

THE RISE OF DIGITAL CAMPAIGNING: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF POLITICAL PARTIES' SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGIES IN SOUTH ASIA

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ABSTRACT

The political landscape, especially in South Asia, has undergone remarkable changes with the growing accessibility of the internet and the quick development of digital technologies. South Asia, which has in excess of 1.8 billion people and a youthful population, is increasingly active in digital politics. The widespread use of smartphones and the availability of Facebook, X, WhatsApp, Instagram, and YouTube are compelling political parties to abandon outmoded campaign techniques in favor of more real-time, agile, and data-centric strategies. The goal of this paper is to conduct a detailed, cross-border study of the social media strategies of the principal political parties of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, with an emphasis on the role of digital campaigning in the contemporary politics of the region. The investigation considers how BJP and INC, PTI and PML-N, AL and BNP, and SLPP and UNP strategically issue political messages and construct counter-narratives through social media as political storylines to summon and galvanize political devotees tailor opposition using comparative analysis, social media, and case studies as tools. It also further seeks to comprehend how political advertisement, emotionally charged content, and leadership branding campaigns are crucial for the targeted audience. The findings further indicate that the concern of data privacy, cyber bullying, the risk of curated echo tourism, manipulation through bots and fake accounts, and the spread of misinformation are some of the greatest challenges of online voter engagement. In conjunction, the study shows that these challenges, along with technology and emotional connection to the campaigns deepen control over the voters, and therefore, their reach and impact is determined by the technical organization of the political party. By adopting a comparative approach, this study highlights the distinct patterns, differing approaches, and common problems in the practice of digital political campaigning in South Asia. It finishes with suggestions to foster responsible digital campaigning, improve digital literacy among the electorate, and provide regulation to safeguard democratic principles in the context of contemporary digital society.

Key words: Political parties, democratic, misinformation, digital, electoral, leadership, strategic, social media, technologies.

INTRODUCTION

The digital age has revolutionized the way we engage in political communication. Political campaigning has evolved from the traditional media of newspapers, radio, television, and physical rallies to the modern digital era. A considerable amount of political participation takes place in the digital sphere, where leaders and political parties engage with the electorate. This shift has been most pronounced in South

Asia, which has a youthful and large population, greater internet access, and a developing and energetic democratic environment. India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, the South Asian countries, have undergone a swift digital transformation in the last decade. Data from Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka reveals a sharp up surge in internet and mobile access among the urban and semi-urban populations.

India is also not left behind, as it ranks among the top digital markets with over 800 million internet users. This reality makes the South Asian region one of the most favorable markets. Political leaders and parties have also shifted to targeting voters as well as disseminating and counteracting political messages through social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter (X), Instagram, WhatsApp, TikTok, and YouTube.

The transition from analog to digital campaigning is more than just a technology shift; it is a change in the political landscape and in the way citizens interact with politics. Social media enables parties to bypass the traditional gatekeepers of editors and broadcasters. Citizens can now be reached directly and in real time. Social media also enables the practice of micro-targeting where content is personalized for narrow sociolinguistic groups and even demographic categories. Furthermore, digital media allows for rapid response, meme warfare, livestreaming of rallies and town halls, the slogan and video virality, all at the cost of traditional media. The rise of digital campaigning in South Asia has its own unique problems, though. These tools of engagement can and have been used to spread a wave of fake news, disinformation and hate speech. At the same time, they can be harmful to democracy through their misuse which results in hate speech, fake news, and disinformation. Oftentimes, political parties and their allies engage in online discourse through the use of bots, troll farms, and data falsification to manipulate the results of the discourse. Because of this, concerns that arise from domestically unregulated social media such as misinformation, privacy, foreign influence, and electoral integrity have become a stark threat to democracy.

The focus of this research is a comparative study of the digital campaigning of the primary political parties of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. It aims to answer the following questions:

- How are political players engaging with social media?
- What is the nature of the content, including the narratives that are circulated?
- How are digital mechanisms deployed to shape public sentiment and voter engagement?

- What patterns emerge as common throughout the regions under question, and what is the variance in the digital approaches?

- What is the impact of the tertiary digital campaigning phenomenon on democracy within the region of South Asia?

2.Scope of the Study

The scope of the study is justified for some reasons. Firstly, campaigning in South Asian countries is swiftly evolving towards a digital battleground. Understanding the ways in which parties operate on these platforms can inform trends in votes and their respective outcomes. Secondly, this research has the potential to enrich the body of literature in political communication, media studies, as well as democracy in the Global South. Finally, the research has the potential to alert policymakers, election commissions, and civil society groups on the need for appropriate policy structures to regulate digital electioneering to uphold the principles of transparency, equity, and responsibility.

3.Methodology

In order to study the changing political contours of digital campaigning in South Asia, this research employs a qualitative, comparative, case study approach. The essence of this study is to interpret the strategic use of digital communications by various political parties, aimed at interacting with the public and shaping politics, governance, and elections. In South Asia, the variety of political regimes and the level of developed digital infrastructure makes a comparative study useful, as it enables the researcher to discover both transnational regularities and particularities of individual countries. The justification for case study choice is the effectiveness in understanding the complexity of political changes across several countries. Instead of looking for broad generalizations, this study examines eight political parties from four countries: India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. These countries were selected because of their active participation in recent national elections and digital campaigning. The selected cases are:

India: Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Indian National Congress (INC)

Pakistan: Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N)

Bangladesh: Awami League (AL), Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)

Their political significance and impact in their respective countries. Digital campaigning is widespread and easily accessible on all major social media networks. This study utilized a qualitative approach and content analysis which includes documents and scholarly interviews in order to establish accuracy and truth in the findings. This study method is the primary approach of this research. The official and semi official social media handles of the party leaders and the political parties of interest were examined for a period of six months before the election to analyze peak period of campaign activity and strategic implementation (Pokharel, Bishnu. (2020).

Facebook: Pages of the parties and of the leaders, public posts, comments, live events, and ritualized discourse.

Twitter (X): Posts, comments, reply sections, retweet sections, and follower participation.

Instagram: Visual stories, stories, reels, and promotion by key opinion leaders.

YouTube: Campaigns, public lectures, and promotional spokespersonship.

WhatsApp and telegram: While these are closed forums, references to these were analyzed through journalistic interviews and campaign documents (where available).

This framework made possible comparisons across different cases and sought to reveal strategic similarities and contextual differences across countries.

Six-dimensional framework:

Dimension	Description
Platform Strategy	Which platforms are prioritized? What is the content frequency and style?
Message Framing	What themes dominate the campaign (e.g., nationalism, corruption, progress)?
Audience Targeting	Are specific demographics (youth, women, urban poor, minorities) targeted? How?
Leader Personalization	Is the campaign centered on the party or on an individual leader?
Interactivity& Mobilization	Do posts invite action? Is there user participation, volunteer engagement, or mobilization?
Misinformation& Ethics	Is there evidence of coordinated misinformation or hate campaigns? Are ethical lines crossed?

4.Literature Review

Digital campaigning is transforming the political communication landscape by changing the ways political communication actors interface with the public, disseminate information, and galvanize support. Considerable scholarly attention is now being paid to the implications of the shift to digital campaigning, especially in the context of South Asian democracies with competitive elections and an active electorate. South Asia, with its enormous, youthful population, is fast recognized as an important part of the world in which the scope and complexity of digital

campaigning is rapidly evolving. In more foundational theoretical work, Papacharissi (2002) the work of Jürgen Habermas has been used to put forward the idea of the 'public sphere'. They adapted it to study the emergence of digital spaces as possible venues for political engagement. Papacharissi (2002) has argued that the internet has the potential to form a 'virtual sphere' where citizens can go beyond the restrictions of mainstream media to air their views and participate in public discourse. This optimism has been countered by sceptics like Sunstein (2017) who focus more on the fragmentation of the public discourse on the internet and how it has turned into a partisan

digital echo chamber, largely because of algorithmic filtering coupled with commercial motives to tap into attention by prioritizing viral content instead of meaningful conversations. Another important theoretical perspective is the mediatization of politics, which posits that political activities are increasingly tailored to fit the format of the media. With regard to social media, political figures strive to design messages that are aesthetically delightful, evoke strong sentiments, and are easily sharable. The mediatization of social media has enabled the marketing of politics and leaders, which, in turn, has worsened the preexisting condition of personalization. This allows Modi and Khan to relate and engage with millions of followers without any intermediaries or filters.

The phenomenon of digitalization of campaign processes has received attention in the context of Western democracies. The integration of social media, data analytics, and grassroots mobilization in Barack Obama's 2008 and 2012 campaigns served as a watershed moment in the development of a coherent digital strategy. Kreiss (2016) and Howard & Bradshaw (2018) have described the subsequent campaigns, especially Trump's 2016 campaign, that used targeted advertising, algorithmic profiling, and social media marketing to unprecedentedly shift public perception. Such developments intensified the debate surrounding computational propaganda, disinformation, and the erosion of democratic responsibility. Looking at South Asia, the region offers both challenges and opportunities when it comes to digital political communication. The social media platforms Facebook, Twitter (now X), Instagram, and WhatsApp are used widely. However, their application in political practices has evolved differently, shaped by the intertwining factors of socio-linguistics, class stratification, media monopolies, varying degrees of state censorship, and surveillance. The literature on digital campaigning in South Asia, though evolving, remains shallow and predominantly focuses on individual country studies.

4.1 India

In India, digital campaigning has become a staple of competitive politics, especially after the 2014 general elections. Scholars Chakrabarti and Bose (2019) point out that the Bharatiya Janata Party

(BJP) has effectively exercised digital mobilization to integrate political narratives, especially via its vast IT cell network and WhatsApp group systems (Philipose, P., (2015). Udupa (2020) coins the phrase 'digital Hindu nationalism' to explain the use of online platforms to disseminate a blend of religious identity, nationalism, and state propaganda. In contrast, the Indian National Congress (INC) has been unable to keep pace with the BJP's digital footprint, with other studies pointing to its reliance on siloed and reactive communication along with disorganized, sparse interactivity in the digital sphere.

4.2 Pakistan

In Pakistan, the online evolution of Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) serves as a significant example of online populism. Ahmed and Skoric (2015) illustrate how PTI utilized Facebook and Twitter to cultivate a devoted online following and engage the urban youth. The party's digital tactics employed during the election drove the online discourse to a new height and included memes, slogans, and live streams. Nevertheless, PTI's digital rise has been accompanied by worrisome issues as noted by Digital Rights Foundation, such as journalism and dissent targeted by coordinated information suppression, politically motivated harassment networks, and the rise of digital stalking groups.

4.3 Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, digital campaigning functions through a heavily centralized system influenced by partisan divisions within the press. While the ruling Awami League has sought to project a pro-development Bangladesh image using digital channels, it is simultaneously accused of performing online surveillance and content reregulation to silence dissenting voices. As Hasan (2020) notes, Facebook functions as both a campaign platform and a tool for authoritarian control. Opposition parties, notably the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), experience digital disenfranchisement. International watchdogs, including Freedom House and Reporters Without Borders, document the shrinking of civic digital space in Bangladesh, where content tagged as opposition is routinely blocked or suppressed via algorithms (Shastina, Angelica. (2024).

4.4 Srilanka

The use of digital campaigning in Sri Lanka remained under the radar until the 2019 presidential election brought it into sharper focus. Supporting presidential candidate Gotabaya Rajapaksa, the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) executed an emotionally charged and technologically savvy campaign using Facebook and YouTube. As Senanayake (2020)

points out, the SLPP employed campaign techniques akin to those employed by Cambridge Analytica, utilizing micro-targeting, fear messaging, and ethnic nationalism to consolidate support. On the other hand, the United National Party (UNP) projected a more conventional, policy-driven campaign through digital channels that did not gain much traction.

Theme	Description
Personalization of Politics	Campaigns increasingly centered around leaders (e.g., Modi, Imran, Gotabaya).
Digital Populism	Emphasis on anti-elite rhetoric, emotional messaging, and “us vs them” logic.
Youth and Diaspora Engagement	Parties tap into tech-savvy youth and diaspora communities for support.
Disinformation Ecosystems	Use of fake news, deepfakes, troll armies, and WhatsApp rumors.
Platform Dependence	Over-reliance on platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp, which are vulnerable to manipulation.
State Regulation and Censorship	Increasing government control over digital narratives and opposition voices.

Here are some notable themes emerging from these national case studies in the context of South Asia. Politics have become more personalized, with the focus of election campaigns shifting to the individual leader's persona, rather than the political party's ideology. Another one is a targeted form of digital populism, expressed through anti-elite, nationalistic, or emotionally-charged narratives, aimed at disengaged or youth voters. Interspersed with these trends, digital spaces have become battlegrounds for the spread of misinformation, trolling, and psychological manipulation, with political parties frequently resorting to the employment of “IT cells,” bots, and fake accounts to disrupt and distort political dialogue. Moreover, the digital divide, particularly between urban and rural areas, still impacts the way different socio-economic groups interact with online content. There is still a lack of primary literature focusing on sophisticated comparative analytics for cross-cultural data within South Asian contexts. Scholarship employing a regional approach is still limited. In the broader scope of South Asian studies, the gaps related to data ethics, privacy frameworks, algorithmic manipulation, accountability of the platforms, and the technology's regional

application remain urgent and underexplored. There is an especially crucial gap in the literature that addresses the zooming-in consequences of digital electoral campaigns on the democracy framework, citizen engagement, and socio-political discourse in the South Asian context. To summarize, the literature associates digital campaigning in South Asia with the constantly reshaped global and domestic socio-political landscape. Parties utilize these platforms for demand and supply branding and constituency mobilization. This shift towards a digital paradigm also brings a disinformation challenge and ecosystem-level threats to democratic governance. This address the central aim of the dissertation and the scope of the comparative analysis, focusing on the strategic integration of social media by political parties in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka and the anticipated transformations of democratic politics in the region(Kumar, S Y Surendra. (2023).

5. Case Studies: A Study of Social Media Tactics Used in South Asia

The last decade has brought about an incredible shift in the nature of digital campaigning in South Asia. Smartphones, social media, and the internet

have all fundamentally shifted the nature of the interactions between the public and political parties, as well as the public relations strategies of narrative crafting and voter mobilization. This part examines the social media strategies of the prominent political parties from the four South Asian democracies: India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. With specific case studies, we analyze the extent to which digital media is being exploited for political purposes, the differing levels of achievement, and the prospects for democratic participation.

5.1 India: Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) vs. Indian National Congress (INC)

India has one of the most politically developed and digitally advanced countries in the region. With internet access exceeding 800 million, India has integrated digital media with political communication as a secondary to the workplace. Among Indian political parties, the BJP stands out for pioneering large scale, data driven digital campaigning. The party's social media activities surged during the general elections in 2014 and peaked in 2019. The digital strategy of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has a streamlined central framework and features important details of brand Modi's cult and image, which is mechanically and methodically broadcasted across various digital platforms. A micro-website, 'NaMo App,' is utilized to publish exclusive content, mobilize volunteers, conduct surveys, and harvest voter information. The BJP IT Cell as an organized army of digital volunteers and counters narratives, posts memes, and defends the party on X Twitter. During the 2019 Elections, BJP's campaign strategically utilized #MainBhiChowkidar and #AbkiBaarPhirModiSarkar to promote anti-corruption, nationalism, and support for Modi. Constituents of the party also played a critical role in the video storytelling strategy by producing and sharing short and long social media videos which transformed Modi's image into a relatable and visionary leader. The BJP continues to maintain a lead over the INC as far as digital space is concerned. Despite the presence of INC on social media, the party has given a reactive respond to strategies put in place. Rahul Gandhi's campaign in 2019 attempted to shift to online media, utilizing "Shakti" to direct grassroots volunteer organization, and #ChowkidarChorHai to

combat BJP allegations of corruption. Despite the attempts, the results were haphazard, poorly executed, and uncoordinated. INC's digital presence and narrative focused on themes of failure and critique, lacking the strong emotional appeal and captivating visuals which characterized BJP's communications. The emotional appeal and imagery serve as stark contrast to the INC's fragmented communications and dryness. The coherence of messaging differs greatly between the two parties, and as indicated by BJP, their narrative stands to be far more cohesive. The Congress party puts a focus to policies, while the BJP as a competition stands to fuel emotion widely (Zafar, Muhammad. (2024).

5.2 Pakistan: Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) versus Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N)

The outline of Pakistan's political digital landscape rests on the presence of the youth, social media penetration, and the growing political divide within the cyberspace. Among all political actors, the PTI under Imran Khan has made the most aggressive and effective use of digital tools. Starting from 2011 onward, PTI propelled its political narrative using social media and positioned itself as the clean, nationalist alternative to the "dynastic" parties. PTI's Imran Khan's personal account on Twitter played a crucial part in the progress of this campaign. It is worth noting that Imran Khan's tweets enjoyed the retweets of thousands and often placed on top in trends. PTI's strategy relied on a volunteer base made up of digital workers, university attendees, and Pakistani citizens living abroad who formed a loosely organized, yet synchronized social media army. Catchy phrases like #Tabdeeli and #PrimeMinisterIK served its purpose as well. PTI also utilized visual storytelling techniques by creating short documentaries, live-streaming speeches, infographics, and emotional videos targeting youths and potential first-time voters. PTI's digital campaign did earn some criticism, however, primarily for fostering online trolling through targeted abuse and disinformation against journalists and political opponents. PTI has also faced numerous allegations regarding the use of bot accounts and orchestrated fake trends to shift public sentiment (Akram, Aiman & Iqbal, Liaquat. (2020).

The PML-N, Pakistan's oldest and traditional ruling party, entered the digital sphere much later

than PTI. It only started serious digital campaigning in the lead-up to the 2018 elections. While the party produced digital content and participated on Facebook and YouTube, their messaging primarily revolved around celebrating governance successes and depicting legal victimhood, particularly regarding the disqualification and imprisonment of Nawaz Sharif. Unlike PTI, PML-N did not employ a more emotional and populist appeal to the youth. While PML-N did try to modernize the party's communications by having Maryam Nawaz lead the charge, the party was hamstrung by structural stagnation and a significant gap in both age and digital competence. Moreover, the party's online communications focused on "reacting" to PTI and failed to take the lead in conversations. Content was characterized as defensive and a deliberate absence of PTI allowed the party to dominate online spaces.

5.3 Bangladesh: Awami League (AL) vs. Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)

In Bangladesh, the role of digital media in politics is developing, although it is hindered by censorship and government oversight. The Awami League (AL) utilizes social media both for campaigning and for the control of information. In 2018, AL executed a sophisticated digital campaign focusing on its achievements regarding the country's infrastructure, economic growth, and the so-called "Digital Bangladesh" policies. They livestreamed speeches, and shared animated videos, success stories, and even real time address on Facebook, YouTube and Twitter. AL's attack content targeted the opposition, especially portraying BNP as a destabilizing extremist ally. The party's digital campaign coordination was virtually parasitic on government resources. Human rights groups characterize the gaps in government surveillance and political party information control as "blurring." The existence of pro AL pages and their algorithmic advantages have been documented. Content opposing the government was not only removed and suppressed, but branded opposition content faced rampant suppression. The existing party faced accusations of employing troll farms and digital disinformation campaigns (Tahrim, Md. Raiyan. (2024).

Despite severe constraints, the BNP sought to preserve some form of digital engagement

through posting videos of their rallies, showcasing political repression, and conducting public engagement through Facebook Live. The party was heavily impacted, however, suffering from frequent digital censorship, takedowns of pages, and arrests of digital activists under the purview of the Digital Security Act. Consequently, the BNP was overly careful, fragmented, and far less significant in their online activities. BNP's digitized activism epitomizes the more pervasive problem of the shrinking online civic space in Bangladesh, where government gatekeeping of the cyberspace stifles the mobilization of dissent and undermines democratic pluralism.

5.4 Sri Lanka: Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) vs. United National Party (UNP)

The 2019 presidential election marked a significant turning point in digital campaigning in Sri Lanka, spearheaded by the tech-savvy approach of the SLPP. The campaign of Gotabaya Rajapaksa was strengthened by younger digital strategists and the consulting services of foreigners, employing sophisticated methods like data mining, psychological profiling, and micro-targeting. SLPP constructed a multimedia narrative focusing on security, sovereignty, and Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism. Facebook served as the party's digital hub, where livestreams, videos, and memes created a considerable digital footprint. Exploiting public anxiety in the aftermath of the 2019 Easter attacks, they marketed Gotabaya as the "protector" of national security. He had a modern, efficient, and patriotic digitally sculpted image. SLPP supporters utilized WhatsApp, further segmenting the electorate among the urban youth, rural populace, and diaspora, distributing tailored messages to each group. Within the diaspora WhatsApp groups, messages—often containing false information spread like wildfire. In contrast, the UNP ran a policy-oriented campaign. Its digital narrative emphasized the completion of development milestones, economic growth, and reforms within public institutions. Consistent and polished as the UNP's online presence was, it lacked the emotion and populism that drove digital discourse in favor of the SLPP. Particularly in a post-conflict environment rife with identity politics, UNP's failure to engage voters

emotionally was a critical shortcoming(Peiris, Pradeep. (2022).

5.5 Cross Country Insights

All four countries were characterized by social media usage centered around distinct central campaign leaders (Modi, Imran Khan, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, Sheikh Hasina). Winning the battle of social media often required a strong, central, multidisciplinary social media unit for real-time engagement. The most successful campaigns focused on identity, security, and nationalism. These campaigns avoided detailed discussions of

policies and were built around simple and emotionally charged content, making them easier to disseminate. As a rule, incumbent parties exercised a greater ability to control the digital narratives and often used regulatory disadvantages, data access, or soft censorship to sideline counter narratives. The scope of digital campaigning of a truly universal strategy was limited because while voters in educated urban areas actively contributed to digital discourse, rural populations were often disengaged.

Country	Leading Party	Platform Focus	Strategy Highlights	Challenges
India	BJP	WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter	BigData,AI,Personal Branding	Misinformation, Privacy
Pakistan	PTI	Twitter, Facebook, YouTube	Grassroots Mobilization, Anti-elite Messaging	Trolls, Disinformation
Bangladesh	AL	Facebook	Propaganda, State Control	Censorship, Political Violence
Sri Lanka	SLPP	Facebook, YouTube	Ethnonationalism, Targeted Ads	Polarization, Ethnic Divides

6.Challenges and Ethical Concerns in Digital Political Campaigning

The transformation of political communication in South Asia has been fueled by increasing outreach and engagement, and enhanced personalization through digital channels. However, this shift has also come with a multitude of challenges and ethical issues, especially in nurturing democracies with scant legal protective frameworks, media literacy, and safeguards on data privacy. Political parties are in a hurry to step into this virtual digital stratosphere, and in the process, they are heightening the blurring of ethical frontiers which is consolidating harm on the core of democracy, civic trust, and electoral integrity.

6.1 Misinformation, Disinformation, and Fake News

The ethical issue of the digital spread of campaigning in South Asia that stands out the most is the practice of misinformation and disinformation. For several political parties and their volunteers, these are the most effective

modern tools to shift the public's view, destroy the reputation of political rivals, settle political vendettas, and engineer public approval. To sway voter sentiment in India and Pakistan, WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter are flooded with deepfakes, doctored videos, and false claims. Moreover, in many cases, unverified information spreads like wildfire and encourages brutal violence, including clashes, lynchings, and assaults on politicians. Because these platforms lack proper fact checking systems, they become even more dangerous. Relying on unverified information and potshots at journalists and political leaders, PTI supporters and members of the BJP have been accused of spreading communal unrest. Disturbingly, information wars like these are orchestrated by "IT cells" or social media war rooms with the intention of influencing or emotionally manipulating voters. The ethical issue rests on the social media climate with unconstrained rules and weak accountability(Chaturvedi, Subi. (2024).

6.2 Trolling, Online Harassment, and Cyberbullying

Another severe ethical concern involves **online trolling and harassment**, particularly targeted at journalists, human rights defenders, women, and political opponents. Political parties in South Asia often mobilize their supporters to discredit critics, resorting to threats, sexist abuse, and hate speech. In Pakistan, for instance, several female journalists have reported receiving coordinated abuse from PTI-aligned accounts. Similarly, in India, opposition leaders and activists critical of BJP policies have faced severe online harassment, including death and rape threats. The **toxic culture of trolling** is not only unethical but also poses a **chilling effect on freedom of expression**, deterring dissent and open debate. This raises ethical questions about **digital accountability**—whether political parties are responsible for the actions of their supporters and how far their leadership condones or controls such behavior. The failure to condemn or curb such abuse often implies complicity (Parmar, Sugandha & South Asia, Centre For Gender And Politics. (2022).

6.3 Data Privacy and Surveillance of Voters

The absence of a person's consent to utilize their private information constitutes a grave legal and ethical concern. In the South Asia region, political parties have begun to gather and analyze massive quantities of information to drive political campaigns, often harvesting data through social media, mobile applications, election rolls, or through third party analytic companies. In India, the NaMo App controversy during the 2019 elections raised concerns about its potential user data harvesting, data sharing, and targeted advertising practices. Bengaluru SLPP has also been accused of employing Cambridge Analytica-style micro-targeting that has far-reaching implications of manipulation and surveillance of voters. Most countries in South Asia do not have any formulated laws on data protection, which further complicates the matter. In the absence of laws, political parties have a free reign and exploit personal information, engaging in psychological profiling, targeted political campaigning, and even attempting to alter user behavior, which erodes the fundamental notions of informed and free voter decision-making (Peter, Harry. (2025).

6.4 Manipulation of the Platform and Bias from the Algorithm

Political figures tend to capitalize on the framework of algorithms employed by social media platforms to boost their visibility. Algorithms favor the content that engagements with. Inclusivity and of emotionally driven content, controversial, or divisive tend to do better. This structural bias inadvertently encourage sensationalist and polarizing content which is a hallmark of populist parties. As an instance, wrought with deceit and insincerity, these narratives are perpetuated through the strategic payment of hashtags and trending topics via bots and coordinated campaigns that aim to manipulate the public's perception of specific narratives. Under the veil of demonstrating fictitious mass admiration, political parties can also purchase fraudulent supporters, likes, and views. This type of subterfuge remains an ethical problem for the digital domain's transparency, as well as for the social media's responsibility. Even with the attempts of Meta, Facebook, or Instagram, and X Twitter on monitoring misinformation during election periods, the attempt remains the problem because political content almost always manages to bypass scrutiny disguised as grassroots or user-generated content.

6.5 Limited exposure and the divide digital

As a new forms of communication and social media, digital campaigning does not assume equilibrium in the access to technology, which is readily available in South Asia, a region with profound digital inequality. Digitally excluded older citizens, low income citizens, the underprivileged, and even rural populations fall under this category, which results in a very public spatial bias towards urban, learned, and highly educated tech users. Such issues create additional barriers around engagement and intersectionality. Investing more in digital marketing and outreach while neglecting in-person marketing campaigns, worsens the condition for people who do not have digital access. Furthermore, algorithmic bias in curation based on language and geography may privilege outsiders over local commentators to serve dominant or nationally spoken languages. Thus, in absence of internet, socio-political exclusion, digital empowerment, internet access, and digital

literacy, as well as, content relevant to the region would escalate (Michael, Ilesanmi. (2025).

6.6 Censorship, Surveillance, and Regulatory Power Abuse

In Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, the ruling parties are often blamed for using regulatory agencies to surveil, censor, and digitally silence the opposition. Such actions are commonly justified as fighting “fake news” or “securing the nation.” Still, the enforcement is politically biased and artificially silence the opposition while drowning in pro-government misinformation platforms. This is an obvious abuse of democratic systems and free speech and competition. Acts such as the Bangladesh Digital Security Act and Pakistan's PECA (Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act) have led to the arrest of online activists, journalists, and opposition leaders, fostering a pervasive atmosphere of fear. This system of surveillance gives rise to profound moral dilemmas relating to the use of state authority in monitoring digital environments and the possible diminishment of personal freedoms (Ahmed, Mustak. (2025).

6.7 Insufficient Policy and Legal Ambiguity

Most South Asian countries do not have strong policies in place to govern digital campaigning. Unlike conventional media, a region's digital media may not be bound by any laws and may, therefore, be used by different stakeholders for unfair advantage. The laws regarding campaign financing do not explicitly address online spending, and neither do the electoral bodies have the capacity or authority to supervise active online participation. Consequently, there is no system of accountability regarding digital advertisement, third-party participation, and sharing of data. This situation creates an opportunity for foreign, corporate, or anonymous online representatives to manipulate the narrative affecting elections without any accountability, deeply undermining the concept of electoral democracy and sovereignty (Satyanarayana, Dr. (2025).

In South Asia, the region's politics have been touched by the rapid growth of the internet and digital technology which has brought about new ethical problems. These issues include trolling, misinformation, data privacy, and surveillance. This new approach has potential both to deepen and destroy the heart of democracy, as it has the

capacity for abuse, and the potential for active participation and engagement. If the gaps relating to platform responsibility, media literacy, political integrity, and ethics; action; and policies for digital campaigning are not efficiently contained, technology might snatch democracy, and digital campaigning will become a tool for tyranny instead of empowerment.

8. Recommendations

To avert the erosion of democratic principles framed by the adversarial nature of digital campaigning, the recommendations enumerated below are collectively proposed:

8.1 Establish Clear Legal and Electoral Frameworks

Governments are required to formulate and implement an appropriate legal regime to govern digital campaigning. Furthermore, the electoral commission ought to align the campaign finance regulations to include digital and online expenditures, mandating parties to report online advertising, data harvesting, and third-party collaboration expenditures. In addition, there are adequate provisions in the law for the protection of personal data to be enacted in campaign regulations that govern the scope of data collection, utilization, and distribution in political processes. Such laws should ideally draw from international models, adapting to local contexts, like the GDPR of the EU.

8.2 Enhance Social Media Platform Accountability

The content moderation, transparency of algorithmic processes, election season reporting dashboards, and real-time reporting tools of South Asian tech companies require an upgrade. Social media platforms that fall under the purview of this regulation, including Facebook, X (Twitter), and YouTube, are expected to establish comprehensive political advertising databases, impose strict identity validation for advertising and sponsorship of political content, and work closely with electoral management bodies. Moreover, there is an urgent need for social media companies to allocate resources to counter misinformation in regional dialects by employing local language moderation and fact-checking frameworks.

8.3 Encourage Media Literacy

There is a need for civil society, educational institutions, and government, to implement specific campaigns for digital literacy, particularly in tackling misinformation. A trained electorate would be able to swiftly recognize information, including fraudulent news and algorithms designed to manipulate. Empowering citizens, particularly in the rural regions, to participate in the digital public sphere can be made possible through the integration of media education into the school syllabus and community-based workshops.

8.4 Develop Ethical Guidelines for Political Parties

Digital ethics, including truthfulness, discrimination, transparency, and privacy, need to be encapsulated into a political party's code of conduct. Each political party should be responsible for the actions of its digital branches, including volunteers and related influencers. Party campaigns for digital malpractice can be audited by independent, nonpartisan oversight institutions, as well as organizations who monitor elections and publicize infringements to motivate compliance.

8.5 Mitigate the Digital Divide

Investment in the internet is needed in the remaining rural and peripheral areas, both by the government and private organizations. Focus should be aimed at narrowing the gap for women, providing economically priced devices, and expanding infrastructure to provide political information to all. Engaging the citizens with low literacy skills should be done by localizing content in various regional languages and formats, including audio, video, and infographics.

8.6 Protect Free Speech While Combating Abuse

Governments bear the responsibility of harmonizing the regulation of harmful speech with the right of free expression. Laws that seek to online speech must be neutral and not wielded selectively or instrumentally against dissenting voices, journalists, or members of civil society. Any restrictions need to be compliant with international human rights standards, and must be subject to legal review and required to demonstrate accountability and openness.

8.7 Enhance Inter-Country Regional Collaboration

Given the cross-border nature of digital platforms, collaboration among countries is critical. States in South Asia can work together in forums such as SAARC to exchange lessons and deal with shared problems of misinformation as well as negotiate with global tech companies in a united way. Such collaboration can also help curb external manipulation of domestic politics and coordinated digital misinformation campaigns in those countries.

The digitalization of political campaigns in South Asia is a transformative and inevitable process. It comes with the ability to deepen democratic participation, modernize outreach, and amplify the voices of the marginalized. That said, tools of technology can also be employed to undermine trust, entrench authoritarianism, and distort democratic processes if governments, political actors, and platforms do not act responsibly and ethically. Achieving a balanced and equitable digital future not only requires creativity. It calls for thoughtful consideration, policy formulation, and restructuring. Digital campaigning's ability to enhance democracy in South Asia can only be realized through cooperative, open, and participatory approaches.

9. Conclusion

Developments in South Asia's region highlight a noteworthy change in ICT use in political communication, voter participation, and election management: the emergence of digital campaigning. With the increased internet accessibility, political parties in the region have come to perceive social media outlets as integral to their campaign machinery. This research has illustrated the extent to which the political parties of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka have utilized and continue to utilize digital technologies to construct narratives, galvanize public support, shape public opinion, and in many instances, engineer election results. The Bangladesh and Sri Lanka digital political campaign comparative case studies reveal that the determinants of digital campaigning are multi-directional, arising out of political culture, the level of institutional capacity, the media context, and the level of technology in the country. Dominant parties such as the BJP in India, PTI in

Pakistan, AL in Bangladesh, and SLPP in Sri Lanka have been relatively more digitally agile because of better funding, centralized digital resource hubs, controlled access to government bodies, and state machinery. These parties have established powerful centralized leader image-centered, emotionally appealing, and cross-channel coordinated media strategies. Despite attempts to modernize campaigning, there are severe challenges that arise such as ethical concerns. The spread of misinformation, trolling, privacy abuse, and algorithm manipulation threaten democracy. In most situations, technology is used to silence criticism, deepen societal divides, and distort public perception rather than encourage openness and transparency. Lack of comprehensive policies and privacy safeguards present in most South Asian countries make these challenges more severe. Also, the urban-rural gap excludes a major part of the electorate from active engagement in the politics. Simply put, the growing opportunities of digital campaigning offer a lot of potential; however, it raises core issues concerning ethics and accountability.

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