Understanding And Redefining Voting Behaviour In The Age Of Social Media

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*(This paper is an attempt to understand how social media has become a place for civic discourse and opinion formation. This virtual public sphere is an extension of Habermass' original public sphere. The rise and fall of a government is based on public opinion. This is an analysis of understanding ' How the **public** sphere of mass society depend on media to constitute their discursive spaces.)*

In 21st century, social media has emerged as a platform to help nation and it's societies to create, express and exchange their opinions widely .Here social media includes mainly twitter, face book, whats app and YouTube. From young to old , people of age group are fascinated to use it. This platform connects them to the world with lesser time and energy. Social media has become the part and partial of our daily lives . This new media has entered into all spheres of our lives so political sphere is no exception. We all are involved in social – media and its super- expansionist network capacity. After internet revolution, while the intellectual thought that there would be no revolution which has an impact on world society such as internet; social media carried the development to another phase (Cenk Arslan, 2019). People from all strata of society. Despite the effects of social media in our everyday lives, there is still a big gap in our minds about the proper place of social media in the whole context. It is needed to put it into a contextual framework which includes concepts such as public sphere and mass media.

Now in present time , social media is used as a tool of communication, which is accessible to all without any barriers of class, gender, and age . Because of its easy accessibility , this new medium of communication has attracted political parties to connect their voters and share their visions, and influence their voters with the objective to gain majority Twitter , you tube and face book are used by politicians to let supporters know how they feel about important issues . The Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan (1964) argued that society is influenced much more by the type of the media than by the content or the message it conveys. That is how important role media plays in forming any society.

(Key words: Social Media, Voting Behaviour, Indian Politics, Discourse)

American Linguist and radical writer Noam Chomsky sees the mass media as disseminating propaganda in support of ruling groups in society.

It is needed to identify features of social media in order to have better understanding of it. Biswas, Ingel and Roy (pp129) in his study found out five features of social media-

1. Social networking and social interaction
2. Participation
3. The use of different providers
4. Openness
5. Collaboration (between both users and user group)

Here it is important to define the concepts of social media, mass media and public sphere in order to understand the key words that we discuss. Mass media is a denotation of a sector of media which has a capacity to reach large amounts of people (New World Encyclopedia, 2017). World Wide Web and new communication technologies are the part of mass media. On the other hand, social media could be defined as computer based technologies that facilitate the creation and sharing of information and ideas (Obar & Steven, 2015). The concept of public sphere has been in the heart of communication studies and political discussion for a long time. A broad definition of public sphere could be found in Habermas literature, as it is defined as a realm of social life in which public opinion could be formed (Habermas et al. 1964). It is also an area of everyday life in which people come together and discuss the everyday life problems.

After this conceptual map, a discussion upon the transformative power of social media today would be more meaningful. Has social media become a kind of virtual sphere? This is one of the key questions in media and communication studies. As Fuchs, argued in his article internet, social media and public sphere are commonly combined with new technologies transformative power. Fuches asks in his article who owns internet platform? Who owns social media? If we think about the role of social media in today's world, we cannot ignore the political part of the story (Fuches, 2014).

When social media platforms emerged in the beginning, there was a positive prediction about the future of public sphere. It might have been so, because the fact that social media platforms were mostly startup which was owned by ordinary young people who wished to changed the world. Another aspect of the discussion is the efficiency problem of social media's role of political situations. Is social media so powerful to create a change in political area, as many argue? Shirky's article which was published in Foreign's Affairs shows us that social media's effect could not be generalized (Shirky, 2011). In many countries like Philippines and Moldovan cases, social media create a great impact and resulted in serious political changes.

The German philosopher Jurgen Habermass has given a concept known as 'public sphere'. Public sphere is a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens (Shamsher Alam, 2020). Habermas has discussed the importance of coffee- houses as public sphere in the production of public opinion. Later on, with the advent of modern technology it changed its forms and extended its ambit. It came on the virtual edifice. Thus social media is an extension of public sphere at virtual level. He mentioned that public sphere is equivalent to public opinion. To Habermass the success of public sphere depends on the following factors. First, the degree of autonomy of public sphere; second, access to public sphere, third, rejection of the hierarchy and fourth, the quality of participation. It is an attempt to contextualize these four characteristics in present day social media like –twitter, whatsapp, face

book etc. It is an attempt to understand the role its role in the generation of vibrant public opinion, which led to the formation of healthy and vivacious democracy.

The degree of autonomy can be understood in terms of freedom from coercion. Autonomy is freedom from state and other factors also. Who is making an opinion against whom? It has been found that the moment anybody critics the ruling party, then the same tries to put those argumentative voices under surveillance and sometimes booked but at the same time there are other people who stand for them. For example- Assam MLA arrested for his social media post on covid -19 as he said that quarantine camps are worse than detention camps. Sometimes, disagreed voices on social media were sacked with the sedition and other charges. Inspite of this social media gives space to all to share their views. If there is absence of autonomy, the democratic ethos can be curtailed and minor voices are not heard. But social media is for all. Anyone is free to share their side of story.

The access to the public sphere could be understood by the domination of single ruling political party, caste, class and ideology. Although the ownership and control of social media is free from the purview of upper caste Hindu unlike the mainstream media, which is owned and dominated by them. However, social media is also conquered by the current leading ideology. There are IT cells of different political parties, especially of right wing ideology, to intimidate the dissenting voices. Thus the major arguments are perpetuating but new opinions are also being formed against the ruling party. The accessibility can also be measured from the using capacity of social media. The availability of social media is easy to all particularly middle class. Thus the opinion of middle class is being considered as the opinion of masses. So it can be concluded that social media is available. It also gives the space to weaker and poor section of society to share their opinions.

Participation of every single individual is important in the public sphere. It defines how much open space is available for the common people to express their opinion. They express their ideology whatsoever they feel. Democracy can be strengthening by critical evaluation of all dominant ideologies. The social media serves this purpose.

The quality of participation is another important aspect for constructing public opinion through the public sphere. Though there is also a trend of circulating fae news and hate speech against marginalized community like dalits and Muslims but it is also helpful in spreading the voice of those people who believe in secular values. There is a quality debate and proper information, social media has turned into a public sphere. It is useful in creating a healthy public opinion, which is the backbone of democracy. People can ask the question to ruling party also. Social media has enough potential to heal and strengthen the democratic ethos of our country.

Sociological model of voting behavior is defined in three essential works: The people's choice (Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gauclet,1944) , Voting (Berelson , Lazarsfled & McPhee,1954) , and personal influence (Katz & Lazarsfled,1955).

The central hypothesis of Lazarsfled et al.(1994) was that act of voting was an individual act, affected mainly by the personality of the voter and his exposure to the media.(Malik, Neha.pp146). However voter's social habitus also influences voting behavior. Piere Bourdieu, a French sociologist introduced the concept of 'Habitus'. Habitus is created by a social rather than individual process leading to patterns that are enduring and transferrable from one context to another, but that also shift in relation to specific contexts and over time. Habitus is not fixed or permanent, and can be changed under unexpected situations or over a long historical period (Navarro 2006:16). Thus habitus has an important role to play in deciding voting behaviour. Because social values are deciding factor of this phenomena. Voters' subjective perception of the social and political world surrounding them affects their voting choice..

Based on a sample of about 600 voters, Lazarsfled et al in a landmark study in 1944 made the principal inference that most voters are voted according to their political predispositions.

But in Indian context, voter is influenced by many factors like - religion , caste , community, language , money ideology and political wave etc.Indian politicians are trying to win the battle of the ballot box on these grounds since decades.

Earlier print and audio-visual media were their tools to reach - out voters but now social media has become one of the most easiest way to connect with voters. With the development of technologies and internet, a revolutionary change can be seen in political campaigning. Social media plays a very crucial role to fill the gap between voters and political parties. Almost every political party is using social media platform. In 2011, for the first time social media was used in movement called India against Corruption (ICA) in India. The main purpose of this movement was to attract people with the movement using social media. This was a successful experiment to mobilize masses of the country. According to Houghton, Hamdan & Marder (2017) social media has played a crucial role in the political campaigns in the recent years. Social media provides the bidirectional engagement between politicians and audiences. U.K. election 2015 which is also known as Selfie- Election put a great impact on the election outcomes. It has given rise to a new kind of political campaign, which works like a bridge between politicians and public.

Ahmad, Alvi & Ittefaq (2019) studied the rural Pakistan and found that outline participation in the political activities is strongly correlated with political awareness. In Pakistan young generation is very active in political affairs on social media that resulted into too much offline participation in political activities. The study concluded that face book use and political interest positively correlates with online political participation. Most of the respondents were agree that there is a positive relationship between social media and political participation.

In his book 'The Election That Changed India' Rajdeep Sardesai (2015), wrote that the complete description of sweeping victory of BJP in 2014 election over the UPA government. In election 2014 BJP won 282 seats, in which 137 secured more than half of the votes polled. Near about 73 percent were won with the margin of more than one lakh votes polled. So what is the reason of such great victory of BJP in the elections? Author pointed out many reasons that may be responsible for the victory of BJP. One reason is that popularity of Narendra Modi which is greater than any other politician in India. 36 percent of voter's preffered Narendra Modi while Rahul Gandhi, Sonia Gandhi and Manmohan Singh collectively preferred by the 17 percent of voters. Second was it was for the first time when dalit and Muslims also voted for BJP. What may be the reason of such mobilization of voters suddenly? The main role is played by the media especially social media, which has been used to reach the voters from all sections of society. The use of face book, twitter, whatsapp etc has changed the traditional way of political communication.

Now face book and twitter have become two pillars of political campaign. Every politician is having accounts on twitter and facbook. Political parties are having their cyber cells to connect with people during election campaigns. Face book and twitter have overcome the world of mouth today. In 2014 general election, more than 65 percent of voters were come under the age group of 18 to 35.This age group is more prone to social media. Almost 85 percent of 205 million internet users were using social media sites. Thus social media is an important place to share the information about candidate, political agenda and other information. It is a two way process so it is also helpful in knowing voters exactly wants from their political leaders. It is quite economic platform in comparison to traditional media.

Ratnayke Hasan conducted a study in Sri-Lanka. He selected 120 young voters and found that 'social media has great power to influence voter's behavior as a communication tool in the political context of Sri-Lanka.

Political leaders and their party workers consider social media as modern election campaign tool since they help to spread political messages , discover the areas of interest as well as need of voters and the general public. IT is helpful in giving political message to the targeted audience without any barrier to upload any true or false informal message to social media.

Face book is one of the most used social media platform. Social media and internet have welcomed the citizens to contribute to public debate and political sphere of society .In the early years of internet science and politics discussed this development as a promising chance to empower citizens to participate in the politics and make democracy work better (Emmer &Paolillo,2017).

Despite forming up more than half of the population in many countries, young people (ages 18-30) often find themselves marginalized from mainstream politics and decision making. To make political system representative, all parts of society must be included. When young people are disengaged from political processes, a significant portion has little or no voice in decisions that affect group members' lives. Main consequence is the undermining of political systems' representativeness. Participation of youth is important to make a difference in longer term and to have a say in today's and tomorrow's politics. Inclusive political participation is fundamental to democratic and political right to build stable societies and respond to the specific needs of younger generations. For young people to be adequately represented in political institutions, processes and decision making and in particular in elections, they should know their rights and be given the necessary knowledge and capacity to participate in a meaningful way at all levels. Young people may feel disempowered, when they face problems in formal political participation. Many believe that their voices are not going to be heard or they may not be taken seriously even if they are heard. It becomes more problematic when politicians lose their interest in responding to the aspiration of the young people. Though formal participation of youth is important in any emerging democracies. Active participation of young people can bring life to democratic values, leading to the overturning of authoritarian practices. In countries where young people have led protests that have forced authoritarian regimes from power, they are likely to feel significant frustration if they are not included in formal decision –making procedures. This becomes dys-functional to democracy and accelerates conflict dynamics. There are many ways of political participation for citizens; voting is one of them. Young people can participate in politics by many ways. In a democratic country like India , elections are based on adult franchise . Anyone who has completed age of eighteen years is a voter. But political participation is not just about voting. The process includes awareness of a voter in several ways such as- how to decide to which party I should vote, major issues of elections , ways of thinking etc.

Politicians use social media to reach out voters especially younger generation. Political parties always try to influence as many people as possible I favour of their party. The main target is to reach every voter.

The new trend is to link directly with voters and social media has stimulated young voters , which have a profound impact on the elections (Ramos,2015).

Voting behavior and decisions are decided by environmental dynamics , government policies , political parties and leaders. Voters are considered consumers of services provided by political parties is similar how consumers make purchasing decisions and has been the subject of much research (Ahmed, Lodhi & Shahzad,2011).

When politicians fail to fulfill expectations of voters , they are dissatisfied with political candidates and the intentionally vote them out in the future election(Dalton,2006).

Bimber an Copeland (2011) focused on the role of social media for giving the platform for political participation and changing their political efficacy .

Schutz's (2005) study suggested that new media users are active in politics and political discourses.

Jiang(2016) examined the effects of the internet on online and offline political participation. He also investigated the internet's role in molding citizen's perceptions of politics. This strong relationship creates political efficacy election interest among internet users and increases their political involvement.

According to a study , conducted by Tttefaq & iqbal in 2018 in Pakistan, Pakistan has the second highest population of youth in the world after Yemen which has created huge impact on the dynamics of Pakistan's politics .

Thus it can be pointed out when a voter engages with a political party via social media, the interaction can built trust as a counterpart.

The above studies have discussed how social media is being used in politics . Along with positive side there is a darker side of it too .

As social media provides direct and cheap access to a large pool of information .That is why sometimes it becomes difficult for users to what is real and what is fake. Users have to learn how to fiter online information efficiently , which takes time. User may face information overload if he or she is not able to filter relevant information and consequently make ill –informed decisions.

In this way I tried to analyze the influence of social media ,political communication, content on voting behavior on voters. There are very limited number of studies related to impact of social media political communication content on young voter's voting.

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