

Media and Politics: An Exploration of the Role of Media in Political Movements in the context of Darjeeling Hills in West Bengal

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Abstract

All forms of media impact society and politics. The media are commonly understood to be able to—and many would argue, obligated to—provide a forum for the expression and discussion of a diverse range of oftentimes conflicting ideas. However, the role of media has been such that it has impacted political processes enormously with its twin contributions of empowering as well as silencing the ‘people’/audience it targets so much so that politics has changed and transformed from a largely interpersonal to a predominantly mediated activity. There are many different forms of media that affect the political landscape. The use of print media, and in the recent years, the emergence of the electronic media, has been instrumental in shaping the nature of politics. The present study purports to investigate the role of media in the social and political transformations and political movements in Darjeeling hills.

Keywords: Media, Movements, Darjeeling hills, Gorkhaland

1. Introduction

Social relationship of people is determined significantly by the information obtained through various media forms like the news and newspaper articles, radio broadcasting, television programmes etc. by linking place, space and people. Media’s influence on people begins at home in its relationship with the household life – a process which the cultural historian Lesley Johnson (1981) has called its ‘capturing’ of time and space in the home; transcends the domestic, and interweaves a people, culture and social process of a community, involving the mapping out and shifting uses and implications of a media form in the domestic and public life of a people.

However, any analysis of people and her political institutions and processes necessitate a prior reference to the press and media of her times. In this context, the press, as Mitra (1930) observes, is the guardian of the liberties of its people as well as the most effective instrument for extending the bonds of human freedom and progress. It plays an effective role in moulding and educating public opinion. It proves itself as an exdona in the socio-political consciousness. The press, particularly the vernacular one, highlights the inherent social evils of the society. The press also exposes the wrong and unjust policies of the administrative system which, by and large, serves as the principal source of inspiration both for the social reformers and the political leaders of the day. Yet, it needs to be cautioned that such views on the functions

of media are not free from criticisms (Patterson, 1993; Graber, 2003). Despite criticisms, the role of media in politics continues to remain significant. Keeping such a role of the media and grounding itself on the theoretical insights from various studies globally (Tuchman, 1978; Blumer and Gurevitch, 1981; Beniger & Herbst, 1990; Protes & McCombs, 1991; Neuman, Just, & Crigler, 1992; Gamson & Wolsfeld, 1993; Agarwal, 2002; Biagi, 2006; Iyengar & McGrady, 2007), the present study is an earnest attempt to investigate the role of media in the social and political transformations and political movements in Darjeeling hills.

Darjeeling hills, the northernmost part of the state of West Bengal and inhabited by Gorkhas has a contested history. The people of the region had been demanding a homeland within India for last hundred years or so, and the demand for the creation of a separate state of Gorkhaland within the framework of Indian federation has its history ever since India's independence. The hills saw a bloody agitation for separation from West Bengal and for the creation of a separate Gorkhaland state within the federal structure of India in the 1980's under the leadership of Subash Ghising and his Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF), after which a Hill Council was formed as a separate development agency for the Darjeeling Hills. The developmental benefits in the twenty or so long years of the existence of the council, however, seemed to have failed to percolate down to the people even after twenty or more years of anxious wait, creating in the minds of the nation a sense of deprivation and of being marginalized. Therefore, second wave of protest movement began in 2007, under the leadership of Bimal Gurung and his Gorkha Jana Mukti Morcha (GJMM), albeit with the same demand of the creation of Gorkhaland, however, with different ideological orientations and strategies.

2. Development of Press and Media

The Indian press and media has had a glorious history. It is not out of place to say that the Indian press is not like the British press or French press, 'a press of one language'. It is a press of the major Indian languages in most of which, apart from English, it had its beginnings about the same time. The growth of such press was bound to be multifarious, and at the beginning somewhat diverse. But there has been an underlying unity, with common urges and common conditions. Along with political unity came economic unity, and along with it commonness of development, especially with the enforcement of a common legal system all over the country.

According to 1977 report of the Register of Newspapers for India, India continued to be the second largest publisher of daily newspapers in the world in 1976, with a marginal increase to 875 from 835 in 1975. In circulation, Indian daily newspapers occupied the third place in Asia, coming next only to the USSR and Japan. Newspapers published in India touched 34.075 million in

total circulation, marking a rise of 0.235 million in 1976, as compared to 1975, when circulations stood at 33.822 million. The growth of circulation during 1971-76 was 4.456 million. The circulation of dailies in 1976 was 9.338 million as compared to 9.383 in 1975. Among the daily newspapers and periodicals in different Indian languages English dailies are accounted for the highest circulation figures, Hindi came next, followed by the Malayalam. The largest number of newspaper, 3,289 was in Hindi, followed by English (2,765), Urdu (975) and Bengali (855). At the same time it is evident that the largest number of dailies (252) was in Hindi, followed by Marathi and Urdu (94 each), Malayalam (91), English (89), Tamil (58), Kannada (53), Gujarati (37), Bengali (22), and Telugu (17). But we see that the biggest period of growth of the publications took place after independence, under conditions of adult suffrage and growth of liberty. The Indian Press started as press of dependency and later on the press became the press of developing society compelled to answer many challenges. At present publication of press is not only the medium of news dissemination, but also as a purveyor of advertising service.

However, the development of press and publications as popular media was not uniform throughout the nook and corners of India. In different parts, several forces and factors accounted for a particular nature of growth as well as content. In Bengal, at the beginning of Bengali Press did not owe its origin to any political consideration, although it was destined to play a vital role in the political movement of the succeeding years. It was, in other words, a manifestation of the all round awakening that was taking place in Bengal in the early nineteenth century. Similar is the case with Darjeeling.

In almost all the Third World Countries which were the erstwhile colonies of the Western imperial powers, the development of the vernacular languages and the associated establishment of printing presses and publications in vernaculars have taken place in strikingly similar ways. The common feature of this being that the colonial rulers did not encourage the development of the vernacular. However, although appearing ambivalent and contradictory, yet the initial impetus for the development of the vernacular languages and establishment of the printing presses came from the Christian missionary groups as a part of their proselytisation activities. In Darjeeling hills too, this trend was visible, with the missionaries engaged in efforts of developing the vernacular language, translating the Holy Bible into the vernaculars, and encouraging the opening of and /or opening the printing presses through which the religious messages were communicated. Similarly, the colonial administration's requirements and the necessities of the Planters, all contributed to the mushrooming of printing presses in Darjeeling. Consequently, Darjeeling became a centre of literary activities with the publication of host of papers and periodicals covering a vast range of themes like various socio-economic, political and cultural issues.

As it is evident that the development of press and media in the hills of Darjeeling did not owe to a single factor. Rather, it has been a result of the interplay of multiplicity of forces and factors. However, the most noteworthy among them are: first, the role played by the Christian missionaries and spread of education; second, the introduction of Darjeeling Himalayan Railway as an effective and popular means of communication; third, the emergence of a host of associations: socio-cultural as well as literary, during the period; and finally, the contributions of the Tea Planters and government establishments, among others.

2.1 Role of the Christian Missionaries and Spread of Education

The Christian missionaries were the pioneer to introduce modern education in the hill area of Darjeeling. For the last generation practically the only organization for meeting the primary education of the people of the hills has been the Church of Scotland Mission. When the British took over the district, it was found that popular education was practically unknown. The first attempt to reach education to the hill people was made by Rev. W. Star. After him came a bond of German Missionaries, one of whom, Mr. Niebel, devoted himself especially for schoolwork. But it was not till the advent of the Rev. William Macfarlane in the year 1869 that any broad scheme of vernacular education was devised for the district. Mr. Macfarlane soon set himself to draw some statesmanlike scheme of education based on that of which he aimed at putting some opportunity for even the initial stage of learning within the reach of every child. Moreover, to encourage the cause of general education in the Darjeeling Hill area, Mr. Macfarlane induced Government to offer Scholarship for the students during their course of education. Another person who left significant contribution for the education of hill people was Rev. R. Kilgour. As evident, therefore, the Christian missionaries contributed towards the development of education in Darjeeling Hills, which in turn, contributed to the rise of vernacular press and media in Darjeeling Hills. Furthermore, the missionaries required to develop the language of the natives in order to promote the spread of Christianity. This requirement led to the translation of Bible into the vernacular languages, and above all, its publication, thereby leading to the development of both the language as well as the press and publication houses in Darjeeling Hills.

It has been found that the first attempt to make the Darjeeling hills the home of European education was in the 1860s. For some years Bishop Cotton had been advocating the establishment of Hill Schools for Europeans, and his efforts were supported by Lord Canning who pointed out in a celebrated minutes how the domiciled English and Europeans would, if neglected become profitless, unmanageable, and a glaring reproach to the government, while if properly cared for, they might become a source of strength to British rule and usefulness to India (O'Malley, 1985). The consequence of this movement was

the establishment of several Hill schools, of which one was St. Paul's School, which was transferred in 1864 from Calcutta to Darjeeling. The establishment of this School in the hills of Darjeeling was a very important step for the development of English education in the region. Subsequently within a short time a good number of English schools were established in Darjeeling hills as a result of which the people got the opportunity to learn. Education is the most powerful instrument for the intellectual and cultural exercise of any place or area. Without literary background it is absolutely impossible to have any literary activities, intellectual interaction and cultural practices. In this respect the Christian missionaries were the pioneer to introduce modern education in the hill area of Darjeeling. It is evident that in Darjeeling the Christian missionaries were the pioneers in the field of education (Pradhan, 1982). The gradual spread of education prompted the development of press and media in Darjeeling during this period. Thus, the development of the vernacular newspapers could be credited by the movement that took place during this period for the upliftment of Nepali language and literature. It can be said that this periodicals got its backbone in it.

2.2 The Establishment of the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway

Rapid progress was made in the development of the communications of the district, which the Sikkim expedition of 1860 and the Bhutanese war the year before had shown to be vitally essential. One of the major developments in this direction was the introduction of Darjeeling Himalayan Railway (DHR). The ease of communication facilitated the movements of both articles and goods and people. The accentuated interaction between the people from the plains and the Hills on the one hand and the availability of resources required for publication on the other facilitated the growth of press and media in Darjeeling. The construction of railroads linked with the plains in 1880 moved Darjeeling to a new history with its contact with the rest of the India which brought the newly educated youths more and more under the influence of literary movements ahead in many new directions. This period was the age of awakening in the Indian subcontinent, a period of momentous happenings of epical magnitude. The socio-religious regeneration and the awareness of the economic exploitation of the colonial rule had given birth to a strong sense of nationalism which had received impetus from the contact of the European writings and thoughts. This change brought a new phase in history of Darjeeling and brought the beginning of the journals in Nepali vernacular language which was the epoch making event because it was through this papers that new ideas were brought out.

2.3 The Emergence of Associations in Darjeeling

The emergence of associations and organizations has a clear indication of the general awakening of the people. The associations and organisations which were generally formed to ventilate the grievances of the people, through

their charters, mouthpieces, etc., published preferably in the vernacular languages of a community, which such associations represent. In similar way, there had emerged in Bengal in general and Darjeeling Hills in particular, several associations and organizations, mostly of cultural and literary in character which provided meeting places for exchange of views and for the promotion of common objectives, which ultimately facilitated the evolution of press and media in the region. The growth of public organisations and Associations in Bengal was closely related to the growth and development of the press and media. In Darjeeling district, a good number of associations and organisations emerged during this period. The most important of these include the following: Indian Association (1883), Gorkha National Theatrical Party (1906) Nepali Sahitya Sammelan (1924, Gorkha Dukkha Nivarak Sammelan (1932), Nebula (1935), Gorkha Association (1926), Gorkha Library (1918) and, Hillmen's Association (1917), Nepali Sahitya Adhayan Samiti (Kalimpong), Nepali Sahitya Prasar Samiti (Siliguri), Arya Samaj (Darjeeling Branch), among others. Most of these were socio-cultural and literary organisations, yet they contributed significantly in ventilating the grievances of the hill people and to fulfil their aspirations through their various publications from time to time.

2.4 Contributions of Tea Planters and Government Establishments

The Tea-planters from their commercial outlook and necessity inspired the development of press and publication houses in Darjeeling. They also used the printing press for printing handbill, cash book and some other commercial cum official documents. So it is obvious that in the initial stage of printing and publications the Tea-Planters had some significant contribution. Another factor important on the issue of publication in Darjeeling hills happened to be the government itself. The government for their administrative purposes generally used the press. Most of the government official papers and documents were also printed, therefore, encouraging the printing machinery in Darjeeling.

Darjeeling, a favoured destination of the British and its winter headquarters during colonial period had the privilege of being a centre for leaning. As a result, history of Darjeeling has to its credit a large number of publications in Nepali, English, Bengali and Tibetan, which owed largely to the contributions made by the British rulers and the missionaries by way of the establishment of schools and other institutions of learning. During the colonial period too, the demand for a separate administrative apparatus for the Gorkhas was in place, and hence, several Gorkha leaders propounded these ideas and propagated them through a huge number of magazines and newsletters. Several vernacular publications in the likes of *Gorkha Bharat Jiban* (1886- (Motiram Bhatt), *Gorkha Khabar Kagat* (1901-Ganga Prasad Pradhan) were published from Darjeeling, investigating different aspects of hill society and culture, propagation of the republican ideals and the condemnation of the social evils like child marriage (especially between 1912 and 1939) engaging basically in

socio-cultural reform. The publications in Tibetan took place especially after the arrival of the Tibetan refugees to Darjeeling in the later part of the 1950s, and, most of their publications focus on the plight of the refugees, reflections on their religious and cultural traditions, their determination to free Tibet, and so on. Some Nepali novels (like *Noyo*) also focus on the story of the inhuman treatment meted to the Tibetans and the flight of the refugees from Tibet to India etc. Several associations also contributed to the development of media and to the socio-cultural and political transformations in the region. As regards the associations, most of them were formed in for the assertion of the cultural and ethnic identity of the people of the hills (for instance, the NEBULA) barring some (like Gorkha Dukkha Niwarak Sammelan- GDNS and Nepali Sahitya Sammelan) which devoted to socio-cultural and literary endeavours. Their aspirations were exposed through these associations. Nepali Sahitya Sammelan published Nepali Sahitya Sammelan Patrika. Gorkha Dukkha Nibarak Samity published 'Khoji' by Rupnarayan Sinha to ventilate their thoughts and ideas, to highlight their socio-political and economic demands and problems. The trend continued in the aftermath of the Indian independence and the mobilisation of the print media got further accelerated for the movement in the 1980s under Subash Ghisingh. Ghising himself was a literary figure. Apart from propagating his political ideas for mass mobilisation through his literary pieces in vernacular, Subash Ghising who led the Gorkhaland movement in the 1980s sent letters regarding the status of Darjeeling hills and the need for immediate intervention for its resolution to His Majesty, the King of Nepal and also to the International Court of Justice of the United Nations. The copies of the letters were also sent to the Government of India, the President of the USA, Russia and many others. He regarded this move as a tactic to pressurise the Indian government and to get recognition to the problems of the hill people. His intention was to draw the attention of the international media so that the movement could not be suppressed. Further, during Ghising's movement, he mobilised the local media like the *Himalchuli* and made it the mouthpiece of the movement. The second wave of the movement, under the leadership of Bimal Gurung, apart from mobilising the traditional print media, electronic media has largely been mobilised.

3. New Media

New media is a term meant to encompass the emergence of digital, computerized, or networked information and communication technologies in the later part of the 20th century. Most technologies described as new media are digital, often having characteristics of being manipulated, networkable, dense, compressible, interactive and impartial. Some examples may be the Internet, websites, computer multimedia, computer games, CD-ROMS, and DVDs.

Simultaneous to the development of the new media is the entry of global television channels, and access to global information. Hence, post

liberalization India has provided a space for the conglomeration of media forms: print media: both vernacular and otherwise, global television networks, new media and social media.

Darjeeling is not an exception to this development and has provided for simultaneous existence and working of all these media forms with national and local newspapers, cable television, digital and social media, both enabling and constraining the public sphere, including the virtual.

Today Darjeeling Hills receive almost all the television channels that are received in the rest of India. Cable Television serves most of the homes in the town, while DTH connections are now growing in popularity. Besides mainstream Indian channels, the Hills have Nepali-language channels like *Dainandini (DD)*, *Kalimpong Television (KTV)*, *Haal Khabar*, *Pratidin* and Himalayan People's Channel (HPC), *Hamro Channel*, the *Himali Channel* and the *Darjeeling Television* produced by local TV channel media houses and transmitted through the local cable network which provides daily local news based programs.

Newspapers in Darjeeling Hills include English language dailies, *The Statesman* and *The Telegraph*, which are printed in Siliguri, and *The Economic Times* and the *Hindustan Times* which are printed in Kolkata (Calcutta). Among other languages, Nepali, Hindi and Bengali are prominent vernacular languages used in this region. Newspapers in all these four languages are available in the Darjeeling Hills region. Of the largely circulated Nepali newspapers *Himalay Darpan*, *Swarnabhumi* and some Sikkim based Nepali newspapers like *Hamro Prajashakti* and *Samay Dainik* are read most.

Darjeeling Times in Darjeeling and Kalimpong News from Kalimpong are the online newspapers that chronicle the details of socio-cultural, economic and political life of the Hills.

These apart, people in the Hills today make extensive use of the social media like the Facebook, Whatsapp, weChat to communicate on everyday issues. Even political leadership makes use of these social media forms to communicate to its followers.

The Gorkha Jana Mukti Morcha (GJMM), apart from mobilising the traditional print media, has been mobilising electronic media to a large extent. The GJMM has created its own homepage. The website of the Party provides information on the Party and its ideological orientation, its objectives, its organisational structure, etc. The website also carries various other informations like the Historical documents, press releases of the party, etc., among others. During the second phase of the Gorkhaland movement under the GJMM, various issues and strategies of the movement found place in the website of the Party. In the recent phase, the GJMM has resorted to social media with the extensive use of the facebook.

GJMM supremo Bimal Gurung has been taking the help of social media to spread his message on the statehood demand and at the same time clarify his stand on various steps being taken as today most of the political leaders have accepted the importance of social media. His Face book page had been out there since early 2008. He has also pointed out at several occasions that the new medium or social media is one of the most democratic medium to reach out to public and answer their queries.

Apart from the leadership spearheading the movement (GJMM), the leaders of the opposition have also resorted to electronic media for mobilisation. For instance, in the aftermath of the death of Madan Tamang, the then President of Akhil Bharatiya Gorkha League (ABGL) a weblog named Madan Manch was developed as a virtual space wherein supporters of the ABGL could come together, interact and mobilise popular support by way of mobilising sympathy towards the League leader. Therefore, as evidenced, the Gorkhaland movement in Darjeeling has experienced leadership's attempt to mobilise media- both print and electronic, in the course of the movement. Such mobilisation has contributed more often than not towards both enabling and disabling the consolidation of the support base of the movement and party organisations.

Besides, The Himalayan Beacon, a blog by Barun Roy, a citizen of Darjeeling, very often sparked debate on issues of Darjeeling, sharing knowledge about the hills, and in particular the Gorkhaland issues and conflicts. The site offered insights into the controversies between hills and the government, and also on what were the proper and viable ways of acquiring more autonomy.

Darjeelingtonimes.com, a regional online news media outlet with occasional print magazines, has been devoted to Darjeeling district issues. It has tried to be transparent and tries to give voice to different opinions by allowing comments on all articles. It also republishes newspaper articles from other Indian news sources.

However, at times, the media-politics interface has accentuated in Darjeeling Hills. For instance Himalaya Darpan (Nepali Daily) turned itself to be almost a mouthpiece of the GJMM with its launching of the Gorkhaland Movement since 2007. For obvious reasons, immediately the readership of the paper increased manifold in a very brief period of time, despite the approximately cent percent hike in its price with the paper carrying every news about the GJMM led movement and the appreciation of the emergent leadership. However, a sudden change was observed with the GJMM turning away from the Darpan, in which the Party banned the circulation of Himalaya Darpan from 26th January to 2nd February of 2008. The controversy of *Himalaya Darpan* spilled over to the streets as GJMM finally deciding to protest Himalaya Darpan's 'unethical journalism' by requesting people to

refrain from buying the paper. The GJMM also decided not to issue any news to the paper. They alleged that one of the journalists of the said daily was into criminal conspiracy against them along with some members of the opposition. However, on 28th January, GJMM President declared that there was no ban on Himalaya Darpan and that the so called ban had been a ‘Public outcry’ over the unethical journalism. He requested people not be overzealous over the issue but requested journalists to maintain the dignity of their profession. However, the ban continued till the 2nd of February 2008 in different forms. The ban was opposed by various newspapers, political leaders, civil society organizations and the Darjeeling Press Guild.

Similar incidents took place with other media forms during August-September 2013, and the politics of the media rocked the Hills then. The Darjeeling District officials shut down the cable television network from 8th August 2013 throughout the Darjeeling Hills. A notice was served to Darjeeling Combined Cable Network, one of the service providers. The notice read:

“As per the direction of the district magistrate, Darjeeling, the broadcast of the Combined Cable Network is hereby shut down and the control room is suspended until further order.”

The reason behind such a move on the part of administration was to restrict the local channels, viz, the *Hamro Channel*, the *Himali Channel* and the *Darjeeling Television* from portraying and propagating the news of protests. Similarly, in Kalimpong and other places in the hills, the local channels were banned from telecasting programmes of that sort. The ban was imposed by the office of the district magistrate as per the provisions of the Cable Television (Regulation) Amendment Act, 2011. The Act empowers the district collector to impose such a ban on cable operators in case of the telecast of programmes that could disturb peace and cause hatred.

There were strong protests against the shutdown of the television network. Posters and processions were seen throughout the hills demanding immediate reinstallation of television services in the hills. The Darjeeling Press Guild, particularly, communicated/ wrote to the National Human Rights Commission, National Broadcasting Association, Press Council of India, about the forcible shut down of the television network in the Darjeeling hills. However, after three days, with the district administration allowing the cable operators to telecast, the television network was reinstated but with the ban on the local channels on reasons of having no license to that end, to telecast the local news and other programmes that help propagate the movement.

4. Concluding Observations

The study revealed that in case of the Gorkhaland movement, media was mobilised by the leadership since the inception of the movement during the

colonial period in the 1920s. Both the active phases of the movement- 1980s and the post 2007 made extensive use of media for movement mobilisation. The leadership in the Gorkhaland movement resorted to electronic media for mobilization as soon as it was available before them in post-liberalized India. Obviously, because of the contributions of the media, the Gorkhaland movement which has extensively mobilised the media has emerged as a stronger movement in the region vis-à-vis the Kamtapuri movement which has, to an equal extent, failed to mobilise the media to that extent. In the recent times, however, controversies surrounding the politics over the media itself have taken ground, with strong promises of democratizing the media itself.

Media in general and the regional vernacular press has acted as agencies of socio-cultural and political transformations and contributed to the development of popular political consciousness in Darjeeling. The press/media has contributed to and/or constrained the construction and articulation of cultural, ethno- linguistic and political identity of the Gorkha Community over time.

With the dawn of liberalization and the period following it, Darjeeling underwent a dramatic transformation in terms of press and media. Electronic media, global news channels through cable television, new media with the coming in of internet facilities, and the social networking sites—all became pervasive. Each of these media forms came to be consumed increasingly by the people. This phenomenon transformed the nature of media use since 2007 with the emergence of the GJMM in Darjeeling politics and the subsequently in the period following the murder of opposition leader Madan Tamang.

However, on the other hand, it has also been found that press and media has not only become agencies of socio-cultural and popular mobilizations, but have become epicenters of politics. Increasingly, press and media have been politicized because of the differences in opinion of the political interests and the interests of the publishing houses. Whereas the political organizations tend to manipulate the media coverage to their favour through the contents and nature of news coverage, the media/press owners tend to be more driven by their profit motive, as well.

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