

ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN ELECTIONS AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

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Abstract

Today, Social media is one of the important and effective tools of mass communication. In the 21st century, the advanced communication technology has compacted every aspect of society. Today, we cannot imagine of the world without social media, especially in the field of politics. It plays a crucial role in the active political participation of the people. Free media has since long been recognized as a cornerstone of democracy and plays an important role in influencing political outcome during elections. Social media has rapidly grown as a forum for political activism in its different forms. Social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and Youtube provide new ways to 'stimulate citizens' engagement in political life where elections and electoral campaigns have crucial role. In previous years, traditional media played a significant role in creating awareness among people but over a period of time, social media became important marketing tool which not only made the people aware but also helped to attract them. Politicians are becoming more and more active on it. Personal communication via social media brings politicians and parties closer to their electorate. Through social networking sites, political parties and candidates become able to directly communicate with the public and interact with them. In turn, through social networking sites, voters are also provided a platform to share their opinions and to be heard. At the time of 2014 lok sabha election in India, citizens of the country utilized the social media in the best possible manner. The sharing of the communication related to the party manifestos, ongoing political speeches, exchange of videos related to political issues and mudslinging among the politicians may lead to

serious discussions in social media. In the elections youth participation creates the awareness about the importance of voting in democracy through Electronic Media.

Keyword: Election, Social media, Facebook, Twitter, 2014 Lok Sabha Elections

1.INTRODUCTION

Social media is considered as one of the vibrant communication tools in the present state of affairs. The fourth estate of the democracy is seen playing a crucial role in today's circumstances. In the age of 21st century, communication trappings like social media are growing in a high manner. All the facets of society are gaining the usefulness of social media. Social media is considered as a precious engine of publicity in the arena of politics. The term social media refers to the wide range of internet-based and mobile related services that allow users to participate in online exchanges of views, contribute towards user-created content, or join online communities. Various types of internet services commonly associated with social media (sometimes referred to as "web 2.0) include the blogs, wikis, social networking sites, status-update services, media sharing sites.1Mayfield (2008) describes these media as "online platforms that promote participation, openness, conversation and connectedness".2

It is through the use of social media that people can exchange photos and videos, share news stories, post their thoughts on blogs and participate in online discussions. Social media also allows individuals, companies, organizations, governments and parliamentarians to interact with large number of people. Free media has long been recognized as a cornerstone of democracy and plays an important role in influencing political discourse during elections.

The new media technologies have given a new dimension to the election campaigns. Many political parties have created their own websites, blogs, Facebook and twitter accounts. They are regularly watching and reading their new media contents. The contents are also updated regularly. Some of the political leaders respond to the queries from the public and cadres. They are enthusiastically using the tools for the election campaigns. This paradigm shift has significantly helped them in reaching the voters. Political parties and leaders are enjoying the communication development and travel in the cyber world.³

The elections campaigns have now set new standards for how successfully campaigns are to be conducted on day-to-day basis. The modern information and communication technologies have now-a-days become a core element of modern election campaign system. Politicians in many states have started websites and blogs with a variety of degrees of success. Social software has been used to benefit politicians. Online advertisement, like contextual advertisements on search engine results, pages, banners, rich media, social networking, online classified networks and e-mail marketing are the major techniques used now.⁴

During the 2014 parliamentary general election in India, all political parties and candidates had extensively utilized social media in order to mobilize votes in their favour. Of particular interest to explain here is the political impact of social media as a new means to help people to obtain political information as well as interact with other people on the web. In the social media which is multi dimensionally connected with abundant hyperlink users have become able to receive process and circulate news and information in a new way. The structure of social media is very much different from classical media and it allows people to communicate news and information in very different way. Social media tools such as twitter, facebook, youtube and other social networks are now considered as politically transformative communication technologies as classical media such as newspapers, radio and television. Increasingly, politicians and elected representatives are realizing the power of social media for communicating political information and interacting with citizens.⁵

2. ELECTION SYSTEM IN INDIA

India is a secular, democratic republic and largest democracy in the world. The modern Indian nation state

came into existence on 15 August 1947. India is a constitutional democracy with a parliamentary system of government, and at the heart of the system, there is a commitment to hold regular, free and fair elections. Democracy can endure only when people use their right to franchise without fear and coercion. Democracy and free and fair elections are two sides of same coin. Free and fair election is a perfect idea.⁶ The word election is derived from the Latin word 'Eligere' meaning 'to choose' which is reckoned as a part of the machinery of government in the democratic countries.⁷

Elections are significant because the people participate in elections to decide their own representatives. People should have the necessary education and insight to elect only the right kind of people. Election provides ways and platform for the citizens to prefer the party which they want to see at the position of power. The elections determine the composition of the government, the membership of the two houses of parliament, and the state and union territory legislative assemblies. Presidency and vice-presidency consist the highest body of structure of the system.

Conduct of general elections in India for electing of the people's representatives involves management of the largest event in the world. An election in India is a contest between different candidates from various parties out of which voters can elect one as their representative. There may also be independent candidates taking part in elections. Delimitation of constituencies, preparation of voting lists, filing of nomination of papers, scrutiny of nomination papers and withdrawals, election campaigns, voting and counting of voters and declaration of results are the parts of procedures of the Indian election system. The election campaign by various candidates and political parties, includes public rallies, posters, pamphlets distribution, procession, door to door campaign and using mass media advertisement so as to reach voters.

3. ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN ELECTIONS AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN INDIA

Earlier, the social media was considered as a tool of entertainment to share the communication and videos. But now-a-day, the social media like Whatsapp, Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, my space and Google have made a big role in changing the face of administration. Arab springs and Egypt revolution are the examples in

front of us. The impact of these revolutions has today made a huge change in Indian politics and activated participation of the people. It has rapidly grown in importance as a platform for political activities in its different forms. Social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and youtube provide new ways to encourage citizens to get involved in political life, where elections and electoral campaigns have a central role.⁸

In the present scenario social media plays a key role in elections. Today, these are very popular in the use of communication tools with the number of people and there is extensive scope for bringing changes. Most of young officials and civil servants are using the tool of social media. Availability of smart phone brings lead in the utilization of social media in a good way. India is a leading country in the use of cell phones. This will help to connect the people on large scale for various discussions. Now a day's communication technologies are developed and reaching every one of us very fast.

Social media is to connect the people drawn from different places. Now the distance does not matter in communicating the people with each other. Social media became the stage for the youth to discuss about good administration. In earlier days, the traditional media had become the sole platform for people to create awareness regarding the elections, but today scenario has changed and the social media is playing a crucial role in influencing the people for dynamic participation in voting.

Social media outlets are essential for politicians and political parties, enabling them to gain support, encourage participation and have an open and continuous dialogue. Most importantly, social media allows the highly motivated people to create a context more easily in which the least motivated people can be effective without having to become themselves as activists, creating an environment conducive for politicians to utilize. The emerging social media and its public and political influence have begun to transform the political process and campaign tactics. Politicians are now using social media and the internet and in turn are permitting a new arena of politics.

It has a constructive impact on political campaigning. Its effect on political party perception has a higher scale than political trust and religion. Using social media in political activity and candidate profiling might improve political awareness and opinion.⁹In Indian election system social media is becoming an important medium

in campaigns. These new forums of media can assume a central role in attracting voters and especially the new generation of people.

Social media helps political parties and candidates more effectively to reach large number of voters in a very short time. Social media allows political parties and candidates to share their beliefs; goals and accomplishments directly with voters, making them feel more directly involved with the campaign. It allows candidates to give their supporters a "behind-the-scene" view of their campaign and make track engagement very easy. These new forums of media also facilitate the proximity of latest and relevant crucial target groups.

4. ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN 2014 PARLIAMENT ELECTION IN INDIA

Social media revolution in Indian political space is real, tangible and taking place very fast. It is well known that incidents like the huge protests of 2012 regarding anti corruption movement by Anna Hazare and outrage following Nirbhaya gang rape case were channelized through the social media. It may be recollected that government machinery in India had come to a standstill and the events got immense national and global headlines, and got the common man involved. Not just the political parties, even the government is beginning to experience the impact of social media. Political parties have started to realize the influence of social media.

Hitherto people were not much interested for participation in democratic system, because they were considered only as listeners and no such kind of device has available to people for feedback. But today, scenario has changed and people are using smart phones in a high number. They get an opportunity to discuss and comment on political decisions and happenings.

During the year 2014 India, the world's largest democracy, witnessed elections for the 16th Lok Sabha. This general election was the biggest exercise to form the government at the center. General elections are held every five years when the serving government is nearing its term completion. For a party to form the government, it must win at least 272 seats or prove its majority with the help of alliances. The responsibility of conducting elections in a free and fair manner lies with the Election Commission of India. The total number of registered voters with the Election Commission of India was 814.5

million; in 2014 in comparison to 713 million in 2009.¹⁰ This marks a 100 million rise in the number of newly registered voters.

The number of polling stations across the country was 0.9 million with 1.72 million control units and 1.87 million ballot units.¹¹ The amount of money spent by the parties in these elections was around \$5 billion, a sum second only to the amount spent on US Presidential elections which stands first with \$7 billion.¹² The election to the 543 Parliamentary constituencies in 2014 was held in 9 phases spread over the months of April and May; the first one held on 07 April 2014 and the 9th phase held on 12th May 2014.

The number of parties registered with the ECI is 1,616. This number consists of 6 national level parties, 47 state level parties and others as registered unrecognized parties. The elections of 2014 were a battle between few major parties, namely the Indian National Congress(INC) the Bhartiya Janta party (BJP), the Aam Aadmi party(AAP) Samajwadi party (SP), the Bahujan Samaj party (BSP) etc. There was a significant change in the general elections of 2014 from the general elections of 2009; because the change due to role played by the social media during elections. As per Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI) the internet users in India were expected to be 243 million by June 2014, marking a 28% growth from June 2013.¹³ There are several social media platforms like facebook, twitter, instagram, youtube google+ etc and the people are increasingly using these platforms to express their views on different topics. The facebook being the most popular media has 114.8 million Indian users. Twitter ranks second in the number of uses with 33 million users from india.¹⁴

In 2014 Lok Sabha elections, political parties and politicians had successfully utilized the characteristics, power and popularity of social media. Politicians use the social media as an effective tool of publicity. Especially in the election times, politicians are most active in using publicity. They were targeting the voters to attract towards their party candidates. Election is a very interesting activity in the society. Especially in the democratic country like India, election are like festivals. In the days of election, candidates are more concentrating on the voters and to get them attracted towards them.

In 2014 general elections the social media was utilized by the young voters in an excellent manner.

Youth turn towards the voice of social media. In these elections youth participated and created the awareness regarding the importance of voting in democracy. By way of posting and tweeting regularly, voters potentially get connected with society. The active users of social media engage with each other on the political front.

Social media gives a chance to people to comprehend each other's mind set and influence opinions by sharing knowledge and spreading personal point of view. Especially during Lok Sabha election Prime Minister Candidate Narendra Modi, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi, AAP chief Arvind Kejriwal made a big canvassing through social media. The BJP leaders keep them updated by surfing internet, posting the status and share personal view at international online platform. Social networking sites can also be used to broaden political participation by helping citizens to communicate with their representatives and with each other. The people of 21 to 35 years of age were most active on social media.¹⁵

Our Prime Minister Narendra Modi is popularly known as 'Namo' because of social media and he has also grabbed the tag of first Social Media Prime Minister of India. His party also impressively involves social media platform by engaging the users in to important conversation. The tagline 'Ab ki bar Modi Sarkar' became viral on facebook and twitter. The volunteers of the party strike conversation with common people and understand their view of mind and attitude, which help them to create a big success.¹⁶

By the time of sworn-in as Prime Minister, Narendra Modi had more than 16 million likes on Facebook. He is the second most internet user politician in the world, and he was the sixth most followed world leader on twitter. Modi's popularly carried the BJP victory with 282 seats out of the 543 seats in parliament, the biggest win by any party in India in 40 years. Through the use of social media, BJP was able to sway many young voters; the BJP clearly won the contest for India's young voters. Getting young voters meant harnessing the power of social media. One of the most interesting use of social media in election process was when the BJP crowd-sources its manifesto, with hundreds of thousands of people using social media platform. Lastly the success of BJP in parliament election is extensively due to use of social media in its campaign.

5. CONCLUSION

With the increased growth and popular use of social media in India, social media revolution in political space is real, tangible and getting faster. Social media has to connect the individuals from different places even if there is larger distance. People in India are enjoying the highest level of internet connections and online information is perceived as more credible and reliable than traditional media sources. India is ranked 3rd with regard to use of social networks in the world. Social media plays a key role in Indian elections and politics. Social media has become the platform for the youth to discuss about good administration. Today, it influences the people for dynamic participation in voting. It helps political parties and candidates to reach large number of voters in a short amount of time and effectively. The importance of social media for political campaign in 16th parliament general elections, political parties and candidates can make the characteristics, power and popularity of social media well understandable. Politicians use the social media as an effective tool of publicity. They are targeting the voters to attract, towards their party candidates. The volunteers of the BJP party indulge in conversation with common people and understand their form of mind and attitude, which helped them to achieve big success with the use Electronic Media.

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