THE ROLE OF NEW MEDIA IN THE ELECTORAL POLITICS IN WEST BENGAL (2014-2024)

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Introduction

The decade from 2014 to 2024 marks a transformative epoch in West Bengal's electoral politics, driven by the meteoric rise of new media platforms such as Instagram, X, WhatsApp, and YouTube, which have fundamentally reshaped the dynamics of political communication, voter mobilization, and civic engagement. In a state renowned for its vibrant democratic culture, consistently achieving voter turnout rates exceeding 80 per cent (ECI 2021), and characterized by intense partisan rivalries between the Trinamool Congress (TMC) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), alongside the declining influence of the Left Front, new media has emerged as a powerful force. It has democratised access to political discourse, empowered youth aged 18–30—who constitute 30–40 per cent of the electorate—to take on multifaceted roles as voters, campaigners, content creators, and influencers, and amplified innovative campaign strategies that resonate deeply with West Bengal's rich Bengali cultural identity and regional pride. This period has witnessed landmark electoral cycles, including Lok Sabha elections (2014, 2019, 2024), Assembly elections (2016, 2021), each showcasing the growing influence of digital platforms in shaping voter behaviour and electoral outcomes.

However, this digital revolution is a double-edged sword, introducing significant challenges such as the rampant proliferation of misinformation, with 30 per cent of 2021 X posts containing unverified claims (Neyazi et al., 2021), the deepening of polarised discourse through algorithmic echo chambers, and a persistent rural-urban digital divide, with only 40 per cent of rural youth online compared to 70 per cent in urban areas (IAMAI 2022). These issues threaten democratic integrity, particularly among youth, who exhibit a 68 per cent trust in fake news (Table 2) and with 30 per cent avoiding online political discussions due to toxicity (IAMAI 2022). This synopsis synthesises findings from a comprehensive six-chapter, meticulously dissecting how new media has empowered youth through campaigns like TMC's "Khela Hobe" (2021) and movements like Hokkolorob (2014) and RG Kar (2024), while confronting systemic vulnerabilities that undermine trust and inclusivity. Grounded in robust theoretical frameworks—Manuel Castells' (2012) networked societies, which highlights decentralised power through information flows; Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg's (2012) connective action, emphasizing personalised digital engagement; danah boyd's (2014) networked publics, framing digital spaces as sites for collective action; and Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan's (2017) information disorder, categorising misinformation's disruptive effects—this study

positions West Bengal as a microcosm of India's digital electoral evolution. It offers critical insights for global democracies navigating the complex interplay of technological innovation, cultural resonance, and democratic integrity in linguistically diverse, politically polarised societies.

Scope of the Study

This research adopts an expansive yet focused scope, examining the transformative role of new media in West Bengal's electoral politics from 2014 to 2024 across multiple electoral cycles: Lok Sabha elections (2014, 2019, 2024), Assembly elections (2016, 2021), The primary focus is on youth engagement among the 18–30 age group, a pivotal demographic driving voter turnout, which increased from 73 per cent in 2016 to 78 per cent in 2021 (ECI 2021), and shaping political narratives through platforms like Instagram, X, WhatsApp, and YouTube, where 67 per cent of youth source their news (Table 1). The study analyses political campaigns, such as TMC's "Khela Hobe" (2021), which mobilized youth through Bengali memes and Instagram reels, and BJP's "Bengal With Modi" (2019), which leveraged YouTube ads to target urban voters, alongside youth-led movements like Hokkolorob (2014) and RG Kar (2024), which used hashtags and visual storytelling to drive policy reforms and influence electoral outcomes in urban constituencies like Kolkata South and Jadavpur.

The scope incorporates global parallels, such as the Arab Spring's Twitter-driven protests (Howard & Hussain 2013) and Occupy Wall Street's decentralized activism (Juris, 2012), to contextualize West Bengal's experience, while drawing on national examples like AAP's 2015 Delhi campaign, which used social media to engage urban youth (Kumar, 2019). It emphasizes West Bengal's unique socio-political fabric, characterized by linguistic diversity, with Bengali content dominating digital narratives, and intense TMC-BJP rivalry that amplifies polarized discourse. Key challenges, including misinformation (68 per cent youth trust in fake news, Table 2), polarization (30 per cent youth avoiding online discussions, IAMAI 2022), and the digital divide (40 per cent rural vs. 70 per cent urban internet access), are examined to assess inclusivity and propose solutions. Exclusions include pre-2014 traditional media dynamics, non-electoral activism, and unrelated digital phenomena to maintain a sharp focus on new media's impacts on electoral processes, youth agency, and democratic integrity. By integrating quantitative metrics, such as platform preferences (36 per cent YouTube, 24 per cent WhatsApp, Table 3), and

qualitative case studies, the study aims to provide actionable recommendations, such as scaling digital literacy and bridging access gaps, to ensure equitable participation across West Bengal's diverse demographic landscape.

Review of Literature

The academic literature provides a comprehensive foundation for understanding new media's role in electoral politics, weaving together global, national, and regional perspectives to frame West Bengal's experience. Globally, Howard and Hussain (2013) analyse the Arab Spring, where X and Facebook facilitated real-time protest coordination and lowered participation barriers for youth, offering direct parallels to West Bengal's Hokkolorob movement, which used #Hokkolorob to mobilise 30,000–100,000 protesters (Ghosh 2015). Juris (2012) and Bennett and Segerberg (2012) explore connective action in movements like Occupy Wall Street, where decentralized digital networks enabled scalable activism without traditional hierarchies, a model applicable to RG Kar's global resonance via #JusticeForRGKar, which generated 250,000 X posts (Times of India, 2024). Castells' (2012) networked societies framework illuminates how digital platforms redistribute power from elites to citizens, relevant to West Bengal's youth creating and sharing content like "Khela Hobe" reels, which amassed millions of views (Chatterjee 2022). Loader et al. (2014) and Vromen (2017) emphasize social media's role in fostering networked citizenship, where youth engage in elections through content creation, aligning with West Bengal's 67 per cent youth reliance on new media for news (Table 1).

In the Indian context, Banaji and Buckingham (2013) discuss "civic play," where platforms like YouTube and WhatsApp blend entertainment and activism, as seen in TMC's culturally resonant campaigns that boosted youth turnout by 5 per cent in 2021 (ECI 2021). Kumar (2019) analyses AAP's 2015 Delhi campaign, which used social media to engage urban voters, mirroring TMC's hyper-local WhatsApp strategies in constituencies like Howrah and Hooghly. Udupa (2018) and Neyazi et al. (2021) highlight misinformation's impact, noting WhatsApp's role in spreading false narratives during India's 2019 elections, similar to the 2019 Asansol doctored video in West Bengal, which reached 50 per cent of internet users (Mukherjee 2019). Regionally Ray (2018) and Chatterjee (2022) trace West Bengal's media evolution from traditional outlets like *Anandabazar Patrika* to digital platforms but underexplore youth agency, rural dynamics, and the digital divide (40 per cent rural access IAMAI 2022). Wardle and Derakhshan

(2017) categorise information disorder, framing the risks of fake news (68 per cent youth trust, Table 2), while Sunstein (2017) and Pariser (2011) discuss filter bubbles amplifying polarisation, as seen in #KhelaHobe vs. #JaiShriRam debates that alienated 30 per cent of youth from online discourse (IAMAI 2022). This thesis bridges these gaps, integrating quantitative data from ECI reports (2014–2024), IAMAI surveys (2022), and appendices (VII–XVIII) with qualitative case studies to offer a youth-focused, region-specific analysis of digital electoral politics in West Bengal's linguistically diverse, politically charged context.

Research Objective

- To analyze the transformative impact of new media platforms (e.g., WhatsApp, X, YouTube) on political mobilisation and voter engagement in India's national elections, and in West Bengal's electoral politics from 2014 to 2024, highlighting their role in shaping vernacular narratives and voter behaviour.
- To investigate the influence of fake news amplified by new media on voter polarization and electoral outcomes in West Bengal's elections from 2014 to 2024, comparing regional trends with national and international contexts, and evaluating the effectiveness of countermeasures like fact-checking, AI, and digital literacy programs.
- To explore the role of youth in West Bengal's electoral politics through new media-driven campaigns, such as the Hokkolorob (2014) and RG Kar (2024) movements, assessing their impact on electoral narratives, voter turnout, and susceptibility to misinformation and polarisation from 2014 to 2024.
- To propose strategies and policy frameworks for combating fake news, enhancing digital literacy, and addressing rural-urban digital divides in West Bengal's electoral politics from 2014 to 2024, ensuring new media serves as a tool for democratic empowerment while mitigating its divisive effects.

Research Questions

- What are the unique socio-political and cultural factors in West Bengal that have shaped the adoption and impact of new media in electoral politics across Lok Sabha, Assembly, and local elections from 2014 to 2024?
- How have youth-driven new media campaigns, such as the Hokkolorob and RG Kar movements, shaped electoral narratives and voter turnout in West Bengal's elections from 2014 to 2024?
- What are the comparative effectiveness and ethical implications of political parties' youth-targeted new media strategies (e.g., TMC's "Khela Hobe" and BJP's "Bengal With Modi") in West Bengal's electoral campaigns from 2014 to 2024?

Hypotheses

- The increased adoption of new media platforms (e.g., WhatsApp, X, and YouTube) by political parties in West Bengal from 2014 to 2024 significantly enhances voter turnout and engagement, particularly in urban constituencies.
- Youth-driven new media campaigns in West Bengal, such as the Hokkolorob (2014) and RG Kar (2024) movements, significantly influence electoral narratives and voter behaviour.

Research Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach to investigate the role of new media in India's and West Bengal's electoral politics from 2014 to 2024, combining qualitative and quantitative methods for a comprehensive analysis across five chapters. Qualitative methods include semi-structured interviews with political strategists (e.g., TMC, BJP), NGO representatives (e.g., BVA, DEN), fact-checkers (e.g., AltNews), and youth activists from movements like Hokkolorob (2014) and RG Kar (2024), alongside focus groups with urban and rural voters to explore perceptions of new media and fake news. Content analysis of platforms (X, WhatsApp, YouTube) examines vernacular campaigns (e.g., "Khela Hobe") and polarisation, while case studies (e.g., SVEEP 2021, RG Kar conspiracies) and archival research of election reports (2014–2024) provide contextual depth. Quantitative methods involve surveys of 1,000 West Bengal voters, stratified by age, gender, and residence, to measure platform engagement (e.g 70 per cent youth

exposure in 2023) and misinformation impact (e.g., 45 per cent believing communal narratives in 2021), supported by secondary data from Election Commission reports and social media analytics (e.g., 10 million Instagram views, 84% turnout in 2021). Statistical tools like SPSS will test hypotheses, such as correlations between new media and polarization, visualized through frequency tables and charts.

The study uses purposive sampling for qualitative depth and probability sampling (stratified and cluster) for survey representativeness, with thematic analysis via NVivo for qualitative data and regression analysis for quantitative data to explore causal relationships, such as NGO campaigns' impact on turnout. Ethical considerations prioritize informed consent, anonymity, and data security, with cross-verification and fact-checking to mitigate biases and misinformation risks. This mixed-methods design ensures empirical rigor and contextual richness, addressing the complex interplay of new media, NGOs, fake news, and youth engagement in West Bengal's electoral landscape.

Chapter Scheme

Chapter I lays the foundation for understanding new media's role in West Bengal elections (2014–2024). It defines new media as interactive, internet-driven platforms (YouTube, Facebook, X, Instagram, WhatsApp, blogs) that enable instant, two-way communication—unlike traditional one-way media. It introduces the Election Commission of India (ECI)—an independent body since 1950 running fair elections using EVMs, VVPAT, NOTA, and digital tools. Key political parties include TMC (Mamata's "Ma-Mati-Manush"), BJP, INC, CPI(M), and AAP, all now using digital campaigns. Campaigning shifted from door-to-door and rallies to social media, AI targeting, and memes (#KhelaHobe). India's media evolved from colonial newspapers (1780) → state TV (Doordarshan) → private channels (1991) → 900M+ internet users post-Jio (2023), with 65 per cent preferring Bengali content. New media empowers youth and grassroots voices but fuels misinformation (70 per cent fake WhatsApp forwards), deepfakes, and polarization. A digital divide persists: 78 per cent urban vs. 52 per cent rural access, only 16 per cent rural women own smartphones. AI & big data now drive hyper-targeted ads and fake videos, raising ethical concerns. ECI and IT Rules 2021 fight fake news (1.2M posts removed in 2024), but rural gaps remain. Bottom line: New media democratized

politics but risks trust and fairness—urgent need for digital literacy, fact-checking, and rural internet. Sets stage for deeper study in later chapters.

Next chapter traces the seismic evolution of West Bengal's media landscape from traditional dominance (47 per cent TV reliance pre-2014, Appendix VII) to new media ascendance post-2014 (67 per cent youth news consumption, Table 1), driven by smartphone proliferation (500 million users by 2022) and affordable data (IAMAI 2022). It analyses landmark campaigns like TMC's "Khela Hobe" (2021), which used Instagram reels and X hashtags (500K posts) to drive a 213-seat victory, and BJP's "Bengal With Modi" (2019), which leveraged YouTube ads to gain 18 seats, particularly in urban areas like Barrackpore (Ray, 2019). The chapter applies Castells' (2012) networked societies to illustrate decentralized engagement and Bennett and Segerberg's (2012) connective action to highlight youth-driven content sharing. It explores how Bengali content enhances cultural resonance but notes challenges like algorithmic polarization (31 per cent misinformation source, Table 4) and the digital divide (40% rural access), which limit rural outreach in districts like Jhargram, necessitating hybrid strategies.

Third chapter examines NGOs' pivotal role in leveraging new media for voter education and transparency, enhancing democratic participation. The Bengal Voters' Association's VoteCheck app (120K downloads) enabled voters to verify rolls, boosting minority turnout by 6 per cent in Darjeeling (Democratic Engagement Network 2024). The Democratic Engagement Network's KukuFM podcasts (180K listeners) provided multilingual voter guides, particularly in rural areas. These initiatives align with networked publics (boyd, 2014), creating accessible digital spaces for civic engagement. However, challenges like 30 per cent unverified X posts in 2021 (Neyazi et al., 2021) and limited rural internet access (40 per cent) underscore the need for broader outreach and regulatory support to counter misinformation and ensure inclusivity.

Fourth chapter dissects misinformation's threat to electoral integrity, with 30% of 2021 X posts containing unverified claims, influencing 10–15 per cent of votes in constituencies like Nandigram (Neyazi et al., 2021). Notable cases include the 2019 Asansol doctored video (50 per cent internet reach) and 2024 RG Kar deepfakes, which fueled communal tensions (Times of India, 2024). Political parties (42 per cent) and algorithms (31 per cent) drive misinformation (Table 4), with exposure rising from 48 per cent in Hokkolorob to 71 per cent in RG Kar (Table 5). Wardle and Derakhshan's (2017)

information disorder framework highlights these risks. Countermeasures like Alt News fact-checking, ECI's SVEEP campaigns, and AI-driven detection face limitations due to rural access barriers (40 per cent internet) and weak IT Act enforcement (15 per cent prosecution, The Wire 2023), requiring scalable solutions.

Next chapter details youth activism through movements like Hokkolorob (100K #Hokkolorob posts) and RG Kar (250K #JusticeForRGKar posts), which drove policy reforms and influenced urban votes in 2016 and 2024 bypolls. Youth rely heavily on new media for news (67 per cent, Table 1) but are vulnerable to fake news (68 per cent trust, Table 2), necessitating robust interventions. Party strategies, like TMC's reels and BJP's YouTube ads, highlight cultural resonance's role in turnout, with TMC's Bengali content outperforming BJP's nationalistic approach. The chapter applies connective action (Bennett & Segerberg 2012) to youth sharing and notes urban bias, with rural engagement limited by the digital divide.

Last chapter synthesizes findings, emphasising youth agency in driving turnout (78 per cent in 2021) and shaping narratives through campaigns and movements. It highlights misinformation (42 per cent from parties, Table 4) and polarisation (30 per cent youth avoidance, IAMAI 2022) as key threats, exacerbated by the digital divide (40 per cent rural access). Recommendations include ethical strategies, regulations, and literacy programs to harness new media's potential. The chapter concludes that youth, as democratic torchbearers, can leverage digital platforms to foster inclusive participation, provided systemic challenges are addressed through multi-stakeholder collaboration.

Findings

- The findings of this show that new media completely changed West Bengal's electoral politics between 2014 and 2024. Before 2014, television was the main news source for forty-seven per cent of youth, newspapers reached fourteen per cent, and word-of-mouth was only four per cent. After 2014, new media became the top source for sixty-seven per cent of youth, while television dropped to twenty-two per cent, newspapers to seven per cent, radio to three per cent, and word-of-mouth to one percent. YouTube was the favorite platform for thirty-six per cent of youth, WhatsApp for twenty-four per cent, Instagram for fifteen per cent, and X for seven per cent. More than five hundred million smartphones across India and sixty per cent of West Bengal youth being online made this shift possible. Traditional newspapers like Anandabazar Patrika

and channels like 24 Ghanta lost control because digital platforms allowed instant sharing and direct contact with voters.

- Youth aged eighteen to thirty, who form thirty to forty percent of the electorate, became the most important group in elections. They did not just vote but also created and spread political messages. Seventy-four per cent of people active in new media protests were youth, and seventy-eight per cent of them voted in the 2021 Assembly elections, which was five per cent higher than in 2016. Thirty-seven per cent joined political WhatsApp groups, and forty-five per cent shared unverified news during protests. Sixty-eight percent of fifteen to twenty-five-year-olds believed fake news was rarely or sometimes true. Results in urban seats like Kolkata South and Jadavpur by joining campaigns and street actions.

- Political parties changed their plans to reach youth through new media. The Trinamool Congress won the 2021 Assembly elections with two hundred thirteen out of two hundred ninety-four seats by using the “Khela Hobe” campaign. This campaign had more than five hundred thousand X posts, five hundred thousand Instagram reel views, and one million views for the “Banglar Gorbo Mamata” videos. The Bharatiya Janata Party increased its Lok Sabha seats from two to eighteen in 2019 with the “Bengal With Modi” campaign. It used ten thousand WhatsApp groups and Bengali-dubbed YouTube videos. The Left Front tried the “Jonogoner Gorbo” campaign in 2021 with YouTube documentaries and Instagram reels that got one hundred thousand views, but it won zero seats. WhatsApp messages made for specific areas worked best in villages.

- Student movements proved that youth could use new media to force change and affect elections. The Hokkolorob protest started in 2014 at Jadavpur University over a harassment case and police attack. The hashtag #Hokkolorob got more than one hundred thousand X posts, a Facebook page gained fifty thousand likes, and rallies brought thirty thousand to one hundred thousand people. YouTube songs became protest anthems. The vice-chancellor resigned in January 2015, and this hurt the Trinamool Congress in urban areas during the 2016 elections. Fake news reached forty-eight per cent of the movement. In 2024, the RG Kar movement began after a doctor’s rape and murder. The hashtag #JusticeForRGKar had two hundred fifty thousand X posts, Instagram safety reels got millions of views, and WhatsApp helped protests in rural districts. Protests spread to more than one hundred cities worldwide.

The movement made hospital leaders resign and led to Supreme Court security orders. It lowered Trinamool Congress support in city by polls. Fake news reached seventy-one per cent here.

- Fake news became a serious danger to fair elections. Thirty percent of X posts in the 2021 elections had false claims. Forty-two per cent of youth said political parties created fake news, and thirty-one percent blamed social media systems. Political fake news was seventy-nine per cent in the RG Kar case and sixty-three per cent in Hok kolorob. A fake video in Asansol in 2019 reached fifty percent of internet users. False rumors about Suvendu Adhikari's defection confused Nandigram voters in 2021. Deepfakes in the RG Kar case blamed minority groups. These lies changed ten to fifteen percent of votes in close races and increased fights between communities.

- Polarisation hurt open discussion. Hashtags like #KhelaHobe and #JaiShriRam created closed groups where people only saw one side. Thirty per cent of youth stopped talking about politics online because of insults. Forty-five per cent shared unverified news during protests. Algorithms pushed extreme content, and hate words appeared twenty-nine percent of the time in message clouds. Young people got stuck in one-sided views and moved away from moderate ideas.

- The gap between city and village limited equal participation. Seventy per cent of urban youth had internet, but only forty percent in rural areas did. Village youth depended on WhatsApp messages that were often wrong. Campaigns and fact-checking reached cities more than villages. Literacy programs stayed mostly in urban centers. Districts like Jhargram and Purulia had little digital activity, so their voters had less say.

- Efforts to fight fake news had some success but many problems. Fact-checking groups like Alt News and Boom Live stopped lies quickly. WhatsApp limits on forwarding reduced spread. Artificial intelligence tools marked deepfakes on X starting in 2023. However, only fifteen per cent of reported cases were punished under the Information Technology Act from 2019 to 2023. Rural literacy programs were missing, and most fact-checking was in English, not Bengali. More village internet, local-language apps, and school training were needed.

- Theories helped explain the changes. Castells said networked societies move power through digital information. Bennett and Segerberg described connective action where

youth make and share their own content without leaders. boyd explained networked publics where hashtags and reels create shared meaning. Wardle and Derakhshan defined information disorder as a threat to democracy from fake news.

- Election results showed clear new media effects. Sixty per cent of voters used social media for news in 2021, helping the Trinamool Congress win big. The Bharatiya Janata Party gained city seats in 2019 through YouTube and X. Fake news in the RG Kar case hurt the Trinamool Congress in 2024 city bypolls. Local elections from 2015 to 2021 had two to two-and-a-half per cent lower turnout in areas with heavy misinformation.

- Policy steps are necessary now. Parties must use honest content without deepfakes and focus on local culture instead of division. Government should enforce the Information Technology Act, require clear digital ads, and pay for village internet. The Election Commission and its literacy programs need Bengali digital education in every school and village camps. Platforms must limit message forwarding, mark artificial intelligence content, and add fact-check buttons. Youth and non-government groups can start student checking teams and train influencers to verify facts.

- West Bengal showed patterns seen elsewhere but had its own special features. It was similar to the Arab Spring with Twitter protests, the Aam Aadmi Party in Delhi 2015 with WhatsApp groups, and the United States 2016 with algorithmic bots. Its differences included strong Bengali language use in campaigns, a long history of student activism since Naxalbari, and the Trinamool Congress focus on regional pride against the Bharatiya Janata Party's national message. The state proved that local language, youth energy, and new media together create huge election power.

- Overall, new media opened West Bengal politics, made it faster, and put youth in control. It raised voter turnout, forced leaders to answer, and let local culture shape big contests. However, fake news, hate speech, and access gaps damaged trust and unity. Strong rules, education, and honest behaviour are the only way to keep digital tools helpful for fair democracy. West Bengal's story teaches India and the world how to balance technology and truth in elections.

West Bengal's media landscape has undergone a profound transformation from traditional dominance to new media ascendance post-2014, driven by widespread smartphone adoption (500 million users by 2022) and affordable internet access, with 60 per cent of

youth engaging online (IAMAI 2022). Pre-2014, traditional outlets like *Anandabazar Patrika*, *Bartaman*, and *24 Ghanta* shaped voter perceptions, with 47 per cent of 15–25-year-olds relying on television as their primary news source (Appendix VII). These outlets, deeply rooted in Bengali-language content, amplified regional narratives, such as TMC's "Ma, Mati, Manush" slogan in 2011, which resonated with urban voters and contributed to the party's rise, ending 34 years of Left Front rule (Ray 2018). Television's 24-hour news cycles and newspapers' in-depth editorials provided a structured, gatekept flow of information, but their reach was limited by urban bias, high costs, and slower dissemination, often failing to penetrate rural areas where word-of-mouth (1 per cent) and radio (3 per cent) held sway (Table 1).

The post-2014 era, coinciding with India's digital boom, marked a seismic shift, with new media platforms enabling decentralized, real-time communication that bypassed traditional gatekeepers and empowered citizens, particularly youth, to shape political narratives. YouTube (36 per cent), WhatsApp (24 per cent), Instagram (7 per cent), and X (5 per cent) dominate youth news preferences, surpassing television (22 per cent) and newspapers (7 per cent) (Table 3), reflecting a broader trend toward interactive, user-generated content that aligns with Castells' (2012) networked societies, where digital platforms redistribute power through information flows. TMC's "Khela Hobe" campaign in 2021, for instance, used Bengali idioms in Instagram reels and WhatsApp memes to connect with voters across urban and semi-urban constituencies like Howrah and Hooghly, contributing to a 5 per cent increase in youth turnout (ECI 2021). The enduring influence of Bengali content enhances cultural resonance, enabling parties to tailor messages that evoke regional pride, as seen in "Khela Hobe's" defiance against perceived external interference. However, challenges like algorithmic polarization, with 31 per cent of misinformation attributed to algorithms (Table 4), and the rural digital divide (40 per cent rural access vs. 70 per cent urban) limit inclusivity, particularly in rural districts like Jhargram and Purulia, where connectivity remains a barrier. These dynamics challenge democratic integrity, as rural youth remain underserved, underscoring the need for hybrid strategies that blend digital innovation with traditional grassroots outreach to ensure equitable participation across West Bengal's diverse socio-political landscape.

New media's interactivity, scalability, and capacity for hyper-localised content have revolutionized political campaigns in West Bengal, enabling parties to engage diverse voter segments with unprecedented precision and cultural relevance. TMC's "Khela

Hobe" campaign (2021) transformed a defiant Bengali slogan into a cultural phenomenon, leveraging Instagram reels (millions of views), X hashtags (500,000 posts), and WhatsApp memes targeting constituencies like Howrah, Hooghly, and Nadia. The campaign's emotional appeal, rooted in regional pride and resistance to perceived external threats from the BJP, drove a 78 per cent youth voter turnout, up from 73 per cent in 2016, and contributed to TMC's landslide victory of 213 out of 294 Assembly seats (Mukherjee 2021). TMC's strategic use of Bengali influencers, local folk references like Jatra performances, and hyper-localized content, such as memes tailored for specific constituencies, amplified its reach, particularly among urban and semi-urban youth (Chatterjee 2022). The BJP's "Bengal With Modi" campaign (2019) utilised YouTube advertisements, Instagram stories, and WhatsApp micro-targeting to promote nationalistic themes like Digital India, Swachh Bharat, and Ayushman Bharat, increasing its seat tally from 2 to 18, particularly in urban areas like Barrackpore, Dum Dum, and Kolkata North (Ray 2019). However, its reliance on national influencers like Bollywood celebrities and Hindi-centric content occasionally alienated rural voters, highlighting the critical importance of linguistic and cultural nuance in a state where Bengali identity is paramount.

The Left Front's "Jonogoner Gorbo" campaign (2021) employed YouTube documentaries and Instagram reels to emphasize its historical legacy of social justice, such as the Operation Barga land reforms and public healthcare initiatives, boosting membership in the Students' Federation of India by 15 per cent but failing to secure seats due to limited digital infrastructure compared to TMC's viral strategies (Ghosh 2022). These campaigns reflect Bennett and Segerberg's (2012) connective action, as youth amplified messages through peer-to-peer sharing, creating viral momentum that traditional media could not match. However, the algorithmic amplification of divisive content, such as #KhelaHobe versus #JaiShriRam debates, which pitted TMC's regionalist "Bengali pride" against BJP's nationalistic "Hindu unity," deepened polarization, with 79 per cent misinformation prevalence in RG Kar (Table 5). The digital divide further restricts rural engagement, with only 40 per cent of rural youth online, necessitating hybrid approaches that combine digital innovation with traditional grassroots efforts, such as door-to-door campaigns and radio broadcasts, to bridge access gaps and sustain voter mobilization across West Bengal's diverse constituencies.

West Bengal's youth have harnessed new media to challenge systemic injustices and shape electoral narratives, positioning themselves as central actors in the state's

democratic evolution and demonstrating the power of networked publics (boyd 2014). The 2014 Hokkolorob movement, sparked by a sexual harassment case and a violent police crackdown at Jadavpur University, utilized #Hokkolorob to trend nationally with over 100,000 X posts, mobilizing 30,000–100,000 protesters and forcing the vice-chancellor's resignation in 2015 (Ghosh 2015). X facilitated real-time updates on protest logistics, while WhatsApp enabled secure coordination among student groups, and YouTube's protest songs, like Rupam Islam's "Hokkolorob" and Kabir Suman's folk anthems, embedded the movement in Bengal's cultural consciousness, influencing urban voter sentiment in the 2016 Assembly elections, particularly in Kolkata South and Jadavpur (Chakraborty 2016). The 2024 RG Kar movement, triggered by the rape and murder of a trainee doctor at RG Kar Medical College, leveraged #JusticeForRGKar to generate over 250,000 X posts, achieving global resonance with solidarity protests in over 100 cities across India, the US, and Europe (Times of India 2024). Instagram reels under hashtags like "Reclaim Our Safety" amassed millions of views, and WhatsApp bridged rural-urban divides, amplifying protests in districts like Bankura, Purulia, and Murshidabad, unlike Hokkolorob's predominantly urban focus.

RG Kar's inclusive digital strategies, including multilingual reels and WhatsApp groups in Bengali and Hindi, marked a significant evolution, securing hospital resignations and Supreme Court-mandated security reforms, while impacting TMC's urban support in the 2024 bypolls (News18 2024). These movements align with Bennett and Segerberg's (2012) connective action, as youth personalized and shared content, creating scalable networks without centralized leadership. However, challenges like misinformation, with exposure rising from 48% in Hokkolorob to 71 per cent in RG Kar (Table 5), and urban bias, with only 40% of rural youth online (IAMAI 2022), limit their impact in rural areas, necessitating inclusive strategies that integrate offline outreach, such as community meetings and local radio campaigns, to ensure broader participation and sustain youth-driven momentum in West Bengal's electoral landscape.

The proliferation of fake news poses a formidable threat to West Bengal's electoral integrity, distorting voter perceptions, eroding trust in democratic institutions, and amplifying social divisions. During the 2021 Assembly elections, 30 per cent of X posts contained unverified claims, influencing an estimated 10–15 per cent of votes in closely contested constituencies like Nandigram and Bhabanipur (Neyazi et al 2021). Notable incidents include the 2019 Asansol doctored video, which falsely depicted communal

violence and reached 50 per cent of internet users, and 2024 RG Kar deepfakes alleging TMC cover-ups, which fueled communal and regional tensions (Times of India 2024). Youth are particularly susceptible, with 68 per cent of 15–25-year-olds viewing fake news as "rarely/sometimes true" (Table 2), driven by their heavy reliance on WhatsApp and X for news (67 per cent Table 1). Political parties (42 per cent) and social media algorithms (31 per cent) are primary misinformation sources (Table 4), with exposure rising significantly from 48 per cent in Hokkolorob to 71 per cent in RG Kar (Table 5), as per Wardle and Derakhshan's (2017) information disorder framework.

Polarized discourse, driven by algorithmic echo chambers as described by Sunstein's (2017) filter bubbles and Pariser's (2011) personalisation algorithms, exacerbates regional and communal divides, as seen in the 2021 #KhelaHobe versus #JaiShriRam debates, which pitted TMC's regionalist "Bengali pride" narrative against BJP's nationalistic "Hindu unity" rhetoric. This polarization alienates 30 per cent of youth from online political discussions due to fear of harassment and radicalizes others through exposure to extreme narratives, such as WhatsApp forwards inciting communal tensions in Asansol (IAMAI 2022). The RG Kar movement's apolitical stance mitigated some polarisation by focusing on justice, but misinformation spread rapidly, necessitating youth-led fact-checking efforts. The digital divide, with only 40 per cent of rural youth online compared to 70 per cent in urban areas (IAMAI 2022), further limits access to diverse perspectives, reinforcing urban-centric narratives and deepening social divisions that threaten West Bengal's cohesive political culture and democratic integrity.

Efforts to combat misinformation and polarisation include a range of fact-checking initiatives, media literacy campaigns, and technological interventions, but their effectiveness is constrained by systemic challenges. Alt News, a leading fact-checking organization, debunked false narratives like the 2021 Nandigram videos, reducing their spread through rapid verification on X and WhatsApp (Boom Live 2021). The Election Commission's Systematic Voters' Education and Electoral Participation (SVEEP) campaigns, launched before the 2021 elections, promoted media literacy through Bengali-language workshops, videos, and posters, targeting youth and urban voters in constituencies like Kolkata North. AI-driven deepfake detection tools, adopted by platforms like X in 2023, identified manipulated content in the RG Kar movement, with a projected 50–70 per cent reduction in misinformation spread if scaled effectively (Table 6 The Telegraph 2024). RG Kar's student-led fact-checking groups, which collaborated with

influencers to counter deepfakes, demonstrate youth initiative but lack scalability due to resource constraints and urban focus.

The rural-urban digital divide, with only 40 per cent of rural West Bengal online compared to 70 per cent in urban areas, restricts the effectiveness of digital literacy programs, as seen in the limited reach of SVEEP in districts like Jhargram, Purulia, and Murshidabad (IAMAI 2022). Weak enforcement of the Information Technology Act, with only 15 per cent of reported misinformation cases prosecuted between 2019 and 2023 (The Wire 2023), further hampers countermeasures, as does the lack of mandatory transparency in digital advertising, which allows unverified content to proliferate. Political parties' involvement in misinformation (42 per cent, Table 4) complicates enforcement, as partisan actors often evade accountability. Projections suggest that scaling AI-driven fact-checking hubs, establishing rural digital literacy centers, and implementing offline campaigns via radio and community workshops could reduce misinformation by 50–70 per cent (Table 6), but addressing the digital divide and regulatory gaps remains critical to ensuring equitable access to these interventions and sustaining democratic trust across West Bengal's diverse population.

To fully harness new media's power while reducing its risks, all stakeholders in West Bengal must work together. Political parties should follow TMC's example of using simple, local-language campaigns like "Khela Hobe" and avoid spreading hate or fake messages. Policymakers need clear rules to show who pays for online ads, punish those who spread lies, and build 4G towers in villages like Jhargram. They should also support fact-checkers like Alt News. Educators and NGOs can teach young people how to spot fake news in schools and through radio and workshops in rural areas. Youth should team up with influencers to share true information on Instagram and YouTube and always check before sharing. Social media platforms must limit message forwards, use AI to catch fake posts, and add Bengali language tools. Civil society can run awareness programs and work with local newspapers to spread correct news. When everyone does their part, new media becomes a strong tool for truth, trust, and fair elections in West Bengal.

From 2014 to 2024, new media has profoundly transformed West Bengal's electoral politics, empowering youth to drive voter turnout (78 per cent in 2021, up 5 per cent from 2016) and shape narratives through transformative campaigns like "Khela Hobe" (500K X posts) and movements like Hokkolorob (100K posts) and RG Kar

(#JusticeForRGKar, 250K posts). Platforms like Instagram, X, WhatsApp, and YouTube have democratized participation by enabling real-time, interactive engagement and bypassing traditional media gatekeepers, aligning with Castells' (2012) networked societies and Bennett and Segerberg's (2012) connective action. Youth agency is evident in Hokkolorob's mobilization of 30K–100K protesters, forcing a vice-chancellor's resignation, and RG Kar's global solidarity, securing Supreme Court-mandated reforms and impacting 2024 bypolls. However, the pervasive spread of misinformation, with 42 per cent attributed to political parties and 31 per cent to algorithms (Table 4), and polarized discourse, fueled by echo chambers like #KhelaHobe vs. #JaiShriRam, threaten democratic integrity. Youth vulnerability is high, with 68 per cent trusting fake news (Table 2) and 30 per cent avoiding online discussions due to toxicity (IAMAI 2022), exacerbated by the rural-urban digital divide (40 per cent rural vs. 70 per cent urban access, IAMAI 2022).

By implementing ethical campaign strategies, such as TMC's culturally resonant approaches, robust regulatory frameworks mandating ad transparency, widespread digital literacy programs tailored to rural areas, and youth-led fact-checking initiatives like RG Kar's student groups, West Bengal can mitigate these risks and leverage new media to foster a more inclusive, informed democracy. These concerted efforts will ensure that youth, as torchbearers of the state's vibrant democratic future, continue to harness digital platforms to advocate for justice, equality, and accountability, bridging divides and upholding the principles of a cohesive and participatory political landscape that reflects West Bengal's rich cultural heritage and democratic ethos.

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