



The Impact of New Media on Indian Politics and Democracy: Prospects and Challenges

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Abstract

When new media activate the democratic process in countries by causing an incredible explosion of communication and the formation of public opinion, for a country like India, it is particularly intense and remarkable, as its symbolic democratic criteria are set. Social media is capable of simulating the maturing democracy that India is experiencing. Politics plays a significant role in developing the levels of democracy and shaping the consciousness of the citizens. New media has brought about long-term changes in the political arena, from a social system in which traditional media's political analysis and opinion formation have ceased to exist. They have opened up new dimensions of participatory politics. Social media's existence has both silenced dissenting voices and improved public involvement, online political campaigning, and political agenda-setting. Social media involvement in Indian politics is clearly evident in connection with elections to parliament and state legislative assemblies. The recent elections demonstrate the potential of social media to determine success. Beyond platforms for news, information, and discussion, new media have contributed to the rise of leaders and campaigns, and it has become a prevalent force of impact and influence. New media provide a source of empowerment for people, make them opinion builders and give them a sense of participation. This paper aims to explore and the role of new media in shaping and determining Indian politics and examining how they have transformed the democratic and political landscape of the nation.

Key Terms

New Media, Politics, Democracy

Introduction

New media have become a pertinent platform for constant communication, bringing about a decisive path to increase the communication and connectedness of politicians, allowing them to reach the people. Social media emerged as a new phenomenon in India's democratic and political landscape after the 2014 elections. Beyond platforms for news, information, and discussion, new media have contributed to the rise of leaders and campaigns, and it has become a prevalent force of impact and influence. When new media activate the democratic process in countries by causing an incredible explosion of communication and the formation of public opinion, for a country like India, it is most intense and remarkable, where its symbolic democratic criteria are set, social media is competent enough to simulate the maturing democracy like India. Politics plays a significant role in developing the levels of democracy and shaping the consciousness of the citizens.

New Media

New media revolution in Indian political scene is accelerating and is viewed as an effective device to reach out to the electorate. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) define New Media as 'a group of internet based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of user generated content. New media, otherwise termed as digital media, includes blogs, videos, websites, social media networking sites, etc.

New Media and Electoral Politics in India- Experiences of Aam Aadmi Party

New Media involvement in Indian politics is clearly evident in connection with elections. The Aam Aadmi Party's remarkable victory in the 2014 Delhi Assembly elections, BJP's tremendous victory in the 2014 and 2019 Lok Sabha elections highlighted the capability of digital world, otherwise dubbed as 'social media elections'. The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), which owes its existence to campaigning for the Jan Lokpal Bill, has jumped to an election victory by using digital campaigns. New media popularized the image building as a revolutionary step against corruption. Kejriwal informed the nation that the cause behind the positive impression and reflection towards the Anna Movement had created among people through social media. He later applied it in the Delhi election as well. The consistent use of new media strategies, combined with practical tactics, leads to increased reach and success. A strategic approach was adopted, focusing on building a broader social base. It gained widespread support as a means of fundraising. Kejriwal's policy is to attract people, and seek their support without issuing such polarization cards against caste, religion or culture. The AAP aims to reach out to the young population of Delhi, especially the first time voters. Just because the youth are the vehement consumers of social media generally, it is very easy to reach out to them and provide registration campaigns and Civil Rights awareness sessions.

The 2014 elections results provide a glorious victory for Aam Aadmi Party. It has won 28 out of 70 seats, Kejriwal took his Party by the hand from where the traditional based political locus of Congress and BJP defined Delhi. New media is the reason for bringing the Aam Aadmi Party into politics and activating its role in politics. It is an exaggeration to say that success is entirely due to new media, but its unique role cannot be denied. The most decisive factor to be discussed is the increasing voter turnout. It was in an increasing manner in most of the other states where elections were held during the same period, but the remarkable point is the growing rate of youth participation in elections. This is where a factual analysis needs to be conducted, connecting the influence of new media on the youth. The majority of those who voted for the Aam Aadmi

Party's presence were first-time voters, rather than the small percentage of votes that traditionally sided with the mainstream parties like INC and BJP. The BSP's lower vote share also benefitted the Aam Aadmi Party. The Anna Movement, Anti-Corruption Campaigns, independent and transparent stances, new media strategies, and youth-oriented campaign tactics are the factors that have contributed to the success of the Aam Aadmi Party. Even so, in formulating election campaign strategies and implementing multiple activities, the ever active medium is social media.

Every move or approach of the Aam Aadmi Party was crystal-clear and straightforward, reminiscent of the direct democratic model. The broom, the election symbol of Aam Aadmi Party, could be branded among the people and should be made a symbol of cleanliness by the eradication of corruption. The success of a party, formed only in 2012, which had no organizational base, is certainly a testament to their strategic and sincere activism via social media. The experience of the Delhi elections is that social media has become a new symbol of vote bank politics by avoiding political games using communal cards.

New Media and the Rise of Digital Leverages

The buzz of new media in the Indian political arena at the time of the 2013 and 2014 general elections is highly conducive. It has metamorphosed in to becoming an influential space for political activity and discourse often leading to heated and polarized conversation (Lokniti, CSDS). Indian public have been more pledged to social media become a decisive actor in shaping political communication and managing electoral campaigns. The traditional pressmedia-driven politics was limited to certain professional, educated, and elite sections, and the matter of political participation was restricted to some sections of the population. However, the emergence of social media redefined the orthodox political landscapes and gave a voice to the previously voiceless people of the country.

The 2014 elections were dubbed the first Social media election in India (Ali, 2014). Political parties and leaders have been immensely employing and involving new media since the Loksabha elections in 2014 and commenced a social media revolution in Indian politics. Shashi Tharoor, a Congress MP, was the only politician in India to have a social media account before the 2009 elections. However, the first Indian politician to recognize the colossal potential of new media and utilize it to its fullest and most effective manner was BJP leader Narendra Modi. He joined Twitter and Facebook in 2009 and now the numbers of his followers were increased incredibly and the most followed leader around the world. In the year 2014, he has 25,011,594 followers on Facebook and is the second most popular leader after US President Barack Obama (Indian Express, Nov 21, 2014) & (@narendramodi) crossed the 8 million followers mark on Twitter. Modi has been active on social media since 2012 by criticizing the second UPA Government on its financial policies. Later the nation came across a political strategist who moved the calves very carefully through social media. An image unique to Modi was branded and popularized, a shift from the tarnished image created by the Gujarat riots, especially from the communal mask constructed by the traditional media. Highlighting himself as a person with traditional values who stands for modernization, Modi and the BJP are attempting to establish an online image. His images with an Apple laptop and a cell phone, reading an Obama biography, playing golf, walking with lions, meeting foreign leaders, hosting film stars and sports heroes, circulated in the media and social media, marking the transition from an RSS Pracharak to a modern politician (Prabhu 2020). BJP spot lighted the personality centric politics or Modi politics in their campaign in social media discourses with their

professional and party lines. In lieu of the ideology or principles BJP persistently in holding with, the campaign revolves around the Prime Ministerial candidate Narendra Modi. The image of a humanitarian face was generally circulated among the people and Modi was branded as a cultured person with a combination of personal quality and leadership skills. Here, we can see the implications of social media in how it has engaged in the branding of Modi or the wave of Modism. When personality is branded through any media, it is more likely to gain acceptance among the masses.

Narendra Modi is not usually the one who always gives interviews or participated in question and answer sessions with the media, the very few interviews given are unofficial and beyond political limits. But Modi frequently communicated with the people through 'Mann ki Baat' (MKB), a programme in All India Radio. To reach out to the people and disperse various governmental programmes and developmental initiatives Modi adopted the method of broadcasting through radios. The first broadcast on October 3, 2014 focused on Swach Bharath Programme or Clean India Initiative, in the subsequent episodes he used to broadcast in a viable way by focused on the other developmental schemes like Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, Jan Dhan Yojana, Atmanirbhar Bharat Campaign etc. As well in some of the episodes used it as a medium to interpret various policies and decisions of government like the controversial policy of Demonetisation and Goods and Services Tax (GST). MKB still continues to be successful, addressing a wide range of national festivals, cultural events, and social measures and so on.

2014 elections were social media elections in the real sense. A Facebook campaign titled 'Ek Hi Vikalp Modi' was launched, projecting Modi as the only option at the national level to take on the Congress (Dutta, 2013). Leading the discussion towards Gujarat Model of Development, CM in 2012 and PM in 2014 campaign led posters were perpetuated via social media. The BJP officially announced Modi's Prime Minister Candidature on 14 September 2013, and the number of followers on his Twitter account, @narendramodi, surpassed that of Congress leader Shashi Tharoor as the country's most followed politician thereafter. Number of Twitter accounts were set up to translate Modis tweet in various Indian languages, thus, every tweet of Modi has a far reaching audience Following Modi's appeal to participate in the Run for Unity Marathon regarding the tribute to Sardar Vallabhai Patel's death anniversary, lakhs of people from different parts of the country were actively participated in the event.

The New York Times called Narendra Modi 'The Social Media Politician' (Willi S, 2014). Without holding press conferences in front of the media on a regular basis, Modi has adopted a strategy of communicating directly with the people by bypassing the traditional media. Modi spearheaded a massive social media campaign, with his professional cyber wing, created accounts and profiles on Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Instagram, and Tumblr, and posted the images, videos, and messages of election campaigns, rallies, and so on. Regularly communicating on twitter, Modi's tweets became news in the traditional media, and media habits have changed to the point where discussions and debates can take place based on these tweets. Since political leaders and statesmen are more engaged on Twitter, making their political face even more visible, Modi has adopted a policy of taking a step forward at that level. The 2014 elections in India were widely hailed as Twitter election and the reasons are more precise as the usage of Twitter rather than other new Medias. Rigorously the campaign revolves around the personality of Modi and the branding of Modism as well as the shift from Hindutva or communal agendas to development, new media

is the tool that has brought these into a single goal of capturing power. Not only that, it conceived a set of people, unprecedentedly a group eager to understand the ideas shared on social media, most were the younger population. A Strategy of 'us vs. them' is the sentimental and psychological version of polarization.

Chaiwala Campaign metamorphosed in to the paramount theme of 2014 elections campaign of Modi. The comments of Mani Shankar Iyer who was the MP and the distinguished leader of Congress that sparked the debate. Mani Shankar Iyer had Said, 'I promise you in twenty - first century, Narendra Modi will never become Prime Minister of the country. But if he wants to distribute tea here, we will find a place for him (Outlook, 2017). Mani Shankar Iyer gave a sarcastic counter to Modi's speeches at big rallies and public meeting about the ways in which he has lived and experienced and his noble, simple background. Surprisingly, the BJP took advantage of it and turned it into a sharp campaign weapon. To start fiery discussions and comments, this issue is labeled as Chai Pe Charcha (Discussion over Tea). Modi and his team competently build an ordinary man's image of the Prime Ministerial Candidate in the minds of the people. It is a fact that Modi and the PR team have come together to construct a sentimental vote bank among the lowest strata of the society with this tea discussion. As part of this campaign, NaMo tea stalls were set up all over the country, and related images and news were shared on social media, which, in one way or another, served as a positive factor in the election. Indian politics has witnessed an iconic transformation, add Modi a symbolic glimpse in to how a person from the most backward, under privileged and ordinary family can be considered the Prime Ministerial candidate for Indian politics, which is rich in historical characteristics dominated by traditional elites, dynasties and aristocratic politics. Naturally it is possible for people to weigh these two contradictions on a scale using their own criteria. Politicians who come forward with all sorts of privileges and politicians who sit among the people and drink tea- both are symbolically contrasting; those differences are ideologically reflected among the people as well.

The BJP's calculations on demographic status was highly praiseworthy and in the 2014 elections, the professional team applied and repeated the tactic in the same way that the Aam Aadmi Party won their votes by focusing on the youth votes in the 2013 Delhi elections. According to a study, 50 percent of the population was below the age of 25, while 65 percent was below the age of 35. (Digital Vidya). Modi's regular tweets urging the Indian youth, especially the novice voters, to cast their votes were captivating. The campaign team came up with the plans in such a way as to inculcate in the minds of the people. The emphasis was on making all the advertisements, whether in the visual or digital media, attractive by including catchy slogans on corruption, development, youth, NAMO, Ek Bharat Shresht Bharat, Sabka Saath Sabka Vikas, Acche Din Aane Waale Hein, Jan-Jan Modi Ghar-Ghar Modi, Abki Baar Modi Sarkar. The operation of online Nammo Stores and the subsequent sale of branded items related to Narendra Modi all evolved in to a digital election and the formation of digital

The Brandization of Modism and Social Media Influence

Establishing Modi's brandization from regional politics to national politics has not been an easy process. The IT campaign team has worked tirelessly to bring about such a resounding success. A well-coordinated team of non - politicians, including IT professionals, were active in creating ideas for the campaign and catchy slogans and they deserve the major credit for this election victory. The distance from the Chief Minister of Gujarat to the Prime Minister of India was determined by the strategic election campaign

using social media. The BJP's IT department claimed that the social media campaign influenced 30-40 percent of the overall seats in the election. Under the leadership of Arvind Gupta, Modi's 2014 IT campaign leader, found 155 urban constituencies as digital seats because of connectedness and existence IT hubs or the tech-savvy youth which have easy way to communicate with. Young people, especially those who are IT professionals have never attended big rallies or political meetings and have not announced their presence or perhaps are not interested in it. The Campaign aims to bring such people into the political arena; this direct communication has also been able to create and stimulate a form of awareness of political participation.

Modi's actions since becoming Prime Minister are also a step towards victory in the 2019 elections. Examples include the launch of the NaMo online app and the transformation of all government welfare schemes in to a digital campaign by providing an online presence. Hashtag campaign for government initiatives like # Make in India, #Clean India, establishing a number e-portals, platform for people's feedback etc are attempts to communicate with people through online, a form of direct communication and personal governance, without intermediaries. The Chowkidar Campaign during the 2019 elections was the one that helped BJP to reap the benefits. 'Chowkidar Chor Hei' statement was not only the trending word/ or statement on twitter, but also the most talked and discussed one on political discourses and social media. Though the congress tried to use it as a political weapon by raising the issue of corruption related to the Rafale Deal, (The purchase of fighter jet from France's Dassault Aviation) the BJP turned it in to a counter weapon. As a counter to Rahul Gandhi's accusations Modi started his Main Bhi Chowkidar campaign just after the announcement of elections. Modi prefixed the word 'Chowkidar' to his twitter profile. Other BJP leaders also following the trend and the hashtag campaigns # Mein Bhi Chowkidar receiving more than 15 lakh mentions on Twitter, and other social media. Chowkidar Chor hei Vs Mein bhi Chowkidar online war between BJP and Congress was the trendy campaign method of that time. In a town hall meeting related to Chowkidar slogan was conducted and Modi linked the Chowkidar to Security policies and concerns, in accordance with the Pulwama attack in February 2019. He Said, "In this 2019 election, every chowkidar is fighting with me. I believe that people of country are like chowkidars (Sandhu, 2019). In fact, Rahul Gandhi then tried to politicize the term chowkidar and wished to create an impact campaign among the voters, but something else happened that caused the reversal of the campaign, due to the counter campaign of team Modi as well as the Pulwama, Balakot military action.

In 2018, Modi was the third most followed leader in the world on Twitter with 42 million followers on his personal account (@ Narendra Modi) and 26 million followers on his institutional account (@pmo India), which has the fourth largest following globally, according to a study on 'world leaders and social media' (Burson Cohn and Wolfe, 2018). In October 2019, Modi became the most followed elected leader in the world on Instagram, with 30 million followers (NDTV 2019). Namo App becomes a medium of citizen engagement, an assessment tool for the people towards the BJP MPs, and leaders. It became a centre for candidate selection or distributing party tickets in accordance with people's choices and feedback. After the tremendous victory in 2019, Modi take out the word chowkidar from his twitter account with a tweet - Chowkidar has to become a powerful symbol to safeguard India from the evils of casteism, communalism, corruption and cronyism. The word Chowkidar goes from my Twitter name but it remains an integral part of me. Urging you all to do the same too (16 May 2019).

Being an inclusive space of varied opinions without geographical or gender discriminative features, Social media also had a facet of the complex and manipulative politics. Plagemann (2019) highlight how fear mongering and the politics of hate propagated by BJP and the Congress have widened societal fault lines, misinformation, derogatory and humiliated content, hate speeches, false accusations and allegations become the routinisation of politics in social media. The role of citizens, organizations, and government were criticized and questioned in dealing with the ethics of social media. Fake news regarding Pulwama attack, Balakott etc. leads to the cyber space inundated with misleading information. It exceedingly bounced the nationalistic and security feeling of Indians, and the country at the edge of the war like situation. Releasing of the Air Force pilot Vardhamaan Mahaveeran was also celebrated in social media at which attaches nationalistic or patriotic security implications. The anti-nationalism that is being infiltrated in the midst of this nationalism is very dangerous. Whether you are supportive or against Modi, people's perspectives were placed in the middle of this binary. A recent trend is that when any one shares any kind of comments, criticisms or objections against the government the BJP or the Prime Minister, they are branded as anti-nationals. The impact of this on cyberspace is enormous as cyber groups and fake ids came and harass those people as if they were being attacked by a mob, online abuse and blame is prevalent in the case of Pulwama, Balakott attacks, it is an excellent example of how the BJP government has tried at the extreme level of using nationalism as a propaganda weapon in cyberspace. Cyber platforms were flooded with posts and messages praising and supporting the Indian army as well as hatred and hostility towards Pakistan to the maximum. Attempts by some groups to present nationalism by infiltrating communalism by touching on Hindu- Muslim religious sentiments have been quite successful. The growth of certain sects in the cyber space as 'Internet Hindus' is remarkable for how BJP tried to propagate hindutva ideas in the public sphere. While misinformation and fake news are factors that question the credibility of social media. Yet, it is true that all political parties are taking advantage of this. The BJP's social media management came in a way that suppresses or disrupts dissenting voices. Recently the BJP described the farmers participating in the strike as 'Khalistan Supporters' in mockery of the farmer's protests.

One of the most effective methods of Modi's social media strategies is his personal approach to the people, or the direct contact with the voters. The BJP's cyber Strategies reflects the precise organizational skills to influence the people, from the very grass roots to the regional and national level, by publishing memes, posts and trolls in a way that affects the mind-set of the voters. Modi was able to become the most influential person on Twitter for no other reason that he had a clear vision of objectives. There were differences between Modi and Trump in social media usage as the second most influential political leader after Trump in Twitter after his resounding victory in the 2019 elections. Fewer than 50 of the followed list of Trump's Twitter account include journalists, politicians and his family members. But the more than 2,000 people whom Modi follow on his Twitter account were the most ordinary people. Not only does Modi follow those who follow him, but he also gives them a message that "I'll do anything for this person because they have made this public statement for me". The rewarding approach of treating the following as recognition and support from the people and then back in the same way will surely win the applause of the people. They consider the following of Modi as a blessing and a credit. Mumbai Mirror analyzed Modi's Twitter follows and categorized around 700 of them as 'lay persons', most of who are die-hard supporters of the Prime Minister and defend him furiously online.

Before the end of 2013, a report released by the Internet and Mobile Association of India and IRIS Knowledge Foundation which found out that out of the 543 constituencies in India, more than 160 constituencies were impacted by social media, and the party with the leading number of followers were likely to win the 2014 elections (Indian express, 2014). The Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, the Clean India Mission, Digital India, Make in India etc are all which have popularized due to digital platform shares. In the Maharashtra election in 2014 BJP used Samvad system as a primary tool for campaigning which is an arrangement in transforming the online conversation to offline conversation and offers a space for people to interact with party leaders about their vision and provide suggestive measures. Before elections, the guidelines were to be in touch with 100 non-BJP voters per one party worker who would indulge in resolving their issues and communicating with them, and the technique worked well for the party (Wadke, 2014). BJP created whatsapp groups and thousands of messages were forwarded to all groups. Applications like Namo App helped parties to get authentic information about the voters which helped them formulate plans which would attract more people to vote for their party (Poovanna, 2018).

Electoral Politics in Kerala and Social Media Strategies

Kerala, a state with high literacy rate and internet penetration has a number of new media users which largely engaged in public spheres. Social media transformed our life in to an unimaginable landscape where the technologies have a significant impact on the way we live in, interact with each other, how we die and what we are after the death too (Kasket, 2013). In the 2021 Kerala Legislative Assembly elections also, the new media acted as a decisive force of influence. Twitter became a crucial factor in the national level elections, in Kerala it was reduced to Whatsapp, Facebook and Instagram. Mainstream political parties including Congress, CPI (M) and BJP all had their own new media cells and the top leaders in the party were given the responsibility to manage such cells. A coordinated effort and work in the cyber sphere determined the party's success in the elections. As dialogue and participation take the centre stage in these platforms, a networked society of participatory culture has emerged (Castells, 2012, Jenkins, 2009). When Kerala's development, social welfare projects and popular interventions of the government became election issues, new media spaces managed to discuss them constructively and keep them at the forefront of the debates. Even in the selection of candidates, it should be assumed that the discussions and opinions in the new media were greatly influenced by the political parties. It is noteworthy that the new media actually provides a public space for sharing views on candidate announcements and opinions about them in an effective way, unlike the times when it was confined to individuals, groups or some private spaces. The election slogans of the CPI(M) and the Congress party were enthusiastically taken up by the new media which speaks volumes for its acceptance. 'Urappaanu LDF' (Sure LDF) as the LDF slogan and 'Naadu Nannaakkan UDF' (UDF to improve the country) as the UDF slogan were deeply imprinted in the minds of people.

The figures indicate how viral the campaign songs of various political parties have become. The entries of various candidates in the new media were rich with cinematic presentation of songs and scenes. Facebook pages, Whatsapp groups and Instagram stories were overflowing with slogans and campaigns. It has been fascinating to see social media become the battleground of ideological battles of cyber warriors. Another highlight was the varieties of trolls popularized against each other and the branding of the leaders. Congress

used the simple and common image of Rahul Gandhi by circulating the photographs and videos about his shop visits, interaction with the villagers, and children.

Constraints and Challenges

While new media are public spaces for debate and opinion formation, as many constraints are there. The foremost challenge faced by new media revolves around fake news, misinformation and the popularity they acquire. Many social media pages and posts are proving that political parties will go to any ways to tarnish against each other and often this does not necessarily have to be with the official approval or knowledge of political parties. Another major challenge remains the creation of fake profiles and ids on social media and one of the crucial issue faced by democracy is Indian cyber laws are inadequate to prevent and control the creation of such fake accounts. A significant question is about the extent to which new ideas are produced and accepted while referring to new media as a space for youth participation and consensus. What is often seen on social media spheres is a group with a dominant ideology suppressing the opposing perspectives and their opinions by personal humiliation. Gender issues or cyber abuse against women and transgender people as well as Dalits is also an issue going to be discussed. New media spaces often turn out to be biased spheres, even as we proclaim them to be free and democratic spheres free from partisanship.

Conclusion

The new media directed new platforms for political participation and citizen engagement; indeed, these are open spheres for endless expression of ideas and opinion formation. As new media dominating the electoral politics of India and influencing the voters in to a greater extent. The increasing political participation of youth reflects the compelling role of new media in moulding the political behaviour of voters. Democracy is most meaningfully effective when it actively ensures the participation of the entire nation. Democracy must be inclusive in the sense that the social media spaces are inclusively free and approachable to all sections of the population. The nation does not need public spaces that are constantly fragmented. New media need to become spaces where diversity is constantly grappled with and innovative ideas are created.

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