Chapter IX

Summary and Conclusions

9.1 Media-politics Interface: Dominant Issues

Modern media’s active role in agenda-setting process has expanded the domain of policy making from the traditional sphere of the legislators, administrators and politicians to include the media organisations as agencies and ‘integral part’ of the governance. Responding to this emerging feature of mediated governance, Shanto Iyengar commented (1997: 320): “The battleground for control and influence over public policies has shifted from the halls and corridors of government offices to broadcasting studios and editorial offices.” The dynamic relationship between media and politics is built on mutuality of interests at different levels.

Locating media representations of the Left Front regime in this context, it can be argued that, on the one hand, the Bengali press sustained its crucial place in the deliberative democracy by articulating information and opinion about government agenda and thereby, with the intention of foraging public opinion in West Bengal. In the process, Bengali newspaper houses promoted their own commercial-ideological or political agenda by taking active interest in mediation. On the other hand, governments and political leadership – both the ruling Front and the Opposition, greatly harnessed this relationship to promote and mobilise their agenda, utilising the reach of mass media. Despite debates on mass media’s role in promoting democratic deliberation, there is no denying of the fact that modern media is essentially diverse in nature to facilitate plurality of representations to a great extent. Media-politics interface gave birth to newer traits of democratic politics in the Left Front regime in West Bengal, more importantly in creating and sustaining the burgeoning localised public sphere. Without doubt, the images of governance at the very local levels were increasingly being mediated by the mass media, especially the Bengali press and the satellite channels.

Since late 1970s, the active engagement of the Bengali press in representing the Left Front regime, particularly its agricultural and industrial policies reflected important
features of mediated politics in Bengal. The vibrancy of the political conversation was greatly shaped by the role of the vernacular press as agenda-builders, legitimising and/or de-legitimising government policies in public deliberations. From the beginning of the Left-led rule in West Bengal, the mainstream Bengali press grew with a kind of organic relationship with the Front regime by dominantly adopting a watchdog or adversarial role and thereby, strengthening its own place in public sphere. It helped to set the stage for public participation by providing critical assessment of the regime throughout the three and half decades of the Left Front rule. The party newspaper joined the battle with its own support base and ideological pursuit to influence public opinion and thereby, adopted the organiser role. In the last decade of the Front regime the Bengali press strengthened their crucial ‘insider’ role at an unprecedented level, actively mediating the images of the Left-led governance with its vibrant representations. The Bengali press emerged as one of the potential sites of political mobilisation by utilising the scope of mediation and competed with the political forces to carve its own niche in the state politics.

The study finds that since the inception of the Left Front rule in 1977, the vernacular press gradually emerged as a potent source of political articulation beyond established political organisations. The Front leadership, acknowledging this ‘active’ role of the Bengali ‘bourgeois’ press, repetitively argued that along with the political opposition of the Congress (I) and other anti-Left Front parties “…the nascent Front even had to deal with the disinformation and malicious propaganda spread against it by the big media houses since day one of its coming to power” (Basu, 1997: 236). The political hostility between the Left Front and a section of big media houses reflected one of the crucial features of state politics in Bengal since late 1970s. ABP, as the leading Bengali daily in terms of influence and circulation, sought to play from the very beginning a watchdog role, but filtered it with an emphatic continuity of its predilection for liberal economic model and cosmopolitan global worldview. The pro-capital ideological positioning of the House gradually generated a strong anti-Left tenor in its encoding strategies that was supplemented with the politics of ‘brand-making’ since 1977. The strategy endorsed an important streak of mediation in dissociating individual leadership from the collective identity of the regimented Communist party/Front. Bartaman nurtured the genre of
adversarial journalism since mid 1980s and grew in influence and circulation with its own audience base challenging the near-monopoly of ABP in Bengali news world. The House emerged as one of the relentless crusaders against the Left Front regime, complementing the political Opposition in Bengal in subsequent period. During the Front rule, particularly in the last decade, ABP and Bartaman succeeded in framing the language of the political-cultural activism of the Bengali population to a large extent producing fascinating moments of agenda setting and manufacturing of consent in the state politics. Aajkal, on the other hand, stabilised the ‘friendly’ stance by articulating a pro-Left inclination as against ABP and Bartaman, yet trying to retain its independent place by occasional criticism of the Front government’s policy reforms. Aajkal relied greatly on the tenors of Bengali chauvinism as well in its framing strategies on different occasions. Ganashakti, with its organiser and propaganda role, emerged as one of the mobilising agents contesting the ‘anti-Left’ propaganda, especially of the ‘bourgeois’ media, as well as upholding the contributions of the Front governance and thereby, inciting the media war to a great extent. The competitive coverage of the Front regime generated lot of contending narratives of policy reforms and governance in these three and half decades. The mainstream Bengali press delved into the tension-zones in the party-government or the intra-Front relationship in the active mediation process to articulate the complexities inherent in this politics of reforms. One can also note that the critical-interpreter or mobiliser role of a section of the Bengali newspapers often substituted the periodic ‘lull’ in oppositional politics in West Bengal. This expanded the agency role of the Bengali press in contributing to meaning-making and making sense of governance.

9.1.1 The End of the Front Regime

The study captures some moments of the evolution of the policy strategies of the Left Front governments, particularly the public debates around the development programmes through the prism of mediated representations of the Bengali newspapers. The last few years of the Left Front regime witnessed the engaging role of mass media in facilitating the movements for change in political power that culminated in the historic defeat of the Left Front government in the Assembly election of 2011 after three and half decades of rule. The Bengali mainstream press, setting aside the observer position, played an evident
catalyst role in inciting the debate around change with its own positioning, thereby stabilising its mediating role at the heart of political processes. This ‘active’ intervention of the Bengali press, particularly the ‘bourgeois’ press, was termed by the party newspaper as “media-violence” (Ganashakti, 13 May, 2011) against the Left Front, during the Assembly election of 2011. The massive defeat of the Left Front in the election and the rise of the Congress-TMC coalition to power was instantaneously welcomed in the ‘bourgeois’ newspapers as the “storm of change” (ABP, 14 May, 2011) or “public tsunami washing out the rubbish” (Bartaman, 14 May, 2011) of the three decades. Aajkal did not hide its desperation in the “Left debacle” with its overt commitment to Leftism by commenting (Dasgupta, 2011: 1) that “it is the first and dominant feeling to be shocked at this debacle as the Leftist” and declared that the “greater struggle for the Left will continue”.

9.2 Summary of the Chapters

Situating the whole discussion in the context of the theoretical background of media-politics interface in democratic governance in the first two chapters, the study sought to explore the major traits of mediated politics in the selective phases of the Left Front regime in West Bengal. Chapters III and IV provide the basic cues to understand the evolution of the agricultural and industrial policy strategies and the nuances involved in the processes. These two chapters discuss the policies and broader strategies related to the development of these sectors and more importantly, the ‘shifts’ and the ‘tussles’ in the policy-making processes, particularly in the context of the ‘Left’ experiments with governance.

Chapter V has dealt with the beginning of mediation in the first decade of the Left Front rule in the state around the issues of agrarian reform. The Operation Barga programme received the focal attention of the agrarian reform of the Front government and the Bengali press immediately internalised the hype in its mediation strategies with respective frames. While for the ‘bourgeois’ press the Operation Barga was associated with the embedded ‘politics of clientalism’, Ganashakti dwelt on the ‘political potential’ of the programme in mobilising the interests of the rural lower classes. This phase marked the peak period of prioritisation of agrarian policy strategies in the Left Front’s
governance agenda that was well reflected in the dominant representations of the Bengali mainstream press.

Chapter VI takes into account the mediation of the ‘shift’ in the vision of agrarian reforms of the Front governments, in the emerging context of liberalisation-privatisation since 1990s. The intense spate of agriculture versus industry debate was greatly mediated by the active engagement of the Bengali press in steering public deliberation. Land acquisition for industrial purposes and the issue of capital investment in agriculture formed the core of governance reform and the encoding of the debate in the Bengali press broke the traditional ethos of journalism to include an evident positioning in the debate and thereby, play role in mobilisation of trust/dissent in favour of and/or against the regime functioning. The ‘active’ mediation of the agriculture versus industry debate placed the Bengali press at the core of the political process.

Chapter VII captures the traits of mediation of the gradual unfolding of the polemical battle around the industrial vision of the Left Front governments in the first decade. The Front government pursued the pro-public sector and pro-worker stand vigorously in this phase and the Bengali press incited the political contention by ‘taking sides’ in representing the stand. The encoding strategies revealed interesting convergence in the governance and media agenda in creation of certain hype-zones like the Joint sector policy and Centre-state relations. At the same time, the Bengali press gave birth to contending narratives of industrial reforms vis-à-vis the government claims, nurturing the dissident voice in the state politics. The framing of the policy debates, embedded in the respective commercial-ideological frames of the newspaper organisations, expanded the agenda setting role of the Bengali press to a great extent.

Chapter VIII explores the central role of the Bengali press in agenda building and spin-doctoring the political debates around the ‘great leap forward’ to industrialisation in the last decade of the Left Front regime. The ‘search for capital’ led to evident changes in the traditional posturing of the Left-led governments, creating intense debate on the ‘deviation’ of the Front. The mediation strategies of the Bengali press manifested an unprecedented intervention in shaping the ‘politics of reform’ and thereby, emerging as an extended site of political mobilisation and negotiation. The Bengali press nurtured the
near-polarisation in the state politics in terms of supporting or negating the ‘pro-capital stand’ of the Front governments and in the process, emerged as one of the crucial constituents of the political system.

9.3 The Major Findings

The study in general reveals certain key issues which can be summarised as follows:

- The media representations of the Left Front regime followed certain temporal evolution in terms of encoding strategies of the Bengali press, evident in the use of language, increasingly catering to the expanded catchment of the vernacular media and the aspirations of the emerging consumer society. The shift was visible in modes of representations, appropriating a more “reader-friendly, communicative” mode of reporting, often appealing to Bengali chauvinism, filled with wide use of emotive and symbolic messages sustaining political tenor. The evolution was also located in the replacement of focus in media coverage over different phases of policy strategies. The agenda setting in the Bengali press dominantly followed the Front government’s thrust on agrarian reforms in the first decade of its rule. There had been an evident shift in the representations of the governance reforms that gradually focused attention to the industrial sector since late 1990s, which was nurtured in the mediation process.

- The Bengali press, in its encoding strategy, simultaneously generated certain areas of hyped propaganda and certain zones of silence in the representations of the Left Front in power. Over the three and half decades of the Front rule, the Bengali press had constructed numerous ‘popular’ images of Left-led governance by its spin-doctoring role. On the basis of the genres of reporting a broad classification can be made in terms of media coverage of the issues – primary, ancillary and marginal. The Operation Barga programme and land acquisition debates received focal attention in agricultural coverage of these dailies, whereas various other dimensions of agricultural reform found only selective references, even in the party newspaper. Likewise, the debates on joint sector enterprise, private and foreign investments in big industries, automation or ICT policy got prime space in industrial coverage of these dailies, and small and medium sector, sick and closed
industries, labour issues received comparatively limited attention. While *Ganashakti* and *Aajkal* largely marginalised the intra-Front debates around policy reforms blurring the image of a divided Front, *Bartaman* depended on an incessant coverage of the internal tussles to sustain readers’ attention to the ‘deviations’ in the Front’s policy-strategies. *ABP* predominantly sidelined the ‘tensions’ within the Front to advance its own pro-capital agenda. Choice of ‘hypes’ or ‘zones of silence’ by the media was indicative of and filtered with respective perceptual framework. Media scholars take note of ‘circulation of non-knowledge’ as equally important to understand the exclusionary mechanism that induces selective coverage of news in agenda building processes.

- The study reflects interesting traits of agenda setting by the Bengali press. The encoding of policy strategies reflected strands of *divergence* in representations at two levels – among the media houses and between media and government – in mediating the images of the Left Front rule. At the same time, it shed light on areas of significant *convergence* at the above-mentioned levels that reflected dynamic shades of consensual politics or agenda setting. Both the media organisations and the political processes drew sustenance from the strategies. One of the crucial features of the media-Front interface was that it manifested occasional disjunctions in the convergence or adversarial patterns. For example, inspite of its critical stand on the ‘Stalinist regimentation’ in the ruling Left Front or politics of militant trade unionism, *ABP* rallied with the Front government in providing an aggressive support to the ‘search for capital’. *Aajkal*, setting aside its ‘Left’ orientation, echoed the *ABP* rhetoric in critiquing the reservations of the Front partners against the joint sector and land acquisition policies. Interestingly, the political slogan of the Left Front, of the ‘step-motherly’ attitude of the Centre that culminated in the Centre-state debate, was carved in the coverage of both ‘bourgeois’ media and party newspaper with the same critical tenor, substantiating periodic articulation of the provincial sentiment. The Left politics in Bengal, on a number of occasions, had relied on the historical legacy of Bengal’s opposition to the central leadership of Congress politics. With an interesting slant *ABP* and *Bartaman* reinvented this legacy by projecting the
‘Bengal line’ in Left politics in the state vis-à-vis the Central contingent in the context of debates on industrialisation in the last decade of the Front rule. The traits of convergence/divergence in agenda building were more evident in the later phase of the Front regime, rupturing the perceived ‘consensus’ of the ‘anti-Left’ Bengali press. *ABP* and *Bartaman* differed strongly in their stand on pro-capital industrialisation programme of the Front government. While *Aajkal* endorsed the hype of ‘search for capital’, it nonetheless distanced itself from appraising the basic ‘change of principle’ in the Front politics rallying with the right wing or neo-liberal ideology of some leading players of the Bengali news world like *ABP*. Thus, the study identifies polysemic representations in the mediation process by the Bengali press that defied any obvious generalisation about the nature and scope of political articulation of the vernacular media. The inter-textual field emerging from this process brought in certain *characterisations* of the Left Front rule that succeeded in steering public opinion in specific directions.

- The mediated representations of the Front governments *in power* reflected that the Bengali press was not only communicating and ‘spinning’ regional politics from the back-stage, but also emerging as a potential site of politics itself. The vernacular news industry coalesced with the political and civil society in debating over the roadmap of development in a Left-ruled state, particularly in the last decade of the Front regime. This trend marked a paradigmatic shift in the Bengali media’s informational and narrator role to increasingly appropriate a more ‘insider’ position in politics. The activism of the vernacular media in steering politics was emerging with greater strength since late 1990s with massive expansion of investments in satellite channels. The merger of the ownership in print and the electronic media gives birth to certain inter-textual features in the representation of politics, which is yet to develop in its fullest form, but provides important clues to further studies in *mediatisation* in Bengal.

It can be argued that despite the relative autonomy of the readers in reading the messages, media framing plays a crucial role in ‘creating public’ by providing ‘political spectacles’ through numerous representations. On the one hand, leading
Bengali newspapers generated certain meaning-making messages, beyond simple articulation of the Front government’s policy programmes, to influence the public opinion in intended ways and in the process, developed a dynamic relationship with the Front governance. Both the Front governments and the media received sustenance from this relationship. On the other hand, the ‘self-serving’ interests of these newspapers increasingly gave birth to competitive coverage of the Left-led political regime, often exposing the porous areas or disjunctions in the media-Front relationship. The mediation strategies, in the process, resulted into occasional rupture in the inherent fraternity of the mainstream Bengali press, especially the ‘bourgeois’ press in West Bengal, nullifying any scope of linearity. The media-politics interface, as discussed in the selective phases of the Left Front rule in West Bengal, not only generated fascinating moments of democratic negotiations but also provoked contestation over ‘valid perspectives’ with versatility of representations. The research sought to flash out theoretical and practical bases of the process of mediation.

References