Original Article

Social Media and Political Mobilization: A Gendered Perspective in Indian Context

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Abstract

The advent of social media has revolutionized political mobilization, offering new platforms for engagement, activism, and discourse. This paper examines the role of social media in political mobilization in India, with a special focus on its gendered implications. Through a comprehensive analysis, it explores how social media serves as a catalyst for political engagement, the challenges posed by the digital divide and online harassment, and the comparative dynamics of these phenomena in India versus global contexts. Utilizing a theoretical framework that blends Social Movement Theory and Feminist Theory, the study delves into the interplay between digital platforms, political mobilization, and gender. The findings reveal the critical role of social media in democratizing political participation, while also highlighting the persistent barriers that women and marginalized genders face.

Keywords: Social Media, Political Mobilization, Gender, Digital Divide, Online Harassment, India

INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary political landscape of India, social media has emerged as a transformative force, redefining the modalities of political engagement and mobilization. The ubiquity of platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp has not only democratized the public sphere but also introduced new dynamics in the way political narratives are crafted and disseminated. This paper explores the intricate relationship between social media and political mobilization through a gendered lens, highlighting how digital platforms serve both as spaces for political engagement and as tools for gendered mobilization.

The advent of social media has fundamentally altered the traditional pathways of political participation, enabling grassroots movements and political campaigns to reach a wider audience with unprecedented speed and efficiency. Studies such as those by Harindranath (2022) and Sharma (2019) provide a foundation for understanding the broader impacts of social media on political communication and mobilization within the Indian context. These works underscore the pivotal role of digital platforms in facilitating public discourse and political engagement across diverse social strata in India.

Moreover, the gendered perspective of political mobilization on social media reveals complex dynamics. Gender plays a crucial role in shaping online political discourse, with women and marginalized genders leveraging social media to voice their concerns, mobilize support, and challenge the patriarchal status quo. The research by Darshan and Suresh (2019) underscores the empowering potential of social media, enabling women to participate more actively in political dialogues and movements. Similarly, the study by Meti et al. (2015) highlights how social media platforms have become critical spaces for gendered mobilization, facilitating discussions on gender-specific issues and campaigns in India.

This paper aims to delve into the nuances of social media's role in political mobilization from a gendered perspective, examining how gender influences political participation and mobilization on digital platforms. It seeks to contribute to the ongoing discourse on digital activism, gender, and political engagement in India, offering insights into the ways in which social media can both empower and perpetuate existing gender disparities in political mobilization.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

For better understanding let's have review of the existing related literature on the intersection of social media, political mobilization, and gender, specifically within the Indian context. There are plentiful of researches available on role of social media and political communication etc. some of the notable studies are as follows:

Darshan B M & Kalyani Suresh (2019) in their study, "The 'social' in political communication: social media enabled political discourse, engagement and mobilization in India," explore the transformative role of social media in enabling political discourse and engagement, emphasizing its potential for mobilizing political participation in India. Their analysis indicates that social media platforms have become pivotal in shaping political narratives and facilitating citizen engagement in political processes.

Ramaswami Harindranath (2022) examines digital activism's rise within the context of public protests in India. His chapter, "Digital Activism and Public Protest in India," delves into how digital platforms have become arenas for civic engagement and activism, thereby influencing political movements and public policy. The study provides a comprehensive view of the mechanisms through which digital activism operates, particularly in mobilizing support and creating networks of solidarity among disparate groups.

Although direct studies focusing on the gendered perspectives of political mobilization through social media in India were scarce, the existing literature on social media use for political purposes underscores the importance of considering gender as a critical factor. It suggests that women's political participation and mobilization through social media could be influenced by factors such as digital literacy, access to technology, and societal norms regarding gender roles.

Studies such as "Social Media for Political Mobilization in India: A Study" by Meti et al. (2015), provide valuable insights into how social media serves as a tool for political mobilization in India, comparing it with global trends. This study highlights the effectiveness of social media in campaigning, voter engagement, and influencing public opinion, suggesting that these dynamics might have gender-specific implications in the Indian context.

Manu Sharma's (2019) research on "Political communication and mobilisation: The Hindi media in India," though not directly related to social media, offers insights into the broader landscape of political communication in India. Sharma discusses how traditional and new media forms intersect to influence political mobilization and public discourse, suggesting that

the integration of social media with traditional media channels could enhance the scope and depth of political engagement across different demographic groups, including gender.

The reviewed literature underscores the pivotal role of social media in political mobilization, with digital activism emerging as a powerful tool for public protest and civic engagement in India. However, the gendered analysis of political mobilization through social media remains an underexplored area, highlighting the need for further research. The intersectionality of gender, digital access, and societal norms presents a nuanced landscape for understanding how social media can empower or inhibit political participation among women and marginalized groups in India. There is a need for a deeper investigation into the gendered dimensions of social media-driven political mobilization in the Indian context.

Research Gap

Despite the extensive body of research on social media's role in political mobilization and the growing interest in digital activism within the Indian socio-political context, a noticeable gap remains in understanding how gender influences these dynamics. The literature review reveals that while studies have extensively documented the mechanisms and impacts of social media on political engagement and activism, they often overlook the nuanced ways in which gender shapes these processes. Specifically, there is a dearth of focused exploration on:

- The differential access to and use of social media by gender within India's socio-political landscape.
- The specific challenges and opportunities that women and gender minorities face in leveraging social media for political mobilization.
- The impact of societal norms and digital literacy on the gendered patterns of political participation and mobilization through social media.

This gap signifies a crucial area for research, particularly given India's diverse socio-political fabric and the pivotal role of social media in contemporary political processes. Understanding the gendered dimensions of social media-driven political mobilization could offer insights into more inclusive strategies for political engagement and activism, ensuring that digital platforms serve as equitable spaces for political discourse.

Theoretical Framework of the study

The theoretical framework for "Social Media and Political Mobilization: A Gendered Perspective in Indian Context" is built upon two main pillars: Social Movement Theory and Feminist Theory. This framework is designed to explore how gender influences political mobilization through social media within the Indian context.

Social Movement Theory

Social Movement Theory provides a foundation for understanding the dynamics of collective action and mobilization. Within this framework, Resource Mobilization Theory and Political Process Theory are particularly relevant for analyzing social media's role in political activism.

Resource Mobilization Theory (RMT) emphasizes the importance of resources (e.g., time, money, organizational skills, and social media platforms) for the success of social movements. In the context of this research, RMT can help understand how access to and control over digital resources can influence the capacity of different gender groups to mobilize politically.

Political Process Theory focuses on the political opportunities and constraints that shape social movements. It suggests that the effectiveness of social media in political mobilization can be significantly influenced by the broader political and cultural context, including gender norms and the state of digital freedom in India.

Feminist Theory

Feminist Theory, particularly Cyberfeminism, is integral to exploring the gendered dimensions of political mobilization on social media. Cyberfeminism examines the intersection of gender and digital technologies, advocating for the empowerment of women and marginalized genders through digital spaces.

Intersectionality, a core concept within Feminist Theory, is critical for analyzing how overlapping identities (gender, caste, religion, and socioeconomic status) affect individual's experiences with political mobilization on social media. This concept underscores that the impact of social media on political engagement is not uniform across all gender identities, necessitating a nuanced analysis.

The Public Sphere concept, reinterpreted through a feminist lens, argues for the inclusive representation of diverse voices in public discourse. Applying this to social media, the research can investigate how digital platforms either facilitate or hinder the inclusion of women and

gender minorities in political dialogues, considering the traditional exclusion of these groups from the public sphere.

Integrating Social Movement Theory and Feminist Theory, the theoretical framework for this research posits that social media platforms act as digital arenas where resources for political mobilization are distributed and contested within a gendered matrix of power relations. This framework aims to elucidate:

I. How gender influences the accessibility and effectiveness of social media as a tool for political mobilization.

II. The ways in which social media can both challenge and reinforce traditional gender norms within the political mobilization process.

III. The potential of social media to create more inclusive and equitable spaces for political engagement among diverse gender groups in India.

This comprehensive theoretical framework guides the investigation into the gendered dimensions of social media and political mobilization, aiming to fill the identified research gap by providing insights into how digital platforms can be leveraged for more inclusive political activism.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research methodology, focusing on secondary data sources to gain insights into gender differences in political mobilization through social media.

Research Design

This study employs a comparative case study design, which allows for an in-depth examination of specific instances of political mobilization through social media across different gender groups in India. This approach enables the identification of patterns and differences in the ways social media is utilized for political engagement by various gender identities.

The study relies on secondary sources of data, which include:

Academic Articles and Journals from academic databases such as JSTOR, PubMed, and Google Scholar, focusing on social media, political mobilization, and gender studies within the Indian context.

Reports and other Publications from reputable think tanks, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and international organizations that provide insights into social media usage, political activism, and gender disparities in India.

Publicly available data and analysis on social media trends related to political movements in India, with a focus on gendered participation and engagement metrics.

Data Collection

Data collection involves a systematic search of the specified sources to gather relevant information that addresses the research questions. Keywords and phrases such as "social media and political mobilization in India", "gender and digital activism", and "social media gender disparities in political engagement" are used in database searches to identify pertinent studies and reports. The selection criteria for the sources include relevance to the research topic, publication date (to ensure currency), and credibility of the publication source.

Data Analysis

The collected data is subjected to thematic analysis, a method suitable for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. For this

Initial codes are generated by examining the data for recurrent themes related to the use of social media for political mobilization among different gender groups in India.

Codes are grouped into potential themes and reviewed to ensure they form a coherent pattern relevant to the research questions.

Themes are further refined and related back to the research questions and theoretical framework, facilitating a nuanced understanding of the gendered dynamics of political mobilization through social media.

Ethical Considerations

Given the study's reliance on secondary data, ethical considerations primarily concern the proper citation and interpretation of the sourced materials. Care is taken to accurately represent the findings of the original studies and reports, respecting the intellectual property rights of the authors. Additionally, the analysis remains sensitive to the portrayal of gender identities, ensuring that the discourse is respectful and inclusive.

Limitations

This methodology is subject to certain limitations:

The reliance on secondary sources may restrict the analysis to the perspectives and data available in existing literature, potentially overlooking unpublished or non-academic insights. The qualitative nature of the study might limit its generalizability across different contexts or temporal frameworks.

Discussion and interpretation

The present study suggests that in recent years, social media has emerged as a powerful tool for political mobilization in India, significantly altering the landscape of political engagement and activism. Its role extends from facilitating grassroots campaigns to influencing the broader public discourse, making it an indispensable part of political strategy.

India's digital landscape has seen exponential growth, with the Internet and Mobile Association of India reporting over 700 million internet users as of 2021, a significant proportion of whom are active social media users. This digital boom, coupled with the affordability of mobile internet, has made social media a pervasive force in the country's political domain.

Social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp have become essential tools for organizing protests, disseminating information, and rallying support for various causes. A notable example is the 2020-2021 farmer's protests, where social media played a critical role in mobilizing farmers across the country against the agricultural reforms. Platforms were used to organize peaceful protests, share logistical information, and bring international attention to the cause.

The study also highlights that the Political parties and candidates increasingly rely on social media for campaigning. The 2014 and 2019 Indian general elections showcased the potential of social media in reaching out to the electorate, with political parties leveraging these platforms for advertisement, voter engagement, and spreading their manifestos. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), in particular, has been noted for its effective use of social media to shape public opinion and mobilize voters.

It is also come up that Social media has democratized the public sphere, allowing individuals to voice their opinions, engage in political discussions, and interact directly with political figures. This direct line of communication has fostered a more engaged citizenry and has been instrumental in bringing political issues to the forefront of public attention. Studies, such as those by Darshan B M & Kalyani Suresh (2019), highlight how social media has enabled

political discourse and engagement in India, underscoring its role in facilitating a more inclusive political dialogue.

While social media offers immense potential for political mobilization, it also presents an opportunity to bridge the gender gap in political participation. Platforms like Twitter and Facebook have given women and gender minorities a space to voice their concerns and mobilize around gender-specific issues, such as the #MeToo movement in India. However, as noted in the literature, the digital divide and societal norms still pose significant barriers to equal participation for all genders in the political process through social media.

Despite its advantages, the use of social media in political mobilization is not without its challenges. Issues of misinformation, hate speech, and online harassment have been prevalent, sometimes exacerbating social tensions. The government's attempts to regulate social media content have also raised concerns about censorship and the suppression of dissent. Moreover, the digital divide in India means that not everyone has equal access to these platforms, which can limit the inclusiveness of political mobilization efforts.

Gendered Perspective on Political Mobilization through Social Media in India

The intersection of gender, social media, and political mobilization in India presents a unique landscape for understanding the dynamics of political engagement. While social media has democratized the political sphere, offering unprecedented opportunities for mobilization and activism, its impact is nuanced by gender, reflecting broader societal norms and digital divides.

The digital divide in India disproportionately affects women and gender minorities, stemming from socioeconomic factors, educational disparities, and cultural norms that restrict access to digital technologies. According to the Internet and Mobile Association of India, internet usage among women is significantly lower than men, which directly impacts their ability to engage in political mobilization through social media. This digital divide underscores the need for targeted efforts to enhance digital literacy and access among underrepresented gender groups.

Despite the challenges, social media has emerged as a vital platform for feminist activism and gender-centric political mobilization in India. The #MeToo movement is a prime example, where women used Twitter and Facebook to share stories of sexual harassment, sparking a nationwide conversation on gender rights and leading to tangible changes in policies and societal attitudes towards sexual harassment.

Another instance is the mobilization around the Supreme Court's Sabarimala verdict in 2018, where social media played a crucial role in organizing protests and disseminating information, highlighting the complexities of gender, religion, and activism in the Indian context.

Social media platforms have also enabled women and gender minorities to construct and disseminate their narratives, challenging mainstream media representations and offering alternative perspectives on political issues. Studies, such as those by Kalyani Suresh and Darshan B M (2019), have highlighted how social media enables political discourse and engagement, emphasizing its potential for empowering marginalized voices. However, the representation of women in these digital discussions often mirrors societal biases, indicating that while social media offers a platform for engagement, it does not inherently dismantle entrenched gender disparities.

One of the significant barriers to equal participation in political mobilization through social media is online harassment. Women and gender minorities engaging in political discourse often face trolling, threats, and harassment, which can deter active participation and silence voices. The anonymity and impunity enjoyed by perpetrators on these platforms necessitate robust mechanisms for ensuring the safety and security of all participants in online political discussions.

For social media to be an effective tool for gender-inclusive political mobilization, it is crucial to address the digital divide and create a safe environment for all users. Initiatives aimed at increasing digital literacy among women and gender minorities, coupled with stringent policies against online harassment, can enhance participation. Furthermore, the use of social media by political parties and movements should consciously include gender perspectives and actively promote the representation of women and gender minorities in political dialogues.

Comparative Analysis: Social Media and Political Mobilization in India vs. Global Trends

Globally, social media has played pivotal roles in political movements and campaigns, from the Arab Spring to the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States. These platforms have empowered individuals to organize protests, spread awareness, and challenge the status quo. For instance, during the Arab Spring, social media was crucial for coordinating protests and sharing information that was otherwise censored in mainstream media.

Digital Divide: A Global vs. Indian Perspective

The digital divide is a global issue, affecting political mobilization through social media worldwide. However, the nature and extent of this divide vary. In countries like Sweden or South Korea, high internet penetration rates minimize the impact of the digital divide on political mobilization. In contrast, India faces a unique challenge due to its vast rural population and significant gender and socioeconomic disparities. According to a report by the United Nations, India has one of the world's highest gender gaps in internet usage, which significantly impacts women's and marginalized communities' ability to engage in political mobilization through social media.

Gendered Political Mobilization: India vs. Other Democracies

The gendered perspective on political mobilization through social media reveals distinct challenges and opportunities in India compared to other democracies. For instance, in the United States, the #MeToo movement utilized social media to challenge systemic sexism and sexual harassment, leading to a significant societal and political impact. While similar movements in India, like #MeTooIndia, have gained traction, the impact is nuanced by cultural and societal norms that influence the participation and reception of gendered political mobilization.

Use of Social Media in Elections: A Comparative View

India's use of social media in elections, particularly the 2014 and 2019 general elections, showcases an extensive reliance on these platforms for campaigning and voter engagement, similar to trends observed in the United States, Brazil, and the Philippines. However, the effectiveness and strategies employed differ, with India showcasing a unique blend of localized content, linguistic diversity, and targeted messaging to engage a diverse electorate. The role of WhatsApp in disseminating political content in India is particularly noteworthy, reflecting a distinct approach to social media mobilization compared to Western countries, where Twitter and Facebook dominate.

Challenges of Misinformation and Online Harassment

The challenges of misinformation and online harassment are common across the globe, impacting the efficacy and safety of political mobilization through social media. However, the intensity and nature of these challenges can vary. In India, the spread of misinformation through WhatsApp has had dire consequences, sometimes leading to violence. Similarly, online harassment, especially against women and marginalized groups participating in political

discourse, is a global issue, but in India, it is exacerbated by societal norms that constrain women's voices both online and offline.

Interpretation of Findings in the Context of the Theoretical Framework

The investigation into social media's role in political mobilization in India, particularly from a gendered perspective, underscores the dual nature of digital platforms as both empowering spaces and arenas of exclusion. Through the lens of Social Movement Theory and Feminist Theory, the findings reveal that social media can significantly amplify voices and mobilize political engagement across genders. However, the effectiveness of these digital platforms is moderated by access, safety, and societal norms, aligning with the Resource Mobilization Theory which emphasizes the importance of resources (including digital literacy and access) in mobilization efforts.

The Political Process Theory aspect of the theoretical framework highlights how political opportunities and threats on social media are perceived and navigated differently by various gender groups, influenced by the broader political and cultural context in India. This differential navigation underscores the importance of a nuanced understanding of the political process in digital spaces.

From a Feminist Theory perspective, the digital sphere as a site of struggle reflects ongoing gender inequalities and societal norms that shape offline realities. The cyberfeminism aspect points to social media's potential to challenge patriarchal structures, yet online harassment and the digital divide reveal persistent barriers to inclusive political participation.

Implications for Policymakers/ Activists and Society at Large

For policymakers, the gendered disparities in political mobilization through social media signal the need for policies that not only increase digital literacy and access across all genders but also ensure safe spaces for political discourse online. Policies must address the root causes of the digital divide, emphasizing education and infrastructure development, especially in rural and marginalized communities.

Moreover, regulations to combat online harassment, particularly gender-based harassment, are crucial. Implementing strict measures against digital violence and ensuring platforms' accountability can foster a healthier environment for political engagement.

Activists can leverage these insights by developing targeted strategies that bridge the gender gap in digital political mobilization. Initiatives could include training programs focused on digital literacy for women and gender minorities, creating safe online spaces for political discussion, and utilizing social media to amplify marginalized voices.

The gendered perspective on political mobilization through social media reflects broader societal norms and inequalities. Engaging with these digital platforms critically and consciously can contribute to a more equitable and just society. Public discourse on the importance of inclusive digital spaces, coupled with collective efforts to combat online harassment, can pave the way for a more democratic and participatory political landscape.

Public campaigns and education on digital citizenship could play a pivotal role in fostering a culture of respect and inclusivity online, promoting an understanding of the importance of gender equality in political discourse and mobilization.

CONCLUSION

This research paper explored the complex landscape of social media's influence on political mobilization in India, with a particular emphasis on its gendered dimensions. It highlighted the transformative potential of social media in facilitating political engagement, activism, and grassroots movements, alongside the challenges posed by the digital divide, online harassment, and societal norms. The findings underscored the dual nature of social media as both an empowering platform for political discourse and a reflection of existing gender disparities. Through a comparative analysis with global trends, the study illuminated the unique position of India in leveraging digital platforms for political mobilization. The theoretical framework combining Social Movement Theory and Feminist Theory provided a nuanced understanding of the role of resources, political processes, and gender dynamics in digital political engagement. The implications for policymakers, activists, and society at large suggest a roadmap towards more inclusive, safe, and equitable political mobilization through social media. Bridging the digital and gender divide is not merely a technological or political challenge but a societal imperative to harness the full potential of digital platforms for democratic engagement and representation.

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