

Role of Print Media in the Construction of a Political Image of Mamata Banerjee: A Content Analysis of News Coverage in The Telegraph Newspaper

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Received: January 27, 2019

Accepted: March 11, 2019

ABSTRACT: *The purpose of this study is to examine how The Telegraph has portrayed Mamata Banerjee, the Chief Minister of West Bengal and the national President of the All India Trinamool Congress and look into how this has led to the creation of a certain political image. Media coverage has a strong influence on the readers. It may be favorable, or against the politician. In this case study, the researcher has attempted to examine how The Telegraph, which has the largest circulation in West Bengal has covered Mamata Banerjee. Using Content analysis as a method, the researcher has attempted to analyse the coverage of three incidents during her tenure as Chief Minister, namely the Singur agitation, the Gorkhaland unrest and the Rohingya Muslim crisis. The research also aims to examine the role the newspaper plays to construct her political image. The researcher will aim to analyse the content through the lens of the agenda setting theory. The larger research question which the researcher aims to find an answer to is what kind of agenda is being set by The Telegraph. The research will aim to provide an insight on the agenda which the newspaper wants to project on the readers.*

Key Words: : Media representation, political identity, Mamata Banerjee, Singur, Rohingya, Gorkhaland

1. Introduction:

Mamata Banerjee, the chief minister of the state of West Bengal, is a veteran of Indian politics. Banerjee is the personification of a fundamental change that is transforming Indian politics: the declining vote share of the country's two main political parties and the rising influence of regional parties. ("Mamata Banerjee's TMC records resounding victory in West Bengal panchayat polls," n.d.)

To the common man, she appears as a strong, independent woman, without a political background, cutting a simple figure in the crowd. She is always seen in simple, plain saris and her hobbies include painting and poetry. ("Know all about Mamata Banerjee, the Iron Lady of Bengal," 2016)

She is called "Didi" lovingly, by her admirers and she wrested power last May from a Communist government that had ruled the state of West Bengal for 34 years. But she has been no better for business and investment than her predecessors were, to the dis-appointment of those who had hoped that the vanquishing of the communists from their biggest foothold in the country would help revitalize eastern India. On the national stage, she holds just 6.34% of the majority in the 543-seat Parliament ("Members : Lok Sabha," n.d.) but wields immense influence.

Banerjee had drifted away from the Indian National Congress party and floated her own political party - the All India Trinamool Congress. The primary reason for this separation was that she perceived the Congress to be a subordinate to the Leftist government in West Bengal. ("TC: From Congress breakaway to Bengal's main party - Rediff.com India News," 2011) A supporter of the grassroot level population, she has been embroiled in many standoffs with the Left government.

She remains popular among the poor, but her populist decisions and growing intolerance of dissent have alienated many middle-class Bengalis who had welcomed her victory a year ago.

While in the opposition, Banerjee fiercely defended farmers' rights against clumsy attempts by industry and government to seize their land to make way for factories — forcing Tata Motors to abandon plans in 2008 to set up a car factory. But in government, her failure to design a workable alternative land-acquisition policy has become a barrier to the investment that the impoverished and crowded state desperately needs, business leaders say.

A piece of land given by the West Bengal government to the ABP Group in Kolkata. According to a report published by the *Millennium Post*, ("Why is Aveek Sarkar so desperate to discredit Mamata Banerjee?," n.d.) Mamata had blocked the ABP Group's attempt to use the plot given on lease solely for media-related activities for real estate development.

The Kolkata Municipal Corporation had given the 3.26 acre land on lease for media activities for a paltry sum of Rs 3 crores. The report claims, Aveek Sarkar was pressurising Mamata to amend the lease agreement thereby allowing his company to exploit the prime plot commercially.

The report had also published a letter dated January 15, 2014 written by ABP Group to Mamata seeking a change in the lease agreement. Following which, the Kolkata Municipal Corporation cancelled the lease in July 2014. Which meant, the KMC could technically take possession of the said land back from ABP.

However, ABP moved court and got a stay order. If the TMC returns to power, it could mean immediate repossession of the land in question, the projected value of which is said to be Rs 500 crore, claims the report.

Another reason for the break in relations could be Aveek Sarkar's long-standing demand to modify the Land Ceiling Act in Bengal, a demand that has often met with cold response from Mamata. (Kundu, 2016)

This research paper attempts to study her rise to power and how The Telegraph reported her, which eventually gave her a unique political identity.

2. Research Objectives and Research Questions:

2.1 Research Objectives:

- To examine how the largest selling daily of West Bengal, The Telegraph, has covered Mamata Banerjee in its reporting.
- To determine how a political identity has been created due to this portrayal.

2.2 Research Questions:

- Is there a relationship between print journalism and political identity?
- What is the agenda trying to be set as a result of this coverage?

3. Review of Literature:

In “Who Owns the Media? by Simeon Djankov, CaraleeMcIlesh, Tatiana Nenova, Andrei Shleifer, the concept of media ownership is explained through government ownership of the media, perhaps even as a monopoly, is then desirable for three reasons. First, information is a public good—once it is supplied to some consumers, it is costly to keep it away from others, even if they have not paid for it. Second, the provision, as well as dissemination, of information is subject to strong increasing returns: there are significant fixed costs of organizing information gathering and distribution facilities, but once these costs are incurred, the marginal costs of making the information available are relatively low. Third, if consumers are ignorant, and especially if private media outlets serve the governing classes, then state media ownership can expose the public to less biased, more complete, and more accurate information than it could obtain with private ownership. The various types of media ownership are also discussed and some of them are Chain Ownership, which means the same media company owns numerous outlets in a single medium, a chain of newspaper, a series of radio stations, a string of television stations or several book publishing companies. Chain ownership in India applies mostly to newspapers. Examples- Times of India, Hindustan Times, Indian Express, Statesman, AnandabazarPatrika, Hindu, Telegraph and living media foundations. Cross Media Ownership is when the same company owns several along with newspaper, magazines, musical labels, and publishers and so on. cross-media ownership across the various carriers such as television, radio or print; consolidation, including vertical integration among media operations of content. Conglomerate Ownership means the ownership of several business one of which a media business. For example when a publishing company owns a newspaper along with chemical, fertilizer, cement rubber or plastics factories, or a liquor brewery or distillery or a major corporation has controlling shares in a number of media related business, the pattern is conglomerate. Vertical Integration indicates that a media company monopolizes the production of the ingredients that go into the making of media products. For example a newspaper publisher may own several hundred areas of forests where the major components of a newspaper namely wood for newsprints cultivated. Some other newspaper company may own a factory that produces the bulk of the printing ink or processed used in the industry. Certain film companies may own studios or industrial units producing film stocks or even a chain of theatres where the films are exhibited. (Djankov, McIlesh, Nenova, & Shleifer, 2001)

In order to understand the identity creation in a thorough manner, the researcher looked up newspaper articles on other prominent politicians, like Indira Gandhi and attempted to examine the way the media had created a certain agenda by reporting about her.

Ramachandra Guha, in his article titled “1970's: India is Indira Gandhi and Indira Gandhi is India,” has referred to her as a “messiah of the masses.” (Guha, n.d.)

The article by Economic Times titled “The Wonder that was Indira” has compared Gandhi to Goddess Durga “who broke Pakistan into two.” She has been given the attributes of being socialist and secularist. (Arun, 2017)

Saima Saeed, in her book “Screening the public sphere : media and democracy in India” explains the concept of Habermas’ Public Sphere and gives credence to this notion of the media- supports the expectation that the mass media should facilitate pluralist debate and the free formation of public opinion.

Therefore, a liberal pluralist theory of the media will support a free and independent press, which operates in the role of the public watchdog, while also playing the consumer representation role. With the media operating in the marketplace, it is assumed to thereby reflect popular concerns and finally performing an informational role.

This amplifies the media’s role in a democratic setting. In a developing economy such as India, the media’s role becomes central to the proper functioning of the system. For India, democracy may depend on a media that will attempt to bridge the intellectual, political and economic gap created by differences in caste, creed and other such practices. (“SAGE Journals: Your gateway to world-class journal research,” n.d.)

Dana Griffin says that the message is a bullet, fired from the ‘media gun’ into the reader’s head. In this model, the audience is passive. readers are sitting ducks with no chance to avoid or resist the impact of the message. Mass media, in this view, is dangerous because people believe the message since there is no other source of information. The theory claims, passes into the readers’ consciousness as a mass or single entity, without regard for individual opinions, experiences or intelligence. In this theory, the creators of mass media strictly manipulate the readers as a single unit and the media-makers find it easy to direct reader’s thoughts and actions. Magic bullet theory assumes that the reader is singular and passive. (“What is the Magic Bullet Theory of Mass Media?,” n.d.)

4. Methodology:

The researcher has used the qualitative research form of content analysis and the Agenda Setting theory to examine how The Telegraph has portrayed Mamata Banerjee.

Agenda setting essentially means creation of opinions or content which the public deems as important. Through this theory, media creates content which is driven down to the readers as being “important.” This is a very powerful theory to influence the readers and create a popular public opinion.

The researcher has taken three important events in consideration to document the political career of Mamata Banerjee- namely the Singur case (May 18th, 2006 to May 20th, 2011); the Gorkhaland case (May 16th, 2017 to September 27th, 2017) and the Rohingya crisis (August 25th 2017 to October 2017.)

The researcher has taken the method of content analysis to conduct the research because the method involves critical analysis of the various articles that The Telegraph published. Content analysis is a research tool used to determine the presence of certain words or concepts within texts or sets of texts. Researchers quantify and analyze the presence, meanings and relationships of such words and concepts, then make inferences about the messages within the texts, the writer(s), the audience, and even the culture and time of which these are a part. Texts can be defined broadly as books, book chapters, essays, interviews, discussions, newspaper headlines and articles, historical documents, speeches, conversations, advertising, theater, informal conversation, or really any occurrence of communicative language. (“[No title],” n.d.) The time frame chosen pertains to three important incidents during her tenure, namely the Singur agitation, the Gorkhaland movement and the Rohingya Muslim crisis.

The researcher has critically analysed certain editions of The Telegraph in an attempt to analyse the creation of an political identity of Mamata Banerjee.

5. Analysis:

5.1 SINGUR

The Singur issue has marked an important milestone in the career of Mamata Banerjee. The incident happened at a time when the citizens of West Bengal were tired of the Leftist rule.

The Trinamool Congress, led by Mamata Banerjee had played the pivotal role in this entire matter. She was the strongest voice against the lack of industrialization here. One of her MPs had even gone to the extent of commenting that Bengal would prosper only if the Tatas built a factory in the state. Perhaps it was the fear of being left out of this industrialization process being carried out that time by the CPI(M) that led to the party vehemently opposing the move.

Trinamool Congress has always been a benefactor of support from the minorities of West Bengal. After the defeat in the 2006 polls, Mamata had come up with a new campaign- “Maa, Maati, Maanush” which essentially gave off the idea that the party had taken upon itself to protect the rural peasant

classes.(DHRUBA, (Andy), Dutta, &Tathgat, n.d.) This was affected when the urban classes came into the fray. They began to get the scenario that the government was paying too meagre an amount to the peasants on whose land the factory was going to be built. This posed as a threat to the peasants and farmers who would lose their livelihood with the loss of their farming land.

What was the interesting hook in this matter was the way Mamata went about the protests. She began to use revolutionary poems and slogans and started driving home the point that the CPI(M) was becoming very anti-farmer and that TMC would do its level best to save their land. ("The Telegraph - Calcutta : Opinion," n.d.)

It aimed to prove that the ministers of the time were authoritarian and Mamata was their true messiah and saviour. This had led to a lot of emotional outbursts from prominent figures of Art and literature openly speaking against the anti-farmer policy of the Left government.

This had led to a huge jump of popularity of the TMC in Bengal, as the state elections were due next year. Mamata, through her protests had managed to create an anti-farmer image of the Left which left many people agitated and rendered the Left helpless, come the 2009 elections.

How Mamata portrayed the events was like almost the roles were reversed and the Left had become capitalist and Mamata had become one with the Communist ideology.

Interestingly, the Congress had also joined the protest bandwagon, just to hold relevance in the state. The Singur controversy was an interesting melee of regional politics and makes for an engaging case study.

5.2 GORKHALAND

Gorkhaland consists of Nepali-speaking people of Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Kurseong and other hilly districts of West-Bengal. The people belonging to these areas have ethical, cultural and language differences with the Bengali community of West-Bengal. The demand of Darjeeling as a separate administrative region dates back to 1907. But, the term "Gorkhaland" was coined recently, in the 1980s, by Subhash Ghising, the founder of Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF). The Gorkhaland Movement is a movement mainly focused in the Darjeeling Hills of West Bengal, which demands the creation of a separate state of Gorkhaland. The area covers Duars and Terai region of West Bengal. It is famous for its tea and beauty, which are the main sources of its income.

It may create a stable and responsible government in Darjeeling. It will end one of the longest movement for the creation of a separate state in India. The rise of agitation with the rise of new outfits shows that politics plays the vital role. The division would be an extreme measure for a problem that can be resolved by political consensus like done in 1988 and 2011.

Having caused a total shutdown of Darjeeling for close to four months, the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha has done more bad than good for its cause. (Desk, 2017) Mamata Banerjee has not budged an inch on her stance for a separate state. The GJM has been caught up in some serious political lobbying, with them attending meetings with the Central home ministry or the Chief Minister of West Bengal. They go with the expectation of a free state but run into hurdles every time.

Recently, Mamata Banerjee had proposed a three-language policy in Darjeeling, which would make it mandatory for students to learn Bengali in school. The GJM had vehemently opposed this proposal and Bimal Gurung, the President of the GJM called an indefinite bandh in the town of Darjeeling.

It was very surprising of Mamata to play the language card here in the Hills, where she wants to develop a stronghold. This policy of enforcing Bengali on the students comes across as very surprising and disturbing. One can only think of one possible reason for this move- the Chief Minister wants the entire state to be united under one language. That is why she took these steps.

5.3 ROHINGYAS

In the most recent display of solidarity, West Bengal Chief minister Mamata Banerjee denied to brand the 40,000-odd Rohingyas taking shield in India as "militants", veering off from the stand taken by the Narendra Modi government, which submitted a testimony in the Supreme Court on Monday portraying Rohingya Muslims escaping the atrocity in Myanmar as a potential security risk and connecting numerous Rohingyas with terror associations like IS.

Banerjee on Monday looked for to make a distinction between Rohingya refugees and those having terror links. The CM said that the government should take steps against those who have terror links. But the offenses can't be generalised, according to her.

"There might be some terrorists in the community, who should be considered terrorists, but they mustn't be confused with commoners." Banerjee said. ("All refugees not terrorists: CM," n.d.)

There has been a strong policy of appeasement on Banerjee's part and she is striving to do everything to make the marginalised Muslim community happy.(Mazumdar, n.d.) This has left many Hindus fuming, as they raise the questions that why is the CM mum when the same treatment is being given to Hindus in Bangladesh.

Mamata's bid to please the Muslims has pitted her against the Modi government, where she went against the government's stance of saying that the Rohingya community was linked to organisations like the ISIS. ("Mamata Banerjee expresses concern over plight of Rohingya Muslims, says 'all commoners not terrorists' - Firstpost," 2017)

This show of support towards the Rohingya Muslims comes at a crucial time for her, just ahead of the 2021 elections in West Bengal. She is aiming for a third term as the Chief Minister of Bengal and all these factors will go a long way to ensure a victory for her party.

The Telegraph, West Bengal's largest selling daily, has taken a strong stand against Mamata Banerjee. Aweek Sarkar, the ex-Editor in Chief of The Telegraph, has been very vocal about his difference in opinion with Mamata Banerjee and this has led to negative coverage. He is known to have pro-BJP leanings.(Chattopadhyay, 2015)

In 2015, Derek O'Brien, the Spokesperson of Trinamool Congress had posted a tweet, criticising Aweek Sarkar, in which he accused the media mogul of "appalling, tendentious, biased and polemical reportage and commentary that seeks to sensationalise and misrepresent even the most basic facts and occurrences." Mamata Banerjee went on to villainise Sarkar. ("Will Aweek Sarkar's exit from ABP assuage Mamata Banerjee? - Firstpost," 2016)

She has publicly criticised ABP at public events, calling it the "most destructive element in Bengal". (Daniyal, 2016) While the Trinamool National Congress had been attacking the ABP group in public, the intensity of the attack from a person no less than the chief minister was notable. During one such speech, Mamata made a bewildering array of allegations: she accused ABP and its editor-in-chief Aweek Sarkar of leading to the CPI(M)'s downfall, supporting the Bharatiya Janata Party, propping up the current CPI(M)-Congress alliance and generally "spreading slander against Bengal".

The Telegraph has also reported against Banerjee in a very negative way. One editorial carried the following lines- "Mamata Banerjee's brief reign has been remarkable so far... for deepening the gloom over Bengal...The results indicate a near-decimation of her political opponents... How she managed this in spite of such a dismal record in governance may be explained as much by her political style as by the weaknesses of her opponents...the TMC's victories in most places across the state were never in doubt. Yet, (there were) numerous complaints about violence and the rigging of the polls...blatantly partisan administration aided and abetted her, just as the case was during the days of the Left's rule." ("Mamata triumphs, Telegraph carps," n.d.

6. Conclusion

The Telegraph has always maintained a very strong anti-Mamata stand. This is apparent through the content analysis carried out by the researcher. The main reason for this negative coverage is because of the land tiff between the Trinamool Congress and Ananda Bazaar Patrika group. The Telegraph has been very vocal about its stand against the Chief Minister. The clear agenda of Mamata Banerjee being a political villain and being an adversary of growth and development in West Bengal is being presented to the readers through this type of negative reporting. Ever since Avik Sarkar, the ex-editor of The Telegraph got denied land for his academic venture, the newspaper has started adopting a negative stance towards the Chief Minister. Therefore, a distinct political image has indeed been created for Mamata Banerjee by The Telegraph.

7. Limitations

Due to paucity of time, the researcher could analyse the content of only one daily newspaper. Similarly, the researcher could only focus on the aspect of agenda setting in the media and was not able to examine the other effects of print media on the readers. Multi-method analysis could not be carried out. Neither could an expert interview be taken, due to the controversial nature of the study.

8. Scope of Research

Further scope of research includes exploration of media ownership, understanding newspaper ideology and using multi-method analysis methods to draw a larger conclusion, in order to link media ownership and creation of a political identity of politicians.

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