Contemporary Indian Politics: Internal Dynamics and External Compulsions

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Chapter 9

Politics, New Social Media and Mobilisation in India

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New Social Media (such as blogs, social networking sites and Twitter) has made an interesting penetration in Indian Politics in the recent years. Not only has it attempted to introduce new forms of communication and mobilisation within distinct political actors, it has also brought in a slight change in the content of the political message. Whether it is by way of popular mobilisation of civil society on issues relating to corruption or crime against women, reaching out to the electorate on a real-time basis by using the latest social media platforms, or the state using the new media technology to spread messages of social policy, it does appear that new media tools are now likely to have a permanent space in the public-political landscape in India. So much so that the 2014 elections were often referred to as the first social media elections in India. However, it remains to be seen if the new social media has the potential to alter the grammar of Indian politics which has traditionally been dominated by primordial factors of caste, community and religion. The present chapter attempts to look at some recent trends in social media mobilisation to explore whether it really has a transformative potential or has no more than a marginal influence in shaping opinions and outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary Indian politics is at a very interesting stage of 'information transition' where the nature and direction of political debates are often guided by the way they are projected by the media. At a time when modern Information and Communication technology (ICT) is playing a crucial role in reshaping the contours of deliberative democracy today in many parts of the world, India could have hardly remained an exception.
While on one hand media is playing the role of making knowledge and information available to a large number of people across the globe in shortest span of time, it is increasingly playing the equally important mobilisational role by bringing together communities sharing common aspirations within and across national frontiers. Seen from these perspectives, it is indeed seen as liberating individuals as well as groups from the shackles of ignorance and apathy. The liberating impact however, is varied in its manifestation depending on the other variables (dependent as well as independent) which makes a uniform generalisation problematic. The content as well coverage of the media, role of the state as an intervening agency and the political spaces that created in the process determine how powerful the liberating impact shall be.

A country like India is perhaps symbolic of this dichotomy more than any other country. As an example of a democracy in transition, India meets the fundamental tests of participation and representation. With an electorate of nearly three quarter of a billion and a remarkably well performing electoral mechanism which has over the years seen relatively smooth transition of power among competing interests and political affiliations, India sees itself as a model for many developing societies (Cohen, 2001). An open and vibrant media cutting across print, visual and cyberspace acts as major source of information provider and disseminator to the millions. Heightened civil society activism in the recent times, highlighting issues of public probity and corruption has further helped in sharpening the public debate in India across the length and breadth of the country. Also equally vehement have been the efforts by the state to confront and control the new-media landscape which have started raising the issues relating to freedom of expression and public order.

The debate also has an external resonance. The domestic democratic aspiration has also found an echo in India's location and positioning abroad, aided by nearly two decades of reasonably good economic growth. In the midst of the recent economic decline worldwide, there have been increasing voices on greater role to be played in global monetary management by countries like India, which are seen as potential engines of future growth. India's ascendency in the global IT sector, coupled with its vast human resources and burgeoning manufacturing sector is seen as supplementing its claim for a global role. India's emerging geopolitical partnerships across transnational frontiers are a testimony to this aspiration (Raja Mohan, 2003). The way India handles the new media challenge will therefore have a bearing on its credentials in the emerging global sphere as well.
RISE OF NEW MEDIA IN INDIA

India has been a relatively new entrant to the new media bandwagon, though the quantum and magnitude of the growth that has been seen in the recent years is phenomenal. The first serious attempt to usher in information and communication revolution in India was undertaken in mid-1980s with the telecommunication reforms ushered in by former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. The reforms essentially dealt with providing enhanced telecom infrastructure through greater telephonic connectivity via satellite as well as cable networks. The processes were supplemented with the introduction of computers in the public and the private sector with the prime focus being more on data processing and storage.

This was a period when India was still a largely inward-oriented economy with reforms being introduced in a more selective way in specific sectors, not really driven by a macro economic logic (Frankel, 2005:158). They were seen more as an instrument that would enable India to undertake a smooth transition into the '21st century' as the famous catch phrase during that period would say. Understandably therefore, the social and mobilisational dimension of this change was neither visible, nor apparent and was more directed at creating a base for industrial and technological expansion rather than there being a more overt social design. This is not to say that there was no social impact at all. In fact for the first time after the telecom revolution of the eighties, a significant part of India appeared to be truly covered and connected under the new telephone networks. Thus India did appear set for a new area in communication at the turn of the century, but whether it could translate itself into a plank for mobilisation was not known. Greater attention in fact was paid in the academic literature on the technological, economic and regulatory aspects of the revolution (Vardharajan, 2011).

The Information Revolution and its Political Impact: The Interesting Nineties

The economic reforms unleashed in India in the early nineties created for the first time a platform where the conventional idioms of political communication started changing the image of the self and that of the outside world. The reforms, necessitated by a sharply deteriorating balance of payments situation and looming debt crisis under conditions prescribed by multilateral donor agencies, were unprecedented in scope and coverage and had the following implications as far as the information and communication sector was concerned:
Greater exposure to foreign media: As the satellite television revolution had already made its inroads in the urban Indian drawing rooms with the first Gulf war, with live pictures being beamed from the theatre of conflict, Indian audiences for the first time became exposed to the power of media to shape and influence opinion across the national boundaries. Besides the impact of 'live feeds' which hitherto used to be confined to events such as Olympics or International Summits, made the information consumers sit up and take note of the importance of getting updates real time. For people who were till now used to switching over to the 'BBC regional radio service' to check the authenticity of a news that may have had a local-national implication found a totally new medium which was visually appealing, direct and had immediate connect. A related impact with the technologically superior coverage and the professionally crafted stories which at once brought out the need for the state-run domestic media to come up to global standards.

Unleashing the private potential: The essence of the new economic policy initiated as part of economic reforms was to expand the capacity of the private sector to shape the growth agenda with the clear focus on the manufacturing and the services sector. Ostensibly this was to make up for the 'stagnant Hindu rate of growth' that had become the hallmark of the inward-oriented model of economic development that was followed for almost four decades. With the spurt in private industrial enterprise within a couple of years of economic growth, it was but natural that the media expansion would also ride on the back of an unprecedented growth push that was to come from the private sector. While the initial spurt was led by entertainment channels with the private news production companies often using the platform of the state broadcaster or the foreign cable channels uplinked abroad, it was fairly evident that the appetite of the burgeoning middle class for greater variety, coverage and style of news media was increasing. What was interesting was that this appetite was being felt across the regional spread in India, where not just the English and the Hindi, but also the regional channels experienced a steep increase over the years. As the news media scene appeared to be stabilising by late nineties, a new wave of 24 by 7 news channel phenomenon gradually soon took over which has led to India becoming home to almost 100 local, regional and national private news channels, the political impact of which was bound to be felt as will be explained later. The role of private corporate interests in driving the new political economy of media expansion could hardly be exaggerated.
Decline and fall of the State media: The response of the state to the expansion of the private broadcast media was quite in a sharp contrast to its response to the general expansion of private manufacturing activity. In the case of latter, the state was quite happy to leave the arena to the private sector while actively trying to pursue a proactive agenda of privatisation of sick Public Sector Undertakings. In the case of broadcast media on the other hand, the state attempted to redefine its own role as a public broadcaster. The state-run Doordarshan was sought to be governed by a seemingly autonomous Prasar Bharati Corporation which would try and bring in greater professionalism and accountability. At the same time, the leverage with the Indian Space Research Organisation, the premier state space agency was used to expand the reach of the public broadcaster through the indigenous satellites that were launched. The immediate fallout of this was the proliferation of regional channels of DD which would now be available for viewing across the nation. Such expansion notwithstanding, the public broadcaster was not able to match the popularity of the private channels, partly because of the content which was still guided by considerations of state policy as well as style which often remained a more improvised continuation of its staid appearance of the yore. If at all the public broadcaster could stand out, it was in the domain of the reach and coverage as the private channels were still to expand beyond the urban landscape in India. In a way the rural-urban divide in India remained entrenched (and continues to be so) vis-à-vis public and the private media expansion as well.

Beginning of the 'New Media' phase: While the conventional news media, both in print and broadcast went in for a sea change in the nineties, it was yet to see a major impact in terms of web technology and its multifarious applications. The basic characteristic of the old media was premised on a certain unidirectional flow between the transmitter of information and the receiver of it. The news and the content generated was something that was taken as given, without there being a possibility of instant feedback and further dissemination. The lack of an 'interactive medium' in the old media was however to be more than compensated by the power of the new web technology that gradually emerged on the Indian landscape and was to become the harbinger of a gradual yet effective change that was to come. This despite the fact that the 'New Media' divide across communities and regions in India is perhaps much deeper and pervasive than the old media. As we shall elaborate in the next section, in the Indian context, the distinction between old and the new media and its impact on the political spectrum has to be examined.
not in terms of the overall reach but the effectiveness and impact on the segments it reaches.

THE NEW MEDIA CHALLENGES IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA

As we try to address the contemporary context of new media impact on India's internal and external polity, it would be better to provide an Indianised interpretation of what the term implies given its locational context. 'New Media' reflects an assortment and collection of all media apparatuses (print, audio-visual and web) which derive their contemporary significance from an unprecedented technological sophistication resulting in faster reach, wider coverage and greater interactivity. In the print, it may include features which give greater space to local issues, more emphasis on graphic and visual content of the news, regular reader's column. The audio-visual manifestation may include proliferating channels and radio stations while doing their routine transmission, also reaching out to communities and citizen reporters and constantly uploading public opinion on topical themes through SMS-based surveys or otherwise. The web-based platforms may include online newspapers, web news portals, and the more recent social media (blogs, Facebook and Twitter) having the innate possibility of instant access and upload of news as it unfolds on a real-time basis.

Given the speed with which new media has been impacting different aspects of urban Indian life, there is bound to be a related effect on country's politics as well. Upon analysing the Indian political scene during the recent years one sees the following trends as having shaped the discourse relating to the new media:

Proliferation of the medium: The Indian mass media today is quite diversified in terms of its spread and diversity and that in many ways contributes to the strength of the medium. A consumer today has access to multiple sources of news and information which indeed has the potential to keep the interested citizenry as updated and informed as that of a large democracy should be. Multiplication of the medium also means that there is a diversity of the opinion available with the audience free to choose, accept or reject a view based on their judgement and inclination. In that sense, new media has had an empowering influence as the monopoly of the few (state as well as private operators) has been apparently broken and the basic rationality of the consumer ought to decide which option to go in for. In fact it would not be wrong to say that there is often an
information overkill often leading to a certain compromise with the quality, thereby leading to the dilution of the message.

**Dilution of the message:** An undesirable and perhaps unintended outcome of proliferation of new media is that there are too many players often pursuing too little news, thereby leading to a perpetual tussle between the providers on a) who is the first one to report and b) report it in a manner that no one else does. In such a race, often what gets compromised is the objectivity and depth of reporting. Often there is an attempt to either sensationalise (particularly among the local language channels) the news item which may seemingly be of no major ‘political’ consequence, or leads to a repetitive coverage of a story without there being any new insights or perspectives. This often leads to a greater appreciation of media of the yore, which was more subdued but equally rigorous in its depth of reporting. In fact it is rare to see a news channel to have a regular feature as original documentaries focusing on topical themes. The twin features of proliferation and dilution together however have generated a new framework of relationship between the provider and the recipient that adds a new ‘liberatory’ streak in the popular consciousness.

**Politics of ‘Expose’:** One of the most powerful liberating features of the new media has been its propensity to bring to the fore the corruption of the political class in a form which is more visible, graphic and sustained unlike that in the past. While undoubtedly the first phase of India’s communication revolution (during the Rajiv Gandhi era) coincided with one of the biggest exposes in India’s post-independent history: à la the Bofors Gun deal, it was definitely the moment for the print media which carried on single-handedly the task of uncovering, exposing and disseminating the scandal with dogged efforts of some of the leading investigative journalists of the era. The issue became the single most important event after the emergency to dislodge a government which was elected with an unprecedented majority in the Parliament. The Bofors expose however pales in comparison when one looks at the speed and intensity with which the scandals in the post-reform period have been exposed with instruments as diverse as sting operations during the Defense deals and Cash for Votes, telephone taps relating to politicians and businessmen nexus, leakage of reports of the statutory bodies like the Comptroller and Auditor General of India with regard to 2G spectrum allocation, etc. While each of these exposes has perhaps set new standards on the deteriorating standards of public accountability and probity, the fact that media itself has been found to be complicit in many of these omissions makes the whole relationship incestuous. The
selectivity and timing of the exposes often coincides with the political flavour of the season, with ordinary man often being at loss to comprehend the objectivity of the news media.

Social media and its appeal: In such times when the credibility of the conventional media is often subject to test of objectivity and reason, a new wave is seen as penetrating the new media landscape in India, the ripples of which have at least begun to show if not replace the old one. At one level, one has seen a proliferation of new media practices within the political parties each of whom are trying their best to be more media and technology savvy than the other. Almost all the major political parties of consequence, both national and regional have websites of their own which tend to detail the party mission, vision and organisation. Some of the political leaders have their dedicated webpages and an interactive platform where they regularly interact with their followers. One of the pioneers in this trend was none other than the Bharatiya Janata Party patriarch Mr Lai Krishna Advani, who became one of the first leaders in the party to have a blog of his own. Besides the trend of the number of politicians getting hooked on to the Twitter, either while campaigning or otherwise has only grown in the recent years. In order to cope up with the Facebook generation, also constituting a very important chunk of the young voters, many candidates during the recent elections are known to have used social networking sites in an attempt to multiply their appeal among the youth segment (Tripathi, 2013).

Apart from the political party domain, social media has played a very important role in several mobilisational campaigns with regard to education, ethical voting, right to information, electoral reforms, anti-corruption movement and human rights. This has been in addition to the role of ICT in bridging the digital divide across communities in India. Such campaigns are fairly innovative in their appeal because of the speed and coverage. It enables the domain followers to actually become partners in the campaign with regard to the issue being taken up and acts as an important tool of empowerment and emancipation. Just to give an instance, the recent Jan Lokpal movement (for creating the institution of the National Ombudsman to look into issues of Public Corruption) at one point of time had followers running into lakhs. The conventional media in such instances have helped to multiply the impact and certainly not undermine it.

The 2014 elections in India perhaps were rightly regarded as the first elections where social media played a force multiplier if not game changer as its depth and spread was much more than one saw in the 2009
elections. There were nearly 165 million Internet users in India of which nearly 80 million were active social media followers by mid-2014. Studies had pointed out that in around 163 constituencies, social media would have a high impact. No wonder therefore that the BJP Prime Ministerial candidate, Mr Narendra Modi had close to 4.4 million likes on his Facebook and 2.3 followers on Twitter. By the seventh round of polling in the 2014 elections, there were around 49 million election-related conversations on Twitter alone. However, it has to be stated at the same time that social media alone could not have been a guarantee for strong electoral performance and had to be supplemented with the conventional campaign paraphernalia as well. It was no wonder therefore that Mr Modi had to supplement his social media presence with physical presence as well, having done an astounding 450 rallies in eleven months. Besides, the Aam Aadmi Party, which too had made extensive use of social media platforms, failed to translate its online presence into an electoral advantage.

There is therefore a flip side to such new media engagement. Its appeal far from being universal is still confined to some select urban pockets amidst certain classes where perhaps the access and availability of such new media is not a problem. A majority of Indians (more than three fourth of the population) are still outside the range of what we hereby term as the new media apparatus. A majority of Indians therefore would still be guided by considerations of primordial affinities (caste, community, religion and then gain) when it comes to their electoral choices. Use of new media technology for them would be nothing short of being a new tool which makes limited sense to them. It can therefore be concluded that 'New Media technology may at best change the syntax of the Indian politics and not the grammar of it'.

**Overreaction of the state:** What has been a bit perplexing and contradictory has been the role and reaction of the state in the emerging new media postulations. While on one hand the state has primordially perceived itself as facilitator and enabler for the new ICT revolution to deepen and proliferate, it appears to have been rather chary of attempts by the new media to occupy the deliberative and critical space, particularly when it comes to questioning the state and political leadership over issues of probity. Although the state has taken refuge under the ostensible personal campaigns carried out in the social networking spaces while explaining its intent of controlling the new media, any suggestions that there could be some kind of internet censorship makes the whole idea of open spaces and open debates in fructuous.
What makes the situation even more complicated is the ambiguity of the existing legal mechanisms when it comes to interpreting the manner in which laws are violated when it comes to the use of social media. Section 66A of the IT Act provides for imprisonment of up to three years for posting information online that is grossly offensive or has menacing character. The same applies for electronic communications causing annoyance or inconvenience and uploading of information known to be false to cause annoyance, inconvenience, obstruction, insult, injury, criminal intimidation, enmity, hatred or ill will. The same however may be used to curb freedom of expression and throttle dissent. The following instances offer a case in point:

A Professor at Jadavpur University Kolkata being arrested because he forwarded cartoons by email to his colleagues about West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee.

A cartoonist, arrested by Mumbai police based on a complaint that he had denigrated national symbols in his cartoons as part of his campaigns during the India Against Corruption rally in Mumbai, and his website was shut down as a result.

Two girls from Mumbai arrested because of their endorsement of messages on Facebook stating that the city should not have shut down on account of death of Shiv Sena supremo Bal Thackeray.

Two leading web-based companies, Facebook and Google face trial in India for uploading offensive material on their website.

At the same time, there are some genuine fears that new media technology including the social media has the potential to unleash mass fear and anxiety in a situation of pre-existing social strife. It can always be misused by elements who would wish to exacerbate social tension and discord in order to pursue their hidden political goals. The recent exodus by a number of people from the North East from South and Western part of India is primarily attributed to the kind of hate messages that were spread through mobiles and social media hinting at retaliation in response to the Bodo-Muslims riots in Assam earlier this year. In a deeply diverse Indian society and polity, the possibility of such rumours leading to a larger flare up cannot be totally ruled out. The government was therefore forced to put curbs on the use of SMS.

In its regulatory role therefore, the state is caught in a dual dilemma where on one hand it has to ensure that freedom of expression and creativity be protected, at the same time it has to balance the same with
imperatives of public security and order. It is often pointed out that with the total number of Internet users in India being less than ten per cent, the government is being over active in anticipating the threats emanating from/through the online space. It is also interpreted that the government is trying to be pre-empt the likely consequences of spread of social media to a larger population by bringing in more legislations at such an early stage than what are needed rather than correcting the existing ones (Mackinnon, 9th June 2012).

NEW MEDIA AND INDIA'S GLOBAL ASPIRATION

New media therefore puts India in the midst of a very interesting yet challenging transition with regard to its self-image within and the image abroad. At the local level, India would very much want the new media penetration to become symbolic of the internal transition within. Expansion of the media spaces within symbolises opening of the spaces for deliberation as well as dissent- two essential hallmarks of any healthy democratic tradition. It certainly is the job of the media to inform as well as educate the people of their rights and all the transgressions which the state does as it tramples on the same. On one hand, this keeps the powers that be in check. A reality check by the media therefore enables the putting in place of systems and structures that may lead to good governance. At its worst, the media becomes harbinger of negativism and unduly rhetorical. At its best, it acts as a conscience keeper of the democratic tradition. It may therefore after all bring the much needed responsiveness among the political classes.

The external facet of India's new media change however may yield results which are mixed bag. A powerful media expansion and penetration across the national landscape may yet bring the much needed change in the image and perceptions that India has abroad. For instance, a major section of the academia, state and also the media appears to have over-deliberated on the theme of 'emerging India' or India as a 'future superpower' through a number of studies and symposia on the subject, official policy projections and loads of editorial content and analysis in the not too recent past. However, in the more recent years, the same euphoria appears to have given way to a more critical assessment of India's capabilities abroad and within and the deliberative space is more replete with the huge gap that is unfolding in India's global aspirations and its internal incapacities which may eventually act as a hindrance. What is more significant is the fact that
such an analysis is now gradually making its way in the global discourses engaging India as well, irrespective of what the official projections at the high tables of global deliberation (such as World Economic Forum or G20) may be.

Where does the new media stand in all of this? The following instances perhaps offer us a clue:

New media is symbolic of (and shapes) the divide within: As mentioned earlier, new media penetration in India is still confronting the fundamental challenge of finding a convergence between vertical proliferation and horizontal spread. While undoubtedly there has been an expansion in the media outlets (conventional and modern) it will remain quite a challenge to impart a spatial redistribution to make it more effective tool of popular mobilisation. The chasm that appears to be growing between a wired and connected urban India and the remote and inaccessible hinterland (certainly with shades of urbanising rural side) is pretty much reflective of the unfolding regional divide in India's political economy which is becoming more visible by the day. This would continue to have a major bearing on how new media becomes an instrument of mobilisation on a pan-Indian scale.

Medium and the message disjunction: The spatial dichotomy notwithstanding, what will continue to be of greater relevance in the Indian scenario would be the message that the new media would want to carry. So long as the compulsions of time, space and the market determine the content, one cannot expect the new media to be a transformational tool. In an era of multiple news channels and ever proliferating web, attention span of the consumers often gets limited and memory becomes short. In such scenario, often the very important distinction between reporting the fact and conveying the opinion gets ignored and what passes off as public debate is more of an assortment of aggregated opinionated news. Such a postulation can have severely debilitating effects on a healthy debate that should be the highlight of a robust democracy.

Monitoring the watchdog: While the issues relating to the content have often been at the centre stage, there have been at the same time issues with regard to monitoring the media (particularly the visual media) especially as the counterpart to the Press Council of India for the satellite channels does not exist. Whether the PCI can have a broad mandate over the TV channels has been part of a heated debate recently between the PCI Chairman and the media magnates. While the issue is still to be resolved amicably what is holding for the moment is the voluntary check
which the private broadcasters have maintained through Broadcasting Content Complaints Council of India. Perhaps the existing arrangement is more workable in the current circumstances in the absence of an alternative. Greater public control over monitoring and regulation would certainly not do any good insofar as the image of the largest democracy with a free press is concerned.

*Shaping India's perception:* Finally, the strength and the depth of new media intervention will be seen against the backdrop of how India's own internal as well external dynamics unfold. It is quite apparent that the ability of the new media to shape India's attitude within and attitudes about India outside will eventually depend on how the existing institutions - both political and economic - perform. New media, like the convention media will be quick to latch on to the success stories as it generally also does to the stories of despair and deprivation be it farmers' suicides or corruption at high places.

**CONCLUSION**

It may be inferred on the basis of the analysis above that new media has certainly led to the opening and deepening of the deliberative space in India today and it has been a kind of work in process which started since the late eighties. This space however is constrained in its mobilisational capacity due to the restricted vertical spread of new media in the urban centres in India as compared to the rural hinterland. As a result, there is a perceptual deficit existing within India which has a resonance also in the image of India that is portrayed abroad. Eventual convergence and congruence between the two deficits will depend on how India is able to reform its own institutions and policies, for which the new media shall continue to remain an important observer.

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