Digital Democracy and Governance: Reshaping Political Participation

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It is not inane to comment that we are now solely dependent on new media as well as social media in our daily lives. With the growing popularity of digital media, the concept of traditional political participation by both citizens and political leaders has changed a lot opening up new gamut of research. All around the world digital democracy has started to prove its potential. Abundant examples round the corner of the globe shows the emancipatory role played by social media by posing threat to dictatorial regimes. In our home front, recent cow vigilantism, Nirbhaya case, India against Corruption, Hok Kolorob student movement of Jadavpur University are considered as very prominent examples which has added greater fervor. Digital media too has a major role in general elections of the nation. Netizens are becoming more responsible within the cyberspace which ultimately reflects in the decision making process of the nation. This paper will try to analyse how cyber citizens are playing active role in the recent political scenario in India despite some major barriers. It will also throw light on how cyber citizens as well as political parties have reshaped the notion of traditional political participation in regard to different socio political events.

Keywords: *Digital Democracy, Digital Divide, Digital Literacy, Net Neutrality.*

INTRODUCTION

Digitisation may be considered as the most significant aspect of recent revolution in the field of technology and communication. Just as automobile radically changed people's lives at the beginning of the 20th Century, so too has the revolution in online services changes our lives at the turn of 21st century. Internet is the best possible gift of this technological revolution made possible through this process of digitisation. In the increasingly mediated world, new media as well as social media has gained a lot of attention. With its capability to overcome geographical barriers and with its very nature of user friendliness, new media as well as social media seeks to provide an online platform to participate, share and interact with one another. Digital media may be considered as a result of media convergence. Media convergence is an ongoing process, occurring between media industries, contents and their audience. Convergence alters the relationship between existing technologies, industries, markets, genres, and even governance.

The term Democracy implies power in the hand of common people. Democracy is much about 'voice' and certainly assorted voice. This diversity and plurality of 'voice' is the foundation of true democracy. As media is recognised as the fourth pillar of democracy, it has the responsibility to strengthen and articulate this diverse 'voice'. Social media is the recent addition in the vast mediated world and it too has started performing this role by bringing a massive change in the way people connect, interact or share information. Today's digital platform tries to facilitate everyone's voice to

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be heard or expressed. The wide reach and the flexibility of the medium allow people to build opinions, form communities and in the course of time, of course, to empower themselves.

Recent political upheavals and subsequent protest movements in Tunisia, Egypt, Syria have been celebrated as triumph of social media over authoritarian regimes. The defeat of coup in Turkey was brought out by appeal to use of digital media to organise demonstrations against the coup and it was highly successful. In our home front, Nirbhaya case, India against Corruption, Hok Kolorob student movement of Jadavpur University, US election, Olympics, are considered as very prominent examples which has added greater fervour.

As more of the world becomes connected online, common people across the globe are being empowered like never before. Existing research has suggested several means by which social media can influence collective action, such as providing mobilizing information and news not available in other media, facilitating the coordination of demonstrations, allowing users to join political causes, and creating opportunities to exchange opinions with other people (Bennett & Segerberg,2011; Chadwick & Howard, 2008; Gil de Zúñiga & Valenzuela, 2011). By enacting individuals' offlinenetworks online, social media can facilitate access to a large number of contacts, thereby enabling social movements to reach critical mass (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012). Social media can also promote personal and group identity construction—key antecedents of political behavior (Dalton, Sickle, & Weldon, 2009)—by allowing multiple channels for interpersonal feedback, peer acceptance, and reinforcement of group norms (Papacharissi, 2010). Thesesites can operate as information hubs, too (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012).YouTube videos explaining a movement's core principles and tactics allow cadres to transmit important information to dispersed followers without having to travel.

The objective of this paper is to explore the scope of digital media in terms of reshaping political participation. To attain this objective, the researchers have closely observed different facebook pages and tweets regarding current socio political issues. After extensive literature review, it has gone through some case studies of recent socio political issues.

Cow Vigilantism

The recent controversy over cow slaughter is an example of how protests gather momentum with Internet activity. Hundreds of protesters have taken to the streets in the western Indian state of Gujarat after an attack on low-caste villagers by cow protection vigilantes. In violent clashes a police officer was killed and several others were injured recently, police told Agence France-Presse. Hundreds of people have been detained as authorities try to contain the unrest, which began on July 18 this year and has since spread.

In Gujarat, the home state of India's Premier, Mr Narendra Modi, police fired teargas shells and used sticks to try to control stone-throwing crowds, who have blocked roads and torched state buses. The authorities believe internet helped to organize demonstrators quickly

The protests erupted after video footage emerged of an attack a week earlier on four villagers from the lowest Dalit caste who were taking a dead cow to be skinned. Cows are considered sacred by most Hindus and killing them is banned in Gujarat, but the villagers said the animal had died of natural causes.

The Delhi gang rape protest not only spilled on the streets, but also took virtual world by storm. On Google Trends' search volume index, "Delhi gang rape," "Rape in Delhi" and "Gang-rape victim" has been among the top search phrases in India, reaching a peak on December 20, 2012. The highest volumes were from Delhi and neighbouring states like Uttar Pradesh, Haryana and Rajasthan.

Within 10 days of the incident, Facebook groups 'Gang raped in Delhi' created on December 20, 2012 and 'Delhi for Women's Safety' created on December 18, 2012 received 5046 and 4263 'Likes' respectively. Other Facebook groups such as 'Another girl gang raped in Delhi – Can we stop it?', 'Delhi Gang Rape – Please Don't Ignore "Must Read" For Damini', and 'Delhi Gang Rape \Protest' emerged as individual fight against such crimes. These groups created a common platform and have given a voice to everyone, to protest against sexual assault cases. Twitter, which has about 33 million users in India, has been abuzz with news of the protests, making 'Rashtrapati Bhavan', 'Delhi Gang rape' and 'Raisina Hill' the top trending hash tag in India.

The political class in India has been shaken by the speed and efficiency with which the protests were coordinated. The Then Minister of State for Human Resource Development Shashi Tharoor said, the social media space is a "parallel universe to the mainstream media" and that stories on these platforms have a "resonance of their own". "It is a medium that allows big issues to be made out of issues that mainstream media ignores but politicians cannot".

In context of Hazare's campaign; Internet & Social Media sites have been abuzz with articles/messages showing support for Anna Hazare's fight against corruption and his plea to pass Jan Lokpal Bill. The scale of "Anna Hazare movement on Social Media" was extended to remote South, East, North, and West. Only Facebook witnessed 5.5 Lakh followers who just not only participated in the discussion but they have followed the posts daily during Hazare's fast at Ram Lila Ground in New Delhi. Twitter and other tags have also witnessed massive response on the same issue and hence complimented each other as far as reach and access of the message from team Anna is concerned.

Hok kolorob or 'let there be noise' is a recent revolution that had been started in Jadavpur University and spread like wildfire across the country. The #HokKolorob movement

also took social media as a major platform as students from across India were expressing their solidarity with Jadavpur University students. The hashtag #hokkolorob on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram shows photos and strong views of the students against the administration.

For sporadic, disconnected campaigns, crowd-funded protest and flash mob-style priority setting, social media have clearly made a difference to the profile of issues and the scale of activism. They are a powerful tool and have greatly increased the number of people who say that they are activists. In regard to atrocities against women, social media acts as an influential dais. No More Abuse, Stop Acid Attacks, SlutWalk, Bell Bajao are some of the popular facebook pages which act as an online forum on supporting women issues.

Social Media has also an important role in General Elections held across nation. A recent study of IRIS Knowledge Foundation and IMAI claims that social media can impact voters. The research claims that result in over 150 constituencies could be decided by Facebook users. To understand the effectiveness of political messages on social networking sites a micro level survey was conducted on facebook. To the question regarding Acceptance of political messages on facebook, the response was:

'I read all political messages: 11%

I read only if i support: 56,5%

I ignore political messages: 32.9%

It implies that 56.5% people are actively aware of updates of a particular page. (here party). In the last General Election of 2014, social media has played a massive role. BJP, the winning party in these elections had developed their own customized digital tools based on both commissioned and open source data that put them in direct touch with voters. **Narendra Modi the Prime Minster of India had more than 3.67 million followers on Twitter, 15 million likes on Facebook and the party's 68 million page views**

on Google+. (Chatterjee, Social Networking Sites as Medium of Political Propaganda: A Study on Effectiveness, 2014)

AAP made use of Twitter in three distinct ways, both through Kejriwal's own tweets which reached over 3 million followers and through those of other AAP leaders, volunteers and followers, using over 10 common hashtags. One, to goad and heckle their political opponents in a bid to expose them and to respond to their heckles in turn. Two,to define its own political agenda and underline its concerns. Finally, to guide and enthuse its base of volunteers and supporters. Photographs, newspaper articles and video clips were all grist for the AAP's Twitter mill. Some very common tweets are:

By December2014, the catchy phrase "Paanch Saal Kejriwal" had been devised to signal the seriousness with which the party was taking the polls this time and to lay to rest the *maidan chhod diya* (he had left the field, a reference to his resignation from chief ministership in early 2014) accusation. On December 24, the party tweeted,

5 Saal Kejriwal Is Not A Slogan - It's A Pledge For 'Good & Corruption Free Governance.

When the BJP came out with its "Upadravi Gotra" ad, Kejriwal tweeted that the party should apologise to the Agrawal caste to which he belonged, following it up with an observation that framed Delhi voters as the guardians of his party:

People of Delhi do not like politics of abuse and caste. People will give their reply on voting day

When the *Times of India* put out a story on the how vegetables prices in Delhi were skyrocketing on February 4, it was retweeted immediately:

Despite Modi Magic, Veggie, fruit prices soar by up to 100%."

By 5 February, the party's pledges and promises – ranging from "Revive the Yamuna No encroachments and construction banned" to "Free ambulance across Delhi for the needy people" and "Bus Marshals on every bus. Zero tolerance against molestation, eve teasing & violence against women", were being tweeted under the hashtag #MyVoteKejriwal.

Party leader Yogendra Yadav kept the prospects of victory real by tweeting his projections. On 3 February he tweeted:

Most of the opinion polls are now reflecting what AAP's internal survey says. Delhi is all set for #AamAadmiKiSarkaar(Philipose, 2015)

The end of the day saw him expressing his appreciation:

My gratitude 2 Delhiites for their support. U r so amazing. U rejcted politics of caste n religion. Hope final results r as per exit polls

My sincere thanks n congratulations to all selfless volunteers of AAP, who worked round the clock for their country. AAP is bcoz of u. (Philipose, 2015)

And as they say u campaign in poetry but u govern in prose, the most pertinent question whether Kejriwal's tweeting pattern has really an effect on the way of both political participation and campaigning in India in the future, only coming days can reveal.

E Governance is another concept which is now has become important to foster direct participation of citizen in the proposal, development and legislation of laws. It seems to be the easiest way citizens can interact with their government officials. E-democracy is a style of political processes which can be used at all levels of government, including local communities, states/regions, nations and on the global stage The process of e-democracy can include citizens, voters, political organizations, the media, elected officials, political organizations, and governments. In India, The Ministry of Communications and Information Technology has formulated the National e-Governance Plan which aims to bring all government services to the doorstep of each citizen by making the services citizen centric and ensuring that the right people get the benefits. The gap of information amongst

various strata of the people (urban and rural, farmers & professionals etc.) can be bridged to a great extent. To further accelerate the drive towards efficient and transparent governance, the Right to Information Act was passed in late 2005.

With the emergence and popularity of smartphones, M governance is also become a common term among smart phone users. Today, India is moving towards m-Governance, after its foray into e-Governance. The speedy diffusion of mobile

M-Governance can be defined as 'a strategy for the implementation of Governance and its implementation involves the utilization of all kinds of wireless and mobile technologies, services, applications, and devices. It improves upon the benefits for those involved in e-governance, including citizens, businesses, and all government units'.

As challenge always goes hand in hand with more or less all success stories, the factors like 'digital divide', 'network neutrality' and 'digital literacy' have been also cropping up as major barriers to internet evoking serious question on access of digital media and enjoying it equally around the globe. While the use of IT is growing rapidly, some segments of society has remained disconnected from the fruit of digital culture. It refers to the unequal access to internet based on income, race, ethnicity, gender etc.

Ensuring Network neutrality is also a crucial issue which has stirred up hot debate among internet users. Net neutrality, in the simplest sense of the term, refers to the principle that all internet traffic should be treated equally. It advocates for free and open internet. With the growth of Internet users in India, there is now a higher chance of network clogging. In such a scenario ISPs may impose a certain type of premium rent on download or surfing thus endangering net neutrality. It is important to ensure neutrality of the Internet, if we want to promote fair competition and give chance to small and medium enterprises

operating on Internet to grow, as these small entrepreneurs will not be able to pay higher rent to get its content prioritized. Slowing down of websites on the basic of content and price will also have an effect on speed of global traffic and will act as an impediment against increasing Internet usage.

Today freedom of speech and expression is understood as a multi-faceted right that includes not only the right to express or disseminate information and ideas but also the right to seek, receive and impart information or ideas, regardless of the medium used (S.Jacob, 2011).

Internet has changed the traditional ways of receiving information. Every news is 'one click' away from us. In this context, a fair connected world is the need of the day.

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