Digital Activism for Homeland: Social Media, Politics and the Indian Diaspora

Vijay Kumar Soni & Sadananda Sahoo

Abstract

In one such incident, a Sikh American doctor, Dr. Harmandeep Singh Boparai, returned to Amritsar to serve people suffering from the pandemic. Incidentally, it was not the diaspora alone that had galvanized itself. Their homeland (that is India) mobilized its resources and launched one of the biggest repatriation operations in Indian history. Under *Vande Bharat Mission,* it brought back more than a million members of Indian Diaspora stranded in different parts of the world. This brings centrality to William Safran's theory on diaspora, which highlights their commitment to safety, security and prosperity of homeland and their attempt to relate to its ethno-communal consciousness (Safran, 2018).

Keywords: Activism; Digital Diaspora; Homeland Politics; Social Media.

In addition to diaspora's conscious identification with their country of origin, Safran illustrates many examples of global diaspora when their respective homeland governments exploited them. But it must be admitted that there has been paradigm shift the way diasporas are now looked at from the time Safran propounded his theoretical framework. This is more so in countries receiving huge amount of remittances from them. It also explains why homeland governments have begun nurturing their relationship with their Diasporas.

Now, while the Covid-19 pandemic was raging globally, there was yet another narrative taking shape, which had an indirect relation to Indian diaspora. A section of data analyst felt that it was inflow of Sikh diaspora from the UK in Punjab's Farmers protest that led to spread of second wave of UK variant in India (Narayanan, 2021).

Like all sphere of diasporic life, the pandemic catastrophe was politicised

with one group of the diaspora supporting the Modi-led Indian government, while the other critical of 'inefficient' handling of the situation. Here lies the paradox of policy, politics and diaspora engagement as they get entwined with each other. Thus, making Indian diaspora a peripheral part of Indian politics as they continue to influence global opinion. There were two more events in recent times that brought diaspora-homeland relation to limelight — Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and Indian Farmers protests. Both these events witnessed unprecedented involvement of Indian diaspora and divided them on ideological, religious and political grounds. While some of them were supporters, there were others who were dissidents and organised global protest and demonstration.

Digital Diaspora Activism

Unlike most diasporas, Indian diaspora is deeply divided on the lines of caste, religion and regional-linguistic lines, they frame their own identity politics and negotiate their needs with political powers of their home country. They make this possible by being part of digital diaspora who use new media technologies to remain connected with Indian politics. They are known to use micro-blogging sites like Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp to campaign, canvas, collect funds and mobilize public opinion in favour of political parties. The role of new media in politics however was at the centre of controversy recently when they were asked to follow guidelines related to regulation of contents (Times of India, June 5, 2021).

These controversies notwithstanding, digital activism has brought a significant shift in diasporic political communication. "It is by mobilising shared values as culture, national identity and community awareness that the online expatriate build up a virtual community" (Gabriel, 1992). It is this virtual community with a sense of cultural continuity that plays in mobilizing public opinion, be it political, social or economic change. The virtual community, which in fact is a reflection of the aspiration of real people, re-imagines its role by mobilizing and renegotiating the public discourse (Anderson, 1991).

As a result, digital diaspora "re-create identities, share opportunities, spread their culture, influence homeland and host-land policy, or create debate about common interest issues by means of electronic devices. But "Digital Diasporas" differ from virtual communities and nations because in digital Diasporas there are strong ties with the real nations before creating or re-creating the digital community, thus differing in some ways from Licklider and Taylors' ideas of a virtual community. On the Inter-

net, all of us are 'immigrants' who simultaneously share a common space called cyberspace" (Alonso and Oiarzabal, 2010).

The role of technology in migration and diaspora formation and its sustenance is well attested. It has "facilitated both population movements and the formation of diasporas" and the new era of Internet has offered deterritorialised space in the cyberspace. "It connects, maintains, create and re-create social ties and network with both their homeland and other co-dispersed communities" (Alonso and Oiarzabal, 2010).

Digital activism through Internet-enabled devices has impacted the governance model of democracy more than migration and the diaspora formation because it covers a much larger tectonic area. "Internet has been associated with major political developments, ranging from the empowerment of citizens, the winning of elections, the rise of political movements, and the reform of political institutions, to the collapse of regimes." (Dutton, 2014)

Now, cell phones are ""used in the effort to change regimes, as happened in the Philippines, where President Joseph Estrada was peacefully overthrown in January 2001, or to alter national opinion, as in Spain after the March 11, 2004 or to bypass government control over media and censorship, as happened during the so-called Green Revolution in Iran in January 2009" (Alonso and Oiarzabal, 2010). The traditional model of Web 1.0 democracy has been supplanted by Web 2.0 democracy, where participation, engagement, discourse and discussion between people and democratic leaders are fundamental values of reciprocal relationship. The Tele-democracy, which was coined in 1970s in the US to mean electronically aided, rapid, two-way political communication has been replaced by Web 2.0 democracy.

Reimagining Diasporic Media

Digital activism and new media are much more than a tool of communication as Peter Mandaville (2001) points out, "Diasporic Media should be seen as spaces of communication in which the identity, meaning and boundaries of diasporic community are continually constructed, debated and reimagined." Social Media and electronic form of communication have now occupied a central role in diaspora's life as they are "characterized by a double dependency on communication and the media, depending on mediation between diasporic subjects as a group in the host land on the one hand, and on the communication of groups thus defined with their land of 'origin' on the other" (Stierstorfer and Wilson, 2018)

For the diaspora, identity is of paramount importance as it provides them a sense of belonging and security. With the emergence of digital activism, their sense of belonging and participation in the home country activities have found a new expression. But unlike the traditional media, digital activism is providing them an unlimited landscape of two-way, free-flowing information and ideas between the Diaspora and the home country. "The extensive use of diasporic groups of online services like the Internet Relay Chat, e-mail, Usenet, Listserv and the World Wide Web is allowing for relatively easy connections for members of communities residing in various continents" (Karim, 2003). "Online media are superior to traditional printed media in two aspects in addition to global access and speed. First, it's quite cost-effective, unlike the print publishing, which requires not only a large sum of money but also involves high degree of economic risk. And second, the cost of establishing and maintaining online publishing can be very low." (Reddick, King, 1997)

Apart from the aspect of cost-effectiveness, digital activism provides a differential advantage of forming new social and political groups. "The greatest benefit of the online media is not that they facilitate communication among already connected individuals and groups, but rather they provide a medium for the formation and cultivation of new relationships by providing virtually instantaneous access to thousands of potential contacts who share similar interests and experience" (McLaughlin, 1995).

Digital activism has strengthened participatory democracy and has given a voice to disagree, dissent and in the process has become a medium of expression for the marginalized. In fact, transformation of national politics and sovereignty are arising not only from the mobility of population but also from new modes of communication (Bernal, 2014), to which digital media is a significant contributor. Social media "testify to a renewed desire to participate in political decisions and in collective action that can be read as a positive reaction"

But it is equally important to define these publics who take part in politics. Not all publics who are in social media participate in these activities. Angel Adams Parham has classified these Internet-mediated Publics into three groups called the representation publics, a network public and vertical public. While the first two groups are nominal and un-committed, it is the vertical public who are active to political causes. "It is the vertical public which has access to political resources. In addition to facilitating political discussion, some of the groups raise large sums of money for home countries and have demonstrated capability to mobilize significant resources with social and political commitment."

As a result of Internet-mediated interaction, India Diaspora is no longer seen as "margins of the state" but an integral part of the political process. They contribute to "political remittances" by way of their geographic mobility and "Internet is facilitating new forms of political agency and giving rise to new transnational public sphere where struggles over meaning, resources, and power are mobilized" (Bernal, 2014). As Anderson (2003) said, "the combination of new media and new contributors…feed into new senses of a public space that is discursive, performative and participative, and not confined to formal institutions recognized by state authorities."

Transnationalisation of Digital Space

Digital activism has played a significant role in building transnational networks of political communication amongst Indian diaspora. As the workforce move from one country to another, especially the diplomats, IT professionals and businessmen, digital activism provides them a constant and permanent thread of connectivity with their home country. The earlier concept of 'transnationalisation' seems to have now been replaced by internationalization, where the whole globe has become one unified point of reference for migration" (Karim, 2003)

In fact, Indian Diaspora's participation in the electoral politics of their home country is a new and unique phenomenon that has emerged during the last one decade. Incidentally their active political participation corresponds with the rise of digital, especially social media, in the political landscape. There are studies that attest to correlation between the rise of social media and increased people's participation in democratic process, but involvement of diaspora, a 'non-state actor', is altogether a new occurrence that warrants explanation which this paper has tried to explore.

Diasporas have traditionally participated in long-distance nationalism across the world. The process has been further intensified with the rise of Web 2.0, which has the capacity in facilitating political communication between the transnational, dispersed expatriates and political parties. In fact, a diaspora's participation in home country's politic is as old as diaspora itself.

The process of globalization, emergence of new media, transnational movement of workforce and the resultant exchange of ideas, culture and technology have further strengthened the relationship between the diaspora and their homeland (Anderson, 1991). The role of race and ethnicity in mobilizing people for political action (Jain, 2010) has found a renewed expression in diasporic participation as well.

It is no wonder that political relationship of a diasporic group with home and host country is often determined by a sense of identity, belonging and vested interests. Diasporas have become "political actors with local and transnational agendas" and differ from the traditional sense for carrying "multiple national identities and loyalties that are interlinked across the globe." Sometimes, as in the case of Mexican Diaspora, the home politics becomes an extension in the host country. The Mexican expatriates wield considerable influence in the voting pattern of their kith and kin, especially when they send remittances to their home country. They impact polity in their home nation by way of financial contribution to political parties and candidates. Sometimes, they become driving force in transporting liberal social and political values to home country. "Diasporas teach their extended families and friends about democratic practices, such as how to vote for local government and to develop gender equality norms – a process termed a transfer of 'social remittances'" (Koinova, 2010, 154)

As studies have pointed out, transnationalism does not necessarily work in opposition to nations but can support nations and strengthen nationalism, which is not far from truth in the Indian case. "Today much evidence attests to the continued force of nation-states in the world, globalization and transnationalism notwithstanding. Increasingly, diasporas are being enfranchised and included in various ways as nationals in their state of origin and enjoy "diasporic citizenship" with legal rights. (Bernal, 2005)

Earlier it was presumed that homeland nationalism of the diaspora was a consequence of their failure to identify with the host society because of low level of assimilation. It was asserted that preoccupation with the country of origin is greatest among those immigrants who intend to return (e.g. political exiles and migrant laborers) and least among those who have made a long-term commitment to the host society (e.g. professionals and immigrant entrepreneurs) (Portes, 1997). However, it has been argued that ethnic identity could be salient even among professionals if they experience discrimination.

Another view argues that loss of status is a driving force behind diasporic transnational political activity. Latino males face a greater loss of status compared to Latino female in the US and are likely to participate in transnational political activities. Likewise, studies have shown that "British women of Pakistani origin have greater earning power in comparison to their Pakistani husbands, thus upending traditional roles. In some cases, extremism among some members of the UK-based Pakistani diaspora may stem in part from male."

Post-globalization and liberalization provided the much vigour and impetus to strengthening Indian diaspora-homeland links. To overcome the economic crisis and to meet the need of hard currency, India tapped its 'strategy asset' of diaspora during early 1990s. The emergence of Indian IT industry and the offshore site for Business Processing Outsourcing (BPO) further accelerated the process of skilled manpower dispersion and the consequent engagement in India's economic polity. Countries like the US, the UK, Australia, Canada who have sizable chunk of affluent Non-Resident Indians, played an active role in bilateral business association that were mutually beneficial to each other.

Empowering Democracy

The Web 2.0 democracy, in addition to facilitating Indian diaspora has also empowered political parties. The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), which made its debut in 2012, mobilized

its overseas supporters through its Overseas Chapters in various countries. It was probably the first of its kind incidents when expatriates, using digital communication tools and their own money and resources, came to their home country to campaign for a political party. In fact, Indian diaspora, using digital activism, played an important role in election campaigns to bring Arvind Kejriwal, the chief minister of Delhi, to power in 2013, 2015 and again in 2020. It is interesting to note that majority of these expatriates shared a political understanding of their native space.

Mayank Gandhi, an activist who played a key role in India Against Corruption and was a member of National Executive of AAP who later resigned from the post documented the spirit of the time. "What was even more extraordinary was that we had NRIs trooping in from across the world, hoping to contribute to this people's party. I received hundreds of inquiry calls from the United States, Australia, the United Kingdom, Canada; each wished to assist AAP. Unknown faces became friends, stayed at the homes of volunteers, and assisted in every way they could. Together we created a tsunami of a campaign." (Gandhi, 2018)

New media turned out to be a potent tool in election campaigns. Arvind Kejriwal won 67 out of 70 seats in 2015 Delhi Assembly elections. Thousands of Non-Resident Indians, largely from the US came to India to support him. It was the same group who had worked for India Against Corruption (IAC) launched by Anna Hazare and Arvind Kejriwal earlier. Well equipped with the knowledge of latest communication technology, thousands of NRIs jumped into provide backend and front-end campaigning

support to APP. The unprecedented support helped the party in reaching out to voters and win the election with massive margin.

Involving Indian diaspora in electoral politics was first of its political experiment in Indian history. Using telecom-enabled services, including email, SMS, phone calling, the Indian diaspora was able to reach out to a large number of voters. The overseas chapters of the party, dispersed across the globe, had adopted Delhi constituencies amongst themselves to provide strategic feedback and back-end inputs to AAP candidates. Those with expertise in IT managed the party's regular newsletters, Google hangout, social media, helpline support and telephonic calling services to donors and voters alike. With major presence in the US, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, Qatar, UK, UAE and Italy, the AAP overseas volunteers, according to one estimate made over 10.8 lakh calls from the US alone. (Narula, 2015)

Online donation by Indian diaspora and Indians was another key attraction, which was first of its kind to bring in transparency in political funding of elections. Most of the online donation and transaction were recorded and put on the party's website to instill a sense of fair play in electoral politics. It was therefore not surprising that it found maximum support in its fight against corruption. According to AAP estimate, 25 per cent of party donation came from the Indian diaspora, which also happens to be its biggest overseas support base.

For the elections in Punjab and Goa in 2017, the party geared its diaspora wing and started organizing overseas events to win the support of NRIs. A massive campaign of 'Chal Punjab 2017' was organized in Canada at Surrey and Toronto, which was participated by over three lakh Punjabi expatriates. Canada's Punjabi Diaspora groups had plans to send over 1.17 lakh Sikh migrants to Punjab to help the party in campaigns. (Bhandari, 2017)

In view of the rising influence of the Indian Diaspora in election campaigning, other political parties, including the Congress, also tried to win their support. Punjab Chief Minister Captain Amarinder Singh attempted to organize political rallies in Canada but was denied permission by the Canadian authority by invoking 'Global Affairs Canada' (GAC) policy that forbids "foreign governments to conduct election campaigns in Canada or establish foreign political parties and movements in Canada" (Goyal, 2016).

The AAP may have been the first political party to use Indian diaspora and digital activism on a large scale for political campaign, but it was for-

mer Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, who for the first time laid the foundation of positive engagement with Indian expatriates. He drew a long-term strategy of 'partnership among all children of Mother India' so that India could emerge as a major global player. It was during his time that the concept of Pravasi Bharatiya Divas was conceived and executed. Today, most political parties have foreign extensions including the AAP and the BJP, with presence in more than 30 countries.

The Overseas Friends of BJP (OFBJP) have formed very strong links and massive following with the overseas Indians. It was the OFBJP who mobilized the Indian diaspora for Prime Minister Narendra Modi's rallies at Madison Square in New York and at Wembley Stadium, London (Roy, 2016). The OFBJP made use of digital activism through Google hangouts and live-stream conferences to discuss political issues during such occasions. The importance of Indian expatriates have been so central to the BJP's vision that the party appointed Vijay Chauthaiwale as a global convener to lead the organization's foreign affairs department. Chauthaiwale was responsible for organizing Prime Minister Narendra Modi's overseas events (Marlow, 2016). Later, the Howdy Modi event in the US was another landmark of Indian diaspora mobilization.

The whirlwind tour of Narendra Modi across continents further helped in cementing the bonds between the diaspora and the homeland India. While Prime Minister Narendra Modi wanted to 'make the diaspora an integral part of India's development journey', the diaspora on the other hand look up to India for recognition and identity and also for starting business enterprises in their homeland. According to a Harvard study, 50 per cent of NRIs are returning to India for entrepreneurial and business reasons and the government often favours them with better interest rates and investment opportunities. The opportunity of getting politically associated with India has further strengthened the symbiotic relationship between the diaspora and the homeland (Wadhwa, 2007).

Another feature of Narendra Modi's overseas visits has been the organizational abilities of Indian diaspora and the use of digital activism. It should be borne in mind that it was not the Government of India that organized these events but the Indian diaspora themselves. The Europe India Forum organized the Wembley Stadium event while the one at Sydney's Olympic Park was organised by the Indian Australian Community Foundation (IACF) and the Indian American Community Foundation (IACF) had organized the event at Madison Square. It was Indian diaspora groups that funded these events, which goes to show their influence, affluence and the organizational abilities.

The homeland politics have also been seen to have adverse ramifications on the diasporic population as was evident in the case of Telugu expatriates. The Telugu diaspora in the US and Canada have been affluent and powerful community since 1970s. According to one estimate, most members of the 10 lakh-strong-community are in high-paying jobs and business enterprises (Vadlapatla, 2015).

Conclusion & Recommendations

These events also heralded a new beginning in diaspora's engagement with the home politics. The relationships between the diaspora and politics however, at times have proved tenuous. As Narendra Modi pointed out in one of his addresses that "some communities with real grievances, like the Tamils and Sikhs, have been vulnerable to manipulation by extremist groups." In the case of Khalistan movement after the Operation Blue Star, a section of Canadian Sikh supported the creation of an independent nation for Sikhs by using armed violence and extremism. It gave birth to organizations like Babbar Khalsa, Khalistan Terror Force (KTF), Sikhs For Justice" (SFJ), International Sikh Youth Federation (ISYF) which publicly and openly supported the secessionist movement in Canada and UK.

The killing of Canada-based Sikh journalist Tara Singh Hayer and bombing of Air India flight 182 are linked to such terror acts launched by Sikh groups. In recent times, a new term 'Khalistan 2.0' has received the coinage of resurfacing of terror support in Canada and other countries. The Khalistan movement had more relevance to Canada as it has the highest population of Sikh diaspora in the world (Jakobsh, 2014).

The demand for the creation of Khalistan and Tamil Eelam by Indian diaspora in their host countries indicates a very delicate balance between their numerical strength in the host country and political volatility in their homeland. An event in the homeland, as in the case of Punjab, was seen to have far-reaching consequence in another country, whereby disturbing the social equilibrium in their host country.

With the rise of new technology and CMC and digital media, there is far more danger of such secessionist movements gaining momentum. If such situations are not handled carefully with sensitivity, it carries within it the inherent danger of mass human displacement. It also indicates that people living in globalized world, can fall easy prey to ulterior interest groups more than ever before.

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