

Voice of the Unheard: Role of Social Media in Darjeeling

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Abstract

This research paper discusses how social media has become a platform for providing voice to the section of the nation whose voices remained unheard until the emergence of the social media especially the social networking mediums. It is believed that media has always acted as the facilitator of information for its consumers in the form of readers, listeners or viewers. The different forms of media are supposed to provide the public with information such that they become “well informed citizens”. However, when it comes to coverage of newsworthy events in the Darjeeling Hills (Darjeeling District) the conventional media viz. Print, T.V. and Radio seems to turn a blind eye. In most occasions the news coverage from the region provided on the national platform is a far cry from what it deserves. The news from the Darjeeling Hills always seem to be covered at a minimal level or limited to local coverage only. However, with the emergence of social media the scenario seems to be changing. The absence of coverage by mainstream media in the region might have provided a perfect platform for social media to flourish and be the source to disseminate information regarding the Hills on a much larger level than ever before. The current research intends to review the effect of social media, the way in which Darjeeling connects and communicates socially and politically.

Keywords: Darjeeling, Social Media, Social Networking, Traditional Media, Communication

Mainstream Media and Darjeeling

Media has a very important role to play in our world especially in countries with democratic government where media seems to have immense power. In India, media has been looked upon and is known to be the fourth estate, with the Legislature, Executive and Judiciary being the first three. Media should only present facts as it is and interpret those facts; and much like Habermas’ theory of public sphere, it should formulate public opinion and propagate ideas and ideologies.¹ Media is supposed to be the pillar that represents the public by guarding their interests, bringing them to forefront, reporting on failings and lapses of the government and other bodies exercising governing power. The media has therefore been rightly described as the Fourth Estate.

In essence, the mass media are the essential tools or technologies that facilitate dissemination of information and entertainment to a vast number of consumers. They are the tools of large scale manufacture and distribution of information and related message.²

¹ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, Burger Thomas and Lawrence Frederick (Trans.) (Neuwied/Berlin: Luchterhand, 1989), 49.

² Keval J. Kumar, *Mass Communication in India* (Delhi: Jaico Publishing House, 2002).

Media in any form has become an integral part of our daily life and the role it plays in our contemporary society cannot be underestimated. Media acts as a bridge between private lives and its relation to the public world and it's through media that force for integration and force for dispersion and individualisation of the society can be enforced. Media has an immense impact when it comes to shaping our understanding of the world around us. To a great extent for most of the people media is predominantly the best and sometimes even the only easily accessible approximation of the ever changing political, social and economic actuality. The active audience theory propagates that media is merely a tool or a source for information and data which the audience can utilise and analyse to evaluate the current events. Audience, unlike machines, have the capability to interpret and process the information fed in by the media on their own and individual way. They simply do not receive the information provided but instead develop individual and independent interpretation of those data or information.³

However, after the process of economic liberalisation, the status of media in India has changed immensely. Much like how Habermas had blamed the development of media leading to the decline of the public sphere and formulation of the public opinion. In his book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas suggests that the transformation of the public sphere started to take place with the innovations and developments in the world of media with the beginning of the press to radio to television.⁴ All these media developments had an impact on the public sphere. Habermas hinted that with the main stream media especially press, radio and television being controlled and hegemonic there was a phase where the public sphere shrunk.⁵ Development and changes did lead to a change in the role of the media in general. Changes are in terms of content, technology, and ownership pattern. Although media houses did try to build more public interactions in different ways but it couldn't due to various reasons. The media to a large extent control what their audience gets to know or how they think about personalities, issues or events, by providing partial information about them.

Habermas has mentioned that in the initial stages the public sphere had productive equilibrium between the state, business, family and individuals. However with the expansion of capitalism the society as a whole went under a transformation that led to the shrinkage of the public sphere with the increasing power, control and hegemony of the state and media.⁶ But it is not the change in media and its effect on public sphere that is going to be reviewed or discussed in this research paper. Instead we would look upon the question whether the effect of media or the changes in media have been helpful to all or only to certain sections of the societies or zones, especially in Darjeeling district and adjoining areas.

³ Jin Huimin, *Active Audience: A New Materialistic Interpretation of a Key Concept of Cultural Studies*, (Weltzar: Transcript-Verlag, 2012), 67-68.

⁴ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), 77-79.

⁵ Micheal Higgins, *Media and Their Publics* (Mc Graw Hill: Open University Press, 2008), 28.

⁶ Paul Hodkinson, *Media Culture and Society: An Introduction* (London: Sage, 2011), 13.

The inspiration to focus on this research area has come from a much visible communication gap regarding the people and information from Darjeeling district in the main stream national media. We do know that India as a developing nation has had several issues to deal with, most of which are unique to a particular place or region where it originates. Darjeeling too has to deal with various developmental issues such as lack of basic amenities, drinking water woes and extremists which have affected the region over many decades. Tourism and Tea Plantation were, and still remain, the primary sources of income and livelihood for most people in the region. Connectivity with the mainland is minimal even after so many years of independence.

Communication can be effective not only when adopted to induce change in awareness, knowledge, attitudes and behaviours, but also when used as a tool to build trust, share knowledge and explore options enhancing the overall results and sustainability of development initiatives. Darjeeling as a region has different needs and different demands. The mainstream media, which is mostly market oriented and is always aiming at maximizing its profit, barely gives any attention when it comes to catering to the information need of the people of Darjeeling. One of the greatest examples of the lack of media coverage of the area along with north-east India is that there are Indians who are surprised at the sight of people with Mongolian features. Some believe that we belong to one of the south-eastern countries they know about. Such level of ignorance exists mostly due to the fact that some people are unaware that people with Mongolian features are a part of India. No form of media until recently has reported the fact that the vast diversity of India does include us.

The agitation for Gorkhaland, in 1986 also had a very deep impact on the region in every aspect, be it political, economic, social or individual. However, the mainstream media just presented only a superficial report regarding the episode. As a result, an in-depth analysis regarding the agitation went unaccounted for. The death toll, the losses incurred, the after effects especially social and psychological also went unnoticed. Even during times of natural calamities there weren't any report regarding them on national media. Only the local media reported them. Even when there was coverage of natural calamities in the area on national media, the focus was the tourists who were stranded and their wellbeing, while the people residing in the area, who too were facing the same problems, were left out.

The problem of scarcity of water has been an issue that has plagued the region since a long time. But no effort has been made to highlight and bring to the notice of the relevant agencies or departments of the government by the media. The lack of basic amenities such as a proper hospital with facilities for CT scan and MRI machines has troubled Darjeeling for long. The lives and houses lost during the innumerable landslides every year also go unnoticed. There is no proper maintenance of existing infrastructure mostly because the plea for proper maintenance to the concerned authorities and the government goes unanswered hence basic civic amenities in Darjeeling have deteriorated and the region remains chronically underdeveloped. Although the media will not be able to solve all of the mentioned problems but it would be of great help if they were highlighted in proper light.

Since time immemorial the hills have had very less media coverage especially when it comes to reaching out to the people living beyond the region. Darjeeling used to have one outsourced correspondent be it the vernacular dailies or the English dailies. The hills now have a multitude of journalists representing a number of Local dailies published both from Sikkim and Siliguri. The hills still have very few journalists representing English dailies published from Calcutta, and often their stories do not go beyond the editing desk. The unscrupulous approach of mainstream media, whether it be from Calcutta or New Delhi, is unwarranted. The news or stories, even if seen or heard on television would either be that of Darjeeling Himalayan Railway, the Darjeeling tea or the bigger one Gorkhland, whereas the core issues remain uncovered.

The region has suffered much due to negligence and apathy, that to catch up with the other parts of India seems more or less unachievable. However, it must be noted here that to subscribe to the more popular and very convenient view that our region has remained backward simply because the government neglected it is also very much false and unacceptable. Yes, there was negligence on a large scale from the government regarding the region, and, still does not bother much about it except during the "election season", but the isolation of Darjeeling also has much more to do with failure of leadership and the lack of initiative on the part of its own people. For years, a section of the leadership and the educated elite from the region have become willing partners with the 'exploiter' class from the government and mainland India, a process that began not today but decades ago.

The regional print media like Himalya Darpan and the local TV channel like Hamro Darjeeling are of course a lot more engaged with Darjeeling news than the national media. But news reports in the regional media rarely have the power to influence policy or impact changes at the level of the central government in Delhi or even at the level of state government. Regional newspapers come under a lot of pressure from political parties and local goons to carry their press releases verbatim. Small newspapers do it for survival. If they don't, their reporters are attacked. The government also tries to put pressure on the regional media.

Between the lack of interest of the national media and the lack of objectivity – or at times the powerlessness – of the regional media, reporting from the region has become insignificant or flawed. Could new media help to break the silence? Representatives of the mainstream media argue that the remoteness of the region makes it difficult for them to get access to it. This argument hides the fact that the media suffer from self-imposed restrictions and rarely invest money in travel and equipment which are essential to get access to remote regions and report from there. Hence, emerges the notion of alternative media as a space for localized content, participation and involvement of the community. In recent years there has also been a considerable shift in the philosophy of development professionals and development institutions from an extreme emphasis on market driven economic growth and technology transfer to a more people-centred communication. In this standpoint voices that are suppressed and powerlessness have been recognized as key dimensions of underdevelopment while democracy, equity and civil rights are seen as not only fundamentally desirable but as directly contributing to the realization of human security, well-being and opportunity.