Technology and Empowerment of Women: Role of Digital Media in Democracy

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Abstract: In this digital world the social, political and cultural course of the society is highly influenced by the information and communication tools. It just takes merely seconds for new ideas to reach any corner of the globe unknown to a few decades ago. There is a widespread need to use media for the awareness of the women folk to achieve the long-cherished goals of women empowerment. Regarding how Media can make people realize that women empowerment is an important tool to bring the required social changes in the contemporary society the discussion on the role of the new media comes to the front. In order to achieve the goal of gender equality the focus should be on providing more freedom to women, to organize their lives and identity and also to reduce power imbalances.On this ground Media can act as a catalyst in projecting women empowerment as a dynamic process of individual as well as collective struggle against the forces which suppress and subordinate women. It accentuates a procedure of reorganization of all existing resources in the society, be it social, economic, political, intellectual or cultural. The objective of this paper is to look at the political ground reality of women in the electoral politics of the state. It tries to analyze the role of the new media as a forum of political participation in the state of Assam examining the relevance of it as a space of public discourse to women voters in electoral politics. It basically looks at the leeway concerning women and media that aims to promote women empowerment is to increase women involvement in decision making process through political participation.

1.1 Introduction

Every sphere of a citizen's life is now covered by the use of new media. The change that the idea of new media has brought is visible in political, educational, cultural, business and even in behavioral pattern of human across the globe. In the field of information and technology it can be called as a paradigm shift. Current scenario around new media is crystal clear with its mainstream adoption across the globe. With the introduction of internet and World Wide Web (WWW) it has become the modern face of all the traditional media. One of the first theorists of digital media, Mark Poster[1] argued that new and digital media is active and the traditional media is passive. He further added that interactions, two-way communications as in the internet model of communication diminishes the distinction between producers and the consumers making it less hierarchical and more decentralized (Poster, 1995). The term 'new media' is technical as well as a social one. In technical sense it is a network of technologies for exchanging information and in social sense it's a network that connects societies of the world.The development of new media has provided useful tools for people to get mobilized for specific political causes. It has blurs traditional distinction between news production and news consumption. Elements like web page content, email, forums, blogs, social media and podcasts are now the fastest form in dissemination of political information. Whether new media has a dominant role in politics or not is an important question? But there is convincing examples of the new media ability to act as a catalyst in certain political situations. It's not like that internet is replacing the traditional mass media instead the relationship between internet and the traditional media is increasingly symbiotic at enhancing people involvement in politics through media (Oates, 2008). The internet is the sphere which can involve

virtually all levels of the political communication world simultaneously. For example, at the same time it can connect different level of elements of a countries political system, Government's officials who are broadcasting their policies via websites, the mainstream media which are elaborating or interpreting these policies in different websites or via live video, and the citizens or voters who are accessing the information about these policies at their computer or mobile phone. So, with all these new possibilities of dissemination of information, delivery and creation new media is the efficient means in this age of digitalization to enhance political communication within society or of citizens with political system.

1.2 Data Sources & Methodology
The study about new media in strengthening women political leeway relating it to the role of new media as a tool of political communication and its contribution towards the creation of a space of public discourse as the vital source of political information to women voters in Assam in this paper is solely based on secondary sources like books, journals, articles of newspaper and different essays available on internet and also taking resources from different research works done by various scholars and academicians following the descriptive analytical method. Also, the study takes quantitative data from the Post Poll Survey by CSDS under LOKNITI Program on Assembly Election 2016 in the state of Assam.

1.3 Digital Media and Democracy in Assam
It has been quite a good time for Assam Media-both print, broadcasting and to some extent digital media. The increasing numbers of media in the state has seen an upheaval during the past few years. There has been a robust growth in the number of newspapers and television channels, not to speak of the tabloids, pamphlets, magazines, FM centers etc. as the sign of development of the media business in the state. Particularly there has been noticed a real vibrancy and profitability in the private satellite television news channels. Although the fact remains that the Assamese press specially the Assamese language satellite television channels is still in growth mode even though the growth is remarkable aided by improved technology, steadily expanding literacy, growth in the economy, aggressive publishing and political excitement. Half of the total viewership of these channels is in small towns and rural areas while women account for a third of the viewership (Jayanta Das, Chittaranjan Nath, 2014). But this vibrancy of the development of Assamese media should not be glorified too much. The point of concern is that the social reach of the media channels is not so impressive. The issue of uneven distribution and reach between urban and rural, between men and women and among different social classes is there related to the access to these contents of this channels. The worrying aspect is that such disparities and unequal distribution of information obviously influence and distort news and editorial coverage of happenings in society.Assam achievements in new media are quite in a nascent stage. The young generation however is becoming more and more avid readers and users of the new media which is central to this transformational age. More and more people majority being from the techno-savvy young generation are reading newspapers digitally many of which offers rich, many sided, multimedia content, including long form features, investigative reporting, coverage of live political happenings and thoughtful analysis of different talk shows of the news media channels (Jayanta Das, Chittaranjan Nath, 2014). Naturally there has emerged a live global audience of the state for the contents of this news channels in digital form through different blogs, websites of the channels and the social networking sites available at the form of apps and internet of mobile phones or computers. But this is just the brightest side of the story. The existential crisis of proper information sources, the issue of fake news, dramatizing news of political information is there because all the wonderful developments has not yet yielded a variable revenue and business model for internet or digital journalism (George, 2003). The questions of trend of media workings are relevant here as what should be the functions of media in a state like Assam? What functions media has been serving so far? Should media go beyond these functions?

1.4 The new in 'New Media' as a tool of Political Communication

Communication have been revolutionized the networks around the world with the growth of Internet and social media and India is no exception in that regard so as Assam. Maya Ranganathan (Ranganathan, 2014) argues new technologies of surveillance and dissemination has made new media as the 'Fifth estate' of democracy. Any information in this age can be broadcast to the people at the click of a button because of the emergence of social media which changed the way people think, write and react. Due to the social networking sites common man or woman now feels empowered as they have a voice and in a true sense they are enjoying the right to freedom of expression. Social media is defined as a media for the society through which people can get more social with new conversation to new people. Everyone from politicians to actors, editors to social activists a lethal combination of opinion makers and opinion terminators are virtually present and far more accessible than in real life. Political parties or political leaders can catch the pulse of the public at this social networking sites and pretty quickly (Vaidhyanathan, 2018). Tweet-stick surveys are now more demanding than the notion of dipstick surveys in political games.

The connection of people in social media used to establish through talking and sharing providing opportunities to the campaigner to know the voters, target specific audience, mobilize support and urge them to participate. When these people who participated in the process of talking and sharing get actively engaged in political discussions or debates they automatically turns into digital tools of spreading words to influence public opinion. The most important feature of new media in politics is the power of its platform to sensitizing and popularizing issues in politics. Corruption, Scam, Scandals, Black Money, Communal arguments or religious commentaries were certain examples of much sensitized and debated issues in the last decade in the floor of social Medias in Indian politics. Politicians who are on social media have a better connection to voters than those who are not. There is no doubt that social media has the power to lead or to follow, although it has turn to a pervasive force of impact and influence in Indian politics.The politicians are changing their way by using the tools of these social media to reach out to their electorate. Even sometimes the mainstream media is going by what is trending on these social media inside. According to a survey (Google, October, 2013) thirty seven percent of the urban Indian voters are online voters who are rarely seen at political rallies. Four out of every ten urban voters in India are on the internet accessing political information through social networking sites. It means social media platforms are an excellent place to engage young and urban voters. As a result of which political parties are now investing time, money and leadership in a large scale in communities online as the younger generation has been brought up in a hyper-communication world (Jha, 2017). Electioneering and interacting with the voters through different tools of social media goes miles in trumpeting a change in the new communication order of the world's largest democracy.The phenomenon of using social media in politics or election campaign in India is a new idea of how social media can affect voters mind through digital mode in political run of elections (Chopra, 2014). So, what can't be ignored is the ability of social media to bring together people in common issues of political, social or moral causes. It brings the political authority of a state directly to the voters.

1.4.1 Is new Media being the 'Fifth Estate'?

In the last two decades the evolving technology and social media has led to, or at least hastened the descent of a quite a few people from their places of position whether in politics or in society. Internet has played an important role in almost every major expose in recent times. It's the new media that takes information related to government or any other officials or political parties or political leader to nook and corner of the world with amazing ease and efficiency (Chopra, 2014). But from another view new media has been employed in calculated ways to produce desired effects. In connection with technological determinist approach the human agency that employs technology can't be accepted as media and the motives of the human agency that employs it needs to be account. But many researches work on new

media have arguing that with all its attendant issues of ethics, privacy and propriety, communication technology is proving more effective in ensuring probity as none other.

1.5 New Media: The Space of Public Discourse to Women Voters

The election commission of India has warned of social media posts that border on hate speech by one or other political party and their followers, trolling of those holdings dissenting views continues. Press freedom when conflated with social media turns into an ugly cocktail. But social media has emerged as a powerful medium for the promotion of political communication. During elections in the heated-up atmosphere of campaign and high voltage media coverage on election related issues social media plays the role of game changer to some point especially among the urban concentrated voters (Lal, 2017). The atmosphere of social media users in the state of Assam is similar to the rest of the urban areas of India. Political parties of the state are well aware about the might of social media and in the use of this all penetrating weapon for digital campaigning and vote bank promotional during elections.

Table 1.1 Social Media Account Holders Information of Assam, 2016

| SL No	Social Media	Account Holders Percentage
1	Facebook	87.2
2	Whatsapp	88.4
3	Twitter	95.8

(Source: LOKNITI-CSDS, NES-Post poll 2016 Assembly Elections, Assam)

As the people of the young generations without any differences on the basis of gender are more digitally linked and sound using New Media as a source of political information. The propagation of political content through new media is the most common means of reaching out to the voters and also the internet is turning into the most common tool of political communication. Even the television media channels also depend on the new form of digital connectivity of new media for the propagation of their content. The creation of web pages, blogs, facebook pages, availability of the contents of these media channels in different news apps and social media are some of the prominent visible examples.

1.5.1 New Media as a source of Political Information

Earlier the political actors had to go door to door for spreading a message in an area, public announcements through loudspeakers to gather a group, public meetings to fix a problem of a society or neighborhood and to select leaders for representation in public affairs. But now these all traditional ways are regarding by people as slow process because new Media are providing that connectivity among people through which they can champion any social cause, can seek opinion on issues or to campaign in any election (Kumar K. J., 2013). This shifting of ways from traditional technologies too new platforms are making digital strategies as the central to political authorities. Manifesto of political parties are no more conspiracies from a closed door. Instead they are now common parts of social medias like Twitter, Face book, Instagram, Pinterest, Youtube, Google plus and others. The public through these social media are now an influential part to the thinking process of any political parties (Chopra, 2014). Politics is no longer just to get elected in elections but also to socially elected in the floor of the social media. The political parties are now aware of it very well so they seek promises of Voters online and every political leader are now in a competition to gratify people in both real and virtual worlds.

Figure 1.1: Social Media users for political information at 2016 Assembly election in Assam
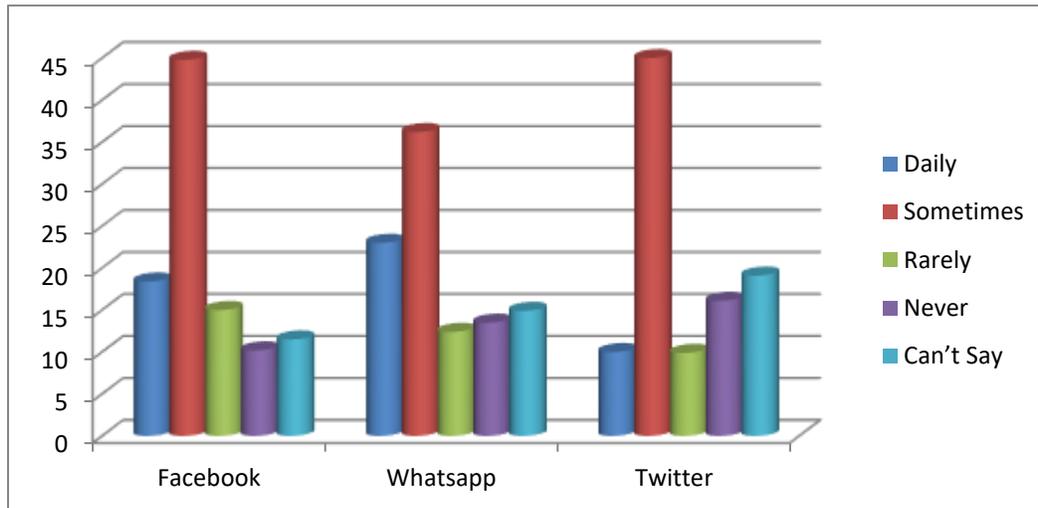
(Source: LOKNITI-CSDS, NES-Post poll 2016 Assembly Elections, Assam)

The above figure 1.1 explains the different category of users of social media for political information during Assembly election 2016 in the state of Assam. As mentioned earlier the account holders of social media in Assam are similar to the rest of the urban areas of India but the difference lies in the use of this social media political information. The percentage of social media users on daily basis for political information is less than the average percentage of social media users of India for political information which is above 50% (Pathak, 2019). As the account holder of facebook is less than whatsapp and twitter but the user of facebbok for political information is higher than whatsapp and twitter. The daily user of whatsapp for political content is higher than facebook and twitter as 23% and the daily user of facebook is next at 18.4 %. But together the daily user and sometimes user total shows that twitter remains at the bottom for political information by the user at 55% of which account holder percentage in the state is 95.8%. whatsapp remains at the middle with 59% whereas facebook users marks at the highest with 62%.

1.5.2   New Media as the Platform of Political Participation in Assam

The difference in social media account holder percentage and the use of these new media for political information percentage significantly talks about the use of this social media for other purposes by the users or maybe it holds the sight of fake account users in the state. The promotion of political leaders or political parties in the contents of this new media is a common phenomenon in the politics of Assam. Use of different social media platforms like facebook for live coverage of their activities or their campaigning or rallies or any other election related activities is a regular work of almost every political party of the state (Kumar, 2014). Even at certain points the news media channels have started to propagate news taking contents from the social media. The competitions among the political parties to attract the voters are a critical phenomenon at the floor of this social media. Social media is being used in a very robust manner in the elections of today by leaders and the political parties across the length and breadth of the state in reaching out to the voters.The young voters in between the age group of 18 to 40 years constitute about 59% of the total electorate (Pathak, 2019). Studies and reports have revealed that youngsters use social networking sites and the new media devices like cell phones to browse election related news without any differences on the basis of gender. An active presence in social media helps to get influenced by the contents of it and the impact of this reflects on their choices of voting. There are critical moments when citizen become journalists, when they document a case and because of which internet is a major issue for freedom of expression (Sevanti Ninan, Subarno Chattarji, 2013). No doubt the issue of fake news and breach of privacy is there of which has to be taken care of for the health use of new media platforms in democracy. But despite the above issues new media holds the prospects of acting as the

vibrant means of communication to strengthen the political leeway of women in the state of Assam in the following way-

- Less hierarchical
- More Decentralized
- Wider Scope as a source of political information
- Impact on political opinion in universal manner

1.6 Conclusion

Right to internet in now days is regarded as the parts of population human rights like right to education and right to food. Internet evangelist La Rue[2] is propagating this idea of creating a new space to work for human rights in this sphere. He was to India as the United Nations special Reporter for freedom of opinion and expression to prepare a report on Internet and freedom of expression. Internet is an instrument of democratization and mobilization, sometimes well used and sometimes not well used. The trend of debates towards this development of technology is of over commercialization of communication. The point is freedom of expression is not the right of those who live in the capital of a country but also of everyone even in remote areas. It is the means to access the ways of express one. So right to internet in broader terms indicates of a strong democracy through all its citizen participation with the security of right to information and political knowledge as the actual meaning of Right to freedom of expression. The misuses of internet have to be scrutinized as the violence of norms of the society but before putting limitations to the use of internet more important to investigate those misuses for solutions.

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