



Role of Media in Democratic Politics in India

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Abstract

The role of media in democratic governance constitutes an important part in understanding the functioning of democracy across the globe. On one hand the traditional form i.e. print media and broadcasting media have been a one-sided form of communication with limited participation from the audience while on the other hand social media is a two-way means of communication between the political leaders and the electorate. Post-independence the 'public sphere' in India was dominated by print media, followed by electronic media in later phases and was state controlled till 1990s. With liberalization, private players brought competition within the forms of media and also between electronic and print media leading to commodification of news. This had huge implications for democratic politics as reflected during elections. The advent of social media in the later period developed a new democratic discourse. This paper traces the journey of media in India after independence, the major transformation it has undergone in the post-reform period along with the advent of social media and its implication for democratic politics in India.

Keywords: *Media, democracy, electorate, elections, political campaign*

INTRODUCTION

In a democracy media plays a powerful role in keeping the people informed and has been often referred to as the 'Fourth Estate' a co-equal part of the government along with executive, legislature and judiciary that keeps government under vigilance. It plays an important role in keeping the elected representatives responsible to the electorate by acting as a watchdog and preventing abuse of power. Freedom of press is quintessential for the functioning of vibrant democracy where ideas can be debated and opinions can be expressed for the betterment of the society. It is an essential part of Fundamental Rights put out in Article 19 (1) (a) of the Constitution as 'freedom of thought and expression'. Media landscape in India has undergone major changes since independence. The objective of this paper is to analyse the historical evolution of media in India and its contribution to democratic development.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Media's association with democratic politics has been a central part of social science research. In a democracy study shows that Press has performed the role as a watchdog, public forum and facilitator of social reforms (Coronel, 2003). The study revolves around how media has been shaping democratic politics in India and explores the context within which media, state and society operate. For this purpose the study takes into account Jurgen Habermas and Noam Chomsky's concept related to media society, economy and state.

Jurgen Habermas, one of the eminent thinkers from Frankfurt school devised the concept of public sphere for explaining the relation of media, society and state. **Habermas, opines 'public sphere' is "the realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed"**. Here private individuals come together to form a public body and in an 'unrestricted fashion' along with the freedom of expression, form assembly and association, express their opinions on issues of common interest. The precondition of this public sphere is that access is provided to all citizens. The purpose of public sphere is deliberation i.e. mobilize the public for debate and discussion regarding political affairs within the democratic state. Newspapers and magazines, radio and television i.e. media are central to public sphere. **The governmental authority facilitates the existence of the public sphere but is not a constituent of it.** When information is accessible to the citizens through media free from any kind of political control, the citizen's body is able to influence the legislature through criticism and periodic elections, public opinion is formed. According to Habermas the very forms in which public sphere manifested itself underwent changes with the advent of social welfare state. This is largely due to the fact that private and public is blurred as political authorities perform the task of 'commodity exchange' which is the function of the economy and not state and also social powers assume political functions. With the growing elements of economic interest citizens cannot have access to complete information (Habermas, 1974).

Noam Chomsky in establishing the role of the media vis-à-vis the state and economy goes on to say that media is dependent because it is market driven and used for the vested interest of the elite. The political and economic elite use media to serve their interest. Chomsky and Herman in their book first suggested the propaganada model in which money and power are able to screen out news, reduce dissent and allow the government and dominant private players to get their message to the public. Habermas and Chomsky are both relevant in their own way in analysing the role of media in democratic politics in India (Herman and Chomsky 2008).

METHODOLOGY

This research paper includes data collected from secondary sources i.e. books, newspaper articles, research papers etc. **The study investigates the evolution of media in India, as well as its role in democracy.** The desk research methodology and qualitative analysis was used for this purpose.

MEDIA IN INDIA

Media in India is not a post-independence phenomenon as it played a prominent role in India's struggle for independence. The Indian Constitution does not explicitly guarantee independence of press but the Supreme Court in its number of judgments have upheld that freedom of Press is an essential part of freedom of expression and is covered under Article 19 (1) (a). The understanding on Indian media can be divided into two phases; first the Indian media in the late forties when India adopted the state controlled path of development and the Indian media in the post liberalization era. Immediately after independence print media was the only form of media informing people for a considerable period of time. In the later period print media joined hands with radio and electronic media in the form of television which provided information as well as entertainment under the control of the activist state. India inherited the age old British tradition with the privately owned commercial print media and the government control imposed on the electronic media. The primary aim of the electronic media was 'to educate, to inform and to entertain' which was devoid from any form of participation or encouraging the development of critical faculty of the citizens. From the Nehruvian to the Rajiv Gandhi era the same message was reiterated that the state owned media are too immature to be provided autonomy (Dasgupta et. al. 2011). **After independence, the English media**

controlled the national media until the 1990s, when the vernacular media presented a major challenge to the English media in the public realm. Study shows the decline of the one party system in 1967 can be attributed to the rise of regional consciousness created by the vernacular press. The expansion of Hindi newspapers in North India and the vernacularization of public sphere was effective in mobilizing marginalized groups and significantly influenced democratic politics (Neyazi 2011). A major turning point was the imposition of Emergency for one and a half years and the censorship of the Press. The elections of 1977 turned out to be different as no leader opposing the ruling party and the government received so much response from the media as did Jay Prakash Narayan. However it was the same media who were critical of Mrs. Gandhi's policies during the 1977 elections shifted from their earlier stand and supported her during the elections of 1980. However, there was a volte face in the governmental policy towards media after the initiation of the New Economic Policy. The broadcasting media was freed from the clutches of the activist state and opened up to private entrepreneurs. The monopoly of Doordarshan suffered a setback. The broadcasting arena was rapidly occupied with cable and satellite channels. The print media partially remained undisturbed as it already had an entrepreneurial past but there was the fear of foreign control in ownership and the possible competition with foreign newspapers and journals. The entry of private players not only brought in fierce competition within the two forms of media but also between print and electronic media itself.

Accompanying changes at the policy and competition levels spectacular changes occurred in presentation, content and analysis of news. Analysis of news became light and crisp and news came to be viewed as a form of entertainment. It was a merger of information and entertainment which came to be termed as infotainment (Tuchman 2002). Infotainment changed the dynamics of Indian media as it considered citizens more as consumers and merged news with personal views of the news presenter. Another marked change was how the news is presented. In electronic media, the transformation in news delivery came in the form of 'mode of address to the viewers'. News now came to be presented by corporate attired standing anchor persons who were ready to enter the viewer's home, sensationalising news with their opinions in contrast to the subtle and modest approach by news presenters of DD sitting behind the desks. As for the print media magazines became glossier and newspapers took recourse to the tabloid format. Of all the three elements of news making it was content which had gone a disastrous change. 24x7 news channels and a plethora of newspapers and tabloids the lingering question was what is making news? (Tuchman 2002). Indian media entered into an era where news meant high drama quotient backed by huge corporate sponsorship and treating the citizens devoid of critical faculty who would binge on anything served to them. News is burdened with providing information with entertainment and here in debate setting is replaced by drama setting.

Today Indian media comprises of 24x7 news channels (vernacular and national) newspapers, radio, web and the internet and also the alternative media. It is commercially driven and entertainment friendly. Within the backdrop of neoliberal economy it is illogical to argue that mainstream media should eliminate profit but the question raised is whether profit motive should occupy the centre stage in determining news content. In catering to commercial interest media makes content highly superficial and brands such information as truth. At the same time using symbols, images, texts and catch phrases it captures the imagination of the audience severely undermining their critical faculty. It has moved away from its role in generating awareness among the people towards treating people as an amorphous mass who do not possess the ability to reason. This is the reason why the use of media has also created an impact on elections in India. BJP was successful in creating the Brand Atal in media cover ages and the result was decisively in favour of BJP led alliance National Democratic Party (NDA) which lasted a full term. In 2004 and 2009 general elections there was extensive use of print and electronic media for campaigning and this time victory came for the Congress



led UPA (United Progressive Alliance) government which lasted a full term. Study shows in electoral politics the role of meeting and rallies have been declining since the 1970s because of the growing importance of media. Electronic media has played a decisive role in urban electoral politics in India while the traditional forms of campaigning in rural areas (**Sardesai 2023**).

RISE OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND NEW DEMOCRATIC DISCOURSE

The advent of social or digital media according to Habermas has broader implications for media's role in democratic politics as it increases the divisions that already exists in the society and therefore has greater ramifications in democratic politics. For Habermas, the new media is transformative as there has been an extension of the public sphere beyond the strict geographical boundaries of the national territory (**Habermas 2023**). Social media has carved a niche alongside traditional forms of media and has provided the viewers the opportunity to express their opinions. It has proved to be more representative than news paper and television and has transformed people from audience to citizen through changes in public communication. The audiences have been empowered through higher level of interaction which was not possible with the print or electronic media. However social media's impact on democracy comes with its own set of challenges. The major concern is the effective circulation of fake news, which erodes the quality of public deliberation and sets up opportunities for manipulation (Chambers 2021). Moreover there has been commodification of political communication as these private media platforms commercially exploit user data and therefore represents a new form of power (Zub off 2019). Such social media companies dominate users as citizens continue to use them as they have no choice but not for the purpose of political action (Aytac 2024). The dominating position of private social media in the public sphere puts forward the question of how it is going to be beneficial for democratic politics and whether there is a need for alternative social media from below (Patburg 2025). Media platforms if are allowed to continue unregulated will lead towards the development of 'post truth democracy' (Habermas 2023).

In the 21st century Facebook, X (formerly Twitter) and YouTube are influencers and creators of views on politics and there has been tremendous effect on democratic politics in India. Not only for influencing and creating viewer's opinion, social media is also used by political parties to communicate with the electorate. Through social media platforms like Facebook or X, politicians are able to see direct response to their actions. In addition to this, social media campaigns are capable of reaching out to more voters especially the young voters and are playing an important role in shaping democratic politics in India (Roy and Sarkar 2016). The Lok Sabha elections of 2014 were the first general elections in India where social media was used on a large scale for political communication and campaigning (**Jose 2021**). Studies relating to the impact of social media on voting behaviour have shown that the 2014 General elections the electorate had the highest exposure to media in the last two decades and that media exposure influences people's voting behaviour (Verma and Sardesai 2014). Political commentators have argued that the victory of BJP was largely due to its extensive media campaigns and public communication strategy (Sardesai 2023). The success of the Delhi elections of the Aam Admi Party was also due to the impact it created through social media. The 2019 General elections was a one of a kind election campaigning where political parties publicized their ideologies and mobilized public opinion through social media (Mahapatra and Plagemann 2019). The information available on social media helps to form opinions as well as reinforcing existing opinions. Sometimes based on these opinions certain actions are triggered and thus social media has the potential to influence voter's decision at the time of the elections. In the last few years there has been rise in 'fake news' which has become prominent during elections where in political parties and leaders have used social media platforms to spread misinformation and instigate voters. Study shows that although social media did play an important role in disseminating



information there also seems to have a trust deficit among voters with regard to information available through social media. Nevertheless, social media usage and political participation are directly related (CSDS 2019).

The General elections of 2024 also witnessed an unprecedented rise of artificial intelligence, social media and digital platforms for political campaigning. Social media was used to share speeches, campaign matters and press conferences (Singh 2024).

CONCLUSION

To conclude it can be said the study on media's role in democratic politics in India is guided by Habermas and Chomsky's role of media vis- a- vis the society, state and economy where there has been a commodification of news in the hands of political and economic elite.

In India, with substantive powers media has played a vital role in making public participation meaningful. In this light the role of media gains immense significance especially before an election. However this role by media through the dissemination of information leads to wider ideological mediation resulting in various forms of domination. To add to this, media houses are controlled by the market which in turn is controlled by political and economic elite. Moreover with the rise of social media the present situation is not very encouraging in a pluralist society like ours where hate messages and discussions can affect the society at large. **THEREFORE, THERE IS A NEED FOR REGULATING MEDIA AND SOCIAL MEDIA IN GENERAL.** To ensure healthy democratic process it is necessary that information circulated by media is true and does not affect people's trust. It is extremely important for media organisations whether in print, audio visual, radio or web that professional reliability and ethical standards are not to be sacrificed for creating dramatic news. Apart from these, there is also need to democratize access to the use of media with the development of local media especially in poor and remote areas where native people lead a marginalized social life.

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