



POLITICAL COMMUNICATION IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA

LOCATING DEMOCRACY AND GOVERNANCE

Edited by
Yatindra Singh Sisodia and
Pratip Chattopadhyay



“The book *Political Communication in Contemporary India* edited by Yatindra Singh Sisodia and Pratip Chattopadhyay is a welcome new addition to the body of literature that establishes a connect between political communication, democracy, and governance in contemporary India. A collection of fifteen thought-provoking chapters, the volume discusses a wide range of issues from the impact of economic liberalisation to the rise of social media and its implications for political communication in Indian politics. Combining both theoretical frameworks and specific case studies, this volume provides fresh insights into the understanding, working, and dynamics of political communication in the engagement with democracy and governance at the grassroots level.”

Sandeep Shastri, *Vice-Chancellor, Jagran Lakecity University, Bhopal, and National Coordinator, Lokniti Network, India*

“This anthology brings out the salience of ‘politics’ in comprehending political communication. Anchored in the broad themes of democracy and governance, the chapters show the complex relationship between political institutions and political processes, the state and civil society, and electoral politics and political mobilisations. A collection of well-researched and cogently argued chapters, this volume is an important intervention in the field of political communications specifically and political studies in general.”

Anupama Roy, *Professor, Centre for Political Studies, School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India*

“An important book on an extremely interesting topic. A must-read for those in the field of political communication. This book will add new knowledge on a subject which is topical and relevant to present-day politics.”

Sanjay Kumar, *Professor, CSDS, Delhi, India*

“In this theoretically dazzling and empirically illuminating volume, the authors brilliantly and incisively bring back the agency of ‘politics’ to the centre stage of increasing geographies of fractious social and electoral conflicts in India and elsewhere. Further, this work should go a long way towards reviving the long-dormant field of political socialisation in the disciplines of political science, electoral sociology, and political economy – hugely enlightening and redemptive simultaneously!”

Ashwani Kumar, *Professor and Dean, School of Development Studies, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, India*



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Political Communication in Contemporary India

This book explores the forms, patterns, and trends in political communication in India in the twenty-first century. It underlies the influence of context in political messaging laying bare its complex, overlapping, and multidimensional structures.

The volume:

- Examines how political decision-making is shaped by media – through political speeches, community opinion leaders, and formal and informal public conversations.
- Explores a range of political communication channels – from community radio to social media.
- Presents an overview of the problems associated with message designing and message dissemination through communication channels in a political setting.
- Highlights how political communication impacts critical aspects of democracy and governance and goes beyond mere rhetoric.

A comprehensive work on the production, diffusion, transmission, and impact of information in a political environment, this book will be of great interest to scholars and researchers of politics, governance, democracy, media and communication studies, journalism, cultural studies, and South Asian studies.

Yatindra Singh Sisodia is Professor and Director, Madhya Pradesh Institute of Social Science Research, Ujjain (an ICSSR institute). His areas of research interest are democracy, decentralised governance, electoral politics, tribal issues, and developmental issues. He has been conferred with the Professor G. Ram Reddy Social Scientist Award (2017). He has authored/edited 20 books, including *Electoral Dynamics in the States of India* (Routledge, 2021); *Social Inclusion of Marginalised in India* (Rawat, 2021); *Strategies for Human Development and People's Participation in Rural India* (Primus, 2020); *How India Votes* (OBS, 2019); and *Two Decades of Panchayat Raj in India* (Rawat, 2017). He is Editor of *Madhya Pradesh Journal of Social*

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Preface

Contemporary India is beset with competing narratives about nationalism, freedom struggle, secularism, foreign policy, governance, and democracy. Such narratives are conflated in the public domain through speeches, statements, behaviour, body language, and press briefs by the political party in power and those in opposition through their leaders. In a multiparty democracy like India, this becomes an arduous task for communication. Political communication reflects that part of communication that revolves around the self-interested manifestation of one's own contributions which are politically and socially significant. In the context of contemporary India, every political party comes up with self-imposed certified communication about their effort to boost governance and democratic ethos. The COVID-19 period witnessed in India a situation where 'politics-of' and 'politics-in' communication continued among contending political parties in India on health, education, vaccine, and relief services. Such manifestations in print, digital, and social media shape political communication. This edited volume endeavours to identify how important and strategic they are in electoral politics, social engineering, and administrative efficacy.

It is well established that the three main elements of political communication are media, citizens, and political organisations (political parties, pressure groups, public organisations, and government). Brian McNair in his book, *An Introduction to Political Communication* (Routledge 2011, 6th edition), sketches in detail how political organisations try to communicate their position on several issues and areas to media through appeals, advertisements, programmes, and public relations. The media communicates to citizens through the report, editorials, commentary, and analysis. The citizen communicates their feedback through opinion polls, letters, blogs, and citizen journalism to media, which in turn uses the same communicative methods to provide those feedbacks to political organisations. Political communication being such a multilayered process faces an equally multilayered social audience in India. Issues of democracy and governance are recurring themes in political communication in India since Independence. With the deepening of democracy and good governance agenda taking the centre stage of political discourse since the late 1990s, political communication

became synonymous with electoral communication. However, with coalition politics gaining ground, political communication became an area of bargaining narrative building on the issue of democracy and governance.

Indian political system has seen changes in vocabulary and grammar of political communication with the change in political power at the Centre in 2014. Prime Minister Modi gave more emphasis on communication as compared to his predecessor Dr Manmohan Singh. From *Mann ki Baat* in radio communication to *Chay pe Charcha* type of street communication to *Sabka Saath-Sabka Vikas-Sabka Vishwas* type of electoral communication, Prime Minister Modi strategically infused the trio of democracy–development–governance in his political communication. While in yesteryears, Lalu Prasad Yadav introduced a typical regional variant of political communication with humour and satire, the present genre of communication is national, competitive, and contentious in character. As a result, in contemporary Indian politics, the communicative activity of individual political figures, public and government institutions, the media, and political campaigns draws scholarly attention. Like the political economy and political psychology, political communication study is a hybrid field with complex ancestry, permeable boundaries, and interests that overlap with those of related fields such as political sociology, public opinion, rhetoric, and media psychology. The emergence of transnational and non-national actors in communication field like that of identity and ethnicity and the enhanced ability of individuals to convey messages to large-scale audiences through the use of social media have broadened the scope of studies on political communication.

This volume attempts to locate elements of democracy and governance in the latest phase of political communication in the post-2014 period. It is true that the basic research approaches on political communication will remain intact but will undergo constant refinement. As the volume promotes, a network analysis by which information flows through various channels within the communication system can be traced treating each communication source as nodes in a network of interdependent relationships among agents and structures of communication in contemporary India.

Keeping in view the significance of academic debate and discussion on the various facets of political communication in contemporary context, the Madhya Pradesh Institute of Social Science Research (An ICSSR Institute), Ujjain organised a national seminar on this theme. Only selected papers presented in the seminar were taken together in this edited volume. The volume is relevant to contemporary times by adding the COVID-19-related dimension in some chapters and devoting an entire chapter to it.

We would like to acknowledge Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) for providing financial support to organise the seminar. We are thankful to all the chapter contributors who kept their patience in this long period for the volume and readily made necessary changes in their chapters. Comments, observations, and suggestions of the anonymous reviewer on

an earlier draft of the manuscript added a new dimension to the volume and we are grateful to the reviewer. Finally, we would like to express our sincere thanks to the entire team of Routledge India, especially Mr Aakash Chakrabarty, for support and encouragement in bringing out the volume for the academic fraternity.

Professor Yatindra Singh Sisodia
Dr Pratip Chattopadhyay



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1 Interplay of Politics and Communication in India in Contemporary Period

An Introduction

*Yatindra Singh Sisodia and
Pratip Chattopadhyay*

Political communication is a critical area of enquiry, and the criticality of perspective becomes manifold with the COVID-19 period presenting “crisis” in communication studies, be it political, social, economic, or interpersonal communication. The crisis stems from the variety of interpretations that lies in between message-coding and message-decoding in a turbulent period of profound sociopolitical change. In other words, whether policy interpretation (political/social/economic) or behavioural interpretation (interpersonal), ‘designed message’ for communication is far away from ‘expected message’ for communication leading to varied interpretations ranging from positive to negative. Advancement in information communication technology (ICT) has played a major role in continuous screening, comparing, and analysing message designs. Analysis of disjuncture between ‘designed message’ and ‘expected message’ in communication surfaces the importance of democracy and governance. Expression of free-spirited expectations pressurising the government to engage with each one of them is a signpost of vibrant democracy while the strategy of accommodation and aggregation of these expectations in message design for communication is the art of governance. India, being the largest functioning democracy in the world, a continuous web of communication unfolds between state and citizen, between non-state actors (political parties, pressure groups, NGOs) and citizens, and among citizens on issues of democracy, development, and governance. Extremities of ‘netizen’–‘citizen’, ‘digitisation of society’–‘digital divide’, ‘tele-politics’–actual field-level ‘citizen-politician’ interface, ‘democratic governance’ (political)–‘good governance’ (technical) contextualise political communication in contemporary India.

During elections (national, state-level, and local-level) and even between elections, communication shapes how government functions, how it relates to citizens, how it provides routine public services to them, and how public order is maintained. Interactions about social and political relationships between citizens inter se and with government functionaries structure political communication. There has been a sea change in the field of political communication in India over the years as an audience of communication,

that is, the citizen has changed in form while the sender of a communication, that is, government structure and politicians have remained the same in form. Citizens are 'de-centred' these days, that is, they are not concentrated in 'social' and 'political' space but have scattered into 'apolitical,' 'virtual,' 'global,' and 'spiritual' spaces. Therefore, what is required today is not one-dimensional message design for 'one-dimensional man' but multi-variate elements-based message design to address de-centred constituencies of contemporary citizen/netizen. At the same time, one has to keep in mind the simultaneous presence of 'earlier generation' of the citizen in 'social' space looking for 'earlier generation' principled, ideology-based political communication. Given 'deepening of democracy' in India, it is quite possible to imagine that message design for communicating policy position or issue position simultaneously to economically driven 'de-centred' as well as politically driven 'centred' citizen is an uphill task of state-driven, civil society organisation-driven, party-driven, leader-driven, community-driven, or market-driven governance. Therefore, a redefinition of both politics (in terms of governance/management) and communication (in terms of democracy [equal distribution of accessible communicable messages]) is the need of the hour to understand contemporary political communication in terms of form, structure, and message design in India.

The broad sense of available literature in political communication studies zeros in on the role of social media in such a proportion as if at present political communication takes place in social media space challenging the primacy of 'politics' (Brants and Voltmer, 2011). This volume interrogates such general reasoning trying to bring back 'politics' in the understanding of political communication. The idea is to contextualise the 'agency-structure' relationship in analysing the 'political' content of communication in India. The available literature on political communication mixes up 'political' (politics) with 'technology' (media communication) and loses the inherent complexity of the context and process of political communication in a cosmopolitan twenty-first-century India. The mainstay pathways for political communication are electoral manifestos of political parties, language used in communicating the social and political message by leaders of various political parties during and between elections, media representation of the political message, policy briefs of various governmental departments, and political messages through advertisements, films, and theatres.

Deepening of democracy and good governance are two buzzwords in Indian politics since the late 1990s (Yadav and Palshikar, 2000; Kohli, 2001; Chaturvedi and Sharma, 2005; Reddy, 2012). While the former is an indigenous process following entrenchment of coalition politics and globalisation process in Indian social and cultural systems, the latter is a technical conceptualisation based on the World Bank's understanding of service delivery to the citizen. The content of political communication revolves mostly around two important issues – meaning and performance of governance and democracy. While governance is measured on 'service delivery' capacity and ability

of the state, 'democracy,' is measured on two counts – (a) extent to which questions can be raised freely and regularly on performance of state (b) distance between promise of political leaders during elections and delivery of promises between elections. The vibrant space of civil society in India also communicates through its various organisational forums, issues of social and political relevance with the state on behalf of the citizen. Debates centring on tolerance–intolerance, majoritarianism–minority, nature of federalism, old party-based politics–new movement-based politics (broad issues of democracy), regional disparities, state-specific problems, sub-national demand for statehood, citizenship registration–deregistration, industrialisation–agricultural policies, healthcare faculties (broad issues of governance) flare up time and again in political communication in contemporary India.

Political socialisation and political participation are important issues in the analysis of political communication. While the former is the source, the latter is the manifestation. People's participation gets influenced in multi-variate ways out of which political rallies and media coverage are important mediums having a communicative effect. The message that is designed through these mediums mainly deals with discourses on rights, development, and decentralisation. Differences in understanding the meaning of 'politics' and 'political' in a rural and urban setting in India force communicators to recourse to different ways of communicating their desired message on social and political issues.

There is a dearth of academic literature on the theme of democracy and governance vis-à-vis political communication in social science disciplines. Political communication as a subject has been mainly studied in the disciplines of management studies and psychology. The existing literature on political communication in general, and India in particular, revolves around electoral communication, media communication, and the political economy of communication. These works focus on specific themes and therefore are extensive in their reach. However, India in the twenty-first century offers a complex structure of communication where overlapping patterns get noticed. Therefore, a specific thematic understanding of communication types and the basis of communication, that too, having a political underpinning gives the reader a sense of bits and pieces of ground reality. In this context, the volume covers an extensive range of forms, patterns, and trends in political communication in India. It offers a sense of how complex, overlapping, and multidimensional political communication analysis can become. It is a wholesome presentation of real-world political communication in India in the twenty-first century.

In This Volume

Keeping in view the significance of this topical issue, various chapters of this present volume are an outcome of a national seminar organised by Madhya Pradesh Institute of Social Science Research, Ujjain (an ICSSR institute). Selected papers were presented and later thoroughly reviewed and edited.