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RESEARCH ARTICLE

CHANGING FACE OF ELECTORAL BEHAVIOUR: ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA -GENERAL ELECTIONS 2019

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Abstract

The 2019 election witnessed a society that was consuming digital technology. For the first time in the history of India's political platform the national elections were fought both on the streets and by using the smart phones and social media platforms using the digital technology. The digital media teams of the political parties in the 2019 elections played a very crucial role in trying to tip the scales in the favor of their party. *The NaMo app had nearly 10 million downloads while the Shakti app of the Congress had around 70-80 lakh users.* But the critics raised the question what if the party that mis-adopted the technology during 2019 is also the majority party in the house that would be responsible for designing the control mechanisms?

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Introduction:-

The declaration made by our Prime Minister Modi in 2017 that the 2019 election would be fought on the smart phones came true¹. Proving all electoral pundits wrong and completely defying the electoral math, the BJP decisively won the 2019 elections and came back for a second term with a full majority. For the first time in the history of India's political platform the national elections were fought both on the streets and by using the smart phones and social media platforms using the digital technology. The 2019 election witnessed a society that was consuming digital technology with more than half our population having access to digital pathways and access to social media. In such a scenario the digital tools for the first time became a strong tool in the hands of the election campaign managers to catch up support and votes for their party and their leader. During the 2019 elections the use of digital platforms were not merely a tool adjunct to offline politics but became the most important and inseparable tool for political mobilization and proved the fact that from the Gutenberg press in Medieval Europe to the mobile phones of recent history, whenever a new mass technology emerges, it changes the very nature of politics. (Jeffery and Doron 2012)²

Till before the 2019 elections the impact of the digital media was limited to a very small section of the Indian population, i.e. the elite, but the rise of cheap data with the launch of Jio network and smart phones had reduced this digital divide and made the digital tool as a powerful tool for political mobilization.

¹ <https://www.cigionline.org/articles/how-bjp-used-technology-secure-modis-second-win>

² <https://www.epw.in/engage/article/digital-politics-indias-2019-general-elections>

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Merely using the technology or understanding the use of technology does not necessarily mean that this will ensure a win in the elections and coming to power. But one cannot deny the fact that if used effectively and efficiently, they can play a crucial role in swaying the elections and tipping the balance as it did during the 2019 elections.

The digital media teams of the political parties in the 2019 elections played a very crucial role in trying to tip the scales in the favor of their party and the balance finally tilted, in fact practically tipped in the favor of the BJP giving it a resounding victory and a thumping majority.

The Digital media team of the BJP adopted a two pronged strategy during the election campaign. The first one was to mobilize the party workers and voters by setting the narrative to be shared by the party workers with the voters and secondly through a mechanism of messaging of information as well as misinformation, what has today come to be called the Whatsapp University.

In the backdrop of a continually falling GDP as a result of the inefficient economic policies of the government, lowest unemployment rate ever and the after effects of demonetization and poorly implemented GST policy one was almost sure that BJP would have a poor performance during the 2019 elections thought it could still come back to power as the opposition had no credible leader and could not form a strong opposition coalition against the incumbent government. However the duo of Modi and Amit Shah did not envisage a BJP that would need to come back to power with an alliance but as a party on its own with a majority in the house and this was very smartly and strategically planned resulting in the magic that happened in 2019.

For any election campaign to be successful, one of the most important roles is to be played by the workers at the grassroots levels and connecting with the workers at the grassroots in a manner that the narrative reaching each and every one of them for dissemination amongst the voters is the same, is not an easy task, We have all heard of Chinese whispers and how meanings of messages can be completely changed if not communicated properly. With the use of digital platform, and the smart phone, BJP during the 2019 elections overcame this problem and it had one of the most efficient and effective usage of the smart phone to energize and disseminate the narrative to the grass root party workers who felt totally connected with the party leadership on a real time basis. Such energized and enthused party workers are the key to success in any election campaign for they are ones in direct contact with the voters and converting them to votes at the crucial hour of voting.

BJP was not the only party that used the digital platform and used the smart phones and the Whatsapp University, but with the huge funding that BJP had, thanks to the changes it made in the process for making contributions to the electoral funds by the corporate world, it received a windfall donation, BJP used its donation wisely to set up a huge maze of party workers for a real time dissemination of narrative both up and down the chain of party workers. In fact in UP, where there were six zones, the party had 11 media team members in each zone followed by 11 in each district, five in each mandal, two in each ward and 5 at each booth which was the last point of contact with the voters. Their machinery was very beautifully planned and flush with funds and with the use of technology, they could also execute this machinery very effectively.

The process was very simple, every welfare scheme of the BJP government, when it reached a labharthi, the party worker at the lowest level would take a picture and video with the labharthi and share the story with the chain above which at the top of the chain was then disseminated by the party workers to the Indian voters at large through the smart phone WhatsApp groups and the social media platforms as Facebook and Twitter. Unlike the traditional media there was no delay in sharing of views just as the party wanted them and not as the traditional media wanted it to be presented. Not only that, even the reach of this information was faster and to a larger set of masses. With smart phones and internet connections easily available, the youth of India is always on the phone using social media platforms or reading messages in the WhatsApp groups where the messages are shorter, crisper and easily accessible, all in one place. This was the easiest way to reach the masses and create an impact.

Modi and his digital media team were the first to also adopt Twitter as a platform to the build of election campaign and this team of warriors were very active in the game of creating narratives which were focussed towards the elite of the Indian population and the influencers who ensured that these narratives were smoothly seeping into the minds of the voters and the wider information ecosystem. In fact, after Trump, Modi has the second most number of followers on this platform. His strategy was very simple. Modi would follow every one of his party workers and supporters and this made them feel connected with the party leader. It is matter of pride when the Prime Minister of

the country is reading, following or retweeting your tweet. It is this sense of pride that converts a party worker into a warrior who is ready to do anything for their leader. The leader of the opposition, Rahul Gandhi, joined the Twitter battle late in 2015. He actually got more traction and in fact he retweeted more than Modi but he never engaged with his party workers and that is where the platform did not work for them for he completely failed to make that connect.

Few of my respondents from opposition parties even highlighted the issue of spreading of misinformation by using social media. While one part of the strategy was to reach to the workers and motivate them with the narrative, the other part of the strategy was messaging of misinformation. During the 2019 elections the Whats App University and other social media platforms were very generously used to spread misinformation or to target the opposition parties with trolls. An investigation by the Huff Post India revealed the a political consulting firm ABM (Association of Billion Minds) was a major source running misinformation campaigns during the 2019 elections, directed at garnering support for the agenda of the BJP and trolling the Congress leaders and their agenda. The Investigation linked the consulting firm to Amit Shah as a firm established by him though BJP and Shah completely denied it and the firm was subsequently restrained but not before the job of spreading misinformation had already been done and served its purpose.³

It was also for the first time that all political parties used the social media platforms of Google and Facebook for political advertising. During February to May 2019, Google and Facebook declared that the political parties had spent nearly 60 crores on political advertising on these two platforms with the BJP dominating the digital spend and spending close to nearly 40% of this amount with DMK coming distant second at around 15% and Congress was third with around 10%. This difference was possible because of the windfall of donations received by the BJP due to the new policy for contribution to political campaigns introduced by the BJP just before the 2019 elections.

While this was a direct spend by the BJP to advertise and reach out to the voters during the election, they also spent money on political advertising through their voluntary party workers. Such workers are technically separate from the party and do not have the same guidelines as per Election Commission norms. The BJP had a very strong such army of volunteers as compared to the Congress. This army of volunteers created digital war rooms which churned out political misinformation, political trolls and BJP favouring narratives thus seeping into the mind of the India electorate and influencing the voters. Some examples of such pages were “My First Vote for Modi”, Bharat ke mann ki baat” and Nation with NaMo” and several others.

This data above clearly shows that BJP dominated the digital media and definitely in terms of spending. As per Times of India in 2019, in 2017-18 BJP declared a total income of 1027.34 cr while Congress declared a total income of 199.15 cr and this difference in war chest was very evident in the spend that these two parties did both online and offline and the results were there for all to see in 2019.

The results were also a result of the manner in which the social platforms were used by the two parties. While the main narrative on all digital platforms was Brand Modi they also put out lot of content from all BJP leaders and Modi followed and retweeted these ensuring party morale and also reaching out to a much wider base. On the other hand in the Congress the leaders only retweeted Rahul Gandhi while he himself never followed or retweeted his party leaders or followers as a result of which his digital footprint was always considered poor as compared to that of Modi. Even the performance of the apps of the two parties showed this difference.

The NaMo app had nearly 10 million downloads while the Shakti app of the Congress had only around 70-80 lakh users. These apps were very powerful tools which BJP used to push their narratives to the users whether they were on Rafale, Chowkidar Chor Hai campaign, Uri attack, Balakot strikes, success of its welfare campaigns as Ujjwala, Housing scheme, Ayushman Bharat, Jan Dhan Yojna, Congress politicians facing the music for amassing black money and losing it due the demonetisation policy of the BJP . But above all the two most important narrative that BJP pushed was the narrative of sharing success stories of every Labharthi and promising that they will ensure that each Indian is a labharthi. They were not a suit boot ki Sarkar and were for the common man but they needed one more term to do away the evil and ills of the years of Congress government.

³ <https://www.epw.in/engage/article/digital-politics-indias-2019-general-elections>

The second narrative was the narrative of Brand Modi who alone could bring back National pride of the Indians. It presented Modi as a decisive leader who had the guts to stand up against Pakistan in the Uri and Balakot strikes. Further, in all his international tours Modi had clearly been a winner for he was successful in creating a strong picture of India in the International arena.⁴

Another dimension of use of the social media by the BJP digital media team and more by the voluntary party workers was the Hindutva inspired narrative pushed to the Indian population. Narratives of the ruling party supporters whipped up passions of Hindutva and nationalism with messages on the social media platforms as WhatsApp, Facebook using words “terrorism against Pakistan” and remarks like “Muslim refugees are like termites” , “ elections is between Ali and Bajrangbali” “Crackers will be burst in Pakistan if Mahagathbandhan won” and such others all of which had Pakistan as the recurrent theme to attract voters who were basking in the glory of the win by the Indian Army in Uri and Balakot.

This was the only way that BJP could have diverted the minds of the electorate when the economy was in doldrums. Secondly, because of its failure on the economic front Modi had to bank on the Hindutva campaign which was successfully done by the digital media team. Last but not the least, the media narrated this election as one around the “other” party which was not the opposition but “Pakistan”, or “Muslim” or “terror” and the people had to choose between BJP and be a nationalist or chose the “other” and be an anti-nationalist. Even the election Manifesto of the BJP projected a hardened Hindutva position with all issues as Ram temple, Uniform Civil Code, Sabarimala, Citizenship Amendment Bill, Article 370, Article 35A, strengthening border and therefore everything which stood for a Hindu Nationalist state

The push of these narratives was so strongly and effectively done by the digital media team of the BJP that the disastrous economic policies of the BJP as demonetisation, GST and the rapidly declining GDP, rising unemployment, all of these factors took a back seat. People were willing to give him another chance and they realised that there was no alternative to Brand Modi and for any strong nation building they needed to bring him in power with a majority mandate so that he could take the corrective steps to make our nation great again.⁵

While we will continue to debate the impact of technology and if it was the reason for winning the 2019 election, it cannot be denied that it has completely changed the manner in which elections will be fought in the future and it is imperative to have a strong mechanism to control the use of the technology platforms. But the critics raised the question what if the party that mis-adopted the technology during 2019 is also the majority party in the house that would be responsible for designing the control mechanisms?

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