**Chapter 3**

**Indian National Political Parties' Facebook Strategy: Findings of the Conducted Interviews**

In the above section, the possibility of social media to be a new public sphere was discussed. This research, as already mentioned, is limited to the political interactions in the Facebook pages of Indian National political parties as public sphere. It was also mentioned above that how scholars argue for social media to be a platform of more democratic interactions among people and politicians. During the literature review, it was found that political parties claim to use social media with a strategy to contact people and have direct discussions about public policies and political issues. This chapter will discuss the interviews conducted with the Indian national political parties in relation to the research questions and objective of this research work. The findings will be discussed based on the following themes:

(a) Opinions of Indian national political parties regarding changes in political communication due to social media.

(b) Importance given to social media as an effective means of communication in relation to the traditional media.

(c) Indian national political parties' Facebook strategy in connecting with people.

**Method**

The interviews were conducted based on the open ended questionnaire which was used to get views of political parties regarding their strategy for using social media in general and Facebook in particular. Interviews were conducted by the heads of social media departments of the Indian national political parties Also, one spokesperson from each party was also interviewed which was selected based on the convenience.

**Social Media and Change in Political Communication: Views of Indian national political parties**

All the parties shared more or less same views regarding the major change in political communication due to social media. It was found that political parties are in line with scholars who believe that social media has empowered the people to (i) share their views (ii) produce information (iii) engage in political debates (iii) criticize government. Along with this they agreed upon the views that social media has (iv) increased youth political participation.

According to the Ranjan Srivasta, who is leading core social media team of Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP) at the national level, social media has given opportunity to everyone for sharing their views. It has created equality in terms of control over posting, producing or sharing of information which traditionally was enjoyed by only some elites. While in an interview with him he said, "It has made you, me and all others to have same control over generating and sharing information. Sab log koi news share kar sakte hain aur wo kai bar viral bhi ho jati hai. So, this is the power of social media. Pehle tou aisa nhi hota tha na, sirf elite log jo media mai hote the, only they used to share the news and frame the debates", said Ranjan Srivastava (BJP). Thus focus is on the production and sharing of information. While stressing on the capabilities that social media has provided to the common people, Hafiza Amin, national co-ordinator of the social media cell of Indian National Congress said, "Political communication has become more democratic due to the ability it has provided to common people to share their views. It is not the heads of the broadcasting media which used to decide what goes into the people but anyone can now talk about the political events, issues and policies. Social media has increased the importance of views of common people regarding socio, economic as well as political issues." It shows that social media has been taken as an agent strengthening democracy in the country.

It is easy to guess about the positive orientations of two big national political parties, i.e., Indian National Congress (INC) and Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP) about the role of social media in strengthening democracy by making people exercise more power over the communication and decision making. This is due the fact that these parties are having many followers in Facebook. This can be justified by the fact that present Prime Minister Narendra Modi (BJP) is the most followed political leader in social media (as of 10 April 2018). Also, during the visit of the headquarters of the Indian national political parties, it was found that these two parties were having separate and well-resourced social media cells as compared to the other Indian national political parties.

Other national political parties in India also responded enthusiastically about the change in political communication due to the social media. They not only recognized the capability of sharing ideas in social media but also the ability of engaging in public debate that social media has provided to the common people. In the interview with Derek O'Brien, a senior leader of AITC, he said, "Due to the emergence of social media, political communication in the life of common people, which used to be limited among the family members, friends and neighbours has extended to the larger population. Now, you can share and discuss what you think with a large population which was very limited earlier. In other words, every one using social media can become a broadcaster or content producer and reach out to large population which was earlier enjoyed only by traditional broadcasting media with television becoming the most important after print media". In this context it can be said that public sphere in social media has broadened as a result of new possibilities to connect with many people at a time, which earlier was limited to the debates with friends and families inside the rooms, halls, coffee shops now has broadened to such an extent that

people from many rooms, halls and coffee shops can together be engaged in political debate in the virtual room of social media.

It is very important to take the view of socialist parties regarding the change in political communication, if any, due to the social media. It was found both the Indian national political parties who owe their origins to the socialist ideology also take the change in political communication as a positive thing. In an interview with Pran Jal, national head of the social media cell of the Communist party of India (Marxist) abbreviated as CPI (M), he said, "Social media has empowered common people to raise their voices while in the traditional time the media was dominated by some elites who presented the information according to their own way which often used to be modified. Hume pata hai jab koi sources of production of information limited hands mai chale jate hain tou wo corrupt aur exploitative ho jate hain". Parties agree that traditionally the nature of media was monopolistic which has changed now with the dawn and rise of social meida. "Social media has given opportunity to the common people to share their view and information and criticise government. So, it has put an end to the monopoly of some people in the broadcasting media who earlier had exclusive control over sharing of information", said Duraisamy Raja, National Secretary of the Communist Party of India (CPI) since 1994.

Another substantial change that Indian political parties talked about is that it has multiplied the number of sources from which youth can get information about an event or issue. For instance, Devashish Jararia, leading the youth wing of Bahujan Samajwadi Party (BSP) and the head of newly established voluntary social media wing of BSP, said that, "The most important thing that the social media has brought into is that it has allowed youth to go through the multifaceted information from various sources, think and decide what is true and support it".

It is clear that Indian national political parties accept that social media has increased the weight of ideas of common people extensively. They also agree that it has increased political participation of the people by engaging in public debates. Thus, it can be said that social media has made political communication more democratic. However, the fundamental characteristic of 'public sphere' as described by Habermas is that people in this sphere are engaged in the rational public debate. It can be said that 'rationality' of the discussion and debates is the soul of the public sphere according to him as discussed in above section also. The quest is that, can public interaction or debate in social media said to be rational? Indian national political parties do warn about the irrationality and also the possibility of unauthentic information to get viral. Some of these information is made viral by specific persons with a particular agenda such as to defame someone. While talking to Sima Malik a member of Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), she said that the most important change in political communication due to social is that, "earlier only some elites use to influence the people. Elites are still having the edge over common people but now, common people have more power to share their views and influence others. So, it is a competitive world now. Though, it can't be said that the capacity provided by social media to the people is always productive. We can see a lot of cases where people misuse by spreading fake information about someone and defame them. However, this doesn't means that social media is bad altogether. We have to think about the more productive, genuine and efficient way to use it." Thus, Indian national political parties though aware of possibilities of irrational use or in other words, misuse of social media by some people, focus more upon the democratic opportunity of free and independent communication it has provided.

**Social Media or Traditional Media? Comparing importance given by Indian National Political Parties**

It is already discussed that how social media is penetrating into politics in India as well as across the world. It was also discussed that how political parties around the world are using social media for political communication and particularly in campaigning. In India, in the recent few years, increasing involvement of political parties for communication in social media is found. So, one of the objective of the research was to find out how much important is social media for Indian national political parties in the modern times. Are political parties moving towards social media from the traditional media as a platform for communication? How much importance do political parties give to social media strategy for communicating with people during the time of elections and at time when there are no elections? Findings form the data collected through interviews with the political parties show similarities in answers of all the Indian national political parties. Political parties talked majorly about two things - (a) whether it is social media or traditional media, they are equally important (b) effectiveness of social media or traditional media depends upon which category of population one wants to connect with.

It was found that no party wants to compromise any media for connecting with the people whether it be traditional or new media. Ranjan Srivastava (heading core social media team of BJP at national level) said that, "Traditional as well as social media both are important for connecting with the people in the modern times. It is obvious that social media is growing at such a scale that it can't be ignored at all. However, social media can't go all alone and conventional means of connection and also on-ground events are not replaceable. In order to effectively connect with the people and if we talk in terms of political parties to be effectively communicating what they are doing, they need to be strong on-ground as well as in social media". Again, Hasiba Amin (National

Convenor in social media department of INC) talked about the importance of particular media in connecting with particular set of population. She said," Both are equally important. The reason is that social media is more effective in connecting with particular set of population, such as youth population which is more engaged in social media. On the other hand traditional means of communication are more effective to connect and communicate with, for example, old generation. So, in order to have comprehensive reach to whole of the population of the country, importance of traditional as well as social media can't be compromised". In similar tone Derek O'Brien said that," As a political party who wants to be successful, you have to be present everywhere. This is because in order to reach out particular category of population social media can be more effective than the other while in case of other category of population, traditional means may prove to be more effective. For example, for reaching out to the youth, social media is becoming more and more convenient and effective and while in order to connect with the older generation it is the traditional media which is more successful as most of them still don't use social media".

Social media cells and departments have already became part of the organization of the political parties (particularly BJP and INC) while others (particularly BSP) admitted they were lacking in social media field. Ambeth Rajan (BSP member) in this context said that, "In fact, all types of mediums whether it is traditional or social media are playing important role in communication in the modern time. However, our party is inclined towards removing inequality from the Indian society and emancipation of the weaker sections of the societies which are in minority. In order to connect with these weaker sections of the society, traditional methods such as face-to-face communication by organizing talks and meeting people are more effective and so we have largely relied upon them.

Indeed, social media is becoming more and more important with time and we, particularly our youth volunteers have started to make us strong in social media as well". In this connection Devoshish Jararia (head of the youth wing of BSP and voluntary social media wing of BSP) said that, "Conventional means, especially on-ground connections can't be replaced. However, youth's engagement in social media and the capacity of social media which allows youth of India to share and receive confronting information so that they don't have to rely on the biased truth and sort for themselves what is true, social media has become very important. All the parties have developed there social media cells and department but BSP has mainly relied on traditional methods of connecting with the people. However, now we are making the voluntary team of the young people who support the cause and agenda of BSP to challenge the bigger parties through the means of social media also. The young volunteers of BSP are making two teams, one will go on ground to meet and interact with the people and other will focus on the social media for that concern. So, we are trying to be more effective in both". Similarly, communist parties, CPI and CPI(M), talked about increasing social media presence. While talking to Pran Jal [convenor of social media cell of CPI(M)], he said, "Though we have not been voted by the people in many parts of India, the people often come to us for raising their voice against the exploitative and defective policies of various political parties in power. So, we are increasingly trying to improve our presence on social media to listen to the voices of the common people. However we have not stopped to speak publically, conventionally and the importance of traditional media in connecting with the people has not reduced".

It can be concluded that Indian national political parties are taking social media very seriously as a means to connect with people in the modern times. BJP and INC are the two big parties who are ahead of the other national parties in terms of the organised social media cell and

strategy. However, other parties have also recognised the need of social media and are focussing to improve their presence in social media too. However, all the parties admitted that the rise of social media has not replaced the traditional means of connecting with the people and both are equally important.

**Indian National Political Parties' Facebook Strategy**

There are many aspects which come under the umbrella of the term 'Facebook strategy'. However, objective of this research is to investigate the democratic use of Facebook by Indian National Political Parties. 'Democratic use of Facebook' in itself is ambiguous phrase. However, this research is inclined towards studying whether Indian national political parties engage themselves in direct dialogues, discussions or interactions with the people in their Facebook pages or not. They gave five major reasons for using Facebook – (i) Sharing information creatively (ii) connecting with youth (iii) bypassing gate-keepers in traditional media (iv) direct interactions with people and (v) Taking feedback from people

**Sharing information creatively.** Traditionally, it needed a lot of efforts to share information with the people. However, social media has made it easy by reducing the time and cost of information. "Technology has made sharing information as simple as hitting the keys of keyboard and posting it with a click in blink of an eye. Thus, what you need is to have a device connected to the internet, have accounts of twitter or Facebook or any other social networking website and you are ready to connect with the masses. In order to connect with the elite group of people who are relatively literate and from good economic background, twitter is most effective and to connect with large number of common people, Facebook is the most important", said Derek O'Brien (AITC). This shows that indeed parties are using Facebook for sharing information with the people. The question is that how they do it. Ranjan Srivastava (BJP) said that they share

information about the policies and programmes of government in form of textual posts, images and creative videos. "We have a social media team in which we have divided tasks among the workers who are specialised in different areas. Some of them write effective messages, some of them design images others are animators. After selecting the information we want to share, the message is created and shared in the most presentable form so that it can reach to as many people as possible". He also said that, "it is easy to post text messages in the pages but they are not as influential as images and videos. Creative videos are most important to convey the message to audience influentially. But making creative videos needs more time and effort. So, if we talk about Facebook, we do share videos but in order to fill the time gaps we share images with certain short message having deep meaning written on those images. It allows people to get the message in interesting form and also it is less time consuming for them to look at it".

India is a diverse country having various languages and cultures in its various parts. Thus, a uniform message is hard to have its desired impact on the whole population of the world. It becomes an important question or challenge in front of the political parties to cope up with this diversity. It is generally accepted that people in the urban areas are more technology oriented and hence engaged in social media also as compared to the rural areas in India. So, one can't expect a uniform Facebook strategy to connect with the people of rural as well as urban areas. Indian national political parties do admit that the way of connecting people using Facebook can't be same for all the regions. However, interesting to note here was that to confronting views regarding to the importance given to Facebook to connect with the people of rural areas were found during the interviews with the Indian national political parties. One view is that whether it is a rural or urban area the importance of social media in general and Facebook in particular can't be ignored while connecting to people. The other view while considering social media more important for urban

areas than the rural areas admitted that in order to be successful political party it should have strong presence in all the media. Hasiba Amin (INC) while recognizing the need of different strategy for different regions said, "The strategic importance of connecting with people in urban and rural areas is not different. Yes, we generally use English or Hindi language for connecting with the people in urban areas while in rural area focussing on the local language is very important. Regional factors do matter but they don't reduce the importance of social media or Facebook for a particular region in any way". Similarly, Ranjan Srivastava (BJP) said, "As long as there are any Facebook users in an area it becomes important in that area. Also, we should not ignore that internet and social media penetration is increasing very fast in each and every part of India. This means ignoring social media in any part of the country is not in any way good for a political party". However, According to Devashish Jararia (BSP), "This is true that BSP has relied mainly on the traditional methods of connecting with people because of the reason that conditions of minorities in India is not good they were mostly illiterate and can't use social media. If we talk about Facebook, there is no official page of BSP there. But, there are many pages created by young volunteers supporting BSP". He further said that, it can be seen that many young individuals of minorities are now educated and they move to urban areas in order to study and get a job. After completing their study they come back to their native place and make their children to study as well. In order to emancipate the whole population of minorities it is very important to connect and make these educated youth to understand the cause and agenda of BSP and who in turn will make it possible to educate the illiterate and poor people. Social media can prove fruitful in that. He adds that, no doubt traditional methods were very important for them but they are trying to make BSP strong in online world also.

Another interesting thing that came up while interviewing Indian National Political Parties was about compromising authenticity or faking information while focussing more on the presentable and catchy message to influence the people. It is obvious that no party will admit doing this. However, one of them specifically talked about this. While talking to Pran Jal (CPIM), he said, "You have to make information interesting and presentable without losing its authenticity. You can't compromise in the authenticity of message just to make it go viral. There should be no fake elements in the images and videos that you share with people and the message should be informative so that it improves the knowledge of the people and invokes their thoughts by getting that information." He further adds that, "Sadly, political parties share messages in the Facebook and other social networking sites just to gain the attention of the people and they don't bother about lying with people or faking everything. But I want to tell you that we only share the real information and never compromise authenticity of the messages shared".

Thus, it can be concluded that Facebook is used to share information in such a way that more and more people browse it and the message reaches to the large population. In order to do so, Indian national political parties first of all decide upon what is to be shared and then about what is the best way to share the information. Images are considered as the most influential form of sharing information on Facebook pages because these are interesting as compared to simple text messages and also require less time to be browsed by the people. Indian national political parties do admit that creative videos are most influential in conveying the message to the audience. However, it requires more time and effort to create videos. Also, Facebook users do have internet speed issues as well as time issue to watch the videos. That's why images are given the most importance. However, it doesn't mean that textual posts and videos are not important but images are relatively preferred more. The other thing that was found that Indian national political parties

do recognise that India is a diverse country as such it requires certain variations while connecting to the people of different regions. It was specially mentioned that in the rural region in which less people are literate, using local languages to share the information is very important. At last, each party emphasised that they don't spread fake news and information just to get the attention of people.

**Connecting with the youth.** India is a youth nation. So, connecting with the young population is very important for any political party. Accordingly, it was found that one of the important strategical part of using Facebook for Indian national political parties is to connect with youth. They consider it very effective in connecting and communicating with youth population. Shree D Raja (CPI) said that," For the youth population, social media is definitely having a wide edge over traditional media. However, traditional media is still important while connecting to old generation who are not active in social media and all the people who still are not using it by their own wish or due to some reason. Youth population needs to be more informed about the defective policies of the party in power. We get a lot of support and positive response from the youth when we post some information in the form of text, image or video". According to Hafiza Amin (INC), "Today's youth is using technology and internet very extensively. Young population is increasingly relying upon internet for many things .starting from enjoying videos on YouTube, getting information, learning things, getting all kinds of knowledge including what's going on in politics, buying things, even getting jobs and many more. If you go outside from here in Delhi Metro, you will see young people all around you who are busy in their mobiles for various things like watching videos in YouTube, chatting in WhatsApp and using Facebook and Instagram. So, yes, one of the important aspect of using Facebook is to be in touch of the young population".

Indian political parties recognised that Facebook and other social networking platforms are more effective for connecting with Indian youth. However, they also emphasised about its increasing importance in the near future when it will be effective for connecting with whole of the nation. In this context Derek O'Brien (AITC) said, "Though, at this time young people are more active in social media, trends show that soon it will encompass whole of the population of India. For instance, take the example of political parties, leaders of old generation who had never seen Facebook or Twitter in their life. Are running their pages and accounts with many followers as well".

It can be concluded that one of the most important strategical element of the Indian national political parties for using Facebook is to connect with the youth. The reason provided was that youth are actively engaged in the social media and relied on it for many things like connecting with friends and relatives, getting information and news, playing games, for seeking general knowledge and for other entertainment purposes. Thus, in order to connect the youth population of India, the Facebook can be a very important media.

**Bypassing gate-keepers.** Another important strategic reason for using Facebook along with other platforms of social media that Indian national political parties described was about bypassing gate-keepers in broadcasting media (print media and television etc.). Gate-keepers here means the person at the head of broadcasting media who do the screening of the content going for publishing or for broadcast. Here, it is important to go back to the Habermas' public sphere and his view about how media evolved. According to him commercialisation of media led to the screening of the information that would go for the publishing and hence editors had to look into what will sell more in the market and it shaped the content of the articles Pure public sphere was the one in which debates were rational and the media published content and information without

self-interest. In this context, social media has provided an opportunity in which screening of the content to be broadcasted can be avoided. In the interviews with the Indian national political parties, it was found that they also regard social media an important revolution in the media as now unnecessary screening of content to be shared can be avoided.

While talking to Pran Jal (CPI(M)), he said, "It is really important to understand that broadcasting media works largely for the pleasure of elite groups such as heads of media and the government. What we receive is a partial truth or we can say a modified truth which is modified in the interest of broadcaster or the one benefitting the broadcaster. Social media can prove to be very beneficial in this context to provide the multifaceted reality to the people. It becomes more effective because social media is dominated by youth. Young people are creative and they can understand what is the reality is, provided they are not limited to one-sided truth that the broadcasting media or I will like to call it 'elite media' shows them". However, other parties focussed more on the monopoly of elite over media for sharing of information. Common people can't have their say due to no control over broadcasting media. Hafiza Amin (INC) said, "Social media has empowered the common people to share their truth and information with the large population. Every person has got some information which he or she gets in day to day events in life. Obviously, not everything can be shared by the broadcasting media. Also, there are biasness while showing news such as television. We notice that one news is repeated a lot of times by a particular television channel while there are many other things to be shared by people and discussed upon".

Thus, Indian national political parties regard it very important to share information with people without the risk of information getting filtered out. Social is media is a useful platform where political parties and leaders can present themselves and their achievements creatively and

in many ways. Social media in general and Facebook in particular is thus considered strategical important by Indian national political parties for this reason as well.

**Interactions with people and consideration of Feedback.** Another important element of the strategy of the Indian political Parties which they focussed upon was to use Facebook for 'interactions with people'. It is important to note difference between the term 'connecting with people' and 'interacting with people'. Connection not necessarily needs to be a two-way process. Connection just means to be in touch with people. Sharing of information by political parties and people receiving it without the involvement of reaction and counter-reaction also comes under the connection. However, in order to interact, a two-way communication between the political parties and people is needed. Thus, people react regarding an information shared by a particular party which in turn counter-reacts and it makes the interaction between the two possible. Here, it may be reminded that the main research question of the work was to find out about whether there is openness and free two-way communication between the people and Indian national political parties in their Facebook pages or not. This section is regarding the findings related to the question that were taken from the Indian national political parties via interviews which will be compared with the data collected from their Facebook pages in the following chapter. All the parties said that their strategy for using Facebook was to interact with the people and they allow people to say what they want to say. Ranjan Srivastava (BJP) said, "We allow people to say what they want to say about any information that we share on our pages. We want to make communication in our pages as interactive as possible so that new ideas can be generated and people can also have a say regarding the policies and programs which will be formulated or have already been formulated. Of course our purpose is to make communication as democratic as possible". Similarly, Hasiba Amin (INC) said that, "One of the most important limitations of the traditional media is that it is

a one-way connection. Social media has provided the possibilities to remove this limitation as it is now possible to have direct interactions with the people which can strengthen the democracy by making the communication between government, political parties and people more open. We are very receptive towards our audience and our aim is to use this possibility of interaction with people as fully as possible".

Also, the parties emphasised their use of social media for taking feedback from the people regarding their policies or agendas or regarding any information that they share on their Facebook pages. While talking to Seema Malik (NCP) she said, "Any kind of Media is a means to connect to the people. However, earlier it was a one way process which has changed now. Of course, social media has allowed people to share their views and made dynamic interaction possible. It is necessary to utilize the potential that social media has provided for free and open expression of thoughts or even take criticism from people to make more progress. Unlike, some other parties, we accept our criticism on our Facebook pages. We don't want to dominate the content and threaten the people to criticize us on anything done by us which is undesirable according to them. Surely, our party considers the views and feedbacks of the people and the free interaction is the basic element of democracy which we should never compromise".  When asked regarding the interactivity in Facebook pages,

The parties also talked about certain challenges in interacting with people on Facebook. It was found that they sometimes consider it necessary not to react to spams or irrelevant comments (such as abuses). However, neglecting the importance of interactions and discussions all together will destroy the opportunity provided by social media to make political communication more democratic in nature. Parties also mentioned about the fake messages and trolls as the serious challenge for democratic interactions in social media. Seema Malik (NCP) also said that, "There

are a lot of challenges and the most important among them to think about is the problems related to fake trolling, pages and profiles made on fake identity. Our party has faced the serious attempts of defamation by making the fake accounts and pages by the name of our party leaders and party on the whole. This is a very serious problem which we have faced and it really hampers the democratic character of social media drastically". Thus, It is true that social media has provided weight to the ideas and thoughts of common people but it is challengeable to consider political communication in social media to be 'rational' as it was in Habermas' 'public sphere'.

The most important thing to note here is that Bahujan Samaj Wadi party (BSP) has no official page on Facebook which is verified by Facebook to official. (The verified pages have a blue tick mark followed by the name of the page). However, Devashish Jararia admitted that the pages on Facebook having the name of Bahujan Samajwadi Party were running based on the volunteer support from the young people. The only thing they talked about was that they are trying to make the party strong in the online world also. That means they are trying to increase the presence and influence of the party in the online world of social media. As such, they might be thinking about creating official page in Facebook as well. It is also possible, that they might have already created the page but it needs some time to get verified by Facebook developers. However, the exact positon is unclear. The only thing that is clear is that the youth wing of Bahujan Samajwadi Party are helping the party grow in the online world and they are making a large team of young supporters who will support the cause and agenda of Bahujan Samajwadi party using internet as well as through on-ground connections.

Thus, except Bahujan Samajwadi party (the position of which is unclear in Facebook), all Indian national political parties accepted that one of the important strategy of using Facebook was

to interact with the people, get their feedback which according to them will result in the improvement of the party agendas and ultimately in the development of the nation.