

Social Media: A Tool for Substantive Democracy in India

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Abstract

The Institutionalization of democracy in India is a success story which is appreciated worldwide. Yet the deepening of the democracy and making it the substantive democracy, is nonetheless remains a key concern. This paper aims at understanding the difference between procedural, and substantive democracy and how social media is incorporating substantive aspects into formal democracy in India. At the beginning, this paper discusses the difference between the procedural and substantive democracy as a normative background. Thereafter, it conceptualizes the social media, and analyse the democracy-social media interfaces in India to derive some conclusions about it. Structurally, the social media is very conducive for the culture of public discourse. Moreover, it is empowering people and notably, the deprived sections of society also to participate in public affairs. Social media is quite helpful in attaining the ideal of substantive democracy in India.

Keywords: Social Media, Democracy, Substantive Democracy, Public discourse.

Introduction

In 1947 India was going through a major experiment in the field of governance as the latest form of government was being applied in the oldest living civilization. Critics were sceptic about the compatibility of democracy and Indian society. Constitutional forefathers of India borrowed the idea of a representative form of democracy from western models and particularly from the Westminster system of the United Kingdom. Ramashray Roy describes this transformation as reshaping an aged man in tattered coat into a new energetic and adventurous man, who could explore the dimensions of the uncharted promised land (Roy 2009, p.1). The transformation process despite not being very smooth, accomplished its goal successfully.

India has overcome aforementioned challenges. Now, in any serious discourse, democracy in India is hardly impugned, at least for its viability and compatibility with the society. Now it is a desirable thing and held sacrosanct by all the stakeholders of Indian politics. There have been some issues, but democracy in India is undoubtedly a success story. Pratap Bhanu Mehta counts the indicators of this success story as- Voter turnouts, turnover of incumbents, the empowering of new groups, maintaining liberal freedoms, civilian control over armed forces, political contestation (Mehta 2012, p. 204). However, at the same time the question of deepening of the democracy and attaining the substantive aspects of democracy remains relevant. Deepening of democracy is such an ideal that is relevant for all democracies across the globe and especially for developing countries.

Objectives and Methodology

This paper seeks to understand the interface between the social media and the ideal of attaining substantive democracy in Indian context. The paper is based on conceptual analysis.

Formal versus Substantive Democracy

The formal conception of democracy accentuates the procedural aspects of democracy which mainly involve free, fair, and timely election. Moreover, there must be universal adult suffrage. Once the people elect their representatives through fair procedure, the formal democracy is considered to be attained. Then the onus of proper functioning of government is considered to be on elected representatives only. It means the formal democracy begins and ends with the act of voting (Jacobs and Shapiro 1994, p.11). This model of democracy has no congruity with the real spirit of democracy.

The procedural democracy generally tends to produce apathetic citizens. With the combination of the indifference of citizens towards political system, lesser awareness of democratic rights, and long tradition of feudalistic structure of the society, there arises a superior sense of political elitism among the representatives and their associates as well, which is sometimes referred as 'VIP Culture' in India. These political representatives seek preferential treatment for themselves, which is naturally, against the essence of democracy. Thus, procedural democracy, sometimes may empower the representatives in place of the common people.

On the other hand, the substantive conception of democracy transcends the procedural requirements of democracy and gives attention to the democratic functioning of the state also. In a substantive democracy, people are enabled and encouraged to participate in public matters and governance. They are supposed to participate actively and constantly in such affairs unlike the periodic and symbolic participation in formal democracy. Moreover, people should be conferred with freedoms and rights in a true sense, so as to help them in self-realization because only then they can realize the active citizenship. Especially they have to be well informed and must be given the freedom of expression. The state should endeavour to reduce the plights of the deprived sections of society; specially the financial constraints in attaining the self-realization. In addition to financial constraints, there exist social, educational, health related constraints that limit a person's choices for realising active citizenship. It is also true that among these impediments or constraints, economic aspect is most important and it further emanates other constraints also. This is the state's part in ensuring substantive democracy.

People also have their part to supplement it. People must practice democratic values in their life. We can say that besides a way of governance, democracy must be a way of life as well. People must hold democratic values in every part of life. For instance, they must practice tolerance, must believe in pluralism, must participate actively in public discourses, and must respect the dignity of each individual. It affirms the civic republicanism. This leads people to constitute a democratic society in addition to a democratic government. All these features of a substantive democracy may seem numerous and nebulous, but can be summarized in two key features-

(i) - Prevalence of the culture of public discourse for policy making which is induced by highly regarded 'freedom of expression'.

(ii) - All forms of disabilities and especially the economic disabilities should be addressed so that the people can participate in a vibrant democratic life with full capacity.

This paper contemplates aforesaid aspects of the democracy in India with regard to the advent of social media. Patric Heller describes two interrelated characteristics of an effective democracy- a robust civil society and a capable state (Heller 2000,p.488). He further expounds that in a free and lively civil society, consultation takes place not only through

electoral representation, but also through constant feedback and negotiation (Heller 2000,p.488). A strong civil society can be achieved only through conferring extensive degree of freedom of expression to citizens. Hence we can observe a correlation between substantive democracy and freedom of expression which has become more visible with the advent of social media as a key mode of expression. Apart from being a carrier of free speech and public discourse, social media has been propelling the democracy towards substantive level by positively transforming many features of the democracy which will be discussed further generally and with special reference to India also. Before that, it will be expedient to understand the social media briefly.

Conceptualizing the social media

Social media is a by-product of the web 2.0 version of World Wide Web. Earlier internet technology could transmit the information from the website to the viewers. The web 2.0 enabled the users to read, manage, or edit the content on a given platform and thus opened the way to interactive and instant communication on internet. Social media is a part of internet that allows to receive and share user generated content in a bilateral or multilateral way unlike the unilateral transmission of content in earlier times. Summarizing various scholarly definitions, a research defines it as-

"A set of mobile and web-based platforms built on Web 2.0 technologies, and allowing users at the micro-, meso- and macro- levels to share and geo-tag user-generated content (images, text, audio, video and games), to collaborate, and to build networks and communities, with the possibility of reaching and involving large audiences"(Ouiridi, Mariam El, et al 2014,p.123).

WhatsApp, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, etc. are some of the most popular social media platforms. Sometimes social media and social networking sites are understood interchangeably. In short, IT tools involved in both social media and social networking sites are the same, but 'social networking sites' have some emotive and human aspect based connotations while 'social media' have connotations for structure based approach of using these tools. Since social media and social networking sites overlap each other and there is no precise difference between the two, this paper conceives them as the same.

There is another perspective to understand the social media. It is a type of mass media. Mass media can be categorized into 'the first age' and the 'second age' of media (Martin 2014, p.3). The first age refers to 'one to many' communication which is a one way communication; for instance, broadcast platforms; and the second age refers to 'many speakers to many receivers' communication as like www based platforms (Martin 2014,p.3). In any model of democracy, including substantive democracy, one cannot neglect the media; Therefore the media-social media dynamics must be evaluated to understand the interrelation between substantive democracy and social media.

Media has been playing a key role in maintaining and preserving the democracy by keeping the citizens well-informed. Traditional media has some constraints. Everything cannot be published or broadcasted. Moreover, sometimes the personal interests of the media house owners may refrain themselves from publishing some contents. Sometimes, things may be overlooked by editors. Social media on the other hand, is a neutral platform. It has almost immeasurable space to circulate any content. The collective wisdom of its users decides that what is going to be 'viral' on social media. In this way, social media and the democracy have a commonality that is valuing the collective wisdom of the people. Thus social media is compensating the shortcomings of traditional media. Since the media is an integral component of democracy. Anything that enhances the quantity and quality of media, enhances the quality of democracy also. In other words, social media is helping to realize the true sense of democracy.

Social media is basically an IT tool, but as the term 'social' suggests, there is a societal component involved within it. It is designed for 'social interaction' in 'social environment' (Bertot, Jaeger and Hansen 30). Human beings are gregarious in nature and have always been the same since the beginning of civilisation. Aristotle famously termed human being a 'political animal'. We have to have some communities (generally overlapping each other) to live in. Some community membership we inherit and some we acquire. Social media have extended the meaning of 'community' and have certainly expanded our options for such acquired community memberships. Virtual communities are also an important type of communities whose membership we acquire. Social media provides leverage to create such virtual communities.

In 1987 Howard Rheingold used the term 'virtual community' first time in an article "The Whole Earth Review" and described it any group of people who may or may not meet one another face to face, but exchange words and ideas through digital networks (Curley 2010, p.96,97). Further, in 1993, Rheingold elaborated his definition with incorporating 'sufficient human feeling' (Curley 2010, p.96,97). Thus, it is a group of some acquainted and unacquainted persons digitally connected with each other and share feelings and views there. Virtual communities have significant presence in social media where people with shared interests or aims or any other commonalities, come together. It not only gives new dimensions to the meaning of society and community, but also empowers people by uniting them and creating new kind of associations.

The associations and communities, either real or virtual, are crucial for the functioning of a democratic political system. However, social media is not confined to be a set of virtual communities only. It is somewhat made of with virtual communities, individual to individual relations, and an open discourse platform. The structure of internet regulating agencies is multilateral, vague, and so nebulous that authorities find it very difficult to curtail the people's

interactions and freedom of expression here. It is less controlled by government and therefore facilitate political engagement (Martin 2014, p. 3) in a relatively unobstructed way. Social media presents a great mode of expression to its users.

Social Media and Substantive Democracy: With Special Reference to India

The idea of substantive democracy focuses on the importance of each individual, his or her reason, rights, personality and so forth. When we talk of an individual having a distinct personality it means we are referring to the fact that he has his own ideas and opinions (Mathew 1978, p.96). Here also social media serves the purpose. It helps the users in self realization. Social media provides a platform to its user where they can and they do assertively proclaim their views, personality, attitude etc. Dhiraj Murthy explains this phenomenon -

"Social media posts serve as an important vehicle of self affirmation. We can read tweets such as 'had too many espresso shots today' as a means by which individuals affirm their identities in a constantly shifting liquid modern world... an important tool to say 'look at me' or 'I exist.' " (Murthy 2012, p.1062)

In the aforesaid way social media seems to serve the individualist aspirations of its users. Users spend a large portion of their day on social media and in this course they express their thoughts in multiple way which is certainly a part of their self realization process. Social media provides congenial conditions for expressing one's thoughts regarding self affirmation. But it is not confined to self affirmation and things of personal domain only. There is a congeniality also for expressions regarding public affairs. Zizi Papacharissi points out a unique aspect that users remain lonely, but not isolated on social media and he or she can enter into public sphere operating from the private environment (Papacharissi 2014, p.153). The opportunity to engage in public affairs from the comfort of private environment seems to have great scope for furthering democratic ethos.

Unlike earlier times, now with social media people can participate in public affairs, protests, movements etc. even without involving physically. Moreover, if there are security threats from authorities, users have the option to act in anonymity also. In this way and from the perspective of Papacharissi's view, social media seems to be an interface of personal and public domain which is very conducive for civil and political action. Further the option of remaining anonymous or pseudonymous, coupled with the comfort of acting from private environment, make social media a catalyst and reconciling point as well for two core but contradictory values of liberal democracy- one, individualism and second, active participation in public affairs. As far as Indian context is concerned, aforesaid phenomenon can be experienced here with more profoundness due to the fact that Indians prefer mobile phones to access internet and social media. Mobile device is the primary internet accessing device for 77 percent of urban users and 92 percent of rural users (Lal 2017,

p.15). It is quite evident that mobile phones provide far more ease of accessing the internet and social media. One can join the political and social happenings with just a network connected mobile phone, even without disturbing his or her solitude.

Active and constant participation of citizens in public affairs, even between the electoral procedures is the essence of the substantive democracy. For that, each individual must have a say in public affairs. There must be a tradition of all-inclusive public discourses. Traditional ways to participate in public discourses or modes of exercising freedom of expression have been slow. With the advent of social media, practicing aforesaid democratic traditions has become much easier, faster, and most importantly all-inclusive in nature. It is so because, economically and regarding accessibility, social media itself is inclusive in nature. Social media and web 2.0 applications "give voice to those who would not otherwise be heard" (Hanson 2008, p.89). In earlier times, mainly intellectual class could become a part of any public discourse that is intended to shape the public policy. Even for intellectuals, it was not an easy task. In addition to that social media is helping in overcoming the challenges posed by a large, diverse area and population of India. People from hinterlands can participate in social media debates as like the person sitting in New Delhi.

It is important that in social media, people are not engaged in public discourse or with each other in a tepid way. One post provokes many other users also, to post their views, and the chain reaction goes on. In a real society, people generally, refrain from engaging in discussions on all issues and with everyone, because it may upset them or it may get turned into a heated altercation. Moreover, there is an option to remain anonymous or pseudonymous in social media, which allows users more freedom to express themselves. Yes, there exists cyber bullying and trolling, but it doesn't hurt anyone physically and can be managed with proper knowledge of the features of social media platforms. The most important fact is that social media is immensely enriching the culture of debate. This new propensity is especially useful for the large, diverse society of India, where people from all backgrounds, can find a place to propagate their interests and views.

As a result, an incessant public discourse takes place on almost every relevant domestic and global issue. The discourse on social media seems very efficacious, so much so that governments and political parties keep eyes on its trends and they have to react and act accordingly. In India, major political parties specially Bhartiya Janta Party and Congress have their dedicated social media management teams. The process of building and swaying public opinion is taking place on social media to a large extent. However, there are some dark sides also. Serious concerns are being expressed regarding its potential misuse, like meddling in election procedures. Government of India issued stern warning to social media platform Facebook to take steps to avoid such incidents in Indian Lok Sabha election 2019. Facebook acted aptly and took various measures to

remain a neutral social media platform. This implies that social media may entail some unwanted impacts, but social media platforms have the capacity to mitigate these side effects. Facebook is following some measures to clearly identify political ads, and to prevent foreign meddling with elections.

Sometimes, social media is targeted for the proliferation of misinformation and fake information. But it may happen with all useful things. There may be various mechanisms to cope with such negative propensity of spreading misinformation. Many websites provide fact checking facilities and people are becoming more aware about it. The 'fake news industry' has given birth to a 'fake news busting industry' (Lal 2017, p.233). Similarly, social media platforms, specially WhatsApp have been working on an extensive awareness programme against hate messages and fake news. It has launched ad campaigns and also limited the number of messages which can be transmitted in one go (Firstpost 2018).

Actually, for most of the Indians, to be exposure to the internet and social media is relatively a new affair and therefore, the majority of the internet users are first generation users. In addition to that, due to socioeconomic backwardness a vast number of social media users in India are merely literate or less educated and consequently they are more susceptible to rumours and misinformation. Refer to the initial lines of introduction about India as the 'oldest living society'. This society has been very resilient to changes and it has had a great ability of reconciling contradictions. This society embraced the democracy despite many social traditions which were contradictory to the democracy. Similarly, the aim of realizing social media as a mode of expression and public discourse without any distortion like spreading misinformation, would be achieved here. Understandably, the misuse of social media is manageable and it doesn't outweigh the brighter side and the potential of social media.

Now an individual can make a suggestion, and feedback in social media regarding public policies and if other people find it righteous, their supports get aligned with it. Further, if it gets snowballed support, it compels authorities to take an appropriate decision. Such views, ultimately, may get accepted or rejected. Whatever will be the fate of those views, ordinary citizens get involved in the policy making exercise. This is what the substantive democracy demands. Engaging with, and approaching the authorities has never been so easy before.

Social Media is a two tailed platform for public and government with regard to public opinion. Public can impart its opinion and government can gauge it for taking feedback on its policies. Interaction between the electorate and elected has never been so easy and instantaneous before social media. Here also, social media is benefitting both, representatives and people. Election contestants are managing their campaign on the ground and in social media also so as to approach the maximum voters. On the other hand, people can interact with candidates and even after the election, they can keep in touch with their representatives. Government in democracies must be

not only responsible ones, but responsive governments also. Representative government does not necessarily imply responsiveness of the government (Mehta 2012, p. 207, 208). Social media has potential to fill this gap.

In pre social media era, this tendency was common in India that leaders used to woo their voters during the election campaign by responding and acting with alacrity, but after the election, people could find it very difficult even to access them. In India, there have been widespread jokes and political satires based on such propensity of the representatives. Social Media compels political leaders to address people's plight, grievances and suggestions with alacrity even during the period between two elections. In this way the social media is diluting the age long criticism of representative democracy for not being responsive and lacking in the regular involvement of the people. Some Union Ministers of India have been known for their active response in social media. For instance, former minister of external affairs Mrs. Sushma Swaraj was very active and responsive to requests made on twitter by Indians stranded in abroad. People tend to appreciate such gestures very much and such leaders also get benefited with increased political stature. Hence social media facilitates the political leaders also in performing their duties.

In India, official procedures and the importance of the documentation process is overemphasized by the bureaucracy during registering a complaint and grievance. In so doing, the means become more important than the end itself. That means cumbersome procedures become more important than the redress of grievance. Almost all the important government agencies and ministers are present on social media and people can seek help directly without going into official procedures. Moreover, there is no need for documentation there as all conversations will remain on the database of social media platforms without the fear of fabrication and meddling. It's a great milestone in the field of governance. Officers cannot hide their incapacities by tinkering with the documents if the complaint has been posted in social media by a victim.

Complaints can be posted even with videos. The reply from the concerned agencies and ministers also matters as millions of social media users are there as spectators. Therefore, authorities act with alacrity on such issues raised in social media. We have been witnessing that how ministers are acting on the complaints made at their twitter handle. The whole process can be understood as a paradigm shift in governance. The users are associated with each other in social media and their collective power compels authorities to act righteously. In the democratic form of governance, it is assumed that the elected shall act as per the interests and the will of the electorate. In India there are no elements of direct democracy like referendum and initiative; therefore, the will and interests of electorate can be expressed only through the voting process. The social media is providing a mode for constant expression of the will and the interest of the electorate.

The democracy is often criticized that it equalizes citizens only on political ground, but inequality prevailing in other parts of life, e.g. education, property, or social status may impede them to fully realize the benefits of democracy. Even the equality of political rights that is mainly understood as universal adult suffrage could be achieved in a later stage of the evolution of democracy. In this context, internet and social media, especially in India, remains distinctive. With reduced cost and time to communicate, the internet has equalizing and levelling effects to reduce the gap between rich and poor or between urban and rural (Hanson 2008, p.5). This is very important happening as far as evolution of democracy is concerned. India has experienced a drastic reduction of internet data rates, during the last few years. India has the cheapest internet data in the world (Roy 2018).

With the help of low cost internet data and budget smart phones, internet has become easily accessible in India. According to a March 2019 report by McKinsey Global Institute (MGI), in 2018, India had 560 million internet subscribers second only to China and moreover, Indian mobile data users consumed 8.3 GB of data each month on average, compared with 5.5 GB for mobile users in China (Kaka et al. 2019, p. vi). The report further informs that During the period between 2014 to 2018, the number of total smartphone per 100 people reached to 26.2 from 5.4 and monthly data consumption per unique connection has increased drastically from 86 MB to 8320 MB (Kaka et al. 2019, p.vii). Higher rate of data consumption can certainly be attributed to the low cost of the data and smartphones in India. Hence, the social media coupled with the low cost data and smart phones, is removing economic constraints of the people of India and thus helping them to realize democratic citizenship in a substantive way.

Conclusion

Now we can recapitulate the effects which social media is producing in the world's largest democracy. First of all, social media is fostering the culture of public discourse in India. The social media seems like a reconciling point of individualist's comfort-seeking nature and democratic activeness in public affairs. Due to its psychological conduciveness for engaging in public debates, the social media is popularizing the debate culture in society. It is true that sometimes debates in social media do not take place in an ideal and decent way but it is a manageable problem. It can be managed with some technological corrective measures and awareness campaigns.

The cheap data and mobile device induced ubiquitous presence of internet and social media are ensuring people's easier access to public discourses. The social media seems to proclaim the equality of all individuals in accessing it, irrespective of their economic and social status. Bearing in mind its utility to get engaged in public affairs, the inclusive coverage of social media, can be regarded as a remarkable incident of the democratic evolution. However, concerns regarding the destructive use and misuse of social media cannot be overlooked. As the humankind has had the experience that technology

itself provides the solutions for its misuse, we can expect the same in the case of social media also. This problem is more common in India as there is a majority of first generation internet users and the lesser literacy level vis-à-vis developed democratic countries. But this problem is temporary and will not remain for always.

The social media has been filling the communication gap between the elected representatives and the electorates. For the representatives, it is a tool to communicate with the voters, in a geographically large, and populous democracy like India, where hardly any representative can visit his or her entire constituency in a single tenure. For the citizens of India, it is a tool that confers power to them by synchronizing them with each other. They are now empowered to shape public policies, to question the injustice, and to seek hectic free redressal for grievances. Overall, by facilitating people to people engagement and people to government engagement, the social media is serving people in India as a tool to realize the substantive aspects of democracy.

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