing and regulation in the public sphere can be further done in more detail. Also, issues related to fake news and the digital divide have not been incorporated.

Chapter 2
Review of literature

This research engages in the reading of a variety of literature to develop a framework of analysis, methodology, and research objectives and questions and identify the research gaps. The review of the literature is carried out thematically and builds upon the emerging scholarship on the reconceptualization of the notion of the public sphere in the wake of the growth of ICTs. This is followed by a review of theoretical and empirical studies on social media, participation, and interaction, and studies on the structure of digital news media. A comprehensive view of issues of media framing of immigration is outlined by incorporating empirical research from Europe, North America, and India. Thereafter, the chapter discusses studies on the media of the Northeast and finally identifies the research gaps in the literature discussed.

2.1. Rise of ICTs, social media, and
the reconceptualization of the public sphere

The development of information and communication technologies and the internet during the late twentieth century have attracted researchers from various disciplines to understand this new phenomenon. One such area is the study of the public sphere. Scholars have increasingly sought to redefine, conceptualize and theorize the idea of the public sphere in the wake of technological developments. Early among them was Keane (1998)

who saw new media effectuating a new structural transformation of the public sphere. He classifies the new public sphere into a range of macro, meso, and mirco public spheres built around specific interests and geography. Gitlin (1998), on the other hand, notices the fragmentation of the unified public sphere into multiple self-enclosed "public sphericules" as a result of technological advancements.

The issue of fragmentation of the public sphere has been subject to various discussions. Young (1997) argues that the public sphere will generate justified outcomes when different groups bring different perspectives into the public sphere. He considers fragmentation as an important resource for democratic communication. Whereas Benhabib (2002) highlights the challenge of a multicultural society to argue for the need for a public sphere capable of accommodating "maximum cultural contestation".

The rapid growth of social media since 2004 has resulted in broad discussions on the ramifications of these media in the public sphere. In comparison with other platforms on the internet, social media is thought to be closer to many of the theoretical models of the public sphere because of its power to facilitate expression, representation, and interaction (Robertson et al., 2010). According to Benkler (2004), the internet is promoting the rise of a new networked public sphere where people are increasingly discovering new opportunities and prospects to share their experiences, concerns, and opinions in the public sphere through communicative forms including social media and citizen journalism. He regards the internet as giving expression to vernacular perspectives against the existing monopolies over public communication enjoyed by commercial media. Benkler considers social media a promising force for democratization.

Dahlgren (2005) emphasizes the importance of technical and cultural resources while participating in the networked public sphere. He argues that political engagement on the internet requires certain capacities and motives. Participants should have communication skills and consider themselves active citizens willing to participate efficiently. The absence of these technical and cultural resources will lead to self-exclusions. To Shirky (2008), social media enriches freedom. He considers social media as bringing an "epochal change" because of its power to assist coordination and change. Shirky associates the freedom to publish and connect online with freedom of the press and hence the freedom to assemble. He argues "To speak online is to publish, and to publish online is to connect with others. With the arrival of globally accessible publishing, freedom of speech is now freedom of the press, and freedom of the press is freedom of assembly " (p.172).

Papacharissi (2010) notices the blurring of the line of separation between the public sphere and the private sphere as a result of social media intervention. He argues that those activities that were previously performed physically in the public domain are now being pursued online in private with more freedom and flexibility. The connection of the "personal to the political, and the self to the polity and society" (p. 164) is serving politics as people's participation and interaction in the private space is potentially affecting the public agenda. Fuchs (2014), critiques Papacharissi's approach and calls it "individualistic, reductionist, and philosophically idealistic" (p. 186) which ignores the importance of co-presence and physical matter. Citing popular protest movements, he argues that the facets of visibility and interpersonal connections that are significant for any political action could not be conveyed over the internet.

Skepticism on similar lines was earlier raised by Dean (2005) who felt communication media only feeds the capitalist ideology of consumerism. He argues that new media makes people feel that they are active and empowered whereas, in reality, nothing changes. Dena asserts. "By sending an e-mail, signing a petition, responding to an article on a blog, people can feel political. And that feeling feeds communicative capitalism " (p.70). Shirky (2010) while acknowledging the potential influence of capital and state remains optimistic and argues that social media are the long-run tools that strengthen the public sphere.

2.2. Social media, participation, and interaction

The nature of audience participation and interaction has always been an important area of concern for scholars interested in studying the role of media in democracy. With the speedy development of information and communication technologies since the late twentieth century, this concern has gained heightened attention. The rise of digital media has radically altered the way people interact with the media. Digital media, particularly social media offers various features and prospects for engagement including the ability to comment on and share content across networks. This has triggered interest among researchers to study the character of the transformation of audience interaction in the age of the digital.

Macintosh offers three stages of development of online participation- e-Enabling, e-Engaging, and e-Empowering (c.f. Effing et al., 2011). The e-Enabling stage gave users access to information. The e-engaging phase allowed people to interact with the

organization and start a conversation. And, the e-empowerment stage facilitated collaborations and interactions between and among people and organizations.

While taking stock of this technological phenomenon Castells (2000) argues that the values and technologies of the Information age are constituting a new society made up of networks which he calls the "networked society". According to Castells (2000), new information technologies like the internet facilitate the formation of new forms of social organization and social interaction leading to multi-dimensional social change. He sees the internet giving rise to the culture of virtual reality where individuals and groups participate in symbolic representation and interaction in form of multimedia hypertext. Castells anticipates virtuality becoming the fundamental element of the communication experience and the backbone of a new culture.

Likewise, Jenkins (2006) regards digital media technologies as giving birth to new forms of "participatory culture". Traditional media is commonly argued to be passive and privatized, and with digital media offering new forms of interaction, Jenkins argues this new media nurturing new cultural, social, and political practices where people access and make use of information innovatively and productively.

Van (2018) associates these practices with the emergence of the online participatory culture in form of a "platform society". Platform society is defined as "the society in which social and economic traffic is increasingly channeled by a global online platform ecosystem that is driven by algorithms and fueled by data" (p.4). He argues that platforms are an integral part of society that shapes everyday economic, political, and socio-cultural practices. According to Van, platform society is operated by big tech companies like

Facebook, Google, Amazon, Apple, and Microsoft which provide the infrastructure, design, and data to the people. Institutions, citizens, and individuals participate and interact in the platform society at local, national, supranational, and global levels and engage in collaborations and confrontations of various interests.

Social media has become one of the most popular, dominant, and effective communication platforms for individuals, groups, and institutions to participate and interact with the outer world. Grown out of web 2.0, social media notably promotes a high level of participation and interaction by allowing users to generate and distribute content across time and space. Boulianne (2015) examines four competing theories on social media and participation. One theory considers social media as a platform to access information or news from family or friends or traditional news media. A recent report on digital news media in India found that 28% of respondents below 35 years of age use social media as the main source of news, outpacing print which accounted for 16%. (India Digital News Report, 2019). However, social media users, particularly Facebook, are found to use a limited number of news sources. (Hermida, 2012)

Another theory, according to Boulianne (2015), focuses on how social media create networks of mobilization. The scholars here propose how different network sizes enhance different social ties and varying forms of mobilization (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012; Tang & Lee, 2013). Other research concentrates on the formation of online groups and argues that people subscribing to more online groups increases the opportunities for participation (Boulianne (2015). The final theory examines the relationship between participation and social network. It observes how civil and political participation is affected or influenced by the members of the social network. A study by

Bakshy et al. (2015 argues that people exhibit the same attitude as their friends primarily because of homophily rather than the influence of their peers.

Liking, sharing, and commenting have become regular activities practiced by billions of people every day while engaging with social media. According to them, social media affect engagement through information access, peer discussions, and social pressure. Several studies have shown the effects of sharing and commenting on an individual or the whole. Sharing or commenting on social media news affects both offline and online political participation of an individual and can motivate exposure, attention, and elaboration of media messages. (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2014; Pingree, 2007). Choi & Lee (2015) argues that when an individual share on social media or is exposed to articles shared by friends, it enhances the probability of an individual getting further connected to other discussions in the network.

Why do people share the news? The research by Kümpel et al. (2015) provides three motivations. First, self-serving motives- when people share news to draw the attention of their followers and friends to gain status and reputation. Second, altruistic motives- when people share information purely to inform people or circulate the message. Third, social motives- when people share news to initiate social interaction or for socialization and social approval. The study also found that people do not share news for entertainment or escapism.

The substance and effect of commenting have also been the subject of several analyses. Lee (2012), argues that readers may change their understanding of a particular issue after reading the comments on news stories on the subject. Readers are found to be

judging the quality of the news articles based on reading the comments (Prochazka, Weber, & Schweiger, 2016). The study on comments on online news videos by Ksiazek, Peer, and Lessard (2014) highlights the distinction between those videos inviting lots of user-content interaction and those showing user-user interaction. Popular videos drew more comments whereas less popular ones enticed more interaction among commentators. The study also puts light on the relationship between reader interaction and geographical proximity. People are more likely to comment on the news closer to them.

The aspect of participation and interactivity on social media however also have been contested. Brabham (2015) considers social media activities like comments, likes, and shares as "crude approximations" of human interaction that trivialize the essence of face-to-face communication. Morozov (2009) claims these activities as "slacktivism", a kind of activism that has no political or social impact, an action people perform virtually without any effort just to make themselves feel good about themselves. These activities are argued to be ineffectual and damaging because they tend to hinder meaningful physical participation in social and political life. A similar concern is raised by Fenton & Barassi (2011) in their research on the political culture of social media who argue that rather than empowering people, social media further self-centered participation.

2.3. Structure of digital news media

The development of new media communication technologies, particularly the internet and smartphones has drastically changed the news environment across the globe. People are gradually shying away from legacy media and using digital, mobile, and social

media to access and consume news. The changing media landscape has given rise to big tech companies including Meta, Google, Microsoft, Twitter, and others which provide communication tools and distributive platforms like search engines, social media, video-sharing, and messaging applications where people every day seek and share information. This has led to an upsurge in the growth of digital news media across the globe. Digital news has today become an established part of the news media landscape that operates across online platforms, mainly social media.

Cornia et al., argue that legacy media were under immense pressure because of their declining revenue. They are compelled to find new models of revenue generation for which broadcasters and particularly newspapers invested in exploring digital opportunities. And despite them going digital, the legacy media are facing a challenge to collect revenue as people do not pay for online news (2016).

There are two waves through which digital news media developed (Nicholls et al., 2018). The first wave during the 1990s saw the emergence of news aggregators like Yahoo and Google news that collected and packaged news from various sources and supplied it to readers. The second wave came at the dawn of the twentieth century with the mushrooming of numerous digital-born news sites. These sites produced their original content and were diverse in terms of organizational and financial structure.

The development of digital news media has generated immense interest among researchers and institutions to understand the nature and implications of this transformation. According to Schroeder (2017), three commonly used theories that dominate the understanding of digital media are; network theory, mediatization theory, and

actor-network theory. Developed by Castells (2009), network theory supposes communication media as a chain of networks of dominance and resistance. Large media conglomerates control a chunk of these networks. At the same time, these networks have been a site of resistance for various social and political movements. Schroeder considers Castell's formulation to be flawed because numerous media systems around the world are state-run or are operated on a model of public service broadcasting that has nothing to do with corporate control.

Schroeder argues that the mediatization theory although acknowledges the difference in media systems lacks clarity on how media operate differently in different spheres of cultural and political life. Mediatization theory talks about media uses and dependence and proposes that social interaction is compromised due to the increasing mediatization of society and social institutions. (Hjarvard 2008). Digital media promotes "disintermediation" when people share their information and experiences directly outside of institutions (Schroeder, 2017). The actor-network theory argues against the generalization of the role of media. It regards media being shaped and constructed by individuals, society, and social contexts (Chadwick, 2013; Couldry, 2012). Schroeder (2017) argues for the need for media theory to discuss how media transform or preserve the social order.

Cornia et al. point out two major concerns about the new digital media environment. First, the need for effective policy intervention on the matter of the quality digital media market and media literacy. Secondly, they raise the question of the issue of media pluralism and diversity of news given the supremacy of big media organizations in the media landscape. Nip (2006) put forward three criteria to measure the potential of digital new

media: "connecting to the community; engaging individuals as citizens; and helping public deliberation in search of solutions".

Few empirical studies have been conducted on digital news media, particularly on the structure. The study on digital news media in Europe found that the major chunk of revenue came via advertising, however, they are simultaneously exploring the prospect of subscription and membership models model as an alternative source (Nicholls, 2018). The same study found that digital news media although yearning for direct traffic is closely working with distributive platforms like Facebook and Google because of the scope these platforms provide for reach and readers' engagement. The study on digital news media start-ups in India found that the majority of these media use social media as a platform to promote and disseminate content (Sen & Nielsen, 2016). Digital news media were found to face stiff competition from the digital operations of legacy media. Although they are experiencing exponential growth in terms of the user base, they face an immense challenge in terms of revenue generation from advertising. Another study on the founders of digital news media in India state that the motive behind starting such media is to counter the underlying values and business model of the existing legacy media (Prasad, 2021).

The study on news consumption habits in India highlights the position of social media as a dominant news source (Aneez, 2019). The study found that social media has overtaken print media as the main source of news. Social media were found to be the leading news source with 75 percent and 82 percent of the respondents claiming that they get news from Facebook and WhatsApp respectively. The same study found that 50 percent of the respondents share and 33 percent of them comment on online news.

2.4. Media framing of immigration

There are fundamentally two methods to the study of media framing- inductive and deductive framing analysis. The inductive approach involves reading the text without predefined coding instruments whereas the deductive approach employs preconceived indicators during the coding process (Gorp, 2010). The inductive framing analysis is mostly used for exploratory research and the deductive framing analysis is adopted for the validation of established data. The two key distinctions between the framing approach by the media are the application of issue-specific frames and generic frames (Esser et al., 2017). Generic frames are not based on a particular theme and are closely associated with the culture of journalism whereas issue-specific frames focus on the specific aspects of certain topics or issues (Brüggemann & D'Angelo, 2018).

A substantial body of literature reflects upon how the media represent the issue of immigration. A majority of media research on immigration employs issue-specific frames and analyzes the economic, welfare, cultural, or security considerations within media representation (Eberl et al., 2018). "Immigration and integration" is the third most negative topic in political news coverage in Western democracies (Esser et al., 2017). The study on the integration debate in the Netherlands foregrounds how the generic framing of the story determines the thinking of the people about immigrants (Bos et al., 2016). The multicultural frame was found to have a positive effect on the readers while the victimization frame led to negative views about immigrants.

The study on the coverage of immigration by Canadian print media found that, although considered a threat to security, immigrants are portrayed as taking advantage of

the social welfare programs of the country (Lawlor & Tolley, 2016). Likewise, during the "immigration crisis" in Canada in 1999, the media were found to be engaged in the collective problematization of Fujianese immigrants as an embodiment of danger, a threat to the physical, moral and political security and well-being of the nation (Greenberg & Hier, 2001).

The immigrants are found to be framed by US newspapers in terms of economic and public safety threats, and civil rights issues (Fryberg et al., 2011). The study found that location and political ideology considerably influences the way the media represents immigrants. Contrary to this, a comparative study on Canadian and British print media, however, found no evidence of location influencing media framing (Lawlor, 2015). The framing of immigration both by national and local media was found to be similar. Abrajano et al., (2017) highlight the relationship between media framing of immigration and the shift in the balance of power in the US. The study found that negative portrayals of immigration in the media increased with the rise of the Republican party known for its anti-immigrant rhetoric.

The study of the Australian press by Pickering (2001) shows that immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers are not only depicted as a "problem population" but also as a "deviant population" concerning the integrity of the nation, race, and disease. In the United Kingdom, immigrants are seen as an economic threat, particularly to the increasing competition for job opportunities (Baker et al., 2008). Another study of national newspapers of the same country reveals that anti-immigration attitudes are largely dominated by arguments and justifications based on "welfare chauvinism"; understood in

terms of how and why people believe that welfare benefits should be restricted to citizens (Balch & Balabanova, 2014).

Belgium's press is found to have depicted Roma as an economic threat, whereas, North-Africans are closely related to security and cultural threat (Meeusen & Jacobs, 2016; van der Linden & Jacobs, 2016). The stigmatizing portrayal of African immigrants in Swedish and Finnish media is accounted for constructing a division between Europe and Africa (Horsti, 2008). Negative portrayal and the process of "othering" plays a significant role in the generation and spread of fear about immigrants (Breen et., 2006).

In India, the influx of illegal immigrants from Bangladesh has been a major concern, particularly in the seven states of the Northeast region; Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Tripura. These states share an extensive border of 1,168 miles with Bangladesh. Over 14 million people were estimated to have taken shelter in India during the Bangladesh war of independence of 1971 (Singh, 2016). Similarly, a considerable number of people have also migrated to Northeast India from the neighboring countries of Myanmar, Nepal, and Bhutan (Goswami, 2007). In the 1980s, the state of Assam in the Northeast witnessed a violent political campaign against illegal immigrants when thousands of people lost their lives (Baruah, 1986). The recent legislation including the National Registrar of Citizens Citizenship (Amendment) Act 2019 has rejuvenated and intensified the long-standing debate on immigration in India mainly in the Northeast.

Few papers have been published on the media representation of immigration in India. One study of television media finds that the construction of the negative image of Rohingyas is largely shaped by a religious-nationalist ideology where Rohingyas are often depicted as a terrorist, a threat to the nation, and potentially destabilizing forces (Mohanty, 2020). The study on immigration and online media is almost absent. In Northeast India, the study on immigration is plenty, however, no substantial study was found on the media representation of immigration. Media studies are primarily focused on media coverage of the conflict in the region or representation of the Northeast in mainstream media (Basnett, 2011; Kharshiing, 2020; Kabi & Nayak, 2019; Roluahpuia, 2016). The study of media representation of immigration in Northeast India's online media intends to fulfill the above gap.

2.5. Studies on media of the Northeast

Basnett (2011) investigates the perception of the Indians from the Northeast living and working in Bangalore towards the coverage of the Northeast by mainstream media particularly the national newspapers and television news channels. Taking Hindi and English news media into consideration, Basnett (2011) argues that the Northeast Diaspora living in Bangalore remains unsatisfied with the general reportage of the news media covering the Northeast. A critical distinction in the general reportage Basnett (2011) found was the constant othering of the people of the Northeast where the reporters used the term 'they' or 'them' while referring to the people of the Northeast and 'us' or 'we' while referring to the rest of the nation. This accentuated and perpetuated the alienation of the Northeast Indians from the rest of the nation leading to an identity crisis.

Roluahpuia (2016) investigates how the media frames movements in the North Eastern states of India particularly the state of Manipur. The author takes up the demand for the Inner Line Permit (ILP) demand raised by the tribes of Manipur and the same tribes protesting the passing of three bills viz. "The Protection of Manipur Peoples Bill, 2015, Land Revenue & Land Reforms Bill (Seventh Amendment) 2015 and Manipur Shop & Establishment Bill (Second Amendment) 2015 and how local media covered the two opposed movements. The author argues that while the local media sought to advance the cause of the Inner Line Permit, they toed the line of the tribes in their opposition to the three bills. She further argues that local politics strongly affected the media framing of the local press. As such there was a significant overlapping of the media and local ethnic politics as witnessed in Manipur.

Kabi and Nayak (2019) investigate the role played by news media in the public discourse and on conflict resolution given the fact that the Northeast is a militancy-ridden region. The authors further seek to ascertain the confluence of media, gender, and peace initiatives in that how women particularly were the most vulnerable lot during the militancy, how media reported this aspect and the role played by local journalists in conflict resolution in the region. Their findings revealed that while newspaper journalists from the Northeast reported extensively from the region, there was minimal coverage of the Northeast by journalists outside of the Northeast. This resulted in minimal coverage from outside of the region. Journalists strongly believed that newspapers played a critical role in conflict resolution and that extensive coverage of the region would bring about peace in

the region as all stakeholders would be able to "raise their grievances and concerns (Kabi & Nayak, 2019: p. 2019)".

Khasrshiing (2020) to a large extent resonates with Basnett's (2011) findings stating that asymmetrical power relations between the Indian 'mainland' 'us' and the Northeast 'them' have led to the othering of the Northeast. This othering of the Northeast through representations in media texts is chronic. Khasrshiing (2020) argues "issues of control, and dominance is pivotal to the power struggles... which are inherent in the process of othering (p. 65). She further argues that this othering through media representation causes chronic race-based differentiation and the risk of loss of identity to prop up continuously.

Sinha et al (2014) seeks to examine how media professional in the Northeast use the internet and social media particularly, and what patterns of usage could be ascertained from the same. The authors found that media professionals extensively employed the internet and social media for their professional research. It was found that an overwhelming majority used their mobile phones to access the internet. A sizeable majority of the work was done at night and the premium resources used were the Google search engine and the most popular social media portal Facebook.

Roy (2015) examines the role played by social media as a means of development communication in the Northeast. She argues that with the rise of literacy in the Northeast and the penetration of mobile telephony and internet services, social media can play a critical role in development in the region bringing about a greater reconciliation in the region and positive social and economic change.

Purkayastha and Chanda (2018) investigate the usage of WhatsApp as a means of sharing information by Library and Information Science professionals in the Northeast. The authors reveal that the usage of WhatsApp is very high in the Northeast. The popularity and fact that the users have been using WhatsApp for four years prove the LIS professionals' desire to use the latest mobile tools. The authors also revealed that a majority of the LIS professionals were spending an average of four to nine hours on WhatsApp.

Bhagawati (2020) seeks to ascertain the "nature and optimality of website and social media usage by state governments in Northeast India (p. 3188)". Focusing on Assam and Nagaland, the author reveals that e-governance had matured in the region with plenty of e-services provided by the respective state governments. However, there was minimal reciprocity from the citizens towards the same. Thus citizen-government e-interaction was minimal. This was largely due to a lack of ICT skills both among the lower-ranking government officials and operatives as well as the citizenry. The state governments too did not promote the e-services adequately. E-governance yet had a critical role to play in the grassroots development of the region.

2.6. Research gaps

A cursory glance at the literature reviewed above informs us that the notion of the public sphere increasingly received attention beginning from the late nineteenth century against the backdrop of Habermas's publication of STPS and the rise ICTs. The same stimulated research on diverse aspects of the topic. It may be noticed that few studies have been conducted on digital media in the Northeast. The majority of such research on digital

media focuses on the use of the internet and social media by institutions and professionals (Purkayastha and Chanda, 2018; Bhagawati, 2020; Sinha et al.,2014) which provides us the considerable scope to understand the nature of the relationship between digital media and politics. Additionally, research on the structure of digital news media, particularly in India is scarce. No research was found on the structure of digital news media in the Northeast. It is also observed that the research on the issues of media representation in the Northeast is primarily focused on media coverage of the conflict in the region or representation of the Northeast in mainstream media (Basnett, 2011; Kabi & Nayak, 2019; Khasrshiing, 2020; Roluahpuia, 2016). No substantial study was found on the media representation of immigration which was identified by this study as the most dominant political discourse in the Northeast.

By examing the structure of digital news media in Northeast India, analyzing the representation of political discourse, and assessing the nature of people's participation and engagement, this three-dimensional study intends to fulfill several of the above research gaps.

Chapter 3
Research Methodology

This study adopts both qualitative and quantitative methods to seek answers to the desired research questions. The information on the institutional features of Facebook news pages is collected through primary and secondary data. Personal interviews were conducted with the editors, founders, or administrators of the Facebook news pages based on a semi-structured questionnaire. Secondary data is collected from the websites of government authorities, self-regulatory bodies, digital media associations, funders, and social media handles of the concerned organization. Further, the study classifies the opinion articles published by these Facebook news pages and finds the issue of immigration to be the most dominant political discourse in the Northeast. The qualitative content analysis of opinion articles on immigration is done through an inductive framing approach. To measure the inductively reconstructed representational frames of immigration, the study further conducts a quantitative deductive framing analysis of readers' engagement data of opinion articles on immigration.

3.1 Site of Study

The present thesis studies social media as an institution of the public sphere in Northeast India. For this purpose, Facebook is considered the entry point. A recent report on "India Digital News" by Reuters Institute found that 75 percent of their respondents use Facebook as a source of getting news (India Digital News Report, 2019). Although the

websites of leading Indian broadcasters and newspapers are widely used to access online news, the report claims that digital-born news media have a significant impact. Digital born-news media operates on and across online platforms including websites, Facebook, Youtube, Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp where many engage in posting and cross-posting content online.

On Facebook, digital news media are available in form of Facebook news pages. Such pages may be opened under the page category called "News & media website" provided by Facebook. This interactive feature provides a platform for individuals, groups, and organizations to open a free Facebook news page without much effort and share content online. The readers may also simultaneously engage by commenting, sharing, and liking. As a result of this feature of Facebook, the world wide web is encountering a proliferation of indefinite Facebook news pages run by individuals, groups, and organizations sharing news and views to varying audiences across the globe.

This study chooses similar kinds of Facebook news pages from Northeast India as the site of study and conducts a three-dimensional analysis of the same- structural, representational, and interactional. Further discussed is the basis of the selection of Facebook news pages and the procedure of analysis of each dimension.

3.2 Methodology for structural analysis

The structural analysis examines the organizational character of the Facebook news pages. This dimension allows the study to address the intrinsic issues concerning the place of social media in democratic societies, particularly questions related to freedom of

expression and diversity of information and opinions. The analysis primarily looks into three aspects of each Facebook news page- organizational structure, means and modes of content gathering and publication, and matters related to financing and regulation. With this objective, the study raises the following questions:

a) How are the Facebook news pages of Northeast India organizationally structured?

b) What are their various means and modes of content gathering and publication?

c) How do they financially manage and sustain themselves? What are their sources of revenue?

d) Are they subjected to any form of regulation or control? If yes, what are the various means and mechanisms?

3.2.1 Sampling/Selection of Facebook news pages

There is no data available on Facebook pages or Facebook news pages from Northeast India. Therefore initially, the selection of pages incorporated an effort to identify as much as Facebook pages relating to Northeast India. The same was done with the assistance of Facebook's internal search engine and Google search by using keywords that included " "Northeast India, Seven Sisters, North-east India, and "the name of the eight northeastern states and their capital cities". The search feed results showed numerous pages of various page categories. Only those pages which fell under the page category of "News & media website" were considered for further selection.

Four Facebook news pages that categorized themselves as News & media website were eventually selected. They are The NewsMill, East Mojo, Raiot, and Inside Northeast.

The following are the various considerations taken into during the process of their selection:

3.2.1.1. *Page category*

While opening a Facebook page, one has to assign a page category to the page. Facebook provides multiple options of page categories and sub-categories to choose from. Some of the popular page categories are- Local Business or Place; Company, Organization, or Institution; Brand or Product; Artist, Band, or Public Figure; Entertainment; and Cause or Community. "News & media website" is one of the sub-categories that comes under Company, Organization, or Institution. Page category gives identity to the page. It has different layouts and functions.

3.2.1.2. *Coverage*

Notwithstanding that Northeast India is argued to be conceived as a homogenous entity in the popular imagination, the region is diverse and varied in terms of topography, languages, socio-cultural practices, ethnicity, politico-economic structures, and religious beliefs. This diversity and differences are reflected in the presence of a multitude of active Facebook pages. As noted earlier, the Facebook pages categorized under News & media website are considered for the present study. Two distinct kinds of pages under the News & media website surfaced during the examination of their content. First, pages whose subject matter and readers were largely limited to a specific group, region, or ethnicity inside the Northeast. For example, pages like Naga Blog, We the Nagas, Pasighat News, Arunachal Wings, Mizoram News, and others, addressed specific communities or regions.

Second, pages that covered issues and matters concerning the whole of Northeast and also outside. Facebook news pages incorporative of the entire Northeast were considered for selection.

3.2.1.3. *Onlineness*

Facebook news pages having pan-Northeast coverage may be further categorized into two types. The first type is pages that are social media handles of traditional media organizations like newspapers, television channels, and magazines engaging in physical and offline publication. These pages are primarily online constituents of their respective parent media organization. Some of the Facebook news pages operating under this category included Nagaland Express, Imphal Free Press, Imphal Times, Shillong Times, Eccletic Northeast, Meghalaya Times, and others.

The second type is Facebook news pages were digital-born news media operating exclusively online. Some are part and parcel of an online news media organization existing across multiple online platforms which operate in a loop and some started as a Facebook news page but later converted into a full-fledged digital news organization. For example, East Mojo has a website, a Facebook page, a Twitter handle and a YouTube channel and they engage in crossposting, that is, they simultaneously post the same content to their various online channels whereas The NewsMill and Inside Northeast started solely on Facebook but later turned into a digital news media organization. Raiot considers itself as a webzine and was considered for the study primarily because it published lots of opinion articles. Facebook news pages selected for the study belong to the second type.

3.2.1.4. *Popularity, transparency, and content updation*

During the process of page selection, the researcher closely monitored several pages for at least three months. The researcher particularly monitored the content and ascertained its originality. It was found that many of the pages engaged in duplicating content from mainstream regional and national media and other popular online media portals without even acknowledging the source. Despite efforts, the researcher could not confirm the identity of the administrators of the bulk of the pages. Page transparency looked into aspects of the page that included, anonymity, page content, and page history.

The selection process dug into matters, mainly, uniformity and followers. Uniformity entails page consistency, that is, regular and timely updation of content. Pages that regularly updated content were considered. The popularity of pages was measured in terms of the number of followers following the page. At the time of data collection, NewsMill had the highest followers of 316,000. East Mojo, Inside Northeast, and Raiot had 229,000, 134, 000 and 13,000 followers respectively.

3.2.2. Analysis procedures

The answers to the research questions on the structural dimension of Facebook news pages have been sought through both primary and secondary data. The primary data was collected mainly through personal interviews. The researcher has conducted personal interviews with the administrators of each Facebook news page based on a semi-structured questionnaire. The interviews were transcribed and coded under the three broad themes-organizational structure, content gathering and publication, and financing and regulations.

Secondary data was collected in form of information and insights gathered from sources that included the websites of government authorities, self-regulatory bodies, digital media associations, and funders. A substantial amount of information was accessed and analyzed from the Facebook page itself, the website, and other social media handles (Twitter handle, Instagram profile, and YouTube channels) of the respective digital news media. All the secondary data was coded under the above three themes.

3.3 Methodology for representational analysis

The representational analysis examines the content of the Facebook news pages (NewsMill, East Mojo, Raiot, and Inside Northeast). Digital media is known for its multimodality. It makes use of and combines various representational modes including text, image, and sound in the process of creation and circulation of content. Both textual and audio-visual content is found on Facebook including the select Facebook pages under study. The type of data found was primarily hard news (both in print and audio-visual format), soft news, commentaries and opinion articles, live events, short and viral videos, personal interviews, panel discussions, and others. Considering the feasibility to study all data types, the researcher prefers to choose opinion pieces and commentaries as the subject for analysis for the representational dimension.

This research acknowledges the space of opinion as an important entry point to the study of the public sphere. Opinion pieces are articles that mainly reflect the writer's analysis and interpretation of the subject. Both public sphere theory and discourse studies accord immense significance to deliberative politics and practices. The public sphere

comes into being when people engage in discussions and deliberations on issues of common interests and form public opinion. (Habermas, 1991). Similarly, discourse studies deal with three major components of deliberation: language, practice, and context. "Practice refers to specific ways of appropriating and processing language and extends to everything that may take place between the participants in interaction, including the various claims made in the name of expertise and exclusion" (Angermuller, Maingueneau, & Wodak, 2014, p.7).

3.3.1. Sampling/Selection of opinion articles

A total number of 434 opinion articles and commentaries were posted on the select four Facebook news pages of Northeast India between September 1, 2018, and March 31, 2020. The 434 were further classified into two categories: a) opinion pieces carrying an explicit political undertone (political commentaries). b) opinion articles where such political undertones were not readily visible (general articles).

The political undertone here implies something of being characteristic of holding, expressing, or acting in accord with particular ideological beliefs. An ideology is understood as " a set of ideas, beliefs, or stances that determines a perspective with which to interpret social and political realities" (New World Encyclopedia, 2018). General articles covered issues like sports, music, education, tourism, technology, youth, agriculture, health, environment, art and culture, films, media, biography, and others.

Out of 434 opinion pieces, 279 articles were found to be political commentaries and 155 as general articles (Table 3.3.1.1). Among 279 political commentaries, 191 commentaries were on political issues concerning the Northeast and the remaining 88 were on other political matters (Table 3.3.1.2). Further classification of 191 articles on the Northeast has revealed opinion articles on various political issues of the Northeast (Table 3.3.1.3). The issue surrounding immigration was found to be the most dominant political discourse in the Northeast with 67 articles posted on the subject. These 67 opinion articles on issues surrounding immigration are the main subject of analysis of the representational dimension.

Table 3.3.1.1

Frequency of count and percentage of opinion articles

Type	Count (out of 434)	Percentage (%)
Political	279	64.28
General	155	35.71

Table 3.3.1.2

Frequency of count and percentage of political commentaries

Type	Count (out of 279)	Percentage (%)
Northeast	191	68.45
Others	88	31.54

Table 3.3.1.3

Frequency of count and percentage of political commentaries on Northeast

Type	Count (out of 191)	Percentage (%)
Immigration	67	35.07
Ethnic politics	34	17.80
Development politics	31	16.23
Electoral and party politics	20	10.47
Insurgency and crime	13	6.80
Racism	11	5.75
Gender	9	4.71
Religion	6	3.14

3.3.2. Analysis procedures

The representational analysis engages in the inductive framing analysis of opinion articles related to the issue of immigration in the Northeast. Framing analysis is widely used as a methodological tool to study media content to determine how the media represent a certain issue. To frame is to "select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation" (Entman, 1993, p. 52).

There are multiple frames embedded in the media text which leads to varied definitions and interpretations of topics, issues, and persons and each frame may be reconstructed by building a frame package (Van Gorp, 2007). The frame package is a coherent entity of framing devices and reasoning devices that demonstrates how the frame

functions to represent a particular issue (Van Gorp, 2010). Framing devices identify within the text the metaphors, historical examples from which lessons are drawn, catchphrases, and depictions whereas the reasoning devices examine explicit and implicit statements that deal with problem definition, causal interpretation, consequences, and solutions (Gamson & Modigliani,1989; Van Gorp, 2010; Vossen & van Gorp, 2016).

The inductive framing analysis of opinion articles on immigration in the Northeast answers the following questions:

c) What are the different frames of representation (frame packages) of the immigration issue in Northeast India?

d) How do these frames (each frame package) function in terms of the problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation?

3.3.2.1. *Inductive framing analysis*

The end product of framing analysis is the frame matrix. The frame matrix comprises the total number of frame packages build after the completion of data analysis. The frame package consists of all conceivable framing and reasoning devices that represent the core idea of the subject.

The coding was done manually. The opinion articles were initially openly coded without the use of a predetermined coding instrument. The focus was primarily on not what an article is about but on the manner in which the article tells the story about the subject. By applying reasoning and framing devices, a datasheet was created to code words,

sentences, and fragments from 67 opinion pieces. Everything that answered the question of how the issue of immigration is defined, what the cause and its justifications are, the consequences, the solution for the problem, and the related metaphors, examples, and catchphrases were coded.

Then the process involved arranging the codes around meanings or groups. The selected codes were listed and then reduced to a smaller number of significant codes. The purpose of this phase was to look for patterns and clusters and link them to overarching ideas. It is here the frame packages gradually started becoming visible.

Finally, the codes were sorted out the codes by building a frame matrix. The frame matrix represents the frame packages that refer to the central reasoning and framing devices. The frame package consists of the problem definition, causes and justifications, consequences, solutions (reasoning devices), and framing devices that refer to the same organizing frame.

3.4. Methodology for interactional analysis

The interactional analysis looks into the aspects of reader engagement in 67 opinion articles on immigration that were the subject of analysis of representational dimension. The interactional analysis interrogates the practices involved during the process of interaction between the reader and the text. Reader engagement on Facebook pages is measured in terms of the number of comments, shares, and likes.

Two aspects of interaction are explored. First, the interaction of readers with the posts/opinion articles. Second, the interaction initiated by the post among readers. To investigate the same, the study has conducted a deductive framing analysis of the data on the reader's comments. Also, data on likes, comments, and shares are examined to get general insights into the nature of reader engagement. The structural analysis poses the following question:

e) What is the nature of readers' engagement in opinion articles on immigration?

f) To what extent the representational frames are found in the reader's comments?

g) Do we find any new frames from the reader's comments? If yes, what are its characteristics?

h) What is the frequency and nature of interactional sequences from the reader's comments?

3.4.1. Analysis procedures

3.4.1.1. *Deductive framing analysis*

The deductive phase of framing analysis in the present study primarily involves the validation of the inductively reconstructed representational frames. This phase does quantitative analysis by measuring the extent to which inductively reconstructed frame packages are applied in the readers' comments. Here, the important factor is the researcher is already familiar with the framing and reasoning devices of each frame package identified during the representational analysis. Therefore, the deductive analysis of the reader's comments included the following procedures (Gorp, 2010). First, coding the data while

keeping in mind the core idea expressed by the framing and reasoning devices of each representational frame package. Second, the analysis looked for clusters in the coded devices and assigned the codes to the associated frame package. Here the analysis found a new frame otherwise not present in the representational frame.

The third procedure included determining the weight of the frame packages. The extent to which the representational frame packages are found in the reader's comments was measured by counting the framing and reasoning devices that belong to a particular frame package. According to Gorp (2010), "the higher the number the higher the chance the different devices within a particular text are able to evoke a schema in the mind of the reader that is in line with the frame" (p. 101). The identification of the dominant frame package "suggests a particular framing of the situation that is most heavily supported by the text and is congruent with the most common audience schemata" (Entman 1993, p. 56). The analysis has also measured the frequency and counts of interactional sequences. Interactional sequences are readers' interactions among themselves within the comments.

Chapter 4

Structural dimension of select Facebook news pages of Northeast India

The study on the structural dimension examines the institutional features of digital news media organizations or Facebook news pages of Northeast India. It individually looks into three aspects of four Facebook news pages- organizational structure, means and modes of content gathering and publication, and matters related to financing and regulation.

4.1. NewsMill

4.1.1. Organizational structure

The present NewsMill started as a Facebook news page on September 17, 2013. It was formerly known as Voice of Northeast India. Its name was officially changed to The NewsMill after being acquired by a Guwahati-based digital media start-up named Heynortheast Media Private Limited (HMPL) in 2016. HMPL is registered under the Companies Act of the Ministry of Corporate Affairs on December 18, 2015, and as Mirco Enterprise under the Ministry of Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises. The HMPL is founded by Jayanta Deka and Bikash Singh. Jayanta Deka worked as a journalist at The Times of India in Lucknow and Bikash Singh runs a PR firm in Guwahati. When asked about the rationale behind the rebranding of Voice of North East India into The NewsMill, Jayanta Deka said:

When we were known as The Voice of North East India, we were mostly posting content on the Northeast's culture and tradition. This was making our platform a bit light and was diluting the overall feel of the page. Therefore, we thought of rebranding it as NewMill because we wanted to post serious stories. We don't want to miss important stories (personal communication, March 23, 2021).

During the writing of this thesis, The NewsMill had a website, a Facebook news page with 366,000 followers, a Twitter handle with 879 followers, a YouTube Channel with 4,720 subscribers, and an Instagram account with 26,600 followers. The NewsMill is still named The Voice of Northeast India on Instagram. The content of The NewMill is posted across all these platforms. The NewsMill is run by a core six-member group and stringers. All six members are paid monthly emolument. It has an office in Guwahati.

4.1.2. Content gathering and publication

The NewsMill mainly publishes hard news and commentaries on politics, business, sports, and entertainment with a special focus on the Northeast. It carries national and international news as well through its subscription to United News of India (UNI) and Asian News International (ANI). It invariably posts videos which mainly include short videos of interest, viral videos, statements, and others. For example, one popular video posted by the page which received eleven lakh views was a video showing villagers from Kutsapo in Nagaland pulling a truck that went off the road (TheNewsMill, 2012). The video was titled "#UnityIsStrength".

The NewsMill has a news desk that mostly does local reporting of the Northeast. The page has one person assigned to gather local news. It mainly engages in participatory journalism where people send their news to the portal and the editors edit and publish it. Newsmill also publishes news carried by prominent newspapers in the Northeast. However, it claims to publish with additional inputs. Jayanta Deka says, "For example, if Manipur Times, Arunachal Times, or Nagaland Post publishes an interesting or good story, we get additional inputs, rewrite the story, and publish it. We do give credit to the newspaper" (personal communication, March 23, 2021). According to Deka, NewsMill is designed to give a platform for people to voice their opinions. "We get numerous commentaries. We just curate it and give them the platform". The NewsMill also commissions people to write op-eds for them. All except a few of the op-eds are paid. Most of them are voluntary contributions. Another means employed by the outlet to gather content is through interns. The NewsMill accepts interns chiefly from Universities and Colleges and assigns them to write.

4.1.3. Financing and regulations

4.1.3.1 Advertising

The primary source of revenue for NewsMill comes from advertising. It receives advertisements from two primary sources- direct advertisement and programmatic advertisement. Direct advertisements are those ads the NewsMill obtains directly from the clients. Most of such advertisements come from local advertisers (Jayanta Deka, personal communication, March 23, 2021). The NewsMill receives programmatic ads through Google AdSense and MGID. Google AdSense provides free-of-charge means for

publishers to earn money from the online content that they publish on their website and social media platforms including Facebook and YouTube. Google AdSense Help outlines three steps to explain how Google AdSense works (Google AdSense Help, n.d.). First, publishers provide the ad spaces available by pasting ad codes on their site and directing where they want the ads to appear. Second, advertisers bid to display in the ad spaces given by the publisher in a real-time auction. The highest-paying ads show on the site. Third, Google AdSense handles the process of billing all advertisers and networks for the ads and ensures that the publisher receives their payment. MGID is is a programmatic advertising agency headquartered in Santa Monica, California. Established in 2008, MGID has more than 700 employees working in 11 global offices. It partner with clients originating from over 200 countries, while supporting more than 70 different languages (MGID, n.a).

The NewsMill publishes both direct and programmatic ads on its website. The top of Figure 4.1.3.1.1 shows a direct advertisement for Kaziranga University based in Assam. On the middle and the middle right are programmatic advertisements of Postcard and Semrush promoted by Google AdSense. MGID's ad for Olymp Trade is on the bottom right. Direct ads are completely controlled by the administrator of NewsMill whereas programmatic ads work through algorithms that analyze a consumer's behavior allowing for real-time ad optimizations toward an audience.

Figure 4.1.3.1.1

NewsMill webpage showing direct and programmatic advertisements

(*Source*: https://thenewsmill.com/)
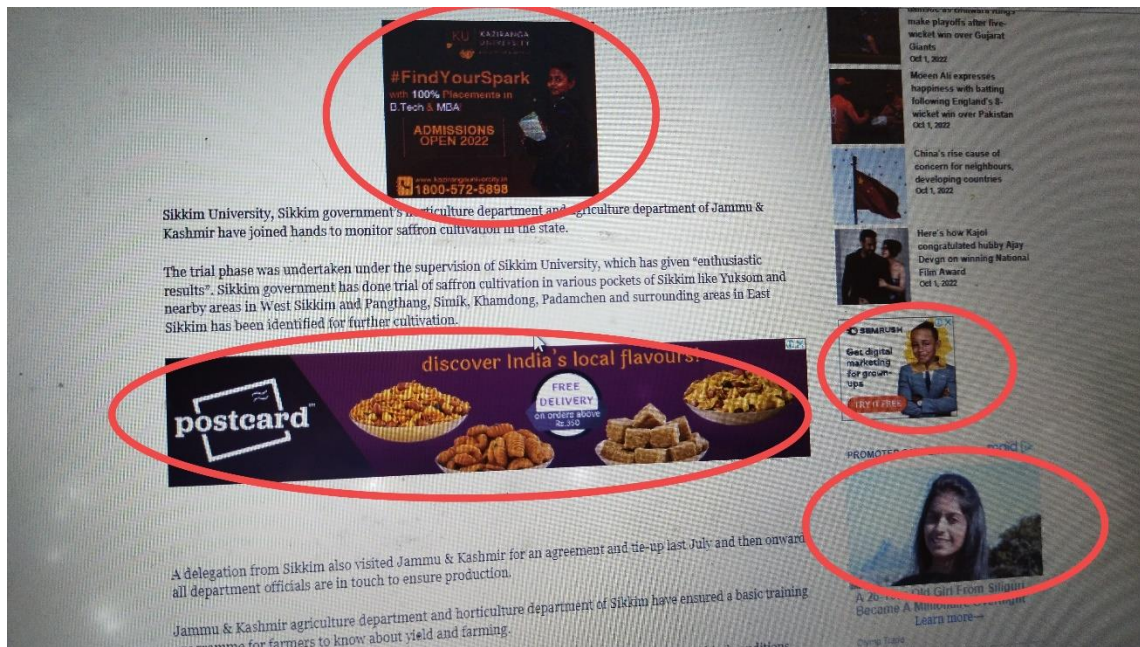
The Facebook page of NewsMill mostly publishes direct advertisements. There are two ways the page post direct advertisements. First, by directly posting the advertising poster on the wall of the page (Figure 4.1.3.1.2). Second, in the form of a banner ad at the bottom of the image representing the news story (Figure 4.1.3.1.3).

Figure 4.1.3.1.2

Poster advertisement on the Facebook news page of NewsMill

(Source: https://www.facebook.com/TheNewsMill/photos/pb.100064518800143.-2207520000../1311795959024434/?type=3)
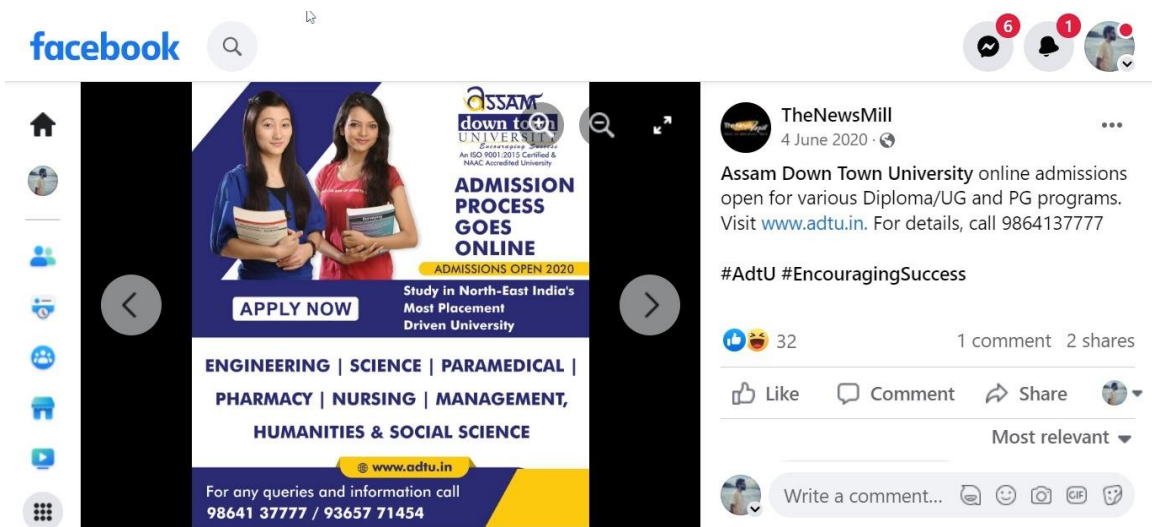
Figure 4.1.3.1.3

Banner advertisement on the Facebook page of NewsMill

(*Source*:https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=406213541539269&set=pb.1000645
18800143.-2207520000..&type=3)
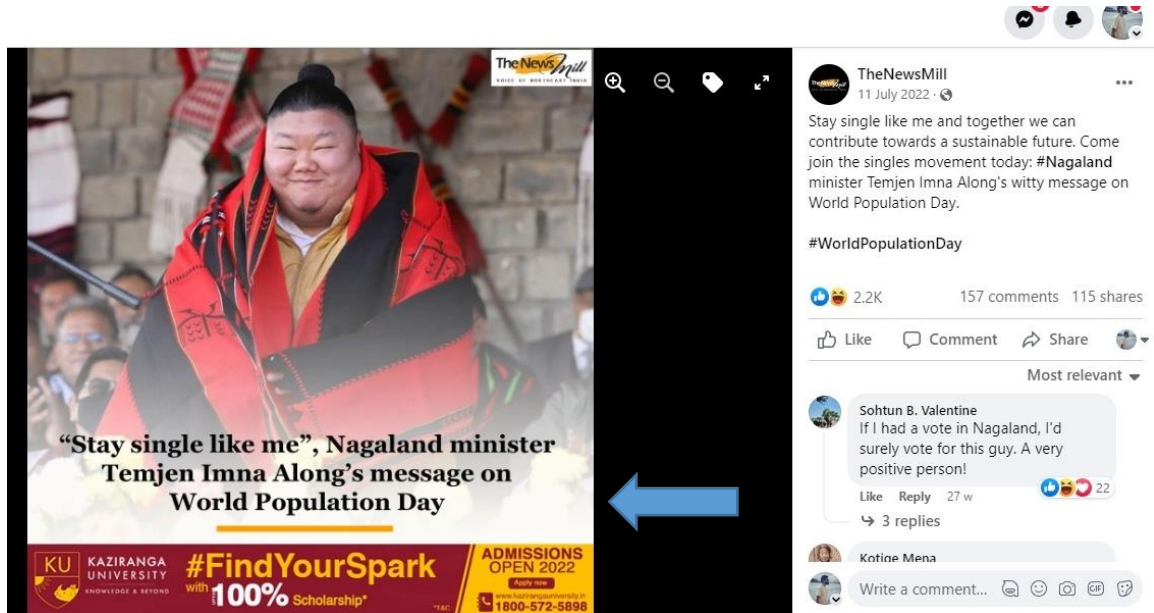
Although the Facebook page and Youtube channel of Newsmill is monetized, it does not generate much revenue from them. Jayanta Deka says: "We do not generate money from Facebook and Youtube because we are not sharing video content but mostly articles. Facebook and Youtube monetization works only with video content" (personal communication, March 23, 2021). The NewsMill doesn't receive any advertisements from Government sources.

4.1.3.2. Regulatory frameworks

4.1.3.2.1. Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021. All digital media including the NewsMill are to comply with guidelines, ethics, and rules specified by the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology and the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting under Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021. The Rules define digital media as digitized content transmitted over the internet or computer networks by an intermediary or a publisher of news and current affairs content or a publisher of online curated content (Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, 2021). It lays down the due diligence, code of ethics, and grievance redressal mechanism to be adhered to by publishers operating in the territory of India. For the same, the Ministry mandates a three-tier regulatory structure as under:

Level I.   Self-regulation by the publishers: The publisher is required to appoint a Grievance Officer who shall oversee all the grievances received by him or her. He or she should compulsorily address the grievance within fifteen days of receiving the complaint.

Level II. Self-regulation by the self-regulating bodies of the publishers: The publisher should be a member of one or more self-regulatory bodies constituted by the publishers or their associations. The self-regulating body must be registered under the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting and should agree to follow the rules specified by the Ministry.

Level III. Oversight mechanism by the Central Government: The Ministry should develop an oversight mechanism to coordinate and facilitate adherence to the code of ethics by the publishers and self-regulatory bodies. For this purpose, the Ministry may publish a charter for self-regulating bodies, establish an Inter-Departmental Committee for hearing grievances, issue appropriate guidance and advisories to publishers, and issue orders and directions to the publishers for maintenance and adherence to the Code of Ethics.

The NewsMill has fulfilled the first level structure of self-regulation by the publisher. It has appointed a Grievance Officer in name of Vikash Singh. It has also uploaded a Grievance Redressal Compliance Report from June 2021 to May 2022. However, the report data shows no grievances received during the said period (Figure 4.1.3.2.1.1).

Figure *4.1.3.2.1.1*

Grievance Redressal Compliance Report of NewsMill

(*Source*: https://thenewsmill.com/grievances-periodic-compliance-report/)
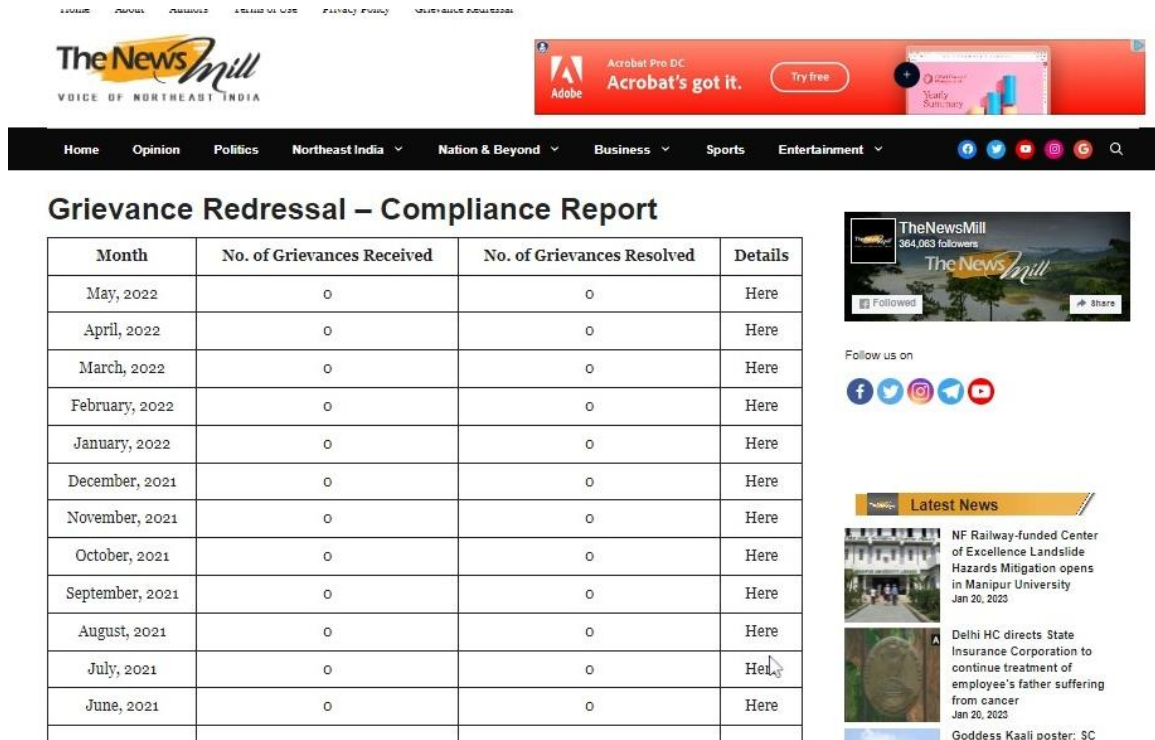
4.1.3.2.2. DIGIPUB News India Foundation. About the second level requirement to mandatorily be a member of a self-regulatory body, NewsMill is a constituent of the DIGIPUB News India Foundation. DIGIPUB is a self-regulatory registered with the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. The body seeks to represent the interests of digital-only news media. It seeks to amplify and evolve best practices among digital news media organizations that are independent and of the highest standards of journalism. As per the information provided on their website, the founding members of DIGIPUB are Alt News, Article 14, Boomlive, Cobrapost, HW News, Newsclick, Newslaundry, Scroll, The

News Minute, The Quint, and The Wire (DIGIPUB News India Foundation, n.d.). During the writing of this thesis, the body has one hundred twelve members which include digital news organizations, individual journalists, and commentariats. Dhanya Rajendran of The News Minute is its current Chairperson. DIGIPUB has an internal committee to provide the members with an industry-wide level of self-regulation. The Committee has three members comprising the former Supreme Court Judge, Justice Madan Lokur, Ms. Swarna Rajagopalan, founder, and director of Prajnya Trust, and Bezwada Wilson, activist and National Convenor of the Safai Karmachari Andolan.

4.1.3.2.3. Northeast Association of Digital Communications and Media (NADCOM). According to the information gathered from their website, NADCOM is an association of digital-first news media organizations working in Northeast India (Northeast Association of Digital Communications and Media, n.d.). Its main objectives are to promote, aid, encourage, develop and protect the interests of the members of the Indian digital news media industry. Only digital-first media organizations working in Northeast India can apply for its membership. NADCOM also functions as a self-regulatory body because it has an "Internal Ethics Committee" headed by a retired Judge of Gauhati High Court, Justice B K Sharma for self-regulation. However, the organization is not yet recognized as a self-regulatory body by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. NewsMill is the founding member of NASCOM along with East Mojo, G Plus, Hub News, Inside NE, Northeast Now, Sikkim Chronicle, The Northeast Today, and Time8. Sujata Gurung Chowdhury is the Chairperson and Director of NADCOM. The organization claims to adhere to the Code of Ethics as prescribed by the Press Council of India.

When asked about the need to form NADCOM, Jayanta Deka, a founding member of the organization, provides two reasons:

The immediate requirement was definitely to go by this new digital media policy. That's why we required the formation of this Netcom. The second thing is what we have seen during the election in Assam, three to four hundred Facebook pages were calling themselves digital media. There are few dedicatedly working in this field and there are numbers of others who are just roaming around with a boom mic in their hand with no experience in journalism. So, we wanted to differentiate and create a platform for good journalism and that is why we formed this organization (personal communication, March 23, 2021).

4.1.3.3. Content regulation

NewsMill encountered one instance of content regulation from the State machinery. It was concerning the picture of the bird which they posted on the Facebook page. Jayanta Deka narrates:

There was one issue with the administration of Meghalaya. We just shared a picture sent by a journalist friend. The picture was about a bird and someone was trying to sell it in some place in Meghalaya. We verified the picture and posted it. Then the forest department of Meghalaya approached us. They wanted to know the exact person who was trying to sell the bird. It was an endangered species. We did try to identify the person but we could

not find out the exact details of the person. That was one time we had to face the law (personal communication, March 23, 2021).

NewsMill did not report any form of control and content regulation from external sources or Facebook itself.

4.2. EastMojo

4.2.1. Organizational structure

EastMojo (East Mobile Journalism) is a digital news platform based in Assam in Northeast India. It was founded by Karma Palzor in 2017 under the company named ATVI Infotainment Private Limited. Karma Palzor is an experienced journalist and formerly an established television news anchor at CNN- News18 but moved to Guwahati to start a digital news media. Asked about the reason why he started EastMojo, Karma Palzor says:

> News from the Northeast is mostly not covered by the national media. I thought if nobody is telling our stories, it has to be done by us. In earlier days, considerable capital was required to start a news media, whether a television channel or a newspaper company. But starting a digital media doesn't require much investment. I saw this opportunity in digital media. It was the right time for me to do something which was in my mind for a long time (personal communication, May 14, 2021).

Palzor further believes that, unlike television or newspapers whose TRP and viewership may be manipulated, digital media is authentic and validated. "Google Analytics cannot be manipulated", he adds. Palzor claims to get 10 lakh visitors to their website every month out of which about 10 percent comes via Facebook. During the writing of this thesis, EastMojo had a website, a Facebook news page with 261,775 followers, a Twitter handle with 18,200 followers, a YouTube Channel with 253,000 subscribers, and an Instagram account with 30,000 followers. EastMojo has a Facebook page in the Assamese language named EastMojo Assam. It has 6, 200 followers there. Karma Palzor is the founder, proprietor, and chief editor of EastMojo. Eastmojo is run by employees who are editors, correspondents, technical support, and stringers. All the permanent employees are paid whereas stringers are paid based on their contributions. EastMojo has an office in Guwahati.

4.2.2. Content gathering and publication

EastMojo publishes news articles, video stories, and podcasts on politics, business, sports, entertainment, lifestyle, health, science, and career. It gives primary attention to the Northeast, particularly Assam. EastMojo also regularly publishes in-depth stories. News articles mainly include hard news and op-eds whereas video stories include video reports, viral videos, short videos, and documentaries. All their content is posted across all its online platforms. Video stories posted on the Facebook page don't attract high viewership. The last five videos posted by EastMojo received 118, 122, 76, 82, and 623 views (EastMojo, n.d.). User engagement on Youtube is better than on the Facebook page.

The last five videos posted on the Youtube channel garnered 464, 51000, 369, 3000, and 248 views (EastMojo, n.d.).

EastMojo has subscribed to the Press Trust of India (PTI) and MCI. It carries national and international news. Most of the local reports are written by their correspondents and stringers. (Karma Palzor, personal communication, May 14, 2021). Concerning the opinion articles, most are voluntary contributions, they occasionally pay for some articles (Karma Palzor, personal communication, May 14, 2021). All the opinion pieces received are said to pass through the editorial desk where, Karma says, an objective review and editing of the article is done and published.

4.2.3. Financing and regulations

4.2.3.1. Advertisement

The source of revenue of EastMojo comes from advertisements. Akin to The NewsMill, EastMojo receives both direct advertisement and programmatic advertisement. Direct advertisements primarily come from local advertisers (Karma Palzor, personal communication, May 14, 2021). EastMojo gets programmatic ads through Google AdSense and Taboola. Taboola is a public advertising company that promotes brands, products, and services. It was founded by Adam Singolda in 2007 and is headquartered in New York. It provides advertisements such as "Around the Web" and "Recommended for You" boxes at the bottom of many online news articles. The Facebook page of EastMojo mostly publishes direct advertisements. Similar to the NewsMill, EastMojo posts direct advertisements either by directly posting the advertising poster on the wall of the page or

in the form of a banner ad at the bottom of the image representing the news story. The organization also has adopted a subscription-based model recently where readers may pay per article basis or buy a weekly, yearly, two-yearly, or three-yearly subscription.

4.2.3.1.1 The Independent and Public-Spirited Media Foundation. EastMojo is one of the grantees of The Independent and Public-Spirited Media Foundation (IPSMF) and received funds from the organization from February 1, 2019, to July 30, 2022 (Figure 4). The researcher could not ascertain the exact amount of grant received by EastMojo from the foundation as EastMojo declined to disclose it. However, according to the information received from Nirmal Mangar, one of the founders of Sikkim Chronicle, a digital news media organization based in Sikkim which is also the grantee of IPSMF, Sikkim Chronicle has received an approximate grant of more than one crore from IPSMF (personal communication, March 10, 2022). He said that EastMojo must have received more funds in comparison with Sikkim Chronicle as EastMojo is a bigger organization (Nirmal Manger, personal communication, March 10, 2022).

Figure 4.2.3.1.1.1

The website of The Independent and Public-Spirited Media Foundation shows EastMojo as one of its former grantees

(Source: http://ipsmf.org/grantee-portfolio-continued/)
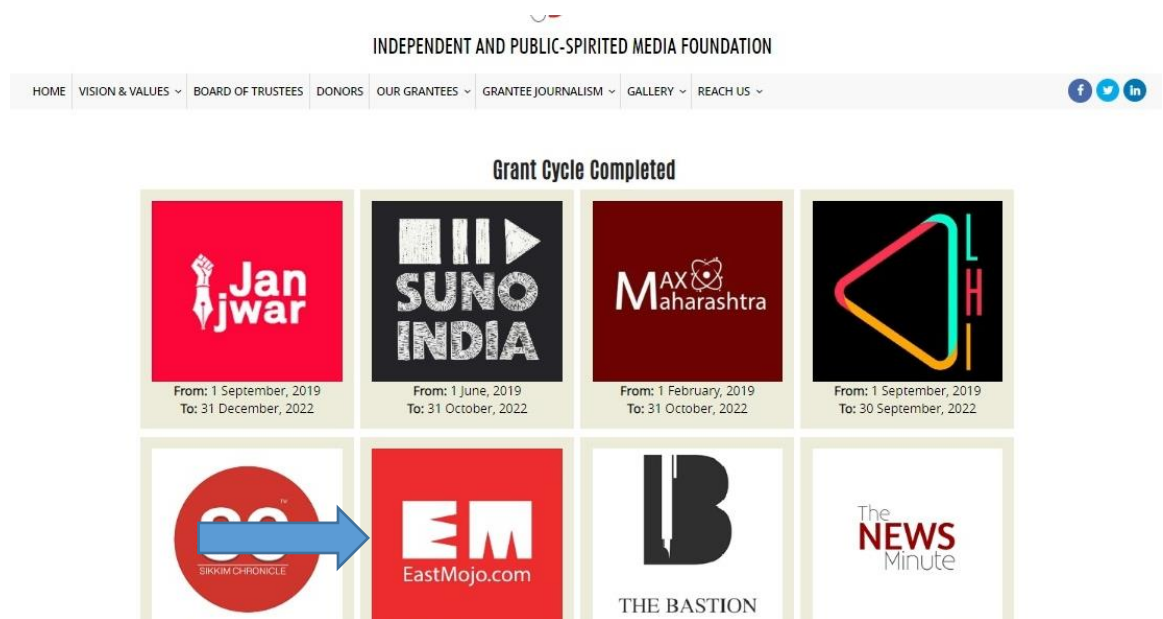
The following information about IPSMF is taken from its website (The Independent and Public-Spirited Media Foundation, n.d.). IPSMF is a public charitable trust based in Bengaluru which acts as a mentor and provides financial support to "organizations creating and distributing public-interest information to the public at large using digital media, social media, mass media or any other media". By supporting and building independent and public-interest media, the Foundation seeks to encourage the attainment of higher editorial standards, influence public debate, challenge and complement mainstream media, and empower individuals to exercise their democratic rights. The Foundation is run by a board

of trustees comprising six members chaired by Mr. T.N. Ninan, a journalist, and the chairman of Business Standard Pvt. Ltd.

The Foundation declares to have received donations from individuals and charitable organizations. It claims itself to be an independent entity where only the trustees and not the donors have exclusive rights or say about how the funds are spent. The list of donors provided by IPSMF on the website are- Azim Premji Philanthropic Initiatives Pvt Ltd; Pirojsha Godrej Foundation; Cyrus Guzder; Rohini Nilekani Philanthropies; Kiran Mazumdar Shaw; Rohinton and Anu Aga Family Discretionary No.2 Trust and RDA Holdings Pvt Ltd; Lal Family Foundation; Sri Nataraja Trust; Manipal Education and Medical Group India Pvt Ltd; Tejaskiran Pharmachem India Pvt Ltd; Viditi Investment Pvt Ltd; Unimed Technologies Ltd; Quality Investment Pvt Ltd; and Piramal Enterprises Ltd. IPSMF presently has twenty-seven active grantees whom it provides grant monthly. Some of the former and active grantees of IPSMF are The Print, The Economic & Political Weekly, The Wire, Alt News, The Caravan, The Better India, Sikkim Chronicle, and others.

4.2.3.2. Regulatory frameworks

As required, EastMojo is said to comply with guidelines, ethics, and rules specified by the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology and the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting under Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021. It claims to fulfill the three-tier regulatory structure mandated by the said law. It has appointed Ms. Momi Ahmed as its Grievance Officer. It has however not uploaded any Grievance Redressal Compliance Report.

EastMojo is the founding member of the Northeast Association of Digital Communications and Media and also a member of the DIGIPUB News India Foundation.

EastMojo did not report any instances of content regulation from any sources.

4.3. Inside Northeast

4.3.1. Organizational structure

Inside NorthEast was founded by Afrida Hussain as a Facebook news page on December 10, 2016. It later converted into a full-fledged digital news organization after registration under the Companies Act of the Ministry of Corporate Affairs in 2017, Hussain was formerly working for NE TV and when asked about her decision to start Inside Northeast, she says:

> People started moving digital. People started consuming more information from mobiles than from TV. So, I thought it is the right time to start as the Northeast was not explored by the mainstream media and that was important. Digital media is such a platform that can be accessed from anywhere in the world. So to make the Northeast informed and to inform the Northeast, we started Inside Northeast (Afrida Hussain, personal communication, March 23, 2021).

Inside Northeast was acquired by the India Today Group in July 2022. Founded by a veteran journalist, Aroon Purie in 1975, India Today Group is a multi-

brand, multi-platform, multi-vertical media conglomerate that presently has four 24/7 national television channels, eighteen digital platforms, and nine magazines. It claims to have an audience reach of 500 million monthly covering every discipline that impacts human affairs: from politics and economy to sports, satire, art, business, entertainment, luxury, health, weddings, technology, science, environment, sex, relationships, parenting, and life. (India Today Group, n.d.). Despite several efforts by the researcher to get information on the acquisition, Inside Northeast could not be contacted.

During the time of data collection, Inside Northeast had a website, a Facebook news page with 156,000 followers, and a Twitter handle with 1600 followers. The organization was run by a group of nine permanent employees and stringers. Afrida Hussain was the owner and the chief editor. All permanent members were paid whereas stringers were renumerated based on their contribution.

4.3.2. Content gathering and publication

Inside Northeast gave primary attention to the Northeast and published news and views on various issues. It carried national and international news, however, it did not have any subscription to news agencies. Inside Northeast was mainly a text-based digital news media and did not post any video materials. It invariably posts videos which mainly include short videos of interest, viral videos, statements, and others. "Video contents have the potential to earn revenue but we only deal with written content. That's why we are lagging but to create video

content we need lots of money and we lack funds" (Afrida Hussain, personal communication, March 23, 2021).

The news desk of Inside Northeast was handled by the permanent reporters and stringers that mostly did local reporting of the Northeast. It also reported having encouraged citizen journalism. They did accept, edit and publish news sent by citizens, however, they were very strict about ensuring that the contents received are factual news and not promotion or propaganda (Afrida Hussain, personal communication, March 23, 2021). According to Hussain, Inside Northeast firmly recognized the existence of varied perspectives on the matter. Therefore, through its opinion section, it claimed to give a platform to multiple voices which any ideological inclinations. "We get many opinion articles. If it is written rationally, no matter what the position is, we publish it" (Afrida Hussain, personal communication, March 23, 2021). All the commentaries published on Inside Northeast are voluntary and not paid. It did not report on commissioning writers to write op-eds for them.

4.3.3. Financing and regulations

The primary source of revenue of Inside Northeast came from advertisements. Similar to The NewsMill and EastMojo, Inside Northeast received direct advertisement as well as programmatic advertisement. According to Afrida Hussain, most of the direct advertisements were of local advertisers (personal communication, March 23, 2021). The programmatic ads came through Google AdSense. Other sources of revenue came as monetization fees from Facebook and Youtube. Hussain said that the money they receive

through social media monetization is very less. She informed the researcher that Inside Northeast is facing a heavy financial crunch. She said:

> Right now, especially after Covid, we are surviving on pain due to lack of funds. The revenue Inside Northeast generate is very small and insufficient. We do not receive government advertisements because the government still doesn't acknowledge us as proper media. We are facing so many challenges. Because of this, all our planning, vision, and the structure we have made are not happening. We need funds to execute it (Afrida Hussain, personal communication, March 23, 2021).

Inside Northeast is said to adhere to Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021 enacted by the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology and the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. It had appointed a Grievance Officer and was also a member of the DIGIPUB News India Foundation. Inside Northeast is the founding member of the Northeast Association of Digital Communications and Media (NADCOM). The website of NADCOM shows Alfrida Hussain as its Chairman. Inside Northeast did not report any instances of content regulation from any sources.

4.4 Raiot

4.4.1. Organizational structure

Raiot is the Facebook page of a webzine based in Meghalaya in Northeast India published in Khasi and English language. It was formed in 2013. During the writing of this thesis, the webzine has a website, a Facebook news page with 13,000 followers, a Twitter handle with 1,613 followers, and a YouTube Channel with 1,840 subscribers. The You Channel is however inactive having no videos posted so far. The content generated is posted across all these platforms. Raiot has no proprietor as such but is administered and run by an editorial board comprising a group of five individuals who call themselves "Raiot Collective". Only they have access to it. The "page transparency" section of the Raiot Facebook page reveals that the account is managed by four people from India and one from the United Kingdom. Raiot does not have any correspondents, neither permanent nor stringers.

The webzine considers itself to be loosely associated with Thma U Rangli Juki (Raiot, n.d.) "but necessarily does not have to toe the line of the said organization" (Tarun Bhartiya, personal communication, July 23, 2020). An open manifesto published by Thma U Rangli Juki (TUR) defines itself as a political formation of a new progressive and transformative vision that brings together the various struggles of the working masses (Thma U Rangli Juki, 2013). The organization seeks to "change the present scheme of loot and exploitation" through policy reforms in the land, environment, agriculture, industry, health, education, social security, governance, employment, sports, and culture (Thma U

Rangli Juki, 2013). Four out of five individuals of the Raiot Collective are members of TUR (Tarun Bhartiya, personal communication, July 23, 2020).

4.4.2. Content gathering and publication

Raiot primarily publishes commentaries and opinion editorials. It rarely posts videos and does not publish hard news. Its main area of focus is Northeast India, however, they do cover issues of national and international importance. Raiot posts two categories of commentaries and op-eds on their platforms. First, are commissioned articles that are written by authors whom the Raiot Collective themselves approaches and request and assigns to write on a specific topic or issue. "I can give you an example, like if recently something happened, so we think that someone may have an interesting thing to say about, we will write to that person who would like to write for us" (Tarun Bhartiya, personal communication, July 23, 2020). Second, are write-ups that individuals send to the Raiot Collective on their Facebook pages, email IDs or Twitter handles. Raiot doesn't have any word limit for the articles. They accept short and long essays.

Raiot claims to have an editorial desk but no editorial hierarchy (Tarun Bhartiya, personal communication, July 23, 2020). They allege to have a high rejection rate and do not publish randomly. Anyone from the Raiot Collective may commission an article and the member who commissions usually edits it. The received articles, it is edited by any one member of the Raiot Collective based on availability. Although Tarun Bhartiya, one of the five members of the Raiot Collective contends that Raiot does not have any specific guidelines or policy for content and does not impose ideology, narrative, or tradition on its contributors, they do engage in editorial scrutiny. They ask questions on important claims

and arguments the writers are making and seek evidence for the same. They provide the authors with counter-arguments for the contentions they are raising and advise them to review their commentaries.

According to Bhartiya (2020), they publish original op-eds of both established and young writers (personal communication, July 23, 2020). One example he cites is an article by a popular Indian author, Arundhati Roy which was first published on Raiot and later republished in Guardian, a prominent newspaper in the United Kingdom. Similarly, Bhartiya claims Raiot to have published numerous original articles which were republished in popular mainstream online portal named Scroll. Also, Raiot is said to give space to young people who would like to put forth their opinions. Even when they receive an article that is badly written but has something very interesting to say, the Raiot Collective maintain that they assist the writer to give a proper shape to the article and publish it. Raiot allows contributors to republish their articles on other platforms.

Raiot asserts that it aims to present an objective view of Northeast India. Bhartiya (2020) says:

We are not interested in PR kind of a view of North East. In the sense that they will publish that we have living roots and we have a culture and that Shillong is the rock capital of India. In the Raiot, we always called it a crop capital, not a rock capital because we believe that we need to wash our dirty elements in public. We shouldn't have to constantly say how great we are. We are as problematic, we fight with each other, we are disgusted with each other, and we make bad music. There are gender issues… So like I'll give

you the example, we have a whole series on dog meat eating. We publish

recipes for dog meat eating and we don't care about eating it. This is not the

image that you want to put out, but we will do it ... there will be a kind of

big anxiety about devil worshipping so we thought it's okay, what's wrong

with worshipping. So we are at an angular relationship in both mainstream

media as well as mainstream Northeast (personal communication, July 23,

2020)

4.4.3. Financing and regulations

In terms of financing, Raiot claims to be a no-budget digital media outlet with no

source of revenue. The page is said to be managed completely voluntarily. Bhartiya (2020)

says: "we don't pay anyone because we are also not paid" (personal communication, July

23, 2020). All contributions made to the webzine are voluntary. As per the information

accessed by the researcher from the page transparency segment of the Facebook page,

Raiot presently does not advertise. Similarly, their website also does not advertise.

While examining the varied control mechanisms the webzine may be subjected to,

the researcher could not confirm or ascertain the nature and extent of influence and control

exerted by Thma U Rangli Juki (TUR). Although Raiot in its various online platforms

declares itself to be associated with TUR, Bhartiya (2020) contends that Raiot is not its

mouthpiece and TUR does not interfere in the working of Raiot (personal communication,

July 23, 2020). He likewise unveils Raiot as being part of the "larger church of the left"

but open to different perspectives and arguments. Bhartiya (2020) states:

We believe in certain amounts of, certain kinds of freedom, and we also believe that identities are important, all our communities have certain rights, and they need to be respected… so there are articles like that, but there are articles countering that also… we think those positions needs to be aired…there is no single narrative about the region (personal communication, July 23, 2020).

Raiot however reported instances of control and content regulation from external sources. One such occasion of content regulation the webzine encountered was when they posted a commentary on Burhan Wani by Mohamad Junaid (Junaid, 2016). Both the Facebook page and website of Raiot were blocked without any communication with the administrators. Bhartiya (2020) tells that the editors had to access their website through a Virtual Private Network (VPN). The website and the Facebook page were restored only after they changed the title of the article and reposted it (personal communication, July 23, 2020). Raiot has said to have faced a similar brief ban while posting a series of articles on the issue of women's reservation in Nagaland. The article was mass reported as a result of which Facebook barred it. The webzine also had to confront stiff opposition from the members of the civil and political organizations for the article which talked about the patriarchal character of the traditional institutions of the Naga community was trolled online.

Content regulation has primarily come about from the State and social media platforms themselves. On three occasions the website of Raiot was put down.

Bhartiya (2020) assumes this to be done by State cyber agents who constantly monitor online content. Likewise, he alleges Facebook of being pre-emptive of politically sensitive issues and blocks content without proper examination when mass reported by politically funded and motivated trolls.

Chapter 5
Representational dimension of select Facebook news pages of Northeast India

The study on the representational dimension engages itself in the qualitative reading of the issue of immigration which was found to be the most dominant political discourse in Northeast India. It conducts an inductive framing analysis of 67 opinion articles on immigration that were posted on select Facebook news pages of Northeast. The concept of framing as a methodological tool is employed by scholars to study how media constructs different versions of reality through representation. The adoption of three-step coding procedures developed by Gorp (2010) led the study to deconstruct four dominant frames on the issue of immigration, namely, the Immigrant takeover (IT) frame, counter-Hindutva (CH) frame, Failed Policy (FP) frame, and Flawed Narrative (FN) frame.

This chapter identifies and discusses the various reasoning and framing devices employed by individual frame packages in their treatment of the issue of immigration. Framing devices identify within the text the metaphors, historical examples from which lessons are drawn, catchphrases, and depictions whereas the reasoning devices examine explicit and implicit statements that deal with problem definition, causal interpretation, consequences, and solutions

5.1. Immigrant takeover (IT) frame

5.1.1. Problem definition

The Immigrant Takeover frame foregrounds the problem of marginalization of the indigenous/original inhabitants of Northeast India. The heavy influx of immigrants is held responsible for overriding the identity, traditions, and cultural ethos of the indigenous people of the Northeast. The frame highlights the huge demographic shift in Northeast India and questions the very existence of the indigenous inhabitants presupposed of being converted into "third-class" citizens in their own homes. It argues within the larger cultural theme of the "right to self-determination" as a universal and integral part of human rights.

The IT frame primarily highlights three types of immigration in the Northeast. First, immigrants who have illegally migrated to the region after the creation and independence of India. Northeastern states are regarded as overwhelmed by lakhs of the immigrant population coming from neighboring countries, mainly Bangladesh. Second, immigrants were brought by the British during the colonial era. Third, immigrants who have internally migrated to the region during post-independent times. All immigrants are conceived to have taken a heavy toll on the land and economic resources of the region. They are alleged to have been taking control over the state of affairs of the indigenous/original inhabitants and determining public opinion and policymaking by holding important positions of power inside influential institutions, including state legislature and bureaucracy.

5.1.2. Causes and justifications

5.1.2.1. The colonial woes

The IT frame identifies the colonial state as one of the causal agents of the problem of immigration in Northeast India. The British colonial state is denounced for changing the demography of the region through the grand colonial scheme of "settler colonialism". In colonial policy and academic debates in the Northeast, the promotion of immigration by the colonial state for large-scale economic exploitation of the region is considered one of the root causes of many contemporary problems in Northeast India (Bhaumik, 2009; Baruah, 2012 & 2020; Goswami, 2007). The IT frame argues that the colonial state promoted settler colonialism since the 1820s when a significant number of people were brought from mainland India to work in the newly established tea gardens, coal mines, and oil refineries of Assam. Muslim cultivators from East Bengal were settled in open and barren lands to promote agriculture and support the rising demand for food supplies. The gradual opening of economic opportunities further spurred the migration of many other communities from outside the Northeast. The colonial state is held responsible for the subversion of the indigenous language. The frame contends that the colonial state supported Bengali and other major languages over the indigenous languages through imposition and administrative and social recognition. The fear of immigrants is equated with the fear of the indigenous communities getting assimilated into a more strong and superior linguistic and cultural nationalism.

5.1.2.2. The postcolonial state

The colonial woes have further continued and only worsened in post-colonial times. The policy of the post-colonial government towards the Northeast, according to the IT frame, is guided by the Nazi's principle of *Lebensraum*. Lebensraum is defined as the right and duty of the nation to provide ample space and resources for its people through means which may include expansion at the cost of the weaker. The IT frame argues that the volume of migration both internal and illegal has expanded exponentially after independence creating more trouble for the people of the Northeast. The frame also associates this condition of the post-colonial Northeast as a result of *Delhivaad*. Delhivaad characterizes the centralized power consolidation and distribution mechanism reflective of the post-colonial Indian state centered in Delhi, the capital city of India. The power centers in Delhi are denounced for being not emphatic towards and ignorant of the people of the Northeast. Political parties, bureaucrats, and policymakers are criticized for prioritizing party and economic interests over regional aspirations. Land rights and territorial jurisdiction are recognized as the underlying discourse driving politics in the Northeast and no development model approach of the Centre would remedy the problem. The frame urges the Indian state to look at the Northeast beyond its picturesque landscape and exotic culture.

The central discontentment of the IT frame with the post-colonial state is concerning its immigration policies. The immigration policies of both the State and Central governments are conceived to be not clearly defined, detached from ground realities, and against indigenous people of the Northeast. There is a strong belief that because Northeastern states share 98 percent of their borders with five foreign countries, the region

is the worst victim of the influx of immigrants in the entire country. Therefore, the formulation of robust immigration policies should be done in due consultation with all major stakeholders of the region, particularly the native people of the Northeast - an exercise that the frame asserts as unbecoming.

5.1.2.2.1. PRC in Arunachal Pradesh. One example of post-colonial policy failure the IT frame brings forth is the dispute surrounding the Permanent Residence Certificate (PRC) in Arunachal Pradesh. PRC is a government-issued documentary proof of state or local citizenship in Arunachal Pradesh. The holders of the PRC are mostly from the communities of Arunachal Pradesh Scheduled Tribes (APST). People having the PRC are generally considered the original inhabitants of the state of Arunachal Pradesh (J.S. Rawat, personal communication, March 23, 2021). In February 2019, the government of Arunachal Pradesh, on the recommendation of the Rebia Committee, decided to grant PRC to six non-Arunachal Pradesh Scheduled Tribes (APST) communities living in Namsai and Changlang districts of the state — Deoris, Sonowal-Kacharis, Morans, Adivasis, Mishings, and Gorkhas. PRC would give these communities some domicile-related benefits, mainly reservations in educational institutions and government jobs (J.S. Rawat, personal communication, March 23, 2021). The move invited violent opposition from the members of APST where three protesters died during the clash with the security forces. The State government was finally forced to withhold the decision.

The IT frame contends that the granting of PRC to six non-APST will dilute the very essence of the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation (BEFR) Act of 1873. The Act introduced by the colonial state regulates the Inner Line Permit (ILP) in the Northeastern states. Section 2 of the Act empowers the State government to restrict the entry of people

into the notified area without a pass issued by the authorized district official (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2013). Section 7 of the same Act makes it unlawful for any person, who is not a native of the place, to buy land without the sanction of the State Government. After the recent Adaptation of Laws (Amendment) Order, 2019, the Inner Line Permit is presently in force in the States of Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Sikkim (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2019).

According to the IT frame, PRC to non-APST arguably violates the (BEFR) Act, 1873 enacted with the sole purpose of protecting the indigenous people of Arunachal Pradesh by preventing the entry of non-tribals. PRC would then serve the interests of non-tribals to gain tribal status and claim indigeneity in the state. PRC would also give the license to non-tribals to expropriate tribal resources and heritage leading to a demographic invasion of Arunachal Pradesh. The IT frame presumes PRC as a tactic for electoral gains and party interests- to consolidate non-tribal votes at the cost of the life of indigenous communities.

5.1.2.2.2. The Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019. The most important and contentious specimen of policy failure of the post-independent Indian state is the Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019 (CAA). CAA is the latest legislation passed by the Government of India which lays down rules of Indian citizenship. Section 2 of the CAA provides citizenship to those people who have come to India before 2015 after being religiously persecuted in countries which include Afghanistan, Bangladesh, or Pakistan (Ministry of Law and Justice, 2019). The Act doesn't treat such communities as illegal immigrants.

The IT frame strongly opposes the CAA for breaching the "Assam Accord" designed to protect the land and the indigenous people of the Northeast from illegal immigrants. Assam Accord is a memorandum of settlement signed between the Union Government and the leaders of the Assam movement on 15th August 1985 to end six long years of political turmoil and ethnic conflict in the state of Assam. The Assam movement was a campaign against illegal immigration in Assam mostly entering from Bangladesh. Spearheaded by the All Assam Students Union (AASU) and Assam Sangram Gana Parishad (ASGP), the movement was sparked by the report submitted by the then Chief Election Commissioner in 1979 who had raised serious doubts about a sharp rise in the numbers of voters in the Mangaldoi parliamentary constituency due to large-scale inclusions of foreign nationals in electoral rolls (Goswami, 2007). The main demand of the movement was to identify, disenfranchise, and deport illegal immigrants who came to Assam after 1951 (Baruah, 1986). The Assam Accord was instrumental in negotiating a consensus with the agitating parties. It was agreed in the accord that the people who came to Assam before 1966 would be given citizenship, foreigners who came on or after 1966 up to 24th March 1971 shall be delisted from electoral rolls for ten years, and foreigners who came on or after 25th March 1971 shall be detected and expelled (Ministry of Home Affairs, 1985). The Central Government under the accord was bound to initiate immediate and practical steps to identify and expel such foreigners. However, the process was largely delayed and the actual effort to identify illegal immigrants came about only when the Supreme Court of India took cognizance of the matter after a writ petition was filed by three non-governmental organizations of Assam. The Supreme Court judgment in 2014

directed the state and central governments to identify foreigners through the updation of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) in Assam (Gogoi & Nariman, 2014).

NRC is a register containing the names of all legal citizens of India. It was prepared only once after the completion of the Census of 1951. Section 12 of the Citizenship (Amendment Act) 2003 mandates the Central Government to maintain a National Register of Indian Citizens and issue a national identity card to all its citizens (Ministry of Law and Justice, 2003). It was as per this Act and other provisions of the Constitution including the Assam Accord and Supreme Court judgment that the Office of the State Coordinator was instituted and given the task of updating the NRC in Assam (Dagiral & Singh, 2020). The final list of the NRC was published on 31st August 2019. A total number of 19,06, 657 were excluded from the list out of 3.29 crore applicants (Karmakar 2019).

Whereas the IT frame is not very optimistic about the final NRC list as it anticipated more illegal immigrants to feature on the list than what came out finally, their main bone of contention is the CAA- passed by the Central government on 11th December 2019, just 102 days after the NRC final list came out. The IT frame vehemently condemns the CAA for diluting the NRC. The granting of citizenship to selected persecuted religious minorities (Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi, and Christians) from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, or Pakistan under CAA would violate the Assam Accord according to which all illegal immigrants identified by the NRC were to be expelled without any considerations. The frame argues that the people of Assam have already compromised by backtracking from their earlier demand to make 1951 the cutoff date for the detection of illegal immigrants and agreeing on 1971. The assurance given by the Central Government that the provisions of the CAA are not applicable in the Northeast states is strongly disputed by the IT frame.

Section 6 B(4) of the CAA prohibits the persecuted communities from availing citizenship in those areas of the Northeast protected by the provisions of the Sixth Schedule and the ILP of the Indian Constitution. (Ministry of Law and Justice, 2019).

The IT frame contends that the maximum number of illegal immigrants in India are from Bangladesh making the states of Assam, Meghalaya, and Tripura which share extensive borders with Bangladesh their worst victims. These Northeastern states are not protected by the Inner Line Permit and very few areas of the states are included under the Sixth Schedule in the Constitution. The exemption under the Inner Line Permit and Sixth Schedule does not guarantee them any real protection because the said legislation only takes away the property and voting rights of the immigrants and does not prevent them from entering the state. Therefore, CAA, according to the IT frame, would legalize infiltration and convert the Northeast into a dumping ground for illegal immigrants. Concerns are raised about these persecuted communities, after getting citizenship, preferring to settle in the already familiar terrain of Northeastern states along the border with Bangladesh not protected by the existing laws. This would encourage millions of Hindus from Bangladesh to gradually join their close kin in the Northeast and eventually overwhelm the indigenous population and its resources. Also, considering that a simple court affidavit is required to prove the religion of the persecuted communities and claim citizenship as per the CAA, the frame anticipates Muslims of Bangladesh easily infiltrating under the guise of a new name and religion. There is already an apprehension among the advocates of the IT frame about Assam and Tripura being overshadowed by the Hindus and Muslims of Bengali origin. Land is already seen as a scarce resource in Assam with an estimated 27 percent of the population being landless due to yearly floods in the

Brahmaputra. In addition, giving citizenship status to persecuted illegal immigrants would aggravate the already high rate of unemployment in the Northeastern States.

5.1.2.2.3. The liberal ecosystem. The IT frame is critical of the left and liberal ecosystem for their biased and politically myopic interpretation of the CAA. The left liberals are strongly challenged for championing the inclusion of Muslim immigrants in their opposition to the CAA. This narrative, thought to be promoted by the left-liberals in the national discourse through their influence on the mainstream media, is considered to be reflective of a total lack of understanding about the complex issue of immigration in the Northeast. It is alleged to be driven by an ideology of cosmopolitanism and self-righteous multiculturalism which tends to invisibilize and trivialize the genuine insecurities of the people of the Northeast. For the proponents of the IT frame, CAA is more anti-indigenous than anti-secular or anti-Muslim, and any effort to legalize any kind of illegal immigrants is against the indigenous aspirations and rights of the people of the Northeast.

5.1.3. Consequences

5.1.3.1. Tripura the living embodiment

The case of the state of Tripura is often cited by the IT frame as a living embodiment of the ramifications of illegal immigrants in the Northeast. The census data is often quoted to validate such a claim by emphasizing how the tribals of Tripura who constituted 87.07% of the total population in the year 1881 have been rendered as a minority of 31.78% in 2011 subduing their identity and culture. The Bangladeshi immigrants are held responsible for not only changing the essence and character of Tripura but also exerting political,

economic, and cultural hegemony over the natives of Tripura. Discontentment is expressed over Kok-Borok (the common language of the natives of Tripura) being superseded by the Bengali language as the primary language of the state. The instances of changing the name of roads and villages from the original Kok-Borok to the Bengali language have been brought into the limelight.

5.1.3.2. *The case of Barak valley*

Similar discomfort is expounded while discussing the Barak Valley in Assam. The present dominance of Bengali speaking population over the Assamese-speaking people in Barak Valley is understood in terms of the incremental inflow of Bengalis in the region over decades. The IT frame is critical of both Hindu and Muslim Bengalis for being dubious in their stand on the CAA unlike the people in the Assamese-dominated region of Brahmaputra Valley who are fully against the Act. The frame argues that a much devoured Indian tradition of *Atithi Devo Bhavah* (Guests are equivalent to God) seems to have floundered in the Northeast where the indigenous communities are compelled to demand their rights from the same people whom they welcomed as guests in the past.

5.1.4. Possible solutions and actions

As noted earlier, the IT frame is critical of the CAA, therefore, its advocates are demanding the immediate scrapping of the CAA. They are mainly concerned about Section 2 of the CAA which allows persecuted minorities, mostly Hindu immigrants, to settle in India. For the IT frame, the sanctity of the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation Act, of 1873, and the Assam Accord should be respected and implemented. The frame also calls

for constitutional protection of the socio-economic, political, and cultural rights of the indigenous people of the Northeast, particularly land rights, employment, and policy benefits. It seeks this through the conversion of the Inner Line Regime into a statute in the Indian Constitution and its enforcement in all Northeastern states. As discussed before, Inner Line Permit is presently in force in only four Northeastern states of Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, and parts of Sikkim. While acknowledging the need for constitutional safeguards, the frame appeals to the people of the Northeast to give up their general abhorrence towards hard labor. It is of the view that if the local people work hard, there will be no need for them to import labor or human resources from outside and therefore get insulated from "outsiders".

The IT frame champions the exercise to identify and segregate the original inhabitants from the immigrants. Then after, asks for the total expulsion of illegal immigrants without any consideration. For the immigrants who have internally migrated, the IT frame presses for righteous application of the Inner Line Permit regime. Some states in the Northeast have already initiated exercises like the Register of Indigenous Inhabitants of Nagaland and Manipur Peoples Protection Bill to prepare a database of original inhabitants of their respective states and enforce the Inner Line Permit. These proposed legislations will be discussed in detail in the coming pages.

The IT frame calls for unity among the people of the Northeast as a way forward to overcome the takeover of the Northeast by immigrants. The frame acknowledges the complex ethnic, cultural and linguistic composition of the Northeast and the need for a movement that will be broad-based and inclusive and not acquire a sectarian character.

5.2. The counter-Hindutva (CH) frame

5.2.1. Problem definition

The counter-Hindutva (CH) frame considers immigrants as the victim of the religious nationalistic rhetoric of the "Sangh Parivar". Sangh Parivar is an umbrella term for right-wing Hindu organizations in India which mainly include Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP), Bajrang Dal, Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), and others. The Sangh Parivar, particularly the BJP, is held accountable for the unceasing conflict on the issue of immigration in India. They are criticized for dividing the Northeast into ethnic and religious lines for short-term electoral gains and furthering the Hindutva agenda of converting India into a country for Hindus.

5.2.2. Causes and justifications

5.2.2.1. The Sangh

The CH frame conceives Sangh Parivar as the primary causal agent of the problem of immigration in the Northeast. The ruling BJP is firmly criticized for exploiting the issue of immigration and orchestrating a division between the Hindus and the Muslims in the Northeast. This, according to the CH frame, is done to fulfill the larger ideological agenda of the Sangh to convert India into a "Hindu State" where only people belonging to the Hindu religion command exclusive rights over citizenship. The NRC and CAA are regarded as part of this larger political scheme to give legal sanctity to the idea of a "Hindu Homeland". It is viewed as an effort to neutralize the Muslim population growth by

countering it with imported Bangladeshi Hindus. The CH frame criticizes the CAA for its exclusivist character and challenges the religious basis on which citizenship is granted under the act. As stated earlier, CAA, 2019 provides citizenship to persecuted immigrants belonging to Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi, or Christian religions from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, or Pakistan. After exploiting the "Ayodhya dispute" for polarizing India on religion for three decades, BJP is alleged to have been employing the recent immigration policies-NRC and CAA- as a "new holy cow".

The Ayodhya dispute is centered on the plot of land in the city of Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh which both Hindus and Muslims claim as their holy land. The Supreme Court verdict in November 2019 put an end to this long dispute. The entry of the BJP into the dispute in the 1990s has been considered very instrumental in its rise and electoral success in India (Vaishnav, 2019).

CAA is labeled as religious, anti-muslim, and unconstitutional, instigated by the "communal" and "chauvinist nationalist" regime of the Sangh to polarize the Northeast on ethnic and religious lines. The frame is of the view that the immigration policies of the State-particularly NRC and CAA- are allegedly purported to alter the basic structure of the Indian Constitution as it violates the secular spirit of India envisaged by the architects of the Indian Constitution. The frame cites the case of the Constituent Assembly debate where the proposal to seek citizenship for every person who is a Hindu or Sikh by religion and not a citizen of any other state was outrightly rejected to protect the secular character of the Indian Constitution. The frame often invokes article 14 of the Indian Constitution which guarantees individuals equality and protection before the law and prohibits discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth.

In Assam, the CH frames contend that rather than addressing the real issue of the immigrants, the NRC, and CAA, are employed by the BJP to consolidate Hindu and tribal votes. The BJP has accomplished this by persuading the Hindus that their root cause of deprivation is illegal immigrants, particularly Muslims. Similarly, a narrative that immigrants are encroaching on the land and cultural and economic rights of *Khilonjiyas* (indigenous people) is being built by the BJP. The frame criticizes the ruling BJP government in Assam for siding with "ethnic chauvinist" and "religious communal forces". The BJP legislators are condemned for; openly spreading hatred against the Bangladeshi immigrants; targeting the anti-CAA activists and harassing them with tags like "anti-nationals" and "*tukde tukde* gang". *Tukde tukde* gang is a popular phrase used by the Sangh Parivar and by the media to refer to individuals and groups who wants to divide the country.

5.2.3. Consequences

5.2.3.1. Religious, ethnic, and linguistic fragmentation

The far-reaching and detrimental consequence of the dominance of Sangh Parivar's religious nationalistic agenda on immigration, according to the CH frame, has led to total fragmentation of the Northeast based on religion, ethnicity, language, and history. Particularly in Assam, fragmentation is taking place at multiple levels; between Assamese and Bengalis, between Assamese Bengali Hindus and illegal immigrant Hindus, among Assamese Bengali Hindus, between Assamese Bengali Muslims and illegal immigrant Muslims, among Assamese Muslims, and between Assamese Muslims and Assamese Hindus. The same may be explained through the following two categorizations.

5.2.3.1.1. Assamese and Bengalis. The CH frame is of the view that, in Assam, the policy decision to grant citizenship to persecuted Hindu immigrants under the CAA has divided the Assamese and Bengali-speaking populations. "Assamese" as an ethnic category is both "inclusive" and "exclusive" (Baruah,1986). The inclusive definition of Assamese embraces all the legal residents of Assam, whereas, its exclusive definition includes only those who speak the Assamese language, barring the Bengalis and other communities living in the state (Baruah,1986). The CAA, the CH frame contends, has dismantled the inclusive character of the Assamese as an ethnic category.

The fundamental rationale behind the demand for revision of NRC during the Assam movement of the 1980s was to identify and deport all illegal Bengali immigrants, both Hindus and Muslims, alleged by the agitators to have migrated mostly from Bangladesh. Because the state of Assam is home to sizeable Bengali-speaking Hindus and Muslims who are its legal citizens, the CAA, by providing citizenship to immigrant Bengali Hindus, has endangered the citizenship status of both Hindu and Muslim Bengalis of Assam. The CAA, the CH frame asserts, has ignited the exclusive Assamese identity which now puts both Bengalis of Assam and Bengali immigrants in the same basket and looks upon them with skepticism. It has turned the Assamese discontentment towards the illegal immigrants into an anti-Bengali frenzy thereby creating a rift between the Assamese and the Bengalis. The frame claims that the rift was evident during the public hearing of the Joint Parliamentary Committee at Guwahati in Assam's Brahmaputra Valley before the passing of the CAA. Individuals, indigenous communities, members of civil societies, political leaders, and activists openly came out in protest of the CAA. However, during the subsequent hearing at Silchar in Barak Valley, people were hesitant to join the protests and

many organizations were alleged to have supported the CAA. The Brahmaputra valley where Assamese-speaking people are in the majority was totally up against the Bengali-dominated Barak valley. The CAA, claims the CH frame, has not only fragmented Assam ethnically and communally but has regionally divided the state. While the Brahmaputra valley was largely opposed to the CAA, the Barak valley's stand against the act remained ambiguous inducing antagonism among groups.

5.2.3.1.2. Bengalis of Assam and illegal immigrant Bengalis. The CH frame is of the contention that the CAA by providing citizenship rights to Hindu immigrants has largely discomforted the Bengalis of Assam. The fact that both Bengalis of Assam and illegal immigrant Bengalis live in Assam has historically induced confusion between the two groups. The Bengalis of Assam are often subjected to misrecognition as illegal immigrants and tagged as a foreigner invoking a sense of insecurity and apprehension among the Bengalis of Assam. The revision of the NRC was anticipated as a big relief to the Bengalis of Assam as NRC would officially segregate the two groups putting an end to the ambiguous nature of their identity. However, the enactment of the CAA immediately after the publication of the NRC has kept this conundrum alive and has spawned immense fragmentation in Assam.

The CH frame maintains that when immigrant Hindus are granted citizenship under the CAA, the Assamese Bengali Hindus are compelled to either stand for or against the illegal immigrant Hindus. On the one hand, they expected to toe to their religious and linguistic identity and advocate citizenship rights to fellow immigrant Hindus. At the same time, they are also counted upon to champion the inclusive Assamese identity and safeguard the socio-political and economic interests of Assam by not endorsing citizenship

status to any immigrants. As a result of this, there has been a schism among the Assamese Bengali Hindus- those who patronize religious and linguistic identity over inclusive Assamese identity or otherwise, and between Assamese Bengali Hindus who associate themselves with inclusive Assamese identity and illegal immigrant Hindus.

The Assamese Bengali Muslims have also been subject to the same dilemma. According to the CH frame, because the CAA doesn't have the provision to give citizenship to illegal immigrant Muslims, the Assamese Bengali Muslims, are looked upon by their fellow Muslim illegal immigrant brethren to condemn the communal character of the CAA and support the citizenship rights of Muslim immigrants as well. This would however mean detaching themselves from the inclusive Assamese identity. The quagmire has induced multiple fragmentations, first, among the Assamese Bengali Muslims who acknowledge the right of immigrant Muslims to be treated on par with immigrant Hindus and those who vouch for inclusive Assamese identity. Second, between Assamese Muslims who identify themselves along the lines of inclusive Assamese identity and immigrant Muslims. Third, Assamese Muslims sympathetic to immigrant Muslims and Assamese Hindus who consider such sympathy would lead to an existential threat for Hindus in Assam.

5.2.4. Possible solutions and actions

The CH frame conceives the religious nationalistic rhetoric of the Sangh Parivar as a threat not only to the Northeast but the entire India. Hence, the frame appeals for an all-out offensive against the Sangh, its "Hindutva fascism" and their grand scheme of "Hindu Rashtra". The movement against the CAA is supposed to be the key to building a consistent and effective resistance to the Sangh. The frame considers the present situation

in India as "extraordinary" and calls for a united front- comprising various communities, ethnicities, religions, regions, ideologies, political and social institutions, and civil society- to protect and preserve the secular and synthetic ideas of India. It shows the need to showcase and exhibit the shared culture and history of India through story, art, poetry, literature, music, dance, play, film, and others.

The CH frame argues for a humanitarian basis for granting citizenship to immigrants in India. It draws on the historical tradition of how India has been the land of immigrants welcoming and giving shelter to people belonging to different races, ethnicities, faiths, and languages.

In the Northeast, the CH frame cautions about the casteist-communal and ultranationalist elements who are being exploited by the nationalist forces to demolish the region for vested interests. It completely rejects the idea of illegal immigration and asserts that no one irrespective of anything should be considered illegal and rendered homeless. It seeks Hindus and Muslims, tribals and non-tribals, Bengalis and Assamese to come together and safeguard the rich heritage, sanctity, and diversity of the Northeast.

5.3. Failed policy (FP) frame

5.3.1. Problem definition

The Failed Policy (FP) frame considers the problem of immigration emanating as a result of failed immigration policies of the state. It critically evaluates the State's immigration policies in the Northeast and points out its laxness and deficiencies. It talks about how the immigration policies of the State have abysmally failed yielding new problems and complexities. The immigration policies are said to be against the aspirations and interests of the majority of the communities of the Northeast. The central and the state authorities including the policymakers are held accountable for engendering chaos and confusion in the Northeast through its centralized immigration legislation introduced without the consensus of the people.

5.3.2. Causes and justifications

5.3.2.1. Policies and policymakers

The FP frame holds liable the State's immigration policies for the disaccord surrounding the issue of immigration in the Northeast. The independent Indian State is denounced for continuing the British colonial legacy of commercial and political exploitation of the region. The immigration policy of the State is presumed to be highly centralized, bureaucratized and controversial, and incomprehensive of the complex history and politics of the Northeast. The policies chiefly NRC and CAA are strongly rebuked for being devoid of contemplation, planning, and strategy. They are accounted for instilling a

sense of fear and apprehension among the Muslims of India and the indigenous communities of the Northeast.

5.3.2.1.1. The problem of CAA and NRC. The FP frame claims that the pretension that illegal Hindu immigrants -who have come to India and who are now eligible for Indian citizenship under the CAA- are indeed all religiously persecuted is considered to be too vague. The frame believes that many may have migrated for economic reasons as well because there are no concrete data or comprehensive studies to establish the precise factors behind the migration of Hindus to India from other countries. The FP frame too questions the cogency of the CAA, mainly section 2 of the Act which provides citizenship to religiously persecuted Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi, or Christian communities from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, or Pakistan. By leaving out the Muslims, the FP frame asserts, the CAA has otherized the Muslims of India and sowed a seed of insecurity in them. In Assam, the State is criticized for backtracking from the Assam Accord wherein an agreement was reached between the State and the agitating parties to identify and expel all illegal immigrants without any consideration.

In other Northeastern states, the CAA is said to have been engendering fear among a considerable section of the people of the Northeast who believes that those immigrants acquiring legal status will be tactfully settled in the protected areas of the Northeast resulting in the marginalization of indigenous communities and encroachment of their land and other resources. This is the fundamental reason why, the FP frame contends, the indigenous people of the Northeast are strongly against the CAA. In the manner that the special status of the state of Jammu and Kashmir under Article 370 and Article 35A was abruptly abrogated in August 2019, there are concerns that Article 371 too would be

revoked from the Northeastern States. Article 371 of the Indian constitution gives special rights and privileges to the Northeastern states mainly in terms of permanent residents, ownership of land and its resources, and protection of social, cultural, and religious practices (Ministry of Law and Justice, 2019 a). Also, the FP frame questions the design of CAA which gives protection only to those persecuted immigrants from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, or Pakistan. The frame is of the view that there are immigrants who live in India after being religiously persecuted in countries like Myanmar, Bhutan, and Tibet. Why are these countries not covered by the CAA?

With regard to the NRC, the FP frame slams the policymakers for not having an appropriate and clear policy to address those illegal immigrants excluded from the NRC final list. Around 19 lakh people were classified as illegal immigrants in the NRC published in August 2019. The frame questions, in absence of any formal deportation treaty with Bangladesh, how will the Government of India handle these alleged illegal immigrants? It highlights the statements made by Sheikh Hasina, the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, who has often maintained NCR to be problematic and warned India about the implications it may have in the matter of friendly relations with Bangladesh. The frame reminds the policymakers about India's commitment and obligation to varied international human rights laws and treaties which require any country to treat illegal immigrants with dignity and provide them space and opportunities for survival and livelihood. The FP frame points out several loopholes in the NRC in its effort to reprimand the policymakers and the government. Following are the four primary concerns posited by the FP frame about the NRC.

5.3.2.1.1.1. Cut-off date. Fixing a cut-off date to determine who is the original inhabitant and who is not has been a controversial issue in the Northeast. The debate is primarily centered on whether 1951 or later shall be considered the base year to identify illegal immigrants. The Northeast has the previous NRC which was made in 1951. In their proposed legislation to identify illegal immigrants drafted on a similar line to the NRC, Manipur, and Nagaland have demanded 1951 and 1963 (the day the state of Nagaland was created) as cutoff dates for the identification of genuine original inhabitants. Both legislation is discussed in the coming section. Likewise, there was a long discussion on whether 1951 or 1971 shall be considered as a cut-off date for the NRC exercise in Assam.

The FP frame argues that there are no reference documents in the entire Northeast that can objectively, technically, and legally ascertain the citizenship claims in the region. The frame contends that the NRC list of 1951 is incomplete and the majority of districts of Assam did not have the electoral rolls before 1966 and 1971.

5.3.2.1.1.2. Dynamics of internal migration and displacement. In its effort to identify the legal citizens and illegal immigrants, the FP frame comes down hard on the NRC for trivializing the dynamics of internal migration and displacement in Assam. The frame claims that lakhs of people have internally migrated to Assam due to development-induced displacement which includes the setting up of hydroelectric projects, industries, and army camps. Also, the frame highlights massive displacement caused by land erosion in the river line of Brahmaputra. It cites data from the Water Resources Department to show how the 3,860 sq. km. of land has been eroded by the Brahmaputra river since 1954 wiping out more than 2,500 villages and 18 towns in Assam. Considering the above and other factors including illiteracy and poverty, the requirement of the NRC to prove one's

legal identity by validating the citizenship of his or her earlier two to three generations is deemed to be preposterous and impractical. The very expectation from the people by the administration to safely keep the documents dating back more than fifty years is regarded as absurd.

  5.3.2.1.1.3. Procedural lapses. Additionally, the FP frame foregrounds the procedural lapses of the NRC process. One such lapse, the frame emphasizes, has been the case of Chamaria and its adjoining areas in the Kamrup District of Assam where grave irregularities were reported while checking the documents of the applicants. During the verification of documents, the Circle Officer of Chamaria was found to have ticked the Original Inhabitant (IO) column in the application form of all the applicants to unburden himself from the hectic process of cross-checking the documents and finding out the family tree. It was only after this incident came into the limelight that Kamrup Deputy Commissioner Kamal Kumar Baishya sent a report to the NRC State Co-ordinator Prateek Hajela who then ordered re-verification. The FP frame asks, what is the guarantee that similar errors have not been committed elsewhere?

  There were numerous complaints about spelling mistakes in the name of the citizens published in the NRC list. While filling up the application form, many applicants used the English language, however, the list published came out in the Assamese language. The FP frame claims that this transpired during the process of language conversion from English to Assamese. On one occasion, a person pronounced a "foreigner" by the Foreign Tribunal was found to be working with the NRC center. The FP frame contends that it is because of the manifest procedural lapses, the BJP Government of Assam, who indeed enforced the NRC, is now shying away from it and demanding a fresh NRC. Similarly,

various organizations that were vociferous in demanding the updation of the NRC since the Assam movement of the 1980s are unhappy with the final NRC list.

5.3.2.1.1.4. Foreigners' tribunals. Furthermore, the FP frame expresses doubts about the efficacy and functioning of the Foreigner's Tribunals. Tribunals are quasi-judicial bodies set up in Assam by the central government under the provisions of the Foreigners Tribunal Act, 1941, Foreigners (Tribunal) Order, 1984, and Foreigners (Tribunals) Amendment Order (Ministry of Home Affairs, 1964; Ministry of Home Affairs, 2019). Their main function was to adjudicate the citizenship claims of individuals who were identified as illegal migrants by the Assam Border Police Organization. During the NRC exercise in Assam, the Home Ministry announced that it would help the Assam Government establish 1000 Foreigners Tribunals to address claims from people excluded from the NRC.

The FP frame remarks that the colossal task of constituting 1000 Tribunals within a short period is highly ambitious given the low availability of physical infrastructure within the State. The already functioning Tribunals not only lack proper physical buildings and courtrooms but basic amenities like chairs, tables, and file cabinets. Besides, there is a shortage of staff including peons, attendants, computer operators, and others. The FP frame is suspicious whether these highly deprived and underdeveloped Tribunals will be able to appropriately and expeditiously settle lakhs of claims pending before it. The frame also alleges institutional biases along ethnic lines and traditional insider/outsider binaries in the functioning of Tribunals.

5.3.2.1.1.5. Detention camps. The FP frame sternly criticizes the State and the Central governments for their inability to adequately administer the detention camps. Detention camps are purported to confine people who are identified as foreigners and are awaiting deportation or persons waiting for their citizenship claims to be settled in the Tribunal. The FP frame calls detention camps "the graveyard of the living dead" and a storehouse of injustice and human rights violations. The frame highlights the miserable and disgraceful condition of the people staying inside detention camps. It raises questions about the health and hygiene of the detainees and talks about how numerous people are crammed into a single room like animals with four or five convicted criminals to discipline them.

The camps are alleged to have no provision for proper medical facilities, food, and sanitation. The food provided to the people is insufficient and of poor quality. The demand for adequate food and other basic commodities has given birth to illicit markets inside the center where corrupt officials sell goods to detainees at exorbitant prices. Many rooms are alleged to be without toilets and, when available, the upper portion of the toilet's door is made half open to monitor the detainees. Many inmates are also said to be faultily brought into the camps despite being genuine Indian citizens and having all the required documents. The FP frame questions the government's rationale behind setting up some of the detention centers within jail premises. The frame argues that illegal immigrants are not criminals and therefore should not be housed with those who have been jailed for criminal offenses.

5.3.3. Consequences

5.3.3.1. Policy fallouts

The FP frame holds the NRC and the CAA liable for unleashing a "pandora's box". The NRC and CAA are denounced for inviting new avenues of conflict rather than providing solutions to the already existing problems in the Northeast. Given the complex demography and history of India, particularly the Northeast, policies like NRC and CAA are held accountable for fomenting the contentious insider-outsider/indigenous-non-indigenous debate and deepening the inherent fault lines between and among people, communities, and governments. According to the FP frame, the centralized and unitary approach in policy-making has effectuated an environment of distrust among varied parties in the Northeast. State governments in the Northeast including Manipur and Nagaland are devising alternative and counter policies as a means to reconcile the concerns and demands of its people and control the damage anticipated to emanate from the existing immigration policies enforced by the Centre. Discussed among them by the FP frame includes policy initiatives namely the Register of Indigenous Inhabitants of Nagaland (RIIN) and Manipur People's Protection Bill (MPPB).

5.3.3.1.1. Register of Indigenous Inhabitants of Nagaland (RIIN). RIIN is an initiative being undertaken by the Government of Nagaland to prepare a list of all indigenous inhabitants of Nagaland. The fundamental objective of the RIIN is to "prevent the issuance of fake Indigenous Inhabitants Certificates" (Nagaland Legislative Assembly, 2021). Easy accessibility of fake certificates is considered one of the main reasons behind the influx of immigrants who are allegedly leveraging the benefits and privileges otherwise

meant for the indigenous inhabitants.   After hard reservations were expressed by various civil society organizations and tribal bodies over the RIIN, the Nagaland Government constituted a Commission with Smt. Banuo Z Jamir, IAS (Rtd.) as Chairperson along with two other members with an "objective for studying, examining and recommending, and advising on all issues relating to RIIN" (Nagaland Legislative Assembly, 2021). The Commission has submitted its report and is presently holding deliberations with the various stakeholders of the State. Among others, the Commission has recommended December 1, 1963 (the day the state of Nagaland was created) as a cutoff date for the identification of genuine indigenous inhabitants. Only those individuals belonging to fourteen Naga tribes and four non-Naga tribes residing in Nagaland before December 1, 1963, are to be deemed as Indigenous Inhabitants whereas other non-tribal inhabitants living in the State before the cutoff date, are to be recognized as Permanent Residents.

The RIIN, the FP frame asserts, has exacerbated the complex Naga issue and diluted the ongoing peace talks on the same. The Nagas of the Northeast have a long history of the demand for *Nagalim* (one composite Naga State) through the integration of contiguous Naga-inhabited areas in the states of Assam, Nagaland Manipur, and Arunachal Pradesh (Wouters, 2016; Srikanth & Thomas, 2005). Immediately after the notification for the initiation of RIIN came out, the move was vehemently opposed by the National Socialist Council of Nagaland NSCN (IM), one of the most prominent political stakeholders in Nagaland who champions the rights of the Nagas. The primary concern of NSCN (IM) is the exclusion of Nagas who migrated to Nagaland after December 1963, if the RIIN is undertaken. Thousands of Nagas have settled down in Nagaland over several decades. NSCN (IM) considers RIIN to be completely against the well-being of the Nagas and in

total contradiction with the idea of Naga integration. The FP frame also puts forth reservations over the construction of a distinct category of people classified as Permanent Residents. The frame calls this construction of "second-class citizens" discriminatory which will have immense implications on the cordial and working relationship between the tribals/insiders and non-tribals/outsiders.

The FP frame regards RIIN as a direct fallout of the NRC. The frame considers the NRC exercise in Assam to have stimulated the RIIN exercise in Nagaland. The RIIN is conceived as an effort to counter the apprehension wrought by the CAA that if a clear line is not drawn between the original inhabitants and the immigrants, the survival and existence of the original inhabitants of Nagaland itself will be at stake.

5.3.3.1.2. Manipur Peoples (Protection) Bill, 2018 (MPPB). After the CAA was introduced as a Bill in the Indian Parliament, discontentment was raised over the Bill by various State governments of the Northeast for not incorporating any regulations to protect its indigenous communities. Manipur, which was vocal in its opposition to the CAA consequently introduced a Bill called the Manipur Peoples Protection Bill, 2018 (MPPB). MPPB, although passed by the Manipur Legislative Assembly in July 2018, has not yet received the President's assent. MPPB is said to be brought in to fulfill the aspirations and protect the rights of the indigenous people of Manipur. It seeks to identify the Manipuris and non-Manipuris and regulate the entry and exit of non-Manipuris into the State. Meitis, the Pangal Muslims, scheduled tribes of Manipur, and all those citizens of India who have been residing in the State before 1951 are to be recognized as the original inhabitants of Manipur or Manipuris, according to MPPB. Others will however be deemed as outsiders or non-Manipuris and they are required to obtain a special permit to enter or stay in

Manipur. MPPB is thought to be an instrument to check illegal immigration and a mechanism to safeguard the interests of the original inhabitants of the State.

The passing of MPPB sparked heavy protests from different sections of people in Manipur. The high area of contention has been the cut-off date of 1951 conceived as problematic. This would mean that only those people whose names are listed in the National Registrar of Citizens, 1951, and Village Directory of 1951 would be accepted as Manipuris. Questions were raised about the validity of the said data collected decades ago. The cut-off date of 1951 is held as unwarranted when the State of Manipur was formed in the year 1972. Thousands of people have been estimated to have internally migrated to the region before the creation of Manipur and the MPPB is condemned for obliterating the fate of these individuals.

Similar to the RIIN, the FP frame views MPPB as an outcome of the policy fallout of the NRC and the CAA. Although insecurity and hostility between the indigenous communities and the immigrants are long established in the Northeast, the said immigration policies are dispraised for further aggravating and institutionalizing the divide. According to the FP frame, the demand and need for complex and problematic exercises to segregate and protect the insider from the outsider would not have arisen in Manipur and Nagaland had the policymakers anticipated the implications of the policies they formulated.

5.3.4. Possible actions and solutions

The FP frame firmly believes that the complexities and dissonance revolving around the issue of immigration are predominantly due to a lack of consensus and proper

deliberation on the matter of citizenship, migration, and regional diversity. The frame seeks the inclusion of all primary stakeholders, particularly the affected communities, in the process of formulation of immigration policies. Because the maximum share of borders of Northeastern States is with foreign countries, their interests and concerns should be given utmost consideration and weightage. The frame is of the view that the Central government adopted a unity approach and did not consult the states of India while implementing the NRC and CAA. Hence, the frame demands respect for the federal structure of the Indian Constitution. It demands a broad restructuring of Centre-State relations where the interests, rights, and aspirations of nationalities within the Indian state are respected.

Furthermore, the frame calls for structural changes in the implementation of NRC and CAA. It asks for a review and complete overhaul of the composition and working of the Foreigners' Tribunals. It demands immediate closure of detention camps to bring an end to the harassment of people in the name of illegal immigrants. It presses the government to promptly initiate measures against political disenfranchisement and economic exploitation against the backdrop of NRC and CAA.

5.4. Flawed narrative (FN) frame

5.4.1. Problem definition

The Flawed Narrative frame highlights the issue of victimization and discrimination of certain people of the Northeast in the name of immigrants. The frame regards the immigration discourse in the Northeast as being subjected to the flawed

understanding of indigeneity, infiltration, and threat perception. It is skeptical of the dominance of ethnonational and xenophobic narratives in the discussion of the issue of immigration. The frame challenges the definition of Original Inhabitants in the Northeast. It argues that the said definition is ununiform, lopsided, intermittently constructed, and driven by the politics of vote, ethnicity, race, and party interests.

The frame is critical of the problem confronting the people due to the thin line of separation between legal immigrants and illegal immigrants. While acknowledging the rights of the indigenous communities, the FN frame raises the question of justice for people who have migrated during different periods of history, toiled hard, and collectively contributed to the development and security of the region.

5.4.2. Causes and justifications

5.4.2.1. The indigenous

The FN frame considers the indigenous/original inhabitants as one of the agents contributing to the problematization of the immigration issue in the Northeast. The frame claims that the conflict surrounding immigration has emerged and endured primarily because of a flawed understanding of the issue of the immigrant takeover, infiltration, and threat acknowledged and propagated by the indigenous/original inhabitants of the Northeast. The FN frame associates the issue of immigration with the history of British India. The frame stresses how the British commercial enterprise encouraged lakhs of people to settle in the Northeast during the colonial period. These people came to the

Northeast simply to earn livelihood and participated in its collective development and not to subvert the original inhabitants of the region.

The FN frame foregrounds the complexities emanating from the British decision to divide British India into Hindu-majority India and Muslim-majority Pakistan during the transfer of power in 1947. When the Muslim Bengalis-dominated district of Sylhet (erstwhile part of the Chief Commissioner's Province of Assam) was attached to Pakistan, lots of Bengali Hindus living in the region were compelled to cross over to the new Indian border and settle in the Northeast, particularly in the present Barak Valley of Assam. Likewise, the FN highlights the predicaments of other communities including the Chakmas, Marmas, Tripuris, and Tanchangyas who had to flee to India because of the inclusion of Chittagong Hill Tracts into Pakistan.

The frame alleges that the unwillingness of the indigenous people to accept "these communities" as a native of the Northeast is the root cause of the dispute on immigration in the Northeast. These communities are regarded as the victims of colonialism and partition and are often being targeted and discounted by the "so-called indigenous communities". The FN frame calls for moral responsibility towards the people who were once part of colonial India but overnight became immigrants and foreigners due to no fault of their own.

The refugee crisis during the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1972, according to the FN frame, has further added to the woes of these communities. Due to the similarity of their language and ethnicity with the Bangladeshi refugees, the native Bengali-speaking people, particularly in Assam and Tripura, are "unnecessarily targeted and stigmatized"

and suspected of being illegal immigrants. This obsession with the Bangladeshis and Bengalis in Assam is regarded as a "manifestation of Assamese chauvinism".

The FN frame asserts that the whole narrative of the takeover by foreigners during the Assam movement was exaggerated and based on a false proposition. Citing the NRC of Assam which has finally identified around 19 lakh illegal immigrants in the State, the frame criticizes the the advocates of Assam movement's claim of 40 lakh illegal immigrants being made without any statistics. A memorandum was submitted in February 1980 by the then President of All Assam Student's Union, Prafulla Kumar Mahanta claiming that there are around 40 lakh illegal immigrants in Assam.

Referring to the census data of Assam after 1971 which it claims to be declining in terms of population growth rate, the FN challenges the notion of illegal immigration from Bangladesh after the Bangladesh crisis. To further validate this argument, the frame claims a low exclusion rate in the NRC from districts of Dhubri, Mancachar, Salmara, and others bordering Bangladesh and was suspected to have a high percentage of illegal immigrants.

5.4.2.2. Party politics

The FN frame holds responsible both the national and regional political parties for exploiting a sensitive and complex matter like immigration for achieving political ends in the Northeast. The political parties and politicians are criticized for not grasping the genuine concerns of the people of the Northeast but engaging in vote-bank politics of identity and religion. The frame is skeptical of both Congress and the BJP's brand of politics. Congress is blamed for practicing the politics of minority appeasement, mainly

the Muslims in the Northeast. Whereas, the BJP is slammed for carrying off ethnic and majoritarian politics by appealing to the tribals and larger Hindu populace in the region. The regional parties on the other hand are condemned for allying with mainstream parties in their agenda for securing power and short-term political perks. In the process, the FN frame contends that the Northeast is being pushed to the brink of civil unrest and violence.

5.4.3. Consequences

5.4.3.1. Victimization

The serious consequence of a flawed narrative on the issue of immigration, according to the FN frame, is the victimization of people in the name of immigrants. The frame considers the immigration issue to have divided the people of the Northeast based on ethnicity, region, religion, and language. It highlights how the early immigrants who came to the Northeast during the colonial times and partition are often looked upon with suspicion as immigrants. The same argument is applied to the native Bengalis of the Northeast who are doubted because of their cultural resemblance with the Bangladeshi refugees.

The FN frame strongly criticizes the politics of eviction in the Northeast. It is of the view that eviction drives do not take into account the dynamics of internal displacement and internal migration. Referring to multiple cases of eviction in Assam, the FN frame argues that these people who were rendered homeless were the victims of flooding and land erosion due to the Brahmaputra. They were internally displaced and forced to settle in

government lands and grazing reserves. Some even paid hefty sums to local people for land which belonged to the government but were later evicted due to some personal feud.

Likewise, the FN frame foregrounds the instances of internal migration before the political boundaries of the Northeast were drawn. With regard to the ongoing demand of non-APST communities for Permanent Residence Certificates (PRC) in Arunachal Pradesh, the frame asserts some of these communities also live in Assam where they are recognized as Scheduled Tribes and enjoy land and other rights. Whereas in Arunachal Pradesh, they are considered immigrants or outsiders.

Referring to the case of the Gorkha community in Arunachal Pradesh who are also demanding the PRC, the FN frame dispraises the indigenous people of the Northeast for living in "manufactured lies" and ignoring the genuine sacrifices made by various communities in building better Northeast. Following the war with China, the frame claims, in 1964 the Government of India settled about 200 families from Assam Rifles in the barren and empty territory of Arunachal Pradesh bordering Myanmar to stake a claim in this region for India. The settlement process continued till 1970-71, followed by the demarcation of the Indo-Myanmar International Border in 1971. However, despite such contributions to State formation and security, these communities are yet to be given the PRC or recognized as legal citizens. As discussed earlier PRC is an identity proof of state citizenship in Arunachal Pradesh. People having the PRC are generally considered the original inhabitants of the State and would give people domicile-related benefits, mainly land rights and reservations in educational institutions and government jobs.

5.4.3.2. Disruption of public life

The FN frame is apprehensive about the disruption of public life emanating out of discontentment surrounding the immigration issue. It is critical of violent protests and considers that a mere show of strength on the street is not a means to judge the popular mood of the people. It believes that the same undermines democratic institutions, particularly the judiciary.

5.4.4. Possible solutions and actions

The FN frame seeks a uniform effort to deal with the problem of immigration in the Northeast. In doing so, the frame argues that it is a moral responsibility of all including common people, policymakers, political parties, and the State to acknowledge the complex history, politics, and spatiality of the region. The frame calls for the need to build objective, reasoned, and inclusive narratives and policies on immigration considering the complex history of migration. The frame considers it as a social responsibility of the national and regional political parties to rise above the politics of vote and power and find a solution to the problem of immigration in the Northeast. The frame also seeks justice for all those people who have been targeted and victimized in the name of immigration.

Chapter 6

Interactional dimension of select Facebook news pages of Northeast India

The study on the interactional dimension looks into the facets of readers' engagement in those opinion articles that were subject to inductive framing analysis in the previous chapter. Digital media has incredibly transformed the scope of people's interaction with the media. Digital media, particularly social media provides numerous opportunities for readers' engagement through features that primarily include commenting, sharing, and liking. A peek into such data has immensely helped scholars to understand the nature of participatory culture in a given society or context. Participatory culture is found to have monumental implications for freedom of speech and democracy as a whole.

This chapter examines two aspects of readers' engagement in opinion articles. First, it does a page-wise and general interpretation of comments, shares, and likes. Second, the study conducts a deductive framing analysis of comments from 67 articles examined earlier. The deductive phase involves the validation of the inductively reconstructed representational frames. It does quantitative analysis by measuring the extent to which inductively reconstructed frame packages are applied in the readers' comments.

6.1. Readers' Engagement on the issue of immigration

6.1.1. EastMojo

Table 6.1.1.1 below outlines the reader's engagement data of opinion articles posted on EastMojo. The data set consists of the title of the opinion article, the name of the author, the number of comments, the number of times the post was shared, and the number of likes received. It is found that EastMojo posted a total number of 23 opinion articles between September 1, 2018, and March 31, 2020. A cursory glance at the data shows that the level of readers' interaction with content is very low. The highest number of comments received by any article was 4. The article is on anti-CAA protests in Assam. The maximum number of shares garnered by any article was 125. The article was written when Noam Chomsky expressed his solidarity with the indigenous people of the Northeast. The article also received the highest number of likes for any article posted in EastMojo.

While figuring out the number of persons who commented, shared, and liked per article, the numbers are dismal. The comments per article were 0.60. Shares per article were 12.3 and the likes per article were 31.5.

Table 6.1.1.1

Readers' engagement data of EastMojo

SN	Title of the article	Name of the author	No. of comments	No. of post shares	No. of likes
1	Why the resentment against the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill 2016	Patricia Mukhim	0	9	53
2	Citizenship Bill's buried for now; but who gains and who loses?	Bidhayak Das	0	2	47
3	Gorkhas of Arunachal Pradesh: Know a bit of their story, & history	Dinesh Sharma	0	15	36
4	All's not well on the eastern front	Dinesh Sharma	0	12	68
5	Foreigners' Tribunals and Assam Detention Centres	Jayanta K Goswami	0	0	8
6	Rs 5.1k cr, 25k lawyers, 1k courts & some names of Bangladeshis	Mrinal Talukdar	0	1	6
7	Politics of nationality and the Gorkha statehood movement	Dinesh Sharma	1	15	23
8	RIIN has evoked mixed reactions in attempt to define 'indigeneity	Richard Kamei	1	6	15
9	Where the similarities end: Article 371(A)	Mmhonlümo Kikon	0	12	18
10	Is an error-free NRC ever possible?	Raul Johnson	0	9	8
11	Assam's NRC a stillborn baby?	Anirban Choudhury	0	6	11
12	CAB conundrum and Northeast India	Patricia Mukhim	0	7	25
13	CAB and the Northeast	Anirban Choudhury	1	5	22

14	After Ayodhya, NRC is the new frontier for BJP	Mrinal Talukdar	NA	NA	NA
15	Anti-CAA protests: Did Himanta plot to oust Assam CM Sonowal?	Mrinal Talukdar	4	58	69
16	Sikkimese perspective on CAA: A counter-narrative	Kunga Tashi Lepcha	1	29	67
17	Citizenship (Amendment) Act and Assam's winter of discontent	Anirban Choudhury	0	5	28
18	CAA protests: Where are we headed?	Patricia Mukhim	3	9	36
19	CAA: Why Noam Chomsky shows solidarity with NE's indigenous people	Richard Kamei	3	61	125
20	CAA stir: Street protest isn't indispensable	Anirban Choudhury	0	5	15
21	Assam and the 'fraud' of 1951	Mrinal Talukdar	0	2	7
22	The Bru saga: Is this the end to an impasse?	Zara Bawitlung	0	3	7
23	Can Nagas be called 'Miyas'?	Hayithung Bill Lotha	0	13	31

6.1.2. Inside Northeast

The data of Inside Northeast is given below (Table 6.1.2.1) Inside Northeast posted a total number of 9 opinion articles. The figure is less compared to EastMojo. The level of reader interaction was found to be lower than EastMojo. The maximum number of comments received was 6 by an article on CAA. The article titled "Why is Assam scared of becoming the next Tripura?" invited the highest number of shares and likes which stood at 13 and 50 respectively. As already discussed in the previous chapter, the case of Tripura is frequently used as a framing device by the IT frame to foreground the consequences of the influx of immigrants in the Northeast.

The per-article figures are lower than EastMojo. The comment per article was 0.66.

Shares per article stood at 2.44 and likes per article was 11.11.

Table 6.1.2.1

Readers' engagement data of Inside Northeast

SN	Title of the article	Name of the author	No. of comments	No. of post shares	No. of likes
1	NRC in Assam: Truth vs myth	Anirban Choudhury	0	2	0
2	Government abandoning Asomiya jati in order to secure Bangladeshi vote bank?	Julee Bezbaruah	0	2	9
3	United struggle of Northeast leads to CAB's 'natural death'	Himashree Deka	0	0	0
4	National Register of Citizenship and its Aftermath	Dr.Moushumi Bhattacharjee	0	1	3
5	C(A)B to C(A)A: The Week in a Nutshell	Manisha Bhowmick	0	1	2
6	Citizenship Amendment Act's Passage Proves Delhi's 'Insensitivity' towards NE?	Ronika Chanamthabam	0	1	9
7	CAA Row: 'Misinformation' and the Truth Behind It	Axomsom	6	0	6
8	Why is Assam scared of becoming the next Tripura?	Axomsom	0	13	50
9	Axomiyas: A Forgotten People	Dr Aahlad Mahendra Borah	0	2	21

6.1.3. Raiot

Table 6.1.3.1 below outlines the reader's engagement data of Raiot. A total number of 31 articles were posted by Raiot. It published the highest number of opinion articles on the issue of immigration than any other Facebook news page. An article on NRC received a maximum number of comments that was 4. The article titled "Listen, Indian liberals, you know nothing about Northeast India" received 104 shares and 54 likes. This is one of the most interactive posts among all the 67 articles on immigration. Also discussed earlier, the IT frame strongly criticizes the liberals for their mainstream view of the Northeast and for championing the cause of the inclusion of immigrant Muslims through the CAA. Per article figures of Raiot were; 0.32 comments per article, 21.06 shares per article, and 15.80 likes per article.

Table 6.1.3.1

Readers' engagement data of Raiot

SN	Title of the article	Name of the author	No. of comments	No. of post shares	No. of likes
1	Mas- Lana Bhashani of Assam/Bengal/Pakistan/Bangladesh	Dr. Layli Uddin	1	54	15
2	Raiot Webzine's unhealthy Aadhar obsession	Raiot Collective	0	6	9
3	On the killing of 5 Working Class Bengali People In Assam	Raiot Collective	2	27	26
4	Nagariks on the rolls: NRC and the prevailing consensus in Assam	Gaurav Rajkhowa & Ankur	4	7	17

		Tamuli Phukan			
5	Academics and activists petition President against CAB and NRC exclusions	Petitions & Submissions	0	4	11
6	Many evasions of JPC report on CAB	Santanu Borthakur	0	3	6
7	On non-tribal migration in Meghalaya	Batskhem Myrboh	0	10	26
8	Essential but not so short guide to the crisis of citizenship in Assam	Sanjay Barbora	0	23	5
9	Discourse of evictions in Assam	Parvin Sultana	0	12	4
10	Citizenship kills: NRC/D-voter suicides in Assam	Abdul Kalam Azad	1	2	2
11	Assam: The accord, the discord- A review	Parvin Sultana	0	2	6
12	Listen Indian liberals, you know nothing about Northeast India	Richard Kamei	0	104	54
13	The real horror of CAB and NRC	Shuddhabrata Sengupta	0	19	19
14	To understand anti-CAB protests in Northeast, look at Jharkhand	Ranjith Oraon	0	34	29
15	Speaking amidst spies and drones in Latasil, Guwahati, Assam	Mr. Berham Pooter	0	20	17
16	Register of conflict: NRC and ethnic politics in Assam	Raiot Collective	1	23	13
17	Do we return to the nineties?	Jiten Bezboruah	0	5	9
18	Voices from Northeast India in solidarity with JMI & AMU students	Raiot Collective	0	23	28
19	Listen to our stories to understand anti-CAB protests in northeast India	Janice Pariat	0	31	23

20	Ka , NRC bad ka Khristmas ka ba Nyngkong	Rev. Kyrsoibor Pyrtuh	0	5	12
21	Essential guide to the crisis of citizenship in Assam	Sanjay Barbora	0	23	5
22	This national awakening goes beyond anti-CAA": Akhil Gogoi	Akhil Gogoi	0	33	26
23	Statement regarding my alleged comments on the National Population Register	Arundhati Roy	0	24	32
24	CAA & NRC : Understanding protests and violence	Jinee Lokaneeta	0	8	4
25	A statement by 20 Korean Organisations against CAA	Petitions And Submissions	0	23	18
26	CAA2019: Hope and despair of self-determination	Rojesh Pradhan	0	2	4
27	Azadi from liberal India?	Burhan Qureshi	0	29	16
28	Talking of CAA/NRC on Naga day	Petitions & Submissions	0	2	6
29	What are the North eastern Universities' students saying about CAA 2019?	Petitions & Submissions	0	8	14
30	Locating #antiCAA protests from Assam	Nayan Moni Kumar & Mridugunjan Deka	0	66	8
31	When the Indian ideology trips on Assamese 'xenophobia'	Bidyut Sagar Boruah & Gaurav Rajkhowa	1	21	26

6.1.4. NewsMill

The data of NewsMill is outlined below (Table 6.1.4.1). NewsMill published the

least amount of opinion articles on immigration which amounts to only 4. However, the

readers' interaction is better when compared to other Facebook news pages examined. The

highest count of comments received by the articles was 45 and 42. The articles are on PRC

and CAA respectively. Both these articles are the most interactive featuring in the entire list in terms of comments, shares, and likes. The per-article figures were found to be better than all other Facebook news pages. The comment per article was 23.54, the share per article stood at 28.75, and the likes per article was 352.50. Saying that kindly note the page published only four articles.

Table 6.1.4.1

Readers' engagement data of The NewsMill

SN	Title of the article	Name of the author	No. of comments	No. of post shares	No. of likes
1	What is the PRC issue in Arunachal Pradesh? A ready explainer.	Jayanta Deka	45	31	645
2	What will happen after the publication of the final NRC in Assam?	Hare Krishna Deka	3	3	31
3	Article 370, CAB, NRC: Where do we go from here?	Ujjwal K Chowdhury	4	8	101
4	Citizenship Amendment Bill: Why is Assam angry and protesting it?	Parvin Sultana	42	73	633

6.1.5 General observations and interpretation

A general examination of the above data let the study state that readers' engagement with opinion articles on immigration posted on select Facebook news pages of Northeast is meagre. The finding of this study is starkly opposed to the common notion among enthusiasts and scholars about the prospects of interaction unlocked by social media.

Although beyond the scope of the present study to further investigate, more future studies on the interactional dimension of social media may help us understand whether or why the level of interaction on social media in the Northeast is low.

However, the present findings suggest that 75.64 % of the articles did not have any comments. 97.01 % of the articles had less than 10 comments. The top three comments received by any article were 45, 42, and, 6. It means that 64 opinion articles had comments less than 6. The top two articles which received the highest comments were posted by NewsMill although it published only a total number of 4 articles which is the least among all pages The highest comments received by EastMojo and Inside Northeast are 6 each.

Concerning shares, 4.47% of the articles have no shares. The figure is better than the percentage of the number of comments the articles received. 92.53 % of the articles have less than 50 shares. The top two articles which were mostly shared were posted by Raiot which had 104 and 73 shares. They are followed by an article posted by NewsMill which was shared 66 times.

Regarding the likes, 2.98 % of the articles received no likes. 95.52 % of the articles received likes below 100. The top three likes received by any articles were posted by NewsMill which had 645, 633, and 101 like.

Considering the number of persons who commented, shared, and liked per article, The comments per article were 1.85. Shares per article were 16 and the likes per article were 40.60. The most interactive and engaging op-ed was posted on NewsMill. Titled "Citizenship Amendment Bill: Why is Assam angry and protesting it?" and written by

Parvin Sultana, the article received 42 comments, 73 shares, and 633 likes (TheNewsMill, 2019, January 11).

The authors who contributed the most articles were Mrinal Talukdar, Raiot Collective, Patricia Mukhim, and Dinesh Sharma. They have written 4, 4, 3, and 3 articles respectively. Patricia Mukhim and Mrinal Talukdar are senior and renowned journalists from the Northeast whereas Dinesh Sharma is a social commentator and content strategist. Raiot Collective is the editorial board of Raiot. Many opinion articles were found to be contributed by students, activists, legislatures, bureaucrats, and others.

6.2. Deductive Framing of Reader Comments

This section conducts a deductive framing analysis of the readers' comments. A total number of 124 comments were retrieved from 67 opinion articles on the issue of immigration. All comments were weighed against the framing and reasoning devices of the four competing frame packages that were inductively reconstructed in the previous chapter. Then after, the comments were assigned to their respective frame package and measured in terms of count and percentage. Deductive framing analysis was done with the fundamental objective to validate the frame packages reconstructed earlier. However, during the process of coding, comments were found that applied rather different reasoning and framing devices. Therefore, those comments were clubbed together and new frame packages were developed. The new frame packages built are the Pro-illegal immigrant frame, Query frame, and Unclear frame. Table 6.2.1 provides the frequency of count and

percentage of the four representational frame packages along with the new frame packages found in readers' comments.

Table 6.2.1

Frequency of count and percentage of frame packages on reader comments

Frame packages	Count	Percentage (%) (out of 124 comments)
Immigrant Takeover (IT)	28	22.5
Disputing Immigrant Takeover Frame	18	14.5
Flawed Narrative (FN)	12	9.6
Counter Hindutva (CH)	8	6.5
Failed Policy (FP)	1	0.8
Unclear frame	14	11
Pro-illegal immigrant frame	5	4
Query	5	4

Note. The percentage of do not add up to 100 percent, because reader comments may contain no frame or one frame or more than one frame or new frame on immigration. What is measured here is the presence or absence of each frame.

From the above, it is observed that the IT frame is the most dominant frame applied by the readers while engaging with the opinion articles. 22. 5 percent of the total comments were found to have the presence of the reasoning and framing devices employed by the IT frame. Additionally. 14.5 percent of the comments dispute the IT frame. In other words, the comments either disagree or argue against the narratives put forward by the article or other readers' comments. Hence, it may be said that a total of 37 percent of the comments engage in a discussion around the IT frame. It may be noted here that the comments that disputed the IT frame could be simultaneously assigned to other frame packages for the

reason that reader comments may contain no frame or one frame or more than one frame or a new frame.

The IT frame is followed by the FN frame which is the second dominant frame applied by the readers in their comments. It constitutes 9.6 percent of the total comments. The CH frame was employed by 6.5 percent of readers in their comments. The FP frame was found to be the least applied frame by the readers among all the four frame packages reconstructed earlier. Only 0.8 percent of readers' comments have applied this frame.

Among the news frames found in the readers' comments, the Unclear frame is the most dominant. It comprises 8 percent of the total comments. The Unclear frame constitutes those comments that do not clearly fit into the existing frame packages or comments whose positions are difficult to deconstruct so to assign to a particular frame package. Figure 6.2.1 and Figure 6.2.2. below are examples of when unclear framing and reasoning devices were used.

Figure 6.2.1

Readers' comment

Source:(https://www.facebook.com/profile/100064518800143/search/?q=Citizenship%20 Amendment%20Bill%3A%20Why%20is%20Assam%20angry%20and%20protesting%2 0it%3F)

Figure 6.2.2.

Readers' comment

Source:(https://www.facebook.com/profile/100064518800143/search/?q=Citizenship%20Amendment%20Bill%3A%20Why%20is%20Assam%20angry%20and%20protesting%20it%3F)

The picture (Figure 6.2.1) was posted in the comments section by a reader. The caption reads "If India continues to treat Northeast as such. Then Indian map will soon become like this". Likewise, a reader posted a picture (6.2.2) and writes, "This is the future". It is difficult to assign a frame package to the above comments as the reader does not explicitly use the framing and reasoning devices of any of the existing frame packages. Also, the researcher cannot build a separate frame package (eg. Separatist frame) for the comments because the frame occurrence is very low.

Another new frame found is the Pro-illegal immigrant (PII) frame. The comments belonging to the PII frame used narratives that supported illegal immigrants. For example, a comment was found that read, "The persecuted Hindu, Buddhist and Christian people

from Pakistan and Bangladesh have nowhere else to go". It may be recalled that all frames except the FP, were not found to freely advocate the cause of illegal immigrants. The FP, however, did raise the issue of injustices and inconveniences encountered by immigrants in Foreign tribunals and detention camps.

Besides numerous comments were found that asked questions. Some of the questions asked were: "What is the main purpose of this policy?". "I want to know from the peoples of Arunachal which tribes come under Arunachal jurisdiction and who are Arunachal's indigenous peoples?". "I am unable to understand PRC here. Is it like the state domicile that is in existence in other states or is it something exclusively for the indigenous tribes of Arunachal??".

Table 6.2.2

Frequency counts and percentage of frame difference on reader's comments

Frame difference	Harmony	Conflict
Frequency Counts	29	11
Percentage (%) (out of 124 comments)	23	9

Table 6.2.1 above shows the frequency counts and percentage of frame difference in the readers' comments. Frame difference looks into and identifies in comments the instances of harmony or conflict with the dominant framing and reasoning devices of the opinion article. It is found that 23 percent of the comments completely agreed with the arguments and narratives made by the article without adding any other information. 9 percent of the comment engaged in open disagreement with the article.

Table 6.2.3

Frequency counts of interactional sequences on reader's comments

Interactional Sequence								
Sequence No.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Length of Interaction Sequence	2	4	3	4	4	2	28	9

Social media facilitates mainly two types of interaction; user-content interaction and interaction (Lessard, 2014). Interactional sequences map the instances of user-user interaction. Interaction sequences help map the level of vitality in readers. Such engagement may are found to be instrumental in consensus-building on issues of interest. The study found only eight occasions when readers interacted among themselves. The highest length of interaction found was 28. It means participants replied to one another 28 times. The interaction happened on the issue of indigenous against non-indigenous.

Chapter 7
Discussion & Conclusion

7.1. Discussion on the structural dimension

7.1.1. Organizational Structure

All four Facebook news pages examined are found to be an integral part of a digital news media outlet that operated across multiple online platforms mainly in form of a website, Facebook news page, Twitter handle, Instagram page, and Youtube channel. However, digital news media outlets like NewsMill and Inside Northeast started as a Facebook new page whereas Eastmojo and the Raiot were established as digital news media by launching a website. It may be noted that having a website is a primary requirement set by advertisers, digital news media associations and regulatory authorities to be recognized as a proper digital news media company. The same may have driven the erstwhile Facebook news pages to launch its website and convert into a legitimate digital news media company.

All digital news outlets of which these Facebook news pages are a part, excluding Raiot, are registered as a non-government company at the Registrar of Companies, Shillong, under the Companies Act of the Ministry of Corporate Affairs. Raiot has not registered anywhere whereas NewsMill is also registered as a Micro Enterprise and classified as a Web Portal under the Ministry of Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises.

The digital news media of Northeast India are founded in the profession of journalism. Most of the outlets are launched by journalists having experience in legacy media and not business people. For example, EastMojo was founded by Karma Palzor who was a senior journalist at CNN- News18. Likewise, NewsMill and Inside Northeast were started by people who were professional journalists. Fuelled by digitization, the changing habits of news consumption across the globe are found to have necessitated the initiation and expansion of digital news media in Northeast India.

Another important reason highlighted by all the founders for initiating digital news media was the need to project the Northeast in the mainstream discourse. Most of the founders were of the view that Northeast India is not adequately represented by the mainstream media. Given the prospect unleashed by the new information and communication technologies to start news media with low investment and minimal physical, technical, and human resources, instituting digital news outlets in the Northeast is regarded as an opportunity and tool for self-representation.

All outlets operate on a lower cost base, with smaller newsrooms and sometimes no physical space, and almost with no distribution costs. All news media reported having less than 10 permanent employees. The editor of NewsMill said that they had no office during the entire covid period and completely operated from home. And because these portals distribute content online mainly through their Facebook new pages and other social media handles, there is a small or no distribution cost.

7.1.2. Content gathering and publication

Unlike the digital news organizations in Europe that were found to have been confronted with making difficult choices regarding which audience to serve (Nicholls, 2018), the digital news outlets in Northeast India concentrates on the tight niche audience base, that is, the Northeast region, its people and their issues. The editorial priorities do not include giving much attention to national and international news, although they do cover important national and international events, the focus of all the news media examined is primarily on news and views of the Northeast. All portals were found to have special sections on all eight northeastern states. All posted text or visual or audio-visual or mixed content.

The study finds three common ways of content gathering. First, permanent correspondents based in different parts of the Northeast send both text and video reports periodically. There is not much difficulty in ascertaining the originality of the video content, however, verifying whether text content is completely original based on first-hand field data collected by the reporter becomes a tricky endeavor for anyone. The researcher found that digital news outlets occasionally practice a kind of journalism that the study wishes to call "Courtesy journalism"- where the reporter picks a report published by a legacy media or even bigger digital news media platforms, edits or rewrites, or gives additional inputs, and post it with a disclaimer like "courtesy" or "with additional inputs". There is a kind of mutual understanding or unofficial partnering between various information sources during the process. The same was told to the researcher by one of the interviewees.

Secondly, considerable numbers of content come from stringers who are paid based on the contribution they make. Thirdly, the majority of the outlets have subscriptions to news agencies. Almost all of the national and international news they publish are taken from these agencies. Fourthly, the portals gather content through citizen journalism or participatory journalism where citizens, mainly locals, play an active role in reporting news and information. Most of the opinion articles published by the portals are voluntary. There is no set time frame for uploading the content contents. They are posted throughout the day. Content traffic was observed to be high for EastMojo, followed by Newsmill, Inside Northeast, and Raiot.

All are found making use of social media to reach a wider audience. The interviews revealed that Facebook is their most dominant distributive platform. The same could not be verified because all declined to share their Google analytics data. However, the information is in with with the findings of India Digital News Report (2018) which claims that Facebook and WhatsApp are widely used mediums with 75% of respondents using Facebook and 82% using WhatsApp to access gets.

7.1.3. Financing and regulations

The financial position of all digital news media studied remains not so strong. Portals are constantly looking for new sources of funding or revenue generation to sustain themselves. The study has identified three primary funding models. Ad-supported model is common among most organizations excluding Raiot. Raiot claims to be "no-budget media" having no revenue sources and operating completely on voluntary contributions. Advertisements are received in form of direct and programmatic ads. Direct advertisements

primarily come from local businesses and institutions whereas digital advertising agencies including Google AdSense, MGID, and Taboola supply programmatic advertisements. The portals also receive social media monetization fees which were reported to be minuscule. All do not receive any government advertisements.

The other two models-grant-supported and subscription-supported models were found only in EastMojo. EastMojo received a grant from The Independent and Public-Spirited Media Foundation, a public charitable trust, between February 1, 2019, to July 30, 2022. The organization declined to furnish the details of the grant. The organization also has adopted a subscription-based model recently where readers may pay per article basis or buy a weekly, yearly, two-yearly, or three-yearly subscription. Advertising remains an important and regular source of revenue for all digital news outlets.

Professional digital news media are subject to similar regulations as legacy media in India. All digital media excluding the Raiot reported complying with guidelines, ethics, and rules specified by the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology and the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting under Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021. They are members of the DIGIPUB News India Foundation (a self-regulatory body registered with the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting) and the Northeast Association of Digital Communications and Media (an association of digital-first news media organizations of Northeast India). The above are the essential attributes advertisers, funders, and authorities look for to consider any digital news media organization as legitimate.

A couple of portals were apprehensive about the risks of working completely online during moments of crisis when the internet is taken down or policing of content by civil society and state authorities or control by the service providers themselves in the guise of violation of community guidelines and standards or other mechanisms.

7.2. Discussion on the representational dimension

The representational dimension examines the online deliberation on immigration in Northeast India. An inductive framing analysis of opinion articles published in digital news media enabled the reconstruction of four dominant frames. The findings suggest contradictory yet parallel themes of representations of immigration and immigrants. The same leads the discussion to ask a question about how different frames compare or differ with each other and what are the underlying patterns the frames manifest. The Immigrant takeover (IT) frame sees immigrants gradually taking control over the cultural, economic, and natural resources of the indigenous people of the Northeast. Contrastingly, the Flawed narrative (FN) frame regards the immigration narratives defined and justified by the flawed understanding of indigeneity, infiltration, and threat perception. Whereas, the Failed policy (FP) frame and Counter-Hindutva (CH) frame view immigration through the prism of lackadaisical policies and religious nationalism.

7.2.1. Construction of the victim and its principles

One common thread that binds all the competing frames is the presence of the "victim" and its construction. For the IT frame, the victims of immigration are the

indigenous or original inhabitants alleged to be overshadowed by a heavy influx of immigrants. While considering immigrants as the primary cause, the IT frame does not make exclusive negative statements about immigrants. Instead, the frame strongly criticizes the colonial and post-colonial Indian state and their centralized policies for the marginalization of the indigenous communities of the Northeast.

In this sense, the IT frame departs from several studies that have found media portraying immigrants as an embodiment of danger or physical, public, or moral threat, or a deviant population (Fryberg et al., 2011; Greenberg & Hier, 2001; Pickering, 2001). Discontentment with immigrants, although grounded on "communitarian and ethnonational cultural" arguments (Badar, 2005; Balabanova & Balch, 2010), focuses mainly on the principles of cultural protectionism and domestic social justice. The IT frame associate immigrant with a threat to identity, culture, land, tribal resources, and heritage. It maintains that immigration should be controlled for the economic and social welfare of the indigenous people.

The FN frame counters the IT frame and proposes mainly other three types of victims; people who were brought by the British to the Northeast during the colonial era, people who were forced to migrate as a result of partition, and those who have internally migrated after independence. Despite remarkably cooperating in the overall development of the Northeast for decades, the frame asserts that these people are often subject to subjugation in the name of immigrants. Their contribution is being swayed away by the flawed narratives on immigration reproduced by groups engaging in identity and vote-bank politics. The FN frame argues within the framework of the basic principle of "justice as fairness" (Rawls, 1957) and the "egalitarian principle of equal liberties" (Badar, 2005). It

criticizes all ascriptive privileges and seeks justice for its victims in form of moral acceptability, social recognition, and social cooperation.

The CH frame, likewise, employs the principles of "multiculturalism" and "secularism" to argue in defense of the Muslims considered the primary victim of the religious nationalistic rhetoric of the Sangh Parivar. Multiculturalism refers to a celebration of ethnic, racial, cultural, and religious diversity, particularly during the formulation of policies (Abu-Laban 1994) whereas secularism entails equal respect for all religions. The immigration policies of the ruling BJP are seen as a ploy to single out Muslims and deprive them politically, socially, and economically. The CH frame blames the BJP for dividing the Northeast into religious lines for electoral gains and furthering their larger agenda of a Hindu nation. It condemns them for attacking the secular character of the Indian constitution and demands citizenship for illegal Muslims on secular grounds.

The FP frame holds an inclusive character by calling all the people of the Northeast the victims of failed immigration policies of the State. They include indigenous communities, early immigrants, internal migrants, illegal immigrants, and Muslims. By passing legislation that provides citizenship to illegal immigrants of all faiths except Muslims, the Citizenship Amendment Act of 2019 (CAA) is said to have otherized Muslims and instilled a sense of fear and insecurity among the indigenous communities. By not acknowledging the complex history of migration and the dynamics of internal migration and displacement, State immigration policies have done injustice to the early migrants and internal migrants. The frame calls detention camps "the graveyard of the living dead" where several injustices are meted out against the illegal immigrants and their human rights violated. The FP frame guides its criticism of immigration policies through

all the aforementioned principles which include ethnonational cultural considerations, justice as fairness, egalitarianism, multiculturalism, and secularism.

7.2.2 Discontentment over immigration policies

The other important constitutive element that has invited extensive discussion is the State immigration policies. The majority of the frames were found to be discontent about the immigration policies of both the colonial and post-colonial states. The IT frame is critical of the promotion of immigration by the colonial policy of "settler colonialism" which it holds liable for the subversion of the indigenous communities. The frame equally condemns the postcolonial policies, namely the Permanent Residence Certificate (PRC), National Registrar of Citizens (NRC), and Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), but primarily invokes the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation (BEFR) Act of 1873 in its opposition. Also, as a mechanism to deal with the problem of immigration, the frame demands the expansion and proper implementation of the BEFR Act.

Hence, it may be said that the IT frame employs colonial policies both as the cause and solution to the problem of immigration as well as the means to critique the post-colonial state. On the other hand, the FN frame does not dispraise the policy of settler colonialism but rather uses it to counter the ethnonational narratives. The FP frame perceives this policy as a colonial tool of commercial and political exploitation. Both FN and FP frame calls upon the policy of settler colonialism to seek and justify an inclusive immigration policy in the Northeast.

Among many post-colonial immigration policies, the CAA, particularly its section 2, and the NRC, has been the subject of huge controversy. Both CH and FP frames are skeptical of the CAA for targeting and isolating Muslims and hurting the secular ethos of India. The CH frame in particular raises questions on the agenda behind the updation of NRC followed immediately by the passing of the CAA. The FP and FN frame highlights the consequences of the reluctance of the CAA and NRC to address the complex history of migration and the nature of internal migration. The NRC is firmly discounted by the FP frame for its incompetency, deficiencies, and, injustices.

The IT frame accuses the CAA of diluting the decades-old movement of the indigenous people against immigration and making the Northeast the dumping ground of illegal immigrants. Although protective measures including Article 371, Inner Line Permit, and Sixth Schedule are in place in many parts of the Northeast, such measures, the IT frame contends, may be easily scrapped by the Indian government like the way it did in the state of Jammu and Kashmir. The FP frame shares this apprehension of the IT frame.

7.2.3. Discourses on fragmentation and conflict

The discourses that underpin all the competing frames are concerned with the division and conflict over the issue of immigration. The majority of the frames are apprehensive about the deepening of boundaries between indigenous and non-indigenous, between insiders or outsiders, between legal immigrants and illegal immigrants, between Northeasterners and mainlanders, between Hindus and Muslims, between Indians and foreigners, and between State governments and Union government. Referring to the proposed legislations like the Register of Indigenous Inhabitants of Nagaland (RIIN) and

Manipur People's Protection Bill (MPPB), the FP frame foregrounds the growing conflict within the federal structure of India. The frame regards RIIN and MPPB as a counter-legislation to the CAA and a sign of distrust and difference between the State and the Union governments. Likewise, the IT frame anticipates that CAA may reignite the dormant Assam agitation and more importantly the waning separatist movements of the Northeast.

The policies including, RIIN, MPPB, and PRC, according to the FN frame are fomenting the contentious insider-outsider/tribal-nontribal issue and dividing individuals, communities, and governments. After the recommendation to grant PRC to non-tribal communities in Arunachal Pradesh in 2019, the friction and conflict between the tribals and non-tribals have exponentially increased (Prakesh Sharma, personal communication, March 27, 2021). The FN frame also questions the logic of setting 1951 as the cut-off date to identify illegal immigrants on MPPB when the state of Manipur was created in 1972. RIIN is held responsible for stimulating hostility among the Naga community and

The CH frame similarly believes that the NRC and CAA have completely fragmented the inclusive character of the Assamese identity. The CAA by providing citizenship to illegal immigrant Bengali Hindus has given rise to anti-Bengali sentiments in Assam and hence divided the Assamese and the Bengalis. The citizenship to illegal immigrant Bengali Hindus has also divided the Bengalis of Assam and illegal immigrant Bengalis. The revision of the NRC would have given relief to Bengalis of Assam as the list would segregate the Bengalis of Assam from illegal immigrant Bengalis. However, the passing of the CAA immediately after the publication of the NRC has kept the ambiguous nature of the identity of the Bengalis of Assam alive.

7.3. Discussion on the interactional dimension

The interactional dimension examines the character of readers' engagement with immigration discourse in Northeast India. A general interpretation of readers' engagement data of all Facebook news pages and deductive framing analysis of comments allowed the present study to find that readers' interaction and participation on the issue of immigration is meagre. The online participatory culture in Northeast India conforms to the theory of social media and participation that considers social media merely as a platform to access information, news, or views (Boulianne, 2015). The finding contradicts the findings of the study by Aneez (2019) which claimed that 50 percent of online news readers share and 33 percent of them comment on the news.

The culture of online participation is somewhere between the e-Enabling and the e-Engaging stage and has not yet touched the e-empowering stage in terms of Macintosh's (c.f. Effing et al., 2011) three stages of development of online participation. The notion of increasing democratic practices and participatory culture as a result of the rise of digital media technologies anticipated by scholars (Jenkins,2006; Theocharis and Quintelier, 2016) may be in its offing.

The inference drawn above does not however mean that readers' interaction is completely absent. The relatively small data on readers' engagement do help us discover important insights. If we take into consideration the opinion articles posted by all Facebook news pages that provoked the highest reader interaction, the associated and dominant framing and reasoning devices applied by these articles belong to the IT frame package. The article that received the highest reader feedback in Inside Northeast highlights the

apprehension of Assam becoming the next Tripura. As discussed in chapter 5, the IT frame often cites the marginalization of indigenous communities in Tripura to showcase the implications of the influx of illegal immigrants in Northeast India. The article that invited maximum readers' interaction in Raiot criticizes the mainstream Indian liberals for supporting the inclusion of illegal immigrant Muslims in the CAA which is the narrative of the IT frame package.

Likewise, the narratives and arguments employed by the popular articles on PRC and CAA in NewsMill and EastMojo take us to the same understanding. At EastMojo, the article titled "CAA: Why Noam Chomsky shows solidarity with NE's indigenous people" garnered the highest interaction. The article was written on the occasion when Noam Chomsky, an American linguist, historian, and political activist condemned the CAA in his reply to the email sent by Richard Kamie (writer of the opinion article). Chomsky wrote, " I have been following these shocking and dangerous developments with deep concern. The Citizenship Amendment Act poses intolerable threats to indigenous people along with many others and should be strongly condemned by international opinion… ". The fact the said article received higher popularity in comparison to others substantiates the theory of the power of influencers in the social news community which proposes that "social news communities are hierarchical with some gaining positions of authority and power" (Tuten, 2008). The highest length of interaction found was 28. It means participants replied to one another 28 times. The interaction happened on the issue of indigenous against non-indigenous.

The dominance of the IT frame was also found during the process of validation of the representational frames through deductive framing analysis. The weight of the IT frame package amounted to 22.5 percent of the readers' comments. Therefore, reflecting upon the concept of framing proposed by Entman (1993), the present study suggests that the framing and reasoning devices applied by the IT frame on the issue of immigration are congruent with the most common readers' schemata or considering Gorp's (2010) contention, it may be argued that the IT frame has the higher chance to evoke a schema in the mind of the reader that is in line with the frame.

As stated earlier, 14.5 percent of the comments dispute the IT frame and 9.6 percent of the comments have applied the FN frame. As discussed in chapter 5, the FN frame serves as the counter-frame to the IT frame that primarily challenges the narratives and claims of the latter, hence, it may be said the readers' comments on the issue of immigration in the Northeast are fundamentally premised on the discourse of ethnonationalism. About 47 percent of the readers' comments are engaged in advocating or contesting the ethnonational cultural arguments on immigration. The highest length of interaction found also happened on the issue of indigenous against non-indigenous. And since both the CH frame and FP frame are skeptical about the Hindutva rhetoric on the issue of immigration, it may be said that, following ethnonationalism, the issue of immigration is based on the discourse on religious nationalism.

7.4. Conclusion

Building upon the emerging scholarship on the reconceptualization of the notion of the public sphere in the wake of the development of new information and communication technologies, the present thesis studies social media as an institution of the public sphere in Northeast India. One common proposition advanced by scholars on the subject matter is new media technologies have led to the emergence of multiple domains of the public sphere including "micro-public spheres" that facilitate a diverse level of communication and interactions and bring different perspectives and narratives into the public sphere (Dahlgren, 2005; Gitlin, 1998; Keane; 1995; Young, 2007).

In the Northeast, this phenomenon is examined in terms of the nature and functioning of digital news media, specifically Facebook news pages as an institution of micro-public spheres. Given the opportunity to start a news media with minimal infrastructural and human resources, multiple digital news media including Facebook news pages has come up in the Northeast. Three dimensions of Facebook news pages- structural, representational, and interactional- has been studied.

A healthy institution of the public sphere is predominantly measured in terms of its democratic and deliberative character. Digital news media in Northeast India partially operates as a micro-public sphere in the sub-nation-state of Northeast India. They are tied immediately to the territory and community of the Northeast and are making a considerable contribution by providing communicative spaces for politics at the local level. In this regard, digital news media in the Northeast are attaining one of the three important public sphere functions of online journalism propounded by (Nip, 2006) which is "connecting to

the community". By disseminating diverse narratives on important matters of politics, they are also "helping public deliberation in search of solutions". The results of the framing analysis of the immigration issue found all four frames provide various solutions to the problem of immigration. About the third function to "engage individuals as citizens", digital news media is abysmally lacking. Bottom-up communications are an important institutional feature and function of micro-public spheres.

Another important aspect institutional feature of the public sphere is issues regarding freedom of speech. The nature and character of freedom of speech are determined by multiple factors including, political economy, ownership, regulations, funding models, and others. The majority of digital news media including Facebook news pages are owned by individuals or a small group. They are mostly started as micro-enterprises by journalists having experience in legacy media. Hence, digital news media in the Northeast is relatively free from state or corporate control. However, the recent takeover of Inside Northeast by India Today Group does convey some signs toward corporatization.

Minimal control by the state is exerted through one regulatory framework called the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021 which authorizes the state to constitute a committee to hear grievances against digital news media. No evidence of control was found through the funding models. Digital news media doesn't receive any advertisements from the state. Direct advertisement comes from local sources and corporate advertisements are received via programmatic ads which are AI (Artificial Intelligence) enabled. The nature control by donors (if any) could not be ascertained. The digital news media in the Northeast may be argued to fall largely under

the "journalism domain" of the net-based public sphere principally functioning as an alternative news media where news and views principally related to the Northeast are highlighted and deliberated upon.

As an emerging institution of the public sphere, digital news media including Facebook news pages has generated significant outcomes. They are to some degree challenging the asymmetrical power relations between the Indian mainland and the Northeast. The "othering" of the Northeast is the major concern raised by scholars in their study on the representation of the Northeast by mainstream media (Basnett, 2011; Khasrshiing 2020). Digital news media in Northeast India are found to be primarily grounded on the principle of "self-representation". The fact that these news media are heavily dependent upon stringers and voluntary contributions provides support to this argument. All the founders of digital news media unequivocally agreed on the need to self-project the Northeast to make a presence in the mainstream political discourse. They are particularly devoted to giving a maximum and horizontal representation of events and issues of the Northeast. Digital news media in Northeast India as an institution of the public sphere is giving expression to vernacular perspectives against the existing mainstream media thereby becoming a promising force for democratization.

Digital news media at the same time is fulfilling the fundamental requirement of the public sphere to accommodate maximum cultural contestation. The initial classification of political commentaries posted on Facebook news pages and the findings of the inductive framing analysis of the immigration discourse of Northeast India provide insights into the same. Opinion articles on diverse issues including immigration, development politics, insurgency, racism, gender, and others were found to be deliberated upon. Consequently,

the reconstruction of frame packages revealed different and contradictory narratives on immigration. The immigration discourse was found to be based on the varied principles and communitarianism and liberal democracy. This means that different individuals, groups, and ideologies are bringing different perspectives into the public sphere.

This study however puts forward genuine reservations over the nature of people's interaction on social media, especially on Facebook news pages. The prospect and power of public interaction are yet to be fully realized in the Northeast. Considering the findings that the comments, shares, and likes per article were found to be 1.85, 16, and 40.60 respectively, the critical interactive feature of social media to engage individuals as citizens in the process of deliberation is almost absent. The finding is inimical to Habermas's (1991) ideal or normative formulation of the public sphere as a liberal democratic practice or a space where private individuals enter into conservation as public and express opinions about matters of public interest. It weakens the constructive notion propounded by scholars about new information and communication technologies as bringing about a culture of participation, freedom of speech, and social change.

The explanation for the low level of people's participation and interaction on social media specifically in deliberative politics like opinion articles may be the subject matter of future studies. The study may look into the aspect of technical and cultural resources while participating in the networked public sphere.

7.5 Scope for future studies

As discussed earlier, readers' participation and interaction are found to be very low or almost absent. The finding is against the very foundation of social media as an interactive medium and therefore the facilitator of a robust public sphere. The low reader engagement is something future studies on social media may look into through audience studies. Given the poor physical and technical infrastructure and sparsed and hostile terrain in the Northeast, the study on the same may add to the available literature on the digital divide or bring other new insights.

One interesting piece of information received by the scholar from one of the respondents is that digital news media organizations provide the hyperlink to the content on social media which redirects the reader to the website. The readers after being redirected are reluctant to shift back to the erstwhile source and comment or share. The management of the organization does so to increase the website traffic to attract more programmatic ads on the website because text content on social media doesn't invite such ads as compared to video content. The said information throws further research questions. Does the hyperlink content discourage readers' engagement? Does video content invite more programmatic advertisements than text content? If yes, what are its various implications

The study found that ethnonational positions and narratives are very dominant in the Northeast. Is this position limited to the discourse on immigration or does it dominate other political discourses in the Northeast as well is something that may be studied in the future. The very basis of ethnonationalism in the Northeast may also be investigated which may simultaneously throw light into why other positions are least dominant. The study has

already revealed many other dominant political discourses apart from immigration. The present scholar is particularly interested in examing the framing of the discourse on development politics and racism. Studies on feminism may look into media discourse on gender and others on other issues.

This study has revealed that digital news media in the Northeast is heavily dependent upon stringers and voluntary contributions. The nature and implications of the same may be further probed. Likewise, the studies on the vernacular and region-specific digital news media within the Northeast may give further micro-level insights into the nature and functioning of the Northeast public sphere. Studies may be conducted on other online media formats available.

Some specific areas of research that may be looked into further are:

1. Social media and citizen engagement: The study of Northeast India
2. Social media and hyperlinking: Implications on readers' participation and engagement
3. The study of "Stringers" in the making of digital news media organizations
4. Social media as micro-public spheres: The study of vernacular and region-specific Facebook news pages and groups of Northeast India

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