



Manufacturing the Frontier: Media Sensationalism and the Historical Imaginary of Northeast India in Siddhartha Deb's *Surface*

Rohit Jahari*

Abstract

Set against the prolonged history of insurgency in Northeast India, Siddhartha Deb's *Surface* (2005) offers a sustained critique of the mainstream media's role in producing and sustaining stereotypical representations of the region. Through the character of Amrit Singh, a journalist, the novel illustrates how ambition, sensationalism, and institutional bias converge to frame the Northeast as a marginal and violence-ridden frontier. This article situates *Surface* within the historical construction of the Northeast as a "frontier" and examines how the misrepresentation of the area in national newsrooms perpetuates a cycle of distortion and cultural othering. By exposing the complicity between media markets, audience prejudice, and journalistic malpractice, Deb's novel underscores the urgent need for greater accountability and inclusivity in reporting on marginalised territories. The study contends that *Surface* functions as a literary intervention that critiques the ethical failures of mainstream journalism by pressing for more responsible engagement with Northeast India in national discourse.

Keywords: Frontier Gaze, Media ethics, Media Mis-representation, Northeast India, Sensationalism, Siddhartha Deb

Introduction

Siddhartha Deb, a writer originally from Meghalaya, has earned recognition for his nuanced exploration of Northeast India's rich sociocultural diversity and intricate political landscape. His debut novel, *The Point of Return* (2003), narrates a poignant tale

* Assistant Professor, Department of English, Shyam Lal College, University of Delhi

of Hindu Bengali immigrants from erstwhile East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) who resettled in the Northeast. The book captures the experiences of many Bengalis facing postcolonial displacement and uncertainty in the wake of the Indian subcontinent's partition. His second novel *Surface* (2005) – the focus of this study – offers a compelling depiction of life in pockets of Northeast India affected by militancy. In recognition of his literary brilliance, Deb received the PEN Open Book award in 2012.

A substantial portion of Deb's *Surface* depicts Northeast India's socio-political landscape that is shaped by decades of insurgency. This theme shares commonality with several English-language novels from the region, including Mitra Phukan's *The Collector's Wife* (2005), Easterine Kire's *Bitter Wormwood* (2011), Aruni Kashyap's *The House With a Thousand Stories* (2013), Dhruba Hazarika's *Sons of Brahma* (2014), and Ankush Saikia's *Red River Blue Hills* (2015), among others. What distinguishes Deb's novel, however, is its critical examination of the mainstream news media's misrepresentation of the Northeast, which reduces the area's intricate socio-political dynamics to the image of a conflict-ridden periphery. This critique unfolds through the protagonist, Amrit Singh, a journalist assigned to cover the place. His effort to report the "truth" paradoxically reinforces the very stereotypes that paint the Northeast as a disturbed area. Examining this contradiction would expose the factors that restrict reporters like Amrit from moving beyond reductive and clichéd portrayals of Northeast India.

Public understanding of Northeast India remains constrained due to the national media's tendency to oversimplify the region's cultural, historical, and political complexities. Arijit Sen affirms that "the [media] coverage of the Northeast remains trapped in stereotypes," often positioning the zone as India's "wild frontier" (6). Daisy Hasan similarly observes that "ethnic

strife', as reporters chose to call the several movements for political autonomy has been over-reported" (269). This fixation on violence and insurgency is not incidental but financially driven; as Payel Chakrabarti argues that the media "[c]overage of violence [in the Northeast] appears to be motivated by profit margins, perceived populist appeal and often bends on the sensationalist representation" (7). As a result, Northeast India is widely misrepresented and misunderstood as uniformly conflict-ridden. This study seeks to interrogate such distortions in media coverage by situating them within the historical construction of the Northeast as a "frontier" and by analysing their effects through Amrit's journalistic conduct. Doing so would demonstrate how psychological pressures, market imperatives, socio-cultural biases, historical legacies, and political factors collectively shape—and restrict—the mainstream media's narratives on Northeast India.

Literature Review

Scholarly readings of Deb's *Surface* have predominantly emphasised its political nuances, while offering comparatively little analysis of its engagement with journalism and media ethics. For instance, Gora Chand Das notes that the novel links Northeast India's political volatility to chronic misgovernance aggravated due to its geographic isolation from national power centres, resulting in "a turbulent and destructive arena for sorting out disputes regarding ethnic identities" (60). Seram Guneshwori Devi situates the novel within a broader tradition of Northeast Indian Literature that "explain[s] the same genre of violence from the state of Manipur" (81). Prachurjya Borah echoes this emphasis on politics: "Siddhartha Deb in his novel *Surface* brings out the truth related to the various rebel groups working in the North-Eastern parts of the country" (311). Elsewhere, Siambiakmawi and Sivasish Biswas engage with the novel's depiction of "a land long plagued by several groups of insurgents" while also uncovering the existential philosophies it

conveys (47). Another critic goes so far as to characterise Deb's vision of Northeast India as "a dismembered world of betrayal and lies," again reinforcing the critical focus on politics and violence (Roy). Only one scholar gestures towards the novel's journalistic texture: "Chunks of *Surface* are written with a journalistic or travelogue feel, as Siddhartha Deb plays with the blurry boundary separating fiction from fact" (Paul). Although insightful, such observations seldom interrogate the structures through which Northeast India is framed, circulated, and consumed—especially by mainstream media houses and their metropolitan audiences. This paper takes up that task, examining how larger media apparatuses, particularly non-Northeastern ones, perpetuate simplified portrayals with little accountability.

Another strand of criticism draws parallels between *Surface* and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), though such studies overlook the novel's engagement with media practices. Rossella Ciocca, for instance, observes that Deb's depiction of Northeast India recalls Conrad's Africa:

In many descriptions the almost mystic beauty of the land appears sullied by the dismal ramifications of polluting modernization. As a result, a very old and mysterious land, through a peculiar mix of atavistic practices and the ecological byproducts of modernity, appears shrouded in a sort of uncanny atmosphere, which from the very start summons up the African jungle depicted by Conrad in *Heart of Darkness*. (93)

While surveying global literary output shaped by Conrad's legacy, David Miller finds that Deb's *Surface* "echoes Conrad playfully in a number of ways" (131). Although such comparisons situate *Surface* within a global literary tradition, they tend to obscure the novel's more immediate preoccupation with the media's role in shaping perceptions of Northeast India, a concern that this research foregrounds.

Historical Construction of Northeast India as a “Frontier”

While Deb blames media practices for hindering the Northeast’s seamless integration into the national mainstream, historical circumstances and their long-term impacts appear to be the root cause. As the novel explores, the divide between Northeast India and the so-called “mainland” India stems from longstanding structural realities. Understanding these deeper past roots is key to explaining why dominant media outlets continue to propagate reductive and negative images of the region. Although the sociocultural fault line is gradually narrowing, its origins can be traced back to the pre-independence period when the Northeast was first perceived as a borderland. David Vumlallian Zou and M. Satish Kumar argue that the region’s status as a frontier is not a recent phenomenon but the outcome of long historical processes. They contend that the Northeast has, across centuries, functioned as the “imperial fringe of the Mughals, the British Raj, and the Indian successor state” (143). This trajectory firmly positioned the area as both a geographical and political periphery—a perception that originated during the Mughal period and was subsequently entrenched under British colonial rule. Nityananda Kalita concurs, noting that the term “Northeast” was “formalized through the British colonial administration as a frontier region,” a label that reinforced its marginal and liminal status in both historical and contemporary discourses (1354).

At present, certain people, including journalists, continue to perceive Northeast India as an enduring “frontier”—not only of India but also of Southeast Asia, with which it shares deep social, cultural, and ethnic affinities. Subir Bhaumik astutely locates the Northeast at the “crossroads of a great ethno-cultural frontier that separates two of Asia’s greatest civilisations: the Indo-Gangetic and the Southeast Asian” (“Negotiating Access” 143). Rather than enriching the national imagination, these affinities are frequently invoked to underline the region’s

difference from the Indian mainstream. Consequently, despite their active participation in the Indian polity, Northeasterners are persistently subjected to processes of ‘othering,’ as dominant mainland perspectives recast them as exotic figures or cultural outsiders. Journalists, such as Amrit from Deb’s novel, whose worldview is shaped by such inherited misconceptions, tend to produce reportage that reflects only a superficial grasp of the place. Thus, the Northeast “continues to baffle or conjure up images of ritualistic weirdness for many in the mainland, the politics and culture wars of the world’s largest democracy – which is now a majoritarian democracy – have become part and parcel of social life in the north-eastern states” (Chophy). In this way, the Northeast remains symbolically cast as an uncivilised margin, juxtaposed against the ostensibly modern and cultured Indian heartland.

Media’s Reproduction of the Northeast as “Frontier” and Its Consequences

Deb’s *Surface* is perhaps the only Northeast Indian English novel to challenge the mainstream media’s distorted portrayal of the territory, a distortion rooted in its historical construction as a “frontier.” Contemporary cases demonstrate how this inherited bias continues to dictate media reporting on the Northeast. The widely sensationalised “Meghalaya honeymoon murder” of 2025 illustrates this pattern: before facts were verified, the media rushed to frame the incident through frontier tropes of violent tribals and the involvement of drug and arms cartels. Although the investigations ultimately identified it as a case of mariticide, the damage was already done—Northeast Indians were subjected to online trolling, racist abuse, and dehumanising commentary. This episode reveals how flawed media narratives operate less as neutral reporting and more as mechanisms of harm, sustaining the perception of the Northeast as a dangerous and alien borderland.

The broader implications are clear. The media's power to shape public opinion and influence individual thinking is well established, with numerous real-world instances substantiating this claim. Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, in *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, acknowledge the mass media's potency in "inculcat[ing] individuals with the values, beliefs, and codes of behavior that will integrate them into the institutional structures of the larger society" (1). Crucially, they show how the media often operates as a "propaganda system" (1) capable of manipulating public consciousness. In the Northeast Indian context, the mainstream media's engagement with the territory echoes the historical frontier imagination and which has moulded the public perceptions of the area, including bureaucrats tasked with administering the region. Sanjib Baruah highlights that official government discourse often echoes media-driven stereotypes when speaking about the Northeast: "Phrases like 'ethnic insurgencies', 'cross-border terrorism', and 'proxy wars' are the staple of Indian official talk about the Northeast" (2). Such rhetoric frames the region as perpetually unstable and marginal. Conversely, Swikrita Dowerah and Debarshi Prasad Nath observe that biased media narratives foster "feelings of difference and distance" among many Northeast Indians in relation to the Indian mainstream (122). This psychological divide, long sedimented by frontier thinking, renders mainland Indians less attentive to the numerous inconsistencies in Amrit's reportage on the Northeast.

The persistence of the "frontier gaze" has fostered a parochial attitude towards Northeast Indians, a bias starkly exposed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Across several parts of India, Northeasterners faced stigma and discrimination, as their Mongoloid physiognomy led some to ignorantly associate them with the so-called "Chinese" coronavirus. Thongkhohal Haokip attributes this racialised prejudice to the exclusion of the oriental-looking Northeast Indians from the dominant

conception of the “Indian face.” As he observes, “[T]he Northeast Indians, who are not physically associated with the place of origin of the virus [in Wuhan, China], but on the mere ground of racial affinity with those associated with the origin of the virus were negatively affiliated with the disease” (357). Ironically, certain journalists’ efforts to foster awareness about the Northeast are undermined by some of their peers. As Duncan McDuie-Ra argues, the media’s fixation on insurgency and political violence reinforces the constructed image of Northeasterners as “suspect citizens,” a narrative that not only marginalises but also corrodes national unity (94). The significance of *Surface* lies in its exposure of the mainstream media’s reproduction of the historical frontier imagination that continues to shape perceptions of Northeast India.

Discussion on Deb’s Surface

Through a third-person omniscient narration, the plot delves into Amrit’s deteriorating mental state and uses it as a lens to illuminate the historical notions that enable and legitimise his prejudiced portrayal of Northeast India. Amrit’s descent into depression stems from his professional stagnation, which has steadily eroded his sense of self-worth and has left him deeply insecure. As frustration mounts and his psychological stability falters, Amrit seeks to restore his damaged ego by tying his self-respect to career advancement. He becomes convinced that reporting on Northeast India will revive his fading reputation and thus pursues this subject with renewed determination. With his self-esteem now contingent upon professional success, Amrit becomes intolerant of obstacles that might slow his progress. This impatience leads him to fabricate stories. The ease with which these distortions are accepted as truth exposes the complicity of a media environment that readily accepts misinformation.

As part of his assignment, Amrit investigates the source of a photograph allegedly depicting armed militants parading a woman named Leela as punishment for her supposed involvement in pornography. Despite extensive efforts, he finds no eyewitness testimony to the incident, yet he uncritically accepts the photograph as authentic. This prompt endorsement betrays Amrit's desperation for professional validation: "Once I stopped believing in the story, I stopped believing in the possibility of a different life. The story would make me free" (39). Aware that his professional resurgence hinges upon the completion of the investigation, he reflects: "It was the first step in a journey towards my independence, finding out if I could emerge from the stupor of the past seven years to start a new life" (40). Although his initial lapse in journalistic integrity seems to stem from the intense pressure to reclaim his self-respect, the narrative gradually uncovers a troubling pattern of fabricated news reporting. The absence of institutional accountability or critical scrutiny in response to Amrit's fabrications highlights a conducive sociocultural environment for such ethically dubious journalistic practices in the context of the Northeast.

Amrit exploits a readership largely unequipped to recognise the subtleties of media manipulation. The credibility of his fabrications relies heavily on their alignment with historically entrenched misconceptions about Northeast India. He concocts a fictional backstory for the victim, Leela, which seamlessly fits into the dominant and flawed conception of the Northeast as a peripheral site of perpetual bloodshed, thereby pandering to those predisposed readers who already accept such distortions as fact. This conjecture is validated through Daisy Hasan's observation in which she vouches for the commercial appeal of exaggerating the Northeast's sporadic insurgencies: "In a region that remains marginal and rarely noteworthy in the national consciousness, terror is used as a way to 'sell' a story to commercial television channels which would not ordinarily be

interested in this region given its geographical and cultural remoteness from mainland India” (265). Hasan’s analysis underscores the existence of a sizable readership conditioned to consume sensationalised portrayals of Northeast India’s political volatility. Amrit deliberately caters to this demographic by prioritising shock value over accuracy. His framing of Leela’s story as a “portrait of the mystery and sorrow of India through the story of the woman in the photograph” illustrates how he reinforces dominant myths while commodifying Northeasterners’ lives, turning individual pain into a marketable spectacle (5). Ultimately, his professional success depends on affirming his audience’s biases, for only then can his elaborate fabrications gain credibility.

Amrit is only the most recent in a long line of journalists who have exploited Northeast India through fabricated reporting for personal gain. His confidence in spreading falsehoods stems from a journalistic tradition that has repeatedly sensationalised the region without facing repercussions. Particularly troubling is the mainstream media’s persistent insensitivity towards Northeastern women, a concern noted by Kh. Kabi and Ashes K. Nayak: “As it is observed, media in the Northeast lacks sensitivity in their reporting particularly towards women who are often the victims of violence and among the first to bear the brunt of armed conflicts” (324).

Leela’s life reflects the systemic vulnerability of women from the region who are subjected not only to physical violence but also to exploitative media portrayals. Instead of verifying the facts of Leela’s case, Amrit prioritises his career ambitions and thus weaves a narrative riddled with distortions. The unchecked dissemination of such lies is deeply harmful, as it normalises the continued victimisation of already marginalised individuals under the cover of journalism. This recurring pattern underscores the urgent need for media accountability. Had earlier cases of unethical reporting been met with meaningful

consequences, figures like Amrit might have been dissuaded from misrepresenting Northeast India in the press.

Decades of distorted portrayals have conditioned the public to not pay much attention to accounts that challenge stereotypical portraits of the Northeast. This persistence of prejudice is inseparable from the region's historical construction as a "frontier." The media's failings must be understood within this framework: Northeast India is positioned as a distant borderland rather than an integral part of the nation in the popular psyche, including those of the journalists. The media's long history of distortion has drawn sustained scholarly critique. As early as 2007, an online article carried condemnation of the national media's fixation "with news of violence and insurgency which emanates from the region" (Sengupta), which has tarnished the Northeast's image. Fourteen years later, Kalpana Sharma reiterated this critique, noting that despite extensive air, road, rail, and mobile connectivity, journalists continue to cite "[d]istance and inaccessibility" of the Northeast as justification for shallow reporting" ("Big Media's"). Sharma argues that "the real distance is not a physical one; it is a mental one. It is an inability to take the time to understand the multi-layered and complex history of a region that is lumped into one only because of its geographical location" ("Big Media's"). This "mental distance" is itself a product of the frontier imagination, which casts the Northeast as outside the cultural and political mainstream. Amrit capitalises on this inherited bias. Aware that his readers are predisposed to accept reductive stories about the Northeast, he fabricates and manipulates narratives that reinforce its frontier image. He deliberately suppresses evidence of Leela's innocence because it contradicts the widespread perceptions of the place as violent and alien. In this way, Amrit's actions epitomise how the media's ethical lapses are tied to the deeper historical processes that have relegated the Northeast to the margins of public consciousness. Thus, Amrit's actions are not aberrational but structurally enabled.

Amrit steps into a journalistic void created by the stark underrepresentation of Northeastern voices in national media. With few local scribes capable of providing authentic counternarratives, misrepresentations of the region often go unchallenged. Even when credible Northeastern reporters speak out, their perspectives are frequently overshadowed by the sensationalist coverage of non-local counterparts. This imbalance highlights a deeper issue rooted in the cultural politics of representation. In the introduction to *Stories of Resilience: Media Voices from India's North East*, Piyashi Dutta and Aditya Sharma express concern about the exclusion of Northeastern perspectives from national newsrooms:

Besides the pressures from state and non-state actors, diversity in the newsroom is also increasingly becoming a concern in the region as well as across the globe. This has raised questions about the composition of the newsrooms – in both print and electronic media. Do they mirror the diversity of the country in terms of caste, gender, ethnicity and creed, or are they largely dominated by people from the higher classes and castes? The lack of recognition of the diverse identities of journalists is certainly unhealthy for journalism. (13)

Without explicitly referencing it, Dutta and Sharma's critique resonates with the central tenet of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" – the structural silencing of marginalised voices. Whether or not the Northeasterners can be classified as subalterns, the problem remains the same: the absence of local journalists who can intuitively represent the region's lived realities. This void facilitates the entry of outsiders like Amrit, whose shallow understanding of the region undermines his credibility as a reporter. His disregard for journalistic ethics further exposes how the lack of local representation creates space for opportunists who prioritise ambition over accountability.

Amrit's actions mark a sharp break from journalistic integrity, as he unhesitatingly tarnishes the Northeast's reputation to salvage his fragile ego. When delays stall his professional ambition, he turns to fabricating a sequence of events that reproduces familiar stereotypes about the Northeast. Responsible journalism demands rigorous investigation and the careful cultivation of diverse and credible sources—an approach particularly vital in a region as heterogeneous as the Northeast. Subir Bhaumik, a former BBC correspondent with decades of experience in the area, stresses the importance of engaging with a wide spectrum of voices, from traditional leaders to modern activists, from community elites to grassroots members: “For a journalist reporting this region (or any other similar conflict zone of comparable diversity), it is important to have a wide range of sources in the various communities. It is important to know the community leaders, young and old, traditional and modern, interact with them and also reach out to the grassroots to get a varied perspective” (“Reporting”). Bhaumik's guidelines are essential for capturing the region's layered perspectives and resisting reductive portrayals. Amrit disregards these principles and instead pieces together a story of fabrications, exaggerations, and omissions: “There would be enough for me to create a coherent narrative, and the anticipation of an end to this long journey led me to think of what lay beyond” (168). He even admits to tailoring his portrayal of Leela to suit the preconceived biases of his target audience: “What I had to say about Leela to a distant foreign audience had been entered into my machine and processed as neat rows of typed words, whited out in places where I thought they verged too close to what I really felt about her” (214). These calculated distortions expose Amrit's dependence on a media ecosystem that incentivises sensationalism and thrives on simplified representations of the Northeast.

Amrit displays no guilt in exploiting the prevailing stereotypes about Northeast India. He appears indifferent while

reinforcing inaccurate clichés as a means to restore his fractured self-esteem, fully aware that few outside this “frontier” region care about its realities: “What satisfaction was there in knowing the woman was not really a porn film actress, or that she had suffered surface wounds rather than crippled? And what did it mean that nothing of this existed for those who lived beyond this circle of fear, as no doubt it would cease to exist for me upon my return to Calcutta?” (172). His concern lies not in uncovering the truth of Leela’s plight but in sustaining a story that secures his career goals. This motive explains Amrit’s reluctance to meet Leela as her real presence threatens to dismantle the fictional persona on which his story depends. Leela ceases to be a woman with a traumatic past and instead becomes a potential threat to his fragile sense of achievement: “I was afraid-afraid of new complications, afraid of losing what I’d gained, the knowledge of Leela that let me hold on to some semblance of achievement and success” (215). Amrit’s anxiety is exacerbated at the prospect of confronting the actual Leela, whose lived reality might expose the gulf between the person herself and the symbolic figure he has fabricated: “My sense of unease deepened as I considered the woman I would be talking to in Moreh, someone who had Leela’s name and personal history but was, for all practical purposes far removed from the character I had built up over the past month” (221). In seeking validation and recognition, Amrit reduces Leela’s pain to a tool for self-promotion. This act is not merely a personal failing but also reflects the profound ethical failures of sensationalist journalism in its treatment of underrepresented and historically misunderstood regions like Northeast India.

The recurrent misrepresentation of Northeast India in the national media remains a source of grievance among its people, exacerbated by their limited ability to hold journalists accountable for such distortions. Shipra Raj’s survey highlights this concern through testimonials from participants in Manipur, who voiced their near-unanimous consensus on both

misrepresentation and underrepresentation of the Northeast in the national media: “Most of the participants said that they don’t see themselves reflected in the mainstream media. Across all groups, participants expressed that they felt underrepresented as well as misrepresented in the mainstream media. When representation does occur, most feel that it is bracketed either into conflict and racial discrimination” (78). Amrit compounds this issue by generalising an isolated incident from a specific locale as indicative of entire Northeast India, thereby flattening its complex sociocultural and political diversity to fit narratives of “frontier” territory. If Northeasterners had been able to exert sustained and effective pressure on the media to follow ethical reporting standards, journalists like Amrit might have been discouraged from engaging in such biased and sensationalist practices.

Conclusion

Amrit’s determined pursuit of professional success and respectability initially appears admirable, yet the plot gradually exposes the ethical compromises that underlie his ambitions. His concern for self-respect outweighs any genuine commitment to the responsibilities of journalism. By framing Northeast India within the historical construction of a “frontier,” he reinforces reductive stereotypes instead of questioning them, tailoring his report to align with audience prejudices. In doing so, Amrit exemplifies a broader failure within sections of the media, where the pursuit of recognition eclipses the ethical imperatives of accuracy, accountability, and nuanced representation.

Amrit’s professional misconduct is not isolated but symptomatic of a wider sociocultural and professional climate that normalises and even rewards such practices. His reportage mirrors a familiar pattern in media portrayals, where Northeast India is persistently depicted through the narrow tropes of insurgency and violence. Deb’s novel incisively critiques this

reductive framing by exposing how historically entrenched stereotypes both inform and justify unscrupulous journalistic practices. Amrit's willingness to cater to audience prejudices underscores the complicity between market demands and media sensationalism, revealing how distorted representations gain both legitimacy and circulation. In foregrounding this dynamic, the novel situates Amrit's actions within the broader cultural politics of representation, where Northeast India continues to be discursively contained as a space of otherness. Ultimately, Deb's novel calls for a critical reassessment of these narratives and presses for more ethical, inclusive, and authentic modes of engaging with the region in national media discourses.

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