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Democracy, Political Engagement and Social Media

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Abstract : The present paper is an attempt to understand the relationship between democracy, political engagement and social media. The researcher has identified political engagement as one of the basic pillars of a successful democracy. A meaningful, substantive, accountable and responsible democracy demands political engagements both from the political leaders and from the common people. The researcher has tried to show how the emergence of social media is helping in this political engagement. In doing so, researcher has tried to focus on democracy, role of political engagement in a democracy, role of media in political engagement and particularly the role played by social media in this political engagement or participation. It is not that political engagement is the only criteria of democracy, but it is beyond doubt that political engagement is one of the key criteria of democracy. It is equally true for media. Though media is not the only agency of political engagement, but it is surely the most effective agency of political engagement. Therefore, the researcher has tried to engage in an understanding of the interrelationship of the political trio.

Index Terms - Democracy, Political engagement, Political participation, Mass media, Social media, Politics.

I. INTRODUCTION

Most of the governments today are democratic in form. A democratic government is unique in the sense that it is a responsible and accountable government. To make the government accountable, the common people of a country participate in the governance, making it a popular government. This participation today is not a direct participation in governance, rather democratic governments today are representative in nature. To make a meaningful representation of one's own ideas and opinion, people need to politically engage themselves. Thus popular engagement is a must in any modern democracy. The best way to participate politically is through media and of late social media. Thus the relevance of social media in political engagement for a healthy democracy is the main theme of this paper.

II. LITERATURE SURVEY

Since this research is mainly based on secondary data, literature survey is one of the most important parameters of the work. Several books and articles have provided interesting insights to the study. Various online platforms have been equally helpful. Academic researches on democracy, political participation, political engagement, media, including social media have provided much required input on the topic. Since, social media is an emerging field of study, the online articles have been particularly helpful for the research work.

III. METHODOLOGY

The present study is mainly based on the secondary data in the form of inputs collected from several books and articles regarding the topic. The scope of field survey was not so high in this particular research work. Therefore, inclusion of primary data is very restricted. Rather the work is particularly based on the literary understanding of the topic from various researches.

IV. DEFINING DEMOCRACY

The word democracy originates from the Greek words "demos" and "kratos". The word 'demos' signifies people and the word 'kratos' means power. Therefore, democracy in a sentence can be defined as the "power of the people"- a type of governance which rests on the power of the people. Democracy is just opposite to the idea of autocracy or dictatorship, where one person rules and is also different from the concept of oligarchy where a small segment of the society rules the other. The concept of democracy particularly derives its moral strength from its two basic pillars – (a) individual autonomy which promotes the idea that people should govern their own lives with reason and (b) equality – the idea which shares the view that everyone should enjoy same and equal opportunity to influence the governing decisions which affects the people in society.

The concept of democracy first evolved among the Greeks. The Greek model was established in the 5th century BC, in the city of Athens. All around the world then we saw the popular practise of autocracies and oligarchies, but Athenian democracy was not only an exception in the world, but also had two other defining characteristics which made it special. Firstly, they had a direct form of democracy, i.e. instead of electing representatives to govern on the people's behalf, "the people" themselves met, discussed questions of government, and then implemented policy. Secondly, such a concept was feasible because "the people" was a very limited category. Only a small part of the population could only directly participate as the women, slaves, aliens and the children were all excluded. Presently, there are many forms of democracy which are unique from one another and none can be labelled as a "model". These forms of democracies include presidential and parliamentary democracies, democracies that are federal or unitary, democracies that use a proportional voting system and ones that use a majoritarian system etc. But, the characteristic that is common to all the existing democracies and which also distinguishes them from the ancient models is the use of representatives of the people. Instead of direct popular participation in the law making, modern democracies use elections to elect representatives who are sent by the people to govern on their behalf. Thus, the model of democracy prevalent today is representative democracy.

V. POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT/ POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

The most responsible way to run a democratic government is engagement of the people in governance. Here, political engagement and political participation have been used interchangeably. Political engagement is the participation of the citizens in governance of the country in general and particularly in selecting and sanctioning the leaders who become power holders in government. Political engagement includes within it different actions of the citizens as voters, actual and potential challengers for leadership positions in government, and also participation in certain organized groups that act as pressure groups to the elected participations or government. Political participation actually includes within it a wide range of activities through which people inculcate their opinions and express those opinions and try to take part and shape the governmental decisions which ultimately affect their lives. These activities range from developing political ideas, joining different political organizations and groups and campaigning for or against the government at the local, regional or national level to the process of formal politics like voting, doing organized politics and standing for elections. It needs to be mentioned here that ordinary people can participate in politics including people with disabilities as all individual has the right to engage politically. Therefore, political participation implies that a person is participating in the political process by making his or her opinion and beliefs known. In the social sciences, the term 'political participation' is used to describe an action taken by a citizen to influence the outcome of a political event or issue. Political participation can take on many forms like voting, protests, public consultations, signing a petition, blogging, political donations, and the like. There are certain factors which affect political participation and those includes gender, age, education, place of residence, family, community affiliation, unemployment, income, poverty, economic growth, social relationships, regional affiliations etc. Some other factors which also affect political participations are constitutional right to vote, performance of the elected politicians, political trust, party activities etc.

VI. IMPORTANCE OF POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT IN DEMOCRACY

Political engagement is one of the key characteristics of a healthy democracy. A healthy democracy rests on the principle of 'of the people, by the people and for the people'. So, we can consider people as the fundamental pillar of any democracy. What exactly do we mean by popular democracy? From one angle, popular democracy is about building power from communities up and empowering people to participate fully in their democracy. So, it is very clear at the outset that popular democracy rests on people's participation or political engagement from utmost upper to the grass root lower level. Since, democracy rests on people's voice, therefore political engagement is a must in any democracy. Now, these political engagements not necessarily mean active political participation like walking in rallies or seeking donations or political propaganda, but also include latent / disguised political engagements like building up of political opinion, sharing of political ideas among their group members or associations, shaping and re-shaping of political ideologies etc. Whatever the implications of political engagements, i.e. whether in broader or narrower aspect, it is an unavoidable truth that popular engagement is the basis of any democracy. Since democracy is a number game, the more it will be able to engage people in politics more wide will be its support base. Political engagement is not only effective for a ruling political party but is also equally effective for the oppositional political parties. Each and every political party needs popular involvement or engagement as it widens their support base. But one thing needs to be mentioned here that political engagement is important for both the political leaders and the common people.

Now, we will look into the issue that how political engagement is vital for the common people and the political party leaders. Firstly, we will look into the matter from the political leader's point of view. Why political party leaders emphasis on political engagement? Primarily it is true that political leaders need political engagement to build their support base through which they can themselves come into governance position and can make their party eligible as ruling party. But this coming into power is not an one time activity. Leaders not only need to engage actively in politics but with the common people also, as democracy is a number game. With the active support of the common people, the leaders can achieve a governmental position. But mere achievement of governmental position is not all, because the leaders need to keep on holding the position for long. It is definitely important to achieve a position in governance but is equally important to remain in that position. For remaining in that position the leaders must remain in constant touch with the people, because it is the common people who contribute politically to make the leader a successful political office holder. If the political leader loses all popular attachment with the common people, after coming into power, then that decreases his scope of re-election in the position. Democratic politics is a continuous game where every leader gets a chance of re-election after every five year (particularly in India). So, for repetition of political term, the leaders need constant political support and engagement with the common people. This importance of political engagement is equally important for such a political person or party activists from the oppositional politics who aspires to come to power.

The issue of political engagement is also relevant for the common people of the country. The primary reason for this is that democracy implies a responsible government which remain accountable to the common people. In a democracy, the people have the right to choose their own representatives through the electoral process. These elected representatives form the legitimate government and take part in the decision making and law making processes on behalf of the people. If these elected representatives fail to fulfil

the demands of the people, then the people have the right to not elect those representatives in the next elections. The government always remain accountable to the electorate in a democracy. Citizens have the right to vote against their representatives or the entire government if the policies are not pro-people or the laws are not effectively executed. Moreover, the citizens can approach the judiciary in a democracy if the government takes any anti-people decisions or implement such laws which are detrimental to the interest of the common people. Now, to understand the pulse of the government, to scrutinize the role of their elected representatives, the people should remain politically engaged. The evaluation of the government through their elected representatives is both a political right and a duty on part of the citizens of a country. Mere election of the representatives by the people is not enough, rather the people should keep their representatives accountable, people must always keep themselves politically engaged. Political engagement of the people is a basic necessity in any democracy because by remaining politically engaged, people can scrutinize the entire political situation, the working of the political leaders – the promises made by them and the work done to fulfil promises. Until and unless the people remain politically engaged they will not be able to gather the much needed political information by which they will be able to assess the political situation of the country. An ‘apolitical’ person who does not participate in politics (atleast theoretically), but only cast his vote at regular intervals does harm to politics itself as that practice only gives birth to a procedural democracy not a substantive one. There is a basic qualitative difference between the procedural and substantive democracy. Procedural democracy implies such a democracy which only follows the procedures of democracy. On the other hand, substantive democracy is that democracy which apart from just following the procedures of democracy, is also a qualitatively rich democracy. While procedural democracy emphasizes on quantity and procedures, substantive democracy emphasizes on qualitative part of democracy along with quantity. Therefore, to make a democracy substantive, responsible and accountable, political engagement has no substitute.

VII. MEDIA AND POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

There are many agencies of political engagements, among which media play the most vital role. The media has a major role to play in political engagements, as media has a powerful influence on political reality because it designs public opinion and lays the foundations of political ideology. In any democratic society, the media plays a very crucial role as it is a channel of communication through which the exchange of views and opinions take place between the people in power/position and the general public. In a liberal democracy, the role of the media is particularly crucial as it facilitates public discourse, informs the public, engage them politically, and most importantly act as a watchdog of the government. German intellectual Jurgen Habermas defines the media as such a space for public discourse, which must guarantee universal access and national debate in society. People by relying on the media as ‘consumers’ can engage in subtle political activities which can range from developing public opinion to the power of criticizing the political positions. Thus, media helps in political engagement of both the common people and the political leaders. The political leaders who need to remain in touch with their potential voters, or need to answer the criticisms of their oppositions or just want public propaganda, have to use different mass media to fulfil such interests. Moreover, common people who wants to engage politically needs much political information as ‘inputs’, which enhances their political knowledge base and thus they can contribute back politically which acts as their political outputs.

VIII. SOCIAL MEDIA AND POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

The onset of the information age has marked a revolution in the relationship between politics and media. In this new media environment, shaped by social networks and blogs, the general public is no longer a passive observer, but an active player. The new media has restructured the style of political engagement which is somewhere different and developed than conventional media like – newspapers, television, radio etc. The new social media has enhanced the scope of political engagements for all and particularly has been a new avenue of political participation for the youths and women. Social media being an interactive medium gives enough scope of political participation. Social media helps both the common people and politicians to actively engage in politics. These new social media are forms of communication that facilitate the production, dissemination and exchange of political content on platforms and within networks that accommodate interaction and collaboration. Social media today has drastically transformed the ways in which government institutions function and political leaders communicate. Social media fulfils the basic functions of any media, i.e. it informs the public by providing citizens with the much needed information to make logical decisions regarding leadership and governance. New media provides a platform for public discussion of issues, and provide a forum for political expression. At the same time, new media emphasizes on and facilitate community building by helping people to find common causes, identify civic groups and work toward solutions of socio – political problems. Again, social media helps to keep a continuous check on the governmental activities thus increasing the scope of governmental accountability. Social media provide an unprecedented access to information, and can even reach disinterested audience members through personalized, peer – to – peer channels like Facebook. New media also has the ability to foster community building that transcends physical boundaries through their extensive networking capabilities. Political thinkers and researchers contemplated on an ushering of a “new media populism” that would engage citizens and facilitate a more active role for the common people in political discourse. Social media has the potential to enhance people’s access to political information, facilitate wider – ranging political discourse, and foster political engagements. Therefore, social media today is a better agency of political engagement. Through these new media, political parties remain in touch with the common people 24x7. They can build a more engaging support base through the social media. Social media which is based on relentless communication, give the political leaders the varied scope of posting their messages through different social media apps, which has the advantage of being heard several times. Social media also helps the leaders to remain more politically active by sharing certain political trolls and memes to attack their opponents. The scope of political engagements of the common people have also increased manifold as they found this new media as a platform where they can not only build their own political opinion, but can also share those opinions, which in turn can influence the decision making of the other fellow citizens.

IX. CONCLUSION

Not that social media is one and only option today for political engagement or not that conventional media did not provide any scope of political engagement earlier, but there is a basic difference in the intensity of political engagement or participation among the two. While the conventional media were mainly one way communication medium, social media is an interactive communicative

medium. These provisions of interaction are that which makes social media more accessible for political engagement. For sharing of thoughts in conventional media, one needs to have hard core journalistic knowledge or refined knowledge which is not so the case with regard to social media. Expressing one's opinion or sharing one's views is much easier in social media than conventional media. The boundaries of social media are thus much more accommodative than the conventional media. But then again there is the problem of fake news in social media. Social media being easily accessible by all suffers from the problem of mis - information or mal - information in the form of fake news. Fake news get easily circulated through social media which ultimately disturbs the health of the democracy, which it promises to broaden. But today we cannot think of existing without social media. Rather, we have to be responsible users of social media. Mere quantitative engagement is not enough, what we need is qualitative engagements. Social media definitely has the potentiality to enhance this scope of political engagement. What is needed now is that those who engage themselves in social media should engage responsibly, meaningfully and qualitatively.

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