

A Comparative Study of the Role of Local Newspapers in Rural Development in Three Selected Blocks in West Bengal

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate and compare the role of local newspapers in facilitating rural development with a focus on three selected blocks in North 24 Parganas district in West Bengal, India. Local newspapers are a significant communication medium in rural areas, influencing community awareness, mobilization, and development initiatives. The study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative interviews, content analysis of newspapers, and surveys to comprehensively understand the impact challenges faced by local newspapers in contributing to rural development. The findings underscore the role of the newspaper in disseminating information, promoting local culture, and acting as a platform for community engagement. This study aims to explore the role of local newspapers in rural development, focusing specifically on three selected blocks in the North 24 Parganas district of West Bengal. By comparing these blocks, the study seeks to assess how effectively local newspapers disseminate information on rural development and influence knowledge, attitudes, and actions among rural communities. By examining the role of local newspapers in rural development, this study seeks to contribute to the broader understanding of how communication influences development outcomes. It will provide insights into the effectiveness of local newspapers as a medium for disseminating information about government schemes, engaging rural communities, and promoting public participation in development programs.

Keywords: Local newspaper, rural development, community engagement, local culture

INTRODUCTION

Communication is a cornerstone of modern society, and local newspapers stand out as key architects of the socioeconomic landscape in rural areas. They transcend their role as mere information sources, becoming vital community connections and empowerment conduits. They disseminate crucial information about welfare schemes, agricultural practices, healthcare, and education as a critical link between the government, non-governmental organizations, and the rural populace. Their unique ability to identify and address local issues has propelled their growth, cementing their irreplaceable role in rural development.

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Local newspapers are more than just a communication medium; they are the local community's voice. They are a promising platform for disseminating information on local happenings and other issues concerning the local people. By prioritizing local matters, they have gained significant importance among the readers. Local newspapers also provide extensive coverage of news and serve as a low-cost medium for

advertising, publicity, and information, ensuring easy access to information of immediate importance to the people of rural communities. They are also essential in keeping the government informed about public demands and responses to policy. Despite their small circulation compared to other regional dailies, their influence on the perspective of rural development is substantial. If the government wishes to ensure proper news circulation in rural areas, it must utilize the local press as an organ.

Local newspapers always emphasize local grievances and play a significant role in exposing local corruption and evils. They also record social, political, economic, and cultural activities and the region's development. Local newspapers are an integral part of society and play a crucial role in molding public opinion. Their unique perspective, deeply rooted in the local context and understanding, sets them apart. This perspective allows them to contribute to the immediate purpose of the local people better than national or international newspapers, making them an invaluable source of information and influence in rural development.

North 24 Parganas, a district in West Bengal, is characterized by its predominantly rural setting. Understanding the dynamics of rural development in this region is crucial for improving living standards and infrastructural development. Recently, due to a lack of modern technologies and limited finances, local newspapers cannot afford to print on high-quality newsprint, which can give the newspaper a "cheap" look. These newspapers are also facing challenges with the advent of localized digital media.

This study aims to delve into the specific contributions of local newspapers in North 24 Parganas District towards rural development. It will explore how these newspapers inform, engage, and empower the local community, catalyzing progress. To achieve a comprehensive understanding, this research will investigate the content and reach of regional newspapers in the district, highlighting the crucial role of Journalism in advocating for rural development and analyzing the impact of media initiatives on socio-economic aspects in the region. The ultimate objective is to offer perspectives on how to enhance the function of local newspapers in rural development. The contents of local newspapers were positively related to the daily lives of community residents and the opinions of the overall community.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

This study examines the current role of local newspapers in various aspects of rural development. In the face of the evolving media landscape, it remains unclear how effectively local newspapers contribute to rural development in the North 24 Parganas district of West Bengal. The study addresses whether local newspapers adequately serve as information bridges for rural communities and, if not, what barriers hinder their role in rural development. Local newspapers are not correctly preserved, making them challenging to access and use effectively. With limited finances and space, local newspapers cannot accommodate all the relevant rural issues.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The planned study's primary goal is to examine how local newspapers contribute to rural development. To attain such objectives, the research needs to undergo specific systematic processes mentioned below:

1. To identify the barriers and challenges faced by local newspapers in terms of technology and financial constraint
2. To know how local newspapers are participating in rural development
3. To examine whether the rural people use the information disseminated by the local newspapers
4. To study which category of development news is more coverage and which category has less coverage in local newspapers
5. To find out how local newspapers are filling up the vacuum of information-communication chain.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

1. The study aims to contribute to democratic processes and community participation in local governance.

2. The study helps to improve rural awareness by providing information about the government's different development programs, such as agricultural practices, healthcare services, and other vital resources.
3. The research shows how local newspapers empower rural communities by providing information, education, and a platform for voicing concerns and needs.
4. The study helps identify challenges local newspapers face, such as financial sustainability, technological adaptation, and changing media consumption patterns.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section underscores the pivotal role of a comprehensive literature review in the study area. It is not just a step but a cornerstone in establishing a robust research framework, as it rigorously analyzes secondary sources, such as textbooks, journals, periodicals, and online materials. The focus is on comprehending rural development and the unique challenges newspapers face in these regions. This review aids in establishing historical context, recognizing critical issues and obstacles, and charting a path for future progress.

The literature review is a crucial first step in research. It offers valuable insights from past studies and aids the researcher in understanding potential issues and challenges, preparing them for the research process. More importantly, it provides a comprehensive overview of the existing knowledge landscape, guiding the reader through the context and relevance of the research. Several diverse sources have been consulted to develop a vital literature review. The sources have been divided into the following few categories.

Definition and Overview of Rural Development

Jain (2010) [1] in his article “Rural Development Programs: An Overview,” defines rural development as a multidimensional concept that involves all kinds of development in rural areas through collective governmental and voluntary agency efforts. The provision of both waged and self-employment, water supply, appropriate sanitary and health care measures, and education are all highlighted in this report as being at the heart of rural development strategies.

Saurabh (2018) [2] in his paper “Rural Development of India: A Research Trend Analysis,” describes rural development as a process aimed at improving the well-being of people living in rural areas. The author also mentions the World Bank's definition of rural development. Rural development, according to the World Bank, is a growth strategy that attempts to provide development benefits to people whose future depends on pursuing a living in rural areas.

Rural development as a strategy aimed at improving rural communities' lives through active participation, addressing their needs, and increasing their per capita income and standard of living. This includes enhancing food and nutrition levels, healthcare, education, recreation, and security [3].

Cavaye (2001) [4] in his paper “Rural Community Development—New Challenges and Enduring Dilemmas,” emphasizes the pivotal role of rural communities in development. He stresses the need to foster relationships within rural communities by engaging with the local population and enhancing their access to information and services. Additionally, he emphasizes the importance of rural community vitality, which hinges on reevaluating assets, establishing networks, fostering local cooperation, and harnessing local passion and motivation [5].

Role of Media in Rural Development

Halo (2015) [6] in his article “Media and Rural Development”, explores the influential role of electronic and print media in the development of rural areas, with a particular focus on Assam over the years, media has played a pivotal role and catalyzed social transformation, fostering social integration, cooperation, and mobilization. The advent of science and technology in media has further amplified its impact, leading to the establishment of societal development through media [7].

Murthy (2015) [8] examines how print and electronic media have continuously failed to address rural issues in his article “Issue of Rural Development in Mainstream Journalism: Exploring New Strategies for Media Intervention.” The study also makes the case that rural newspapers did not succeed in the media arena, whereas journalism in the mainstream press developed very little.

Vagdevi et al. (2016) [9] in their study “Role of Media in Development Communication with Special Reference to Kissan Call Centre (KCC) in India,” analyze the media's role in developing the agriculture sector in India. The study explores the role of media in development through the use of Kissan Call Centre in informing, instructing, and enabling participation among farmers for holistic development.

Sen Chowdhury (2011) [10] in his paper “Media in Development Communication,” points out that the media plays a pivotal role in development communication by providing knowledge, ideas, and skills for people's upliftment. He also argues that satellite technology brings about social change and development.

Sambo et al. (2015) [11] in the article “Newspaper patronage and uses among rural dwellers: a study of Gwallameji community in Bauchi State” focus on how television was crucial in influencing Indian people's perceptions of globalization through cultural implications. The authors also views globalized television as significantly changing human attitudes, lifestyles, behavior, and culture [12].

Mudgal and Rana (2020) [13] in their paper “Future of Print and E-Newspaper in India: A Critique,” focus on the significant role of print media in pre- and post-independence India. This study analyzes the reasons behind the change in news consumption and charts the evolution of newspapers from print to digital.

Mandal (2023) [14] examines the transformational power of media in forming rural communities in his article “Contribution of vernacular newspapers to the emergence of revolutionism in colonial Bengal.” Informed policies and strategies that aim to use the sociological potential of mass media to empower rural communities and spur sustainable rural development are also aided by the study [15, 16].

Role of Newspaper in Rural Development

Swamy (2020) [17] discusses the important role that print media play in reaching and influencing rural populations in his article “Print Media in Rural Development: A Case Study of Four Districts of Karnataka State.” His research findings highlight the crucial importance of print media in contexts where poor education and economic dependency on men are significant barriers to rural development [18].

Patil (2011) [19] in his article “Recent Trends of Print Media in Development Communication,” examines how sophisticated modern technologies are changing the scenario of print media in both developed and underdeveloped countries. The author also gives opinions on how new electronic media impact print media.

Sarkar (2015) [20]. in his article “Rural Development News in Regional Dailies of Assam: A Comparative Study,” examines that most national dailies have largely ignored development news regarding concerning issues. This research attempts to assess and investigate this trend and analyze the coverage of rural development categorical matters of north-east India in the two regional dailies, *The Assam Tribune* and *The Sentinel*.

The article “Print Media Coverage of Violence against Women: A Content Analysis” [21], examines the coverage of violence against women as represented by print media. This study also analyzes the placement of stories on the front and inside pages to determine the significance of the sample newspaper in covering such issues [22].

With particular reference to Kanpur's rural region, “Coverage of Development News in Newspapers” [23] focuses on attaining general development in rural areas. All facilities and progress indicators must

reach the grassroots level of rural areas. This paper also investigates the impact of newspapers on covering development news in rural areas [24].

Role of Local Newspaper in Rural Development

Swamy et al. (2015) [25] in their article “The Role of Small and Medium Newspaper in Development: A Case Study of *Suddimoola* Newspaper,” point out that small newspapers bridge the gap between society and the concerned government in rural areas. The paper investigates *Suddimoola*, a small newspaper in Raichur that covers developmental issues and prioritizes regional news [26].

Hastjarjo (2017) [27] in his paper “Local Journalism in the New Media Landscape: Opportunities and Challenges”, focuses on the opportunities and challenges of local journalism with the advent of the new media landscape. He contends that the use of new media in local journalism has led to the creation of multi-media and multi-platform news production and distribution.

Adhikari et al. (2020) [28] in their article “Role of development journalism in agriculture and rural development of India” point out that the rural press is one of the most important and effective means of communication for reaching out to the vast majority of the rural population. Such newspapers give more insight into local development issues and establish a link between the government and the rural populace. The article explores what rural newspapers have faced for their existence [29].

Sharma and Sharma (2024) [30] in their article “Role of a Community Newspaper in Women Empowerment: A Content Analysis of *Khabar Lahariya* Newspaper of India,” examine the *Khabar Lahariya*, which is run by women from underprivileged and backward communities in Indian society. This paper also investigates how women's consistent engagement with the newspaper contributes to empowerment [31].

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical foundation for the research study “The Role of Local Newspapers in Rural Development: A Comparative Study of Three Selected Blocks in North 24 Parganas District of West Bengal” will mainly be based on development support communication. This critical theory will be the main focus of the research [32].

Development Support Communication

Development support communication (DSC) [33] is a theoretical framework focusing on communication strategies and the media's role in supporting and facilitating developmental issues in rural areas. In our study, DSC is crucial in understanding how local newspapers can contribute to rural development in three blocks in the North 24 Parganas District. DSC encompasses the following key components: Local newspapers are vital for disseminating crucial information about local government policies, agricultural practices, health and education initiatives, and community development programs. Their main objective is to highlight local concerns and issues and empower rural populations with knowledge. Local newspapers also implement local governmental promotional activities and policies in rural areas [34].

DSC highlights the significance of involving the local community in the communication process, Local newspapers can be platforms for engaging rural residents in discussions, feedback, and dialogue on development issues. These newspapers concentrate on content that directly connects with their interests and concerns. This might include stories on local events and community happenings, agricultural updates, profiles of local personalities, and tips for rural living. They also involve the community through reader submissions, local columns, and editorial letters, which can encourage participation and engagement [35].

DSC acknowledges the importance of culturally sensitive and locally adapted communication for effective outreach. Local newspapers should understand and respect the district's cultural nuances and traditions to communicate development messages effectively. They can cover local multicultural events and provide a forum for discussions on various cultural topics to foster understanding among different groups within a community [36].

The theoretical foundations mentioned will serve as a strong basis for the upcoming research study investigating the influence of local newspapers on rural development. The study will concentrate on DSC, community participation, empowerment, and social change within three blocks in the North 24 Parganas District of West Bengal.

Cultivation Theory

Research on cultivation examined the role of media in shaping social behavior and aimed to establish the extent to which television affects the perceptions of frequent viewers. Gerbner [37] found that people who watch television for extended periods are more susceptible to being influenced by the version of reality portrayed on television compared to those who watch less, especially regarding subjects they have limited personal experience with. Cultivation theory posits that mass media promotes the dominant ideology within society. This theory can be applied to newspapers, particularly in rural development. Continuous coverage of agriculture, local success stories, and development projects can lead to a more informed and motivated local population. Cultivation theory enables us to examine how media consumption in rural areas affects community attitudes, behaviors, and development results.

Local newspapers play a crucial role in providing information to rural communities. They offer accurate and relevant details about development opportunities, government programs, and community achievements, empowering rural residents to make the most of these resources. Local newspapers can also highlight specific development issues, prioritizing them for the rural population and policymakers. For example, comprehensive agriculture or rural health coverage can increase attention and action in these areas.

METHODOLOGY

Research methodology is a systematic approach that uses various methods and techniques to gather, analyze, and present data in a scientifically valid and reliable way. It ensures the research process is consistent and logical and helps draw meaningful and accurate conclusions.

This section outlines the research methodologies selected for the study, provides examples of the methods employed in the thesis, and demonstrates the reasoning behind them. Before designing the research methods, the concepts related to the survey are specifically defined to achieve a framework for the study that will help in understanding the relationship between the different variables and the factors of the study. Several social scientists have defined research. As John W. Best (1981) [38] describes, research is the methodical, objective examination and documentation of carefully monitored observations that may result in the formulation of generalizations, ideas, or principles that could eventually lead to the prediction and control of occurrences. (Kothari (2004) [39] states that "Research is an art of scientific investigation, a methodical and scientific search for relevant information on a particular topic."

Defining and redefining problems, developing hypotheses or proposed solutions, gathering, organizing, and analyzing data, drawing conclusions, and then rigorously verifying those results to see if they align with the hypotheses are all components of research.

A comprehensive review of relevant literature guided the research design. This process played a pivotal role in identifying the research variables necessary for the study, formulating a hypothesis, and establishing a solid framework to achieve the study's objectives systematically.

Research Variables

Several factors influence rural development by disseminating information in local newspapers. The research variables were pinpointed based on a thorough literature review, aligning with the study's specific needs. Each identified variable holds significance in the research and is interconnected with and influences the others, adding a layer of complexity to my research that is fully prepared to navigate.

Definition of Population

Population is defined as the cumulative of all the elements that share common characteristics and justify the purpose of the research problem. Three chosen blocks in West Bengal's North 24 Parganas area served as the sample population for our investigation. The sample needed to represent the population accurately to generalize the outcomes. North 24 Parganas (Table 1) is the most populous district in West Bengal, India. It is regarded as the tenth-largest district in terms of area and ranks second in the country in population.

Location

The district stretches eastward across India and is located at the southernmost point of West Bengal. It shares borders with Nadia district to the north and Bangladesh to the east and north. Kolkata and the South 24 Parganas are located to the south. The district lies between latitude 22°11'6" North and 23°15'2" North and from longitude 88°20' East to 89°5' East.

Research Design

The research design of the present study was descriptive and utilized mixed methods. The researchers explored the phenomenon from various perspectives, allowing for a comprehensive grasp of trends and relationships. Qualitative data enhanced understanding by providing insights into the contextual, interpretive, and experiential aspects underlying the numerical data. The design involved a multi-stage sampling method, which included collecting data from three distinct blocks to compare the influence of local newspaper readership on knowledge of developmental issues. The role of local newspapers in the rural development of three blocks in North 24 Parganas District was selected based on official government data from the 2011 census.

Sampling Procedure

Sampling involves selecting participants or cases from a population of interest in such a way that the selected group accurately reflects the characteristics of the larger population. A multi-stage sampling method has been used in this study to ensure representation from different rural areas of three blocks in this district. This technique includes two or more stages of sample selection and is used for primary data collection. The researcher has identified three blocks in North 24 Parganas with the highest, average, and lowest literacy rates. The selected blocks are: (1) Barrackpur-1, (2) Amdanga, and (3) Haroa. This selection is based on official government data (2011) (Tables 2–4). Two villages were selected from each block based on the highest literacy rates to ensure diversity in geographical location, population size, and development status. Twenty homes were chosen at random from each community. This is the main analytical unit.

Two family members who read the local newspaper at least three days a week were selected from each of the selected households. This ensured that the perspectives of different age groups and genders were captured. The total population for the study consists of 597,598 people in three blocks of the North 24 Parganas district of West Bengal. The three blocks selected from the North 24 Parganas district are Barrackpur-1, Amdanga, and Haroa.

Table 1. North 24 Parganas district.

Population (2011)	10009781
Literacy rate	84.06
Sex ratio	949

Table 2. Barrackpur-1.

Total population	191,524
Male	90,994
Female	86,654
Literacy rate	85.91%
Rural population	51%

Table 3. Amdanga.

Total population	191,673
Male	98,618
Female	93,055
Literacy rate	80.69%
Rural population	96.5%

Table 4. Haroa.

Total population	214,401
Male	111,080
Female	103,321
Literacy rate	73.13%
Rural population	73.13%

Table 5. Barrackpur 1 Block.

S.N.	Village name	Population	Literacy rate
1.	Kanpa	4,451	86.81%
2.	Majhi Para	3,280	80.56%

Table 6. Amdanga Block.

S.N.	Village name	Population	Literacy rate
1.	Hamidpur	1,164	68.90%
2.	Dariapur	6249	61.54%

Table 7. Haroa Block.

S.N.	Village name	Population	Literacy rate
1.	Mallickpur	1,499	71.25%
2.	Kalikapur	4,3781	51.52%

Data Collection

Survey Questionnaire

This study's data collection methods were primary and secondary. A structured, close-ended questionnaire was developed to gather data from the chosen participants aligned with the study's themes (Tables 5–7). The questionnaire was created with the study's themes in mind. In addition to being a very successful strategy, using a closed-ended questionnaire is also quite economical. It comes highly recommended as it simplifies coding and analysis. The questionnaire consists of sections covering demographics, local newspaper readership habits, newspaper reading for rural development news, and the role of local newspapers in rural development. Questions related to the content and sources of their knowledge can help assess the influence of local newspapers.

Interviews

In these blocks, semi-structured interviews were carried out with selected local newspaper editors and selected local government officials. This method was employed to identify the research problems and acquire answers to them. It has several key questions related to the research. The interviews provided valuable context and information. They were recorded and transcribed for future analysis.

Development of Scale

To create the questionnaire, we first identified the study's target audience, sample, objectives, and hypotheses. We then formulated study variables and items for the questionnaire. Subsequently, we developed the questionnaire, designed appropriate scales, and determined the appropriate statistical tests for analysis. Five variations of the 'Likert scale' were used in the questionnaire. The first scale consisted of 'strongly agree', 'agree', 'disagree', 'strongly disagree', and 'don't know'. The Likert scale is frequently utilized in surveys to assess individuals' attitudes, opinions, or behaviors.

Data Analysis

Quantitative Analysis

Quantitative data was collected through a survey questionnaire. The researchers used an individual questionnaire to collect responses and recorded them for future reference. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) analysis validated the questionnaire and data. This program was used to analyze the data and test the study hypotheses statistically. The data collected from the survey was coded and entered into SPSS. Necessary parametric tests, including *T*-test and regression analysis, were used to compare the utilization of local newspaper readership on knowledge of developmental issues between the highest, average, and lowest literacy rate blocks in North 24 Parganas district. A non-parametric chi-square test was applied to the data to calculate the results.

Qualitative Analysis

The interviews with local newspaper editors and local government officials on this subject involved open-ended questions intended to gather as much detail and personal insight as the interviewees were willing to provide. The data and content were analyzed to understand better the contextual factors and nuances of the local newspaper readership and their impact on knowledge.

Conversations with local newspaper readers in the selected areas helped clarify the thesis's findings. A common perspective emerged regarding the vital role of a local newspaper in sharing developmental news in rural areas and the challenges faced by the local newspaper in their publication and community engagement.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, while local newspapers hold immense potential in driving rural development, their effectiveness is contingent upon enhanced accessibility, improved literacy rates and integration with digital media platforms. Policymakers should support the growth of local newspapers through subsidies, literacy campaigns, and digital transformation initiatives to ensure equitable access to information in rural areas.

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