

# **MASS MEDIA-CAUSE AND EFFECT OF DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES**

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India is witnessing a consolidation in its democratic processes. In fact, a new wave of democracy is sweeping the country. India has seen 14 general elections and as many for the State Assemblies and local bodies. The gap between people's expectations and performance and promises of elected governments/political parties is causing certain frustration and that in turn has become an undercurrent for this new wave of democracy. That is how there is recognition today that "good governance" is the ultimate bet for durability of elected Governments, irrespective of the majority, and that democratic governance is better for development. The focus, as such, now is on accountability, transparency, responsiveness and performance of Governments. Hectic and elaborate electoral process and devolution of power is helping the cause of democracy to constantly evolve beyond exercising franchise. But fifty years of election-centric democracy has also led to a realization that casting votes is not sufficient to consolidate and sustain democracy. At the same time it is recognised that participation in the electoral process is important. In this process media is both a cause and effect of democratic consolidation.

Of many things that manifestation of democracy requires, freedom of opportunity and equal opportunities are at the core. For this process freedom of information and access to media is as critical. For, access to information is empowering. No other intervention makes the difference for a level playing opportunity of people as access to news media. Those who are deprived of such an opportunity will never be able to reap the benefits of economic development. Access to media and extent of exposure to news media is a critical virtue. Devolution of decision making is meaningful only when there is diffusion of information and access to it.

Despite increase in educational levels in the country, income levels, urbanization and employment levels and despite all that proliferation of media, the overall reach of all mass media put together is not more than two thirds of

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adult population. And, regional differences in this regard continue to be glaring. That is while in States like Kerala and Tamil Nadu the overall reach is more than two thirds, it is much below half of that in states like Bihar, UP, Orissa and Rajasthan. Infact, media specific reach in the case of rural and women, brings out that it is a long way for India to meet this challenge. The media boom of the last decade could be attributed to hectic political activity culminating in too frequent elections and the anxieties in that process. With increased exposure to news media and their expansion, the gap between aspiration and promises and performance has come under public perview more and more. This in turn is activating democratic practices. That is because media has been the primary source for public perceptions about both promises and performance. This is despite the argument that media influence has declined recently because of "disconnect" of media to the main stream.

### **MEDIA AT ITS BEST**

If elections are meant democracy-at-work, mass media has been at its best in upholding democratic system. Mass media is the differentiator of democracy and its scope and relevance to various sections of people. That is how it is said that a "free-press" is indispensable for the very relevance of democracy. In this process, public perception and opinions matter a lot, even more today - not just at the time of elections - but in the day to day functioning of various democratic institutions. Infact, news media is cause and effect of those democratic processes. That is how specific moulding of public opinion and public perceptions has now become an instrument for democracy-at-work. Though elections may come once in five years, Government's performance is being monitored, tracked and evaluated by news media and projected as if on a daily basis.

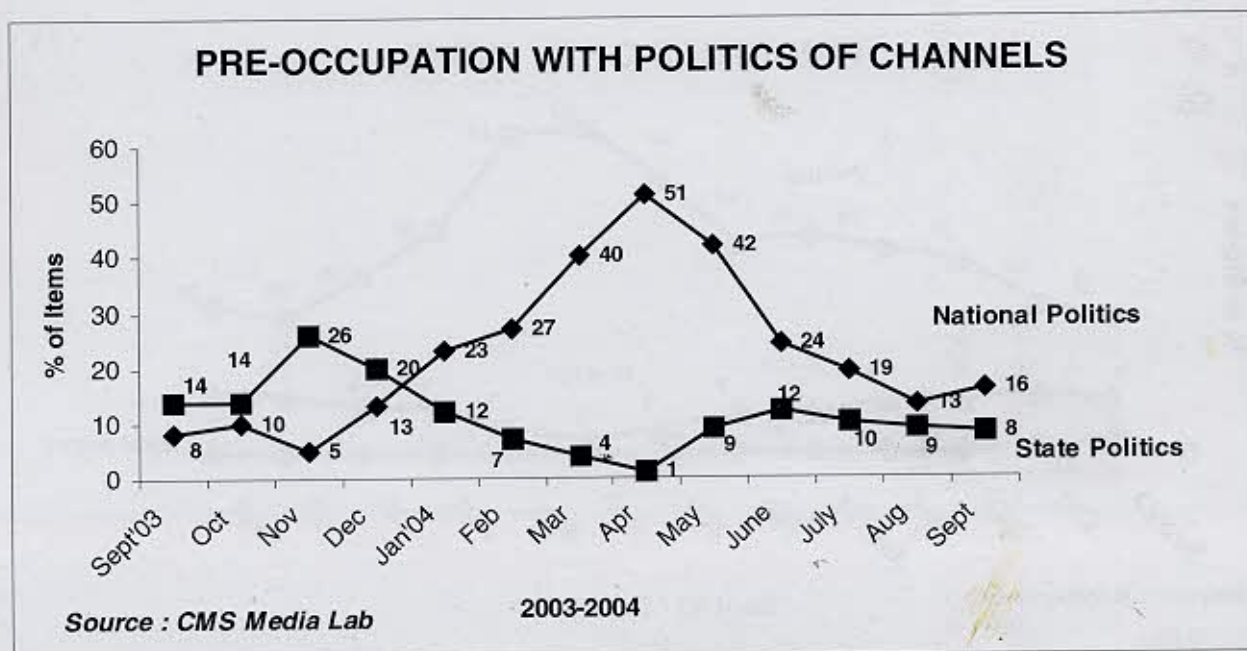
### **DECENTRALIZED STRUCTURE, BUT CENTRALIZED MEDIA?**

Media infrastructure today in terms of number of locations from where newspapers are published and the number of locations with radio and television terrestrial transmitters is three to four times more than what it was only a couple of years ago. Most districts in India today have low or high powered transmitter to make decentralized and localized broadcasting possible. But, unfortunately the tendency has been to use them more as relay outlets. Instead of strengthening terrestrial network and make the programmes locally relevant, the preference is for DTH platform with centralized concerns and command system. It is regional



channels with local news bulletins and with regional coverage, that has helped to expand the overall reach and growth of electronic media in the country. It could be said that one direct beneficiary of new wave of democracy is media, both quantitatively and qualitatively.

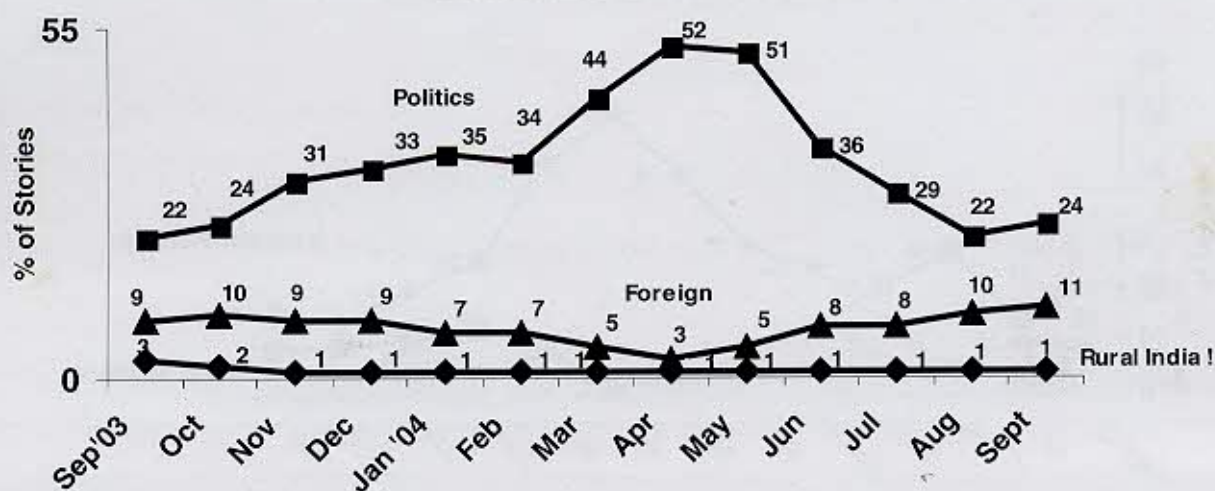
With regard the contents of news media and priorities in coverage, the situation is complex and tending to get polarised between haves and have nots. For, hardly two percent of National news bulletins is about health, education, development, welfare, environment etc. And, even in 2004, one-third or more of the news items of national channels continue to be on politicians and party politics and more than half of news continue to originate from Delhi and Mumbai. Infact, in the case of print media, there has been a decline recently in the extent of coverage of community issues and aspirations of rural people. An analysis of contents of newspapers and TV news bulletins implies that for news media there is no voluntary sector or perhaps they do not recognize what people themselves do on their own in their respective communities. The source for news is mostly political leaders or parties, Government and corporates; not so much the civil society. Despite proliferation of 24-hour news channels, there is hardly any increase in the coverage in this regard as is expected in a functional democracy and despite growth opportunities for media themselves. Regional language channels, however, have saved the situation. For, their news is far more concerned and far better dispersed with in the respective State. If voluntary organizations



have to seek the help of commercial public relation agencies, it does not augur well neither for the media nor for the democracy!

Even as to the subject matter of news items covered by round-the-clock news bulletins, the range has been limited, which perhaps explain why the "penetration of TV" in general and news channels more particularly remained nearly stagnant in the last one year and more. The preoccupation with politics of news channels is even more than the newspapers as is evident from CMS Media Lab analysis for one full year of 2003-04. Infact, this trend is at the root of media's pampering of politicians and vice-a-versa. Despite proliferation of channels and intense competition, their over all coverage of India has not expanded beyond what it was earlier in terms of news origination and subject focus. On the contrary, certain hype and trivialization in the coverage has been too obvious and in the process, the very definitions of news has changed. Such a trend cannot be said is in consistence with deepening of democratic practices in the country. No wonder why the very "Fourth Estate" stature of media is being increasingly questioned of late. "More of the same" phenomena in the contents of all media, both print and electronic, is too obvious more recently, as if plurality and diversity features of Indian democracy have been ignored. Concern for federalism is yet another issue which seems to have missed media's attention. The tendency of TV in particular to "homogenize" the viewing fasts/interests is something that democrats need to be cautious about.

### PRIORITIES OF TV NEWS



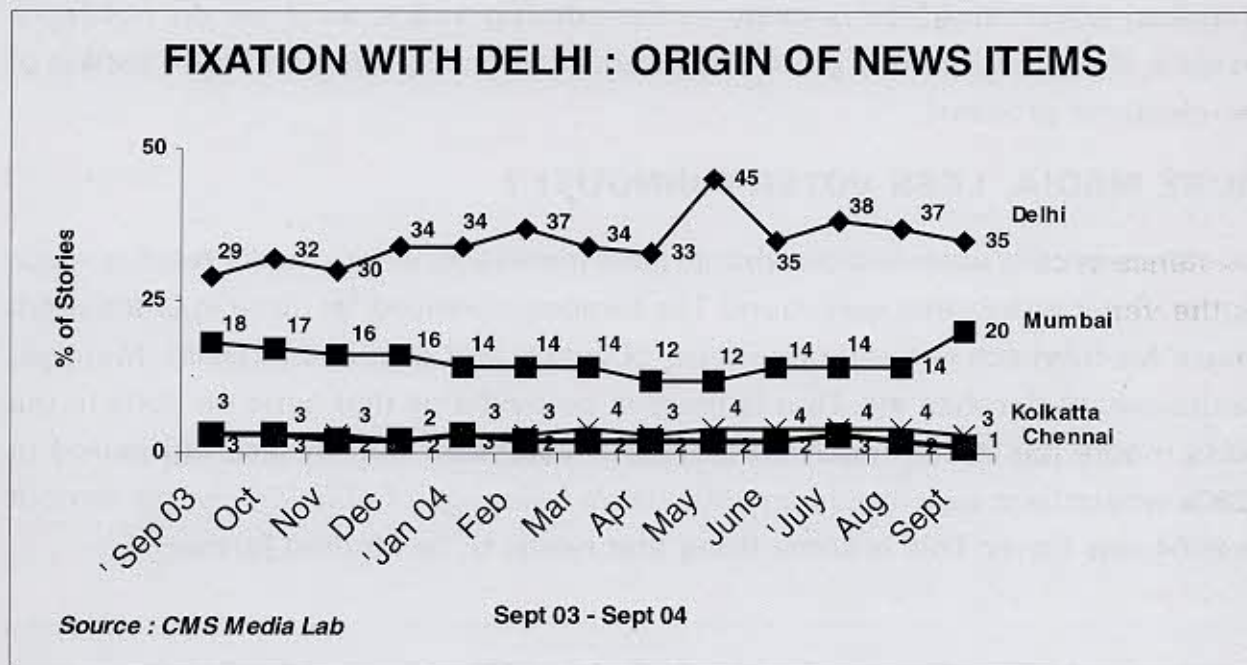
Source : CMS Media Lab

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Such a trend is the result of an irrelevant Television Rating Points (TRP) system, misleading the priorities of Television in India including the news channels. The TRP system has not only suppressed the real viewership to Doordarshan but exaggerated an inane model of programming. This is nothing but "hijacking of Indian TV" away from challenges and opportunities peculiar to the country. That is how news channels of late have been under hype in their coverage of certain items much beyond their relevance or significance and yet doling out more of the same.



## MEDIA COVERAGE OF ELECTIONS

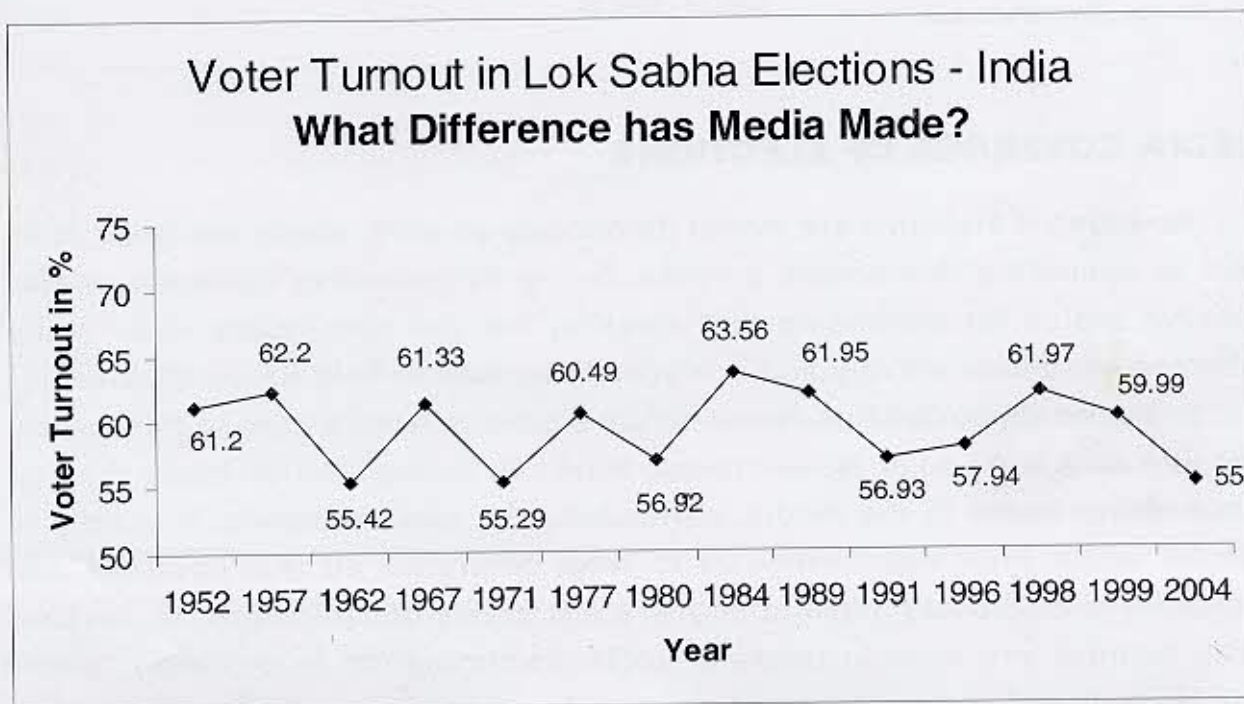
However, if elections are meant democracy-at-work, media has been at its best in upholding democratic process. Going by extensive coverage, media deserve praise for sustaining and steering the poll campaigns in so many different ways interactively and analytically by way of field based discussions and animated studio debates. Never before elections in India were so transparent and live as in 2004 polls. Nevertheless, 2004 Lok Sabha election being the first since recent boom in the media, particularly the news channels, it is time to ponder about their significance as to what difference all that coverage and exposure to media has made to improve the quality of campaigns, to increase voter turnout and even in terms of voter discrimination in choosing "better representatives". The coverage of election by channels was extensive, to the



extent of "trivializing". The phenomena of going for animated "notanki" type programmes and studio "jugalbandh" (with same pollsters and experts), has its implications. It distorts the very objectivity of news bulletins that is implied in making fun of news of the day and the news makers. In the process it is not only the credibility of political leaders and political parties that is being eroded but also of the very media in the long run. But TV has increased campaign expenditure of contesting parties several times more. If this trend continues, it is bound to vitiate the electoral process. Further, if television too is opened for "political advertising", as is likely in the coming years, as if we do not learn lessons, the situation may go to the extent of effecting "free and fair" aspect of the electoral process.

### **MORE MEDIA, LESS VOTER TURNOUT! ?**

Theoretically voter-turnout should have increased, where media reach is much higher. But it is the other way round. The turnout increased far more in Chattisgarh where media reach is hardly one-third of voters and declined in Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore, Hyderabad etc. That is there is no evidence that hype on polls in the mass media has made much difference in voter-turn out. In fact, compared to 1980s when there was hardly any television coverage of elections, voter turnout in 2004 was lower. This is some thing that needs to be studied further.





## **POLL EVE SURVEYS**

Pre-poll surveys and exit polls were taken up by news media as a major part of their coverage of elections. The number of pre-poll surveys published in the media each election is increasing, both in the case of Assembly and Lok Sabha. So also the number of exit polls. This is despite wide variation in the findings and going off the mark the actual result. Nevertheless, poll surveys have come to stay and will continue to be relied by news media. They have become part of our electoral process and of our media. But going by the experience of 2003 and 2004 one needs to wonder how much sensitivity is there in the Media as to the very scope of poll surveys and in ensuring electoral sanctity remain unaffected. Over the years CMS, based on its post-poll- surveys, had maintained that pre-poll surveys in the media do influence poll process. No wonder why pre-poll surveys have become yet another instrument in the armoury of political parties. Academically speaking, poll surveys in the media are expected to improve the content and quality of an election campaign and the very process itself. This is something media need to view more seriously and professionally, going beyond competitive and commercial concerns.

## **WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION**

Nearly a million women hold elected positions today in Panchayats and Municipalities and nearly one-fifth of them head the elected body. Most importantly, most of these women are from backward communities. Their participation in local governance is helping to expand the very scope and meaning of democracy. Media certainly has a positive role in this. And yet not much appears in the news media as to what difference the elected women leaders are making to the democratic process. Also, the reach of media among women has not increased despite all that proliferation. Infact, television boom has caused some shift in the exposure pattern of women to "totally entertainment programmes". This being a source for the new wave of democracy, deserve serious consideration.

## **CORRECTIVES**

The Shift in the Paradigm of media operations need to be corrected in the interest of media themselves and for sustaining the very scope of democracy. The rise of corporate PR should not mean fall of journalists or decline in media power. It is not a healthy symptom for neither. Media is the link for ensuring that



democratic traditions do not loose track of means and ends dilemma. Involvement and participation of people and debate and deliberation is the essence of democracy. For ensuring this process mass media is a far more reliable source and means. To ensure this some correctives are needed in this regard. The first one is to do with the very reach of media. This need to expand much beyond the present levels among those sections of people and pockets not presently reached. Only then political decentralisation touches those sections of people. Only then equal opportunity could be said is possible and happening.

The second one is in terms of range and extent of coverage by media. Unless it reflects and represent large sections of people, communities and regions, it cannot expect to go beyond the present levels and make a difference qualitatively. The third is relevance of what is contained in the media. Giving what tempts people is one thing and giving what is in their interests is altogether different with some balance between the two. The fourth is that reach, range and relevance of media is possible only when there is realization as to what impact potential mass media as such have and they have concern for certain priorities and pre occupation in the contents and coverage in the larger national context. All this calls for a decentralized media operations in the country; not centralised, with focus on concerns of local people and on their participation in the processes. Only then media becomes truly a cause and effect of democratic traditions and ensures that the eternal dilemma of democratic practice in terms of differentiating means form ends is not lost track.



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