CHAPTER 14

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

The study on the press coverage of panchayat elections in West Bengal from 1978 to 2003 gave several interesting insights. The study revealed that the focus of the sample newspapers on the subject was considerable. As far as the electoral battle was concerned the subject was well represented by the sample newspapers. The total number of news items on Panchayat and Panchayat Election in the sample newspapers saw manifold increase as the years progressed but the nature of the news did not alter much. The sample newspapers' reporting of the subject was not analogous to that of a socially responsible institution. The press coverage included various aspects and components of the panchayat election process but it cannot be said that the content promoted grass-root participation in the local bodies and espoused the cause of grass-root empowerment. The sample newspapers chose to remain observers and commentators in approach and content during their discussion and analysis of the subject.

In this prevailing situation its influence over the relevant audience could naturally not be dominant or pervading. The distance created by the mainstream press with its audience was the primary cause for its failure to convince or mobilize it. The press interacted with the political parties and their leaders and reported their activities and statements. The sample newspapers reported about the various administrative decisions on the panchayats but cold shouldered the grassroots who were integral to the panchayat system and panchayat election. It is ironical that though the aim of the panchayat system and the panchayat election was to ensure grass-root political empowerment yet the newspapers’ discussion on the subject frequently precluded their opinion and perspectives. Throughout the sample period of 25 years (1978 to 2003) the information provided in the news reports was predominantly that which was usually fed by the political parties and their leaders or administrative heads. Even when the news reporters wrote feature stories or editorials the focus was usually on news provided by the same sources interspersed with the opinions and the statements of the respective news writer. The news items followed a uniform pattern - after a broad view of the condition in selected panchayat area(s) and the occasional account of one/few grass-root members on the performance of the incumbent panchayat
bodies and their shortcomings, the discussion inadvertently turned towards political parties – their squabble, their campaigning and their electoral chances. The correspondents rarely conferred with the grassroots on their problems in the existing panchayati set-up or proffered adequate impetus to their participation. It is true that the influence of political parties over the electorate, as reflected in the newspaper reports too, was intense in West Bengal. The stark political polarity in the state with the Left Front coalition on one side and the opposition, comprising mainly the Congress and later the Trinamul Congress on the other intensified political battle at all levels. The sample newspapers’ reports only confirmed the importance of political organizations in the prevalent set-up and throughout their coverage the focus was on the prevailing political powers.

The question is why did the press reports overwhelmingly rely on political parties and leaders for news and information and not function independently. The first reason is that any mass media is another social institution and its presentation of facts and account cannot be isolated from the events and features of the relevant society. The coverage of panchayat elections from 1978 to 2003 by the sample newspapers is testimony to this fact. Since 1978 political parties and their leaders are integral to the panchayat system and the panchayat elections in the state of West Bengal. Grass root ‘empowerment’ for most people in the state entailed representing the political parties in the panchayat elections. The sample newspapers could not have ignored this reality and disregarded the political parties in their reports. But the mass media in their over enthusiasm to report on electoral battle and the status of political parties in that battle did not bother to review the status of the grassroots in the decentralized political structure. The second reason for the overwhelming dependence of sample newspapers on selected sources like political spokespersons was the lack of adequate resources for independent ground reporting. In fact a substantial number of sample news reporters (94%) blamed scarce resources for “armchair reporting” Questionnaire I (see Chapter 13). The third reason was that the panchayat voters did not depend greatly on the sample newspapers for news and information on panchayati system as they had other information sources like community members and local leaders of the various political outfits who campaigned intensively in the villages. It was rather the urban audience who depended on the sample newspapers for a perception on the subject of panchayat elections. The urban audience identified with the prominent political leaders and the authority heads when they were referred to as news sources and the
sample newspapers therefore relied on these chosen news sources to gratify this readership.

The inability of the sample newspapers to mobilize grass-root participation reduced the grassroots' dependence and acceptance on them. This is evident from the response to the Questionnaire II (see Chapter 13) directed to the panchayat members in the different tiers of different districts. 70% of the sample respondents clearly indicated that they were influenced by the community members or local leaders of contesting political parties in their voting choice rather than newspapers or any other mass media.

The media as a social institution has certain responsibility towards the society in which it operates. The sample newspapers of the study did not give much evidence of such social responsibility. A vital function of any mass media - integration of the audience with the various aspects of the relevant society - was pursued by the sample newspapers selectively. The urban audience was familiarized with the various aspects of panchayat election through the content in the sample newspapers. The sample newspapers served as both "guide and interpreter" to the urban audience on the subject of panchayat elections. But from the perspective of the rural audience, the sample newspapers disseminated information that did not contribute much to the formation of 'informed choice'. There were few reports on the functioning of the local bodies, or the extent of participation of the grassroots in the decentralized units or ways to empower the rural people. The sample newspapers mostly reported the perspectives of the political leaders which isolated them from the audience. The analysis of the news sources of the sample reports provided at the end of Chapters VII to XII would underline the chosen perspective of the sample newspapers. The responsibility of mass media in developing societies to initiate, motivate and bolster people participation in social and political processes for empowerment and welfare was mostly overlooked by the sample newspapers.

In an age where media advocacy and activism is common and mass media instruments are known to induce changes in the society as evident from the several studies referred in the Literature Review section of Chapter 1, the sample newspapers invoked in this study were unsuccessful in mobilizing the masses in the democratic decentralization process. They were required to be more vociferous about the implementation of grass-root rights and motivate grass-root involvement in the local political process. The sample newspapers were satisfied to report the events and
incidents surrounding the panchayat elections during the 25 year survey period. The imbalanced and at times predisposed news angle prevented them from assuming the role of advocate and crusader in the political empowerment movement.

So there was ample news on the political scenario during the panchayat election - the atmosphere of tension and violence, the Machiavellian tactics of the rival political parties and their leaders, the war of words between the political opponents, the rift and make-up of coalition partners, the allegations of corruption and nepotism. In fact the sample newspapers covered the subject of panchayat election extensively in these years. But the extent of participation of the rural grassroots in the panchayat system or the panchayat election process did not receive the same attention and significance as the above mentioned issues. The scope of improving grass-root participation in rural local bodies and ensuring their political empowerment was overlooked by the press, which was the dominant mass media.

SCOPE OF FURTHER STUDY

The arrival of the satellite television channels, which are privately owned and operated, changed the prerogative of mass media as well as people’s expectation from it. The sample newspapers faced stiff challenge from the regional news channels. The wide coverage and 24X7 telecasts of the satellite television channels led to varied and abundant content. The newspapers with their limited space would not be able to match the variety and quantity dished out by the television networks. To improve their acceptance among readers the newspapers needed to reinvent themselves - evolve their content and include more analytical insights, realize their social responsibility to ensure their viability to the audience in the face of continuous onslaught by the other media.

While interpersonal communication among panchayat members is effective for diffusion of development information, the mass media can also play a vital role in the dissemination of such communication. It would be interesting to know about the changes in newspaper coverage, if any, in today’s age where interactive media like television talk shows, radio chat shows and the internet and social networking sites dominate. It is evident the mobilization by the new media would be more effective as there are scopes of direct interface and feedback but whether the new media would be accessible to the multitude remains to be seen. The division between the information
rich and information poor in the new-age information society would determine the penetration of information and participation of the masses in the socio-political set-up. It would be intriguing to see how participation of people in the new media interaction alter the dynamics of mass involvement in political and social movements.