

Social Media as a New Political Space: Youth Participation and Political Expression in Tripura

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Abstract:

In the age of digital communication, citizens' interactions with politics, political institutions, and each other have changed significantly. Social media platforms – like Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, YouTube and X – are increasingly playing an important role in political communication, political expression and civic engagement. These platforms offer a space for young people to get political information, to talk about public issues, to comment on political matters, to engage in political campaigns, and to link with political actors, while not relying entirely on traditional means of political communication. In a state like Tripura, which has a socially and culturally heterogeneous population, the transformation is especially important as youth make up part of the politically active population and questions of identity, development, tribal rights, autonomy and representation are important in the public discourse. This paper explores the new political domain of social media and youth participation and political expression in Tripura. The study is qualitative and analytical, with the main sources of data being secondary sources such as academic works, research articles, government and institutional documents, and relevant studies on digital political participation. The paper aims to describe how social media has created new possibilities for youth's political communication and participation in relation to three areas: (1) democratization of information, (2) speed of spreading political information and (3) creation of networks and alternative spaces for political expression. Digital political participation also poses challenges such as misinformation, political polarization, hostility in the online environment, echo chambers, and unequal digital access and the potential for manipulation. The paper concludes that social media should not be seen as a tool of democratic empowerment, but also not as a source of political disorder. Instead, it is a contested political arena which is democratic only when digital literacy, responsible political communication and inclusive access and critical engagement of young citizens are present.

Keywords: Social Media, Youth, Political Participation, Political Expression, Digital Democracy, Political Communication, Tripura, Tribal Youth.

Introduction

Political participation is one of the basic traits of democratic politics. Voting, membership of political parties, attendance at political meetings, involvement in demonstrations, contacting political representatives and community organizations are traditionally held to be examples of political participation. But with the advent of technology, the definition and forms of political participation have changed in many ways. The advent of the Internet and social media has provided citizens with new means of accessing political information, political communication, and political preferences. Social media plays especially a crucial role in the political lives of young people. Social media is different from mass media because it provides an opportunity to produce, edit and share political messages. A young person can comment on a political issue, share a news report, make a political video, join an online discussion, join a

campaign and communicate directly with politicians. Political communication is thus more interactive and decentralized. The findings from the research in India increasingly show that social media is playing an important role in the political process of the young. A recent meta-analytic review of 21 empirical studies revealed a moderate positive correlation between social media and political participation among youth and the importance of contextual and methodological factors in the relationship. Research on Indian youth also finds social media to be a significant platform for political awareness, opinion formation, campaigning and civic engagement. This transformation is especially significant for Tripura. Tripura has a peculiar political and socio-cultural landscape of ethnic diversity, tribal identity, issues of autonomy, development, land, representation and the working of the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council (TTAADC). The presentation of political information and discussion is increasingly being encountered by young people via digital channels. Finally, social media is not only a technology of communication, but it is also a new political space where political identities, opinions and expression of political participation are continuously constructed and negotiated. An earlier study on the use of social networking sites amongst adolescents in Tripura has analyzed their use of social networking sites and the gratifications they get from it, which shows that social networking sites are significant in the life of youth in Tripura. But it is possible to explore the specifically political aspects of the above digital transformation, especially the connections between social media, youth engagement and political expression in Tripura. Thus, this paper analyzes the role of social media in changing political participation of the youth of Tripura (TN), its possibilities for voicing political opinion and challenges to political participation.

1.Statement of the Problem:

Because of the growth of social media, the traditional citizen-to-political communication dynamics has been altered. Political information was predominantly shaped by political parties, newspapers, television channels and other institutional actors in the past. This one-way flow of information is undermined by the rise of social media, in which everyday people can be producers and distributors in the political arena. This change can have a major impact on youth. Before reading the same information on the traditional media, young citizens may have seen it on social media, such as Facebook posts, WhatsApp groups, Instagram reels and YouTube videos. But more political communication does not necessarily lead to more democratic participation. Social media also can lead to misinformation, hate speech, polarization and selective exposure to information. Recent studies in India on the youth population show how network homophile and algorithmic recommendations can contribute to the formation of political echo chambers and to polarized political attitudes. The dual nature of the social media as a political space is thus the central problem that is tackled in this paper. On the other hand, it can have a negative effect by depriving young people of voice and opportunities for participation, as well as of information. It can, on the other hand, foster new forms of political manipulation, misinformation and exclusion. Political issues are very closely linked with identity, ethnicity, tribal rights, autonomy and development in a particular State like Tripura where the problem becomes more important. Therefore, knowledge of how social media plays a political role among youth can help in getting a glimpse of the state of today's political participation.

2.Objective of the study:

The main aims of the research are:

1. To investigate the new political arena of social media in Tripura.

2. To determine the nature of youth engagement with politics via social media over time. To explore the influence of social media on youth's political expression.
3. To determine what is offered by social media in terms of opportunities for democratic engagement.
4. To discuss the difficulties with digital political participation.
5. To discuss about the relevance of social media to political communication among Tripura youths.
6. To recommend strategies to encourage responsible and inclusive digital political engagement.

3. Research Questions

The study aims to answer the following questions:

1. How social media has become a new political arena for youth in Tripura?
2. In what ways do young people use social media for political participation?
3. What is the effect of social media on political opinion and expression?
4. How can social media be a tool to connect with youth and engage them politically?
5. What are political participation challenges posed by digitalization?
6. What can social media do in building an inclusive democratic political culture in Tripura.

4. Methodology:

This research is qualitative and analytical research. The study is based mainly on secondary sources and does not claim to be original to the survey. The study utilizes academic research articles, books, institutional reports, government and constitutional documents and literature related to the concepts of social media, youth participation, political communication and digital democracy. Existing literature on Indian youth and social media has been leveraged to build general analytical conclusions and literature from Tripura has been used to offer regional context.

Thematic analysis is employed in the study to analyze the five main dimensions:

- Political information and awareness;
- online political expression;
- political mobilization;
- digital politics and identity; and,
- Challenges to democratic participation.

The research is descriptive and analytical and not statistical. Thus, percentages and sample sizes and participants' responses from other studies are not reported as results of the present study.

5. Conceptualising Social Media as a Political Space:

Social media as a political space goes beyond the concept of social media as a communication tool. Political space refers to a field of action or interaction where political actors communicate, debate, negotiate interests, develop identities and form public opinion.

Traditional political spaces are legislatures, political party offices and public meetings, newspapers and television debates. This political landscape has been enhanced by social media. The uniqueness of social media is that it is interactive. Citizen consumers are not only "consumers" of political information.

They can also develop and disseminate political messages. A young person could, for instance:

- Discuss a political news article;
- Give an opinion on a political statement;

- participate in a political discussion;
- Develop a political video;
- Show support or dissent with regard to a policy;
- Get involved in a digital campaign;
- interact with elected officials;
- organize a local campaign; discuss community problems;
- organize individuals in relation to a public matter.

This reflects what has been observed as the extent of political participation has grown beyond formal political institutions. Social media is thus a networked political place in which political communication can take place quickly and in a geographically dispersed way.

6.Youth and the Changing Nature of Political Participation:

Youth have been a key force in political change in the past. Methods, however, in which young people engage in politics, have changed significantly. Normally, participation in traditional media was limited to being physically present. Someone had to go to a meeting, demonstration or political event. Some of these geographical and organizational barriers are lowered by digital participation.

Youth can engage in politics from their homes using the smartphones and Internet connectivity. They can track the political figures, political parties and civil society organizations online and engage in discussions without having to go to political gatherings.

In India, some research indicates social media has become an integral part of young people's political involvement. Political awareness, opinion formation, electoral involvement and civic participation are areas identified in the studies as being impacted by social media use.

But that's not to say that the traditional way to participate is gone. Online and offline participation on the other hand, are increasingly intertwined. A young person might be introduced to an online political issue, chat about it in a messaging group with their peers, and then join an offline meeting, campaign or election. So digital participation can at times serve as a channel for transitioning from online communication to offline political action.

7.Social Media and Political Awareness among Youth in Tripura:

The quick dissemination of information is one of the most significant political roles that social media plays.

The young people of Tripura can avail information on:

- State politics;
- Elections;
- Government programmers;
- Employment opportunities;
- Education policies;
- Tribal affairs;
- TTAADC-related issues;
- Development programmers;
- Political parties;
- Public protests;

- National political developments;
- International events.

The significance of the social media as a news environment is also evident in India on a broader scale. According to Reuters Institute report, the digital news landscape in India is highly mobile and platform-based, with social media and messaging apps filling a significant role in access to news. Younger respondents (those under 35) are especially interested in online news and social media as their main sources of news.

This provides additional access of political information to the adolescents of Tripura which is beyond local media.

With regards to political information, visual content in social media could also make it easier to understand. Short videos, infographics, photographs, interviews and explanatory posts are ways to present political issues.

But just because people have more information doesn't mean they have accurate information. There is potential for misleading headlines, edited videos or false claims or politically biased content to be presented to young users. Political awareness needs a certain level of access to information and a critical evaluation of it.

8. Social Media as a Platform for Political Expression:

Political expression is an important component of democratic citizenship. In a democracy, citizens need opportunities to voice their opinions on issues of public interest.

Social media has given young people a lot more avenues to express themselves politically.

Youth can have space to express:

- Support for political parties;
- Criticisms of government policies;
- views about development; opinions about elections; concerns regarding unemployment;
- demands concerning education;
- Opinions on tribal rights;
- opinions about autonomy; opinions on environmental issues;
- Attitudes towards local government.

Unlike the traditional media, where production of publications relies on editors and institutional gatekeepers, social media provides an opportunity for people to be able to publish political content directly. This can help issues get more visibility in matters that may otherwise not be dealt with as much.

For instance, a local issue such as roads, schools, water or jobs may be brought to an online discussion and/or to the attention of local political leaders, the media and administration. Social media can thus allow a manifestation of citizen voice.

9. Political Mobilization and Youth:

Political Mobilization it is the process of inculcating people into being more involved in political activities together. The use of social media can help to lower mobilization costs and time.

Political messages can be spread to a wide network in the blink of an eye.

1. Youth can use social media to:
2. Announce political meetings;

3. Share campaign information;
4. Organize public discussions;
5. Promote social movements;
6. Coordinate community activities;
7. Circulate petitions;
8. Promote awareness of issues of the general public;
9. Encourage electoral participation.

This move from collective to digitally networked (or “connective”) action has gained growing traction in the study of political communication. This transformation from collective to digitally networked (or “connective”) participation has been acknowledged more and more in research on political communication.

The recent meta-analysis on youth political participation also suggests that personalized and decentralized digital networks are becoming more relevant ways of engaging with youth.

This is a chance for the youth of the different geographical areas of Tripura to connect among themselves on similar political issues.

10.Social Media and Tribal Youth in Tripura:

Social media is of special political relevance to the tribal youth of Tripura. Tripura is an interesting state, with a significant tribal population and a unique political story of identity, representation, land, autonomy and cultural recognition. Political development of the tribal communities has always been linked with the political parties, organizations, community leaders and institutions like TTAADC. This political climate is exacerbated by social media.

Youth of all tribes can leverage digital platforms to:

- Discuss cultural identity;
- Encourage the use of indigenous languages and traditions;
- Raise awareness about tribal rights;
- Discuss TTAADC-related issues;
- Explain issues related to land and development;
- Promote cultural programmed;
- Establish linkages with the residents outside Tripura.

Social media can play a part in shaping and articulating political and cultural identity in this way. However, if online political discussion is hostile or misinformed, it can become polarized too, particularly at the same time. Thus, the digital nature of political participation should help to foster discussion, not exacerbate divisions.

11.Social Media and Electoral Politics:

Elections are one of the most significant ways in which people can participate in politics. Social media has dramatically changed the landscape of election campaigns, offering a direct line of communication to the political parties and candidates.

Social media can be a tool for political actors to:

- announce candidates;
- communicate campaign messages;

- distribute speeches;
- promote manifestos;
- Debuted the series on the BBC in 1966, which received widespread acclaim;
- target particular groups;
- mobilize supporters;
- encourage voting.

Young people are an important age group because they are over-represented in the ranks of people who are active users of the Internet. In recent years, studies on the attitudes of youth in India toward political issues indicate social media has the potential to not just shape political awareness, opinion formation and electoral participation, but also pose dangers related to misinformation and partisan content.

During elections, social media may thus prove to be an important campaign setting in Tripura. But digital campaigning should be in tune with democratic values, electoral stipulations and responsible political communication.

12.Discuss, related to social media politics and everything else:

Political discussion and social media. Social media offer a forum for political debate outside the formal framework of political institutions. Youth are able to communicate about politics with community members, strangers, friends and classmates. This provides opportunities for:

- political debate;
- exchange of opinions;
- Contact with other points of view;

Discussion of public political learning. But the nature of the digital environment has a significant impact on political discussion. Users may be frequently shown advertisements that are similar to those that they've already seen.

This can help fuel political polarization and reinforcement of ideology. Recent studies targeting young voters in India, however, suggest that these elements of 'network homophile' and 'algorithm recommendations' can help drive political polarization. For this reason, digital political communication should facilitate access to an array of opinions and not just perpetuate existing political inclinations.

13.Challenges of Digital Political Participation:

Social media offers many potential benefits for democracy, but also has some significant challenges.

13.1 Misinformation and Disinformation In the digital age, fake political news has a tendency to circulate quickly via social media. The youth may find their way to altered images, misleading videos, misquoted statements, and fabricated political arguments. This can impact political thinking and voting habits.

13.2 Political Polarization Social Media can foster an atmosphere of people meeting mostly others with similar political opinions. This can help limit discussion of politics and bring out the worst in people when it comes to opposing opinions.

13.3 Echo Chambers There is information reproduced again to reinforce preconceptions that users may hold. This restricts the exposure to alternative political views.

13.4 Digital Inequality Not everyone has the capacity to own a smartphone, have access to good internet connection or have digital skills. So, digital democracy can also reproduce inequalities of the current social and economic order.

13.5 Online Harassment Trolling, abuse of users, threats, harassment of users of young political activists. These experiences can make it more difficult for people to express their politics.

13.6 Political Manipulation Political actors have the ability to reach targeted audiences and communicate emotionally charged messages via digital platforms.

13.7 Privacy Concerns Important issues of private and political targeting arise with the collection and use of personal data.

13.8 Digital Political Fatigue If there's a high level of political polarization and negative content over a long period of time, people can become frustrated and apolitical.

14. Each of these is a distinct question.

These are separate questions. A major issue with social media political participation is the 'digital divide'. In digital democracy, it is assumed that citizens can gain access to digital technologies. But access could vary due to:

- income;
- location;
- education;
- gender;
- age;
- digital literacy; Internet connection speed.

So social media can't be an alternative to the regular democratic institutions. Digital participation should be used in addition to offline participation. To make social media a truly democratic forum, it is crucial that young people from rural, remote and economically marginalized communities have access to it in a meaningful way in Tripura. Digital inclusion should, therefore, include access to the Internet, digital literacy, and the ability to locate reliable information.

15. Opportunities Created by Social Media:

Social media has great potential for democracy but also has major problems.

15.1 Misinformation and Disinformation:

Misinformation about politics can take deep root in social media. Young users may come across the altered images, deceptive video, false quotations and bogus political statements. This may have an impact on political attitudes and voter behavior.

15.2 Political Polarization:

Social networks can offer spaces where people are able to engage mostly with individuals that have comparable political perspectives.

This can dampen political discussion and infuse animosity to opposing perspectives.

15.3 Echo Chambers:

Users might come across information that reinforces what they already believe. This restricts exposure to alternative views of politics.

15.4 Digital Inequality:

Not every citizen has access to a smartphone, to a reliable internet connection and to the digital skills. So, digital democracy can recreate social and economic inequities.

15.5 Online Harassment:

Trolling, abusive comments, threats or harassment of young political activists and users. These experiences can turn off the political mode of expression.

15.6 Political Manipulation:

The political actor can engage in forming public opinion using targeted messages and emotionally charged content on the digital platforms.

15.7 Privacy Concerns:

Collection and use of personal data raises significant privacy and political targeting issues.

15.8 Digital Political Fatigue:

Exposure to politics and provocative information may result in frustration and low political engagement.

16. Social Media, Democracy and the Public Sphere:

The notion of the public sphere is instructive to the political significance of social media. Citizens need to be able to discuss issues that affect them together and exchange ideas in a democratic public sphere. Social media may contribute to the extension of the public sphere, in which ordinary citizens can engage in political communication.

The digital public sphere is not the same as the public sphere, though: platforms' algorithms and commercial interests or user networks shape communication.

Social media is thus not necessarily a totally free and neutral public sphere.

It will require:

- Freedom of expression;
- Access to reliable information;
- Diversity of viewpoints;
- Responsible political communication;
- Protection from harassment;
- Transparency;
- Digital literacy.

17. Social Media and Political Identity in Tripura:

The political identity is a significant aspect of politics in Tripura. Social media can shape the self-perception of young people with respect to:

- community;
- ethnicity; tribe;
- language;
- region;
- political ideology;
- development;
- autonomy;
- national identity.

Digital worlds enable youth to express identities in the public sphere, and find others who share similar experiences. This can foster a sense of togetherness and cultural sensitivity within the community. Political identity can also be exclusionary, however, when social media conversations build up politics mainly via categories of “us” and “them”. Social media should, thus, foster identity recognition, but also stimulate democratic pluralism.

18. Discussion:

The analysis shows that social media is an important means of politics participation in the modern society. Its most significant impact is that of moving from one way political communication to interactive political communication.

The old politics of communication was a hierarchal process:

Political institution → Media → Citizen

Social media has been able to establish a more networked structure: C ↔ C ↔ PA ↔ Media ↔ Institution
This is not to say that the traditional political institutions are of no relevance. Rather, the political communication is happening in both traditional and digital space. Social media can be a place for political learning, political expression, community communication and mobilization for the young people in Tripura. But the democratic implications of this transformation are not necessarily good.

Social media can create:

- Empowerment + Misinformation
- Participation + Polarization
- Expression + Harassment
- Connectivity + Echo Chambers
- Political Awareness + Manipulation

The fact that this is a dual nature, is what is important in understanding digital politics. This is supported by the findings of the wider Indian study. Research has found that social media can have a positive relationship with political participation alongside highlighting misinformation and polarization as key issues, as well as digital inequality.

The question in the first place should not be the issue of whether social media is “good” or “bad” for democracy. But the most important one is what is required for social media to enhance meaningful democratic engagement.

19. The key findings of the study were:

The key findings of the study were: After a critical review of existing literature and discussion, the following main findings are identified:

- Social media has become an influential political arena for youth.
- Political participation is more and more taking place outside of traditional institutional arenas.
- Social media can be utilized for political consciousness and political expression and mobilization among young people.
- Local and community political issues can be made more visible via social media.
- Digital platforms offer an opportunity for tribal youth to address identity, culture, rights and political issues.
- Online political participation may sometimes lead to offline political participation.

- Social media can foster political efficacy by providing opportunities for young people to voice their opinions.
- Misinformation and disinformation are a significant impediment to informed political engagement.
- Political polarization can be caused by algorithmic filtering and network homophile.
- Social-media political participation is less inclusive because of digital inequality.
- It is therefore essential for Digital Literacy to be part of political participation.
- Social media should supplement rather than supplant democratic processes and 'real world' political engagement.

19. Conclusion:

Social media has transformed the way people communicate and engage in politics, as well as the opportunities available to young people to do so. The rise of digital platforms in Tripura is notable as the youth are more inclined to turn to social media platforms for political information, to voice their opinions, to communicate with people and to discuss issues related to society and governance.

The study shows that social media can act as a new space for politics: it diminishes social divides and extends political opportunities to the young citizens. It can raise awareness on local issues and build political awareness and communication among young people. Social media can, however, not spontaneously generate democratic empowerment.

The bad quality of political participation can be jeopardized by misinformation, political polarization, echo chambers, online harassment and digital inequalities. The democratic potential of social media relies on the use it makes citizens, political parties, institutions and digital platforms. The challenge for Tripura is to move beyond the stage of social media being a platform for political reaction to one of informed democratic engagement. It is important to encourage youth to engage in the consumption of political information and also to critically analyze information, to engage in constructive conversations about politics, and to link online political expression with real-world civic engagement.

The future of political participation in Tripura will be greater dealings between traditional political spaces and digital political spaces. It is thus best to look at social media as a space for democracy's negotiation, contest, and practice, rather than as a space in which traditional democracy is replaced.

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