



Role of Social Media in Electoral Campaigns: A Study of Patna with special reference to 2015 Bihar Assembly Election

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Abstract: This study aims to analyse the role of social media in an election campaign, using the 2015 Bihar Assembly Election as a case study. Social media has become an important part of our everyday lives, and it is important to consider the possible impact these tools could have on our political process, including their influence on the actions of politicians. Building on existing literature around political participation and social media, as well as literature on the use of social media in a general election campaign, this project intends to provide a new perspective to the subject. Two main

themes emerged in this study on the use of social media by political parties and candidates – social media as means of broadcast; and social media as means of involvement and influence. This project found that, by and large, political parties and politicians use social media primarily as a broadcasting tool during election campaigns to communicate their message to voters. The use of social media has exceeded far beyond its use only for engagement and discussion with voters. The question, whether and how this role will change in the future, provides exciting prospects for research in this area.

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Introduction:

Social media is a new form of communication around the world. It has wide impact across the globe and on every aspect of our life. Politics is no exception. Social media has dramatically transformed the internet. This has rapidly become a forum for political activism in its diverse form. Social media platforms, such as, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube etc. provide new ways to stimulate citizen's engagement in political life, where elections and electoral campaigns have a central role. Personal communication via social media brings political parties closer to their potential voters and helps voters elect their leaders wisely. It has changed from merely an information source to an election battlefield. It presents an opportunity to connect and engage with voters in discussion, as well as receive feedback on

political issues. Social media in politics can be used for advertisements, geographic targeting, fundraising and mobilising people.

Objectives :

The objectives of this research paper are:

- To analyse the popularity and role of social media in recent years in increasing the turnout of voters.
- To find out whether role of social media like, Facebook, Twitter etc. has replaced or minimized the role of traditional communications like radio, televisions and newspaper during the election campaigns in India.
- To study how the users of social media are engaging with political parties and politicians online.
- To evaluate the positive and negative impact of social media on Indian democracy.

Hypotheses :

- The tool of social media is used by political parties and politicians to reach out to the young generation.
- Social media is distorting the opinion of the electorate.

Methodology :

This work was an empirical study based on both primary and secondary data. Primary method included interview of 50 eligible voters out of which 25 were in the age group; 18-35 and 25 above 35 irrespective of caste, creed, class and gender. Sampling method was incidental-cum-purposive and sample size was 50. Secondary data was collected from books, magazines, newspapers, blogs, websites, and different internet portals based on content analysis.

Area of Study :

The area of study was East, West and Central Patna. People from different age groups, professions, caste, religion were approached and we tried to find their opinion on role of social media in election campaign. Boring Road, Rajenda Nagar and Raja Bazaar were covered for this project.

Terminology :

Democracy : Democracy is now the most popular form of government, though it is as old as the Greeks.

The peculiar thing about democracy is that it is a form of state, a form of government, a form of society, and above all, an ethical idea or a way of life. [Johari, 2015: 329]

The political parties of the countries that have representative democracies not only use big financiers but also the media to propagate their own agenda and interests during election campaign.

Importance of Election in Democracy :

- Elections provide a way for the citizens to choose their leaders.
- The citizens are free to contest elections either independently or by joining a party.
- Elections provide a medium to put check on the activities of the government, if the people are not satisfied with the performance of the government, they easily show them the way out in the next election. [www.eci.in]
- During campaigning the parties present their thoughts, ideas and policies to the masses and in the process make them educated politically.

Election Campaign : Election campaigns are the means through which candidates and political parties try to reach and communicate with their voters, their election manifestos, objectives and programmes. There are various factors that influence voting behaviour in India — caste, religion, language, region, personality, money, ideology. While formulating their election strategies the political parties always take into account the factors influencing voting behaviour.

Social Media : Social media are web-based communications that enable people to interact with each other by both sharing and consuming information.

Social Media is different from traditional media in the following ways:

- Social Media is far less expensive than traditional media.
- Social Media offers a level of flexibility that traditional media does not as it cannot be edited once published.
- Social Media is interactive as the audience can give feedback while traditional media leads to passive involvement.

Use of Social Media Platforms during Elections: With millions of people joining the conversation from all over the country, social media

sites have also proved an effective way for politicians to reach out to their voters. Though the value of face-to-face interaction has not been lost, yet social media offers an inexpensive alternative to communicate a campaign message to the people. In USA consequently, a media centered democracy has been created in which the vast majority of political activity is conducted with the media, including social media sites, in mind. [Lilleker 2006; 110]

There are various social media platforms which are used by politicians in different ways:

- **Facebook** – Today every political party has a Facebook page and as such has many followers. People post their likes and comments which makes it easier for the leaders to know the opinions of the people.
- **Twitter** - Twitter is another such platform used by politicians. Every leader has a number of followers on Twitter. More the followers, it is easier for the leaders to publicise their election agenda. Twitter war between leaders is also a very common phenomenon which does involve public to a great extent.
- **YouTube** – YouTube, specifically, during elections is used to upload videos that might influence people.
- **Snapchat**- It uses filters and 10-second video ads which cater to political campaigns.
- **Tumblr, Pinterest, Instagram** etc as media platforms are more popular in foreign countries.

Electioneering process through Social Media :
Global Scenario, National Scenario and Bihar : Use of social media for political campaign involves political communication at different level both international and national level. Politicians generally highlight issues concerning the whole nation, while at regional and state level they are more inclined towards caste and regional issues.

Global Scenario: The 2008 US Presidential election has changed the way political campaign utilises the internet, especially social media. President Obama has been called, “First Social Media President”. Obama’s website was interactive and it allowed his constituents the power to navigate and gave a sense of involvement (Lenvenshus, 2010:328). Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton too embraced social media in 2016 Presidential election in America. The online interest in Trump was three times higher than Clinton, according to Google trends analysis.

Nigeria and Ghana also witnessed a massive use of social networking like Facebook, Twitter and blogs during elections held in 2011 and 2016 respectively.

National Scenario:

India’s 2014 General Election : The 2014 Parliamentary general election in India saw politicians leveraging social media to reach out to the constituents like never before. Earlier, those who were not in favour, later realized the importance of social media tools as politically transformative communication technologies of modern media. An interesting report published in April 2013 by the Internet and Mobile Association of India and a Mumbai based company Knowledge Foundation, held that Facebook users had a tremendous impact on the results of the polls held in 160 out of India’s 543 Lok Sabha seats.

As per the study of Indian online pages site 2014, 50% of the population is in below 25 age group and 65% below 35 age group. This population is either studying in college, working in various companies, such as IT companies, BPOs, Research Centres and various other sectors or are entrepreneurs. Their busy schedule has distanced them from television and radio especially in case of acquiring or sharing information. Today’s youth is tech-savvy and thus love being connected to one or the other electronic devices (Narshimamurthy, 2014: 202-209).

Narendra Modi and his Party BJP have utilized all the social media platforms for creating a desired image for the Party. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Blogs were effectively used to highlight issues which immediately resonate with young and urban voters during the campaign. Social media platforms helped Modi connect with the masses and establish a two-way communication. Modi, being an excellent orator, has delivered scores of similar speeches since then. He attributed slow economic growth, high inflation rate and lack of new jobs, to the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance government’s bad policies. After the elections were announced, his marketing team bombarded voters with print, television and radio advertisements with the same themes. It reached voters through text messages and Modi’s recorded voice seeking votes for himself. It also tapped social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter - Modi has about four million Twitter followers - to magnify the impact of the advertising and branding campaign. Narendra Modi had left no room for a negative content by stoking all the search engine with excessive positive content with the help of accurate positioning with

excessive content sharing. Slogans like “Abki Baar Modi Sarkar”, “Janta Maaf Nahi Karegi”, “Acche Din Aane Wale Hai” were filled on all social media sites. Blogs on various issues, occasion, events, situations and topics were published on regular basis to create the desired image in the mind of masses.

The Congress party started with organized and planned social media operations in mid-2013 after realizing that in the race to win over citizens in India, Narendra Modi led BJP is miles ahead of them. Following the postulate of never too late party, it joined the social media bandwagon by launching a Facebook page, a Twitter handle, renewed its website, YouTube channel, announced to start a volunteer's platform called, Khidkee, used Whatsapp and Line extensions. The party understood the potential of the art of storytelling with pictures, to a target audience which is addicted to this platform. Apart from the above mentioned social media entities, Congress also nurtures a habitat for a vast network of people working at the grassroots. “Khidkee” is a party owned platform aimed to bridge the gap between people working at various levels and to keep channels of communication open for all.

Aam Aadmi Party founded in 2013 is called to be a creation of social media. Their popularity has surprised all, including the two major rival parties — Congress and BJP. AAP is very active on social media channels. BJP and AAP fight it out against each other on social media.

Bihar Scenario: Bihar is one of the major political centres of Indian politics. Chief Election Commissioner Nasim Zaidi chose to describe the Bihar Assembly election 2015 as the ‘Mother of all Elections.’ Bihar is a bicameral legislature, consisting of Bihar Legislative Assembly and Legislative Council. The Bihar State Election Commission is empowered to conduct electoral processes within the state. Bihar is administratively divided into 38 districts, has 40 Parliamentary constituencies and 243 Assembly Constituencies. The major political parties of Bihar are JDU, RJD, INC, BJP, BPCC, LJP. There was an alliance named Mahagathbandhan which was a coalition of political parties named JDU, RJD and INC. It was formed before the Bihar Legislative Assembly Elections 2015. Nitish Kumar was declared Chief Ministerial candidate. The Election Commission introduced a new communication strategy named SVEEP. In Bihar's scenario, SVEEP became an important tool to disseminate authentic information to the electors regarding extensive security arrangements made by the election commission.

SVEEP extensively used social media like Facebook, YouTube, Twitter portals to address urban apathy and disseminate election-related information. Due to their efforts, the voters turnout increased by 4.1% and Mahagathbandhan emerged victorious.

Unlike, most of the other politicians from other parties Nitish Kumar usually shied away from using social media. He was even seen taking digs at political leaders who used this medium, including Modi during his campaign days. But when the battle for Bihar began, Nitish embraced social media like never before, answering to the delight of his fans, tens of thousands of questions. Nitish Kumar now is one of the most familiar name on Facebook, and Twitter connecting a huge mass of admirers and supporters both in the country and abroad. On an average, the Chief Minister holds an hour long question and answer session fortnightly under ‘Ask Nitish’ campaign. The campaign began on Twitter and its success inspired him to take it to Facebook. According to a report, the Bihar's CM took time studying the questions, clubbing them under categories and responding to them personally. Admirers say, Nitish Kumar's new love for the virtual media has created a positive image of him, particularly among the youth. This page includes “Fir ek bar Nitish Kumar” and “Badh Chala Bihar” to showcase the works done by the CM in the last 10 years. Above all, the politician who appears to have taken to twitter like fish to water is undoubtedly Lalu Prasad Yadav, whose tweets and retweets drew great attention of general public.

Social media is an easy tool for political parties and leaders for gaining popularity. But, it is also still a big challenge for people and many politicians to understand and accept the influence of social media because of lack of education, lack of knowledge about technology in Bihar. As a result caste has a dominant role in Bihar politics. Rajni Kothari has rightly said “Indian politics is casteist, and caste is politicized”. While formulating their election strategies, the political parties always take into account the factor of caste. [Laxmikant, 2017, 69]

Impact of Social media on Democracy : One of the positive effects that social media has on politics is that social media provides an opportunity for voters to interact more easily with candidates and gives access to every minute details about election campaign, which was not possible before the evolution of social media. Before social media evolved people had to physically attend a live event to meet a politician or candidate, which was difficult and also, everyone was not able to

attend political rallies. Social media proves to be useful by providing direct contact with voters, two-way communication, economical advertisements, nature of public opinion, fast and speedy form of communication etc, during an electoral campaign.

Despite the fact that there are various positive impacts of the use of social media on electoral campaigns, there are also certain negative sides of the use of social media. Political campaigns are influenced by every story which is spread around social media, whether true or not. It is very difficult to separate actual news from fake news. The constant stream of memes, links and rumours about politicians and candidate are a mixture of truth, lies, satire and speculations. There are some sites with political biases or those peddling various unsustained conspiracy theories. Sometimes political leaders strategically distort media posts to influence opinion of the voters. There are also chances of creating an artificial image of political leaders through social media. People in this case are unable to see the true picture. Social Media generally promotes personality-driven, rather than issue-driven election campaigns. There are various other ways like content seeding, Search Engine Optimization etc, by which parties and leaders strategically manipulate the content on social media in their favour.

Election Commission's instruction regarding use of Social Media in India : In order to supervise the entire procedure and machinery for election, the constitution provides for an independent body, namely, the Election Commission. [Basu, 2003:386]. Seeing the greater use of social media by the political parties in India for election campaigns, Election Commission issued certain guidelines for the parties and candidates regarding use of social media while campaigning. These instructions were given in order to bring transparency during elections.

Major inputs from the guidelines:-

- Candidates are required to provide information about their social media accounts in the affidavit that they file at the time of filing nominations.
- Every registered party and candidate proposing to issue advertisement on social media, will have to apply to Election Commission of India for Pre-certification before putting it online.
- The provisions of model code of conduct and related instructions of the commission issued from time to time shall also apply to the

content being posted on the internet including social media websites, by candidates and political parties.

- In case the content is posted online by a third person, who is neither the candidate nor a party, the commission would consult the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology.

Findings :

- Almost, all the political parties and political leaders are available on social media. Political parties use social media for campaigning and promoting themselves for political purposes.
- Social media has become a very prominent medium for two way communication between the voters and the politicians. Facebook and Twitter are the most used social media sites among politicians.
- BJP is the most famous and visible political party on social media. Apart from them, AAP is also very active online especially at the regional level, JDU also has a prominent online availability. These were statements given by a majority of sample candidates.
- Social media is not merely an urban phenomenon any more as people of rural India also have access to smartphones. But what reduces their participation in online campaigning is the poor phone network connection and lack of internet facilities.
- Approximately 65% of Indian population is below the age of 35. This generation is tech savvy and thus political parties target youth specifically in their social media strategy, but today people of all age have their online presence and they are actively participating in social media campaigning for election.
- Social media has revolutionized the election campaign but in Bihar election 2015 the voting behaviour of people was influenced by caste factor, thus social media was not the only dominant factor. The social media phenomenon in the political campaign is more evident and visible on national front as regional and state level are more inclined towards caste and the regional issues. Also in 2014, BJP was the only one party to use social media at such a vast level for their promotion

but in 2015 all small and big parties started using social media and it became common to promote parties online.

Recommendations :

- People should develop analytical thinking towards the news posted on social media. They should not get influenced by every news. People should not support any politicians or candidate blindly, rather they should rationally judge posts appearing on social media sites and then analyse true from fake.
- People should not share messages and posts without checking their relevance.
- Political parties and political leaders should not spread rumours or fake news or try to manipulate the content available on the social media intentionally for their personal benefit.
- There should be access to internet and good phone connections even in rural areas if social media has to be promoted as a more effective tool for Electoral Campaign.
- Interaction is also crucial for politicians to keep in touch with supporters, it can be done through different social media platforms.
- Sometimes discussion on social media posts can be negative and it is important to bring a halt when it is becoming counter-institutive. Also, it is wise not to feed the trolls or fake elements.
- Finally, social media posts containing electoral matters must be authorised. Candidates should check with their party to ensure that social media posts are compliant to internal guidelines that might exist.

Conclusion :

Social media as the latest form of communication has not only become an important part of everyone's life but also an effective tool used by the political parties during election campaigns. It is a new phenomenon and thus it is important to realize its effectiveness as a forum to provide new ways to stimulate citizen's engagement in political life. But as every coin has two sides, similar is

the case with social media. On one side it provides an opportunity for voters to interact more easily with candidates and on the other side, there are some negative impact with sites having political biases, distortion of opinion and manipulation of content. Sometimes it becomes difficult to differentiate between authentic and fake news. Therefore, the people must have a logical thinking before believing any of such news posted on social media. However, when used constructively, social media can prove to be a more effective tool for Electoral Campaign.

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