

# Algorithmic Agitation: Social Media and Political Mobilisation in India (2014–2024) – Patterns, Mechanisms, and Democratic Implications

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## Abstract

The architecture of citizen participation and political mobilization in India has been reconfigured down at its roots with the growth of digital communication technologies. In this piece, social media platforms – Facebook, Twitter (X), WhatsApp, Instagram and YouTube in particular are positioned as a central means of political communication, electoral campaigning and social movement organising from 2014-24. And it unpacks how, by what means and in which ways digital platforms enable and fashion political participation in general – and updated forms of engagement more specifically. Drawing on qualitative research methodology, the article investigates how political actors, civil society organizations and citizens strategically use these instruments to mobilize support, shape public opinion and coordinate action. The focus is on the transformative potential that social media holds for India's democratic processes, as well as challenges it imposes. By attending to regional level dynamics in Karnataka, the article situates national trends within local context. There is speculation that even as social media has allowed for rapid, large-scale, and diffused mobilisation in Indian politics – transforming the manner in which collective identities are forged and alliances coordinated – such use of platforms without regulation and with asymmetric deployment has also contributed to socio-political divisions and information disorders, thereby leading to a paradoxical impact on democratic health. They contend that social media is an inescapable binary force in Indian democracy and the need of the hour was a tripartite policy response comprising balanced regulation, stepped-up digital literacy and ethical political communication to unleash its participatory potential while mitigating its threats.

**Keywords:** Social media, Political Mobilisation, Digital Democracy, Political Participation, India, Karnataka, Misinformation- Networked Public Sphere

## Introduction

The mobilization of politics – that is to say, how people are organized and incited to engage in collective political action – sits at the heart of democratic politics. In India's rich and flawed democracy, which has historically been fought through extensive party networks, trade unions, mass movements — print journalism and physical rally have long served as mobilisers. But the decade from 2014 - 2024 would actually see a reversal of fortunes, driven by explosive global internet access and smartphone adoption.

India's digital leap, and the presence of over 800 million internet users, has given birth to a new space for political contestation where social media platforms are not accessories but first-order battle grounds for narrative control as well as mobilisation of voters (Kumar 2020). Talking Point, the 2014 elections were a turning point for the adoption of digital strategy: it decisively moved into mainstream political campaigning, which further became accentuated in 2019 and is likely to do so even more in 2024.

This is the focus of this paper, which seeks to systematically analyse the transformation. It surpasses a descriptive narrative to question how and what impacts of digital mobilisation. By building upon a transparent research methodology, articulated research questions and hypothesis, it intends to offer a systematic scrutiny of a decade— digital political engagement in India with all the empowerment and destabilising potentials.

### **Research Methodology**

This research follows a qualitative methodology, which applies an interpretative lens in order to interpret the meanings, processes and contexts of co-up led social media political mobilisation. The method is multimodal that includes:

**Case Studies:** Primary cases the investigation revolves around two primary cases:

**National Electoral Campaigns** (2014, 2019, 2024): Examined to follow the trends in digital campaign strategizing and rhetoric, in addition to citizen engagement.

**Key Protest Movements:** The Farmers' Protest (2020–21) and the Anti-CAA protests as non-digital, CSA-led cases of digitisation.

**Regional focus – Karnataka:** An embedded case to offer depth. We choose Karnataka as it has high internet penetration, social-political heterogeneity, and is a bellwether state. Its assembly elections and local movements (farmer agitations, language debates among them) are analysed.

### **Data Collection Methods:**

**Documentary Analysis:** Extensive review of secondary sources such as academic papers, policy reports (such as IT Rules debates), election commission advisories and credible media commentaries on digital campaigns.

**Digital Ethnography** (Observational): A process of non-participant observation of political communication on target platforms (Twitter/X, public Facebook groups) during specific event periods (e.g. electoral primaries, protest peaks), to visualize patterns of communication and the usage of hashtags and network dynamics.

**Campaign Materials Analysis:** Examination of selected digital return artefacts—political party posts on social media platforms, campaign videos, WhatsApp forward templates and influencer content—to understand messaging strategies.

**Thematic analysis:** Data that is collected will be coded and analysed to identify themes, some of which can include “personalised outreach,” “misinformation narratives,” “grassroots coordination,” “emotional mobilisation” and ill as regulatory challenges.

**Limitations:** The study acknowledges limitations. There isn't large-scale number crunching of sentiment or primary surveys. It uses openly accessible data and secondary sources, its results are interpretive rather than statistically generalisable. The emphasis is on trends and dynamics rather than trying to quantify electoral effect exactly.

## Research Objectives

And with the following specific objectives, the study is led.

- To map the development and institutionalisation of social media as a platform of political mobilisation in India (2014–2024).
- To characterize the different digital political participation devices and practices used by political parties, leaders and civil society actors.
- To analyse the regional dimensions of ‘digital mobilization’, focusing on Karnataka, and to understand how it is contributing in shaping state-level political discourse.
- To understand the double-faceted implications of social media for Indian democracy: its contributions toward greater participation, awareness, and empowerment but also its role in disinformation, polarisation, and digital inequality.
- To provide a critical analysis of regulatory intervention at the intersection of digital political communication and to suggest how its democratic elements might be optimised, while mitigating harm.

## Hypothesis

This study is based on the following main assumption:

- H: The rise in political mobilisation via social media (2014-2024) is a paradoxical development in Indian politics – increasing democratisation by lowering barriers to entry, allowing spontaneous decentralised mobilising at speed and scale, raising citizen voice through tweets and viral messages.

This claim will be examined in light of the data collected within the methodology outlined above.

## Literature Review & Conceptual Framework

Scholarly work provides a foundation. Castells' (2012) concept of networked social movements is doing important work here - the idea that digital networks afford decentralized, fluid mobilization on a scale far too rapid for repressive slicing-through its new reality. Chadwick's (2013) “hybrid media system” is at home in India, where social media shapes the trends that television news talks about, and where television soundbites double up as digital viral content. Habermas' vision of the public sphere is idealised but it would appear that the digital avatar, where political talk swirls, offers a disorganised and frequently skewed image.

This transformation has been documented in the Indian scenario too. Jaffrelot (2019) also highlights the purpose of social media as a tool for ideological reinforcement and leaders' direct link with the voters. Two of the downsides include its links to mobilisation protest and polarisation (Roy, 2021). Kumar (2020) explains the creation of “IT cells”—party wings for campaigning and perception management on the Internet. There are consistent warnings in the literature: Nielsen & Vaccari (2013) on engineered authenticity, a growing literature on WhatsApp-driven misinformation cascades in India's multilingual, forward-sharing culture.

Drawing on this foundation, the article uses a structured methodological lens and sustained regional analysis to evaluate the hypothesis articulated.

Analysis: Digital Mobilisation Trends (2014-2024)

## The arena of elections: From experiment to ecosystem

Social media in 2014 engaged as a vigorous force multiplier (emphasis added) but with branding and vir-

ality flowing top down. By 2019, it had matured into a complex, data-driven micro-targeting ecosystem. Parties used voter lists, demographic profiling and psychometric analysis to target tailored advertisements and messaging through Facebook/Instagram, and most crucially tens of millions of encrypted WhatsApp groups. Even the 2024 campaign seamlessly integrated AI-generated content, deepfake audio/video reels for personalised reach-out and an army of volunteer “digital campaigners” to orchestrate localised group chats. That pattern went from merely communication to behavioural nudging and granular community management.

Karnataka Context: In the 2023 state elections, all major parties operated mirror “digital war rooms.” And those in places like Belagavi and Coastal Karnataka had fierce WhatsApp battlegrounds based on agrarian distress or religious primacy, replete with hyperlocal video content (in Kannada and Tulu). This is an example of the glocalization of digital campaigning—national narratives altered for a local linguistic and issue-based sensibility.

### **Movements of the Net: The Networked Demonstration**

Social media has transformed the logistics of protest are solidarity-building. The Farmers’ Protest was a classic example of digital choreography. Twitter was the world’s press wire, Instagram and Facebook Live provided real-time visuals from protest sites and WhatsApp managed logistics, legal aid and resource sharing across states. It formed a loosely knit but coherent whole. In the same vein, the Anti-CAA protests were initiated and respiration through digital networks, where students and activists employed platforms to declare sit-ins, spread protest art and document state action.

Karnataka Context: Mobilisations demanding resolution of the Mahadayi water dependency conflict or protests about deforestation in the Western Ghats, were highlighted in powerful ways by these state level social media influencers and groups on Facebook of affected step-districts, illustrating how digital tools can be used to empower sub-state political entrepreneurs.

### **A Test of the Democratic Paradox**

The two-pronged hypothesis is mostly corroborated by evidence.

Democratising Participation (Supporting H):

Reduced Barriers: Basically, anyone with a smartphone has the capacity to voice their opposition, support or organise.

Decentralised Mobilisation: This is evident in the protests, that action is no longer dependent on hierarchic party structures.

Voice Amplification: Marginalised sections of society and local voices (Karnataka’s demand for representation) gain a voice.

Improved Accountability: Action by informants or citizen journalists is virtually instant and can bring applied scrutiny even before officials have finished their paperwork.

### **Democratic Quality Hollowing (Supporting H)**

**Misinformation & Manipulation:** Coordinated disinformation campaigns, weaponised deepfakes and the spread of communal rumours through encrypted platforms abound in a climate that is already sensitive to informed consent.

**The Use of Algorithmic Polarisation:** All digital platforms are optimized for engagement, profiting from outrage and trapping their users in affective loops that amplify biases and erase any common ground. This

has deepened social fractures.

**Asymmetric Power:** The ruling party and powerful actors have vastly better digital infrastructure (IT cells, data analytics and advertising budgets), making the field highly skewed. This digital asymmetry reproduces and can amplify wider socio-political inequalities.

**Deliberation Gives Way to Erosion:** Led by a character-limited, meme-propelled, often abusive discourse, reasoned debate yields to the symbolic violence of uncivil polemics in which little room is left for deliberative democracy.

### Regulatory Measures and Democratic Concerns

This is attempted by the Indian state too, with the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021—the Indian government’s response—trying to enforce traceability and grievance redressal on platforms. Presented under the rationale of combating misinformation and harmful content, their critics complain that they afford expansive government supervision over platforms, which could have been chilling in terms of free speech and facilitatory in terms of platformed authoritarianism — using the language of regulation to squish dissent. The tension between accountability and freedom is yet to be settled, which reflects the global challenge of regulating digital political space.

### Conclusion and Future Trajectories

The decade 2014-24 is the watermark on India’s arrival into the era of algorithmic political mobilisation. Social media has changed the political landscape, making it more participatory and chaotic, more inclusive in reach and yet polarised in discourse. What we are witnessing in Karnataka is a regional example of the same and that these are far from just an elite phenomenon but trickle down to thinking at the grassroots level.

Especially on social media—a wondrously paradoxical force, as the central proposition insists. It has done so by democratizing participation and undermining the quality of democratic deliberation. Its structure can serve to mobilise a farmers’ protest or incite communal violence with as much efficiency.

And the future will bring us advanced Generative AI for hyper-realistic propaganda, more developed behavioural analytics and Internet of Things for sentiment sensing that will provide the amplification we’ve been talking about. The fortunes of Indian democracy will be heavily influenced by its ability to thread its way through this digital labyrinth. A three-pronged approach is non-negotiable:

**Smart, Rights-Respecting Regulation:** With an emphasis on transparency in political advertising, data privacy and platform responsibility — not content control.

**National Digital Literacy Mission:** To arm citizens, especially beyond the urban elites, with basic skills to discriminate fake news & engage meaningfully.

**Ethical Political Communication Charter:** A cross-party pledge, perhaps assisted by the Election Commission, to basic standards against disinformation and online hate speech.

In sum, social media is not a substitution for traditional politics but has complicatedly hybridised it. Its long-run effect on Indian democracy is not pre-determined but will depend on the conscious actions of citizens, politicians, platforms and regulators in the next decade. The pattern from 2014-2024 is an instructive one: in the digital era, the very tools of mobilisation are themselves a central field of democratic struggle.

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