

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT AND THE ROLE OF PRESS: AN ANALYSIS OF NEWSPAPER COVERAGES OF 1993 WEST BENGAL PANCHAYAT ELECTIONS

Jhumur Ghosh

Assistant Professor
Future Institute of Engineering and Management
Sonarpur Station Road, Kolkata 700150, West Bengal, India
Website: <http://www.teamfuture.in>
Email: jhumurghosh@rediffmail.com

Abstract: *The issue of political empowerment of women has been a burning issue in the country since 1970s. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts were adopted to realize the objective of political empowerment of the rural and urban grassroots. West Bengal which had already established itself as a model panchayati raj state took no time to implement the 73rd Amendment Act with the provision for 33% seat reservation in all the three tiers of the panchayati raj.*

This paper explores the ground reality in the aftermath of the implementation of the 73rd Amendment Act during the 1993 panchayat election in the state through the newspaper content on the issue in a selection of the most widely circulated newspapers. The paper explores the response of the women candidates, nominated in the reserve seats, the reaction of the other panchayat members and that of the political parties reflected through the news reports during the period. The paper also investigates the role played by a mass media (newspapers) with respect to women empowerment.

Key Words: *Women Empowerment, Participation in elections, Reservation of seats for women, Mainstream newspaper content, role of mass media*

Introduction

The political history of women in India has been unique, from equal status with men in the ancient times, to denigration in the medieval times to being the subject of social reformation during the colonial rule. Post independence there much was hope for change in the status of women with the support of the constitution which emphasized equal rights and opportunities. The principle of gender equality is enshrined in the Indian Constitution - in its Preamble, Fundamental Rights, Fundamental Duties and Directive Principles of State Policy. The Constitution not only guarantees equality to women, but also empowers the State to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favor of women to bring forth the equality long deprived. But successive governments did not use the power conferred on them by the constitutional makers for the uplift of women and their fate and their participation in development remained largely elusive. The policy-makers were satisfied with the declaration of various welfare schemes for women and did not realize that their non-inclusion in the policy-making process impaired the implementation of the schemes chalked out for their benefit. It was only during the Fifth Five Year Plan (1974-78), that there was a marked shift in the country's approach to women's

issues from welfare to development, and the issue of empowerment of women became central for elevating their status in the society. The active participation of women in the processes of local governance became essential for the successful implementation of development plans at the grassroots level. The makers of Panchayati Raj (the system of local governance in the rural areas) had stressed the need for rural women to become not only a beneficiary of development, but more importantly contributors to it (P. Manikymba, 1989). But the ground reality leading to the realization of the above idea was quite the opposite because of the biased social structure in the country. The only way left to ensure the participation of women in the local political process and promote their empowerment was through reservation.

The 73rd and 74th Amendments of the Indian Constitution in 1993 provided for reservation of seats for women in the Panchayats (rural areas) and Municipalities (urban areas) respectively, laying a strong foundation for their participation in decision-making at the local level. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment created opportunities for political participation of women at the grass roots level. The Act provided reservations for women in PRI set-ups in two ways - for the office of the panchayat and for that of the chairpersons of various panchayat bodies. As per clause (2) and (3) of Article 243(d), not less than one third of the seats meant for direct election of members at each tier of the Panchayats were to be reserved for women.

Considering the role of panchayats in rural India, successive governments adopted several measures to strengthen the Panchayati Raj system. The reservation of seats for women to ensure their active participation in PRIs was a step in that direction. The implementation of the 73rd Amendment Act gave a boost to women participation in terms of increase in the number of women elected to the 3 tier panchayat system. Bhargava and others (1996) stated that it was to improve women's representation that the policy of reservation was introduced. According to them, reserving seats for women in the political institutions provided them with an opportunity to raise their grievances and other related social and economic problems in a formal forum, a process necessary to ensure improvement in the status of women. Usha Naryan (1996) asserted that reservation provisions for women were a guarantee for their empowerment.

It was certain that the provision of reserving seats for the 'fairer sex' to ensure their representation in the panchayat institutions increased the percentages of women at various political levels considerably. But the lot of the women folk did not improve significantly in the initial years after the amendment was implemented by different state governments as the process of representation did not evolve into a process of empowerment. There were several factors in the social order that delayed, if not, deterred the political empowerment of the womenfolk. Women were still under-represented in decision making positions and as the social fabric of the panchayat areas did not change much they were confined in their roles as voters and candidates and did not get or were not allowed to get actively involved in the political or administrative process. Women were still looked down upon and lacked leadership potential due to dearth of political consciousness and public exposure to political affairs. Snehalata Panda (1996) in her study of village panchayats in Orissa found that women entered into politics due to mandatory provision of reservation. Most of the women were from non-political background and entered into politics either due to persuasion by their family members or pressure from the village community. Devaki Jain (1996) found that most of the women elected were illiterate and majority of them declared themselves as homemakers. O.P Bohra (1997) in his case study of a Tamilnadu panchayat observed that even though the women electorate constituted half of the vote bank, local election candidates including female candidates were hardly interested in campaigning to seek the women's support. K.Jayalakshmi (1997) based on the field study conducted in the Nalgonda district of Andhra Pradesh found that reservation merely brought quantitative change in the gender participation rather than ushering qualitative developmental efforts.

Overview of the Panchayat System and Panchayat Elections in West Bengal Before 1993

The panchayati raj was well entrenched in the state of West Bengal in 1993 when the fourth panchayat election was held. The most 'significant event' of that year's panchayat election was the nature of contest and difference in participation and perception after the introduction of 33% reservation in all the three tiers of the panchayat for women candidates. The Left Front coalition came to power in the state in 1977 with the promise of agrarian and political reform. The most significant political reform undertaken by it was the adoption of the three-tiered panchayat system with the gram

panchayat at the lowest level, the panchayat samiti at the middle level and the zilla parishad at the highest level. The first election to the three tier system of local governance was held in the state in 1978. Thereafter the state witnessed regular elections to the panchayat bodies every five years, a phenomenon highly appreciated by political observers and the electorate as the picture in most other Indian states was quite the opposite.

West Bengal was also among the first few states in India to include political parties in the electoral contests for the panchayat seats. The Asoka Mehta Committee's recommendation (1978) was adopted by the Left Front as it felt it was not possible to achieve grassroots participation in the local political process without the political parties who were integral to the representative democracy in the country. After the first five years of panchayat administration in the state several lapses and errors came to the forefront. There were charges of rampant corruption in the panchayat bodies especially at the lowest level (in the gram panchayats), charges of discrimination by the dominant political party [the CPI (M)] in favor of its supporters and against opposition members while distributing the benefits of the panchayati rule. The violence associated with the electoral process during the panchayat elections of 1983 and 1988 overshadowed the participation of the grassroots. The involvement of the panchayats in the distribution of the surplus land or the work initiated by them under the several schemes for rural development and their recognition as the third rung of the government machinery which cemented their place in the political and administrative hierarchy were appreciable. The Left Front government which initiated the panchayati raj administration through elected representatives was lauded for establishing local governance in the rural areas. But the general trend of participation in the panchayat election and thereafter in the panchayat administration followed a pattern which was common to representative democracies in developing societies. The representation of the marginal sections of the society, the women, and the socially oppressed remained much to be desired. The political parties in Bengal, including the CPI (M) which dominated the panchayats gave representation to the economically backward and traditionally overlooked villagers but were indifferent to the socially deprived. It was an effect of the unresponsive attitude and approach of political institutions in the country to the plight of the underprivileged. There was no reprieve from the vested interests of the pre-panchayat era. The constituents of 'vested interests' only changed from the landed elite, money-lenders and affluent traders to the new local leadership especially of the ruling party who had power to influence the decisions of the panchayats and the fate of the community members. The common people participated in the panchayat elections and some of them were also part of the panchayat administration but their role in their own development was limited and controlled by the political parties and their prominent leaders which stifled the independent decisions and political growth of the panchayats. The panchayat members were mere pawns in the hands of the political parties and their leaders who were reluctant to let go the power over voters in the rural areas and the purse strings. The panchayats was the source of grassroots political power but unfortunately the powers of the panchayats was usurped by the political parties and their representatives and the grassroots were denied the exercise of political power which cast a shadow on grassroots empowerment. The panchayat election became crucial to the political parties to establish their supremacy in the rural areas. The representation of women in the panchayats remained almost out of consideration for the political parties engrossed in power play.

The Constitutional Amendment Act in 1993 to ensure the participation of women in the panchayats was therefore essential to induce their participation in local governance. The West Bengal Panchayat Act, 1973 was modified to reserve one-third of the councilor positions for women and seat share equal to their population for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. The forced representation through reservation proved beneficial as the proportion of women elected to Panchayat councils increased to 36% after the 1993 election (Chattopadhyay and Duflo, 2003). The experience was considered a disappointment, however, because very few women (only 196 out of 3,324 gram panchayats) advanced to the position of Pradhan, which is the position that yields effective power (Kanungo, 1998). The Panchayat Act of West Bengal was again modified in 1998 to introduce reservation in Pradhan positions for women and SC/STs.

The effect on women participation after reservation of seats in West Bengal has been undertaken by several previous studies including that by Raghavendra Chattopadhyay and Esther Duflo (November, 2003) referred to in the preceding paragraph. This paper specifically deals with the newspaper coverage of the West Bengal panchayat election in 1993 when the constitutional amendment ensuring 33% reservation for women was introduced in the state. The reflection in the dominant mass media of the time of the most significant event of the panchayat election of that year is explored in this paper to study the responses of a mass media, another powerful social institution and to find out the responses of the political parties, panchayat election candidates and voters to the new and crucial development. All relevant contents in

four widely circulated newspapers are considered for the analysis of the press' coverage on the subject. The newspapers are Ananda Bazaar Patrika and Aajkal (Bengali dailies), Statesman and Telegraph (English dailies). The sample period ranges from three weeks before the election to one week after it when the coverage on election related matters would be the most.

While there is no doubt that the government's intention was noble and aimed at ensuring the representation of one half of the rural electorate, the actual job was not easy. The position of women in the rural areas was not happy. There were not many women involved in politics at the village level in 1993(13th May, 1993 issue of Ananda Bazaar Patrika). Politics was traditionally considered a male bastion and women rarely had entry into it even in the urban areas where education and awareness were much advanced. With lesser education and awareness the women in the villages found it was not easy for them to participate in the panchayat proceedings. Moreover the panchayats were the seat of rural power and the men were reluctant to step down in favor of women candidates. The reports in the newspapers reflected this picture. The women were hesitant entrants to the political field, leaving the men in their family and their party with the campaigning. It was feared that the male members would take decisions on their behalf in the panchayat bodies later on. In some occasions women were compelled to file nomination against their wishes and interest to facilitate the men in the family. In both cases they were mere pawns, powerless entities who participated in the election process but wherever decision-making was involved they were compelled to fall back on their party supporters or family members as they were ignorant and overshadowed by the men who were averse to relinquish power.

It is pertinent to ask if the reservation of seats was the right step towards empowerment of women. If one considers the fact that many candidates faced a similar predicament when the panchayat election was held for the first time in 1978 and later on these same representatives became adept and proficient in handling panchayat matters then it can be safely presumed that the women candidates would with time and experience also develop the same skill and expertise. There has to be a beginning and it was correctly assessed by the administration that half the rural population was mostly unrepresented in the gram panchayats – the citadel of rural political power, and the only way to rectify the anomaly was to reserve seats to bring equity in the social and political ambit.

Sample Newspaper Content on Women Participation Post Reservation of Seats

The 11th May issue of Ananda Bazaar Patrika published a report that depicted the status of women gram panchayat candidates in the state. The report stated there was excitement among the rural voters at the new development and a real interest to see whether the objective of the administration to bring parity between men and women in the panchayat bodies was successful. The report observed politics has been a male domain and the lack of education and awareness in rural areas made it all the more a male prerogative there. The report stated the relegation of women in the political arena and their general neglect in the society was prominent. The administration hoped that the reservation of seats would obliterate the difference and give prominence to the women but the report remarked there was apprehension about actual change. The report pointed out after several centuries of subjugation it was difficult to convince women in the rural society to leap into the political fray and take decisions for an entire village when they had no right to take decisions in their own homes. The report informed that dearth of women candidates led to the selection of an 18 year old as a candidate for CPI, a constituent of the ruling Left Front while a CPI (M) woman candidate was elected without contest as her opponent, a Congress candidate, withdrew her name as she was shy and afraid to come under public scrutiny after years of remaining in the house and because her party workers refused to campaign in her favor. The CPI candidate confessed she was reluctantly fighting the election and her father was overlooking her political campaign. The report also informed that the CPI (M) candidate elected uncontested was a daily wage-earner and was peeved that she was not assigned 'bargadar' rights like the men. The report said she vowed to fight for equal rights for women as a gram panchayat member. The report gave insight into the background of women candidates in the fray and portrayed their helpless condition with regard to inequality in their social standing, non-cooperation of the male members in the party and in the community and their uneasiness about public appearance after a prolonged stretch within the four pillars of the house.

There was a second report in the Ananda Bazaar on the same day (11th May, 1993) that categorically pointed out women candidates were mere pawns in the hands of political parties or male family members. This report informed a CPI (M) woman candidate in Howrah admitted that she was ignorant and had no political opinion. She consulted her nephew in case of any query or before making a statement during the electoral campaign. The report remarked such a candidate would just be a puppet in the hands of other people and even after she was elected the situation would not change much and the purpose of reserving seats for women (i.e. empowerment) would be defeated. The report underlined the purpose of seat reservation as not only increase of women representation in the panchayats but involving them in its decisions. The sample clearly points out the futility of the well-intentioned political legislation without adequate social rehabilitation.

The Aajkal reported on the participation of women in the panchayat election on the 11th May. The report stated that the participation of women in the election process would be an exemplary case of involvement of the fairer sex in the democratic process. It gave details of the total number of women candidates in contention at the different tiers of the panchayat system which made it clear that if nothing else the numerical strength of women panchayat representatives were bound to be more than those of the previous years.

The Telegraph on the 11th May reported that the CPI (M), Congress and the BJP, the three main contenders in the 1993 West Bengal panchayat polls were searching for suitable slogans to woo the female voters who would make or mar their electoral prospects. The report informed all three parties claimed that they were instrumental in reserving 33% seats for women candidates in the panchayat election. The report informed the major political parties – the CPI (M) and the Congress have nominated about 25000 women candidates in the reserved seats. The report stated that the Congress leadership claimed that like the concept of panchayati raj itself, the provision for having enough women representatives in the panchayat bodies was Congress' brainchild. The secretary of the CPI (M)'s women section was quoted in the report that Congress was forced to nominate women candidates in the seats reserved for them but the nomination was not free from class prejudice. She alleged most of the Congress women nominees belong to the privileged class while those of the CPI (M) belonged to the downtrodden sections of the society.

The Ananda Bazaar reported on the 12th May that in Kultikari block, in West Midnapore the CPI (M) has nominated women in all 11 gram panchayat seats. The report stated if all the nominees win it would be history as it would be an all woman panchayat. This report commented that the 1/3rd seat reservation for women have jolted the social fabric in rural Bengal. The report further informed, of the 11 candidates only one was from lower middle class; others were all daily wage-earners. It added that of the 11 two were newly literates while the others were involved in literacy programs. The report concluded that the CPI (M) workers were actively involved in the campaigning for these candidates. This news item reflected an optimistic picture of women participation in the panchayat election.

The Ananda Bazaar on the 13th May gave yet another example of the distraught condition of women who were nominated by the various political parties as candidates. It gave details of contest between two sister-in-laws on the tickets of CPI (M) and BJP respectively. They were personally on good terms and stood in the election for the sake of their husbands. The party members were campaigning on their behalf. They hoped that if elected their respect would increase manifold if not in the village community but in their families. It was a revelation that women candidates expected that their win in the gram panchayat would elevate their status in the village society and in their families.

The Aajkal in a report on the 13th May revealed that though there were apprehensions about the availability of women candidates for the reserved seats, after the filing of nomination it was clear that adequate number of women candidates were up against each other which was at least a positive outcome of the reservation process as it successfully drew out the female folk outside their homes.

A Statesman report on the 14th May pointed out the ineffectiveness of reserving panchayat seats for women as the men have vacated their seats in favor of women family members who could be easily coerced and the panchayats would be ruled by them on behalf of their women. The report further informed that a woman nominee in Jagaddal in Howrah

clearly indicated that she was not comfortable in politics and her brother (who was the erstwhile member) was supervising her campaigning. The brother, a Congress member, was quoted that the reservation of seats for women candidates was a ploy by the ruling party to defeat his party. The report asserted there were many erstwhile members who were reluctant to give up their power. The policy of reservation without adequate political consciousness and created misunderstanding and confusion and somewhat hampered the empowerment process.

The Ananda Bazaar on the 14th May opined that the reservation of 1/3rd of seats in the three tiers of the panchayat for women and reservation of seats for SC and ST according to their population would bring about a radical change in the panchayat bodies. The report said the reservation for the above categories has kept out almost 60% last time panchayat members. This implied new leadership especially women leaders would dominate the ensuing panchayats. The report observed that new leadership in the panchayats would give the traditional vested interests a body blow and would hopefully change the structure of rural society.

The Ananda Bazaar on the 15th May described the orientation and outlook of a woman candidate in Bagnan, Howrah. The CPI (M) candidate was happy that she would be able to address the issues of her neighbors after her election in the gram panchayat. She was aware of the problems faced by women in their families and in the society and hoped that she would be able to alleviate those problems as her voice would be heard as a gram panchayat member.

Another report in the Ananda Bazaar on the 15th May highlighted the opinion of CPI (M) leader and state minister Binoy Chowdhury that the inclusion of women and the Scheduled Castes and Tribes in the panchayats would reduce the inequalities and flaws in the existing system. Chowdhury assured the new members that the state government would provide guidance and training post their election. This initiative was laudable as the newly elected members would gain experience and much needed support from the state.

A report in the Statesman on the 16th May stated that the decision of the state government to reserve one-third of panchayat seats for women was unlikely to change the gender equation in rural politics. The report quoted a woman gram panchayat candidate in the Jalpaiguri district that she was confused at the sudden turn of events. She was aware she was about to enter a domain long considered to be a male preserve and confessed she has filed nomination out of compulsion (motivated by a male member of the party and her family) rather than interest. The report specified that the intention of the administration to bring gender equity in the power structure may not be successful under such circumstances. The report concluded each panchayat election was an opportunity for the political parties to strengthen their hegemony over the rural areas and the issues of participation of various sections of the society and their empowerment was not that important for them. The report indicated over-enthusiastic political parties downgraded constitutional provisions and rights.

A report in the Ananda Bazaar on the 18th May proved that reservation of seats was the only guarantee for the participation of women in the panchayats. The Forward Bloc, a constituent of the Left Front had urged all LF parties to nominate women candidates to the gram panchayat seats in Bagmundi block, Purulia. But the local male leaders were unwilling to give up their seats in favor of women candidates. The report informed local women took initiative in the development of their villages where the panchayats failed to perform but still there were obstacles to the nomination of women candidates in unreserved seats. This underlined the gender bias of the political leaders. The local leaders when confronted with this revelation cited two specific reasons for the preference towards male candidates – the women were not adept in running the panchayats and the bureaucrats would take advantage of their inexperience.

The Ananda Bazaar on the 19th May highlighted how the political parties were eager to rope in women who were involved in voluntary social service as candidates in reserved seats for the panchayat election. The report commented preference for these women was natural as they were conscious of their rights and had a voice in the rural society. The social organizations, on the other hand, were concerned with the weaning away of their volunteers by the political parties. They had prepared their volunteers after a long ordeal against the vested interests and the local political leaders for community service but panchayat representation would reduce their availability and acceptance.

A report in the Aajkal on the 19th May highlighted the statement of a woman zilla parishad candidate of Kuchlibari area in Coochbehar. The candidate representing Kamal Guha's FB, a breakaway outfit admitted that she did not understand politics and would tail the party's policies if she won. The candidate said her family and many others like it fled the Kuchlibari area after the handover of the Teenbigha corridor to Bangladesh, India's neighbor on the eastern side but returned soon after seeing normalcy prevail in the area. The report observed that Kamal Guha's party was propping up the 'Teenbigha' issue for political gains. The news item pointed out that this was the consequence of the lack of political consciousness among people like the woman candidate who could not comprehend the import of the Teenbigha issue and take up an appropriate stance or could not adopt an independent and neutral stand against the political party she represented. This problem is not confined to the woman nominee referred to in the news item. It was a problem faced by political nominees who could not shake off the influence of their parties.

The Aajkal reported on the 24th May that chief minister Jyoti Basu believed that women panchayat members would be successful in controlling the misuse of funds allocated for development of the panchayats. He was quoted that it was important to not only elect women members but increase their consciousness for better governance. The observation was not only appropriate but the only way out for ensuring active participation and actual empowerment of the women members.

The Telegraph on the 25th May depicted the moving tale of a woman candidate who was forced to participate in the panchayat election and gave up on her dream and passion. Ekdashi Mondal, the Congress candidate in Andharmanik gram panchayat in Bishnupur block, South 24 Parganas was a voluntary in Bengal Rural Welfare Service (BRWS) and had participated in many literacy and health campaigns as a dedicated social worker. She was widely respected and accepted in all the villages in the block. The report elaborated the Congress had occupied this gram panchayat last time and it was the only winning seat of the party in the whole block as all the adjoining villages were occupied by the CPI (M). The seat was reserved for women by the government's new directive in the 1993 panchayat election and the Congress, to retain control over it sought to encash on the popularity of Ekdashi. Her husband, her in-laws were Congress activists who forced her to file nomination for the gram panchayat. The report observed not only was she forced to desert her passion of pursuing voluntary service but she was a reluctant entrant in politics and the fact that she has no interest in the field would deter her from actively pursuing the activities of the panchayat. Moreover the control of her family over her was so overpowering that it would hamper independent decision-making. The much-respected Mondal now faced attacks of her political adversaries. The CPI (M) activists campaigned that her social work was a ploy to carve out a political base. They asserted that she would be prevented from carrying out social activities in future. The report concluded that even if Ekdashi wins the election it was a personal loss for her, a loss that was more heart-breaking than the victory wreath for the electoral win. This tale was the epitome of women candidates – used by family members and political parties for their interests ignoring their and their capabilities.

The Ananda Bazaar on the 25th May reported on the benefits of the reservation policy. The news revealed that the ruling party has nominated many new entrants (almost 75%) in the three tiers doing away with influential candidates and vested interests. The report commented reservation of seats has assisted the ruling party in shedding away individual-centric politics that has become the order of the day. The report concluded this would auger well for the panchayat system.

The Aajkal reported on the 26th May that the selection of women CPI (M) candidates in Nadia was done with the help of its women's organization in the district. The efforts to increase the political consciousness of the women by the ruling party were mentioned in the report.

The Statesman on the 30th May informed about the plight of the women candidates for the ensuing panchayat election. The report observed that for most women candidates the hearth and home were more important than politics. The report commented participation of so many women in an election contest was a milestone in Indian democracy but it was evident that this participation was restricted as the women were mostly shy or busy with domestic chores and rarely showed interest in the political fray.

The Aajkal on the 31st May quoted FB's (a LF constituent) Ashok Ghosh that his party wanted 1/3rd seat reservation for women in the position of gram panchayat pradhans, panchayat samiti sabhapatis and zilla parishad sabhadhipatis to establish an example to the entire country. The suggestion was later adopted through the Panchayat Amendment Act, 1998. Ghosh also stated that the success of the 1993 panchayat election was reservation of seats for women and the backward classes effectively breaking the hold of the vested interests over 75% of the seats.

The Statesman, Telegraph, Ananda Bazaar and Aajkal on the 31st May reported that women turned out in huge numbers especially where women candidates were in the fray.

The Aajkal on 1st June, 1993 informed that the first day after winning the panchayat elections women panchayat members mostly remained engaged with their daily chores. In between few joined the victory procession organized by their respective parties or took time out to thank the people of the locality. The report said most women members vowed to come out of their secured homes and work for the people and address the issues in the locality especially those concerning the welfare of women. This was a welcome indication of political empowerment of the much deprived women in the rural interiors and a positive outcome of the reservation policy.

Analysis of Newspaper Reports on Women Participation and Empowerment during the Election Period of 1993

There were 23 reports about the plight and participation of women candidates in the 1993 panchayat election in West Bengal during the month-long survey period in the four sample newspapers – Ananda Bazaar Patrika, Aajkal, Statesman and Telegraph. The reports highlighted the state of women in the rural society and the perspectives of political parties and their leaders following the 33% reservation of seats for women in all the tiers of the panchayat system. The general feeling was one of perplexity as the women were not habituated to the political doldrums and even if they expected to overcome the initial hiccups and take advantage of the reservation policy, the political parties and the male family and party members made it difficult for them. There were references to the helpless condition of women candidates who had to rely on family and party members for campaigning and interaction with the voters because they neither had political consciousness nor were they ready for their new roles outside the four pillars of their houses. There were mentions of how women were forced to participate in the electoral contest to satisfy their fathers, husbands or other family members though they were neither willing nor competent to handle the pressures and expectations of election. The poignant tale of Ekdoshi Mandal is a case in point (The Telegraph, 25th May). Some of the women did promise to look into the issues concerning the locality and themselves but the total number of news items on this matter was limited. The impassiveness of many of the women nominees even after their win was reflected in news items (Aajkal, 1st June). The overriding picture in the news items was that of refusal of the male members to accept the predominance of women in the panchayats. The social circumstances were heightened by the discrimination of the political parties.

If the perspective of the political parties with regard to reservation of seats is examined then it would be evident that the political parties were only interested to maximize their benefits from the reservation policy. There was no attempt to mobilize the women candidates or encourage their participation. In fact it was pointed out several times in the newspaper reports that party activists refused to cooperate with the nominated women candidates and even declined to campaign for them (Ananda Bazaar Patrika, 11th May). There was no report on the steps adopted by the leadership of political parties to alleviate the situation. It can be assumed that political parties were interested in retaining their vote bank and their objective was not boosting the empowerment of women through reservation. The opportunistic mindset of the political parties was clear from the information that political parties were interested to nominate women who already were known in the community through their social endeavors. The reason was that these women were more conscious and familiar to the voters (Ananda Bazaar Patrika, 19th May). The political parties were compelled to nominate in the reserved seats but they were not willing to make exception such as nominating women candidates in the unreserved seats as illustrated in the report published in the Ananda Bazaar Patrika on 18th May.

Yet the positive effects of the reservation cannot be overlooked. The newspaper reports pointed out that there was enthusiasm and hope regarding the decision of the government among the womenfolk. The most prominent impact of the

new legislation was the increased participation of women members who were almost kept out of local politics till then. The prospect of new leadership and the displacement of the vested interests due to the nomination of new candidates in almost 75% seats gave impetus to the participatory local governance system. It provided an opportunity to the panchayat system to overhaul itself and get rid of the lacunae that have crept into the system.

Role of Newspapers in Women Empowerment in 1993 Panchayat Election

The mainstream newspapers reflected the picture in the rural society and suggested that seat reservation was not sufficient to involve the grassroots women in the local political and administrative process. It required the political and social awareness of the women. The press as a social institution in a developing society did not play a proactive role in mobilizing the rural women for participation in the panchayat system. The newspaper reports stated that though there was initial apprehension about the availability of adequate women for the reserved seats after the end of the nomination process it was clear that there was no dearth of women candidates. The political parties were at least compelled by the legislation to nominate women candidates but the newspapers, the dominant mass media in Bengal in 1993, did not take initiative to encourage the participation of women and assist their empowerment. The newspapers' role was confined to information dissemination and did not progress towards mobilization. The function of the mass media has evolved from the days when information dissemination was considered its main prerogative (Harold Lasswell) to motivation that involve campaigning for societal objectives like political and economical development. The qualitative analysis of the newspaper content on the aftermath of reservation of seats for women at the grassroots level in West Bengal gives no evidence of the newspapers' active mobilization effort or their endeavour to educate rural woman on the importance of participation as candidates or panchayat members later on or illustration of the socio-economic impact of their involvement in the local political process. The newspapers restricted themselves to reports on the contemporary social predicament of rural women, the consequences of seat reservation on the other community members and the outcome of the legislative act on the strategies of political parties who spearheaded the panchayat election process in the state.

Conclusion

The issue of reservation of seats for women in all the three tiers of the panchayat for the cause of women empowerment during the 1993 panchayat election did not have active support of the widely circulated mainstream newspapers in West Bengal. The newspapers threw light on the status of women, the consequences of reservation on the women candidates as well as on the other community members and the responses of the political parties who were integral part of the panchayat election process. The reports underlined how political parties were intent upon utilizing the constitutional amendment Act for their own benefit but there was no attempt on the part of these reports to involve the rural women in the local election process or prepare them for their new roles outside the precincts of their homes where they were confined. The issue of empowering women politically may have been the preserve of political institutions like the political parties and the government bodies but the task of empowering these women socially could have been undertaken by social institutions like the press. We have to admit that the sample newspapers' did not adopt the role of social motivator and crusader.

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Author: The author has been teaching English Language and business Communication in Future Institute of Engineering and Management, Kolkata for the last 10 years.