



Role of media and electoral politics in India

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Abstract

In a constitutional democracy the media plays a crucial role in strengthening the democratic institutions of free society. Modern Politics is largely mediated politics, experienced by most citizens through their choice of print or electronic media. Any study of contemporary democracy is therefore, also a study of how the media reports and interprets political events and issues, influences the political process and shapes public opinion. Thus the media has become central to politics and public life in contemporary democracy. Media's relationship with politics has long been an integral part of social science research in India and elsewhere. Media's role in the Indian sub continental politics and society has emerged as a crucial point of discussion in the last two decades. As a matter of fact India the largest democracy in the world is an emerging economy and Society. Hence the media - politics-society relationship will be discussed here. However the main focus of this paper is to explore media's influence on general election 2014 in India with the help of mediated buzzwords (a word or a phrase that becomes highly popular for a particular period of time). Role of media will be explored by analyzing the relationship between the buzzwords and newspapers disseminating them and exploring the impact and influence of these mediated buzzwords on the electorate cutting across different social location.

Keywords: election, media, social media, politics

Introduction

There are various perspectives in terms of exploring the inter-relation of media, politics and society; this study takes a society centric perspective that entails examining media as an institution and its influence on society in terms of its relation with state (largely represented by politics) and electorate (that represents society). There are several schools of thought regarding what role media plays and what role it should play in society, especially vis-a-vis political news. Arguably, there are four possibilities in terms of the tripartite relationship of media, politics and society, one is that the media strongly influences politics and society (for good or ill), another is that the media simply reflects what is going on in the state and society at large – this makes media more an effect than a cause, while a third is that the inter-relationship is an interactive and circular one, with no clear line of influence; there is a fourth possibility that posits a lack of influence in either direction among the three, where media, politics, and society are three independent complexes of social and cultural practice. However, this study is not focusing on the questions of what ought to be, it will rather try exploring the actual situation of electoral politics that brings media, politics, and the electorate at direct relation and influence with one another.

Media-politics-society in the Indian context

Though it was never mentioned clearly in the Constitution, the Indian media enjoyed more freedom after independence, i.e., after India became a democratic republic. However, for various reasons, with the exception of a few cases, criticism against the Government was very rare during this period. In fact, a larger percentage of the media denounced movements against the Government, stating various issues. Opposition did not get much support from the major newspapers in the country, and as a result it was a torrid time for them to ventilate their views through the media.

The relationship of media, politics and society becomes important in a democratic setup. In a democracy, media is independent and the electorate has voting rights to elect their representative. In this light, in a representative democracy, both media and the electorate play crucial roles in determining the political situation of the state. At an ideal situation, media and electorate both enjoy full independence in expression of political opinion. However, at the functional level, this independence can be compromised, especially at the face of media houses being owned by private investors, who also often enjoy political positions (however, argument can be raised that state owned media restricts opinion of dissent in relation to the state, while privately owned media would enjoy more freedom of expression). Notwithstanding, such trends in turn influence political opinion formation of the electorate in a certain fashion already crafted by the media influenced by their political preferences. In this light, while democracy augments inter-dependence of media, politics, and society at a functional level (starkly different from an ideal level), this inter-relationship has the potential of becoming asymmetrical. In other words, it can be observed that at certain situations, influence of one factor is more on the other two, or vice versa, i.e., in a state, media can have more impact on the political situation than the state would have on media houses; on the other hand, the electorate can also impact both media and politics more than the duo would do the former.

In the 1996 elections, BJP secured a majority in the Lok Sabha, but the Government's tenure was only for 13 days. Struggling for the next two years, it finally formed a stable government under the leadership of Vajpayee in 1999, with its alliance NDA, and served a full term of five years till 2004. With BJP at the helm of affairs, a big section of the Indian industrial lobby and the media controlled by them tilted towards them. Even after the completion of

Vajpayee's term in 2004, a majority of the Indian media, irrespective of language and region, became part of the campaign 'India Shining'. The campaign by the media backfired, the BJP misread peoples' minds and ultimately lost to Congress. The Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) emerged as the winners and formed the next Government. In spite of massive waves of campaign in the media, BJP lost the elections in 2004.

Between 2004 and 2013, India witnessed the rise of UPA I and II. Congress-led government of a decade met with several ups and downs. This was also the period when media and politics started coming close to each other, a phenomenon earlier defined as mediatization of politics. The UPA regime was characterized with massive corruption that was easily picked up by the media. By that time, political, economic, and media elite had also begun their interrelation insofar as media ownership and dissemination of political news was concerned. Media houses were increasingly owned by business tycoons, many of whom were also part of the ruling party. This in turn influenced the pattern of dissemination of political news by different media houses, including impacting their editorial slants. Newspapers like The Times of India, Dainik Jagran, and The Telegraph (they have been discussed later in detail), who were initially close to the Congress and its party president Mrs. Sonia Gandhi, widow of Rajiv Gandhi and daughter-in-law of Indira Gandhi, gradually started shifting their political allegiance away from the party. Amidst this shift of media loyalty and massive corruption at the then UPA-II government, General Election took place in 2014.

Role of media in elections and political participation in India

Earlier, the media was considered as a tool of entertainment to share the communication and videos. Arab springs and Egypt revolution are the examples in front of us. The impact of these revolutions has today made a huge change in Indian politics and activated participation of the people. It has rapidly grown in importance as a platform for political activities in its different forms. In the present scenario media plays a key role in elections. Today, these are very popular in the use of communication tools with the number of people and there is extensive scope for bringing changes. Most of young officials and civil servants are using the tool of social media. Availability of smart phone brings lead in the utilization of media in a good way. India is a leading country in the use of cell phones. This will help to connect the people on large scale for various discussions. Now a day's communication technologies are developed and reaching every one of us very fast. Media is to connect the people drawn from different places. Now the distance does not matter in communicating the people with each other. Media became the stage for the youth to discuss about good administration. In earlier days, the traditional media had become the sole platform for people to create awareness regarding the elections, but today scenario has changed and the media is playing a crucial role in influencing the people for dynamic participation in voting.

Media plays an important role in politics as it influences public opinion and helps define and take up the issues. It can keep the powerful in check by seeking transparency in their actions. Suppose if a government were to control all

the information regarding its own actions, won't it escape all accountability?

Thus, an independent media is an effective check on government's power and influence over its citizens. In fact, with the emergence of TV and Radio networks, many governments in Europe and America brought about legislations so that the broadcast media did not deviate from neutral position.

Yet before we dig the issue more, it would be apt to refer to media's role in defining the political future of our country during the recent elections.

In course of the polls, BJP's prime ministerial aspirant (Now Prime Minister) Narendra Modi coined an interesting term — 'news traders'. It was a mocking reference to a section of media hostile towards him and his ideologies. His purpose was clear – to attribute motives to their anti-Modi stories. He even cautioned a news channel editor against "carrying forward" charges levelled by political opponents in the course of an interview.

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Wasn't Modi's tactic a shrewd political ploy to project himself as a victim of market driven 'news traders' more keen on exploring ways to enhance their TRP ratings and advertisement revenue than presenting news in its true form. There is no doubt that the mainstream media had always been hostile towards Modi after the 2002 Gujarat riots, and he desperately needed a makeover. Though, Modi cleverly cultivated social media as a propaganda tool (isn't it true that even the Aam Admi Party was a product of Social Media?), by coining 'media traders', he launched a well-deliberated counter offensive against the mainstream media. After all, it had a big role to play in Modi's political scheme of things! And he played by the media rules and succeeded in confounding media.

We all know that media and politics enjoy a symbiotic relationship. Simply speaking, none of the politicians, how powerful they may be, can afford to neglect media. Yet, only those who are media-savvy and know how to play within the media rules can use them to their advantage (The US President Barack Obama is a good example of such media-savvy candidates who understood media's constraints and could wield a mass appeal).

Conclusion

Internationally, the power of the media to define politics, has been forensically examined. In Western liberal democracies, the governments have been pressured to institute major inquiries into where the buck stops in media governance. It has been a constant endeavour of the torch bearers of free opinion to ensure that media just does not remain a propaganda tool of vested powers but plays a larger role of creating informed citizens with constructive public opinion.

After all, isn't politics meant for making citizens happy as perceived by the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle? Wikipedia defines it as the practice and theory of influencing other people on a global, civic or individual level. In nutshell, it is all about creating conducive atmosphere for better governance. And mass communication mediums (or the Media) are instrumental in creating a public perception on polity and governance.

More specifically news media- plays an important role in democratic societies because they allow for participation among citizens. Therefore, when it comes to healthy democratic networks, it is crucial that that news remains true so it doesn't affect citizens' levels of trust. With the increased growth and popular use of media in India, media revolution in political space is real, tangible and getting faster. Media has to connect the individuals from different places even if there is larger distance. People in India are enjoying the highest level of internet connections and online information is perceived as more credible and reliable than traditional media sources. India is ranked 3rd with regard to use of social networks in the world. Media plays a key role in Indian elections and politics. Media has become the platform for the youth to discuss about good administration. Today, it influences the people for dynamic participation in voting. It helps political parties and candidates to reach large number of voters in a short amount of time and effectively. The importance of media for political campaign in 16th parliament general elections, political parties and candidates can make the characteristics, power and popularity of media well understandable. Politicians use the media as an effective tool of publicity. They are targeting the voters to attract, towards their party candidates. The volunteers of the BJP party indulge in conversation with common people and understand their form of mind and attitude, which helped them to achieve big success with the use Electronic Media.

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