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Social Media and Indian Politics: Its Evolution through History to the Catalyst, Influencer and Contender in 21st Century

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ABSTRACT

This research paper explores the intricate relationship between social media and Indian politics, tracing its historical roots from the pre-independence era and the independence movement to its contemporary significance as a powerful influencer in the Indian political landscape. Through a comprehensive analysis, this paper highlights the evolving role of social media platforms in shaping political discourse, mobilising public opinion and attitudes towards the situations, and influencing electoral outcomes. By examining key historical events and contemporary trends, this paper aims to shed light on the transformative impact of social media on Indian politics and its implications for the world's largest democratic country and its governance. This research paper delves into the multifaceted role of social media in the modern era, exploring its impact on communication dynamics, cultural exchange, economic activities, and political processes. Through a comprehensive analysis of current trends, ongoing media platforms, and scholarly literature, this paper examines how social media platforms have transformed the way individuals and communities engage with each other, consume information, and participate in public discourse and raising the voice of the common man to the political regime. By addressing key issues such as algorithmic bias, echo chambers, online misinformation, and digital activism, this paper aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the opportunities and challenges presented by social media in the contemporary scenario. Ultimately, this research contributes to a deeper appreciation of the complex interplay between technology, society, media issues and their impact on the people at large and human behaviour in the digital age.

Keywords: *Social Media, Indian Politics, Digital Revolution, Internet Misuse, Government Policies, IT Laws.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Social media has emerged as a game-changer in Indian politics, significantly influencing

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governance, electoral processes, developmental issues, watchdog, awareness and public discourse, etc. With the widespread adoption of platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp, politicians and parties have found new avenues to connect with voters, disseminate their messages, and mobilise support for those campaigns. Social media enables real-time communication, allowing politicians to directly engage with citizens, address grievances, and showcase their policies and achievements directly to the people. Moreover, it has democratized political participation, empowering ordinary citizens to voice their opinions, organize campaigns, and hold leaders accountable and maintain their transparency. However, the impact of social media on Indian politics is not without its challenges, as it also facilitates the spread of misinformation, fake news, and divisive narratives, which can polarize public opinion and damage the trust in the people related to the government and undermine the democratic process. Also, India which is the largest democracy in the world and has obtained a top-notch place in terms of online users on the internet, lacks the legislation concerning such activities if something wrong happens to the public. Thus, while social media has revolutionized political communication and mobilization in India, it also poses complex challenges that necessitate careful regulation and critical media literacy efforts.

II. HISTORY OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN INDIAN POLITICS

- **PRE INDEPENDENCE:** Before the independence also social media played a crucial role in Indian politics. While social media as we know it today did not exist during India's pre-independence era, communication and mobilization efforts played a crucial role in the country's struggle for freedom. Various forms of media, such as newspapers, pamphlets, articles and patrikas from our freedom fighters and public speeches, served as the primary channels for disseminating information and rallying support for the independence movement. Leaders like Mahatma Gandhi utilized these platforms effectively to spread their message of nonviolent resistance and political awakening. Through newspapers like Harijan and Young India, Gandhi communicated his ideas directly to the masses, inspiring millions to join the fight against British colonial rule. Furthermore, the Indian National Congress and other political organizations organized rallies, protests, and mass gatherings to galvanize public opinion and demonstrate unity in the quest for independence. While not comparable to the instantaneous reach and connectivity of modern social media, the communication strategies employed during the pre-independence era played a pivotal role in mobilizing the people of India and laying the groundwork for the eventual attainment of independence. Social media played a major role in this effort of our political leaders to raise our voices in the freedom

struggle.

- **INDEPENDENCE STRUGGLE:** In the struggle for independence also, social media, albeit in its primitive form, significantly influenced the Indian populace by disseminating examples of successful international independence movements and news of the mass struggle against the imperialist powers to the masses. Platforms like newspapers, pamphlets, and public speeches served as the primary means of communication at that time. The circulation of accounts from movements in countries like the United States, Ireland, and South Africa provided inspiration and guidance for Indian nationalists. Many examples such as the American Revolution[2], the French Revolution, and movements in other colonies reached the Indians and served as beacons of hope and models for resistance. Social media played a pivotal role in mobilizing support, fostering unity, and spreading awareness about the injustices of British colonial rule not only in India but from all over the countries that were being ruled by them. It facilitated the exchange of ideas, strategies, and tactics among freedom fighters across the nation and international borders. Social media, even in its rudimentary forms, facilitated the sharing of these narratives among the masses, fostering a collective consciousness and determination to challenge British dominance. Through these channels, the Indian political movement against the British gained momentum, ultimately leading to the successful attainment of independence in 1947. Thus, social media served as a catalyst for change, empowering the Indian populace to challenge colonial authority and assert their right to self-determination. Without the use of social media, it is indeed true that it would not have been attained at that pace. Thus, while not in the digital sense we understand today, social networks of communication undoubtedly played a crucial role in galvanizing the Indian political movement against colonial rule.

III. Evolving role in 21ST century and contemporary political landscape

In the 21st century, the evolution of social media has revolutionized the landscape of Indian politics, emerging as a powerful tool for political parties and governments alike. With the advent of the digital era, platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram have become integral channels for political communication, outreach, and mobilization. The increased use of the internet has also given a new way for the masses to engage with direct politics. Indian political

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[2] Basnet Mohan. (2023, April). American Revolution 1776, History, Causes, Timeline and Impacts. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/370074626_American_Revolution_1776_History_Causes_Timeline_and_Impacts. Accessed on 12/02/2024.

parties have leveraged social media extensively to connect with voters by sharing their manifestos on social media, disseminating their messages, and shaping public opinion and also the resolution of their problems in the most suitable way. Another big effect created by social media is that now politicians actively engage with citizens through live streams, tweets, and posts, allowing for direct interaction and feedback from the stakeholders. Moreover, social media serves as a platform for political activism, enabling citizens to voice their concerns against the shortcomings in the processes of the government and the officers, organize movements, and hold authorities accountable in the shortest possible time. The rapid dissemination of information and the ability to mobilize large numbers of people swiftly have made social media a game-changer in Indian politics. Governments in power utilize social media for propaganda, crisis management, and image building, while opposition parties harness its reach to critique policies and galvanize support.

With the widespread adoption of smartphones and affordable internet access, millions of Indians gained unprecedented connectivity and access to information. This digital democratization has empowered citizens to actively engage with political discourse, transcending geographical barriers and traditional media channels. Politicians and parties leverage social media to directly engage with voters, disseminate their agendas, and garner support during elections. Furthermore, grassroots movements and citizen activism find a powerful voice through online platforms, catalyzing social change and driving political agendas.

The incumbent government under Prime Minister Narendra Modi has demonstrated remarkable adeptness in utilizing social media as a tool for engaging with the masses and fostering a healthy political environment in India in the new century[3]. Prime Minister Modi himself has been an avid user of platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, leveraging these channels to directly communicate with citizens and share updates on government policies and initiatives. His engaging and interactive approach has helped bridge the gap between the government and the people, allowing for direct feedback and dialogue. The government's use of social media has also been instrumental in promoting transparency and accountability, with various ministries and departments actively disseminating information and seeking public input on important issues. Additionally, social media has played a crucial role in rallying support for key initiatives such as Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (Clean India Mission), Digital India, and Make in

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[3] M. Rodrigues Usha, Niemann Michael. (2017) Social Media as a Platform for Incessant Political Communication: A Case Study of Modi's "Clean India" Campaign. International Journal of Communication 11(2017), 3431–3453. https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/6727/2119. Accessed on 15/02/2024.

India, among others. By harnessing the power of social media, the Modi government has been able to effectively communicate its vision for India's development and engage citizens in the democratic process, thereby contributing to a more participatory and inclusive political system for the new century.

IV. NEW PLATFORMS IN THE DIGITAL ERA

With the advent of the 21st century, we came across many new social media platforms that have revolutionised the whole political scenario in Indian politics. Now, the time has come for every political party to use these digital facilities to garner support for their agendas. Every policy of the government transverses through social platforms to raise awareness about them. Though various platforms have their different aspects but some of the main platforms and their effects have been discussed below:

- Despite its limited word limit capacity, Twitter also known by its new name X[4] has emerged as a significant platform in transforming the political system in India, continually engaging more and more people through its journey as a political tool for various stakeholders. With its brevity and immediacy, Twitter allows politicians, activists, journalists, and citizens to share thoughts, opinions, and information in real time, making it a powerful medium for political discourse and engagement. Political leaders utilize Twitter to communicate directly with constituents, announce policies, and respond to current events swiftly. Activists leverage the platform to mobilize support for causes, organize protests, and hold authorities accountable. Journalists use Twitter to break news, provide live updates, and engage with their audience, facilitating transparency and accountability in governance. Moreover, citizens utilize Twitter to voice concerns, express solidarity, and participate in conversations around key issues affecting the nation. Despite its character limit, Twitter's influence in Indian politics continues to grow, facilitating dialogue, fostering transparency, and empowering citizens to actively participate in the democratic process.

(A) FACEBOOK[5]:

Facebook emerged as a transformative force in the Indian political landscape, profoundly altering the dynamics of governance and political engagement in this new digital era. With its

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[4] Vanian, Jonathan. (2022, October 29). Twitter is now owned by Elon Musk — here's a brief history from the app's founding in 2006 to the present. CNBC News https://www.cnbc.com/2022/10/29/a-brief-history-of-twitter-from-its-founding-in-2006-to-musk-takeover.html Accessed on 12/02/2024.

[5] Carlson, Nicholas. (2010, March 4). At last – the full story of how Facebook was founded. Business Insider. https://www.businessinsider.com/how-facebook-was-founded-2010-3?IR=T Accessed on 12/02/2024.

widespread adoption and reach, Facebook became a crucial tool for political parties, leaders, and citizens alike to communicate, mobilize, and influence public opinion. Political campaigns leveraged Facebook's targeted advertising and data analytics to reach specific demographics, thereby customizing their messaging and maximizing voter outreach. Additionally, political leaders utilized Facebook to directly engage with constituents, share their vision, and solicit feedback, effectively bridging the gap between the government and the governed. Moreover, Facebook facilitated the rapid dissemination of information and facilitated citizen journalism, enabling ordinary individuals to report on events, share opinions, and hold authorities accountable. Facebook's impact on the Indian political system has been undeniable, ushering in an era of unprecedented connectivity, transparency, and citizen participation in the governance of such a huge democratic country.

(B) Whatsapp Messenger[6]:

WhatsApp has emerged as a powerful and influential messenger tool in Indian politics, facilitating direct communication between the government and the people, as well as among citizens themselves. With its widespread adoption across diverse demographics, WhatsApp has become an integral part of political discourse, enabling political parties, leaders, and citizens to exchange information, opinions, and feedback in real time. It's a very handy tool that makes use of the groups to advocate campaigns, visions and common goals of the group to a wide range of people in a very smooth and easy way. Political campaigns have capitalized on WhatsApp's group messaging feature to disseminate campaign materials, mobilize supporters, and organize events efficiently. Moreover, government agencies have utilized WhatsApp to broadcast important announcements, solicit public feedback on policies, and address citizens' grievances promptly. Additionally, WhatsApp has empowered ordinary citizens to participate actively in the political process by facilitating discussions, sharing news articles, and voicing their concerns within their social circles. WhatsApp's role in Indian politics highlights its potential to foster transparency, accountability, and citizen engagement, ultimately strengthening the democratic fabric of the prospering nation.

(C) Instagram:

Instagram has revolutionized the dynamics of the political system in India, emerging as a potent tool for communication, mobilization, and engagement between the government and the

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[6] Pathak Priya. (2019, February 27). WhatsApp is now 10 years old and here is a look at how it grew, changed the world. India Today. https://www.indiatoday.in/technology/features/story/whatsapp-is-now-10-years-old-and-here-is-a-look-at-how-it-grew-changed-the-world-1465208-2019-02-26 Accessed on 15/02/2024.

people[7]. With its visually captivating interface and extensive user base, Instagram has provided political parties, leaders, and citizens with a platform to share their perspectives, showcase their initiatives, and connect with a wide audience. Political leaders utilize Instagram to humanize their image, offering glimpses into their personal lives, highlighting their achievements, and engaging with followers through interactive stories, live sessions, and posts. Additionally, political campaigns leverage Instagram's visual appeal to create compelling content, reach younger demographics, and generate buzz around key issues and policies. Moreover, Instagram influencers and activists play a crucial role in shaping public opinion, raising awareness about social and political issues of regional, national and international importance, and mobilizing support for various causes such as climate change, solar energy adoption, voter's rights, political engagements, etc. The platform's features such as hashtags, geotagging, and direct messaging facilitate grassroots organizing, enabling citizens to amplify their voices, coordinate efforts, and hold authorities accountable. Instagram's impact on Indian politics underscores its potential to democratize communication, foster transparency, and empower citizens, ultimately contributing to a more inclusive and participatory political system.

(D) YouTube[8]:

YouTube as an open video-sharing and streaming platform has undergone a remarkable journey in shaping political development in India, emerging as a crucial platform for information sharing, engagement, and advocacy in the contemporary political landscape. Initially conceived as a video-sharing platform, YouTube has evolved into a powerhouse of political content, offering a diverse array of perspectives, debates, and analyses on Indian politics, agendas and efforts done by the political parties in this way. Political parties, leaders, and activists utilize YouTube to disseminate campaign messages, rally support, and connect with voters. With its wide reach and accessibility, YouTube democratizes access to political information, enabling citizens across the country, including those in remote areas, to stay informed and engaged with them. Additionally, YouTube serves as a platform for citizen journalism, allowing ordinary individuals to report on events, share opinions, and document social and political issues just a few clicks away. Moreover, YouTube facilitates dialogue and debate, providing a space for

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[7] Kumari Bhatt Isha, Kumar Varinder. (2022, February). Instagram as New platform for Political Partricipation among India Youth: An Opinion Study of University Students. Research Gate. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/358477996_Instagram_as_New_platform_for_Political_Participation_among_Indian_Youth_An_Opinion_Study_of_University_Students. Accessed on 15/02/2024.

[8] Leskin Paige. (2020, May 30). YouTube is 15 years old. Here's a timeline of how YouTube was founded, its rise to video behemoth, and its biggest controversies along way. Business Insider India. https://www.businessinsider.in/tech/news/youtube-is-15-years-old-hereaposs-a-timeline-of-how-youtube-was-founded-its-rise-to-video-behemoth-and-its-biggest-controversies-along-way/slidelist/76111673.cms Accessed on 12/02/2024.

diverse voices and viewpoints to be heard. Through tutorials, explainers, and educational content, YouTube also helps demystify complex political concepts and processes, empowering citizens to make informed decisions. Its role as a major political base tool in India's contemporary scenario underscores its potential to foster transparency, accountability, and citizen participation in the democratic process.

V. CHALLENGES AND REMEDIAL MEASURES

Certainly, while social media has brought numerous advantages to the political landscape of the largest democratic country in the world, it also presents a plethora of challenges and issues. Some of the major issues and their remedies are discussed below:

- **Spread of misinformation:** One of the most significant challenges is the rampant spread of misinformation and fake news on social media platforms[9]. False narratives and rumours can quickly go viral, leading to confusion among the public and undermining the credibility of information. This misinformation not only distorts the truth but also undermines the democratic process, leading to polarization, distrust in institutions, and even violence in extreme cases. Moreover, the sheer volume and velocity of information on social media make it challenging for users to discern fact from fiction, perpetuating the cycle of misinformation. Addressing this problem requires a concerted effort from both the platforms and users to promote media literacy, fact-checking, and responsible sharing practices to safeguard the integrity of the political discourse in India.

- **Polarization:** Social media algorithms often prioritize content that aligns with a user's existing beliefs and preferences, leading to the creation of echo chambers where individuals are only exposed to viewpoints similar to their own. This can exacerbate political polarization and hinder constructive dialogue between opposing sides. Secondly, the anonymity and ease of dissemination on social media platforms encourage the spread of extreme and inflammatory content. Users may feel emboldened to express radical opinions or engage in aggressive behaviour, further deepening divides between opposing political factions. Thus, controlling the polarization effect of social media to benefit Indian political discourse necessitates a multi-faceted approach that addresses both platform design and user behaviour. Firstly, social media companies should prioritize algorithmic transparency and accountability, ensuring that their algorithms do not inadvertently amplify polarizing content and checks should be placed at multiple

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[9] Wu Liang, Morstatter Fred, M. Carley Kathleen, Liu Huan. (2019, November 26). Misinformation in Social Media: Definition , Manipulation, and Detection. ACM SIGKDD Explorations. Volume 21, Issue 2. https://dl.acm.org/doi/abs/10.1145/3373464.3373475 Accessed on 15/02/2024.

points. Implementing mechanisms to promote diverse viewpoints and reduce echo chambers could help mitigate polarization. Moreover, promoting media literacy and critical thinking skills among users is essential to enable them to discern between reliable and misleading information. Fact-checking initiatives and digital literacy campaigns should be promoted so that they can empower individuals to navigate the complex landscape of online discourse more effectively. Additionally, fostering spaces for respectful dialogue and constructive debate on social media platforms can encourage the exchange of ideas while minimizing hostility and polarization. Ultimately, a combination of technological interventions, educational efforts, and community-building initiatives is crucial to harnessing the potential of social media for positive political discourse in India.

- **Privacy concerns:** The collection and utilization of user data by social media companies raise significant privacy concerns. Personal information can be exploited for targeted advertising, political profiling, and other purposes without users' consent, raising questions about surveillance and data protection. With the exponential growth of digital technologies and the widespread adoption of online platforms, individuals' personal data has become increasingly vulnerable to exploitation and misuse. The advent of social media, e-commerce, and digital communication tools has led to the collection, storage, and analysis of vast amounts of user information, raising profound questions about the protection of privacy rights. In India, where internet penetration is rapidly expanding, safeguarding citizens' privacy is paramount for maintaining trust in the government and upholding democratic principles. However, the proliferation of surveillance technologies, data breaches, and the lack of robust regulatory frameworks pose significant challenges to privacy protection efforts. Moreover, the intersection of privacy concerns with national security imperatives further complicates the issue, often leading to debates over the balance between security measures and individual liberties. Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive legislation, enforcement mechanisms, and international cooperation to establish clear guidelines for data protection, promote transparency in data practices, and empower citizens to exercise control over their personal information. Additionally, fostering public awareness and engagement on privacy rights is essential for building a resilient and rights-respecting digital society in India. Through the constitutional principles and our given right to privacy, the government also takes many actions against the perpetrators who contradict

with the laws of privacy in our country[10].

- **Online harassment and abuse:** Social media platforms have many times become breeding grounds for online harassment, bullying, and abuse, particularly targeting marginalized groups, women, and minorities[11]. Moreover, social media platforms' algorithms and moderation mechanisms have been criticized for failing to adequately address harassment and abuse, allowing harmful content to proliferate unchecked. This toxic online environment not only erodes trust in democratic institutions but also stifles political participation and diversity of opinion, ultimately undermining the vibrancy of the Indian political system. Addressing this challenge requires a multi-stakeholder approach involving government interventions, checking platform accountability, civil society engagement, and digital literacy initiatives, and seminars to raise awareness to foster a safer, more respectful online discourse conducive to healthy democratic debate in India.

- **Regulation and governance:** The rapid evolution of social media has outpaced regulatory frameworks. The main existing law is the Information Technology Act, 2000. While this act was one of the earliest attempts to regulate cyberspace in India, its provisions often fall short of addressing the complexities of modern digital communication, such as cyberbullying, online harassment, and misinformation[12]. The lack of regulations and outdated laws related to the internet and social media online in India presents a formidable challenge for governing bodies tasked with regulating social media in the dynamic digital space of the 21st century. As technology continues to evolve at a rapid pace, the absence of comprehensive legal frameworks leaves a regulatory vacuum, allowing social media platforms to operate with relative impunity. This gap not only undermines efforts to address pressing issues such as misinformation, hate speech, and online harassment but also poses significant risks to national security, privacy rights, and democratic norms. Moreover, outdated laws ill-equipped to address emerging challenges in the digital realm further compound the problem, hindering effective governance and enforcement efforts. The absence of clear guidelines and

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[10] Mehta Bhashkar. (2023, November 26). Right to Privacy and Media. SSRN. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4644715. Accessed on 12/02/2024.

[11] Felle Tom. (2023 October, 06). Online abuse could drive women out of politics. IPS Journal. https://www.ips-journal.eu/topics/democracy-and-society/online-abuse-could-drive-women-out-of-politics-7036/. Accessed on 15/02/2024).

[12] Duggal Pavan. (2015, October 07). Social Media misuse and Indian cyber law. Business Standard. https://www.business-standard.com/article/opinion/social-media-misuse-and-indian-cyber-law-115100700139_1.html. Accessed on 15/02/2024.

oversight mechanisms not only undermines public trust in institutions but also creates opportunities for manipulation, exploitation, and abuse by bad actors, both domestic and foreign. To effectively regulate social media in the digital age, Indian governing bodies must urgently modernize existing laws, develop robust regulatory frameworks, and collaborate with stakeholders to address emerging challenges while upholding fundamental rights and democratic values. Failure to do so risks eroding the integrity of the digital space and undermining the government's ability to govern effectively in the 21st century.

VI. CONCLUSION

Thus, we have moved to such a stage in our digital life that it has become imperative for the citizens and governments to make use of social media platforms for sharing, governing, spreading, discourse and many more. It is evident from the above paper that a huge benefit lies in using such platforms, especially in a country like India which is the largest democracy in the world but there is a threat also in misusing these platforms against the incumbency and the positive governance initiatives. Such things require both the platforms as well as the governments in power to collaborate so that we can reap the benefit of such platforms in the best suitable way.

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