

Social Media and the debasement of Political discourse in India

Dipjyoti Das

Assistant Professor (Media Science), Inspira Knowledge Campus, Matigara, West Bengal, India.

Abstract - Few would deny the indispensability of Social Media in contemporary society, empowering the communication process like never before. In the last decade and a half we have witnessed an unprecedented growth in social networking sites, with increased presence of the population in the virtual platform to connect and share with like-minded individuals on diverse political, social and economic issues. Facebook, Twitter and Whatsapp are among some of the most popular social networking sites where political engagement and participation has largely increased among political organisations and parties especially among the political leaders, creating an augmented virtual sphere for online political discourse and interaction.

The increased internet penetration has resulted in unprecedented growth in the number of online users especially among the urban population in India which has undoubtedly played a crucial role in emotion mobilization rather than informed opinion formation as well as mobilization of the masses like never before, especially during the election campaigns within the periphery of the political realms. Even popular political figures or candidates often take advantage catering their message to audiences that lean far right or left, which is directed with a certain ideological propaganda. However with the advent of the virtual media the biggest transformation has been the debasement of Indian political discourse. It was not something new in Indian politics but the grammar, tone and vocabulary of debates and discussion in Indian political discourse has escalated to new lows. The new trend is the use of derogatory and abusive language to make a point, even it may be a trivial one. The other is the use of devious language to make arguments to divide the body politic. Both have the potential to change the practice of politics altogether.

In this paper, I shall attempt to examine the shift in paradigms of conventional political discourse and the disparaging picture of the present debased political rhetoric in India that is devoid of intellectual substance or even a semblance of commitment to real problems. The indignified and coarse manner of political discourse needs to be studied and analyzed deeply in order to gauge the demeaning influence of social media leading to depraved levels of politics and its overall negative perception. What is even more worrying is politicians and electoral candidates actually use and even promote the meaning political exchanges in the new media for short term political gains, escalating their own agenda in the process.

Keywords: Social Media, influence, political discourse, debasement, negative perception

I. INTRODUCTION

The advent of Social Media in the later half of the 21st century has virtually eliminated any form of physical and social gaps. They provide the benefits of participatory democracy, interaction and development in modern society. Social Media plays a pivotal role to enable common citizens to exercise their freedom of speech and expression. In recent times, it has also enabled political parties to make use of social networking sites to boost their political strategies and garner support from the public. The multiple dimensions and features offered by the social media has encouraged political organisations to join the cyber space

and enhance political transactions and engineer the support of various sources especially during election campaigns. The development of social media has led to the ordinary citizens being better informed about key political and economic issues of public concern. Without a doubt the political landscape has changed and ignited a broad democratization of information faster than the mainstream media with the emergence of New media. (Dutta N, Bhat A 2016) However the desire to win often becomes the sole objective for the political parties and any form of discussion, debates and interaction over the virtual media can be a major arsenal to be utilized to manipulate the perception of the voters. The forum provides a great

opportunity to build relationship with common citizens transcending the barriers of time, space and location. Social media practice is one of several forms of political communication and needs to be examined from the point of view of 'social engineering' and the implications on the existing political sphere.

In recent times, Indian political system has identified new ways to reach and connect with voters especially young population, those who primarily dominate the virtual platform. In order to reach the eloquent youths of the urban India, political parties are increasingly becoming tech savvy with leaders engaging in the platform to connect with common citizens. It creates new ways of political mobilizing and encourage social media users in political activities ranging from joining their political groups by tweeting, status update, expressing supports through blogs and videos on Youtube. (Meti V, Khandoba PK, Guru MC 2015) With the ever growing use of the platform for various political activities, discourses pertaining to socio political issues have also transformed. For political debates to thrive, opinion needs to follow from facts. But whether on TV panel discussions, in opinion pieces or online, the contemporary trend is towards snap judgments – opinions expressed without a knowledge of the facts, or before the facts have been properly considered and contextualized. (Meti V, Khandoba PK, Guru MC 2015) Each party's leadership must accept the responsibility for the poor quality of political discourse that is rampantly being practiced today. There is a high probability that the low level of politics played out by the contemporary politicians is surely going to have a very demoralising effect on the Indian youths.

II. RELEVANCE OF THE STUDY

The nature of public discourse within the realms of democracy matters a lot. The language used by political leaders in a segmented democratic country needs to reflect decency and reverence for differences of views and opinion; and inevitability, importance of other political groups. The democratic polity of a country falls apart when the public discourse gets vicious, personal and partisan which has been evident in different parts of the world across the political spectrum. The loud-mouthed rhetoric a la Trump style based on half-truth instead of bringing people together breeds anger, hatred and division in society. (Swain A 2017) Many a times the articulations made by the loud-mouthed politicians is not true, but primary objective is to advance their individual interest as well as the parties interest in electoral politics. A study by psychologists has revealed that many political leaders are regularly using offensive languages in public to show as if they are "expressing their true feelings" to project themselves as different than their peers who are afraid to tell the truth. (Swain A 2017) But this kind of new political culture has also opened a Pandora's box of anger and abuse to the conventional media and more prominent in the social

media. Politicians regularly slam their opposition with all kinds of filthy and unparliamentary statements which are unjustified and absolutely deplorable.

During elections in India it is quite common to find the kind of Poll rhetoric that goes on but the levels reached after the advent of social media are often personal and below the belt, leaving the rest of the country aghast, disappointed and wondering where the political discourse was heading. (Debu C 2015). Across social media platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook and Twitter you can find the kind of messages, jokes and videos one gets, they come laced with political undertones. Smartphones availability reveals how ubiquitous the political messaging is (2017). This sort of messages not only dominate the medium but also the mind of the potential users. There is bound to be a lot of skepticism and negativity among the citizens about the overall image of the political leaders and their respective organisation. Moreover these are the same people who probably will lead and are leading the country and are also the elected representative of the great nation. Increasing intolerance and polarizing politics is a fallout of extreme ideologies that gets displayed incessantly over the social media forums. Today, the political leadership and concerned organisations suffer from massive disillusionment and disenchantment.

III. TRENDS OF CONTAMINATION IN THE GENERAL POLITICAL DISCOURSE

Lack of meaningful political debate and discussion is not something new in India. Audio Visual Media has been one of the main propagators of manufactured debates and programmes to gather people's attention. It is common across 24 hours News Channels in India, English or vernacular language mediums to adopt such practices to gain popularity among viewers without any holistic motive to educate or inform the viewers. Personal attacks, whether by imputing malice or an ulterior motive, or by questioning their character is a clear case that inhibits political debate in India. Unwarranted criticism, shouting, screaming and baseless arguments is simply a ploy to malign your political opponent without substantive and logical facts. All of these seems very entertaining and catches the imagination of the viewers. The culture propagated within the periphery of the audio visual platform has also been expanded or inculcated in the digital sphere too. During elections the abusive content on social media heightens especially when the respective political parties are engaged in constant political rhetorics to woo the voters but keep on subverting the basic premise of civilized political discussion by making disparaging comments and remarks about their political opponents. The audience never gets to understand or are aware about the real issues on which elections are contested. It keeps on distracting and creates a negative perception about the entire political class. The general lowering of standards has created a hyper-sensitive and

highly charged Internet universe where meaningful dialogue has been overtaken by the rush for one-upmanship, often ending in personal abuse. (Pradhan K 2013) This disturbing trend has only been amplified with the rise of use of social media by Indian politician be it using language of bigotry or shaming or disrespecting people's mandate. In a survey conducted by NDTV published on April 19, 2018 revealed that in past four years from 2014 onwards the use of hateful and divisive language by eminent politicians has increased almost 500%. (Jaiswal N, Jain S, Singh N P 2018).

Making a hate speech actually paid off with the current Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister, Yogi Adityanath in November 2015, he had said that the language used by Shahrukh Khan and Hafiz Saeed has no difference. He made atleast six such derogatory comments before being promoted to the post of Chief Minister. In March 2016, Anant Kumar Hegde a BJP member of parliament from Karnataka had actually made a horrific statement claiming that till Islam is there in the world, terrorism will not end and on September 2017 he was promoted as Union Minister of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship.

In October 2017, Bihar MLA and Rashtriya Janata Dal leader Tej Pratap Yadav said "A conspiracy is being hatched to kill Lalu-ji. We will not stay silent. We will skin Narendra Modi." (Jaiswal N, Jain S, Singh N P 2018) This is not the first time any Indian politician has said something completely absurd and insensitve, we have been witnessing such comments for quite a long time. Sometimes they make you doubt about their sanity; at other times they make you laugh and cry at the same time. But there are times when these statements make global news for stupidity and hurt a lot of sentiments in the process. (Das S 2015) The irony is such discourse exist and also promoted to fetch political mileage and eye balls but do they really serve any constructive agenda is the moot point here. The cacophony of name calling and degenerate politics is consistently responsible for spoiling the reputation of the entire political class.

IV. SUBVERSION THROUGH DIGITAL SPACE

For over a decade we have witnessed how politicians have employed the web in an attempt to better reach voters in our new media society. In addition to the impact it can have on the electoral campaign, it also subject to significant abuse. There was massive eruption in Social Media after the news of journalist Gauri Lankesh's murder was officially disclosed across mainstream media in India with several hateful remarks rejoicing the death of the journalist. A Facebook post made by an user stated "*Comrade she was then. I assume she & her kind never showed her brave journalism when all those Hindus in Bengal & RSS were being butchered in Kerela ?? Not an iota of sympathy for d b***h . They should have shredded her body with bullets & even blasted apart her*

apartment (sic)," (Quint 2017) and surprisingly he is followed by the Prime Minister Narendra Modi. However Mr. Ravi Shankar Prasad the Information and Technology Minister strongly condemned the atrocious hate remarks on Twitter about the death of Lankesh and said it is shameful and indeed regrettable. But many supporters strongly opposed and questioned the Minister's statement.

During assembly elections in Karnataka Shobha Karandlaje, a Member of Parliament from Karnataka and the general secretary of the Karnataka BJP, tweeted that the "*Siddaramaiah govt withdrawing the cases of jihadis. He wants to create communal tension in the state at the cost of Hindu life's # Save Hindus*" (Jaiswal N, Jain S, Singh N P 2018) For supporters these kind of inflammatory messages give a sense of momentary high and thrill but coming from well known political figures is really disturbing and alarming.

Trolling is also quite a common phenomena for political parties sitting on either side of the fence, there are volunteers who are encouraged or on pay rolls of the parties whose sole agenda is to tear down the opponents propaganda. In a tweet of November 2017, BJP Member of Parliament Subramanian Swamy remarked "*Hindus wake up! Muslims leaders are refusing to give up on a masjid, that is shiftable, to restore the holiest temple on the birthplace of Ram*" (Jaiswal N, Jain S, Singh N P 2018) In a February 3, 2018 tweet, he again replied to a tweet by saying that "*He knows that I am not anti Hindustani Muslim i.e., those Muslims who acknowledge their ancestors as Hindus*". (Jaiswal N, Jain S, Singh N P 2018) The results are deplorable when the debate crosses all limits of decency and is reduced to a level that threatens to render social media useless as a platform for serious political discourse. Take for example Amaresh Mishra, a Congress party member who went on a Twitter rampage, insulting BJP supporter by tweeting "*@shilpitewari We know where you live Shilpi. Zyada pro-BJP banee to tere saath vahee kareng jo Sanghi har*** ke saath karte hain (translation: If you act too pro-BJP, we will do with you what should be done to right-wing b****s).*" (Pradhan K 2013) These examples clearly exemplifies the extreme form of denigratory exchange that takes place among major political parties in India.

V. CONCLUSION

We have witnessed except in the last few years that the ideological and political differences hardly affected the civility and personal relationship among India's top politicians and leaders cutting across all political parties irrespective of being in power or in opposition. However with the inception of digital space there is a serious threat being posed on the country's secular and democratic fabric and can only be addressed if the political class soon acknowledges the existence of this problem and also rectify as quickly as possible. The reason being there is a growing

tendency amidst young people to align and subscribe to extreme positions whose otherwise political affiliations are rational and objective. The norm created within the excessive belittling political discourse transforms people who are otherwise liberal and open minded. The entire eco system for civilized political discussion and argument is being destroyed rapidly. The political organisation resorting to such kind of interaction and name calling should be mindful that their social media conduct reflects on the overall party's image, hence the elected representatives and party leaders should act in a manner that symbolizes the values the concerned party stands for and is hailed by the citizens. Such unhealthy debates are also harmful for the nation as it promotes misrepresentation and mis-interpretation of various nuances and complex issues. The debate should never become a ruse which can be construed as cyber bullying.

The long term implications are extremely detrimental for the society as they cultivate a feeling of distrust among common citizens towards politicians and these have solid foundation based on the venomous facts and comments being constantly exchanged across social networking sites. It leads, in practice, to an instinctive scepticism, bordering on a refusal to engage, and often to a presumption of malice. It is the root cause behind ad hominem attacks and many of the other unedifying features of our political culture. (scroll.in 2018) The whole idea of an enlightened and humanized society encouraging free and fair public discourse gets defeated when normal citizens on a daily routine witness exchange of abusive terms and accusations with choicest swearwords hurled even for the seemingly non-inflammatory political debates. There is a urgent need to improve the quality of political discourse in the country or risk of losing the credibility from all members of the society.

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