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Mapping the Truth: Teresa Rehman

Dusk falls gently and the lights bathe the interiors of the university campus quarters with a golden glow. Inside one such house, a young woman quietly goes about preparing supper. Her hair is swept back with a scrunch, and she stirs the bubbling gravy over the gas stove, absently wondering whether her husband would be late returning from work.

Little Tamara is sprawled on the carpet in front of the TV, whooping with glee at the antics of Scooby Doo, while baby Kyra is sleeping snugly in her cot. It is a cozy, domestic scene, with the comforting minutiae of everyday life. And yet, the young wife and mother knows what a fragile thing this peace is, and how, even as she winds down her household for the night, somewhere there are guns blazing, grenades tearing open human bodies, and homes built with love and toil going up in flames.

This young woman has had experiences that most can only imagine, reporting fearlessly from one of the most troubled hotspots of the world—Northeast India.

Life for Teresa Rehman often seems to be lifted straight from the pages of a thriller. She remembers traveling deep into Hebron in interior Nagaland, escorted by a man with an AK 47 to meet Th Muivah, chief of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland,

Issak Muivah. All along the way she pestered the man with questions, which he deftly sidestepped. Her one to one with Muivah was a resounding success. She was able to probe deeply into his ideology, his strategy, and his hopes for the future of Nagaland. He was amazed to find that this intense and fearless young woman knew all about his love for pork and his gradual conversion to vegetarianism.

If one day she is caught in the crossfire between the Indian Army and the Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland—Isak-Muivah (NSCN-IM) faction in Nagaland, the next day she is unearthing why so many tea-garden laborers are dying of tuberculosis. As she listens to a disconsolate Manipuri woman describe how her school-going son was kidnapped by militants to work as a child soldier, an armed officer bursts into the hut, demanding to see her ID. Faced with a barrage of questions, a much-feared insurgent leader mutters to his aide, "This reporter is very cunning."

This backhanded compliment aside, Teresa Rehman's work as a journalist has been widely acknowledged. She was honored with the Ramnath Goenka Excellence in Journalism Award 2008–2009 for the category, "Reporting on the JK and the Northeast (print)," the Sanskriti Award 2009 for Excellence in Journalism, and the Seventh Sarojini Naidu Prize for Best Reporting on Panchayati Raj by the Hunger Project. Also awarded the Wash, Kunjabala Devi, and Laadli awards, she has widely traveled and has worked with leading media houses of India like *India Today*, the *Telegraph*, and *Tehelka*.

On a lazy summer afternoon, surrounded by books, cushions, magazines, her laptop, and packets of takeaway Chinese, Teresa leads me to where it all began. "My early years were spent in the lap of pristine nature in a quaint place—Sumer in Meghalaya." She begins, "I remember my mother encouraging us to read a lot of books. I used to eagerly wait for my maternal aunt, as she used to get an assortment of story books for us. I used to live a dual life—that of an ordinary school-going child and that of imaginary

characters of Enid Blyton books. I feel all this helped me to explore the unbidden and come up with something fresh and delightful." Journalism, with all its challenges, seemed right up her street.

"I don't know why, but I was always fascinated by journalists and journalism. There was no journalist in the family who could inspire me. But I used to rummage through my mother's collection of magazines, *Illustrated Weekly of India*, *Reader's Digest*, and *India Today*, and used to imagine myself in one of the bylines. I started writing regularly in the children's supplements of the local newspapers and turned into a child celebrity. There was no stopping me after that. There was a dogged determination to become a journalist, which never impressed my dad. The line-up of accolades and awards could finally convince my father to forgive me for not becoming a doctor!"

"Though I started out as a cub reporter in the local dailies of Assam, where I was writing in the children's supplements, my innings as a full-fledged journalist started with the *India Today* magazine in 2000, where I joined as a trainee journalist. Though I was on the desk, I tried ways and means to do stories, as reporting was my first love. After one-and-a-half years, I came back to Assam due to certain compelling domestic circumstances. I started working as a correspondent for *The Telegraph*, where I handled the Feature page. I did all kinds of reporting here, right from covering a local football match to an investigative story on the State Home for Women. I decided to take a break for four years when I had my first child. Then I joined *Tehelka* news magazine as its Northeast India Correspondent, where I worked for four years and managed to do some path-breaking stories. I did hardcore conflict reporting, apart from the regular stuff on culture, politics, society, and the environment. This fetched me several accolades."

"Then I decided to do some independent work. I started doing media analysis for www.thehoot.org, writing for the *Women's Feature Service* and a series on climate change for *Reuters*. Somehow, I feel the region does not get its due space in the so-called national

dailies." She decided to create her own space. She then turned a media entrepreneur with her own baby, an online news magazine www.thethumbprintmag.com. "It is a dream I am trying to live in its different hues. We called ourselves an international magazine with a northeastern soul. We are a start-up venture and still struggling to stay afloat. We hope to grow not just in numbers and figures but as an institution which will leave its thumbprints in the sands of time."

She vehemently denies that women make better journalists. "There can be only good journalists and bad journalists, gender does not matter. But yes, women are generally more sensitive and empathize better with victims, be it in a conflict situation or a disaster. However, it is still a male-dominated profession and most policy decisions are taken by males." She also feels that women do have problems that are specific to their gender, like lack of separate toilets in the workplace, maternity leave, and a crèche for their children, which compel many of them to leave their career mid-way.

"One mantra to be a good journalist is humility. We should be ready to travel in an overcrowded bus or have food by a roadside eatery or even sleep in a haystack. We will have to shed our prejudices in order to report objectively." Teresa seeks inspiration from unusual quarters. "Somehow, the famous and visible journalists don't impress me. I find women scribes working in grueling situations, especially those trying to carve out a niche for themselves more appealing. For instance, I had met a Pakistani journalist who happened to be the first journalist writing on environmental issues in the Urdu press. She wanted to take these vital issues to the masses. She thus broke new ground and withstood the cynicism of her editors who were doubtful readers wanted to read such news."

"Women journalists also seem to be more resilient when working in adverse circumstances. A group of Afghan women scribes, when asked about their difficulties, one of them said, 'We have to make the best of what we have.' An elderly woman from

Bangladesh told me how she had been ostracized because she was a journalist."

"Figuring out which stories need to be explored and reported is of crucial importance. The underlying thought is that it must be something not reported about that place in any newspaper previously and is unknown to the rest of the country and the world. Added to this is that there is a huge accountability that the story must be in the larger interest of the society. I try to look at the nooks and corners that others don't care about. We must keep our ears, eyes, nose, and most of all, our eyes open."

"To get a good story, one need not travel far. There are good stories lying in our backyard. For instance, my story, which got me the WASH Media Award 2010, given by the Geneva-based Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council (WSSCC) and the Stockholm International Water Institute, was based on the horrors my domestic help had to face when she has to do something as basic as answering the call of nature during floods. I got a story that appealed to a global audience right at my home."

There is some measure of stereotypical presentation of the Northeast in the mainstream media. I ask her whether she has tried to counter this.

"I am not sure I have succeeded. Other journalists are making an effort too. Giving the real picture of the Northeast is a collective responsibility of all journalists not only in the region but the rest of the country and world too."

"Though conflict is an important part of reporting from the region, but it is not the only thing happening. There are so many human interest stories waiting to be told, stories of the common people and their struggles, which are callously marginalized by the mainstream media. Reversing stereotypes cannot happen overnight. It calls for consistent efforts by all journalists; we must be able to package the stories in exciting ways."

One of the highlights of Teresa's remarkable journalistic career was winning the Seventh Sarojini Naidu Prize for best reporting

on women in Panchayati Raj on October 2, 2007. This prestigious award has been instituted by the Hunger Project, and Teresa at that time was principal correspondent (Northeast India). The prize honors the commitment and contribution of the media in showcasing the work of these elected women. The Hunger Project has trained thousands of elected women to enable effective leadership in bringing water, basic health, hygiene, and education to their villages. Teresa's story focused on Hema Kumari Das, a *panchayat* president from Rajabari village in Assam, who had strived for the upliftment of primary education in a village inhabited by the Mishing community, who were internally displaced people. This story reaffirms Teresa's belief that the best stories are waiting to be explored in the most obscure places. In her skilled hands, these testimonies acquire a universal resonance.

She now opens up about the emotional trauma when reporting from conflict zones.

"My story on a fake encounter in Imphal, the capital of Manipur, was such an instance. This is a story that changed my life. The story jolted me to the realities of reporting on a conflict zone—the total lack of a support system, both legal and physical. There is a fear factor that is very real and palpable. There seems to be no redressal of the conflict that journalists face in their line of duty."

On the upside, didn't journalism give her the scope to travel across the world?

"Certainly, I have traveled to almost all the continents. I have many fond memories of crossing the border between India and Pakistan on foot. I remember the delicious roadside tea in Istanbul, Turkey. The warmth and hospitality of the common people rebuts the hostility created by the media and politicians. I was pained by the slums, the filth, and squalor in Nairobi, Kenya. Watching homeless people in America was very unsettling. School dropouts in Baltimore were engaged in deadly gun fights. It was also interesting to see black women shaving off their woolly hair in summer to save the trouble of managing them."

Now it is time to talk about her new baby, thumprintmag.com.

"Listen to the color of your dreams," strummed the Beatles in their album *Tomorrow Never Knows It*. "It seems incredible that I am living a dream in its different shades and hues. Sitting at my home in a district in Assam, a state in India's Northeast, this online news magazine on a shoestring budget is making its presence felt in cyberspace and winning the hearts of people around the world. Such is the power of the Internet. We want to tell the world that the Northeast is not a museum. We are not another killing field. We are a vibrant and living world with moments of joy and sorrow. We are men, women, and children who wish to tell our own stories and take them to the world and bring the world closer to us. We plan to go global with local stories, tales of the marginalized, the underreported, crisscrossing through geographical terrain and psychological barriers." She hums the famous John Lennon number. "You may say I am a dreamer, but I'm not the only one. I hope someday you'll join us. And the world will be as one."

She acknowledges the supportive role of her family. "I am a mother of two daughters. My husband, an academic, is very supportive. He takes care of the kids when I am not around. I am a roving reporter, mother, and wife. My parents have always encouraged me in my pursuits in life."

She then talks about the story that changed her life forever, involving a fake encounter in Manipur. "I titled the story as 'Murder in Plain sight,' and it had a series of tell-tale photographs showing a minute-by-minute account of how an unarmed young man was accosted by policemen and shot dead in a pharmacy in a busy marketplace. Later the police gave an official version that the young man was responsible for a shoot-out in the same location and, hence, was killed in an encounter. Usually such official versions are difficult to disprove, though everyone may know them to be false, but in an almost unprecedented coincidence, a local photographer was present at the scene and managed to shoot a minute-by-minute account of the alleged encounter."

"The photographs reveal that the young man was actually calmly standing as the commandoes frisked him, took him to the pharmacy, and later brought out his dead body. The photographer was petrified and did not want to reveal his identity, though he wanted the news to be published, and no media outlet in Manipur would publish it. So he approached me, as I was in the adjacent state of Assam and represented a national media house. These 12 photographs, exposing a shocking truth, was what journalists dream of. It was the biggest scoop imaginable and was picked up by the global media worldwide. In Manipur, the story highlighted the years of repression the common people have suffered and there was a mass civil uprising. But personally, I was at a low ebb. The grisly photographs haunted me, and I could not sleep for days. I started getting feelers that there was an imminent threat to my life too. I felt very vulnerable. I got to know that the state was gunning for the anonymous photographer. I was very concerned for his safety. I even got a copy of the Indian Penal Code and the Criminal Procedure Code to think of ways and means to protect myself and the photographer."

"After the uprising, came the reprisal. I had to face a threat, daring me to go to Manipur again. The threat came from authorities in the state (I do not wish to make their names public); I still remember how I met the officials of the Special Investigative Team from Manipur in the local police station in Guwahati, my hometown (I thought it would be the safest place for me and I did not have an office). As I refused to go to Manipur after the threats to face the one-man judicial commission inquiring into the case, the commission, in an unprecedented move, held a special sitting for me in Guwahati. The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) also questioned me in Guwahati as I refused to go to Imphal. Physically too I was not keeping well, as I was pregnant. My reluctance to go to Manipur in such a condition was also due to the fact that the state is under the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act 1950 (AFSPA), giving them the power to interrogate and harass me with impunity."

"In a positive sign, 14 months after Chungkham Sangit Singh Meitei was killed in a fake encounter by the Manipur police, the CBI filed a chargesheet against nine of the 14 accused policemen. The magazine *Tehelka* also won the prestigious IPI-India Award for Excellence in Journalism 2010 for this very story."

"Covering conflict from an underreported region like the Northeast of India can spring surprises at every step. As a journalist trying to look beyond the surface, I have often written off dreary government press releases that scrolls down mere statistics of the number of militants killed and arms and ammunition recovered. Instead, I have tried to delve into the inner psyche of the real people—the human faces who are either part of or are victims of violence inflicted by state or non-state actors."

"My work has constantly exposed me to danger. It is also a very lonely battle, running for legal advice and also a psychologist to deal with the emotional trauma. There is no support system for journalists in ground zero."

"There are stories that haunt you long after they have receded to the past. I met a mother in Thoubal district of Manipur, who told me how her boy did not return home from school. The insurgents had kidnapped him to make him one of their child soldiers. The outfit later claimed that the boys joined of their own accord. In states like Manipur, more than 20 militant outfits operate, and editors have been gunned down and newspaper offices closed. Mediapersons have to face the ire of both the state and the militants."

"Reporting hardcore conflict also entails visiting militant camps, which, of course, has its own share of adventure. Meeting the female cadres is an intriguing experience, but most of them are lower-rank cadres waiting to serve tea and cook lunch. For the militants it is an equally intriguing experience to talk to a journalist, that too a woman. Once I was returning from a designated camp of a militant outfit in ceasefire in Assam. A member of the publicity wing called me and asked me to stop wherever I was. I stopped the car at a small marketplace and waited for them to turn up.

I was very apprehensive of what was to follow. Then a car came and the occupants beckoned me. I was stunned when they thrust an envelope into my hands. The man looked very uncomfortable and told me not to open the envelope as it contained important papers. On my journey back I opened the envelope and found a wad of currency notes! They had actually tried to bribe me into writing good things about them! I somehow managed to send back the envelope."

"Sadly, the media projects the Northeast as one homogenous, trouble-torn frontier. It does not bother to look closely into why young Indian citizens are taking up arms against the state. They do not ask why Ima Gyaneswari and 11 other women protested against the AFSPA by stripping in front of the Assam Rifles headquarters. I have had my share of meeting top militant leaders. I met Th Muivah, chief of the NSCN-IM at the council headquarters in Hebron, some 40 km from Dimapur. I bombarded him with questions like what kind of person he was, his love of pork, his gradual conversion to vegetarianism, and whether his religious beliefs clashed with his cause. I also asked the lower cadres to play the keyboard and drums for me. Their discipline and devotion to the cause was clearly apparent."

During the course of her work, Teresa also busts some myths that give the false impression that women in the Northeast are liberated and empowered, unlike those elsewhere in the country. "There are many communities where women are treated as mere commodities. Most of the tribes of Northeast India adhere to age-old customary laws instead of the statutory laws in matters of matrimony, inheritance, and divorce. The unwritten tribal laws are usually recognized as binding by their communities. 'A rotten fence and one old wife can be changed anytime,' goes a Mizo saying. Mizo customary law in regard to divorce is highly anti-women. A divorced women has to leave home penniless, even though she has contributed to the household economy. Among some Arunachal tribes, not only is child marriage practiced but the

girl child is considered as a tradable commodity as well, negotiable for a price decided by parents, paid by the man she is married to. Women are not allowed any say in the village decision-making bodies, thus robbing them of both space and justice."

In regard to her identity, that of belonging to a minority community, Teresa says, "Among many Muslim women, I had the privilege of completing my education and pursuing my career. I do not embody any of the stereotypes of a Muslim woman that is generally portrayed in the media. The representation of Muslim women in media continues to be a source of debate."

"In spite of being educated and empowered, I feel my space as a Muslim woman is limited. I feel a pertinent problem faced by Muslim women is the lack of public space as part of the community. I have my space as a journalist, as an activist, as a mother, or as any other woman in society, but I don't have space as another Muslim woman. I was part of a landmark event when the present Governor of Assam J.B. Patnaik led a group of Muslim women to pray inside a mosque at a dargah in Sivasagar, Assam. The event evoked mixed reactions, mostly criticism, without any sound argument. This step led by the Governor of Assam had at least sparked off a debate across a cross-section of society. There is a vacuum in the public and intellectual space for Muslim women. It is not just the act of *namaz* itself, but the space will open many other doors for Muslim women."

"I don't think the community can progress if its individuals are not respected and given equal space. In an already disadvantaged community, women are doubly disadvantaged. We need to address these inherent problems within the community first, as they are directly or indirectly related to the various social, economic, and political problems faced by the community. Women should be encouraged to participate in debates and discussions concerning various issues."

Teresa has clear views on media activism. According to her, social media has definitely changed the way media activism works

in a country like India. However, she points out, "The problem arises when the basic distinction between media activism and trial by media is blurred. The Jessica Lal case is a wonderful case of media criticism. If a prosecution gets bogged down for an inordinately long period, the media is certainly entitled, nay, obliged, to probe and expose the causes for the delay. However, determination of the guilt or innocence of a person under our constitutional scheme is the function of the courts, which should not be inspired by the media. During the Arab Spring revolts, a spontaneous yet coordinated activist use of social media developed. Activists established strategic communication spaces through Facebook groups and Twitter hash tags. This is a transmedia world—information knows no boundaries. However, just because the civil rights protests occurred without Twitter, Facebook, and mobile phones doesn't mean a powerful movement for change won't happen with them helping bring people and resources together." She is deeply concerned by the cross commercialization that has engulfed the entire realm of the media. Media is now seen as peddling products rather than conveying ideas and promoting events rather than discussing issues. TRP ratings dictate satellite television. But she feels good work is being done in the online media, which knows no geographical or psychological barriers and can be run on a shoestring budget.

With the increasing financial presence in India, there are many conglomerations of women, journalists in the country, notably the Network of Women in Media (NWMI) and South Asian Women in Media (SAWM). Teresa is the Joint Secretary of the Indian chapter of the SAWM. As she says, "In examining gender patterns in South Asia, we need to analyze the participation and position of women in the media, and the impact of these positions on women's development. This means women's right to participate in public debates and to have their views heard and the right to be portrayed in the media in ways that accurately represent the complexities of their lives. The convergence of new media

technologies and influx of private media organizations in the past decades have increased the number of women working in both print and electronic media. However, women have not gained parity with men in terms of participation and decision-making. Women journalists can become catalysts, defenders, and guardians of women's rights all over."

I am curious to know how political Teresa is. "Man is a political animal," she replies. "Politics pervades all aspects of our lives. I do believe that we need good and efficient people in politics and I see some hope in the young lot. Though I am not neck deep into politics, I do drop in as and when some issue interests me. I find politics a very interesting subject. And I feel students of political science will make good journalists, as they will understand the issues of the state better."

Compared to the angst of her earlier years as a journalist, she feels that she has calmed down somewhat. "I guess its wisdom that comes with age and experience. I do get agitated over injustice and the corruption that has crept into the Indian mind. I am appalled when I see the total lack of scruples in relationships among human beings. I feel we do need to respect some values and age-old wisdom. I guess these are the signs of changing times." In her career, Teresa has consciously tried to do women-related stories. She has tried to give voice to women's silence. Some of her best stories had in fact been created when she pursued it from a woman's point of view. As for being a feminist, she explains, "I am more of a humanist and believe every human being should be treated with dignity. I believe women have rights and should be respected. But I am not a dogmatic feminist who will rebel against everything, who would refuse to look after her husband or look after her children. But yes, if I am denied my rights, I will rebel."

So how is Teresa, the woman inside? "Oh, she is very soft and vulnerable," she confesses. "She loves to be pampered. Hates being alone. Loves it when somebody cooks for her and even serves it for her. She loves being showered with gifts. She enjoys being in social

gatherings though she feels quite out of place at times. She enjoys observing others. Can never say no to eating out. Is a shopaholic when she knows there's enough money in the bank; otherwise she can comfortably lead a frugal life. Loves her independence and mental space, which she will never compromise with."

Today Teresa is busy nurturing her two daughters as well as her recent baby, thumprintmag.com. She fills it with stories that make us think of this region in a different way. There is variety, an upsurge of hope, and a realism about the multilayered existence of the people. As Henry Anatole Grunwald put it, "Journalism can never be silent. That is its greatest virtue. It must speak, and speak immediately, while the echoes of wonder, the claims of triumph, and the signs of horror are still there."

She remembers with nostalgia the many unknown and ordinary people whose stories she has given voice to. "I still remember the postman in the river island of Majuli who kept an extra pair of tattered clothes that he used to wade through the muddy flood waters. I will always admire his spirit. And the beautiful Apatani woman with her big nose plugs in Itanagar. It was like opening the pages of a book on anthropology."

"And then there was the old mask-maker in Majuli who gave me intricate details on how to make a mask and his lamenting the fact that mask-making is a dying art. I truly feel the Northeast is a paradise for journalists. There is joy in discovering the untold stories of the common people in every corner of the region."

Looking back on her years of reporting from this region, she says that she was so enthused by her assignments that she never felt tired, either physically or mentally. "There is the joy of writing a report and getting something novel and exciting for my readers. All the travails seem trivial and part of the game. If you want to get the whole story, you have to walk the extra mile, be it driving through bumpy roads or wadding through muddy streams, walking a rickety bridge or getting caught up in a thunderstorm, and

even getting in the middle of crossfire between militant groups—as had happened to me."

Not surprisingly, Teresa believes that journalists are born, not made. "Going to a media school and getting trained by some of the best hands in the industry won't make you a great journalist. I do think you need to have real passion for the profession, so much so that you are ready to die for it. But I have to say I am a trained journalist, considering I went to a media school, but I unlearnt many of the theories and broke many rules in the profession."

Although she admits feeling guilty at times for neglecting her daughters, her husband, an environmental scientist, is a hands-on father and loves nothing better than to look after his girls. The hyperactive Teresa finds it hard to switch off. She is either following a new story, watching old movies on television, meditating, doing yoga, or playing with her daughters. As for her coping strategy, she tries to make the best of what she has, dealing with situations as they arise. And she tries to be bold when in a spot. "That," she laughs, "has always worked."