The Media, Citizenship and Identities

THE NETWORK OF WOMEN IN MEDIA, INDIA
15TH NATIONAL MEETING
BANGALORE
7-9 FEBRUARY 2020

The Network of Women in Media, India (NWMI), held its 15th national meeting at the Indian Social Institute, a haven of greenery and peace amidst bustling Bangalore. As many as 125 network members travelled from 18 states and union territories across the country – Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Delhi, Jammu and Kashmir, Gujarat, Haryana, Karnataka, Kerala, Maharashtra, Manipur, Meghalaya, Odisha, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal – to attend the three-day meeting (7-9 February 2020), hosted by the Bangalore chapter of the network (NWMB).

For those who arrived early, a visit to one of the oldest newspaper offices in the city had been arranged, and members from across the country had the opportunity to interact with senior editors of the *Deccan Herald* and *Prajavani* on 6 February.

As participants trickled into the venue, student volunteers from journalism schools in the city guided them to the registration desks and a hot breakfast and coffee. Alongside, an on-site exhibition put together by NWMB members showcased posters, banners, slogans, photographs and videos from the country-wide uprising against the controversial Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), National Register of Citizens (NRC) and National Population Register (NPR) from December 2019 onwards.

Sab Dekhenge – A multimedia exhibition

'Sab Dekhenge', specially put together for the duration of the meeting, brought together an audio-visual representation of the ongoing, nationwide protests led by students and women against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019, passed by the Lok Sabha on 11 December 2019, and related official initiatives.

'Sab Dekhenge' combined digital and physical images that recalled some of the sights, smells and sounds of resistance to undemocratic tendencies across the nation, with some flashes even from across the globe, over the last couple of months. The exhibition team attempted to capture snapshots that conveyed the scale, diversity, creativity and emotions of the spontaneous agitations. Public expressions of dissent against the CAA, the possibility of the extension of the contentious National Register of Citizens (NRC, already implemented in Assam) to the rest of the country, and the introduction of new features in the National Population Register (NPR) took the form of hand-made placards, banners and posters, dynamic installations, artwork, poetry, songs, slogans, skits and much more. They cut across time, location and language, but also retained local flavours and earthy accents.

The process of collecting, collating and sifting through approximately 500 images, poems and videos was an interesting and deeply moving experience. Only a fraction of the treasure trove made it into the exhibition due to practical constraints. Given the wide dissemination of these images via multiple platforms, it was difficult to source the original artists whose creativity inspired a new wave of resistance. The selection of posters, collages, slides and songs on display during the exhibition was meant to convey some of the intensity and diversity of the protests.

Welcome, introduction to the NWMI and self-introductions

In keeping with NWMI tradition, the meeting began with participants sitting in a large circle and introducing themselves briefly, allowing faces to be matched with names on the Yahoo and Telegram groups which enable regular, ongoing, virtual interactions among members from across the country. New members were welcomed into the fold and older members renewed bonds built up virtually – and at earlier meetings – over the years.

Presentation of the newly redesigned NWMI website

Mahithi Pillay made a presentation on the newly designed NWMI website on behalf of the team which includes Sandhya Srinivasan and Anjali Mathur. The website, launched in 2003, was the sole public face of the network for and source of information about and for the network for many years, until social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram helped expand its online presence. The new interface is expected to be more user friendly and interactive, and therefore more useful to members. It will also serve as an archive that provides the history of activities, documents, photographs and other material generated by the network over the past 18 years. The possibility of adding regional language content was also discussed.

Presentation on the Global Media Monitoring Project 2020

Ammu Joseph and Padmaja Shaw introduced the Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP), a unique five-yearly exercise conducted by a wide range of volunteers across the world.

They explained that the GMMP is the largest and longest longitudinal study on gender in the world's media. It is the leading advocacy initiative in the world aiming to change the representation of women in the media for the better. It is unique in involving participants ranging from grassroots community workers to university students and researchers and, of course, media practitioners in the media monitoring exercise, with everyone taking part on a voluntary basis.

The GMMP was first conceived at the landmark international conference, 'Women Empowering Communication', in Bangkok in 1994. The idea was to conduct a one-day study of the representation and portrayal of women and men in the world's news media in order to provide a snapshot of gender representation in the news media – at the country level and globally. Section J of the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action on Women and Media remains the touchstone for the GMMP, which is directly related to strategic objective J.2: Promote a balanced and non-stereotyped portrayal of women in the media.

The first GMMP took place in 1995. Every five years since then, GMMP research has taken the pulse of selected indicators of gender in the news media, examining the ratio of women's presence in news content in relation to men and the prevalence of gender bias and stereotyping in news media content. The fifth study in the series was conducted in 2015 by hundreds of volunteers in 114 countries around the world.

The NWMI coordinated the monitoring in India in 2010 and 2015 and was getting set to do the same for the 6th GMMP, scheduled to take place during the month of March 2020 (but delayed due the COVID-19 pandemic). As many as 120 countries had signed up for the GMMP 2020 as of February.

Ammu and Padmaja called for volunteers to undertake the one-day monitoring of print, broadcast and digital news media, including Twitter, in English, Hindi and other Indian languages.

A workshop reviewing the GMMP monitoring methodology was held in the afternoon, side by side with other breakout sessions, to familiarise volunteers with the coding sheets and other aspects of the monitoring exercise.

SESSION 1 (2.30 - 4.00 pm on Day 1, 7 February 2020)

Gender, Climate Change and Disasters: Can the Media be a Mediator?

This panel discussion focussed on what the media can do to address the most urgent issue of our times: the climate crisis, the effects of which will be felt by everyone on the planet but first, especially, by the most marginalised communities. Can we see prevention and mitigation through the gender lens? How do we report disasters in a time of news exhaustion and short memories? How do we convince editors to provide due time and space for climate change related coverage? How do we report conflicts over natural resources in the context of climate change? How do we reconcile the reporting on forest rights and conservation? Should our journalism induce fear or optimism – which is more constructive?

Moderators: Namita Waikar and Disha Shetty

Initiators of the discussion: Keya Acharya (Forum of Environmental Journalists in India), Vinuta Gopal (Asar), Helvellyn Timungpi (Karbi Anglong); Theja Ram (The NewsMinute), Durba Ghosh (Press Trust of India, Guwahati)

Co-moderator **Disha Shetty,** a Bangalore-based science journalist, set the tone for the discussion by narrating her experience of travelling across seven states in the past one year to report on climate change. A surprising fact that came to light was the lack of documentation. For example, she realised that the impact of climate change on hill states has not yet been documented. Research is being done on the various impacts of climate

change, but the media have not been looking at the findings consistently, and there is over-reliance on western news sources. The gender impact of climate change is a reality, she said, pointing to just one example to drive home the reality: women walking even longer distances to fetch water for the family. From her experience at a UN conference on climate change, she found that the discussion was not only about mitigation but action that would have greater impact. In countries with high income economies the movement against global warming has in recent times been a student-led one, but that is not the case in countries with low and middle income economies where, in fact, people – and women in particular – are already facing the disproportionate impact of climate change.

Keya Acharya, Bangalore-based president of the Forum of Environment Journalists in India (FEJI), which consists of more than 750 members, highlighted strategies for reporting. “To tackle gender in climate disasters, we need to first understand that the Indian media have undergone a sea of change in recent decades. Although there has been a proliferation of all types of media, especially TV, changes in the proprietorship of media companies have led to a weakening of editorial decisions on what types of stories should be covered: anything likely to hurt the company’s commercial interests is invariably shunned. Concerns about the environment and development, besides not being ‘profitable’, actually conflict with many commercial interests. This affects reportage of these issues even more than others,” she said, pointing out that “There are more fashion blogs than environment disaster stories.”

Keya acknowledged that in this changed scenario, reporting on climate issues, particularly through a gender lens, is a challenging task for reporters. At the same time, India is in the midst of serious, economically harmful disasters related to climate change, as seen in the increasing number of and increasingly devastating catastrophes such as floods, drought, heatwaves, cyclones and storms.
She appealed for a “sea-change” in reporting practice to tackle the above issues: interlink your report to current concerns, even if through a tangential angle. “We must wedge gender and climate change in the mainstream by linking them to politics or the law or sports, finding an angle that will get picked up by the media.”

Other tips she offered were:

- Follow the money. Use the financial angle to highlight the plight of women and children in such disasters.
- Try building up a media movement to follow this issue by researching thoroughly and writing good stories.
- Use social media outlets if your publication kills your story. This is a delicate situation for those with contracts that do not allow publishing elsewhere, but there are ways around the barrier. Twitter, Instagram, Blogs, etc., allow for great creativity.
- Link up with faith-based organisations; most do social work during disasters and provide good opportunities for linking with your main theme.

She concluded by touching on the challenges in persuading editors to okay gender stories.

Theja Ram from The NewsMinute, based in Bangalore, cited the example of the recent Karnataka floods to drive home her point about how climate change affects women in

diverse ways. Changes in rainfall patterns and climate conditions affect women and, specifically, their health, she said. Pregnant and menstruating women face special difficulties. According to her, it is important for journalists to write about how climate change affects women, how it even leads to an increase in domestic violence. She also drew attention to the paucity of data on the gender-related impact of climate change. “Reporting should also target the policy makers to ensure that policies are inclusive of women,” she added.

Durba Ghosh, PTI Bureau Chief in Guwahati, began by asking the question: “What do we NEED to hear about?” According to her, mainstream media in general neglect calamities in India’s north-eastern region. “Climate becomes a secondary concern when insurgency and the international weapons trade is impacting biodiversity,” she said. “The stress and strains of the northeast are such that disasters are waiting to happen. Water bodies are encroached upon and water-logging is a daily occurrence, along with landslides and floods.”

She explained how the north-eastern region is a biodiversity hotspot. “We have natural resources, we have geographical advantages. But you name any problem, we have them, too - like floods, erosion, landslides, a high seismic zone. Floods are reported, others are not,” she said. She admitted that working for a news agency has its limitations: the environment gets side-lined because of other stories that take prominence, like insurgency and anti-CAA protests. Yet, she said, conflict in the region has a direct impact on the environment – for example, poaching to fund the arms trade, pressure on land leading to environmental degradation. “Migration from rural areas to Guwahati and other urban areas is happening. Disasters like flash floods are already happening,” she said. Durba also identified lack of data as a problem in environment reporting.

Vinuta Gopal, with more than a decade experience of working with Greenpeace, now runs the environmental consultancy, Asar. She pointed out that the language has to change: “Climate change no longer describes the climate catastrophe we are facing. The world is past safe limits now, the language has to change. Crisis paralyses people. The world wants to shut it out.”

She spoke about how climate is generally treated as a peripheral issue and emphasised that climate change is not equitable. “Climate has always been treated as an environment issue, on the periphery. Environment is a ‘nice issue’; other issues like poverty, development, etc., take over. But addressing climate change is addressing development. In India, there is a lot of resistance to talking about climate change,” she said.

She agreed that “developing” nations bear the brunt of the consumption patterns of the “developed” world. She admitted that there was always tension between development and the environment. According to her, “Climate change is going to affect the marginalised, women and children the most. In India, we believe we have a right to pollute. Civil society resists the idea of adopting changes to fight climate change. We need to build a ‘Rainbow Coalition’. One step forward is to educate women. The kind of reporting we need is on creating infrastructure for the future – for example, how we grow our food, how we build our community.”

Helvellyn Timungpi, who works with an English newspaper in Diphu, located in the Karbi Anglong district of Assam, spoke about climate change in the context of Assam in general and Karbi Anglong in particular. As a member of the Karbi tribe herself, she said, “The tribes depend upon forests for their livelihood, which is getting affected by deforestation. Right now, a big crisis is happening due to deforestation. Of course, we can encourage people to grow vegetables and herbs, which are also disappearing, in their homes. Regarding gender, I am lucky to be in a society, my tribe, where men and women are treated equally.”

She described the travails of a woman reporter working in an area with active insurgencies. She spoke about how difficult it is to report under the circumstances, with bandhs, threats of violence, etc. She said she felt that journalists in the North East often have to grapple between toeing the official line and listening to the insurgents. Saying that she hoped to find answers for the problem from the gathering of journalists at the NWMI meeting, she shared her belief that, as a journalist, she could help in educating people.

Namita Waikar, managing editor at the People's Archive of Rural India (PARI), summarised the discussion thus far and spoke a little about PARI's work on climate change, which includes a series on lived experiences of climate change across the country. She also talked about her experience of reporting about pastoralists in Gujarat, who depend on land for grazing. Although such land has been affected by climate change, only some of these communities have managed to find alternative solutions, she pointed out.

During the discussion that followed, **Sumi Krishna** pointed out that both gender and climate change are complex and it is important to deepen one's own understanding to avoid making artificial linkages. She also highlighted the fact that the citizenship issue, which was being debated in the context of the CAA/NRC/NPR controversy, is also linked to the environment, stressing that it is not just conflict that has links with the environment. On the reported paralysis gripping communities in the face of such crises, she said, "Those who are actually affected have, in fact, shown great innovation in their efforts to deal with it." She also pointed out that "In times of stress, gender roles change rapidly."

There was a discussion on whether sensationalism contradicted journalism. It was also felt that urban planning and mitigation needs to be talked about. In response, Vinuta cited the example of Greta. According to her, "Greta is not about sensationalism, she had internalised the issue. The implications of climate change are dramatic. Stories can and need to be communicated with great force."

The discussion also highlighted the fact that access to information for independent journalists/digital media is also an important need to keep in mind. The importance of addressing policy while reporting on climate issues was also spoken about.

Joyshree Oisham, from Manipur cited the example of a viral video of a young girl, Valentina, crying when a tree was cut down. She is now the brand ambassador for afforestation in Manipur. According to her, "Plantation drives are carried out, but do we follow

up on these? We all say *jhum* (shifting) cultivation has to stop, but we have to provide alternatives. In the plains, farmlands are shrinking as factories are coming up. All issues are interlinked."

Satakshi Gawade from Pune pointed out that while reporting on disasters, politicians are often named, but there are also planning and adaptation issues, and the administration should also be questioned about their role.

Dhanya Rajendran pointed out that, in 2015, everyone in Chennai was reading about the environment due to the devastating floods there. But interest has gone down now because people tend to read up on a subject mainly when it impacts them. She also mentioned the dangers and problems women journalists in digital media face while reporting under such circumstances as they do not have government-issued identity cards.

Concurring with Dhanya, Vinuta said women in digital media have difficulty in accessing remote areas and resources. Yet digital media provide a large amount of space to focus on diverse issues.

"As journalists, we are at the forefront, said **Linda Chhakchhuak**. "We have to study why climate change is happening. Climate change is a result of global warming towards which we have been pushed by fossil fuels and governments. In the North East dams, national highways, major projects are coming up, which will lead to deforestation and evictions, and eventually to global warming. We have to educate ourselves about what we are doing. It has to be internalised by everyone, of course, but all the more by journalists."

Rohini Mohan pointed out that one of the difficulties faced in environment reporting is showing or explaining the series of actions that caused the problems. Given the severity of the problems, how can responsibility be fixed, she wanted to know. Keya responded by stating that there is no choice but to put the bigger issue, bigger picture forward, however difficult it may be.

Joining in, **Geeta Seshu** said, "When we talk about climate change, policy is often not touched. Yet many disasters start with policies." According to her, the bias of experts talking about projects being undertaken at the cost of environment needs to be kept in mind.

Theja responded by saying, "Sometimes we need to ask the question: is there any other way amenities can be delivered (without harming the environment)? Journalists can take lead in this."

Vinuta maintained that persistence and doggedness lead to results. But many people, including journalists, do not know how to connect projects or problems with policies.

According to Helvellyn, journalists should have some training on how to report on such issues. Namita responded by suggesting that NWMI could have a resource group to look into training.

One member of the audience raised a question about how to strike a balance between emotional connection and objectivity, while another suggested that journalists should look at disability, mental health angles, too, look for solutions and report on positive options. According to Namita, one can use one's emotions to pursue a story, but put it aside while writing the story.

Disha suggested that finding a person who has been affected and basing the story on him/her could be an effective way to narrate such stories. Keya agreed that background knowledge would help journalists and FEJI was open to collaborating on such initiatives.

PUBLIC MEETING (5.30-8.00 pm, Day 1, 7 February 2020)

A well-attended public meeting titled ‘Citizenship, Identity and Migration’ was held at a central venue in the city in the evening.

SESSION 2 (9.00 - 10.30 am on Day 2, 8 February 2020)

Journalism, Culture and Identity

No matter what their beats or areas of coverage, journalists increasingly find that issues of culture and identity come up in the course of their work. Journalists like to think of themselves as professional chroniclers striving to be accurate, fair and balanced (even if “objectivity” per se is an impossibility for any human being) and whose work does not reflect their individual identity/ies. But sometimes the events and issues they are covering involve controversies related to religious/cultural practices or questions of social/cultural/religious identity. And, whether they like it or not, their own social/cultural/religious identity/ies can affect their interactions with sources ranging from ordinary people to politicians.

The session attempted to unpack these experiences and generate a discussion on how the intrusion of culture and identities into their work can be handled so that professional practice can still be maintained.

Moderators: Dhanya Rajendran and CG Manjula

Initiators of the discussion: Pushpa Rokde (Bastar), Rakamma from Navodayam (Chittoor, Andhra Pradesh), Roseline Taropi (Karbi Anglong), Nikhila Henry (Hyderabad), Meher Ali (Aligarh) and Sameera Khan (Mumbai).

Dhanya Rajendran explained that the intention of the session was for the journalists on the panel to talk about if and how their identities -- in terms of caste, culture, gender, etc. – have intruded into their workspace and the challenges, if any, they have faced on account of this.

Senior journalist **C.G**. **Manjula**, who had a long innings with the Kannada newspaper *Prajavani,* revealed how prejudices work at the ground level. Once, when she was working as a staff correspondent in a district, a political party took reporters to a remote village because there was some conflict at the village. They did not invite her, saying that a female reporter would find it difficult to travel such a long distance. But after other local reporters spoke up and said that she had never missed a single press tour, the organisers called (on a landline in those days!) to invite her. She had the additional burden of proving that she had no constraints in travelling across the whole district and that she did have mobility. At every stage she had to overcome obstacles and prejudices and prove her professionalism.

According to Manjula, “Our understanding of culture and its role has developed over the years. However, political uses of culture these days denote many things. The notion of culture is being used to serve many political agendas. One cannot but see how culture and patriarchy are expressed in moral policing, honour killing, ‘love jihad’, etc. In all events involving such issues journalists cannot and should not just report these as some crime story or legal case. We have often seen or read how such reports get sensationalised or over dramatised. If we engage in such things then we are guilty of trivializing the matter. One has to go beyond the immediate event and try to understand the problem. One has to draw the linkages with structural factors such as culture and social norms. These crimes themselves are sensitive and they often involve violence against women. One has to understand the power and control inherent in these sorts of crimes. We face the challenge of bringing these aspects of the events to the fore in our stories. Otherwise ‘love jihad’, honour killing or domestic violence cases are often considered random crimes and dismissed as someone else’s problem.

Manjula pointed out that biases can also be experienced in newsrooms that lack diversity in terms of caste, creed or gender. “It is important to understand this and not let biased minds overpower the professional identity of a journalist. One should go beyond prejudices that restrict a particular identity to a certain category. I believe it is important for us to assert our identities as professional journalists who care about objective reporting. It is necessary to be aware how media content can also reflect communal and caste bias. This happened recently in regional language electronic media coverage of the bomb scare incident at Mangalore Airport. The communal angle initially adopted by the electronic media while narrating this story fizzled out after the accused turned out to belong to the majority community,” said Manjula.

The next speaker, **Pushpa Rokde,** spoke of her experiences as an Adivasi journalist from Bijapur in Bastar, Chhattisgarh. Pushpa explained how she slowly gained credibility among the villagers as a journalist reporting on their issues, so much so that they would call her for their meetings on issues relating to their everyday needs. Many media persons had no empathy for villagers. So villagers really appreciated Pushpa’s intervention and support. She spoke about an incident in 2004 where she helped a woman whose husband was arrested and injured due to police brutality. Pushpa was called upon to help carry him to hospital. He subsequently died due to his injuries and she was there with his wife from the time of arrest until his funeral. The story was very personal and invoked an emotional response from the audience.

Roseline Taropi from Karbi Anglong in Assam spoke next on the Assam movement of the 1980s, during which protestors would chant the slogan, ‘When culture is lost, identity is lost.’ As a child, she did not realise the significance of this but, as she grew up, she increasingly did. As a wife, a mother of two kids, as a woman and as a journalist she used to feel that her culture was her identity. “It was my responsibility to protect my culture. When our culture and language is strong, we become strong,” she said. She said many people like her felt like a minority in their own land, with tribal lands being taken over by migrants from what was earlier East Pakistan, after Bangladesh was formed. According to her, the Scheduled Tribes in Assam are now worried that the implementation of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019 (CAA) would turn Assam into “a second Tripura” and that they would become marginalised in their own state. She felt there was a need to document the inflow of migrants to Assam.

Roseline also mentioned a group of individuals who write and sing folk songs as a form of documentation and preservation of their culture and history. In her view, as identity becomes strong, the community becomes stronger.

The next panellist to speak was **Meher Ali,** an independent journalist based in Aligarh, who spent her early years in the US**.** She spoke of the angst of being an Indian Muslim, of how they are invariably viewed as Muslims and not as Indians. Muslims are constantly forced to prove they are not a threat to national security, she said. That narrative has been further strengthened with the passing of the CAA. She clarified that successive governments have done little for Indian Muslims.

“Over and over again I've heard the assertion by Indian Muslims that this is their India. But I wonder why. What has India done for Indian Muslims? Whenever Modi goes abroad, we are used as marketing tools to show the world that India is still a democracy. But Modi is not who I want to talk about today. I want to talk about upper caste Hindu liberals and their blind spots,” she said.

According to her, prejudice against Muslims is one of the blind spots that upper class Hindus harbour, much like the attitude of white liberals towards African Americans. Erasure of the Muslim identity and lack of transparency in processes are additional problems. “This is why

we see the use of bindis and burkhas by women protesting against the CAA," she said. "While many see this as a symbol of solidarity between women across religious lines, I see it as an erasure of the specificity and problematics that come with wearing the burkha or the hijab. A bindi in India is not, nor will it ever be, the same as wearing a burkha. It is basically a performance of solidarity, an intrusion into what is a movement led by Indian Muslim women. Most likely, you will not get stopped and checked at airports if you wear a bindi, you will not get pulled out and indiscriminately shot at if you wear a bindi; this is not the case with the burkha."

"A lot of people cheered for young Hindu women who wore the hijab, again in solidarity with Muslim women," Meher pointed out. "But, again, to me this is false solidarity; rather it is the taking away of Indian Muslim women's voice, or perhaps tilting the angle just a little so that, once again, the focus is on how we are all Indian and therefore the same, rather than on how we are different but also all equal," she said.

Independent journalist **Sameera Khan** from Mumbai began by saying that a person's identity is a part of the package; hence it cannot be left outside the newsroom. Politics has become increasingly polarised and hard to report on without identities intruding. Even though a newsroom is a professional space, there is a certain level of hostility; you are identified and projected as something you are not. According to Sameera, journalists are often actively encouraged, if not trained, to uncover stories related to their own culture and tradition. Each reporter is made to report stories about people belonging to their own caste and religious beliefs. This practice within newsrooms, she feels, is unjustified. "Can we make it part of our training to revel in our diversity?" she asked. "Is it necessary to ask Dalits to report on Dalit issues and Muslims to report on issues regarding Muslims? We should not be limited by our identities."

Durga Nandini from Change.Org said she has had to juggle her roles of journalist, woman, mother and equal partner at home. At her workplace, 80 per cent of the staff were women, and 40 per cent Muslim. She felt cultural values shape your role in the workplace. When women are in a majority, a gender lens informs what you do and gender equality becomes the norm. According to her, they try to equip women to speak for themselves and work towards community building. However, it is a constant struggle to balance the situation in the workplace with the gender, caste and religious bias encountered in the outside world. At home her cultural identity is that of a working mother and that has played a role in making her push for childcare in the workplace. In her case, there was a reversal of traditional roles, with her husband staying at home and taking care of the child while she went out to work. She feels strongly that there should be gender parity in the area of work and that men should be given equal parental leave.

According to Durga, although she has her own set of beliefs, often she has no choice but to be the unbiased reporter that her job demands, since Change.org is an open platform. During the Jyoti Singh [gang-rape and murder] case there was a Change.org petition calling for extension of the jail time of the perpetrators, for the death penalty, etc., which went against her opinions on the subject. In fact, she said, there is a constant struggle between her own principles and those who initiate online petitions on the platform she works with.

Rakamma from Navodayam spoke about how the men in her village would initially complain when women brought up gender-related issues. They wanted to discuss only topics that were gender neutral. The women formed self-help groups and wrote songs and stories on corruption and other societal problems, including women's health issues. Members of the self-help group also brought out the magazine, Navodayam. Initially the men tore up the magazines. However, eventually, as the women became stronger, things changed, she said.

At this point, **Nikhila Henry** from Hyderabad raised the issue of whether it was all right for a woman journalist to not locate herself in her various identities (related to culture, religion, language, caste, class or gender) while reporting on events and issues. Initially she felt that it should be possible to distance oneself from one's own identity and empathise with the identities of the people being interviewed, in order to present a true picture of the event or issue being covered. However, while covering the Rohit Vemula case, she realised the importance of understanding the caste equation in the community in order to report fairly. Some identities are considered 'invisible', she pointed out. "How do privileged reporters report on issues of communities which they cannot personally relate to?" she asked.

Sameera spoke of the complexity of defining identity through apparel and highlighted the danger of categorising people as good and bad Muslims which, she said, was like walking on glass. Commenting on the challenges of reporting on the disproportionate brutality unleashed against students in Delhi during the anti-CAA/NRC/NPR agitation, Sameera said the effort has to be to report fairly and accurately.

During the discussion, **Shahina KK** pointed out that there are editors who are biased toward upper caste reporters. It is important to have marginalised communities in management positions, she said. Also, she added, "It is vital that upper class and upper caste people acknowledge and talk about the privileges they enjoy. In fact, why are we always having sessions about the marginalised? We should have a session on privilege and how journalists negotiate privilege!" Many in the audience agreed.

Dhanya said she was now convinced that her privileged caste and class background had helped her to rise in her journalistic career without even being aware of the advantages she took for granted. "Identities are not clothes we can take off," she said. "The only way forward is to acknowledge one's own prejudices and privileges. One has to be very conscious of both while reporting on another religion or community. This is not a time to battle each other."

SESSION 3 (11 am - 12.30 pm on Day 2, 8 February 2020)

Clampdowns and Courage: Six months of the Kashmir blockade

The prolonged, ongoing crisis in Kashmir has been pushed to the margins today. The situation in the erstwhile state remains grim and intolerable; the communications shutdown continues, with internet services suspended for over five months. The status of Kashmir has been a sensitive and contentious political issue for successive governments and many people in "the rest of India". How can journalists bring the realities of life in Kashmir, especially in the wake of the events of 5 August 2019, to light? What are the stories of ordinary people, especially women and children, that remain to be told? What are the problems faced by Kashmiri journalists in general and women journalists in Kashmir in particular over the past six months? What can journalists from elsewhere do under the circumstances?

Moderators: Geeta Seshu, Laxmi Murthy

Initiators of the discussion: Raihana Maqbool, Rifat Mohidin, Shahnaz Marouf, Masrat Zahra, Linda Chhakchhuak (bringing in a perspective from the marginalised Northeastern region)

Geeta Seshu, the co-moderator, began the session by expressing appreciation for the NWMI's role in enabling the fact-finding report on the situation of the media and journalists in Kashmir, titled "News behind the barbed wire," along with the Free Speech Collective (FSC), in September 2019. She underlined the fact that, despite the unprecedented lockdown, the practice of journalism continues in Kashmir.

Before the session got underway she requested participants to switch off their mobile phones during the session as one way to begin to understand and appreciate what being cut off from any means of communication is like. Later, at the end of the session she pointed out that if not having access to phones for such a short time had caused so much inconvenience and anxiety, it is important to think about how journalists in Kashmir had continued to work without phone and internet services for such a long period. At a time when instant communication is taken for granted, she said, their experience of managing without it can provide a lesson on agility and resilience. She pointed out that journalists require technology to capture stories, write or shoot photographs or videos, and send them to editors. Even the process of working on a story involves communication as there are sources to be contacted,

colleagues to be coordinated, etc. To function as a journalist without a phone and internet connection is highly challenging, to say the least.

Marouf Gazi pointed out that the period since August 2019 had been one of the most traumatic times in the lives of Kashmiris. “The most certain thing about Kashmir is uncertainty,” she said.

According to her, an impression has been created that 2G mobile services have been restored and that, therefore, normalcy has been restored. But, on the ground, it is a different reality, she stressed. The situation has obviously had an impact on the practice of journalism. It has also led to trauma linked to how uncertain everything is.

Describing her own experience of the clampdown, she said, “On 4 August I was sitting near the river Jhelum, talking with a friend, when I received a WhatsApp message saying I should go back home because something big was going to happen. There was panic in the air. I went home and had to stay put there till 22 August. There was curfew, no landline/mobile or internet connection, no communication with anyone. It was psychologically traumatic. When it was finally possible to leave the house, I remember walking for miles to find a working landline, leaving home early in the morning to buy essentials.

When the Government of India revoked the special status of Jammu and Kashmir under Article 370 of the Indian Constitution on 5 August, it also meant a complete lockdown on communication. This was one of the most severe crises in Kashmir’s history and the media had to deal with the most difficult communication blockade ever while trying to convey the ground reality of what was happening in Kashmir to the world during the (then) six-month long shutdown.

In Kashmir, uncertainty is the biggest reality, she reiterated. The 2G internet service which began functioning in the state (now Union Territory) after a few months of no internet access at all is of no practical use, especially to journalists. According to her, sending stories to editors and media houses is not possible with this service. As of February, there was still no broadband service in Kashmir.

The sense of trauma in the minds of every Kashmiri is naturally present even among journalists, said Marouf. “Our safety and the safety of our family causes deep fear. When the curfew was imposed, first the internet and broadband services were suspended, followed by landline service, too, getting locked out. We had no information about even family members living within Kashmir and in various parts of India. In addition, we were completely severed from the rest of the world in terms of communication. The prolonged curfew and being restricted to our homes affected our psyche. Whenever I had to go out, even to procure household essentials, I had to be accompanied by my father.

Nocturnal raids used to happen after midnight. There was so much tension that I couldn’t sleep anyway. Around 1am one night I heard footsteps outside. I looked out of the window and saw J&K police going towards a house in the neighbourhood. I heard a woman wailing, and a man with a helmet on his head calling out names from a list (he even knew nicknames). Several youngsters were taken away and remained in custody for a month.

It is important to remember that not only people who are directly or indirectly involved in politics, but even those who are not at all involved, are affected by this lockdown: there is no escape.

During the curfew, going out of the house was out of the question because people monitoring the curfew and people’s movements failed to realize that there could be a medical emergency or that people do need to buy essential household supplies. They would ask, “Why are you outside your home? Do you think lambs have died here? Do you have no respect for the lives that have been lost?”

The last time I went out to work I was with *Rising Kashmir*. When I finally managed to go to the office, everything inside was covered with dust. We would leave notes in the office for our colleagues to indicate that we were all right and to communicate where and when we would meet for work. All this naturally caused trauma to journalists having to work in the absence of normal communication services.

Raihana Maqbool, who works with *Global Press*, pointed out that the national media has been disseminating a lot of propaganda, with their reports hardly reflecting the ground realities in Kashmir after the scrapping of Article 370. “On 4 August 2019, one day before Article 370 was revoked, there had been frantic interaction in our WhatsApp groups,

expecting something big to happen the next day but not knowing what will happen," she said. "We had no idea that even our landline services would be stopped. The next day, when we got to know through TV reports that Article 370 was gone, we were shocked. That day, when we went out, we saw that no one was there on the streets, not a soul. There were barbed wires in front of my house and every lane was manned by security forces who did not want anyone to come out of their homes.

When the Media Facilitation Centre was set up by the government, providing space, laptops and basic internet services for journalists in Kashmir, my experience with accessing the internet was bizarre. When I logged in, the system asked me for authentication via SMS, which of course was not working. So, I was unable to reach my editors or file stories using this network. What I did to address this problem was to take a flight to New Delhi, from where I could call my editors on the phone and seek their advice. They told me to practice caution and not to use the media centre network to file stories or communicate with them since they feared the activities of journalists were being monitored by the state. During this lockdown period, I filed my stories on health, detained persons, human rights violations, security, etc., from New Delhi, where I would go for two or three days at least two or three times a month.

The past six months have been the worst period I have experienced in Kashmir. But I must say that, despite all the restrictions and limitations, local journalists did excellent stories for international media – unlike the national media, which were trying to portray everything as normal in Kashmir.

During our movements within Kashmir, when the police, army or paramilitary forces asked us who we were or why we were going to a particular place, we had to decide whether or not it was a good idea to say we were journalists. Telling them the truth could lead to their stopping us from proceeding, which would prevent us from doing any reporting, and not telling them the truth could compromise our own safety and security.

"As a woman journalist I was more privileged than male journalists when it came to getting permission to shoot pictures during the clampdown in Kashmir," said photojournalist **Masrat Zahra.**

"During the total shutdown I was initially confined to my house. Whenever I left home on my scooty, my aunt would ask me how they would know if I am safe now that phone and internet connections were gone. At 9.30 am on 5 August, I told my aunt that I had to go out – it's my job: I have to document what's going on. I reassured them about my safety and told them to have faith in God."

"There was lot of barbed wires on the road, and every house was manned by two or three members of paramilitary forces. A few women who were coming out of their houses were stopped by the security forces and asked to go back home. When I was stopped by a security person and he refused to let me go any further, I negotiated with him, pointing out that, just as he was doing his duty, I was on duty as a journalist and it was necessary that I be allowed to proceed. I found that he was able to relate to that argument because he allowed me to go past the barrier.

"When I met various (male) journalists and asked if they had taken any pictures I found that they had not been able to shoot anything because they had not been allowed to. As a woman journalist, I had an advantage under the prevailing circumstances. So, I took charge of taking pictures. But even after overcoming various barriers and managing to get the necessary permissions from security personnel, there was the problem of how we (journalists) would communicate to each other to coordinate our plans to document the clampdown in Kashmir.

“Eventually we decided to work in groups. We would wait in one place for each other for 2-3 hours and relied mainly on word of mouth. When something big was about to happen, we tried to get together, shooting pictures from across the barbed wires on the road. Police would shoo us away and tell us not to come. One policeman told me, ‘I will beat you with my shoe all the way till Governor’s house.’ That was the kind of personal harassment and tussle with security forces that journalists had to undergo to keep reporting from Kashmir during that time. Local journalists were constantly fearful that we would be detained. Whenever our stories got published in the evening, we would be afraid of receiving a phone call with someone asking us why we wrote that story. My parents used to earlier call me 10-15 times a day to enquire about my safety but during the clampdown they had no information about my whereabouts and had to live in fear of the unknown and the danger I could be in.”

Masrat said they managed to go to north Kashmir, where horrifying incidents were happening daily, to document an incident in which a boy was used as a human shield. A girl studying in school was kicked in the abdomen. She vomited blood and was unable to appear for her Class 10 board exams as a result of the injury.

She ended by saying, “I thought I should speak about the worst times in Kashmir because speaking is my form of protest.”

“The good times don’t test journalists, the bad times do,” said independent journalist **Rifat Mohidin**. “I was guided by this principle and resolved to tell the world about what is happening in Kashmir. We are yet to tell the full story. Kashmir has been turned into a graveyard of silence.”

Newspapers are the most important media platform in Kashmir, she explained, because there are no private television channels in the state. She said witnessing the suffering of the Kashmiri people during the unprecedented communications clampdown and curfew disheartened her to such an extent that she did not know what to report anymore: “I would think to myself, what is the use of my reports, what will change by writing about all the sufferings of people in Kashmir?” According to her, whatever people heard about what happened in Kashmir after 5 August 2019 was just the tip of the iceberg because very little information trickled out.

“The media centre was set up but I believe it was not meant for local journalists,” she said. According to her, it was known as the “sub jail” because of the control and surveillance prevalent there. Nevertheless, she said, somehow colleagues have managed. “The government issued press releases, brought many journalists from outside who were put up in hotels in Srinagar,” she revealed. “But for local journalists, our words and our space were controlled. Clearly, the government had a plan to show to the world that everything was okay in Kashmir through journalists they got from outside and by silencing local journalists who knew the reality of people’s suffering. The local journalists wanted to do their work but the situation did not allow them to function. However, in spite of all the barriers, the local journalists still did their best. The courage of Kashmiri journalists needs to be appreciated.”

According to her, the real stories die in Kashmir because it is not easy to prove that they are happening or have happened, given the stark power imbalance between the government/security forces and the common people. “Gathering evidence is near impossible,” she said. “The thought that predominates in the minds of local journalists is, ‘I am a small person and I will get into a big problem by doing this story.’ I felt like a failure as a journalist during that time. I couldn’t even get to know what was happening due to the communications blockade. I sincerely believe that the real stories haven’t come out yet.”

Local journalists are also anxious about the possibility that their stories will get the individuals or families referred to in reports into trouble, she said. They worry that even if their stories did not get published, the people in them could get exposed, questioned, harassed and even detained. According to her, every journalist in Kashmir considers quitting at one point or the other. “If we stay on, we have to let them (the government) know what we are doing (or reporting) because privacy is no longer a choice for Kashmiri journalists.”

Co-moderator **Laxmi Murthy** reminded the audience that it is important to keep in mind the larger context of the Kashmiri media. Kashmir has had independent media houses since the 1990s but they operate under major financial constraints. Government advertisements, among the few sources of revenue, cannot be depended upon. The situation now is part of a longer clampdown on Kashmiri media. The so-called national media have no credibility in Kashmir. “We need to think about why the mainstream Indian media has failed in the context of Kashmir,” she said.

“How we as media persons are not reacting to how the local media in Kashmir are functioning during this lockdown is food for thought,” said Meghalaya-based **Linda Chhakchhuak**. “Unless we react, how can we find a solution?”

“What has been shared here today is such a long, intense experience; it makes one feel as if the rest of the media in the rest of the country are dead,” she continued. “I am reminded of the story of the frog and hot water. The frog’s skin keeps adjusting to the rising temperature of the water until, when it reaches 100 degrees, it dies. Having gone through a similar process, it seems as if the Indian media is comatose now.”

She pointed out that the northeast has experienced similar situations off and on – whenever people’s organisations in the region’s various states agitate. “We have also experienced shorter periods of internet shutdowns recently in response to protests in Assam, Tripura, Manipur, Mizoram and Meghalaya against the CAB/CAA. And the region has experienced similar clampdowns over the years, but not with the same intensity as in Kashmir. In the northeast we have conflicts at different levels: with the Government of India, within the state, among tribes, etc. When the situation gets too tense to handle, the government imposes an internet ban,” she said commiserating with the Kashmir clampdown.

According to Linda, there is lack of understanding about what's happening in the north east in the rest of the country. "To interpret people's expression and assertion of their identity and their attempt to ensure their own survival as xenophobic is inappropriate and insensitive. As a media professional, I request everyone to refrain from using that word while reporting on news from the north east."

Summing up, Geeta Seshu reiterated that journalists need to have empathy even if we do not always understand a situation completely. "Everyone needs to think about the growing insensitivity in mainstream media and do our part as a community to tackle it," she concluded.

During the discussion that followed, **Dhanya** commented on the lack of credibility of the English mainstream media while reporting on Kashmir, saying that it is important to use regional media for resistance, and for the true picture to come out.

Bharathi from Navodayam said, "I felt breathless hearing about the lives of the panelists from Kashmir. But the fact that five women have come out from Kashmir and are fighting to continue their work as journalists comes as a life-saving breath of fresh air." She put into words what many in the audience felt after having listened to the detailed, first-hand experiences shared by colleagues from Kashmir.

Breakout Workshops

The afternoon saw participants choose from a range of workshops meant to build skills, raise awareness or get to know more about a subject from experts in the field.

Getting ready for the Global Media Monitoring Project 2020

Resource persons: Ammu Joseph and Padmaja Shaw

This session familiarised network members who wished to volunteer for the GMMP 2020 with the monitoring methodology and coding sheets involved in the process. (Details about the GMMP were presented during the opening session of the meeting and are available at the beginning of this report.)

Media entrepreneurship: How to start and sustain an enterprise

Resource persons: Meera K (Oorvani Foundation), Sandhya Mendonca (Raintree Media), Dhanya Rajendran (The News Minute), and Aparna Vedapuri Singh (Women's Web)

This session, led by NWMI members who are media entrepreneurs, explored various aspects of launching and sustaining media start-ups, based on their own experiences and learnings.

Meera K began by talking about how to prepare a business plan for a media enterprise. The first step, she said, is to define the core idea for the venture and understand one's own motivations for starting up. The venture could be driven by passion or because one does not want or is unable to opt for formal employment.

Regardless of the reason, one has to first ensure the feasibility of the idea. It is essential to understand what the market opportunity is – what is the problem one is trying to solve and who would be ready to pay for it (with regard to media enterprises, customer segments include readers, subscribers, advertisers, etc). The process of developing a business plan also involves identifying the value proposition of the product, market research, SWOT analysis, and preparing an execution plan (finance, marketing, operations). In addition, Meera explained various revenue models – for profit and non-profit – that media business can adopt.

A panel discussion followed, with women media entrepreneurs sharing their know-how and views.

Sandhya and Dhanya talked about their journeys as 'accidental' entrepreneurs. Aparna and Meera focused on why they had started up – i.e., having found gaps in the women's publications and civic journalism spaces, respectively. The discussion also covered issues such as fund-raising, the special challenges faced as female entrepreneurs, and the art of managing teams.

Among the aspects of entrepreneurship that participants wanted to discuss were the challenges of raising the initial capital to fund the business, the percentage of costs that could possibly be covered from subscriptions, and the effectiveness of non-journalism related services (such as training, consulting and/or events) in furthering monetisation. Participants also raised the question of how to find like-minded people with critical skill sets like marketing, design and technology, which journalists-entrepreneurs may not necessarily possess.

The session concluded with the participants breaking out into four groups to prepare and present quick business plans using a Business Model Canvas template for their own ideas.

Digital branding and the newsroom: Reclaim control of your website with a flexible page builder

“Why go digital?” was a legitimate question at a time when newspapers were thought to be able to survive computers and online publications. But today 68 percent people say they get their news from smartphones, and 31 percent say they source news only from mobile devices. The workshop suggested ways in which media houses could meet their audiences where they were, in terms of content, design and discovery. Thinking through getting to know your audience and the story and reclaiming your website in with flexible CMS is the way to go, they suggested. A short demo of the Quintype and Metype CMS was presented.

Digital media for regional language journalism: Tips and tools for practitioners

Facilitator: Cynthia Stephen, Resource person: Rajesh Hanbal

The objective of the session was to enable participants to explore the potential of digital media in regional language journalism. It began with a run-through of some key statistics about the increasing production and consumption of digital content worldwide, including in India. Next, the three distinct but interrelated processes of a digital media strategy, consisting of production, distribution, and consumption, were examined. The resource person highlighted the need to sufficiently think through each of these processes holistically and in advance for impactful social change. This requires ideating on the target group, their socio-economic situation, their current media consumption practices, and the local culture. Three critical skill sets required for any meaningful impact – technical, craft, and social skills – were looked at. Technical concerns the audio and video quality of the content. Craft deals with making the content engaging and interesting. Finally, social skills relate to issues of power and social justice in general, and questions such as who is telling the story, who is being made visible and what stories to highlight, in particular. A wide-ranging video clip including different genres was played and analysed in a participatory exercise to deconstruct each of the three skills evident in them.

Workshop participants were from diverse backgrounds and geographies, ranging from Orissa and West Bengal to Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. They brought their experiences and perspectives into the session, adding richness to the workshop, which enabled additional learning for all participants. The women working with Navodayam magazine in Andhra Pradesh shared their experiences as

rural reporters and Dalit women. They shared some of their most difficult and most satisfying stories.

The resource person challenged participants to add digital content to their reports. They saw the possibilities and said that they would certainly work on adding this dimension to their journalism. So far, they had only used digital resources for news gathering, not for dissemination. The group was also linguistically diverse. The facilitator, Cynthia Stephen, was able to make the workshop meaningful for everyone by translating back and forth between English, Telugu, Kannada and Hindi.

How journalists can deal with legalities and defamation threats while writing on controversial subjects

Resource person: Sunanda Mehta

Sunanda Mehta, senior journalist and author of *The Extraordinary Life and Death of Sunanda Pushkar*, began by clarifying the definition of the term 'defamation' in the context of journalism and other writing, and explaining that a defamation case can be filed under both civil and criminal law. According to her, the crux was that, irrespective of the law used, what is most important is the *intent* with which the piece/story had been written, and that is what usually determines the outcome of the case in the court.

She then explored the topic through her own experience with the book on Sunanda Pushkar, which was "as controversial as they come," as she put it. With warnings and threats peppering the writing process, the book went through three legal readings, with almost 100 points highlighted by the lawyers, for which she had to furnish credible sources as back-up or evidence of the information already being in the public domain. What held her in good stead, she said, was the intrinsic intent of the book, which was to portray the life of her protagonist in an unbiased, non-judgmental and honest manner, consciously eschewing sensationalism when the narrative could very easily have fallen prey to it. Also, she said, protection came from the fact that almost all the interviews were recorded, and she could not be accused of misquoting sources or twisting the words of the people quoted in the book.

Mehta also spoke about the differences between newspaper organisations and publishing houses, suggesting that the former were much more likely to back a writer in case of a defamation case. This made it all the more important for authors of books to be very careful with their subjects and final manuscript. Many examples of defamation notices served to different publications and the way they were dealt with were discussed. The issue of press freedom vs. the law and the fairly recent phenomenon of trial by media and its impact on actual trial were also brought up in the discussion.

The informative session ended with a Supreme Court lawyer on call from Delhi answering queries from participants, making it even more interactive. Questions sought clarity on a range of issues, from the application of laws to the digital medium to the rights of independent journalists.

Sessions on Network Matters

Moving ahead on the Freelancers' Initiative

Led by: Leena Reghunath, Vaishna Roy and Shubhada Chandrachud

Over the years, substantive thought and effort has been put in within the network to look into the rights, experiences and problems of freelance (or independent) journalists. Deficiencies and difficulties in payment have been among the major issues discussed.

The huge difference between payments in the English and Indian language media has come up time and again during discussions. The situation has obviously not changed much. According to Shubhada Chandrachud, the writer seems to have no leeway to negotiate the terms of work and pay in the language media.

While the situation is particularly difficult for freelancers contributing to the regional language media, trying to make a living from freelancing is challenging irrespective of language. Concerns about payment are at the top of the list of problems that face freelancers, in terms of amounts as well as the long drawn out process often involved before dues are released.

All the panellists agreed that naming and shaming media organisations that renege on payments is not likely to be very helpful. In fact, going public with problems may only result in burning bridges.

The editors (and former editors) on the panel pointed out that the editor with whom the freelancer has interacted is often the person who is trying her or his best to get payments authorised and disbursed, even though they generally have little say in the

way the organisation's accounts department deals with payments. They suggested that it would be worth keeping this in mind while emailing editors about payments. Vaishna Roy encouraged freelancers to send payment reminders to their editors so that they can follow up with the accounts department.

Those who occupy or have occupied the other side of the editorial desk also suggested that it is a good idea to try to clearly negotiate terms of work and pay. Whenever possible, put every mutually agreed term into an email and save it for the record. Always ask about the kill fee if the piece does not work out for reasons beyond the writer's control, they said, because you are entitled to it. It is often difficult to ensure that a proper agreement, let alone a contract, is in place while commissioning every piece. That makes it all the more important that mutually agreed terms are recorded on email. That is a very important document to have, they said.

The discussion that followed included suggestions that the network, as a collective, should continue to bargain for fair and minimum pay, and timely payment - for example, within 30-45 days – for freelancers. It was also suggested that an important step that could be taken as a collective is to write to all major publishers/editors and appeal to their goodwill while demanding fair and timely compensation for freelance work.

Safety of NWMI members: Emergency response on field work, mental health and PTSD, support for legal cases

Led by: Geeta Seshu and Shahina KK

Geeta Seshu, who has led research on the topic, said there is documented evidence of 90 attacks on journalists in the field between 2014 and 2019. Women journalists were targeted during the controversy over the opening of the Sabarimala temple to women, while investigating illegal sand mining and while covering many other such stories. She explained that the session was meant to elicit proactive reactions and doable solutions that can inform an effective resistance. The focus of the session, she said, is not so much on where the attacks happened or how but on solutions.

"We are trying to see how to develop a response system," Shahina added. "Whatever happens, it is our responsibility and our burden. As individuals, we are left to fight cases for years. What can we do to ease the burden on individuals? The NWMI has intervened and helped at least a support system. Let us also discuss how to deal with legal issues, who to reach out to, etc."

Thingnam Anjulika from Manipur said she would like to link this discussion with the earlier one on Kashmir. "There was a time when there was a killing every day in Manipur," she said, "just like what is happening in Kashmir. After a certain time, a mental block and insensitivity set in. That is when it becomes clear that people are affected by the conflict. Such feelings are

often signs of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). We have to be careful about this and figure out how to intervene and help. The NWMI has actually provided this kind of help well."

Babie Shirin shared her recent experience in Manipur. "The CM has filed a sedition case against me, she said. I had published a statement that was based on a report on an India Today exit poll that said he came third in the poll. But the information turned out to be wrong. So, we were summoned and the government decided to prosecute us using both the public prosecutor and the services of a private lawyer. The High Court stayed the case but it is still active."

Durga Nandini provided information about an initiative by the Delhi chapter of the network "In Delhi, NWMI members met up and discussed what kind of support we could provide in such cases," she said. "Who is the first person the journalist can call? Can the network create a bank of lawyers with contacts to help at such times? After that, the fight needs money. Should the NWMI consider fundraising?"

"Can we list legal and counselling help available for women journalists on the NWMI site?" asked Leena Reghunath. She explained that she received continuous threat calls after one of her stories in Caravan. "I had to go underground," she said. "I went through psychological issues. I quit Caravan. At that time, thanks to a call, Nisha Susan helped me out by scheduling a counselling session for me. Now I want to help in turn. I am a lawyer. I can be part of a legal cell that NWMI sets up," said Leena.

Others thought this was a good idea to explore, along the lines of the Media Legal Defence (MLD). "We can offer legal and counselling help. I became a lawyer during the course of my own case," said Shahina. Discussing the possible setting up of such a mechanism, some participants pointed out that, while pro-bono work is good to have access to, solid institutional support is required. Discussions continued on how to create support structures, provide legal aid, access to insurance, etc.

The importance of the mental well-being of journalists was highlighted by Sonal Kellogg, “I am doing counselling sessions. I suggest that when we are doing difficult stories or series, we should go for counselling every 15-30 days. We could form a support system to push colleagues into counselling. I am also available as a counsellor.”

The challenges of setting up support systems was discussed. As B.Jayashree said, “Let us do a reality check. We need people who will stay for the long run. We have lots of volunteers when we start such a list but later everybody will fall off. I want to mention that during the protest in Bombay against the cutting down of the Aarey forest, 150 journalists were arrested in one day. We went to court, but we could not get six people to file the case. Nobody wanted to come forward and file a case against the government. P. Chidambaram represented us and we won. Getting an influential face to argue the case makes a big difference.”

Sumita Jaiswal from Patna cited the example of the sexual abuse in the children’s home in Muzaffarpur, Bihar. The government had banned coverage of the case. “I was wondering how to get around this ban. That’s when I made friends with a woman legal activist. If we can add our personal/professional contacts to the NWMI list that might help,” she said.

To conclude, it was decided that the following steps would be taken:

- For mental health and PTSD support, a list of counsellors would be drawn up.
- For legal issues, a network of lawyers is sorely needed—so a list would be built up.
- Shortlist ideas on how to organise institutional support.
- Explore the fund-raising option – figuring out how to do this on a case by case basis.
- Continue the discussion on how to organise focussed, long-term campaigns for targeted journalists so that their cases do not remain individual struggles alone.

Ripples of the #MeToo movement

Led by: Laxmi Murthy and Ragamalika Karthikeyan

During the second wave of the #MeToo movement in India, several journalists and media women spoke out about sexual harassment at their workplaces. While the exact number of people who spoke out is unclear, some estimates put the number at 152. And among the women who spoke up are several members of NWMI. Many of them filed official complaints with the organisations the harassers were part of, or with the police. During this internal session, we took stock of where these cases were and discussed the way forward. The session also reflected on what justice looks like for survivors in different parts of the country. The Priya Ramani vs MJ Akbar defamation case is still in court. Akbar’s lawyers have been using several methods to denigrate her as well as other survivors who spoke out against him. However, one positive aspect of the proceedings is that several journalists, including NWMI members, have been supporting Priya in court by simply turning up and making sure that she is not alone and that she experiences solidarity from the community. The proceedings are reported either as articles or Twitter threads.

The case of several young journalists accusing Meghnad Bose of sexual harassment was taken up by The Quint, although the instances of harassment did not take place in their organisation. The Quint’s Internal Committee heard the case in 2019 and initiated punitive measures against Meghnad, including shifting him away from the head office, denying him a by-line for a set period of time, and avoiding video appearances by him, too, for a set period of time. While some members felt this was

a good precedent and was proportionate, others disagreed. Meghnad won two Ramnath Goenka awards after the sexual harassment allegations were made, and this was seen as proof that he did not face any repercussions for his actions, according to many members.

Another case was that of KR Sreenivas, the former resident editor of The Times of India (ToI) in Hyderabad. While at least eight women accused him of sexual harassment and wrote to the ToI, asking the organisation to take action against him, no official action was taken. Sreenivas quit the organisation soon after – and landed a job as editor with DT Next soon after.

The victory achieved by an NWMI chapter was also discussed. The secretary of the Thiruvananthapuram Press Club in Kerala, M. Radhakrishnan, along with some lackeys, barged into the house of a woman colleague at night, assaulted her, her two children, and a family friend. The NWMI Kerala chapter took up this incident, protested in front of the Press Club and took the matter up with Kerala Kaumudi – the news organisation where both Radhakrishnan and the woman journalist worked. Radhakrishnan was finally arrested and let off on bail, but was sacked as secretary of the Press Club, and is currently facing an internal inquiry at his workplace. Most importantly, NWMI Kerala has been able to push for a policy against sexual harassment at the Press Club, and the formation of an IC.

NWMI Kerala chapter members Saritha Balan and Saritha Verma spoke about how this can serve as an example of the way the network can help members in the future – by coming together, being present physically on the ground, and putting pressure on those who can take action.

NWMI's Got Talent! (7.30-9.30pm, Day 2, 8 February 2020)

Curators/Emcee: Vasanthi Hariprakash, MD Riti

After a full day of intense discussions and learning, a fun evening of song, dance, drama and comedy followed by a sumptuous dinner was enjoyed by all.




SESSION 4 (9.30 - 11.00 am on Day 3, 9 February 2020)

Fixing the Ethics of 'Fixer' Journalism

National and international journalists are descending on the states of north-eastern India, Kashmir and rural south India as the politics emanating from these places resonates across the world. These journalists often look for "fixers" – the popular but pejorative term for a local producer or coordinator who is expected to arrange meetings, organise logistics, and often also provide valuable perspectives on the complex subjects involved. These relationships are often fraught. If the visiting journalists make mistakes in their reporting, journalists based in these areas, who are the ones usually hired to assist them, are vulnerable to retaliatory action. Local journalists often feel exploited as they help "parachute" journalists in various ways but get little professional credit, respect or compensation for their time, energy, knowledge and contacts.

The session explored the ethics and power imbalance of parachute/fixer journalism and addressed questions such as: What are the gaps in journalism done this way? How can the media front real experts, keeping the voice of those affected while also providing a larger perspective? What kinds of terms/contracts can local journalists practically negotiate? What is a better name for this job? What are the good existing models that we can replicate? Are media collaborations with potentially fairer terms of engagement viable?

Moderators: Thingnam Anjulika and Kavin Malar

Initiators of the discussion: Raihana Maqbool (Kashmir), Shahina KK (Kerala), Anuradha Sharma (West Bengal), Sushmita Goswami (Assam), Sumita Jaiswal (Bihar).

Thingnam Anjulika, co-moderator of the panel, began the session laying out the basic problem. “We need our stories to go out, and we need collaboration. But many times, we have found that local journalists are not respected for their expertise, time and knowledge. Sometimes the outsider journalist takes the story and writes it up beautifully, but sometimes it is written with half knowledge. Sometimes we are upset at the way they treat people in our states.

Explaining the meaning of ‘parachute journalism’ she said the need for ‘fixers’ arises because most journalists who parachute in do not belong to the area they are covering and do not have local knowledge. According to her, discussions about the practice of parachute journalism become important when local contributors are not treated with the respect and appreciation they deserve for their contributions and/or when the journalist from elsewhere goes back and writes a story based on partial knowledge and understanding, which creates tensions locally.

The term ‘fixer’ is not the best way to describe local contributors, said co-moderator **Kavin Malar**. She urged panellists to refer to them as local contributors or co-ordinators instead.

She also pointed out that the relationship between local contributors and their sources can sour when parachute journalists put out a problematic story.

Raihana Maqbool recounted the incident of a female journalist who had approached a senior Kashmiri journalist after the August 2019 clampdown in the state in an effort to contact local sources and gather local knowledge for stories. In the end she did not reimburse him for his contributions and even expenses. She said this was not an unusual situation: local journalists based in Kashmir are often not paid for their contribution despite the fact that a large number of parachute journalists come to the Valley looking for stories. To make matters worse, many of these journalists often misreport the situation as well, and this can even endanger local journalists known to have helped them with sources, etc. She suggested that a written agreement is required to minimise the possibility of reneging on oral agreements and misreporting.

Anjulika pointed out that outside journalists seek out the senior-most journalists to benefit from their sources, knowledge and opinions but do not respect or reward them for the help they render. There are problems with seeking permission, getting a written agreement, deciding on payment. Visiting journalists should be sensitive enough to realise that even if the local journalist does not specifically ask for money, the outsider should understand that this is an invaluable service that deserves compensation.

Sahina KK shared her experience of being approached by a reporter working for an international newspaper for help with a story on people from Kerala joining the Islamic State (IS) organisation. The international journalist mistook the flag of the Indian Union Muslim League (IUML) for the Pakistani flag and drew conclusions based on that mistake in her report. According to her, most international journalists lack proper knowledge and clear understanding of the places and people they try to cover.

It has been suggested that local journalists should ask for bylines, not just payment. However, not all local journalists may want a shared byline because they cannot be sure that the story will be reported correctly and it is they who are answerable to their sources. Shahina explained that she has reservations about sharing a by-line since the visiting journalists often come up with a story that can land local contributors in trouble. She suggested that a system of footnotes, like the one that exists in academia, may be a better way to acknowledge the contributions of local journalists. During the question-answer session, a participant suggested that the problem could be addressed by requiring that a playback copy should be shared with the local contributor before the story is published. But Shahina pointed out that local journalists do not usually have the bargaining power to insist on such conditions.

The reality that parachute journalists often have a fixed narrative in their mind and approach the sources that support this narrative was brought out by **Sushmita Goswami**, based in Guwahati. According to her, visiting journalists often release reports that can cause damage to the local people as well as the local journalists who have to face the repercussions when the ground reality is not accurately and holistically reflected. Sushmita also talked about another scenario, in which parachute journalists are open to learning about local perspectives but can be misled by local journalists who have a specific agenda. This, too, can lead to gaps in their journalism. Talking about credit and monetary compensation, she said it is currently up to journalists, as individuals, to adhere to ethical practices but the NWMI could also initiate a process to draft guidelines which ought to be followed. The main issue is that there should be more balance in the power equation between visiting and local journalists. A better understanding of the relationships between local journalists and local sources, and more awareness of the importance of ensuring that the stories resulting from the collaboration are both accurate and balanced, are also required.

Anuradha Sharma, based in Siliguri, highlighted the pact that often exists between freelance journalists and suggested that monetary compensation may not be important in such cases. She discussed the politics of who gets to tell the story and the power equations within organisations. “My approach is to push for collaborative journalism. Look at the example of hostwriter.com. We have to push for collaborations with local reporters to tell the story. There will be issues. Situations will keep arising but if we see collaboration as a way to tell stories we can get around the problem,” she said. Some big organisations do want local reporters to tell the story and there are networking sites for journalists that allow them to find partner journalists who can collaborate in a story. She shared the example of Paul Salopek walking the human migration path with a local walking partner who gets to share the byline with him as an example of fair partnership.

Sumita Jaiswal, based in Patna, discussed the entangled nature of the ethics of parachute journalism and media ownership. She pointed out that when journalism has become more of a business, and political leaders are involved in media companies, newspapers follow policies designed to suit a particular readership and ensure popularity. These policies, along with the pressure put by the management on the editorial decision-makers if the advertising department has issues with anything that is reported, do not allow journalists to bring in other perspectives. According to her, each reporter's individual position and capacity within an organisation becomes more important in this context. She suggested that the NWMI should propose a written agreement about payments to help network members, who often have problems in negotiating terms and ensuring proper monetary value for their contribution.

During the discussion that followed, the idea of introducing a consent form for sources was debated upon. Many were of the opinion that such a practice would be one-sided and enable journalists to evade accountability. It could result in sources ending up in a vulnerable position, too.

Narrating her experience as a local coordinator, **Rajashri Dasgupta** said she has found that consent forms for interviews did not protect the people interviewed and instead protected only the journalists. She also pointed out that sometimes the photographer or cameraperson would violate the terms of the inadequate consent form by taking photographs of people without their consent. This created a situation where it was difficult to know what could be done once “the arrow has been shot”.

Linda Chhakchhuak recounted her experience, when she had gone to Arunachal Pradesh for a story a long time ago. “On the way back, I was taking pictures,” she said, “when a man came up to me and posed for a photograph, which I took. He then asked for Rs 5,000, telling me: you take photographs and earn money, so give us some.” According to her, what he said was true.

As for payments, some participants said that it is culturally difficult for Indian women journalists to negotiate. Anjulika pointed out that many people in the regional media who work as ‘fixers’ do not know how the system works, let alone about the option to demand a joint byline, with playback, etc.

There was agreement that NWMI could consider developing a template that could help frame agreements between parachute journalists and local contributors for the benefit of members.

Cultural Programme (11:15-12.15, Day 3, 9 February 2020)

The Threshold by MD Pallavi & Bindhu Malini

Singer and actor M D Pallavi and National Award-winning singer-composer Bindhu Malini presented Threshold, a musical conversation that examines gender through stories of women across continents and generations.

The artistes were introduced by **Rehmat Merchant**.

The performance celebrated the struggles of women through the ages, in different parts of the world, through a musical narrative. The musician duo, who have been performing the evolving compilation of The Threshold in front of diverse audience, had trimmed the customary 90-minute performance to about 60 minutes to accommodate the schedule of the NWMI meeting. The hour-long musical journey highlighted stories of women across centuries and civilizations who had defied the stereotypes of their times to stand up and

speak out, even though many of their struggles ended in tragedy and most were unrecognised for years afterwards.

The performance began with a traditional song of lament from Tamil Nadu, with women coming together to mourn the fate of the unborn child if it is a girl. The prejudices faced by the girl child right from childhood were narrated through poetry that flowed seamlessly along with the songs, drawn from different genres, continents and generations.

During the performance, the duo spoke of many unsung and forgotten women of the past, such as Maria Anna Mozart, the sister of the legendary composer, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, who could not pursue a musical career due to her gender. Presenting a piece by Fanny Mendelssohn, Pallavi and Bindhu talked about how Fanny was not able to publish her work under her own name for a long time and had to use her brother Felix's name. The duo also presented the tumultuous lives of many women of the past, including Moroccan singer and activist Kharboucha, Greek mathematician, astronomer and philosopher Hypatia, and the first female physician of Athens, Agnodice.

The struggles of women of India were also highlighted, including the social censure of Sule Sankavva, whose poems were banned because she was a courtesan, and Nangeli, who fought the 'breast toll' imposed on women belonging to the so-called lower castes in Kerala.

While most of the tales were of women of many centuries past, Pallavi and Bindhu Malini narrated stories about fighting gender discrimination in the recent past, too. They talked about Puerto Rican labour leader Luisa Capetillo, who was taken to court in 1919 for wearing pants. Nearer home, they also told the story of the over two decades of activism that finally allowed women to perform 'aradhana' at the Thyagaraja Aradhana in Tamil Nadu in 1941, and described how the struggles of under-privileged women in south India continue. Compositions of Lingamma, Neelamma, Goggavva, Meerabai and Nina Simone are used to present these stories of struggle for gender equality.

Besides presenting the songs and poems and offering narratives and contexts, the paid of musicians also play a number of instruments to reach out to the audience even more effectively. All the lyrics were not understood by everyone in the audience, but language is not a barrier for music, especially when it is used to put forward struggles against gender discrimination. The universality of music and the theme of the performance were evident when the spell-bound audience of over 100 media women from across the country gave a standing ovation to the two performers when they concluded their musical journey through time.

SESSION 5 (12.15-1.30 pm***,*** Day 3, 9 February 2020)

Culture & the Arts in Times of Trouble

Art, literature, music and cinema may be the most peaceful, free and lasting expressions of dissent, identity or flux. What does it take to make art in polarised times? What are the inspirations and limitations? Does the artist's identity matter, and how does it influence the art? Is there fear of repression? When the subject influences the expression, how important is the craft? What are the roles of language and cultural history in the expression? What are the responses within the artist community? How does one make subversive art and balance financial constraints? How can technology be incorporated into the realm of art?

How can journalists cover the subject to represent both the craft and its impact on society? What are the best ways to democratise art and reporting on it?

Moderators: Nadika Nadja and Anna Vetticad

Initiators of the discussion: MD Pallavi & Bindhu Malini (musicians); Arundhati Ghosh, (Executive Director, India Foundation for the Arts); Manjula, Arunodaya Kala Tanda, Mandya (theatre); Deepa Dhanraj (filmmaker); Sana Irshad Mattoo (photographer)

Citing a few recent examples of art that mirrored the present times, **Arundhati Ghosh** pointed out that they did not receive any support from patrons and organisers. She said many artists have spoken out against various forms of oppression over the years and it is the duty of art funders and sponsors to support such work.

Sana, a photographer from Kashmir, recalled the difficulties she faced while taking pictures in the Valley after the abrogation of Section 370 in August 2019. Showing a few samples of her work, Sana spoke about how she managed to save her images from the security forces who asked her to delete them.

Senior filmmaker **Deepa Dhanraj** highlighted the alternatives enabled by technology to present different viewpoints. As examples, she mentioned initiatives like Chal Chitra Abhiyan, a film and media collective based in Uttar Pradesh, and Dalit Camera, a YouTube Channel which tells stories through the perspective of the Dalit community in India.

Manjula, a theatre artiste from Mandya, had to fight poverty, caste oppression, and patriarchy to venture into a domain traditionally reserved for men - street theatre. She faced many challenges from male artistes and violence from society but today she is an art entrepreneur managing a troupe of women artists.

Singer **MD Pallavi** ruminated on how the traditional notions about gender and social conditioning influence audiences, who as a result want her to present a certain look and don particular types of attire during a concert.

The meeting culminated on a high note, with Pallavi and Bindhu Malini leading the group in singing Faiz Ahmed Faiz's anthem of resistance, *Hum dekhenge* in Hindi as well as in Kannada (based on the translation by poet Mamta Sagar).

The community singing was a fitting finale for the 2020 NWMI national meeting considering that all participants and resource persons were presented with a souvenir mug that declared: "Hum Dekhenge (aur bolenge, likhenge, dikhayenge, sunayenge…).

As customary, the NWMI issued a statement at the end of the 15th national meeting, which is available here.

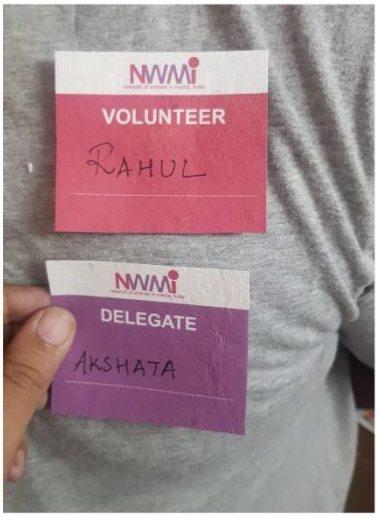








Snapshots from outside the sessions



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Laxmi Murthy
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Meera K
Melanie Kumar
Padmalatha Ravi
Pinky Chandran
Poornima.R
Prachi Pinglay-Plumber
Ragamallika Karthikeyan
Rehmat Merchant
Revathi Sivakumar
Rohini Mohan
Sandhya Mendonca
Shailaja Tripathi
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Shobha SV
Shree DN
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Urmila Chanam
Vasanthi Hariprakash

Rapporteurs among student volunteers:

Students from journalism and media studies from the following institutions participated as volunteers:

1. Christ University
2. Indian Institute of Journalism and New Media
3. National School of Journalism

Yamini Chincholi (IIJNM)
Shoby Krishna (IIJNM)
Ambalika Banerjee (IIJNM)
Ashutosh Patki (NSoJ)
Nishi Trivedi (NSoJ)
Anjana Prijith (Christ University)
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Sushmita Goswami
Urmila Chanam
Vaishna Roy
Ayswarya Murthy

In keeping with the tradition of the NWMI, the national meeting was self-funded and also supported by donations by members and the following institutions. We are grateful for their generous support.

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The NWMI is also grateful to the Indian Social Institute, Bengaluru, for providing the congenial and convenient venue for the meeting, and for their cooperation and accommodation, which contributed in invaluable ways to the smooth and successful conduct of the meeting. We greatly appreciate the fact that the ISI continues to be affordable and allows for freedom of speech, a rare combination in the present time.

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