Social Media: A Tool to Incite Ethno-Religious and Civil Society Unrests in India

Brigadier Sanjeev Chauhan@

Introduction

Media is the propeller as well as direction provider of our society for playing a significant role in fulfilling people's right to information and being a watchdog by making the government and social institutions accountable for their actions. However critics claim that at times media has not played the constructive role that it should have played and has inadvertently played into the hands of a few vested interests. Media, as guardian of social polity, needs to connect the general public to evolving realities around the world; rather than, engaging in baseless sensationalism for the sake of its commercial advancement with disregard to social sensitivities. The degree of media influence differs from country to country depending upon literacy/media access ability of the population, media maturity and government policies.

Mass media in India has been a principal agent for societal development, democracy and good governance. A study of mass media trends contributes to an understanding of social, economic, technological and other factors that influence communities and their relationship with regular citizens and government agencies. Mass media has had a profound impact on democratic process in modern societies, thanks to an ever present phenomenon called investigative journalism. Today omnipresent mass media is considered to be the backbone of our vibrant democracy and consistently influences its many hued changes.

The galloping growth of mass media over the past few years has revolutionised content creation, its dissemination and consumption with emergence of new forms like web enabled social media. In an interdependent, interconnected and globalised world,

@**Brigadier Sanjeev Chauhan** was commissioned into the First Gorkha Rifles in Dec 1987. He commanded his unit 5/1 Gorkha Rifles in the United Nations Mission in Sudan (UNMIL) during 2009-10. Presently, he is commanding a Mountain Brigade in the Northeast.

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the challenge of managing this internet driven mass media is to monitor with unwavering objectivity its extensive coverage of global, national, local events and to channelise its immense powers in a constructive manner. Web based mass media continues to gallop ahead in its people popularity and impacts almost all sections of society in different cultural, ethnic and economic settings.

Understanding Social Media: Mass Media's Latest Avatar

Social media today represents a shift in how we access and use news-information. It used to be that we would wait for the paper boy to throw our newspaper on the doorstep and we would read the paper, front to back, in the morning hours. Now we get information, 24x7 and on the fly, from anywhere through online sources, on our phones, and through the social platforms. Social media allows us to interact and engage, with like-minded people, to find people and connect to varied information sources viz. text, audio and video. It flattens out the world and gives us access to people we never would have been able to meet otherwise. Thus, **social media** is all about leveraging online tools that promote sharing information and conversations, which ultimately lead to relationship building and connecting with target audiences. As opposed to traditional media, social media offers the opportunity to users and providers to interact with each other in real-time allowing news feeds to change and adapt on the fly.

Social media platforms will not replace face-to-face meetings or usher in death of telephonic conversation. Social media tools allow users to create and converse in *interactive dialogues over the web*. Social media is all about influencing people one-on-one; and achieving P2P (person-to-person) communication that influences awareness, acceptance and behaviour. Powerful tactics and tools of social communication, across community networks today play an important role in nation building, maintenance of good governance and protection strategy of the state.

The mainstream media is left with no choice but to cooperate with masses in a converged fashion with social media being used to highlight emerging issues like hobnobbing with opinion leaders and exposing discredited parts of governance and politics. What is clear is that mainstream media risks being irrelevant in public sphere if it ignores the epoch shift in public popularity of social media. This has lead to fostering greater transparency and internal

democratisation of different media channels. This media democratisation can be viewed as impacting our communities in multiple positive and negative ways across India's diverse religious and ethnic groups. The revolutionary features of social media that makes it unique in today's media mosaic are:–

(a) **Reach.** Media which was traditionally the preserve of rich and powerful is now accessible to all: it is free, pervasive and democratic. This reach and spread is simply unstoppable across cultures, geographies and nations. All people from rural to urban areas, across different age groups, and different emotional/religious/ethnic leanings are now enmeshed within this global media whirlpool.

(b) **Non-perishable, Collaborative and Community Generated in Real Time.** The days of visiting and merely reading website contents written as a visitor are all but gone. Now, everyone is a user as well as content creator which can be in different forms – text, images, audio, video or even symbolic likes and dislikes for a content post on a social media site. It is thus the consuming community that dictates shape and scope of content and content once posted stays on forever, making it non-perishable.

(c) **Interactive Conversation Fuels Intercultural Dialogue.** Anything anyone posts via social media has the potential to start a conversation and anyone can jump in and out whenever he so feels. As in real life, you may contribute as little or as much as you like, thereby shaping ongoing conversation that can expand in both reach and impact to global proportions in a flash. Social media brings people together with different backgrounds and encourages interaction; ignoring distance. This leads to more friendly and interactive intercultural dialogues.

(d) **Information Sharing.** Social media has the ability to share an article or an item of public-popularity simultaneously. This ensures its easier and faster dissemination by providing a common medium to communicate, interact and collaborate.

Ethnic, Religious and Civil Society Unrests in India and Role of Media

India has been characterised by more ethnic and religious groups

than most other countries of the world. The 1920s were a transformative moment in our nation's politics because it was then that mass politics emerged in India under Mahatma Gandhi's leadership. He talked of two intertwined battles of independence *(swaraj)*: one against an external adversary, the colonial power; and another against an internal enemy; India's social evils, arguing that the former could not be meaningful without the latter. He first concentrated on three social objectives: Hindu-Muslim unity, abolition of untouchability and *swadeshi*. To these were later added other projects of social transformation: women's welfare, tribal welfare, labour welfare, prohibition, and so on.

Post-Independence India's secular society has come under significant strain, particularly in the latter stages of 20th and the turn of 21st century. The media, post-Independence, was fragmented into regional and localised media channels, as national level media houses did not exist. The issues raised by regional media were a carry forward of unfulfilled aspirations of the Quit India movement. Regional power blocks across India got polarised on linguistic grounds giving rise to India's multiple state federal system. Thus mega states like Madras and Bombay got spilt into multiple states. The role of the media in ethnic or religious conflicts was localised and impact was not viral. On the other hand, pockets of emancipated intelligentsia grouped under the civil society took up cudgels against the government and social elements by leveraging the growing information reach and people impact of the traditional media to raise issues and suggest remedial measures.

In the last four to five years there has been an exponential growth in India in the use of social media. The power of social media and its impact on individuals and society in India has provided an equal opportunity to all Indians to voice thoughts, opinions, and share information. Social media today induces audiences to become digital activists; changing user behaviour from passive to active, non-participatory to avid participation enabling users with a voice that was otherwise unknown or untapped. Although presently the reach of social media is mostly urban, it is predicted that by 2016, nearly 20 per cent of rural areas will have access to Internet. The ethnic conflict in Assam (2012), Muzzafarnagar communal riots (2013) and the recent civil rights movement against corruption and for women rights have shown how virtual communities on social

media have played a vital role in spreading their issues and mobilising mass support pretty effectively.

In July 2012, violence between indigenous Bodo tribes and Minority Community migrant settlers started in Kokrajhar and spread to several districts in Assam, resulting in the death of at least 97 people and displacement of over 4,50,000. It was the biggest internal displacement in the history of Independent India. This conflict threatened to engulf the entire Northeast region as Muslim radicals across India vowed to stand by their Muslim brethren in seeking revenge. In Uttar Pradesh the protests converted into communal tension and violence while in Mumbai road protests turned into brutal violence. Subsequently, doctored images, on social media, portraying gun-toting monks from the northeast killing Minority Community migrant settlers and hate SMS were circulated. This triggered sudden panic and thousands of northeast Indians fled from Bangalore, Delhi, and Mumbai to their homeland. It is believed that Pakistan based groups were involved with south India based Popular Front of India in spreading communal SMS and hate posting. The government banned over 300 websites and bulk SMS were banned for 15 days. In Muzaffarnagar communal riots, which started with a minor incident between two communities, snowballed into a major riot by circulating inflammatory video with morphed images through facebook to incite anger amongst people of rival communities.

The India against Corruption Movement (IAC) that erupted in India was unprecedented in its success in galvanising India's middle classes to protest against corruption. Social media has provided individuals and citizens' rights groups unmatched power to reach their target audience in real time. The brutal gang rape of Nirbhaya girl and attack on her companion led to citizen groups spreading the information through social media to formulate appropriate corrective actions i.e. public marches to demand better laws, proactive policing and more sensitive governance.

Reality Check

'Social media is today being used in ways that it wasn't originally designed for'[1]. Everyday thousands and millions of ideas, concepts, themes and rumours spread across the globe, making it difficult to question their authenticity. Moreover, as the Indian masses are highly emotional, if something sensational is spread by media they

react instantly and strongly. The common man's psychological fear forces them to believe in anything without understanding the authenticity of the content – this fear converts into panic if it is related to religion. National subversive groups and opposing movements – religious/political take advantage of this crowd sourcing means for "Management of collective attitudes by manipulation of significant symbols" simplifying the spread of mischievous deeds.[2]

The Information Technology Act 2008 covers all issues related to Cyberspace including the social media. Section 66(A) states, "Any person who sends information that is grossly offensive or has menacing character... is punishable with imprisonment for a term extended to three years".[3] The legality of this section has been criticised for its interpretation in number of cases and needs a review. Section 69 states," empower the government to block any website, if found violating the sovereignty or integrity of the country". However, in the case of social media, as it works on World Wide Web this present section will have limited jurisdiction under its direct control.

The Government has taken large number of measures to counter misinformation spread by social media; however the pace of things on the social media is so fast that it makes these steps appear reactive. The Government has released a social media strategy framework for Government Departments. A team of experts has been set-up to monitor social media on critical issues. In order to facilitate banning of social media in specific geographies directives have been issued to Internet service providers and mobile phone companies to build 'embedded technologies.'[4]

The Way Ahead

The emerging landscape of social media necessitates it to have a UN mandated body duly ratified by member nations which would standardise policy formulation, monitoring, arbitration and articulate emergency response in respect of the internet and social media.

The monitoring mechanism in the USA and Russia are 'Social Media in Strategic Communication (SMISC)'[5] and 'Dispute/Monitor-3/Strom-12'[6] respectively to cover different facets of social media. Our Government also needs to set-up a centralised content monitoring system with tools and programmes to filter out anti

national threats and 'track ideas and concepts to analyse patterns and cultural narratives'.

The strategy to respond to a crisis would have to be an on-going process. Firstly, an understanding of the dynamics of social media interactions and why issues go viral in India needs to be analysed. Secondly, identify virtual communities who are anti-national or anti-social and keep them under watch. Thirdly, have a dedicated organisation with adequate infrastructure, mandate and legal sanctions to continuously monitor and carry-out emergency responses. Fourthly, in order to overcome redundancy, use both local and national traditional and mass media to provide authentic information to the target audience.

Censorship of social media is a major issue as it is believed that social media is just a medium and cannot be blamed for unsavoury use made by certain anti-national elements. And in a democracy, people at large oppose any kind of regulation or censorship to suppress their freedom of expression. Moreover, the issue of jurisprudence over an entity operating from foreign land, prevents complete regulation. Therefore there is need to understand each problem separately and ensure that the state response to provocations is 'incident specific' or 'situation to situation' strategy to handle the spread of misinformation.

Regular training at grass root levels for police officials and of community opinion leaders needs to be conducted. The aim of this training would be to make them adequately aware of all important issues of social media and internet which can provoke and spread tension. Training community leaders would help foster inter-ethnic dialogue and to bridge divides between emerging adversaries, especially amongst the youth. The training of youth is not just a "feel good tactic" but is aimed at getting ahead of the cycle of conflict.[7]

Conclusion

Unity in diversity is the main character of India and with increased information access we need to effectively exploit social media as a proactive violence prevention tool. Secondly, we need to empower our people by spreading perspectives on social causes and changes leading to digital activism and faster information sharing in times of grave crisis. Finally, we need to be fully prepared to

deal with any content generated by anti-national or anti-social elements.

Endnotes

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