

Impact of Social Media on the Functioning of the Indian Government: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract—Social media has loomed as the most effective tool in recent times to flag the causes, contents, opinions and direction of any social movement and has demonstrated that it will have a far-reaching effect on government as well. This study focuses on India which has emerged as the fastest growing community on social media. Social movement activists, in particular, have extensively utilized the power of digital social media to streamline the effectiveness of social protest on a particular issue through extensive successful mass mobilizations. This research analyses the role and impact of social media as a power to catalyze the social movements in India and further seeks to describe how certain social movements are resisted, subverted, co-opted and/or deployed by social media. The impact assessment study has been made with the help of cases, policies and some social movement which India has witnessed the assertion of numerous social issues perturbing the public which eventually paved the way for remarkable judicial decisions. The paper concludes with the observations that despite its pros and cons, the impacts of social media on the functioning of the Indian Government have demonstrated that it has already become an indispensable tool in the hands of social media-savvy Indians who are committed to bring about a desired change.

Keywords—Impact, Indian government, misuse, social media, social movement.

I. INTRODUCTION

SOCIAL media has emerged as a powerful mass mobilization platform in the recent past. These IT-aided applications are radically redefining new forms of virtual networks, which are being increasingly used for a range of activities such as mutual interests, thoughts, sentiments, interpretations, information share and modify accessible content through easily operated resources, like, messages, comments, digital photos or videos and data generated through online communications and so on. They introduce substantial and pervasive changes to communication between businesses, organizations, communities, networking and individuals [1].

Social media has displayed some unique role in transforming the form of communication that establishes newer network potential that influences individual and consequent collective public opinion formation and participation for achieving targeted objectives.

II. METHODOLOGY

This research categorizes the role and impact of social media in four categories; firstly, its use as a platform for organizing a social movement; secondly, as a platform for

advocacy on a particular issue and policy formulation; thirdly, its impact on politics; and, lastly, its impact on the judiciary.

The impact assessment study has been made with the help of cases, introduction of new policies and the role of some of the social movements which India has witnessed in recent years, in which, the pronounced assertion of public opinion perturbing the inaction by the government on various prevailing and emerging social issues eventually paved the way for some remarkable judicial decisions.

III. INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA WORLDWIDE

Social media has registered its powerful presence and demonstrated worldwide usage. According to Statista.com, Facebook, YouTube and WhatsApp are ranked top three among all the social networking applications.

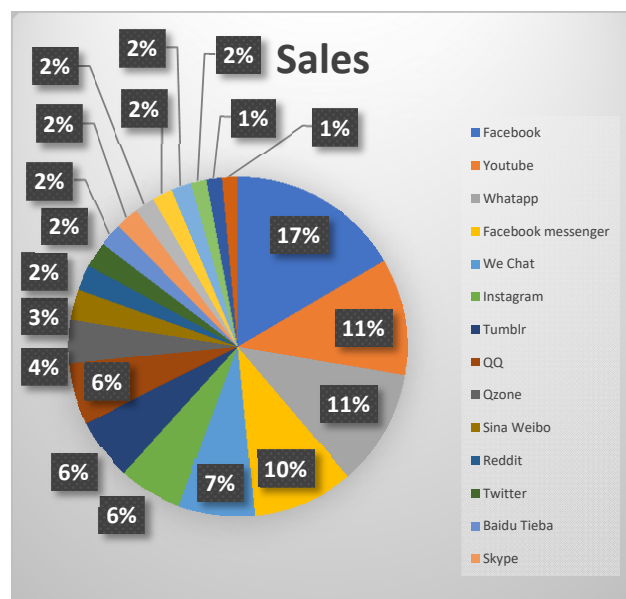


Fig. 1 Most popular social networks worldwide as of April 2018, ranked by number of active users (in millions) [2]

The impact of social media in terms of active users can evidently be seen from the chart above. Facebook is the most popular social media app with 17% usage globally, YouTube and WhatsApp are equal second with 11%, while Facebook messenger is ranked third with 10%. In order to appreciate the impact of social media in terms of users residing in a particular country, it is necessary to look at those leading countries having the maximum number of Facebook users.

It is evident that India is one of the leading countries

globally in terms of Facebook usage, according to the data shown in Fig. 2. To get an in-depth knowledge of the impact of social media on the public at large, it will be useful to study the data on the usage of other social media also.

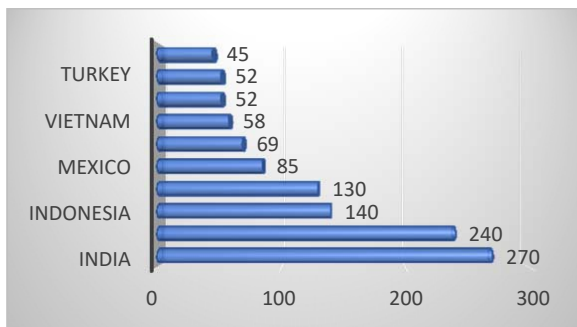


Fig. 2 Leading countries based on the number of Facebook users as of April 2018 (in millions) [3]

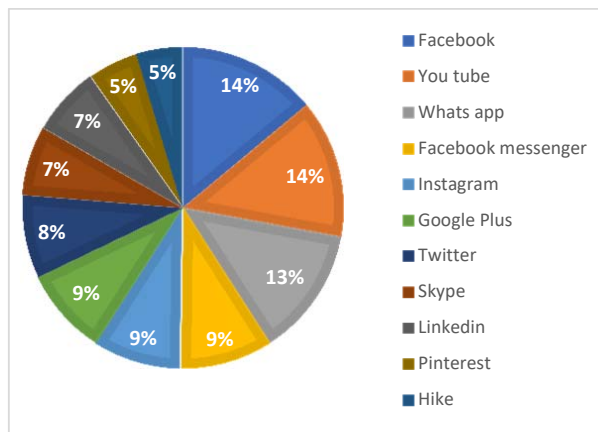


Fig. 3 Penetration of leading social networks in India as of 3rd quarter of 2017 [4]

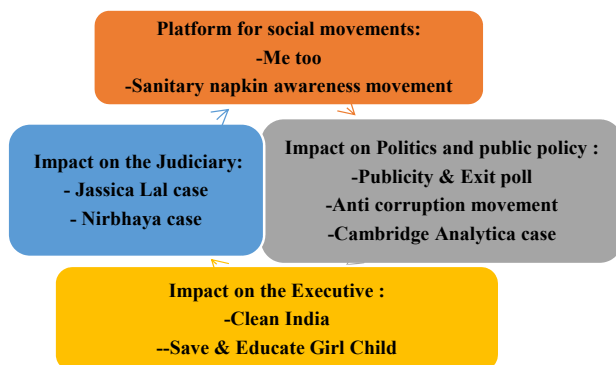


Fig. 4 Notable social movements which have influenced the functioning of the government

IV. IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON SOCIAL MOVEMENTS IN INDIA

Social media encourages dialogue between remotely located individuals and facilitates an independent exchange of

thoughts and views in a democratic and substantial manner. The social movement activist takes advantage of the widespread utilization of digital social media, for instance, Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram and so on, as a new dimension to social activism with the help of numerous movements to make changes in the structure and functioning of government as well as other institutions.

Some of the notable social movements which have influenced the functioning of the government in the recent past are stated below:

A. Platform for Social Movements

1. #MeToo

The movement was started by Tarana Burke in 2006 with the slogan #MeToo. The slogan's original drive was to acknowledge the pervasiveness of abuse in society.

This campaign was popularized by Alyssa Milano to raise awareness of sexual harassment and assault continues to prove the power of social media for activism. This movement created an unprecedented moral awakening, and has resulted in being the driving force behind many resignations, firings, policy change and lawsuits across many industries, organizations and governments.

This movement serves as an open platform for every woman who has been a victim of harassment to raise her voice. Stimulated by a global campaign against sexual harassment and assault, women across the spectrum opened up and shared their stories. No field has remained untouched, from Hollywood to Bollywood, Multi-National Corporations (MNCs) to low-wage industries, the hospitality industry to hospitals, academia to politics, media to technology, women have been speaking out about their personal nightmare openly.

The #MeToo movement rocked India in 2018 when actress Tanushree Dutta accused actor Nana Patekar of sexual harassment during a film shooting in 2008. Gradually, social media was flooded with a series of posts by other women who shared their experiences with the world. In India, people from all walks of life, as well as actors, film directors, advertising tycoons, artists, writers, media and politicians, and female professionals have discussed and openly condemned the loathsome conduct of errant individuals at the workplace. From unwanted attention in the office to sexual innuendos on the film set, there were many kinds of allegations that surfaced to gradually force law enforcement agencies to take appropriate legal actions [5].

2. Sanitary Napkin Awareness Movement

A private study conducted by AC Nielsen called the "Sanitary Protection: Every Woman's Health Right" stated that merely 10-12% of women use hygiene sanitary napkins in India. It affirms that 88% of women in India are forced to use ashes (a locally available absorbent material), newspapers, sand husks and dried leaves during their periods because of the unaffordability of sanitary pads. Due to this unhygienic practice, more than 70% of women suffer from reproductive tract infections [6]. However, the high price of sanitary napkins is not only reason women use these alternatives, a

general lack of unawareness of good hygiene practices emerged as one of the major health problems and challenges in India [7].

The Indian government and educational institutions used to conduct many awareness campaigns on this issue and promote the benefits of using sanitary napkins. However, the revolutionary drive was made by a movie 'Padman', based on the true story of Arunachalam Murganathanam, which has created a wave on every form of media. Bollywood stars, male and female, started a campaign posting their photos with a sanitary napkin and related misconceptions trending to social media. Women and men are found equally enthusiastic about discussing its importance and uploading photos with sanitary pads to break the taboos and support women, especially to those residing in rural parts of India.

Going a step further, some activists even questioned the government for the heavy tax enforced on sanitary napkins and the lack of support for women in rural areas. Raising their voice, they demanded the removal of tax on pads and the initiation of menstrual education and hygiene awareness campaigns for women on a large scale.

As a result, the Delhi Government announced that it will cut taxes from 12.5% to 5% for sanitary pads costing above Rs 20, but the fight for imposing zero GST tax on all female hygiene products has just begun and its impact is bound to be visible in near future [7].

B. Impact on Politics and Public Policy

Social media is playing a significant role in redefining Indian democracy, as it has become a new mode of reaching out to a younger, aspiring population eager to redefine the direction and design of India's future.

1. Election

Political parties encourage social media users in India to join their bloc through tweets, status updates, and expressing support through blogs on social media platforms preferably, Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube, to get more connected.

It has become a powerful mode of publicity which affects exit poll and eventually elections. Social media played a vital role in the phenomenal success of Bhartiya Janta Party's online campaign during the 2014 Lok Sabha elections. According to the Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI) report 2013, the major change in the general election can be attributed to the strategic shift which the political parties made in their election campaigns by involving social media. The presence of social media in the 2014 general elections in India could be clearly felt, as the magnitude of campaigning was evidently commensurate with the funds spent by political parties in engaging social media. Political parties had allocated 2-5% of election budget expenses to social media as per the IMAI report [8].

2. Anti-Corruption Movement

Anna Hazare, the famous social activist, used social media to unite people in New Delhi to launch a campaign to introduce the Jan Lokpal Bill in the name of the anti-

corruption movement 2012. The use of social media greatly helped in rapidly spreading the critical perspective on the anti-corruption movement; finer points of the law, legal and constitutional issues, as well as flawed notions such as "supremacy of the Parliament" were discussed and debated with inputs from experts in the public domain.

According to reports in newspapers, Twitter and Facebook, the impact of this movement was so widespread that more than 116,000 people on Facebook joined hands in support. The growth of the page was organic. All major parts of the country, especially cities like Mumbai, Bangalore, and Delhi virtually took part, with people demonstrating their solidarity by organizing "Candle Light Support" rallies and pledging their support for Anna Hazare.

Over 1,000 photos and videos were uploaded by supporters on the fan page. Around 15,000 users uploaded a badge on their Facebook profile picture via Pic Badges. A Facebook event called "2500,000 Missed Calls" attracted over 9,000 people, while a further 600,000 people supported the event by leaving a missed call on a government telephone number. Anna Hazare himself had more than 25,000 fans on his fan page and 45,000 people on the event page to garner support.

Renowned celebrities and influential figures have actively tweeted their support, and seven out of 10 trending topics in India were about the movement. [9]

This social movement on social media not only supported the cause for which Anna Hazare rallied for a long time, but is also credited with helping in the launching of a new political party in the country, namely, Aam Aadmi Party and its flamboyant candidate, Arvind Kejriwal. It would not be out of place to mention that the credit for his surprise victory in Delhi against major political parties can be largely attributed to the popularity and publicity earned by him due to the effective use of social media.

3. Cambridge Analytica Case

Cambridge Analytica is a data analytics firm based in London. The illegal collection of personal data by Cambridge Analytica was first reported in December 2015 by Harry Davies, a journalist for UK newspaper, 'The Guardian'. Later, on March 17, 2018, the scandal exploded when three news organizations, 'The Observer', 'The Guardian' and 'The Intercept', published articles which caused widespread public uproar. The articles alleged that during the 2014 General Elections in India, Cambridge Analytica had provided services both to the ruling as well as the opposition party to carry out "in-depth electorate analysis" and influence voters, including in the 2010 elections to the Bihar Legislative Assembly. As per a report, 355 Indian Facebook users used a Cambridge Analytica App, which in turn revealed the statistics of 562,445 users. In addition, Cambridge Analytica whistle-blower, Christopher Wylie, alleged that the company has agencies and staff in India and that the Indian National Congress party was a leading customer. A BBC documentary clipping depicting the poster of an office bearer of the Indian National Congress with Christopher Wylie, a former Cambridge Analytica expert, went viral in India, sparking allegations that the company was

deploying both conventional and social media in order to subvert Indian voters away from the Bharatiya Janata Party and towards the INC as part of a neo-colonial effort to undermine Indian politics in favor of vested interests [10].

For these incidents, which united public opinion, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg was held liable and steps were taken in the US and UK to ensure that Facebook and other social media companies are made accountable to the government. As a result, shares of Facebook also fell in price by more than \$100 billion in days. Ultimately, Mark Zuckerberg had to testify before the United States Congress [11], [12].

The scandal was significant for provocative open dialogue on ethical standards and moral principle for social media corporations, political consulting organizations and politicians. Consumer advocates called for better consumer protection in online media and the right to privacy as well as curbs on misinformation and propaganda.

C. Impact on the Executive

1. Clean India

The Prime Minister of India, launched the Swachh Bharat Mission (Clean India movement) on October 2, 2014, with the aim to achieve a 'Clean India' by 2019. With the hope to sensitize the public towards the issue of cleanliness and sanitation and develop a civic sense, PM Modi called on all members of society to join the campaign. The PM decided to initiate this drive by giving key importance to use social media and thereby ensure to keep this campaign outside the purview of the bureaucratic red-tapism [13].

Many of the PM's followers on Twitter, FB, Instagram had enthusiastically taken up the task, with post after post declaring support with hashtags like #MyCleanIndia and #MyIdeaoSwachhBharat.

People from different segments of society have come forward and joined this mass movement of cleanliness. Millions of people across the country had whole heartedly participated in this campaign which included, government officials, Bollywood actors, sportspersons, industrialists, spiritual leaders, NGOs and local community centers and so on, to make India clean, by organizing frequent cleanliness campaigns to spread awareness about hygiene through plays, music, print and social media, skit etc. [13].

Mass awareness through the message of 'Cleanliness is next to Godliness' inspired the citizen for a neat and cleaner India, and eventually, they started paying attention to sanitation and sustaining a hygienic environment [13].

2. Save & Educate Girl Child

The UN has declared October 11 as international Girl Child Day to highlight the disparity and different types of discrimination that girls face. Other than violence and discrimination, education also is also a sector in which the girl child is confronting segregation.

The Save Girl Child theme has been the focal point of consideration of everybody everywhere throughout India so as to improve the overall social and economic status of women. Female infanticide had been declared illegal even before

independence. But the law could not be implemented in letter and spirit even after adding provisions against forced miscarriage in the Indian Penal Code, 1860.

Under the global umbrella name - Save Girl Child/Beti Bachao Abhiyan - numerous activities for spreading awareness, have been launched by the central and state governments, as well as independent bodies, which will help in changing the behaviors of people towards the girl child. Some of the Save Girl Child initiatives launched by the central or state government are as follows:

- A 'Ladli Scheme' was launched and implemented by the Delhi and Haryana state governments in 2008, with the aim to control female foeticide for improving the status of the girl child through education and ensuring equal gender rights.
- The Ministry of Women and Child Development launched the 'Sabla Scheme' in 2011, with the aim to empower adolescent girls through education.
- The Ministry of Women and Child Development launched the 'Dhanalakshmi Scheme' to provide financial benefits to families for the registration and immunization of a girl child after birth.
- The Ministry of Women and Child Development launched the 'Kishori Shakti Yojna' campaign with the aim to improve the nutritional and health condition of adolescent girls.
- 'Sukanya Samridhi Yojana' is a government-backed savings scheme as part of "Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao Yojana" which was launched to ensure equitable share to a girl child by the family.
- The Ministry of Women and Child Development launched Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao (meaning Save Girl Child and Educate Girl Child) in 2015 for the welfare of women.
- All the above schemes could be implemented more efficiently and effectively because the use of social media led to mass awareness, and thereby helped in the success of these schemes.

D. Impact on the Judiciary

Social media as an influential network has played a vital role in pressuring the government to introduce appropriate changes in the existing laws with the public showing a keen interest in high-profile cases, such that they were minutely observed and followed by the common man. As a result of the increased public scrutiny, the courts were ultimately forced to conduct speedy trials and ensure that the judgement is delivered adequately. Some of the notable cases are mentioned below:

1. Jessica Lal Murder Case

One of the most shocking high-profile cases in Delhi was the Jessica Law murder case. The victim was a model who worked as a celebrity barmaid at a crowded socialite party. On the night of her murder, Jessica had refused to serve a drink to a male customer as the bar was closed. The son of the son of the former Indian National Congress, Manu Sharma, was later convicted for her murder. This was a prototypical case in its

own way of an average family taking on rich and powerful opponents, which struck a chord in society. The trial also revealed the lacuna of the legal system as key witnesses turned hostile one after another, which was one of the major reasons for the delay in justice [14], [15].

The case was something of a pot-boiler where fashion, high society, crime, political influence and media activism all came together [15]. The case became a nationwide public outcry; later, due to the intense media interference, the case took a new turn, when it was evident that the media had shaped this particular case and brought justice. It was the power of the masses that got the victim justice without the use of force [14].

2. Delhi Gang-Rape (Nirbhaya Case)

Delhi was shocked in December 2012, when a brutal and heinous gang rape was reported. The incident engendered extensive national and international coverage and the act was widely condemned, both in India and abroad. Social media provided the much-desired space to remotely located individuals to convey their anger against the act as well as their annoyance at the almost in-effective laws that existed against the perpetrators of such heinous offences. This was instrumental in catalyzing a mass movement against the rape laws in India, which eventually led to the introduction of appropriate amendments in the relevant laws in 2013. The discretionary power of courts to reduce the term of sentence for any period less than seven years was abolished. The punishment is made severer for repeat offenders including the provision of a death sentence as per the severity of the case [16].

In the Indian Penal Code, Section 354A-D was introduced which specifically defines stalking, voyeurism, unwanted sexual advances and touches as specific offences. It has ensured that these extremely dangerous behaviors can no longer be ignored or trivialized.

Likewise, recognizing the acid attacks on women in India as one of the most heinous crimes, a 2013 Act introduced provisions specially criminalizing the acid attacker and introducing measures for protecting possible victims of these attacks [16].

V. FINDINGS

In light of the above, it is observed that social media has emerged as a powerful tool in the recent past which has made a tremendous impact on the various government institutions of India. Social media has emerged as the best apparatus, in recent times to flag the issues, content, opinions and direction of any social movement, and has demonstrated that it will have a far-reaching effect on government, in the future also. Early indicators point out that it will be instrumental in radically changing the structure, functioning and policies of governments. Social movement activists, in particular, have effectively demonstrated that social media as a tool has tremendous potential to bring about a desired change. They have extensively utilized the power of digital social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp and so on) to streamline the effectiveness of social protest on a particular

issue through extensive successful mass mobilizations.

The research analyses showed that social media is extensively used as a power to catalyze social movements in India mainly in four ways; firstly, in the execution of many social issues particularly - #MeToo, use of sanitary napkin, and the Anti-corruption movement. Secondly, used by the government to promote social causes, like, Save Girl Child, Educate Girl Child, Clean India are some noteworthy social movements which were conceived, executed and brought to their logical conclusion by using social media. Thirdly, the Indian Judicial System has, under the impact of social media, expeditiously and rightfully pronounced decisions in many high-profile cases. India witnessed a colossal social movement which remarkably amended laws and persuaded the justice system to deliver speedy and fair trials, most notably, the Jessica Lal, Nirbhaya Case.

Lastly, social media is a powerful mode of publicity. India's political parties have aptly used it during and after the elections. However, it is evident that gradually social media is becoming instrumental in changing the legislative system as well as the fate of Indian democracy.

VI. CONCLUSION

Freedom of expression is one of the fundamental rights to express an opinion through any medium. In the past, print and electronic media played a vital role in society. The media in its new avatar, i.e. social media, has very rapidly changed both the condition and direction of government. Social media has an extensive influence to affect public opinion in a revolutionary way, to spread information, making it instantaneous and allowing it to reach the public at large. It has become a new cohort of activism and consequently, exerts influence in the functioning of government in an open, consultative and comprehensive way.

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