

Centre for Culture, Media & Governance
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Organizes a Workshop
on
Media Discourse and AFSPA
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History shows that Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act or *AFSPA* is the adopted version of the colonial law instituted to tackle the activists of the “Quit India” movement, 1942 during the last days of Indian national movement. Viceroy Lord Linlithgow declared emergency in British India and promulgated Armed Forces (Special Powers) Ordinance in August 1942, which conferred special powers to armed forces to arrest and use force (even kill) against the civilians on mere suspicion, with the hope of legitimization and continuation of colonialism in India. The word “emergency” was merely replaced with the word “disturbed” and the Bill was passed only after three hours of debate in the Lok Sabha and four hours in the Rajya Sabha despite opposition by many within and outside the ruling Congress government in September, 1958. The law empowers the security forces to search, arrest, detain and even shoot based on suspicion without any legal protection. Few have called the Act as martial, others considered it as “draconian” and some experts refer to it as “a war on democracy”. Although consecutive regimes of India’s Independence has been following the colonial strategy of Linlithgow, the Act has been critiqued for its incompatibility with the Rule of Law and the International Covenant on Civil & Political Rights, to which India is a party since 1979. Justice BP Jeevan Reddy Committee 2005 observed that the Act became a symbol of oppression, an object of hate and an instrument of discrimination and high-handedness.

Originally, the Act was designed to deal with the disturbed situation in the Naga-inhabited areas of Assam and Manipur (prior to the formation of Nagaland) but it has been amended and now applies to almost all the states in Northeast and Jammu & Kashmir. Since then the state oppression has increasingly become excessive in the name of “law and order,” thus circuitously institutionalizing violence, which to a large extent limited the use of alternative non-violent movements. The institutionalization of violence has meant inducing the people to react violently by exposure to brutal inhuman treatment so that the security forces can then justify the use of force. Evil breeds evil and violence breeds more violence has been the story. When *AFSPA* was introduced, there was but only one militant outfit in India’s North East, but today the region is infested with over a hundred militant groups. Media coverage of the issue and how it mediates it is a critical question that can no longer be neglected. The repeated allegation that the issue related to *AFSPA* has often gone unreported and hence rendered invisible and eventually ignored requires serious interrogation. The selective media coverage of this violence not only enables media to build public discourse on the issue but also undermines the process of nation-building and development of democratic institutions. To the extent, that today, *AFSPA* is being justified as a means for counter-insurgency, in exceptional circumstances. While keeping the above intricacies and debates in mind, the workshop aims to explore the dynamics of media reportage on *AFSPA*, the information dissemination of the Act and the public reaction to it.