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Overview

Democracy embodies public participation and people empowerment necessary to address the power inequities in social, economic and political spheres and affect real change in society. Democratic participation of the grassroots in policy formulation and execution is necessary to bridge the gap between the people and the policy-makers at the highest levels. The decentralization and devolution of state power is essential to ensure the democratization of developing societies. The panchayat system and election to the panchayat bodies are therefore integral to the decentralization and democratization process in the rural areas of India. The village panchayats existed even before independence but they were unofficial, informal bodies without any significant power. After independence reference to the village panchayats in the Directive Principles of State Policy of the Indian Constitution did not give much leeway to panchayat formation in the country. Article 40 of the Indian Constitution stated “The states shall take steps to organize village panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government.” But the institutionalization of village panchayats did not progress much as the Directive Principles were not binding on the State. It was long after the adoption of the Indian Constitution that the panchayats were recognized as important for involving the vast majority of the rural population in public-policy making at the grass-root level.

The Balvantray Mehta Committee (1957) first underlined the need for building grassroots democratic institutions in the villages for the purpose of implementing development programs in place of community development programs which had offset democratic decentralization in post-colonial India. The First Generation Panchayati Raj Institutions, formed in 1959, were accepted with great zeal as they formed the basis of democratic decentralization and devolution of administrative authority in the country. But the laudable approach to involve the grassroots in the administration soon went kaput as “wily bureaucrats, national politicians and vested interest in the villages involving the rural rich ganged up to replace democratically elected local governments with oligarchic set-ups.” The Asoka Mehta Committee (1978) also observed “bureaucrats and the national and
regional politicians were unwilling to give up the administrative and political power to new local leadership and the moneylenders and affluent landowners were reluctant to forego their elevated status." After 1978 the second generation panchayats emerged which sought to politically empower the rural poor for their own social and economic development and curb the power and authority of the existing elites in the rural society. Thus political parties made their entry into the panchayat set-up to ensconce them in the lowest structure of representative democracy in the country. There was a lot of debate over the participation of political parties in the panchayat elections as there were apprehensions that political parties would impound on the rights of the grassroots. But the Ashok Mehta Committee (1978) asserted political parties were "an organic integral part of our democratic process" and including them in the panchayat election process would transform the panchayats into genuine political institutions and focal point of democratic decentralization.

Only a few states accepted Mehta Committee’s recommendation initially and West Bengal was one among them. It would be pertinent to point out that the Mehta Committee’s recommendation was accepted by the state owing to a number of favourable political conditions at that time. The first was the presence of a non-Congress government at the Centre. The second was the coming to power of the Left Front coalition in West Bengal and consequently modification of existing relations between the forces of production. Panchayat elections provided the Left with an opportunity to ensure the coexistence of its ideological commitment towards egalitarian reforms with its political agenda to dominate the rural vote bank. The LF coalition made it clear in its election manifesto before the 1977 Assembly elections in the state that it would initiate two reforms in the rural set-up if it was elected - distribute surplus land to sharecroppers (Operation Barga) and form political panchayats at the grass-root level to assist the process of democratic devolution. The West Bengal Panchayat Act, 1973 was adopted by the LF government as soon as it ascended to power to do away with the feudal structure prevalent in the villages for ages and elect members in three tiers – gram panchayat, panchayat samiti and zilla parishad.

Dreze and Sen (1995) commenting on the incident opined “political organizations dominated by disadvantaged classes succeeded in ushering in a significant change in the balance of political power.” Though there was much consternation over the involvement of political parties in local elections, the Left
Front government of West Bengal implemented the Mehta Committee suggestion of elected political panchayats and since 1978 panchayats in West Bengal has been the source of political power in rural areas. Political parties in the state have considered panchayat elections vital for consolidating their support bases and gaining prominence in the rural areas. The proactive role of the political parties at times led to problems like marginalization of the grassroots in the decisions of the panchayats and limiting their participation to the voting process. If we refer to the reports in the sample newspapers discussed in the later part of the thesis we would find interference of state-level leaders of various political parties extended to the process of candidate selection causing disgruntlement at the grass-root level and inducing political apathy and cynicism. The political parties and their leadership controlled the panchayat members elected on party tickets and played a huge role in policy-making, resource allocation to various projects under the panchayats and distribution of surplus land and relief material and funds. The grass-root panchayat members followed the instructions of their respective political parties and there was little scope of dissent or disagreement. The process of democratic decentralization of power was thus somewhat restrained for the grassroots but even then the panchayats provided at least some degree of political empowerment to the grassroots which was not plausible before its implementation. K. Westergaard (1986) observed empowerment of the rural poor in West Bengal through the panchayats set in motion considerable changes in the rural power structure in the state. The above opinion was supported by many others including Webster (1992), Gent (1995) and Lieten (1994 and 1996).

The accomplishment of the West Bengal panchayat system and successive panchayat elections in the state was participation of the rural masses in the local political process and evolution of political panchayats. But the political parties who acted as intermediaries between grass-root members and the panchayat bodies lessened the involvement of the grassroots in policy-making and impeded their political and social empowerment. It is here that the role of the mass media as a social institution and mass mediated communication becomes crucial.

THE ROLE OF MASS MEDIA IN DEMOCRATIC POLITICS

The mass media has gradually become an essential element in democratic politics. There are several occasions in modern democracies when mass media
communication is considered as imperative. One such occasion is during elections at the various levels. National elections in large representative democracies are dependent on mass media for the publicity of electoral candidates and campaign of electoral issues. It is quite obvious that political parties gain most from such campaign of mass media but there is no denying that the voters in the democratic political system also benefit from the dissemination of election-related information as it helps them to make informed choices in the voting process. The dependency on the mass media during local elections like the panchayat elections in the rural areas and municipality elections in the urban areas would be little less considering the fact that besides mass media there are several other methods of information diffusion that do not require the use or intervention of mass media like campaigning through word of mouth or through posters and graffiti that are effective in close-knit set-ups of local elections. The mass media can be more dynamic and play the role of advocator or crusader, mobilizing grass-root participation in the local political process and giving boost to political empowerment at the grass-root level. Lasswell (1948) observed mass communication has the power to mobilize people and Melkote (1991) commented that communication should play a supportive role in the process of development and the ultimate target of development-oriented communication is to elevate the quality of life of the common people.

The media content during local elections should preferably include news and information on development activities undertaken by local bodies, distribution of allocated resources through local units, and suggestions on ways and means through which involvement of the people in grass-root institutions can be optimized. The mass media along with providing 'informed choices' to the concerned electorate should induce their participation in the electoral process as well as in the workings of the local bodies. It is thus that mass media instruments can help grass-root democratic institutions like the panchayat system and the panchayat elections realize their full potentiality.

The study of the newspaper coverage of panchayat elections in West Bengal would help to appraise the role of a mass media - the press, in encouraging grass-root participation in the rural local governments and promoting grass-root empowerment among the rural population of the state. The coverage pattern in the press before and after the panchayat elections would reflect the mass media's perception of the panchayat system and the panchayat elections and would be an important determinant
to assess the efficacy of the grass-root democratic institutions and their ability to produce social and political transformation. It would also help to ascertain the media's real and apparent location in the local democratic process.

**OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY**

The decentralization of political power through the three-tier panchayat system was a major step towards political emancipation of the grassroots in West Bengal. Elected panchayat bodies in the three lower administrative tiers formed the crux of democratic decentralization process in the state. The primary objective of the study on 'Grass-roots empowerment and the Press: A Study of the Newspaper coverage of the Panchayat elections in West Bengal (1978 to 2003)' is to analyze the role of a dominant mass media, the press, in mobilizing grass-root participation in local bodies leading to their political empowerment. The study intends to find out the nature of news items published in sample newspapers on panchayats and panchayat election before and after the panchayat election process in West Bengal from 1978 to 2003. It is well-known that in large representative democracies mass media play an active role in the dissemination of information especially in developing societies. Golding (1974) observed “significance of mass media and mass communication is manifold in still developing societies.” In the absence of direct involvement of citizens in the political organization, intermediaries who are termed 'social advocates' like political party leaders (who are important sources for the mass media as well) and the mass media itself play a significant role. If the news provided by these mediators is tainted by prejudice or provide superficial account then a complete understanding and interpretation of the information provided is not possible. It is my intention to ascertain in the study whether the relevant newspapers' reports reflected the views and predicament of grass-root panchayat members or imposed the viewpoints of social advocates. The study aims to find out what kind of news related to the panchayats and panchayat elections made headlines in the sample newspapers - was it developmental news or sensational news. The study also intends to find out the prerogative of the newspapers with regard to news sources - was it local level political leaders of various political parties, or political leaders at the state level or grass-root panchayat members and voters who could correctly review the work done by the panchayat bodies without political prejudice. The study intends to analyze newspaper
reports and conduct interview-based survey of the panchayat members to find out whether the information dispersed by the sample newspapers complemented with the requirement of the rural masses or were unrelated to their need. It is also the objective of the study to conduct an interview-based survey of the mass media communicators—the reporters and the editors to assess their view on the content circulated on the issue of panchayat and panchayat election. The objectives of the research work can be summarized as below:

a) To analyze the role of the press in mobilizing grass-root participation and effecting grass-root empowerment.

b) To find out the nature and type of news items on panchayat elections in the sample newspapers.

c) To investigate the relevant reports in the sample newspapers on the subject of panchayat elections and ascertain whether the content reflected the perspective of the grassroots or that of the intermediaries in the political system like the political parties or the mass media communicators.

d) To conduct interview-based surveys on the opinion of the mass communicators and the panchayat functionaries on the coverage of the sample newspapers on the said issue.

HYPOTHESIS OF THE STUDY

The first premise of the study on ‘Grass-roots empowerment and the press’ is that the news reports published prior to and subsequent to the panchayat elections are based on the perspectives, understandings and interpretations of the news correspondents and editors and are therefore likely to be prejudiced. The news reporters selected the news items, determined the news perspective, decided the news sources and most importantly were guided by the commercial viability of the news items that were published. The second premise of the study is that news about panchayat elections in the sample newspapers is tantamount to sensational news often bordering on the scandalous like news on corruption, violence and other despicable activities in the panchayat bodies. It is assumed that partiality towards such news was to generate interest of the urban audience. The contention that press in India is largely urban-oriented is long-standing. Yadav (1994) maintained, “It is no secret that Indian Press is largely urban and elitist and bypasses the multitude of people who live
in rural and tribal India. Reporting from rural areas and about rural people is far between…….” The sample newspapers featured such news items that would attract the attention of the urban readers and did not care about the requirement of the rural audience. The third premise of the study is that the sample newspapers paid little heed to the information needs of the grassroots, those who are organic and integral part of the panchayats and the panchayat system. The news and information published in the press reports on the subject of panchayat elections was therefore inadequate and lacked purpose from the perspective of the grassroots. It is to be assessed in the study whether information disseminated by the sample newspapers promoted grassroots political and social empowerment or was it insufficient and ineffective to serve the purpose.

The hypothesis of the study is summarized below:

a) The news reports published on the panchayat election are based on the understandings and interpretations of the news correspondents and hence likely to be biased.

b) The inclination of the content in the sample newspapers on panchayat elections was towards sensational news and not developmental news keeping in mind the interest of the urban audience.

c) The sample newspapers were unconcerned about the information needs of the rural grassroots and the content disseminated on the subject of panchayat elections was therefore inadequate and lacked purpose from their perspective.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There has been a lot of research on media advocacy and media’s role in the process of social integration and change. The present study examines the role of newspapers in promoting public participation in rural local bodies leading to political empowerment. Some previous studies related to mass media’s involvement in the social cause and the powers of mass communication to purport social development as well as the mass media’s coverage of elections at various levels are enumerated below.

Soderlund and Wagenberg (1972) analyzed the content of editorials in twelve newspapers in the USA and Canada during elections. The study examined the amount of editorial coverage devoted to specific issues, political institutions and
political leaders, the degree and direction of partisanship of the newspapers and the relationship between type of newspaper and proximately of the editorial to the date of the election to the amount of coverage given to specific issues, institutions, or leaders. The study tested a series of hypotheses dealing with differences in election campaigning in the two countries. Finally, cross-national editorial coverage during elections is examined in an attempt to measure the relative importance attached to the neighboring country's election by the press and determine the overall pattern of editorial evaluation.

Dube (1976)\textsuperscript{35} in his study indicated that mass mediated communication along with interpersonal communication was useful in the implementation of community development programs.

Smith-Lovin (1979)\textsuperscript{36} examined the possibility of bidirectional relationship between mass media use and political participation using the Two-Stage Least Squares technique. The data to establish model parameters were procured from a statewide survey in North Carolina State, USA in 1971. The study conducted separate analyses for male and female respondents to explore if sex differences caused any change in the process of political participation. Mass media use is shown to have an effect on participation in both the male and female subsamples. The study concluded that political activity has a positive recursive effect on media use in the female subsample, but there was no significant return effect in the male subsample. The results indicated that models which specify media use as a unidirectional cause of political participation may be incorrect.

Zukin and Snyder (1984)\textsuperscript{37} investigated the phenomenon of "passive learning," or how people may acquire information from the mass media despite lacking the motivation to do so. Two groups receiving different media messages are compared over two elections. The study observed that those who had no interest in an election, but who lived in a media-rich environment were 40 percentage points more likely to have acquired information on the election process than their uninterested cohorts living in a media-poor environment.

Hartmann, Patil and Dighe (1989)\textsuperscript{38} assessed the potential and actual contribution of mass media to the process of development in the villages of Mandu in Andhra Pradesh, Ranabandha in West Bengal and Peraroor in Kerala. This study acknowledged the role of mass media in the process of development but found that
mass media failed to promote desirable social change in these Indian villages since it was mediated through unequal social structures.

Feldman and Kawakami (1991) studied the effects of media on political knowledge, behavior, and interest of the Japanese younger generation. The sample for the study was collected from more than 1100 students in four universities in Japan. The discussion focused on measuring exposure, attention and reliance on newspaper and television media separately which enabled comparative analysis of various media. The findings showed that, more than television, attention and exposure to print media are the strongest predictors of knowledge, behavior, and interest among Japanese students.

Mutz (1994) studied the competing theories on the role of mass media in facilitating or hindering the translation of personal experiences into political preferences. The study used national survey data and media content data that allowed evaluations of both media coverage and individual patterns of media use. The results suggested that mass media may help legitimate the translation of private interests into political attitudes.

Mondak (1995) based his study on the premise that media content and interpersonal discussions both affect mass political behavior. However, assessment of the relationship between media and interpersonal discussion is complicated by the difficulty of establishing a causal order of the relationship. The study addressed the question of causality by considering if access to newspaper coverage affected the quantity of political discussion, and whether it influenced the discussant's electoral choice. A quasi-experimental approach is pursued to answer these questions. The results of the study indicated that media exposure fueled political discussion, but that discussants’ electoral choice were not influenced by the specific content of interpersonal discussion.

Jemigan and Wright (1996) examined how media advocacy can lead to better policy advocacy when used as a complement to community efforts for advancing a social or public policy initiative or bringing about a policy change. The case studies undertaken in the study showed that media advocacy is a potent tool for public health workers in the USA, making an important contribution to campaigns to promote healthier public policies.

Weaver (1996) observed that in spite of criticism of election news coverage in the mass media for being superficial and preoccupied with campaign strategy of
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political parties, voters do learn, especially from television news, newspapers, and televised debates. The study noted that voters were more likely to learn awareness and concern over certain issues, candidates, and traits of candidates. Specific positions of candidates and parties on issues were somewhat less likely to be taught by the media. The study concluded that exposure to media coverage of elections, especially television coverage, is likely to reinforce interest in politics and voting turnout, although heavy media emphasis on campaign strategy and maneuvering can make some voters more cynical and less likely to vote.

Newton (1999) investigated the capability of mass media to inform and mobilize people politically to make them more knowledgeable and understanding as well as the media malaise hypotheses, which contended that modern mass media has a maligning effect on modern democracy and induced political apathy, alienation, cynicism. The study found little support for the latter contention. The study proved that reading a newspaper regularly is strongly associated with mobilization, while watching a lot of television has a weaker association of the same kind. The study emphasized that content of the media has more visible effects than its form.

Adkins-Covert, Ferguson, Phillips and Wasburn (2000) studied the relation of media and democracy at the local level through a detailed analysis of the coverage of community issues in a local newspaper serving a well educated, financially secure, and politically active population. The data suggested that media did not serve democratic intentions even when the audience was not politically disengaged.

Nuijten (2002) discussed the problems of participatory approaches in development and argued that external interventions are always embedded within wider fields of power and that discourses of "participation" and "grass-root initiatives" cannot change these established power relations. The study cited a Mexican government program that used a "bottom-up participatory approach" in order to stimulate peasants to formulate their own internal rules. The study showed that this program—in which "local organizing capacities" were said to be central elements—did not change the existing power relations and only gave more room to peasants in their negotiations with officials and intermediaries.

Goldstein and Ridout (2002) argued that mobilization is an important determinant of individual participation and investigated the mystery of declining voter turnout in the United States for over 40 years. The study identified and evaluated three possible ways in which mobilization might have affected levels of turnout over
time: (a) aggregate rates of mobilization may have declined, (b) the effectiveness of mobilization may have declined, and (c) the targeting of mobilization may have changed. The study found no evidence of decline in mobilizing activity or decreased effectiveness of mobilizing techniques. It found campaigns targeted only habitual voters and that explained some of the decline in voter turnout.

Research examining media effects on political attitudes has put forth broadly conflicting explanations: media use diminishes knowledge and involvement and contributes to political cynicism and declining turnout; media use contributes to learning, political involvement, trust, efficacy, and mobilization. Aarts and Semetko (2003) addressed the differing and sometimes even contradicting explanations with detailed measures for Netherlands in 1998. A dual effects hypothesis is supported: regularly watching television news on the public service channels has positive effects on cognition, efficacy, and turnout, whereas regularly opting for commercial television news has negative effects. This viewing behavior thus separates the more knowledgeable and politically involved from those who are not, revealing what might be described as a "virtuous circle" for some and a "spiral of cynicism" for others.

Eveland and Shah (2003) contended that large percentage of the mass media audience believed that the news media is biased, and the majority of them consider the direction of bias to be against them. The study examined how interpersonal factors such as ideological similarity or dissimilarity and personal communication networks heightened bias perceptions. The study showed through a national survey in the USA that perceptions of media bias were related to conversations between ideologically like-minded individuals and hence the impact of community members, peers and other groups in the society could not be overlooked.

Schmitt-Beck (2003) investigated how mass communication and personal communication interact with each other as sources of persuasive information regarding electoral decision making. They considered the theory of 'filter hypothesis' proposed by Katz and Lazarsfeld which held that personal communication mediates the influence of mass communication in case of individual voters, reinforcing or blocking the impact of media information, depending on the evaluative implications of that information and on the political composition of the voters' networks. The study explored the hypothesis and corroborated it using comparable national election studies from Britain, Spain, the United States and West Germany.
De (2005)\textsuperscript{51} indicated that elected members of local governments preferred development news to entertainment news. The study confirmed from a sample survey of panchayat members in West Bengal that they confronted mass media content with the approach that it would be useful in some way but lack of knowledge, narrow outlook and late acceptability of new ideas were impediments in the way of media accessibility.

Navarro (2005)\textsuperscript{52} found that people participation in media processes transformed mass media into citizen’s media and created a sense of empowerment. The study observed that institutional ownership of media by local communities and its consequent contribution to media production ensured community empowerment.

Hayes (2008)\textsuperscript{33} studied the interactive agenda-setting effects of candidates and media particularly to determine whether the ability of candidates to set the public’s agenda depends on the media’s willingness to reflect their issue. Using an experiment conducted during the early stages of the 2006 Texas, USA gubernatorial election, the author showed that candidate attempts to influence voter issues are most effective when the media focus on the same topics. The findings suggested that candidates were keen in enlisting the news media’s help for percolation of their messages.

Barabas and Jerit (2009)\textsuperscript{54} explored the scope of mass media as a source of policy-specific information. The study employed a simple but underutilized approach for estimating the effects of news coverage. It drew upon a unique collection of cross-sectional survey data and made within-survey/within-subjects comparisons under conditions of high and low media coverage. It showed how the volume, breadth, and prominence of news media coverage increase policy-specific knowledge.

There are few works on decentralization and local governance which I would like to refer to in my literature review. Fleurke and Willemse (2004)\textsuperscript{55} traced the four main approaches to the issue of decentralization and local autonomy: the formal, dynamic, functional, and governance approach. Goldfrank (2007)\textsuperscript{56} studied the comparison between three similar experiments in participatory local governance in Caracus, Montevideo and Alegre of Latin America. The study found two reasons determined the different outcome in the three places. The first reason was the degree of national decentralization of authority and resources for local governments and second was the level of institutionalization of local opposition parties. These conditions decided the ability to design meaningful participatory programs that could attract lasting citizen involvement.
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The present study hopes to explore the role and potential of mass media with regard to mobilization of grassroots in local elections and their participation in local governance. The study of newspaper coverage of panchayat elections would elucidate which issues and sources dominated the press and reveal its specific intention and ability as well as locate its actual location in the concerned society. It would also indicate the particular media’s (press) relation with its different audience. The grassroots’ response to the media content would be confirmed through the interviews of panchayat members (see Chapter 14). This aspect of the study would determine whether the content corroborated with the expectation and need of the relevant audience or was it isolated and disconnected from them.

CONCLUSION

The mass media in developing societies can play the role of guide, interpreter and motivator in several circumstances.57 The present study would explore how much involved and supportive was the sample newspapers to the cause of political empowerment of the rural grassroots in West Bengal. The study would help to draw conclusion on the ‘real’ power of a mass medium and its actual use in a modern democracy. It would explain the media’s perception of its power against its actual influence with regard to grass-root mobilization and empowerment. The issue of political empowerment of the grassroots has received constitutional support from the Union government as well as various state governments like that of West Bengal but the well-meaning intention has not been realized in its full potential due to various impediments put up by wily politicians and power-mongering political parties, reluctant bureaucrats and incumbent local leadership. This study would probe the role of a dominant mass media as an antithesis to the aforementioned obstacles.

REFERENCES


9. ibid., p. 6.


19. Several newspaper reports on the panchayat elections in the sample newspapers discussed in the later chapters of this study indicated that the involvement of the
political parties in the panchayat election process extended to the panchayat administration later on. The impact of political interference was evident in all the three tiers of the panchayat.


52. Amelia Morales Navarro, Empowerment through the Media, Roskilde University, 2005.


