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Electoral campaigning through social media during pandemic in Bihar legislative assembly election: An analysis

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Abstract
This paper discusses the rising popularity of social media in the Bihar Legislative Assembly election when the Election Commission of India (ECI) decided to hold the election after consulting the various political parties and the Chief Electoral Officers, as scheduled and issued a vast guideline under the COVID-19 Protocol for conducting the election during the COVID-19 pandemic, which rigorously forbade physical campaigning such as road shows, door-to-door campaigns, and public meetings. This paper aims to look at the challenges while holding the Legislative Assembly election during the outbreak, assess political parties' social media strategies throughout the election campaigning, and gauge how successful social media may be in election campaigning. This paper concludes that despite being the first state legislative assembly election after the pandemic, the election was successfully conducted by gaining 57.05 votes which is 0.39 percent more than the 56.66 percent of the 2015 assembly election.

Keywords: Social media, election campaign, COVID-19 protocol, physical advertising, door to door campaigning, psephologists

Introduction

The Election Commission of India (ECI) decided to hold the 17th Legislative Assembly election in Bihar when the entire state was battling the catastrophic effects of the pandemic due to a lack of better medical facilities. Out of a total population of 1.23 million infected people with COVID-19, 0.48 million were tested and as of July 28, 2020, 43,591 people were positive for COVID, while 29,320 people had recovered and 269 had died (Ranjan & Kumar, 2020) [13]. As per an estimate, 3 million people inside and outside of the state were a serious problem for the state (Ranjan & Kumar, 2020) [13]. According to media reports, almost 2.5 to 3 million migrants have returned to Bihar due to the COVID-19 crisis (Ranjan & Kumar, 2020) [13]. Testing COVID-19, quarantining all of them, and keeping other people out of their relationships was a separate problem for the government. In such a horrible situation, talking about the election in the state seemed silly to the people of Bihar. Given the fragility of the situation, there was strong objection from the nine opposition political parties and civil society to hold the election during the outbreak (Nair, 2020) [9], and two PILs were also filed in both the High Court and the Supreme Court to postpone the Assembly election. However, they were dismissed by the courts (Tagore, 2020) [14]. The Election Commission of India (ECI), after consultation with various political parties and Chief Electoral Officers, finally decided to hold the Bihar Legislative Assembly election as per its scheduled period of '1, August to 12 September 2020 (Ambarkhane, 2021) [2] and issued a detailed guideline under the COVID protocol for holding the election during the pandemic. The commission strictly prohibited political parties from organizing physical campaigning such as roadshows, door-to-door canvassing, and public gatherings (Ambarkhane, 2021) [2]. Therefore, in order to make social media platforms an effective tool for election campaigning, political parties, and political leaders encouraged their followers to develop virtual relationships with the public, especially with the youths who were going to cast their vote for the first time. They made all efforts by employing social media platforms so that they could assure the voters to fulfill their election manifesto and the promises they made after winning the election. Many psychologists said that the social media in this assembly election was quite positive, and this election remained successful, even though it was held during the outbreak, (Ali & Rashid,

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2020) [1].

Objectives
The objectives of this article are as follows;
1. To assess the Challenges while holding the Legislative Assembly Election during the pandemic
2. To analyze the social media strategies of political parties in election campaigning
3. To study the impressive role of social media in the election

Research Methodology
In order to carry out this study, the data has been collected from both, primary and secondary sources. The primary data includes the data taken from the Election Commission of India (ECI) websites and media reports, and the secondary data has been collected from books, research articles, newspapers, websites, and so on.

Challenges to Legislative Assembly Elections during the Pandemic
The Bihar Legislative Assembly election was the first state election to be held in the shadow of epidemic diseases (Ali &Rashid, 2020) [1]. It was, therefore, very challenging for the Election Commission of India to conduct the election due to being a new test for the country's faulty electoral machinery and an unfamiliar experience for the political parties, and candidates. As a result, the Election Commission planned to hold the entire election in three phases (Gupta, 2020) [6] and asked the political parties to conduct most of their election campaigning online to ensure physical distance. The commission essentially expanded the number of polling places and limited the number of voters who were to cast votes there. While in the 2019 Lok Sabha election, where there were around 73,000 polling places in Bihar and a maximum of 1,500 voters per booth, the Election Commission in Bihar chose to set 1,000 voter limits per booth in this election. Nevertheless, this resulted in the identification of 33,797 more polling places and a rise of 1.8 lakh poll workers (Mishra, 2020) [8]. To ensure voter safety, arrangements were made for 7 lakh hand sanitizers, 4.6 lakh masks, 6 lakh PPE kits, 7.6 face shields, and 2.3 lakh pairs of hand gloves. Masks and gloves were advised for both voters and poll workers (Gupta, 2020) [6]. A candidate could accompany only two people when submitting nomination papers. A maximum of five persons, including candidates, were allowed to participate in the door-to-door campaigns, and thermal scanning of voters was carried out at polling booths by the paramedics (Gupta, 2020) [6].

Following COVID-19, the decision to expand the number of postal ballots for the new categories has been controversial. The opposition political parties criticized the decision as unconstitutional and argued that it would enable the ruling party to influence the voters. They also accused the commission of not consulting them on this move before the decision (Mishra, 2020) [8].

Election Campaigns and Social Media Challenges
There are numerous axes of digital distribution in Bihar. First, smartphone penetration in Bihar is approximately 27 to 30 percent of the total population. Second, these smartphone users are mainly young and they can access social media. Third, 88 percent of the population lives in rural areas. Fourth, it can be challenging to determine how gender and caste distributions of smartphone users differ in rural contexts. Hence all political parties resorted heavily to grassroots campaigning to bridge the digital divide and garner support from the voters. There was an excellent illustration of attempting to dissolve virtual and non-virtual boundaries in the current Bihar assembly election campaign (Tagore, 2020) [14].

Anil Verma, the retired Major General and the Head of the Association for Democratic Reforms said that it would be challenging for the election commission to supervise campaigning on social media platforms with existing infrastructure. However, he also stated that it was a big issue during the Lok Sabha election 2019. Therefore, social media needs to be monitored effectively (Mishra, 2020) [8]. Jijit Bhattacharya, the president of the Center for Digital Economy Policy Research, said that online campaigning might result in an uneven playing field. He claimed that digital campaigns were resource-intensive and could make voters more likely to be favorable. While the fact that not every political party would be able to access such resources and employ them smoothly (Mishra, 2020) [8]. In the same vein, S.Y. Qureshi, the former Chief Election Commissioner of India, said that such gatherings would necessitate expensive communication technology like projection screens among other things. Qureshi added that assembling such facilities would be a costly affair, and the rich political parties would have time to mobilize the voters, while smaller regional or local parties would be affected (Ranjan & Kumar, 2020) [13]. The state BJP leader Prem Ranjan Patel refuted the opposition's assertion that online campaigning would favor the wealthier parties. He claimed that it would be a very useful and pragmatic source for spreading messages across. He added, "We do not have to get crowds for rallies, no helicopters, stage or other such arrangements" (Mishra, 2020) [8].

However, the Election Commission responded to all these objections by saying that it had a social media monitoring section to monitor hate speech, illegal content, and fake news. In March 2019, platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter and their associations and the Internet and Mobile Association of India submitted a voluntary code of conduct (Ali & Rashid, 2020) [1]. Additionally, all these associations have pledged to create a high-priority reporting mechanism for the Election Commission and a mechanism for political advertisers to submit pre-certified advertisements issued by its Media Certification and Monitoring Committee has been arranged (Ali & Rashid, 2020) [1].

Social Media Campaign Strategies of Major Political Parties Contesting the Election
National Democratic Alliance (NDA)
The National Democratic Alliance (NDA) is a political coalition in India with a center-right to right-wing conservative orientation. It is spearheaded by the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) which was established in 1998. It consisted then of the major political parties in Bihar such as Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP), Janta Dal United (JDU), Vikassheel Insaan Party (VIP) and Hindustani Awam Morcha (HAM). The National Democratic Alliance (NDA) currently holds power in the Union government of India and several state governments (Kapoor & Ravi, 2020; National Democratic Alliance - Wikipedia, n.d.) [7].

The strong point of the BJP in the alliance was that it made

a strong and decent start. It deployed 9,500 IT cells and created 72,000 booth-level WhatsApp groups through which the party reached out to each booth to listen to their problems and address them by winning their trust (Tagore, 2020) [14]. Because the BJP has a better social media and digital team than any other political party in the country. It was not difficult for it to relay the speeches and messages of the party leaders to them in written form. However, in a state like Bihar, putting this approach and manpower to use has been difficult. It hired about 10,000 people who were working as officials in the party's IT department, and at every booth level, identified five people who had smartphones and knew how to use them. It recruited more than 400000 people with 80,000 booths across the state who were working directly with the national IT team. In this way, it strengthened its use of social media at every Shakti Kendra in Bihar. These 4-lakh people were further divided into several WhatsApp groups that used to take instructions from the BJP national team and carry them out. These people were tasked to ensure that the party's message, virtual programs, election campaign videos, etc., were displayed to the public at each Shakti Kendra (Tagore, 2020) [14]. On the other hand, the BJP's ally JDU had to learn the intricacies of social media from the beginning. The party began forming a team in May of that year to strengthen its social media reach. As one member of the social media team puts it, "Bihar and the JDU were never ready for social media". JDU included all the IT experts who returned to Bihar during the pandemic. These volunteers helped the party develop a JDU-specific social media platform. However, JDU also tried to imitate the BJP model with social media and digital campaigning (Tagore, 2020) [14]. The party faced a significant hurdle in training its members how to utilize WhatsApp and Facebook in the villages to communicate with local officials. The IT staff had to write a memo to the party's cadre explaining how to utilize Facebook Live. JDU began its campaign on Nitish Care's Facebook page, where the government's works and achievements during floods and pandemics were posted. The party also launched 'Sunday Samwad', a weekly interactive program where people may engage with their local party officials via Facebook Live. In fact, Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar had to work hard to become digitally friendly. He is known as a person who follows traditional principles. He also had to learn how to connect with people on social media, and he started his virtual meetings and programs in June of the same year, till then, he conducted online programs in every assembly constituency of the state (Gupta, 2020) [6].

Mahagathbandhan

Mahagatbhandha (MGB) commonly known as the 'Grand Alliance' is a coalition of political parties that were formed in Bihar before the 2015 legislative assembly election consisting of Rashtriya Janta Dal (RJD), Indian National Congress (INC), along with the Communist Party of India (CPI), and Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI) (Ranjan & Kumar, 2020) [13]. In the election 2020, the Rashtriya Janal Dal and Indian National Congress alliance faced considerable difficulties in formally launching its state election campaign. It had neither the time nor the financial strength to build a competitive online infrastructure.

Because not all the campaigns could be conducted online. Smartphone access in Bihar was still only 5% to 8%. However, despite all these obstacles, the allies of the grand alliance, especially RJD and Congress, emphasized using social media to influence the election templates and reach out to the voters. The RJD leader Tejashvi Yadav has more than 1.5 million followers on Twitter. His Facebook account is also an active account, which played a key role in propagating the "Jan Sabha" as an important means of criticizing the present government's failure in Bihar. RJD established an extensive network of WhatsApp groups at both booth and district levels. Other smaller parties were satisfied with the effectiveness and potential of social media in the Bihar election campaign during the epidemic (Tagore, 2020) [14].

Analysis

Political parties, which had greater access to finance, clearly had a stronger grip on social media. Twitter has been largely responsible for shaping the political campaign statement for most of the country's elections. However, rural voters in Bihar were more impressed with WhatsApp and Facebook. Voters readily accepted videos of candidates and political messages circulating from central leaders. Videos dealing with local issues such as roads, bridge construction, and other development works in rural areas have gained considerable popularity among the people (Tagore, 2020) [14].

Now the question arises as to which political party benefited the most from the new election campaign methods in the Bihar assembly election. For this reason, the pattern of issues, such as the pattern of advertisements, spending on digital advertisements, and the content of advertisements on various parameters, for all political parties except RJD collected by the Digi Camp Project at the National University of Singapore (NUS) was analyzed. Its data is publicly available from August 1, 2020, to the first phase of the election, i.e., October 28, 2020(Rajani & Rashid, 2020) [11].

The first data shows that the NDA's allied partners are at the forefront of spending on advertising. The ruling Janata Dal United spent about Rs 50 lakh on political advertisements between August 1 and October 3, and the JDU's allied BJP spent Rs40 lakh for the same period, while Tejashvi Yadav's RJD and the Indian National Congress, its pool partner, was third with an expenditure of only Rs 30 lakh (Rajani & Rashid, 2020) [11].

Second, a closer look at the weekly data reveals that the BJP's spending decisions are largely strategic. They know exactly when to move the campaign gear on a digital platform. The BJP spent almost twice as much as the Congress in the last week of the first phase of polling. JDU, on the other hand, spent more on digital platforms in September than in October (Rajani & Rashid, 2020) [11].

Third, the NDA CM Nitish Kumar heavily banked on female voters to quell anti-incumbency sentiments against him, and the importance of women's suffrage in this election became even more pronounced, as 5,15,800 new women were added to electoral rolls compared to 3,49,663 male voters. The JDU-BJP alliance has spent almost twice as much as the Congress on women voters (Rajani & Rashid, 2020) [11].
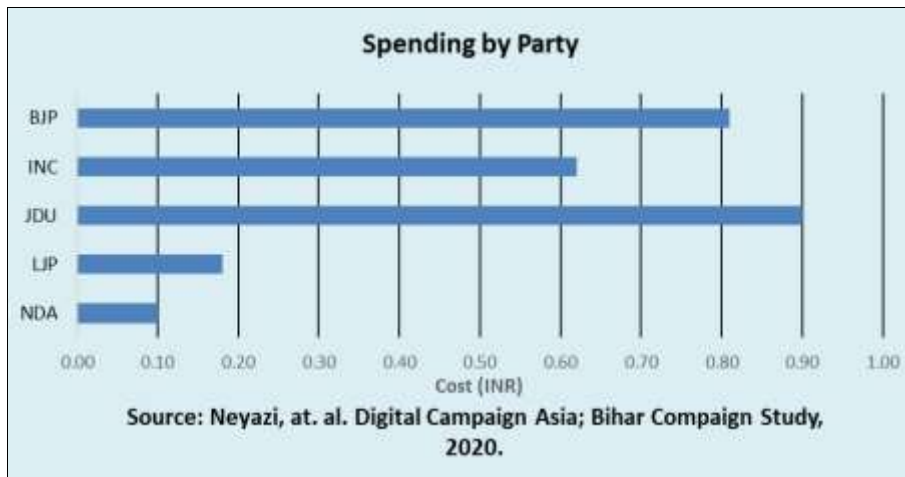
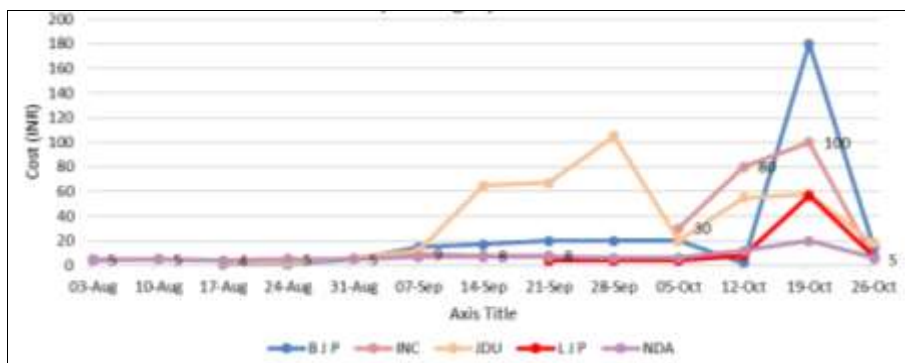**Fig 1:** JDU highest spender in online advertisements
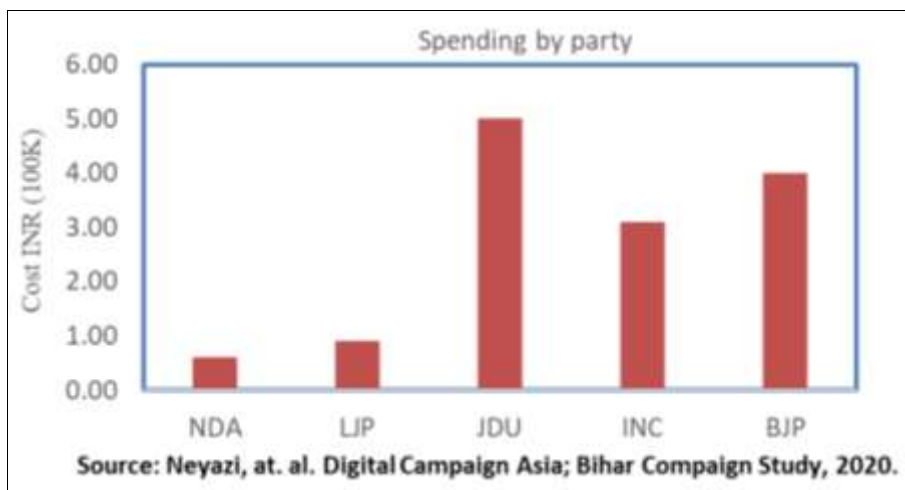

Fig 2: Spending by week

Fig 3: The NDA spends more to target women voters

Fourth, the cost and number of advertisements are important and the advertisement's content is more important. With strict rules on political advertisements by social media, parties have to be careful about the content, emotions, and reality in their advertisements. These ads can be categorized as negative, positive, neutral, rude, and polite. Contrary to the strategy received, these data show that the campaign was largely positive and that the ruling coalition spent more than 5% of its money on these advertisements, which can be categorized as positive and polite. We also saw the emotions that these advertisements give rise to joy, pride, excitement, hope, worry, sadness, hatred, and anger. Not surprisingly, both the JDU and the BJP have spent a large portion of their money on advertising, which has been classified as a source of joy and hope (Rajani & Rashid, 2020) [11]. Additionally, we found that the parties spend one-third of the money on personalizing the campaign. Once again, given the leadership nature of the Indian election, this is not surprising.

Fifth, the top 500 ads are also analyzed based on the number of symbols, which is limited by the number of content displayed on one's social media feed. This shows that the economy is paramount for all parties except the JDU, while for the JDU, governance is more important than profit. Similarly, it is observed that advertisements on crime, law, and order, which have been a major issue in the JDU's campaign since 2005, are higher in the JDU (15%) than in other parties (Rajani & Rashid, 2020) [11].

Election Results

If we talk about the seats won in terms of political alliance, the NDA got 125 seats with 37.26% of the total votes, while the Mahagathbandhan got 110 seats with 37.23% of the votes (Kapoor & Ravi, 2020; Rajani & Rashid, 2020) [7, 11]. Grand Democratic Secular Front (GDSF) got 6 seats, and Lok Jan Shakti Party (LJP) and others won one seat each (Bihar Election Result Constituency-Wise: RJD Emerges Single Largest Party, but NDA in the Driver's Seat, 2020) [4]. The results came as a shock to many analysts and polling agencies who predicted victory for Mahagathbandhan. The only agency that accurately predicted the outcome of the Bihar election was Political Marker, which predicted a narrow majority for the NDA. The point is, despite all these unspoken circumstances if we talk about the voting percentage, the overall voting turnout in this election has been 57.05 percent, which is 0.39 percent more than the 56.66 percent of the 2015 Assembly election. In this election, 59.58% of women cast their votes, while the total voting turnout of men was 54.68 percent (Kapoor & Ravi, 2020; Ramashankar, 2020) [7, 12]. Although the credit for this voting turnout cannot be attributed to social media advertising, its role cannot be excluded. Of course, social media networking sites will not usher in a "new era of democracy", but they certainly serve as an effective tool for candidates to reach out to their supporters in general and their affiliates in particular. These sites will be able to play as significant a role as access to more people in their daily lives (Baker, 2009) [3]. In the end, it is fair to say that it is social media that made this general election easy and successful in the face of this perilous epidemic and also increased the voting turnout more than the previous elections.

Conclusion

In the age of social media, all political parties need to cope with the current situation. As a result, the whole world is falling into its lap. As far as politics is concerned, it is already everywhere, so how could it avoid it? Today, political leaders and voters are using social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Google Plus, etc. with a great strategy. These are the platforms where they can easily communicate, develop their political arena, and discuss regional and national issues and electoral agendas, not just that, before getting their victory in the elections, they push hard in order to achieve success on social media platforms. Because they know, in the words of Shaili Chopra, "While a post, a pin or a tweet can turn into a vote, it can affect it" (Chopra, 2014). Therefore, there is a need to understand the role of social media today, especially its challenges in election campaigning and to find out their effective solution so that it couldn't be misused.

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