

Analyzing The Role Of Social Media In Modern Political Revolutions: An Indian Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This empirical study examines the evolving role of social media platforms in shaping political discourse and mobilizing collective action in India between 2010 and 2017. The research investigates how digital technologies have transformed traditional political participation by analyzing data from major social movements including the India Against Corruption movement and various state election campaigns. Utilizing mixed methods research combining quantitative analysis of social media metrics with qualitative content analysis, this study demonstrates a significant positive correlation between social media penetration and political participation among urban youth. The findings reveal that Twitter and Facebook served as primary catalysts for information dissemination during political movements, while WhatsApp emerged as a crucial tool for grassroots mobilization. Notably, social media's impact varied considerably across demographic segments, with substantial urban-rural and age-based digital divides limiting its revolutionary potential. The paper concludes that while social media has fundamentally altered political communication in India, its role in facilitating systemic political revolutions remains mediated by existing social structures, digital literacy, and access disparities.

Keywords: Social media activism, digital mobilization, political participation, Indian democracy, digital divide.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Digital Transformation of Political Discourse

The proliferation of social media platforms has fundamentally altered the landscape of political communication and civic engagement globally. In the Indian context, the period between 2010 and 2017 witnessed unprecedented growth in internet penetration and social media adoption, coinciding with several significant political movements that leveraged digital platforms for organization and mobilization. As Kumar and Thapa [1] observe, India's digital revolution transformed not only how citizens access information but also how they participate in democratic processes. The rapid adoption of smartphones, coupled with decreasing data costs, created new pathways for political engagement that bypassed traditional gatekeepers of information. By 2017, India had become the second-largest smartphone market globally with over 300 million users, fundamentally changing the dynamics of political communication [2].

Social Media and Collective Action Framework

The theoretical underpinnings of social media's role in political mobilization draw from both resource mobilization theory and the logic of connective action. Bennett and Segerberg [3] propose that digital networks enable forms of political participation that do not require formal organizational structures, reducing the costs of collective action. In the Indian context, this manifested through loosely coordinated online networks that facilitated offline protests during movements such as India Against Corruption in 2011-2012. Shah and Jain [4] document how these



platforms reduced coordination costs and created rapid feedback loops between leaders and participants. Unlike traditional political organizations that relied on hierarchical structures, social media enabled horizontal communication networks that accelerated information flow and decision-making processes during periods of political upheaval.

Social Media in the Indian Political Landscape

The Indian political ecosystem presents unique characteristics that influence how social media intersects with political mobilization. With 29 states and 7 union territories, political communication in India must navigate linguistic diversity, varying levels of literacy, and significant urban-rural divides. Chadha and Guha [5] highlight that by 2016, political parties had established sophisticated social media cells to harness digital platforms for electoral campaigns. The 2014 general elections marked a watershed moment in this regard, with an estimated 56 million election-related tweets generated during the campaign period [6]. However, the digital divide remained pronounced—while urban centers experienced high social media penetration, rural areas that house nearly 70% of India's population showed significantly lower digital adoption rates. This disparity raises important questions about the inclusivity of social media-driven political movements and their capacity to represent diverse constituencies within India's heterogeneous democracy.

2. LITERATURE SURVEY

The intersection of social media and political mobilization has garnered significant scholarly attention in the context of emerging democracies. Early research by Shirky [7] posited that social media platforms fundamentally alter the political opportunity structure by reducing the costs of group formation and information sharing. This perspective was initially met with optimism regarding technology's democratizing potential. However, subsequent scholarship has offered more nuanced analyses. Morozov [8] cautioned against "cyber-utopianism," arguing that the same technologies that enable citizen mobilization also empower state surveillance and control. This theoretical tension between emancipatory and constraining effects of social media forms the analytical backdrop for understanding digital politics in India. In the specific Indian context, Pal [9] conducted one of the earliest comprehensive analyses of social media's role in political communication, examining how politicians leveraged Twitter during the 2014 general elections. The study found that social media served primarily as a broadcast medium rather than a deliberative space, with limited two-way engagement between political figures and citizens. Building on this work, Ahmed et al. [10] analyzed over 100,000 tweets during the Delhi Assembly elections of 2015, revealing how hashtag activism translated into electoral outcomes through strategic online-offline coordination.

The India Against Corruption movement (2011-2012) has been extensively studied as a case exemplifying social media's mobilizing potential. Udgirkar [11] documented how Facebook groups coordinated protest logistics across 52 cities simultaneously, creating unprecedented spatial reach for the anti-corruption campaign. Similarly, Chopra [12] analyzed WhatsApp's emerging role in political communication, noting its particular effectiveness in closed-group mobilization due to end-to-end encryption and high trust among participants. This research identified WhatsApp as uniquely influential in the Indian context, where close-knit community networks often determine political affiliations. The literature also addresses significant limitations of social media-driven political participation. Chakravarty and Roy [13] examined how digital divides along caste, class, and gender lines

reproduce existing social inequalities in online political spaces. Their work challenges technologically deterministic narratives by demonstrating how social media platforms often amplify already privileged voices. Similarly, Neyazi [14] documented how vernacular media continues to exert greater influence than social media in rural India, reaching audiences excluded from digital networks due to literacy and access barriers.

Recent empirical work has moved beyond case studies to quantitative assessments of social media's political impact. Jaffrelot and Verniers [15] analyzed data from five state elections between 2015-2017, finding statistically significant correlations between constituency-level social media penetration and voter turnout among first-time voters. This growing body of evidence suggests that while social media has reconfigured political communication in India, its revolutionary potential remains constrained by structural factors including access disparities, digital literacy, and persistent social stratification.

3. METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Approach

This study employs a mixed-methods research design to comprehensively analyze social media's role in political mobilization in India. The methodological approach triangulates quantitative data from social media analytics with qualitative content analysis and semi-structured interviews. This integration of methods allows for both measurement of communication patterns and interpretation of their sociopolitical significance. The research focuses on three distinct case studies: the India Against Corruption movement (2011-2012), the 2014 General Elections, and the 2015 Delhi Assembly Elections. These cases were selected to represent different types of political mobilization—social movements, national electoral campaigns, and regional elections—providing comparative insights into how social media functions across diverse political contexts.

Data Collection Procedures

The quantitative component utilized Twitter's Historical PowerTrack API and Facebook's Graph API to collect 428,562 public posts generated during the studied political events. Data collection focused on predetermined hashtags and keywords associated with each political movement, capturing metrics including engagement rates, network reach, and propagation velocity. For the India Against Corruption movement, we tracked #AnnaHazare, #IAC, and #Janlokpall hashtags (n=156,873). For the 2014 General Elections, data collection centered on party-specific hashtags including #AbkiBaarModiSarkar and #RahulGandhi (n=189,245). The Delhi Elections dataset tracked #AAP, #KejriwalFirSe, and related terms (n=82,444). Supplementing this quantitative data, we conducted 37 semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders including social media campaign managers from major political parties, civil society activists, and first-time voters in urban and peri-urban settings. Interview participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure representation across political affiliations, geographical regions, and demographic characteristics. Additionally, content analysis was performed on a stratified random sample of 5,000 posts from the quantitative dataset, coding for communication strategies, mobilization techniques, and user interaction patterns using a validated coding scheme with an inter-coder reliability of Cohen's $\kappa = 0.84$.

Analytical Framework

The analytical process proceeded in three sequential phases. First, descriptive statistics established baseline patterns of social media usage across different political events. Second, inferential statistical analyses including multivariate regression models tested relationships between social media engagement metrics and offline political

participation indicators. We controlled for potentially confounding variables including pre-existing political affiliation, socioeconomic status, and regional factors. Third, qualitative thematic analysis of interview transcripts and social media content identified recurring patterns and emergent themes regarding how users perceived and utilized social media for political purposes.

To address validity concerns, we employed methodological triangulation by cross-referencing findings from different data sources. Additionally, preliminary results were presented to a panel of five experts in political communication and digital media studies for peer validation. This rigorous methodological approach enables a nuanced understanding of how social media functions within India's complex political ecosystem, moving beyond anecdotal evidence to establish empirically grounded insights about digital technology's role in political revolutions.

Data Collection and Analysis

The empirical foundation of this study rests on comprehensive data collected from multiple sources between 2010 and 2017. The analysis integrates platform-specific metrics, survey data, and comparative indicators to establish a holistic understanding of social media's political impact in India.

4. SOCIAL MEDIA GROWTH AND POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

Table 1 presents the growth trajectory of major social media platforms in India and their corresponding levels of political content engagement. The data reveals that while Facebook maintained the largest user base, Twitter demonstrated substantially higher political engagement ratios, particularly during election periods. WhatsApp showed the most dramatic growth rate, emerging as a crucial platform for political communication by 2017.

Table 1: Social Media Platform Growth and Political Engagement in India (2011-2017)

Year	Platform	Monthly Active Users (millions)	Political Content (%)	Engagement Rate (%)	YoY Growth (%)
2011	Facebook	34.6	8.2	0.9	41.3
2011	Twitter	15.8	19.7	3.2	37.5
2011	WhatsApp	6.9	5.1	2.8	-
2013	Facebook	62.7	11.5	1.7	32.1
2013	Twitter	27.3	23.8	4.1	31.2
2013	WhatsApp	30.8	14.7	5.2	118.6
2015	Facebook	118.4	17.6	2.3	37.2
2015	Twitter	40.2	31.4	5.6	21.5
2015	WhatsApp	70.6	29.2	8.9	51.3
2017	Facebook	196.2	22.5	2.8	28.7
2017	Twitter	52.7	38.6	6.3	14.5
2017	WhatsApp	133.1	38.4	10.5	37.3

Source: Compiled from Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI) reports and platform disclosure data [16]

Urban-Rural Digital Divide and Political Participation



The second dataset examines how digital access disparities correlate with political participation metrics across various geographical contexts. Table 2 demonstrates a pronounced urban-rural divide in both social media access and corresponding political engagement indicators.

Table 2: Urban-Rural Digital Divide and Political Participation Indicators (2017)

Region Type	Internet Penetration (%)	Social Media Users (%)	Voter Turnout (%)	Digital Participation Score*	Political Knowledge Score**
Metropolitan	72.6	63.8	64.1	7.8	6.9
Urban	58.3	48.7	67.8	6.2	6.1
Semi-urban	42.1	31.5	71.3	4.5	5.4
Rural	16.8	12.3	73.2	2.1	4.2
Tribal	7.4	4.6	62.5	1.3	3.5

*Digital Political Participation Score: Composite index (0-10) measuring online political activities including signing e-petitions, following political accounts, and sharing political content **Political Knowledge Score: Measured on scale 0-10 based on questionnaire assessing awareness of current political affairs Source: National Election Study 2017 [17] and Lokniti Digital Democracy Survey [18]

Social Media Mobilization Across Political Movements

Table 3 compares key metrics across three significant political events, revealing varying patterns of social media utilization and effectiveness in different political contexts.

Table 3: Comparative Analysis of Social Media Metrics Across Political Events (2011-2015)

Metric	India Against Corruption Movement (2011-12)	General Elections (2014)	Delhi Assembly Elections (2015)
Total Social Media Posts (millions)	8.7	49.2	11.3
Hashtag Reach (millions)	42.6	103.8	28.4
Offline Mobilization Conversion (%)*	3.2	0.9	2.4
Average Message Propagation Velocity**	1.7	3.5	2.2
Traditional Media Coverage Correlation***	0.42	0.78	0.56

*Percentage of online supporters who participated in offline activities **Average number of shares per minute within first hour of posting ***Pearson correlation coefficient between social media trend intensity and mainstream media coverage volume Source: Author's analysis based on Twitter API data, Facebook Insights, and media monitoring metrics [19]

Demographic Patterns in Social Media Political Engagement

Table 4 illustrates how demographic factors influence patterns of political engagement on social media platforms, highlighting significant variation across age groups and educational levels.

Table 4: Demographic Distribution of Political Engagement on Social Media (2017)



Demographic Category	Facebook Political Engagement (%)	Twitter Political Engagement (%)	WhatsApp Political Group Membership (%)	Digital Political Efficacy Score*
Age 18-25	37.6	42.3	31.8	6.8
Age 26-35	28.4	36.7	42.3	5.9
Age 36-45	19.3	12.5	36.1	4.7
Age 46-60	11.2	7.1	22.4	3.2
Age 60+	3.5	1.4	9.8	2.1
Education: Primary	5.3	1.2	13.5	2.4
Education: Secondary	18.6	8.7	28.3	3.9
Education: Graduate	42.5	41.5	38.2	6.3
Education: Post-graduate	33.6	48.6	20.0	7.1

*Digital Political Efficacy Score: Measured on scale 0-10 based on self-reported belief in ability to influence political outcomes through digital participation Source: Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) Digital Politics Survey 2017 [20]

Regression Analysis of Social Media Impact on Political Participation

Table 5 presents the results of multivariate regression analysis examining the relationship between social media usage and various forms of political participation, controlling for demographic and socioeconomic factors.

Table 5: Regression Analysis of Social Media Usage and Political Participation (2017)

Dependent Variable	Social Media Usage Coefficient (β)	Standard Error	p-value	R ²	Control Variables
Electoral participation	0.173	0.067	0.011*	0.289	Age, gender, education, income, region
Protest attendance	0.382	0.074	<0.001**	0.341	Age, gender, education, income, region
Political knowledge	0.246	0.058	<0.001**	0.375	Age, gender, education, income, region
Contact with political representatives	0.085	0.061	0.164	0.267	Age, gender, education, income, region
Financial contribution to political causes	0.114	0.072	0.115	0.203	Age, gender, education, income, region

*p<0.05, **p<0.01 Source: Author's analysis based on Lokniti-CSDS National Election Study 2017 [21]



The analysis of these datasets reveals several significant patterns regarding social media's role in political mobilization in India. The platform-specific data in Table 1 demonstrates that while Facebook dominated in terms of user base, Twitter and WhatsApp showed superior engagement metrics for political content. Table 2 highlights how the digital divide maps onto patterns of political participation, with stark disparities between urban and rural constituencies. The comparative analysis in Table 3 suggests that social media's effectiveness varies significantly across different political contexts, with movement-based mobilization achieving higher offline conversion rates than electoral campaigns. Demographic patterns in Table 4 reveal that youth and educated populations dominate political social media spaces, raising questions about inclusivity. Finally, the regression analysis in Table 5 establishes statistically significant relationships between social media usage and specific forms of political participation, particularly protest attendance and political knowledge acquisition.

5. DISCUSSION

Critical Analysis of Social Media's Political Impact

The empirical data presented in this study reveals a complex relationship between social media usage and political mobilization in India between 2010 and 2017. The regression analysis in Table 5 demonstrates statistically significant correlations between social media engagement and certain forms of political participation, particularly protest attendance ($\beta=0.382$, $p<0.001$) and political knowledge acquisition ($\beta=0.246$, $p<0.001$). However, these findings must be interpreted within the context of India's pronounced digital divide. As Table 2 illustrates, internet penetration in rural areas remained at just 16.8% in 2017, compared to 72.6% in metropolitan regions. This disparity creates what Chakravarty and Roy [13] describe as "digital enclaves" where political discourse occurs among demographically homogeneous participants, predominantly young, urban, and educated citizens.

The platform-specific data in Table 1 reveals a significant shift in the social media ecosystem between 2011 and 2017, with WhatsApp emerging as a particularly influential platform for political communication. The 38.4% political content rate on WhatsApp by 2017 represents a transformative development in India's information ecosystem, creating what Shah [22] characterizes as "micro-public spheres" that operate outside traditional media oversight. The closed nature of WhatsApp groups creates information environments resistant to fact-checking and external scrutiny, a phenomenon Bradshaw and Howard [23] identify as potentially problematic for democratic discourse. This trend parallels global concerns about the fragmentation of public discourse into algorithmically defined echo chambers.

Comparative Analysis with Previous Studies

Our findings both align with and diverge from previous research on social media and political mobilization. The strong correlation between social media usage and protest participation (Table 5) supports Bennett and Segerberg's [3] connective action framework, which posits that digital networks reduce coordination costs for collective action. Similarly, the demographic distribution data in Table 4 confirms previous findings by Pal [24] regarding the youth-centric nature of digital political engagement in India, with 18-25 year-olds showing the highest rates of political engagement on both Facebook (37.6%) and Twitter (42.3%). However, our findings complicate Shirky's [7] techno-optimistic view of social media as inherently democratizing. The urban-rural participation disparity documented in Table 2 suggests that digital platforms may actually reinforce existing inequalities rather than transcending them. This aligns with Morozov's [8] critique of "cyber-utopianism" and supports more recent



scholarship by Neyazi et al. [25] highlighting the persistence of traditional socioeconomic barriers to political participation despite technological advancement. The comparative analysis of political movements in Table 3 reveals important nuances not captured in previous studies. The significantly higher offline mobilization conversion rate for the India Against Corruption movement (3.2%) compared to the 2014 General Elections (0.9%) suggests that social media may be more effective in issue-based mobilization than electoral politics. This contradicts earlier research by Chadha and Guha [5] that positioned social media primarily as an electoral tool in the Indian context. Our data indicates that social media's revolutionary potential may be more pronounced in non-institutional political contexts where established power structures are directly challenged.

Theoretical Implications

The empirical findings necessitate a recalibration of theoretical frameworks regarding social media and political revolutions. The data supports a "hybrid media system" model as proposed by Chadwick [26], where new and traditional media logics interact rather than displacing one another. The 0.78 correlation between social media intensity and mainstream media coverage during the 2014 elections (Table 3) demonstrates this interdependence between digital and traditional information ecosystems. Furthermore, the regression analysis in Table 5 suggests that social media's impact varies significantly across different forms of political participation. The strong effect on protest attendance ($\beta=0.382$) compared to the non-significant relationship with contacting political representatives ($\beta=0.085$, $p=0.164$) indicates that social media may be transforming certain aspects of political engagement while leaving others relatively unchanged. This supports Shah and Jain's [4] "selective transformation" thesis, which proposes that digital media reconfigures specific political practices rather than revolutionizing the entire political system.

The demographic data in Table 4 raises important theoretical questions about digital citizenship and inclusion. The concentration of political engagement among highly educated users—48.6% of Twitter political engagement comes from post-graduates who represent a small minority of India's population—suggests that social media may be creating what Jaffrelot and Verniers [15] term "elite networked publics" rather than truly inclusive democratic spaces. This challenges simplistic narratives about technology's democratizing effects and highlights the need for more nuanced theoretical frameworks that account for structural inequalities in access and literacy.

6. CONCLUSION

This empirical investigation into social media's role in Indian political movements between 2010 and 2017 reveals a nuanced picture of digital technology's revolutionary potential. The evidence demonstrates that social media platforms have significantly transformed certain aspects of political communication and mobilization, particularly among urban, educated youth. Statistical analysis confirms positive correlations between social media engagement and specific forms of political participation, most notably protest attendance and political knowledge acquisition. The rapid growth of political content across platforms—reaching 38.6% on Twitter and 38.4% on WhatsApp by 2017—indicates that digital spaces have become crucial arenas for political discourse in contemporary India. However, the data also reveals significant limitations to social media's revolutionary impact. The pronounced urban-rural digital divide (72.6% versus 16.8% internet penetration) creates parallel political information ecosystems that may exacerbate rather than ameliorate existing social inequalities. The demographic concentration of digital political engagement among young, educated citizens raises important questions about

inclusivity and representation. Furthermore, regression analysis indicates that while social media usage strongly predicts certain forms of participation such as protest attendance ($\beta=0.382$), it shows insignificant relationships with other political activities including contacting representatives ($\beta=0.085$, $p=0.164$).

These findings suggest that social media functions as what might be termed a "conditional catalyst" for political change in India—powerful under specific circumstances but constrained by structural factors including access disparities, literacy barriers, and pre-existing socioeconomic inequalities. Rather than triggering comprehensive political revolutions, social media appears to selectively amplify certain voices and issues while potentially marginalizing others. As India continues its digital transformation, addressing these structural constraints will be crucial in determining whether social media ultimately serves to deepen democracy or merely recreate existing power dynamics in digital spaces.

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