Research Paper Mass Communication

Subject Position in the Coverage of Anti-dam Movement in Assam: Analysis of Media Constructions

R. Royal Rongmei

Research Scholar, Department of Mass Communication, Assam University, Silchar, Assam

ABSTRACT

The paper reflects on the construction of subject position and the role of media in restructuring the society. Looking at the concept of subjective interpellation from the structuralists perspectives, the paper tries to institutes the ideological functions in structuring anti-dam activists as protesters. A critical analysis has been made to inquire about the ideological practice in the media texts in sustaining power relations of the state.

KEYWORDS subject position, structuralists, anti-dam activists, protesters, ideology and media.

Introduction

In order to meet the demands of electric energy for the country as a result of pursuing a higher standard of living and with the advancement of technology, the Government of India has proposed for the construction of the Lower Subansiri Dam on river Subansuri on the border of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh in 2000. It is the biggest hydroelectric project with a height of 116m undertaken in India so far which is presently under construction. The execution of the project was entrusted to National Hydroelectric Power Corporation (NHPC) in 2000 which will have the capacity to produce 2000 MW of electric power. The project has led into big controversy like no other project has in recent times because this dam does not meet prescriptions of the international laws and conventions on big dams.

The Brahmaputra gives livelihood to millions of people living on its bank. People depend on this river for agriculture, irrigation, fisheries, and drinking water supply. Any disruption to the natural course of the rivers will bring enormous negative impact on ecology, aquatic life and people. As a result, there has been a continuous agitation by many social organizations, NGOs, pressure groups and indigenous communities in Assam against the construction of this project. According to them the reasons behind the agitation are:

i. Violation of United Laws and Conventions by the government;
ii. Disregard to the calls of people;
iii. No meaningful public consultation;
iv. No environmental management plan for formulating, implementing and monitoring environmental protection measures during and after the projects;
v. No rehabilitation and resettlement plan for the affected people.

This continuous agitation by various social organizations has attracted media attention. The present paper looks into the media coverage of this movement from the structuralists critical perspectives. The Times of India and The Telegraph of Guwahati edition are analyzed during the period of January to December, 2011.

Theoretical Framework

Structuralists like Luis Althusser and Herbert Marcuse have asserted that individuals are constructed as a bearer of positions through the effects of power relations. Althusser has rejected the humanists notion of the individual as a self-conscious, an autonomous beings whose actions could be explained in terms of personal beliefs, intentions, preferences and so on (Lapsley and Westlake, cited in Chandler). He introduced the concept of subject interpellation, whereby the subjects are constructed and positioned as the effects of pre-given structures. In this process, ideology functions effectively in positioning individuals to the constructed subject position through media. In the process of sustaining its power relations, with the function of ideology, institutions produce and reproduce such a condition that any subject has no alternatives but to depend on it. It makes subjection of (subordinate) subjects to the (dominant) subjects. It has created a condition and situation subjecting the subject to the subject. To this, Althusser (1984) said:

> *The category of the subject is constitutive of the ideology, but at the same time and immediately I add that the category of the subject is only constitutive of all ideology insofar as all ideology has the function (which defines it) of constituting concrete individuals as subjects. In the interaction of this double constitution exists the functioning of all ideology, ideology being nothing but its functioning in the material forms of existence of that functioning … that ideology acts or functions in such a way that it recruits subjects among individuals or transforms the individuals into subjects. (Pp. 45-48).*

Thus, ideology transforms individuals to constructed subjective positions through discourse and language (texts).

Marx and Engels (Pines, 1993) also claimed ideology as 'false consciousness'. They said that what people imagine to be the case is not really the case but it is false or illusory beliefs. As such, every action is based upon thought and Marx argued that the thought of the human agents are deceived by this illusory belief which brings inverted consciousness of the world (Larrain, 1994). This illusory belief has concealed the real image and this concealment serves as a veil between the subject and the object so that the subject is not able to penetrate through the veil in order to transcend and reach the object (Hall, 1982). Supporting the argument of Marx, Althusser says that ideology is a system of ideas and representations which dominate the mind of a man or social group with the dominant or ruling ideology: it is a representation of the imaginary world of the individual in relationship to the real conditions of existence (Althusser, 1984). But the truth is that the real point of the imaginary world never reached (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1979). It is said that ruling ideas become ruling ideology. It doesn't happen naturally but mediated between groups or individuals.

Legitimization and naturalization of ideology take place when ideology is constructed by the maximum power holder in a social institution. It is the effect of power that determines the discourse. Ideological struggle not only takes place in discourse and language but also over language, i.e. having pow-

er to determine things, and language serves as a stake and a site for the social struggles (Fairclough, 2001). Ideology functions in such a way that the representation of media is taken as reflections of reality. This is what Althusser said about the ideological interpellation of subjects through discourse.

Herbert Marcuse (1964) sees the advancement and modernization of this world as a result of technological rationality which is colonizing everyday life, robbing individual freedom and individuality by imposing technological imperatives, rules and structures upon their thought and behavoiur. Individual has decline of individuality because the space of his individuality has been colonized by other individual and leading every individual in the direction of one dimension by imposing false belief in their thought. In his book "One Dimensional Man" Herbert Marcuse argues,

> *"Independence of thought autonomy and the right to political opposition are being deprived of their basic critical function in a society which seems increasingly capable of satisfying the needs of the individuals through the way in which it is organized … under the conditions of a rising standard of living, non-conformity with the system itself appears to be socially useless, and the more so when it entails tangible economic and political disadvantages and threatens the smooth operation of the whole … false are those which are superimposed upon the individual by particular social interests in his repression: the needs which perpetuate toil, aggressiveness; misery, and injustice." (Marcuse, 1964, pp.1-5)*

This notion of structuralists perspective allows to see the political function of mass media text in sustaining political power relations.

Media constructing subject position

As structuralists have asserted that individuals are constructed as a bearer of position, in the coverage of anti-dam movement, media has constructed anti-dam activists, for instance members of Krishak Mukhti Sangram Samiti (KMSS) and All Assam Students Union (AASU), as protesters who are violent and anti-government. In almost all the cases, anti-dam activists are structured as preventing movement of turbines to the project site, threatening the state government to continue their agitation, blocking National Highways, creating problems to the state administration because of their agitation, gheraoing the office of National Hydroelectric Power Corporation (NHPC) in Guwahati, and not creating conducive atmosphere to the invitation of the state government for discussion on dam issues. Both the papers provided concentration on the event of the agitation, rather than providing alternative information favouring the affected indigenous people. In one of the headlines of The Times of India, it said: "Police arrest anti-dam protesters in Lakhimpur". Here the anti-dam agitators are structured as protesters and thus the act of police is legitimized. They are arrested not as anti-dam activists but as protesters.

Ideology functions effectively in this process of positioning the anti-dam activists as protesters (Althusser, 1984). Here ideology is seen as the power to signify events in a particular way (Hall, 1982). The events of anti-dam activists agitation are signified in such a way that there agitation has created problem to the general public by blocking National Highways and obstructing the state administration. They are not cooperating with the state government in bringing solution to the issues related to dams and does not provide conducive atmosphere to the invitation of the state government for talk. Rather they decided to continue their agitation. Police are forced to lathicharge and blank fire to disperse the mob and maintain law and order in the region. Action of the state and police are legitimized in the events.

The discourse about the anti-dam activists is organized in the way to portray them as protesters. There action of agitation is portrayed in the way of violence and it is consistently reported in the anti-dam movements discourse. In order to naturalized and win credibility, the statements made by anti-dam activists like KMSS general secretary Akhil Gogoi and AASU adviser Samujjal Bhattacharjee are reported in the discourse. The contents of their statements are about accusing the state government and against the construction of dams in the region. Thus the subject is ideologically interpellated through media discourse in order to sustain power relations of the state. As Herbert Marcuse said this lead the society to one dimensional thought about the anti-dam activists.

Conclusion

Media plays an important role in structuring anti-dam activists as protesters by legitimizing and naturalizing their act of violence. The meaning of the events is constructed by the effect of power. The power involved here is an ideological power (or symbolic power), i.e. the privilege to access and the power to signify events in a particular way by counting them as reliable sources. In this process meaning is produced with the help of ideological power, the producer takes partials explanation of an event, as if it were a comprehensive and adequate (holistic and in totality) meaning of an event which is presented in favour of dominant ideology and interest and thus sustaining power relations. Partial explanation gives meaning of an event partially and in the intention of the producer and interpreter. Here media did not give attention to the indigenous affected people, who are in thread of losing their social, cultural and community life. We should know that this ideologically constructed subject position affects our thoughts, attitudes and actions and persuades us to act according to somebody's interest. In response to this context, media as a public sphere should be a platform for expressing pluralism and diversity for both privileged and under privileged and function as democratic medium. Marginalizing, down-grading or de-legitimizing alternative means should be stopped.

REFERENCES

Adorno, T. and Horkhiemer, M. (1979). Dialectic of Enlightenment, London, Verso. | Althusser, L. (1984). Essays on Ideology, London, Verso. | Chandler, D. Marxist Media Theory. www.cym.ie/documents/chandler.pdf (accessed on 20 June 2014) | Fairclough, F. (2001). Language and Power, England, Pearson. | Hall, S. (1982). The rediscovery of 'ideology: return of the repressed in media studies. In Gurevitch, M., Bennett, T., Curran, J., and Woollacott, J. (eds), Culture, Society and the Media. New York, Routledge. | Larrain, J (1994). Ideology & Cultural Identity, UK,Polity Press. | Marcuse, H. (1964). One Dimensional Man, Introduction by Douglas Kellner, London. Routledge. | Pines, L.C. (1993). Ideology and False Consciousness, Marx and his historical progenitors, USA. State University of New York Press | The Telegraph. January – December, 2011, Guwahati edition. | The Times of India. January – December, 2011, Guwahati edition. |