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Political communication strategies in *Panchayati Raj* election: observation study of *Kangra* District of Himachal Pradesh- India

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Abstract

India's Himachal Pradesh region is a home for several villages in which its rural political system named Panchayati Raj (PR) is increasingly influential in the state. Recently, the state holds the elections for the Panchyati Raj. The local people are enthusiastically engaged in the election and exhibited interest in voting in general and youth voting in particular. The results of the Panchyati Raj election portray the picture of all the political parties and their influence in the state. All parties emphasize the need of connecting with people through communication. The state's literacy rate is another intriguing feature in which, the state, despite living in countryside, has the second-highest percentage of literacy after Kerala. As a result, the populace as a whole are more informed and responsive to communication. It was noted that both traditional and contemporary media have been used throughout the election to communicate with the public. The current study examines the communication tactics used by all political parties in the Panchyati Raj election in the Himachal Pradesh's district of Kangra. It is only 5.71% of the people of Kangra district residing in urban areas; while the remainder reside in rural ones. The culturally appropriate communication methods among villagers become more significant in this election. This study then aims to observe the communication tools, language (mother tongue), development issues and key factors of participants such as resident, life style, or education (villagers and candidates). The researchers used an observation study as a non-participatory means through interview tool and used content analysis method for data analysis. The results of this study showed that *Pahari* (people living in high terrains) were more connected with their traditional culture including communication pattern, lifestyle along with concerned with roots development.
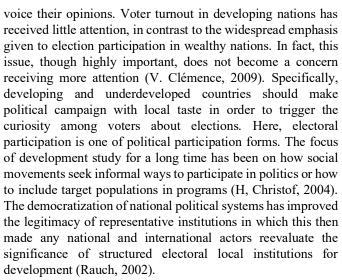
Keywords: Panchyati Raj; Himachal Pradesh; election; rural election; communication strategy; Kangra

1. Introduction

Sharing information with the public, media, and legislators is a part of the interactive process of political communication. The process moves horizontally through relationships between political supporters and upward from public opinion toward authorities as well as downward from governing institutions toward citizens. (P. Norris, 2001). In particular, political communication should be interactive and emotionally driven during local elections enabling the political parties to engage with people easily although emotion makes it possible to quickly assess current circumstances and encode prior experience with its evaluative history (G. E. Marcus 2000).

The communication method for local elections should be interactive and interpersonal in every country, particularly in some developing and undeveloped nations where literacy rates are quite low and people are more tied to their social and cultural voices. Traditional media became tools for political parties to sway voters as a result. Elections are a representational tool and an efficient way to choose and rein among politicians, but only if people turn out to the polls to

voice their opinions. Voter turnout in developing nations has received little attention, in contrast to the widespread emphasis given to election participation in wealthy nations. In fact, this issue, though highly important, does not become a concern receiving more attention (V. Clémence, 2009). Specifically, developing and underdeveloped countries should make political campaign with local taste in order to trigger the curiosity among voters about elections. Here, electoral participation is one of political participation forms. The focus of development study for a long time has been on how social movements seek informal ways to participate in politics or how to include target populations in programs (H, Christof, 2004). The democratization of national political systems has improved the legitimacy of representative institutions in which this then made any national and international actors reevaluate the significance of structured electoral local institutions for development (Rauch, 2002).

India lives in her villages and this is more applicable to Himachal Pradesh- the Himalayan state of the country. It is approximately 89.97% population of the state living in the rural areas. This might be the reason of the peoples' connection to their roots (M. Aslam, 2021). People of the state are more connected to the rural heritage, culture and traditions, which are highly apparent in their daily lives and prefer to preserve their

rich life culture through traditional system of politics. Hence, they take more interest in *Gram Sabha* (village committee) election with a belief that these elections are more personalized and connected to their culture. In this election their colorful costumes and notable beautiful traditional folk culture are more highlighted gracefully and respectfully. The researchers found out that both traditional culture (including Media) and Panchayati Raj election have a personal impact on the people (A. K. Mishra, N. Akhtar, and S. Tarika, 2011).

Democratization process started in India through 73rd and 74th Amendments in 1992 to the Constitution of India with an aim to build up the closer relationship of governance with the common people. It came into the existence with effect from 24 April 1993 with the structure of three tier systems: Gram Sabha (Panchayat) at the village level, Gram Samiti (Panchayat Samiti) at the Block level and Zilla Parishad (District Council) at the District level. This is the systematic structure of the decentralization of democratic structure (Bharmoria, Karun 2021). This system is aimed to empower people living in the lower strata of the country (the grass-root level). Village level democratic institutions and municipal level bodies have been projected to inform the cost effective growth and implement several community-based initiatives at the ground level. The function of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI) was formulated with the vision of Mahatma Gandhi - the father of the nation – stating to empower the villages with development (W. Alkesh, 2018)

Himachal Pradesh is the 18th state of India and was carved out of the Indian map as a separate state on 15 April 1948. With the formulation of new independent government Himachal Pradesh Panchayati Raj Act, 1952 was introduced in the state assembly and implemented in 1954. At that time it was only 280 Gram Panchayats that existed. Then, Pahari Pradesh Panchayati Raj Act 1968 was passed on November 15, 1970 and the two tiers PRI were implemented in Pradesh entirely. In same year, the *Nyaya Panchayats* also came into force in the state for fulfilling the law related functions, but still in the same year the Nyaya Panchayats were closed down and law related functions were given to the Gram Panchayats. According to 73 Amendment Act, Himachal Pradesh Panchayati Raj Act, 1968 was replaced by the Himachal Pradesh Panchayati Raj Act 1994 until today. According to HP Panchayati Raj department statistics, there are a total number of 3456 Gram Sabhas, 78 Panchayat Samitis and 12 Zilla Parishads (District Councils) functioning. Besides, 2 Nagar Nigams (Municipal Corporations)- Shimla and Dharamshala - are in the state (Bharmoria, Karun 2021).

Politics is a comprehensive occurrence that set up the roadmap of power and persuasion. It gives a power of initiatives that decides and allotment different goods and services to masses and formed laws, rights and prohibition (Mirko A. Demasi, *et.al*, 2020). Elected members perform all activities by considering the demand and needs of the public. But politics cannot survive without communication as it is based on communication that decides the future of politics and elected members (A. James, 1972).

The mass is determined by an effective communication "William McGuire's proposed information-processing theory" in 1968; throw light on how influential communication works (A. G. Romarheim, 2005). The theory works with six important

steps. First, the influential message should be communicative, second the beneficiary will automatically get an effective message, third the recipient will understand the objective of conveyed content, fourth the beneficiary automatically perceives the message, fifth the receiver will retain the message and lastly the preferred aptitude and attitude come to pass among receiver.

Political communication is a sub-part of political science subject and communication that deals with the creation of idea/message, path of convey and effects of information, both through channels and dyadic within a political frame. All political parties followed various paths and methods to influence the masses through different tools of media (A. G. Romarheim,2005). All western thinkers consider the political communication as a social scientific technique used for communication, changing the mind set of voters, setting the agenda of social change and persuasive path for participants (W. Alkesh, 2018)

The researchers in their study "Women's Participation in Gram Panchayat Elections in Banspal Block of Keonjhar District of Odisha: A Socio-Political Analysis" (S. Majhi and D. Birendra Suna, 2020) highlighted the level of independence of the female representatives in PRI elections in terms of decision making, leadership capacity building and political independence. They conducted qualitative and quantitative research through observation and survey methods. They involved the samples of 120 elected women members and 5 Gram Sabha and concluded that elected women had been empowered only on papers. In fact, the male member or father/husband of the lady representative dominated the power more. This was in relation to the domination of male in society in view of the existing patriarchal system, the low level of education and awareness of female about their own rights and the existing orthodox culture and society (S. Majhi and D. Birendra Suna, 2020).

In a study entitled **"**Enforcing political loyalties in local elections: an ethnographic account from Punjab", the researcher highlighted the vote casting pattern in village level elections (N. Martin (2020). With the help of anthropological studies, the researcher attempted to explain that lower cast voters exercised their franchise in favor of the upper cast representatives in exchange of money, employment and some recreational activities and favors. The study concluded that local customs and ethics were more stressed and considered in Panchayati Raj elections rather than anything else.

In a similar study entitled "The working of Panchayati Raj in Zero Valley in Arunachal Pradesh" the researcher stated about the modernization of PRI in the state (D. Indexed 2019). The researcher conducted the study through content analysis and highlighted that government of the state connected all villages using technology and focused on digital literacy. Government also ensured to preserve tribal culture at local level vis-a-vis technology growth. The researcher has also focused on the pattern of technology used by local people and political representatives. The study concluded that people slowly started loving the new technology. They loved to use technology but local institutions should focus more on digital literacy. In a study entitled "Political Communication in Odisha: A Study of Odia Television News Channels" the researcher found that the political parties had used different traditional media along with

the social media and television channels to communicate to the electorates (F. Mohan Nahak 2020).

Political actors' intentional communication behavior, such as political advertising and conference speeches, can impact the views and behavior of the intended audience. These effects can be studied at the micro-level of the individual message consumer or at the macro-level, when individual reactions to political communication are aggregated together in the form of public opinion polls and other indices of collective political will, such as elections (M.,Brian 2017). Power and knowledge must be balanced in western nations to maintain political stability over the long run. Political theorists thought that they were able to restore the harmony between space and time. For Innis, that meant releasing higher education institutions from political and financial constraints while reviving the oral tradition within universities (Innis, H. A. (2022). The political brand promise is communicated through symbolic communication in conjunction with a unique brand message and is inextricably related to cultural references. This increases trust, which has an impact on political engagement. This conceptual framework sheds light on the significance of culture in branding, which has ramifications for actors and policy makers in both emerging and advanced democracies (Ihwan Susila, Dianne Dean *et. al* 2020). The "padayatra," a traditional but also spiritually rooted communication and mobilization tactic, is a key component of democratic politics in India. Mahatma Gandhi used the padayatra to successfully mobilize the populace during the liberation movement, and it is still a politically relevant tactic employed for both mobilization and partisan advantages that take advantage of its imagery. Election padayatras has given politicians a chance to engage in meaningful conversation with citizens, comprehend their worldview, and help them to realize it (Kumar, R. 2017). Due to growing affluence, revenue source, and political channels, there are more persons in various punchayats who have a political influence. A practical method of persuading the electorate is the dominant person and well-known personality system. These individuals favor direct communication when seeking votes and leucocratic resources (Sunkari, S. 2022). Politicians dominate public attention during elections, while established media outlets continue to be the primary sources for information dissemination. Researchers looked at how different languages were used and discovered a definite pattern of each language being overused or underused by the supporters of various political parties (Borondo, J., Morales, A. J., Benito, R. M., & Losada, J. C. 2014).

Max Weber's theory of charismatic leadership, village heads (patrons) influence their constituents' loyalty for both material and non-material (non-economic) reasons, including the leader's authority and charisma; the distribution of benefits to individuals or groups in exchange for political support; and the provision of financial aid and other tangible benefits (Nugroho, K., & Windyastuti, D. 2021). However, because of advances in media technology, news media exposes people to a much wider range of divergent political viewpoints than do in-person political debates. The media advantage stems from the relative difficulty and decreased desire to selectively expose oneself to those sources of information due to the impersonal nature of mass media (Mutz. D, 2001).

Objectives of this study are: to study the emerging trends in communication in PRI election, to find out the relationship between traditional cultures and PRI election, and to find out various factors affecting the PRI.

2. Methodology

In the present study, the researchers have adopted the qualitative research method. Non-participatory observational study was conducted in Kangra District of Himachal Pradesh. Along with this, the researchers also followed the interview method and conducted the interviews with 25 aspiring candidates of PRI and 15 media persons or journalists of different Newspapers, television channels working in the district. Primary data were collected through interview and secondary data were collected through Himachal Pradesh election commission site and newspaper reports. Both data were then interpreted through content analysis method.

Content analysis tool was used to determine the presence of particular words, themes and concepts of collected qualitative data. Researcher attempted to understand the dialect, emotions, the way of conveying the message to voters during the campaign of Panchayat elections and communication modes used by candidates during the campaign.

3. Results and Discussion

Himachal Pradesh consists of 12 districts in which Kangra is located in the western part of the state covering 10.31% of the geographical area of the State. It is the biggest district of Himachal Pradesh so far as population is concerned. According to the 2011 census, total population of Kangra district reached 1,507,223. This district has a sex ratio of 1013 females for every 1000 males and a literacy rate of 86.49%. In Kangra district it is only 5.71% population living in urban areas. The *Kangri* people, as the locals use local dialect Kangri as their mother tongue, which has more affinities with the Punjabi language. Most of the people of Kangra district are Hindu, Brahmins, Rajputs, Banias, although many Tibetans and other residents that have settled since 1959 follow Buddhism. Kangra district has total number of 3908 villages, one Nagar Nigam (Dharamshala) and a total of 748 Panchayats. The Panchayati Raj election was held in Kangra in one phase on 19th January 2021. The overall poll percentage in Kangra was around 75.70% in the Panchayati Raj election. In Kangra district. The number of female voters reaches 80.10% more than that of the male voters at 73.80%. Mostly candidates contesting the election are indirectly under BJP, Congress, AAP and Himachal Lokhit Party (A Handbook for the conduct of elections to Municipal corporation, 2021).

Before analyzing the relationship of Panchayati Raj election with traditional culture, firstly it is important to understand the geographical condition of Kangra district.

Kangra district is surrounded by Mandi, Kullu-manali, Una, Hamirpur and Gurdaspur. The western part of the district is shared with Gurdaspur district of Punjab, Una and Hamirpur districts of same state to the south part of Kangra. The north part, meanwhile, is bounded with Chamba and Kullu through Dhauladhar mountain range and Mandi to south east through Bara Bangal range. The eastern part of this district is more influenced by Punjabi culture, while south east and east parts

are influenced by Gujjar community. In this district, both literacy rate and population density are very low. In those areas candidates are elected and people participated in PR election with the direction of local 'Devta'. The literate people mostly living in south, west and central part of the district actively participate in election with development issues.

Several factors in Political Communication Strategies include the messages, language being used, tool, trust to Political Parties, the level of local environment influence and the connection level with local people.

Since most of candidates and voters are literate, people easily understand the problem and the solution of suggested by candidates in PR election.

The ratio of 10+2 candidates are 30 to 40 % and almost 50% of young candidates are mostly graduate and Post Graduates. 1 to 2 % is Ph.D. Degree holders. It showed that education is one of the main priorities of this district and voters choose the candidates on the basis of one of the major criteria i.e. education.

East and south east parts of district are less literate compared to other parts of the district. As local Devta are their reigning deities, the candidates are nominated by these Devta and development issues are selected by candidates with the guidelines of Devta. Those areas have the more preserved and rich traditional culture and traditions. The modern medium of communications are yet to influence to those areas and the people, but besides that mobile smartphones reached to their doorsteps. In these areas candidates have verbal and non-verbal communication with voters.

Another part of Kangra district also likes to live in traditional culture with mother tongue (Kangri), traditional costume and lifestyle. The voters prefer to cast the vote to local candidates, and do not prefer parachute dropped candidates. They assume that local candidate are able to understand the local problems and easily connect to their culture; as a result, they can have a personal touch with them.

In the west and south part of the district one can find an amalgamation of modern and traditional culture. In those areas the door to door campaign and SMS and personal contact are the most effective technique. It is only 20 to 30 % candidates using social networking sites with the help of IT professionals in mother tongue *Kangri* to communicate the voters.

In most part of the Kangra district election campaign it starts with 'Dham'(Traditional way of community food and feasting). All candidates commonly will invite to the voters on Dham in which they can connect to voters directly and convey the agenda of election simultaneously. After the elections and declaration of the results, it was also seen that the winners once again organized the lavish Dham.

In these all possible methods ranging from persuasion and pressure to bribe the voters through malpractice (wine, meat, cigarette, money and gift items) were used.

Mostly, urban people live in Kangra city and Dharamshala. In those areas modernity has an edge over the traditional culture. Candidates use Social networking sites like Facebook and Whatsapp groups for campaigning with traditional medium. In those areas the modern medium of communication ratio are 60 to 80% under the guidance of IT professionals. Interestingly, the content and messages have been created in mother tongue. But ratio of urban population is only 5.71%, so

it cannot be stated that candidates used more modern medium for connecting with the voters.

Another important factor of post-election celebration is traditional folk dance 'Jhamakda' with local instrument. Some of the candidates invite to all section (male) in pre-election campaign for dance party with lavish food to lure the voters. This traditional system also exists in Kangra at large scale. People enjoy speaking in their mother tongue and appreciate to hear the candidates in speaking in their language, according to this significant study. Another important point also highlights that political ideology of sitting government also reflects the opinion of people at grass root level.

4. Conclusion

The results of this study highlighted certain points. There are few factors that have acted as the catalyst in the Panchayati Raj election in Himachal Pradesh including educational qualification of the contesting candidates, their personal influence or public impact in the rural dominated society, literacy of the candidates and voters, rural folk and traditional culture, use of media platforms in general and social and digital media in particular by candidates and language being used by the candidate. As this is a three tier Panchayati Raj system, the communication through traditional media and modern media at the grass-root level plays a huge role and has made the system more effective. Basically, media such as Facebook, Whatsapp as the different digital platforms also played an important role in communicating people at the grassroots level (Yumitro, Abdelsalam & Shukri, 2021).

Researcher suggested that Panchayati Raj ministry should take more initiative for ICT at grassroots level in Himachal Pradesh so that literate candidates can use more ICT during the campaign. It will save time and money of candidate because travelling in the remote areas of Himachal demands both. Government should take more initiatives for the digitalization of traditional culture of Himachal Pradesh and should formulate more policies for the digital literacy of the people by concerning with all stake holders (NGOs, or Active groups). Government should ensure to preserve the traditions, heritage and ethical values of the state and all candidates contesting the elections should take various initiatives to protect the local culture and support the voices.

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