



19th National Meeting of the Network of Women in Media, India

Guwahati, January 31 to Feb 2, 2025



Sustained, Responsible and In-depth Reporting on and from the Northeast need of the hour

More than 190 women media professionals from across the country, representing print, digital and electronic media in diverse languages and regions, came together for this important event.

Almost every year since it was launched in 2002, the NWMI has held a national meeting hosted by one of its local chapters. The aim of these meetings is to get as many of the more than 900 women media professionals who are now part of the network to meet in person, discuss issues that concern journalists and the challenges faced during the course of our work. The meetings also provide opportunities for skill building, for learning more about the city and the state where the meeting is held, and to provide space to discuss concerns that often cannot be aired in public.

The media in India is under extreme pressure, even as the overall liberal space is shrinking and along with it, media freedoms are increasingly at risk. From physical attacks to online abuse, false cases and intimidation, journalists operate in a difficult environment. In addition, with government pressure including outright bans and the use

of legal cases to harass media outlets, the legacy media is struggling to stay afloat in an intensely competitive environment.

Women journalists are struggling to enter and stay in the profession, facing the gender pay gaps, bias, and outright harassment. Journalists from minority religions and marginalized communities are even more vulnerable.

Statement and theme

NWMI released a [statement at the end of the meet](#), calling for more responsible and sensitive reporting on North East India and a more secure environment for independent journalists to carry out their work.

The topic of this year's public meeting was 'Media: Conflict and Climate Change-Impact on Women'. The meeting began with a presentation titled 'Crafting Conservation: The Hargila Story' by Whitley Gold, Champions of the Earth and Time Woman of the Year award winning conservationist Purnima Devi Barman, the only Indian Woman on TIME's Women of the Year 2025. She highlighted how she mobilized villagers, particularly women, in saving the Greater Adjutant Stork (GAS), locally known as the 'hargila' which was considered being an 'ill-omen' for the society.

Registrations, introductions and learning more about who we are



Participants registering for the meet

This year, internal sessions were conducted across all three days of the meet. After registering, participating members from across India introduced themselves, for many, it was the first time they could connect faces to the names on e.groups and WhatsApp groups.



On the second day, the two-hour internal network session of the NWMI discussed in detail various activities that have been taken up in the past and also the plans for the future. There was also a lengthy discussion about the roles of the members, specifically how more members should come forward to volunteer on their own for various network activities. The non-hierarchical and voluntary nature of the collective was highlighted and all members were urged to be more proactive towards helping it grow more dynamically to make a visible difference in the landscape of Indian Journalism.



The final internal session was a wrap-up of the three-day meeting. A discussion on bringing out a statement was also held, while members also deliberated on the venue of the next NWMI national meet.

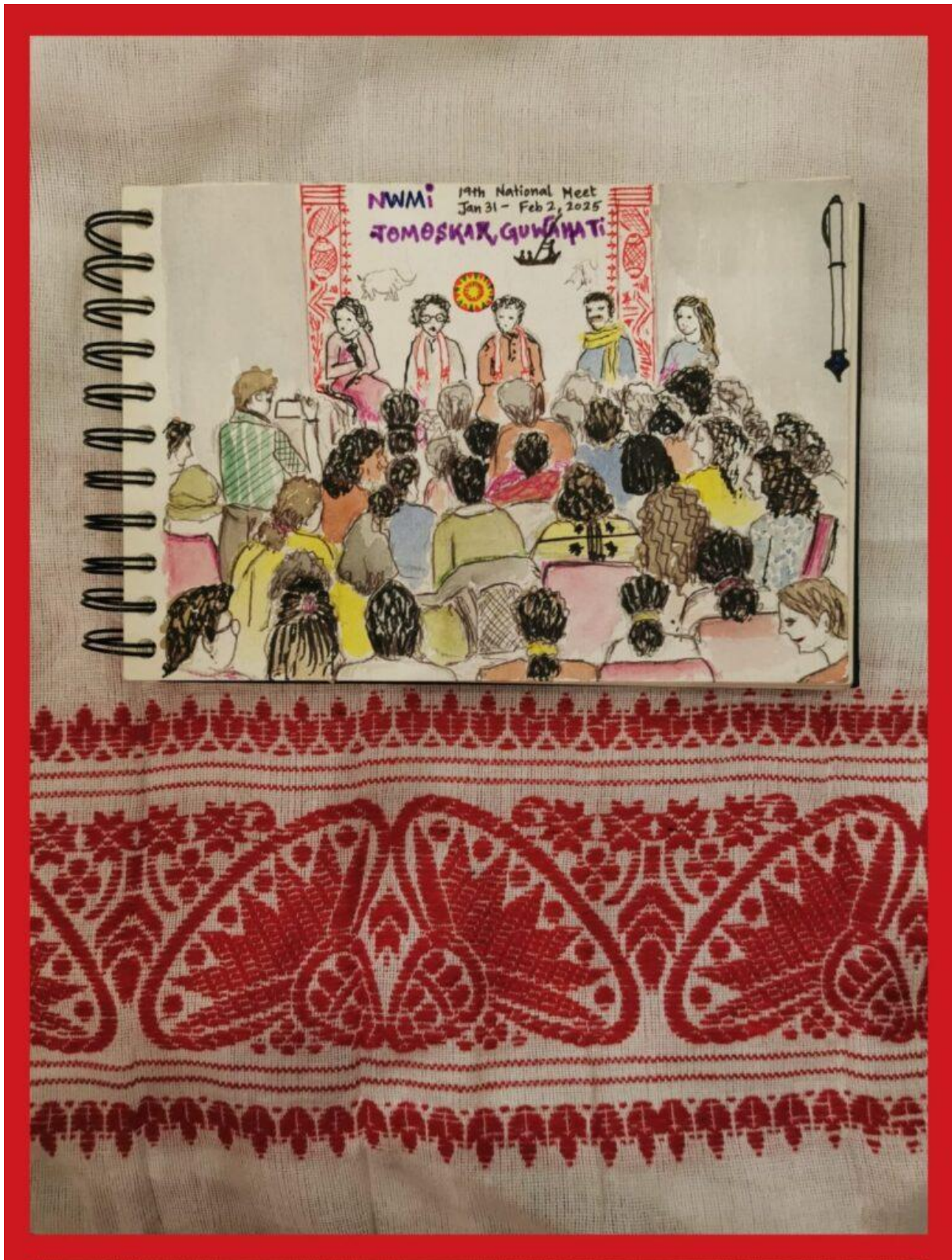
The Brahmaputra calls



NWMI members on the Brahmaputra cruise

Members took some time out after the meeting to cruise along the Brahmaputra, which was a significant presence outside our meeting halls at the Don Bosco Institute.





A sketch of the meeting by Priyanka Borpujari

Session 1: Regional Media-What Lies Ahead in the Digital Age?



From left: Humaira Nabi of Kashmir Life, Sunit Jain, director and publisher of GPlus, Guwahati, C Vanaja, senior journalist from Hyderabad, Nazni Rizvi, journalist with Khabar Lahariya, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh and CG Manjula, senior journalist from Bangalore.

“Traditional media and digital media are co-existing at the local level,” said CG Manjula, senior journalist from Bangalore, during a panel discussion on “Regional media: What lies ahead in the digital age?” at the three-day national meeting of the Network of Women in India (NWMI), held in Guwahati, Assam, earlier this year.

Other members of the panel were Sunit Jain (director and publisher of GPlus, Guwahati), Nazni Rizvi (journalist with Khabar Lahariya, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh) and Humaira Nabi of Kashmir Life. The session was moderated by C Vanaja, senior journalist from Hyderabad. Kasturi Das introduced the panel. The panel examined the challenges and opportunities they transition in the digital age.



From left: Sunit Jain, moderator C Vanaja, Nazni Rizvi, CG Manjula and Humaira Nabi

Vanaja began by saying that both legacy and other local language media have their own spaces. According to her, several journalists have managed to restart their careers with digital media, which present new opportunities.

Manjula agreed, saying legacy media may be facing challenges from digital media but are far from extinct. According to her, print media still make an impact on society, with neo-literate people and those without easy access to the Internet still relying on them for information. Also, she said, with fake news and disinformation rampant in the digital space, including social media, people still rely more on newspapers. Regional language print media are also adapting, not only launching digital editions (often behind a paywall) but also adopting better design, providing explainers as well as news analysis, opinion pieces and special supplements pegged on major events. Legacy media are also venturing into video stories and webinars, which means journalists increasingly need to develop multiple skills. According to her, both regional and digital media are co-existing at present and may do so in the foreseeable future. However, she said, we need to adapt and transform to stay relevant.

Vanaja pointed out that if newspapers do not survive, digital media may also not survive since most of them feed of the digital editions of legacy newspapers. Many of them function more like news aggregators, with newspapers as the primary source of news.

Nazni Rizvi shared the story of her newspaper, the well-known, 23-year-old women-run platform for rural news, Khabar Lahariya. “When Khabar’s print edition was stopped in 2014, we were all shocked and scared that we would lose our identity,” she said. “But we entered into the digital space in 2016 and slowly learnt to survive as thrive as digital

media.” Today, KL reaches five million people every month through multiple digital platforms. It has a network of 25 women reporters across 16 districts of Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh, who run a hyperlocal, video-first news channel, broadcasting news primarily to audiences in remote areas. “Learning never ends,” she pointed out. “We learn and also teach. Earlier rural women were reluctant to talk on camera. But we all have learnt on the job. Earlier officials used to speak to the newspaper. Now they don’t want to talk on camera.”

Talking about the weekly magazine she works with, Humaira Nabi said, “We started as a 36-page magazine and we were earning well. However, after August 2019 and, even more so, during Covid, it became difficult to get advertisements. The Media Policy 2020 of the state administration made the situation worse. The magazine was forced to reduce the number of pages by more than half and became a 16-pager.” According to her, the editor then decided to dive into the digital space in order to survive. However, the space is quite crowded with an over-saturation of media backed by the government. “The line between traditional media and digital media is now blurred,” she said.

Sunit Jain, founder of GPlus, a hyperlocal news portal based in Assam, pointed out that there is a need to deconstruct the term “regional media”. According to him, regional media are different from local and hyperlocal media. He also flagged the fact that the Northeast is a widely misunderstood region. Pointing out that regional media in the Northeast attempt to cover the entire region, which is made up of several states with people belonging to different tribes, speaking different languages, etc., he said there is no common context: the states just happen to be situated near each other, the issues they face are different. “I don’t see any prospect of growth in regional media, at least in the northeastern region. The Times of India and The Telegraph both started north-east editions but they did not work. According to him, the same goes for digital portals attempting to be regional. He believes that the future lies in hyper-local media that represents the power of community and brings people together. As he sees it, the reason why the hyper-local GPlus has not only survived for 11 years but is also thriving is because it focuses on telling stories about the lives of the local people and their concerns in an attempt to make citizens’ lives better. He said they have built up a community of contributors who are also consumers. “The future of journalism and journalists is hyper-local,” he concluded.

A lively discussion followed before the session came to an end.

Report by Varsha Torgalkar

Edited by Ammu Joseph

Session 2: Perspectives from the Periphery-Reporting on and from North-East India



From left: Sushmita Goswami, journalist at Press Trust of India, Kalpana Sharma, independent journalist and author, Linda Chhakchhuak, independent journalist, Sushanto Talukdar, Editor of NEZine, and Rohini Mohan, independent journalist and author.

Journalists from the North-East and those who travel to the region for short periods to report on it, grapple with different sets of challenges, said panellists at the second panel discussion, against the backdrop of the ongoing conflict in Manipur. The session focused on reporting about the North-East, a region that was often neglected for being on the periphery of the Indian mainland but lay at the centre of vital debates about citizenship, federalism, internal colonisation, biodiversity and the climate crisis, the panellists said.

Sushmita Goswami, a Guwahati based journalist working at Press Trust of India, moderated the panel consisting of two journalists based in the North-East— Independent journalist Linda Chhakchhuak and Editor of NEZine, Sushanto Talukdar— and two from outside who have reported on the region—Independent journalists and authors—Kalpana Sharma and Rohini Mohan.

No matter what a journalist’s background, professional vetting processes are vital in ensuring accuracy and fairness, the panellists said. About the critique of “Parachute Journalism,” Rohini Mohan said, a journalist, after all, is an outsider everywhere, with a desire to understand. Echoing her sentiment, Kalpana Sharma said “Is journalism going to be about— ‘I am the only one who is entitled to write about my area, my people, my problems?’ If it breaks down to that, then I think we are facing a true crisis.”

Different dilemmas

Reflecting the panel's composition, a major part of the discussion focused on the dilemmas posed to insiders versus outsiders while covering the North-East.

Insiders, those who are rooted in the region, have to be particularly conscious of not allowing their identities to colour their coverage, said Sushanto Talukdar, who lives in Guwahati and has covered the region for decades. Insiders working for local media organisations may also be vulnerable to pressures from advertisers such as the state government and private entities, he said.



From left: Moderator Sushmita Goswami, Kalpana Sharma, Linda Chhakchhuak, Sushanto Talukdar and Rohini Mohan.

Outsiders, for their part, have to grapple with not being intimately familiar with the region's social, cultural and historical context, a lacuna that they must fill by doing their homework before landing in the region, said Chhakchhuak, a veteran journalist based in Shillong.

Even journalists based in one part of the North-East need to realise that they are outsiders in other areas, Talukdar said, highlighting the region's astonishing but underappreciated diversity, including the fact that it is home to speakers of more than 400 languages. "How can I claim to know Manipur if I visit it just twice or thrice in a year?," he asked.

At the same time, outsiders might retain the ability to be surprised by developments that those closer to the action might take for granted, suggested Rohini Mohan. "Some advantages are that I get confounded perhaps more quickly and easily." She said that she had also learnt from the inevitable criticism that came her way from locals because

it pointed to the gaps in her understanding. “From there, I know what to go and read,” she said. As an outsider, she said that she gave herself time to get all sides of a story and process the information. “I resist the urge to write or say something immediately while I am reporting on a place,” which is a challenge in this digital age, Mohan said.

Outsiders can fruitfully collaborate with local journalists by travelling together, for one, in volatile situations, there is safety in numbers, she said. “For another, while locals can help with translating and quickly locating a story’s geographical hot spots, those on assignment for the national and international media might be able to open doors more easily and could bring a global perspective to a story,” she said.

Scene of action

Covering the North-East was vital because here one can see in action the effects of revolutionary changes that have swept the country’s media, economic and political landscapes over the past four decades, Sharma said. In this period, the media has expanded from print to include television and, more recently, digital platforms and social media. On the political front, the intensification of religious polarisation over the past decade has left its imprint on the North-East, as the conflict in Manipur reveals, while in the economic sphere, market-oriented policies have turned investors’ eyes to the resource-rich region.

Recalling her foray into reporting on the North-East, Sharma said, “I heard Assamese saying to me, we feel like a colony because we have natural resources... Delhi is only interested in us in order to extract as much as they can from us.”

Talukdar suggested that digital media could fill gaps and biases in coverage of the North-East region by allowing its inhabitants to tell their own stories. “We have to create our own space,” he said. But Sharma cautioned that while digital media had democratised journalism to an extent, this process also had downsides. One drawback was that such writing lacked the gatekeeping that defines journalism. Another was that it had led to a trend of people consuming information in silos in ways that confirm their biases, she said. “That is adding to the polarisation, and that is adding to our lack of understanding of complex issues,” she added.

Journalists should write about the North-East also because amidst a global climate crisis and ecological collapse, the region’s pristine forests, its agricultural methods, such as jhum cultivation, its biodiversity as well as the diversity of its traditions represent an alternative to the mainstream and to globalisation’s monoculture, said Chhakchhuak. “We are the ones who have the answers to some of the crises...in the world,” she said.

Report by Sumana Ramanan

Edited by Swagata Yadavar

Session 3: Real Women, Reel Stories-Women Shaping Cinema



From left: Nasreen Habib, journalist at The Assam Tribune, Madhurima Baruah Sen, general secretary of the Gauhati Cine Club, Lima Das, actor, Rajni Basumatary, filmmaker, and Nadika Nadja, writer, teacher and researcher

‘If you are not going to write it, someone else will’ Nadika Nadja emphasised this during a discussion on ‘Real women, reel stories’, held in connection with the 19th NWMI meet in Guwahati.

Assamese Cinema has always been on the margins, and women in Assamese films have been on the “margins of margins”. With that reminder, moderator Nasreen Habib, a journalist with *The Assam Tribune*, kicked off the session that delved into the roles and stories of women in the Assamese film industry. The panellists were actor Lima Das, filmmaker Rajni Basumatary, writer, teacher and researcher Nadika Nadja, and general secretary of the Gauhati Cine Club, Madhurima Baruah Sen. The discussion on ‘Real women, reel stories’, was organised as part of the 19th annual meet of the Network of Women in Media (NWMI) held in Guwahati from January 31 to February 2.

Das, who has an academic and dance background, could never connect to any films she watched during her childhood, she said. But as she evolved as a dancer and artist, she felt she wanted to do “one good film”. So she went to acclaimed Assamese director Bhaskar Hazarika and ended up getting her first role. “I had nothing to lose,” she recalled saying to herself.

Their film *Aamis* (meat) not only explores the significance of meat-eating habits in various Northeastern cultures but also presents itself as a metaphor for desire.



Nasreen Habib, Madhurima Baruah Sen, Lima Das, Rajni Basumatary and Nadika Nadja

On the other hand, much of Basumatary's work has been shaped by her and her community's traumatic past. Hailing from the Bodo community, the filmmaker recounted stories of losing her loved ones during the conflict, which continues to be an overarching theme in her films. While her Bodo-language film *Jwlwi – The Seed* is set in the insurgency-hit Assam of the 90s, her all-female-character movie, *Gorai Phakhri* ('Wild Swans'), explores lives of women in a patriarchal society in the conflict-hit state.

The room was filled with applause as she shared her challenges depicting patriarchy in the Bodo community, otherwise considered liberal.

But it was not too long ago when women in Assamese films were portrayed in a stereotypical manner, as hapless, oppressed women, said Baurah Sen. She talked about *Joymoti*, the first Assamese film in 1935, which was based on a historical character and was a "reflection of the society" at the time. However, in the next few decades the Assamese film industry would hardly see any strong or complex female characters. It was only in the 70s and 80s, she said, that filmmakers began exploring emotional depth in women.

She was particularly moved by a film by Dr Bhabendra Nath Saikia, where a married woman gets pregnant with another man as an act of revenge against her husband who had another wife.

And while women characters in cinema, in Assam and beyond, seem to have evolved over time, most commercial films still explore the idea of queerness only through tragic

or comic lens, Nadja said. “We tend to focus on things we want to look at,” she said, stressing on the need to look at queer characters beyond just these two shades.

She mentioned the Tamil film *90ML* where two queer people are simply having fun.

Towards the end of the session, while Das and Basumatary talked about their upcoming projects, one of the members in the audience requested the panelists for advice meant for writers.

Nadja replied: “If you are not going to write it, someone else will. And you are not going to like it. That’s the only way to write.”

Report by Romita Saluja

Edited by Saraswathy Nagarajan

Food for thought was interspersed with:



Session 4: Breaking the cycle-Media's role in highlighting multi-dimensional strategies to end child marriage



From left: Priyanka Tupe, Journalist, BehanBox, Dr. Gitanjali Ghosh, Associate Professor of Law, Tezpur University, Tora Agarwala, Independent Journalist (Moderator), Dr. Vikram Srivastava, Advocate and Founder, Independent Thought and Rokibuz Zaman, Journalist, Scroll.in

This panel threw up several insights, including that child marriage in India affects both boys and girls, though it predominantly impacts women. The discussion centred around Assam — the state where the NMWI meet was convened — which has made some significant efforts to end this practice. Tora Agarwala, a freelance journalist reporting on the northeast, moderated the discussion.

Multimedia journalist Priyanka Tupe, based in Maharashtra, began reporting on child marriage during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through her work, she had found that the practice escalated at the time, with the boy's or man's family coming to the girl's house, and quickly finishing the ceremony on that day.

She spoke about the many reasons parents commit to a child marriage. Poverty, migration, caste, class were major factors, Tupe said. Another was safety. When women worked outside the house, there was no adult at home to take care of the children, frequently seen in sugarcane cutters in Maharashtra. They would decide to marry their daughters off.

She also cited the case of Monalisa Bhosle, the 16-year-old rudraksha-bead seller, whose video at the Kumbh Mela went viral. Such unwanted virality could possibly force a family to fix their daughter's wedding, a researcher had explained to her.

Climate change was also impacting the practice. One example she gave was of water shortages. Since it was usually the women who carry water, marriage was a way of bringing in more hands to do this.

Agarwala then took the discussion to Assam and its police crackdown on child marriages in the state. She asked Guwahati-based Rokibuz Zaman, who works with Scroll, on his experience of covering child marriage in Assam had been.

Zaman revealed that thousands of people were arrested for being involved in child marriage. These marriages have social consent, many of which stem from romantic relationships, and the use of Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) law in such relationships, is questioned by the community.

Zaman said that in the crackdown, 62% of the families were Muslim, mostly from remote areas, staying mainly on the banks of the Brahmaputra. The tea tribe communities were also impacted. There was a strong pushback to this crackdown, with women gathering in front of police stations, cursing the Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma and the government.

Dr. Srivastava questioned the use of the word 'crackdown', saying it was focused on the illegality of what is a social issue. He also said journalists needed to stop using the word crackdown, because it was just the police doing its job. This was an issue of patriarchy, he said, not religion.

Agarwala then turned to Dr. Ghosh, asking her if the existing legal framework still lacked in some way. "I wish I could answer this in a simple sentence.... The legal age of consent is now 18, and it has its own journey, just like the legal age of marriage. [The year] 1978, was when we finally got a law or act to fix the minimum age for marriage. There are many more laws that deal with child marriage," she said, adding that all those involved in a child marriage are accountable, from the one who initiated the marriage to the attendees at a ceremony.

Awareness, she said, is not just about telling people about one part of a law. "When we talk about awareness, we need to also give awareness on annulment, divorce, rights of the children. There are gaps in the law."



From left: Priyanka Tupe, Dr. Gitanjali Ghosh, moderator Tora Agarwala, Dr. Vikram Srivastava and Rokibuz Zaman.

Tupe and Zaman extended that thought, saying reporters also needed training across legal and socio-economic factors. They drew attention to the Climate Brides podcast by Reetika Revathy Subramanian, who worked as a Senior Research Associate on the Successful Intervention Pathways for Migration as Adaptation research project at the School of Global Development, University of East Anglia.

The panel felt that media reporting on child marriage was one step, but organisations needed to take it one step further and also get involved in generating awareness, because while the government could make and enforce the law, the press had the power to create behaviour change.

This session was organised in collaboration with UNICEF

Report by Sindhu Nepolean

Edited by Sunalini Mathew

Session 5

Behind the Bylines-Navigating Mental Health and Well-Being in Journalism



From left: Gitika Talukdar, sports journalist and photographer, Indrani Raimedhi, Features Editor, The Assam Tribune, Kavin Malar, independent journalist (Moderator), Dr Mythili Hazarika, Associate Professor, Clinical Psychology, Guwahati Medical College, and Pushpa Rokde, independent journalist, Chhattisgarh.

A critical session *Behind the Bylines: Navigating Mental Health and Well-Being in Journalism* explored the unique mental health challenges faced by journalists in India's high-pressure media landscape, with a focus on stress, workplace toxicity, harassment, and the safety of women journalists.

Breaking barriers in sports journalism – Gitika Talukdar

Gitika Talukdar shared her journey as a pioneering female sports journalist in India, which began in 2006 with a regional news channel and went on to covering the Olympics. She described her struggle against gender bias and scepticism, particularly in a male-dominated industry. She recounted a harrowing experience when she was attacked by a mob, leaving her unable to walk for three months. Despite covering high-risk events, including bomb blasts, she remained committed to sports journalism.

“At the start, no one took me seriously because I was a woman. I had to freelance for multiple organizations just to sustain myself. But I kept going because I knew I could handle the camera just as well as anyone else.”

Reporting from the margins – Pushpa Rokde

As an independent journalist covering stories from remote tribal regions, Pushpa Rokde highlighted the extreme challenges of reporting in areas with poor connectivity and security threats due to Maoist presence. She spoke about the mental preparedness required to operate in such hostile environments: *“Where I live, journalism is extremely difficult. The area is heavily controlled by security forces and Maoists. We have to rely on trackers to move around. Covering news here requires immense mental preparedness.”*

She also underscored the ethical responsibility of journalists: *“A journalist’s responsibility is not just about ‘what, where, and when’ but also about ‘how’ the audience perceives the story. The impact of our words matters.”*

Three decades in journalism – Indrani Raimedhi



Gitika Talukdar, Indrani Raimedhi and Kavita Malar

Indrani Raimedhi, with nearly four decades in journalism, reflected on the gender biases she faced as the first woman journalist in her editorial team in 1989. *“I’ll never forget when a gentleman once said: ‘Go home and cook.’ To them, a woman’s role was only in the kitchen. But I refused to be confined by those limitations.”* On mental health, she emphasized the importance of detachment in sustaining a long career, advising journalists to separate their professional responsibilities from personal well-being.

Mental health in journalism – Dr. Mythili Hazarika

Dr. Mythili Hazarika provided expert insights on the growing mental health crisis among journalists. With 25 years of experience in clinical psychology, she outlined key concerns:

- Journalists frequently experience trauma, stress, and burnout due to their work.
- Many are not mentally prepared for the assignments they receive.
- Shock, numbness, and trauma are often dismissed as weaknesses rather than acknowledged as psychological concerns.
- 40-80% of journalists do not speak about their mental health struggles.
- High work pressure and inadequate support systems lead to extreme stress and eventual burnout.
- Sexual harassment and workplace toxicity significantly contribute to mental distress.

She emphasized the need for journalists to adopt coping strategies, including mindfulness, stress management techniques, and seeking professional help.

“Journalists need to accept that they are human. Seeking help is not a weakness—it’s necessary.”

Audience questions and key takeaways

The interactive Q&A session addressed the pressing concerns of journalists in attendance. Key discussions included:

- **Managing emotional triggers during interviews** – Dr. Hazarika advised journalists to avoid dwelling on distressing statements and to focus on controlling their reactions.
- **Overcoming family pressures** – Gitika Talukdar shared that after a bomb blast incident, her family urged her to quit journalism. She persevered despite the challenges, lacking a strong support system or industry connections.

The discussion concluded with a strong emphasis on building resilience and prioritizing mental health in the field of journalism. The panellists reinforced key recommendations:

- Media organizations must create safe and supportive work environments.
- Journalists should practice self-care, mindfulness, and stress management techniques.
- Encouraging open conversations about mental health struggles is crucial for sustaining well-being.
- A work-life balance is essential to prevent burnout and emotional exhaustion.

While journalism remains a demanding profession, acknowledging mental health challenges and implementing supportive measures will ensure a healthier, more sustainable industry for journalists.

The session reinforced the need for collective action and institutional reforms to protect the psychological health of media professionals.

Report by Neetu Singh

Edited by Madhavi Ravikumar

Simultaneous Breakout Workshops

On the final day of the meeting four simultaneous breakout workshops were held on the following topics:



Workshop 1: Facilitators- Laxmi Murthy (left), editor and independent journalist and Geeta Seshu, independent journalist and co-editor, Free Speech Collective.

Watch Your Back: A collaborative learning workshop on safety on the field and beyond

Journalists are pushing the envelope, reporting on issues fraught with danger and are constantly exposed to risks of physical and digital safety. They often venture into fields with little sense of where the attack can come from. Freelancers are at particular risk and impunity is an ever-present condition. The workshop provided a sharing and learning space to learn life-saving tips on and off the field, access legal aid and help watch our backs.

Together We Are Strong

Collectivising Independent Journalists: The concerns and travails of freelancers/independent journalists have been spotlighted for several years in the NWMI. They include: lack of access to editors; payment -related issues, (inadequate and late payment; no kill fees; no travel expenses), lack of contracts, denial of legitimacy, safety related issues, copyright and plagiarism; need for legal support and the need for solidarity to achieve better overall standards for freelancers. The NWMI has already taken some steps forward, in the shape of a database of media houses and contacts of editors to pitch stories; a Freelancers' Charter evolved after discussions;

legal help, fund-raising, advice and moral support when members face litigation. The workshop discussed concrete steps to strengthen the voice of freelancers, to fight for financial justice and dignified working conditions of independent media-persons, for example through a union or association.

Workshop 2: Designing Your Journalism Future



Workshop 2: Facilitator- Neetu Singh (right), independent journalist and founder, Shades of Rural India

Exploring innovative approaches to journalism: This workshop explored the opportunities of the digital transition and ways in which a journalist can design their journalism future, telling the stories they care about, while focusing on the audience and getting paid for it through sponsorship, advertising or membership.

The workshop introduced ‘design thinking’ (problem solving and people-centred innovation) is suitable for individual journalists thinking of setting out on their own, or for others who are thinking of building journalism businesses. Many NWMI members are transitioning to digital platforms and are thinking of ways to make it work, and this workshop was an excellent opportunity and learning experience for them.

Workshop 3: Tracking the Wild



Workshop 3: Facilitator- Ajoy Kumar Das, senior law consultant, NGO Aaranyak

Reporting crime, conservation, and trafficking in India: India, home to some of the world's most diverse ecosystems, faces significant challenges from wildlife crime, habitat destruction, and trans-boundary trafficking of species. This workshop equipped participants with the knowledge and skills to report on critical wildlife and environmental issues across India. The key topics discussed during the workshop were understanding the Wildlife Laws and its role in curbing illegal wildlife trade, the implications of CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) in regulating the trade of endangered and exotic species and investigating trans-boundary wildlife trafficking.

PUBLIC MEETING February 1, 2025: NEDFI CONVENTION CENTRE

Crafting Conservation: The Hargila Story



Purnima Devi Barman speaks at the public meeting

“Takh takh.... Takh takh...”

The public meeting started with a clatter of bird calls.

Renowned conservationist Purnima Devi Barman captured the audience’s attention by mimicking the distinctive clatter of the Hargila or Greater Adjutant Stork, and invited everyone to join in. Soon the hall was filled with the sounds of the Hargila bird.

Dr Purnima Devi Burman’s passion for the Hargila was evident everywhere. Her earrings, pendant, and her Assamese mekhla chador all had intricate Hargila motifs. Her team wore papier mache Hargila hats. She even requested the audience to forget her name and call her Hargila bird. Indeed, she is popularly known as Hargila Baideo or Hargila Sister.

Purnima Devi narrated her inspiring journey to protect the Hargila. This scavenging bird was despised by the community. Its nesting areas would routinely be destroyed, and it had dwindled in numbers until Purnima Devi launched a campaign for its revival. Despite facing resistance, anger and ridicule, she persevered, engineering a remarkable shift in the public’s perception of this bird.

The story goes back to 2007. Purnima Devi had gone back to academics after giving birth to twin daughters. She was completely focused on completing her PhD when a distressing incident changed the course of her life.

She learned that villagers were cutting down a tree containing a nest of baby Hargila birds nearby. When she asked why they were cutting nesting trees during the breeding season, they told her Hargila birds were a bad omen and did not deserve to live. She learned that cutting down Hargila nesting trees was a common practice across rural Assam. (Assam has the largest of the three Greater Adjutant Stork breeding sites in the world.)



Purnima Devi Barman and her team

Purnima Devi was initially taken aback by the villagers' attitude but she came to understand that people prefer to protect attractive animals and birds; they are not interested in species like the Hargila bird, though it plays a vital role as a scavenger, and is part of nature's cleaning crew. This mindset needed to be changed.

At this point her PhD took a back seat and she started work to protect Hargila birds. She did go back later and obtained her doctorate. She started calling small meetings of women in villages in Kamrup district, near Guwahati, to raise awareness about the bird. Initially the women laughed but their interest was piqued when she started organizing cooking festivals and other small activities.

At the meetings the women would play a game called “Mangalmoysanti Jaal”, or “Web of Harmony”, to raise awareness about the interconnectedness of all living beings in Nature.

Noting that when Hargila birds prepare for their babies, they are called bad omens, whereas humans celebrate expectant mothers with baby showers, Purnima Devi started organising traditional baby showers for Hargilla birds, and even weddings of Hargila birds, using the events as opportunities to raise awareness about the species.

Eventually she formed a small group and called it the Hargila Army. The Hargila Army collaborates with local district administrations and forest departments to protect the species.

The team has visited schools, established Hargila learning centers, and organized rallies, leveraging every opportunity to educate people about the significance of Hargila birds in nature, and the challenges they face. They have created Hargila calendars highlighting the breeding times and other important information about the species. They have even installed nets under nesting trees to save Hargila chicks from falling to the ground. They also felicitate people for saving nesting trees, recognizing their efforts in conservation.

Dr Barman emphasized that their work is an integration of science, education, awareness, pride, empowerment, protection, and conservation. She encouraged women to take ownership of conservation efforts, to make an impact in their communities. She said people often ask her why she was working only with women; she explained that the Hargila Army brought women to the forefront as leaders. Women, in turn, brought their men and children to the meetings, creating a ripple effect in the community.

The Hargila Army’s creative endeavours extended to crafting Gamosa (the traditional Assamese stole) and other accessories with Hargila motifs. These have gained popularity across 25 countries and are now available on pashupakshi.com. The Assamese mekhla chador with Hargila motifs has even been showcased at the Natural History Museum in London.

Young people have been inspired by Dr Barman’s work, and a [magazine](#) has been launched to share stories and pictures about Hargila birds and community conservation efforts.

Today, the Hargila Army has over 10,000 women soldiers. Poornima Devi’s conservation efforts have yielded remarkable results, with the number of Hargila nests in Kamrup district increasing from just 27 to over 250.

The remarkable story of Dr Purnima Devi Burman serves as a testament to the transformative power of community-led conservation and the impact that one person can have in protecting our planet's precious biodiversity.

Dr Barman's work in the conservation of the Hargila has earned her world-wide fame and awards including the Whitley Award for Conservation and the UNDP India Biodiversity Award. Just a few days after the NWMI meet, she was named one of TIME magazine's Women of the Year 2025.

Report by Sumita Jaiswal

Edited by Sandhya Srinivasan



Dr Purnima Devi Barman, wildlife biologist makes a presentation on the Hargila at the NWMI public meeting in Guwahati

Songs of Devastation



Singers **Musharaff Khan** and **Saiful Hussain** from Torabari Village in Barpeta followed Purnima Devi's story of optimism with ballads of mourning. They sang movingly about the devastation caused by the shifting river Brahmaputra that destroyed their homes and lands and rendered the villagers climate refugees.

Climate journalist Chandrani Sinha, a member of Guwahati NWMI, has [documented](#) several such climate songs along the Brahmaputra.

Media, Conflict and Climate Change: Impact on Women



From left: Sanjoy Hazarika, journalist and author, Monisha Behal, Chairperson, North East Network, Tongam Rina, Deputy Editor of *The Arunachal Times*, and Kamal Kumar Tanti, Director of the Centre for Environment and Climate Action Foundation and Durba Ghosh, Bureau Chief, Press Trust of India

The centrepiece of the public meeting was a panel discussion on the intersection of media, conflict and climate change, and the effects on women, a topic critically important to the Northeast region.

The panellists were: **Sanjoy Hazarika**, journalist and author; **Monisha Behal**, Chairperson, North East Network; **Tongam Rina**, Deputy Editor of *The Arunachal Times*, and **Kamal Kumar Tanti**, Director of the Centre for Environment and Climate Action Foundation. The discussion was moderated by **Durba Ghosh**, Bureau Chief, *Press Trust of India*.

Looking back on his vast experience as a journalist covering the Northeast, Mr Hazarika said it had become increasingly difficult for media to report on real issues.

Mr Hazarika spoke on the impact of climate change with changing weather and rain patterns in the region. He described the abject living conditions of people living on the shifting riverine islands known as “*char*” — a geography unique to Assam. *Char* dwellers must change homes several times a year, due to flooding and erosion. The *chars* do not have basic amenities like electricity supply or roads, and have little or no access to healthcare. There are about 2,500 such islands along the Brahmaputra and they are home to 3 million people or roughly eight percent of the state’s population.

How does one meet the critical needs of people in this region? “The simplest way is to treat river as an ally and use it as a resource,” Mr Hazarika said. He described his work conceptualising the “boat clinic”. In places where people find it almost impossible to reach healthcare facilities, these facilities can be brought to them in boats. The Assam government took Mr Hazarika’s idea forward, and today people in 13 districts of the state are served through 15 boat clinics. These clinics have contributed to bringing down maternal mortality in the region.

Monisha Behal spoke on how women had been hit by conflict in the Northeast. She identified three major fallouts: extremely low productivity, complete lack of access to education, and an absence of institutional mechanisms like management schools etc.

Ms Behal pointed out that the Northeast has always faced marginalisation. People here feel isolated and alienated, and the youth has an extreme sense of frustration.

The conflict has taken a huge toll on women here, she said, and described her own experience of working at the grassroots during the armed conflict in Nagaland. She saw that men were almost entirely absent from the fields. Before the conflict when men and women worked in the field together, they made their work easier by singing together. That ended with the conflict. Men went into hiding because of the excesses of the army. Children were withdrawn from school. Women had to deal with extreme fear and mental trauma.

Speaking of the impact of climate change, she said the incidence of agricultural pests has gone up in the region. Seeds are not germinating, and there’s water scarcity, leading to a decrease in agricultural productivity. All this has led to loss of livelihoods. “When livelihood goes, women are subjected to abuse,” she said.



NWMI members and audience at the public meeting

Ms Behal emphasised the strength of collective power. She said women needed to work together in order to make a real difference, whether dealing with conflict or with climate change. The Green Revolution went a long way towards ending hunger but destroyed millet production. She spoke of her efforts in empowering women in the rural areas of the Northeast by spearheading millet conservation and production, an initiative engaging women. “The whole point was to be able to grow our own food,” she said.

Tongam Rina spoke about the issues from her home state, Arunachal Pradesh, where protests are going on against the 11,000 Megawatt hydropower project in the Siang and Upper Siang districts. Planners at the Centre have disregarded local concerns and sentiments. Such issues are not highlighted in the national media. She said the dam was being forced upon the people of her state without a proper feasibility study. “There has been no study on the river basin,” she said. Tongam who has covered these mostly women-led protests pointed out that while they had been raising valid questions, nobody was answering them. “It is China who answered by declaring that they are building the world’s biggest dam,” she said with her unique deadpan humour.

Kamal Kumar Tanti from the Centre for Environment and Climate Action Foundation spoke about his study of trends in rainfall and climate change. He also raised the issue of corporate interests dictating to farmers, resulting in the loss of several indigenous varieties of crops. “We used to have 3,000 varieties of rice... Now, no more,” he said. Mr Tanti called for a return to indigenous knowledge systems to help mitigate the impact of climate change, and to protect biodiversity and livelihoods.



The public meeting ended with a scintillating performance of the Bihu dance traditionally enacted to celebrate the arrival of spring.

Report by Anuradha Sharma

Edited by Sandhya Srinivasan



The organising committee: Sushmita Goswami, Karishma Hasnat, Angana Chakrabarti, Bidisha Singha, Durba Ghosh, Nasreen Habib, Tora Agarwala, Sanskrita Bharadwaj, Kasturi Das and Chandrani Sinha

Reports and Visuals

Ammu Joseph, Annie Philip, Anuradha Sharma, Durba Ghosh, Hepzi Anthony, Jayanti Baruda, Laxmi Murthy, Madhavi Ravikumar, Neetu Singh, Priyanka Borpujari, Romita Saluja, Sandhya Srinivasan, Saraswathy Nagarajan, Shahin Mokashi, Sindhu Nepolean, Neetu Singh, Sonal Kellogg, Sumana Ramanan, Sumita Jaiswal, Sunalini Mathew, Supriya Unni, Swagata Yadavar, Tasneem Kutubuddin, and Varsha Torgalkar.

