Role of Social Media in Shaping Voter's Behavior: A Case Study of Assam Legislative Assembly Election, 2021.

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Abstract:

Social media is a kind of a platform, where people can share their ideas, beliefs, knowledge, talents, creativity and many more. Initially it was a medium for people to communicate with each others. But gradually it became a tool for the political parties to influence the voters by spreading negative pictures of their opponent parties and a positive picture of their own party. With the help of social media they can share their agendas, policies and political thoughts. Social media includes Facebook, Instagram, X (formerly known as Twitter), WhatsApp, YouTube, Koo etc. But in this research the author will specifically emphasize on the three main social media platforms. They are Facebook, Instagram and X (formerly known as Twitter). By analyzing these three platforms the author will try to find out how Social media shapes the voting behavior of people of Assam especially in the Assam Legislative Assembly Election, 2021 and the author will try to find out how political parties use these platforms to fulfill their political interests and political campaigns.

Keywords: Social media, voters, Political Campaigns, Politics, voting behavior.

Introduction:

Social media is a digital technology that allows everyone to share their own ideas, creativity, information, knowledge etc to the entire world. More than 4.7 billion people use the social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, X platform (formerly known as Twitter) and YouTube (Dollarhide, 2023). Social media initially started as medium for people to communicate and interact with friends, family and other people. But later it started to serve many different purposes. These platforms serve various purposes and interests of its users. Some people use these platforms to exhibit their talents, hobbies, works, political motives and many more.

Initially the usage of social media was restricted only for the communication purposes. Gradually, it has been extensively used to serve the political motives of several Political parties and the leaders. Before understanding how Social media shapes the voting behavior of people, let us first understand the evolution of social media in India, so that we can have a clear picture of its present context. The growth of internet usage is rapidly increasing in India. With over 460 million internet users, India is the second largest online market after China (Aggarwal, 2018). On August 15,1995, internet was first launched for the common people in India by Videsh Sanchar Nigam Limited (VSNL) (Aggarwal, 2018). In 2005, Google launched its social networking website Orkut, where people could connect with their friends, family and new people. This is how Social media started in India. Facebook started in India in 2006 and gradually it became a very popular platform. According to a Forbes article, India has 448.1 million Facebook users (Wong, 2023). This represents around 31.8% of the population (Wong, 2023). In 2006, Twitter (now X) launched publicly, where people can share their thoughts and ideas. According to a Times of India's article, India has 27.3 million X users, the third-highest worldwide (Kharbanda, 2023). Another most popular platform is Instagram, which was launched in 2010 and now it is owned by Meta platforms. As of January 2023, India had a total of 229 million Instagram users, the largest Instagram audience in the world (Dixon, 2023). However, Reliance Jio has played an important role in making internet easily accessible to common people. After the launch of Mukesh Ambani's 4G mobile network i.e. Reliance Jio, the cheap data turned India's internet dreams into reality. After the launch of Reliance Jio on 5th September 2016, the number of internet users in India, increased drastically because of the free 4G internet plans provided by Jio (Sharma, 2021).

After that the politicians had also started using these social media platforms to serve their political interests, as the number of internet users had were increased. In Assam also, these social media platforms had been extensively used by the politicians to influence the voters. In 2021, Assam Legislative Assembly Election, it has been observed that the politicians were highly active in these social media platforms to get the mass support. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the political gatherings and meetings were banned, which have prompted the political parties to hold its organizational works through social media.

Therefore all the political parties decided to use social media with an aim to increase the party's activities and to promote their policies and works among the masses. Apart from this, the Political parties hire professional workers to manipulate the public by spreading negative pictures of their opponent parties and a positive picture of their own party (Borah, 2022). There are so many Information Technology Cells (IT Cells) of political parties, which help them to influence the masses. Before 2021 Assam Legislative Assembly Election, Dr. Himanta Biswa Sharma was the health minister of Assam. During his tenure as the health minister, he had widely active in all the social media platforms. The way he circulated the information and his activities in Twitter to prevent the Covid-19 pandemic in Assam, which had caught the attention of the masses. These activities had really helped BJP to shape the voting behavior of the masses and attract towards BJP. During Assam Legislative Assembly Elections 2021, the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) had also focused on social media platforms to present a positive picture of the party among the masses (2021 polls, 2020). On the other hand the opposition parties like Congress, All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF), Assam Jatiya

Parishad (AJP), Raijor Dal etc had criticized BJP government in all the social media platforms over the issue of Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and proposed National Register of Citizens (NRC).

Theoretical Background:

Theoretical Framework is an important part of any research. With the help of Theoretical framework one can clearly present their research works more prominently. According to Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT) describes that people actively look for particular functions in media content in order to satisfy their needs and desires. This indicates that people are lured to media consumption for a variety of reasons, such as amusement, camaraderie, or even education. UGT is crucial for publishing companies to understand consumer behavior since it shows what consumers search for on social media sites like Twitter and Instagram. Ultimately social media plays a significant role in shaping its users desires and needs and accordingly the business companies make advertisements on the basis of its user's preferences. Another such theory is the Social Capital Theory, where people utilise social media platforms to create networks and relationships that they can later leverage for their own benefit. This theory is predicated on the notion that individuals can utilise their networks to obtain opportunities, information, and resources. With the help of social media, many small business farms are being run in these platforms, where they can sell their products to its consumers. One more such theory is the Network Effects Theory, where using social media platforms make a network more valuable to its members. This theory is predicated on the notion that a network gains value as more members join it. Moreover, According to the Cultivation Theory, people acquire their attitudes, beliefs, and values as a result of repeatedly being exposed to media messages. The premise of this idea is that people are shaped by the messages they come across on social media. Therefore we can see that nowadays all the political parties they propagate their interests in the social media platforms by manipulating the voters. If it is the incumbent party, then it will demonstrate its achievements. On the other hand, if it is the opposition party then they will highlight the drawbacks of the incumbent party. At the end we can say that all the political parties use social media platforms to cater its goals.

Objectives:

1. To understand the role of social media in election campaigns.

2. To find out the role of social media in shaping voter's behavior.

3. To study the importance of social media in political sector.

4. To examine the relationship between social media and politics.

Methodology:

This study will include a descriptive analysis. It will include both qualitative and quantitative analysis of data along with the secondary data. The secondary sources include internet, books, journals, newspapers, articles, theses, official documents of state election commission etc. Along with these, some personal observations and explanations of the author is also included in this paper.

Findings:

In the history of Assam's Legislative Assembly Election, for the first time a non-Congress government has come to power again 2021 Assembly election. The BJP-led alliance secured 75 seats out of 126 Assembly seats, while the Congress-led Grand Alliance won only 50 seats and the one seat was won by the Raijor Dal (Northeast Now, 2021). The findings are discussed below:

- Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma, was highly active in social media platforms. He used to provide regular updates of covid 19 cases and he used to visit many hospitals during the pandemic. All these activities were posted in his social media handles. Afterwards people were highly impressed by his leadership quality during the pandemic. In fact, many people voted for the BJP in the name of Himanta Biswa Sarma.

- With the help of with the help of social media platforms, BJP portrayed AIUDF chief Badruddin Ajmal as someone who protects the interests of illegal Muslim immigrants of Bangladesh. On the other hand, BJP depicted itself as to protect the interests of Assamese community from the illegal Muslim immigrants (Deka, 2021). Since AIUDF was a alliance of Congress Party, therefore the anti BJP votes did not go to Congress Party either and resulted in the division of votes by giving an edge to BJP.

- Moreover, Himanta Biswa Sarma is highly popular among young women because of his women Empowerment related schemes. For example: Arunodoi scheme, which provided Rs 830 to eligible households every month (Deka, 2021). The BJP promised to increase the amount to Rs 3,000 per month (Deka, 2021). He also promised to waive off all the microfinance loans taken by the women in the state (Deka, 2021). Moreover, schemes like Pragyan Bharati, free scooties were distributed among the meritorious girl students, who had passed higher secondary (HS) final exams in the first division under the Assam Higher Secondary Education Council (AHSEC). Many news portals posted about these schemes, which helped Himanta Biswa Sarma to gain more popularity among teenagers.

- BJP had tweeted widely about the progress they have made in the state of Assam. BJP shared a lot of posts in social media regarding their field campaigns and rallies, Images and videos of large-scale gatherings, motorcycle rallies. They used hashtags like #AkoEbarBJPSorkar or #akoebarmodisorkar etc (Sarma and Hazarika, 2023).

- On the other hand, in a series of harsh tweets, Congress has accused the ruling party. Most of their tweets focused on the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). Moreover, Congress tweeted broadly against the BJP government of Assam for the lack of employment opportunities, the excessive price rise of petroleum, gas cylinders, flood issues, soil erosion, and the declining safety of women in the state (Sarma and Hazarika, 2023). They had used hashtags like #AxomRokhya and #EtiaAxomeKobo or #SpeakUpforAssam were widely used on tweeter (Sarma and Hazarika, 2023). At the end, it has been observed that since India is a young country, where mostly the social media users are youngsters. Therefore nowadays almost all political parties are highly active in social media platforms.

Conclusion:

The term "social media" describes a range of technological tools that allow people to share information and ideas with one another. It is a new way to present one's own viewpoints in front of a large audience. It has been widely used by both political parties and voters. Since these platforms have a large number of audiences, therefore it is very necessary for any political party to attract the citizens, as it can directly establish a connection with the voters. Therefore nowadays almost every politician has accounts in these platforms. During 2014, Indian General Election, these social media platforms have widely used by the political parties to gain support from the citizens. In the same way, in Assam Legislative Assembly Election 2021 social media played a key role in the victory of BJP led alliance. From the above discussion, it has been found that social media plays a decisive role in shaping the human understanding. People tend to get influenced by the social media posts. Social media posts are uploaded in such a way, which even give shapes to the people's political ideology. But we should also be concerned about fake news and posts. Before sharing or uploading any information, we must check the authenticity of the post. Nowadays, Artificial Intelligence is so powerful, which can circulate confusions and misinformation about many things. Therefore self awareness is very essential. However, social media has many positive sides as well. But we should not get influenced by such manipulative social media based posts and should not indulge oneself in any political propaganda after getting influenced by such posts rather we should first verify the facts.

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