



# Social Media and Political Mobilization in India

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## ABSTRACT

India is considered as the largest democracy in the world. The proper functioning of a democratic system depends upon its electoral politics and election result is the outcome of the mobilization strategies adopted by the different political parties of the country. Thus political mobilization is particularly important in any democratic politics. This paper seeks to understand how the mobilization strategy has been redefined due to the entry of social media into politics. There is no scope to deny the fact that conventional media still play an important role in political mobilization. But the coming into being of social media into politics has made things more interesting, politics more democratic and the electoral system more inclusive. The political leaders irrespective of political parties are trying their best to utilize the social media platforms for their electoral benefits. The paper is evaluating the role of social media in political mobilization as different from conventional media with the expectation that doing away with the fake news will make this new media a prospective media in the near future.

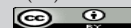
**Keywords:** Political Mobilization, Social Media, Politics, Political Parties, Political Leaders, Civic Engagement, Fake News

This paper is written with the objective to evaluate the role of social media in Indian politics. Three objectives of the paper are as follows:

1. To study the relationship between political mobilization and social media.
2. To differentiate the role of the social media from conventional media with regard to political mobilization in India.
3. To understand how the political parties and the leaders are using social media in Indian electoral politics.

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While doing this research literature surveys have helped immensely. Few could be referred to here. ‘Role of Social Media in the Changing Face of Indian Politics: A Study with Special Reference to Facebook’ is an interesting article to study the role of facebook in comparison with traditional media and to see how social media have changed the politics in India. ‘AAP As Avengers and ‘Thanos’ Modi – Kejriwal party gives Delhi poll campaign pop-culture spin’ is again an interesting article which deals with how Kejriwal led AAP government has used social media and has often taken help of the popular ads and pop-cultures to attract voters. ‘The Politicization of Social Media in India’ is an important article on the evolution of social media in electoral politics of India. ‘The Impact of Social Media on Politics’ is an elaborate study on the potentials and role of social media in Indian politics. ‘Polarisation and Politicisation: The Social Media Strategies of Indian Political Parties’ is an important article on the role of social media in the elections particularly with regard to Bharatiya Janata Party and Indian National Congress.

## **Research Methodology**

The study has been carried out with the help of secondary data only. All the data has been collected from various sources such as social media platforms and reports published and have been compiled as per the need of the study.

## **What is political mobilisation**

Political mobilization is a very common term in any democratic political system. It is the process by which groups, social networks, crowds and social units are organised for political purposes. Through political mobilization a group which till then remained as a passive collection of individuals are turned into an active participant in public life. The term refers to activities that intend to motivate the mass, participants to express themselves and to undertake a particular political action to accomplish political aims. Therefore by political mobilization we mean how the common people are mobilized for political goals. This is particularly carried out by the different political parties to mobilize the common people so that they can turn out to be their vote banks.

## **Importance and medium of political mobilization**

Now the question is why mobilization is important. The most important reason for political mobilization is to create voters out of the common people. All the political parties try to increase their vote banks by including greater number of citizens into their parties. The mobilization process helps the political parties to capture power and once coming into power they try to mobilize people so that they can remain in power. This they do by criticizing the policy and programmes of the opposition parties. They mobilize the people to come up with the same criticism that they do to oust the opposition. Political parties adopt various means to mobilize people. Prior to the social media era the party used to mobilize mainly through conventional media like Television, Radio and Print Media. There the mobilization strategy followed was mainly one sided, that is, the parties used to treat the common people as passive recipient where

there was no scope of interactions among the two. The mobilization strategies also included different rallies, press meetings, face to face interactions, local associations, interesting wall writings, flex and banners etc. Not that these strategies are outdated today, but social media have created new room for a more modern political mobilization. The advent and popularity of new media have not only helped in reorienting political mobilization, it has given new interpretation to democracy, civic engagement and governance. The political leaders starting from the most seniors to juniors are trying to innovate new ways of political mobilization through social media. Before coming into how the political parties through their political leaders use social media, we need to look first at what social media is.

### **What is social media**

Social media are interactive technologies that allow the creation or sharing or exchange of information, ideas, data and other forms of expressions through virtual communities and networks. Some of the most popular social media websites with over 100 million registered users, include Facebook (and its associated Facebook Messenger), TikTok, WeChat, Instagram, Qzone, Weibo, Twitter, Tumbler and LinkedIn. Though no media exists as ‘unsocial media’, by social media we generally understand the new electronic media as differentiated from conventional media like the Television, Radio and Print media. Social media are particularly named so as it helps in maintaining a good societal relationship with the others. New media offers an open and inclusive discussion space which allows engagement with one another democratically. New media alters the meaning of geographic distance, allow for a huge increase in the volume of communication, provide the possibility of increasing speed of communications, provide the opportunity of interactive communications, allow forms of communication that were previously separate to overlap and interconnect.

### **Mobilization in pre and post social media period**

With the coming into being of social media into politics, there has been a change in the political mobilization strategies by different political parties. The political communication, which is an intrinsic part of political mobilization has changed remarkably with the entry of social media into politics. While previously, the political leaders could present themselves in front of the common people via a medium like television, radio or news papers at a particular time, through social media the leaders remain connected with the people 24×7. In social media people are no more passive recipients or consumers of messages rather they are active prosumers who are in the process of manufacturing contents themselves. These netizens actively participate in the debates and discussions in the social media, post and comment on the walls of the social media thereby making politics more participatory and democratic. Thus they are not only mere audiences today, they are critical citizens who are also involved in the process of citizen journalism. Today due to the entry of social media into politics, covert mobilization also takes place through this new medium. People are highly influenced and mobilized by the social media even during their leisure time, while surfing the internet. Moreover through social media the political leaders get enough scope to mobilize the youths of the country who are more associated with new media than

the conventional ones. The relentless flow of information through the screens of social media helps in building political knowledge which provides greater impetus for political communication. Moreover, since the exposure to social media is frequent, the influence come mobilization process is stronger. It is equally true that social media has an all inclusive character at the outset. It helps in including all the voices in the democratic politics, which were left out by the conventional media. Moreover, social media is visually attractive, which helps in attracting the public minds particularly the youths. The different videos and posts in social media including the political trolls and memes help in the process in the political mobilization. Any socio-political incident finds its critical and explanatory analysis through the political leaders in their posts of the social media. These interpretations done by the political leaders help the common people to make political opinions and decisions practically as theoretically propounded in the two – step flow of communication model. As opposed to agenda setting theory, social media upholds a bouquet of information to the common people, where from they draw the relevant information, exchange opinions on them and again provide feedback to the information loop. There is no question of hierarchy of news as seen in the conventional media. Thus, social media has created a new scope of political mobilization.

### **Political mobilization through social media**

The political parties in India today are using social media for political mobilization. The coming into being of social media has made the presence of party leaders compulsory on social media. Starting from the national political parties to the regional ones, most of the parties are trying to utilise the potential of the social media to the fullest for reaping maximum political benefit out of it. The 2008 U.S. Presidential Election was the benchmark as it was the first election to fully utilise the potential and reach of the social networking sites to impact voters. The 2012 U.S. Presidential election confirmed the vital role of social media in politics. In India, the active use of social media in political sphere came with social activist Anna Hazare. During 2012, Anna Hazare used social media to connect people in New Delhi for anti corruption campaign. Social media was a popular word in the Indian Parliamentary election 2014. 2014 Loksabha election was the first social media election for India, with the advent of social media giants in India, namely, facebook and twitter. Narendra Modi then emerged as India's Obama. 2019 Loksabha election became more prominent social media election, turning the political battle fields into netwars. The recent 2021 Bidhansabha election in the state of West Bengal was also a remarkable example of social media election. Prominent political leaders of India like Narendra Modi, Rahul Gandhi, Mamata Banerjee, Arvind Kejriwal, Naveen Patnaik, Sitaram Yechury, Shashi Tharoor and so many others are using social media to gain political advantages. The 2019 campaigning strategy systematically used the whatAapp groups. Presently Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) campaign on social media revolve around two stands – highlighting the developmental works of Modi government and suppression tactics of the opposition. The populist and digital strategy of the BJP marked a major trait in the 2019 election, which was largely a social media app based election, particularly the Narendra Modi (NaMo) app and the WhatsApp. The booth level volunteers of the party were advised to use the NaMo app to get connected with the local electorates, to judge the opinion polls and to get proper feedback on national and local

issues as well as to evaluate the performance of the politicians. Hashtag warfare and campaigns have become very common these days. The BJP started huge social media campaigning and announced recruitment of volunteers under the Mera Booth Sabse Mazboot (“my worker at the polling booth is the strongest”), hashtag campaign. This was linked with their new WhatsApp strategy in 2019 election. The Communist Party of India also started CPIM Digital Campaign, where they invited the youth volunteers to be a part of their digital platforms. They invited applications from the youths to get recruited for managing different positions in the digital services. Indian National Congress (INC) was a latecomer in the field and started its online communication in May, 2017. The INC social media cell has followed the BJP’s social media strategy of focusing on star campaigner Rahul Gandhi, projecting his common man identity and attacking the BJP as a pro- corporate and anti- people government. Though still behind with regard to BJP’s online campaigning, INC also maintains a good social media platform through its IT Cell team to popularise the party activities. Both the parties create hashtag and memes with humor (for instance INC criticising Modi’s hugging with the world leaders as “hugplomacy”) which attract the world attention. Similarly on the screens of the internet, the BJP has made derogatory terms like ‘Pappu’ for Rahul Gandhi. The social media platforms are now a good means of image building. The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) on 8<sup>th</sup> January 2020, tweeted a video named ‘KEJRIWALL’ showing an old advertisement for a cement brand which featured actor Boman Irani and the advertisement was modified to send a message to the rival Congress and BJP. The then ruling party of Delhi, AAP compared the strong wall made by Ambuja Cement as the ‘Kejri-Wall’, while the BJP and Congress were shown as two sides, trying to pull it down. The video went with the tagline: “Kejri-Wall – tutegi kaise? Sachai aur imaandari se jo bani hai (how will Kejri-Wal, made of honesty be brought down)?” From the videogame Mario to the Marvel block buster Avengers and popular ads, the Arvind Kejriwal led AAP government is taking the help of several popular advertisements and pop-cultures to criticise the opponents and to establish links with voters. In a bit to counter BJP social media campaign, West Bengal’s ruling Trinamool Congress launch new initiatives to highlight the achievements of the State Government and show how the federalism is being allegedly eroded and states have been deprived by the centre. The social media post of the Trinamool Congress party focuses on how Bengal under the leadership of Mamata Banerjee has made phenomenal progress in every spheres of governance. Similarly Odisha Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik has adopted innovative social media campaigns during the election seasons to reach out to the youths and make interesting social media posts to attract the attention of the voters in his favour.

Therefore it is seen that not a single political party or the political leaders leave out the scope of nurturing social media for their electoral benefits. The number of followers of the political leaders on the social media platforms is the proof of their popularity on social media.

**Table 1:** Social Media Followers of Some Political Leaders in 2021

Leaders	Twitter	Instagram	Facebook
Narendra Modi	70.6 Million	58.6 Million	46 Million
Rahul Gandhi	19.5 Million	1.6 Million	3.9 Million

Sitaram Yechury	1 Million	15.9 K	258 K
Mamata Banerjee	6.1 Million	167 K	3.8 Million
Naveen Patnaik	3.2 Million	147 K	1.5 Million
Arvind Kejriwal	22.9 Million	1 Million	8.2 Million

**Source:** *Individual Social Media Platforms as on 21-08-2021.*

## CONCLUSION

The entry of social media into the politics of India has ushered in a new era of political mobilization in India. The road shows have turned out to be social media videos, the chaotic rivalries of the political parties have turned out to be net wars and the interesting wall writings have become social media posts. This has given new scope of civic engagement, e-democracy and e-governance. But the entry of politics into social media is spoiling its fruits. The political parties are crossing the constitutional limits on the screens of social media to embarrass its opponents at any cost. The political trolls and memes often cross the civilized limits. Moreover, the manufacturing of fake news, often intentionally disturbs the smooth working of the social media. If the political parties want to reap the benefits of the social media they have to first make it a responsible media like its conventional counterpart. The sound working of democracy depends upon the fair functioning of its media system. Since social media is seen as a prospective media in the largest democracy of the world, it should be dealt with responsibility and accountability to keep its sanctity intact.

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