Social media participatory development communication during COVID-19 by Elected Women Representatives (EWR) of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI) in India

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Abstract. Technological advancement has mandated many elected representatives to use social media for socio-political participation, participatory development, and currently to create awareness about COVID-19. Examining the social media usage experiences of elected women Panchayati Raj representatives during the COVID-19 pandemic reveals insights into their efforts towards creating awareness on COVID-19, ease of communication during the pandemic, increased involvement in developmental issues, and the challenges faced by them. The qualitative data that emerged from the in-depth interview are analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis method. The participants experienced instances of positive outcomes, overcoming the limitations caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and fighting against it. The elected representative become more accountable and sensitive to the development issues arising in their constituency and look for ingenious ways to solve them. Apart from the administrative and Panchayat related activities, social media platforms are also used to extend help and services to the poor and disadvantaged sections of the society during this difficult time. Critical development issues such as water and environment protection are also dealt with effectively through social media platforms.

1 Introduction

COVID-19 has brought the whole world down to its knees at its peak. Now that the world is trying to get back on its feet, people everywhere see a ray of hope to feel the normalcy. During the "new normal," the most easily available, large-scale tool used for accessing pandemic updates, especially by youngsters, women, and elected representatives, has been social media (Vardhan & Pulipaka, 2020). For local governments in India, social media is being increasingly used for keeping citizens safe and informed while the nation worked to flatten the curve of COVID-19.

Panchayati Raj in India was guided by the Directive Principles of State policy of Section IV in the Constitution during the constitutional Assembly, mostly on account of the political instability and scarcity of funds in the new administration. "The aim of the PRI is

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to develop local self-governments in districts, zones, and villages. Rural development is one of its main objectives. PRIs have been established in all states of India except Nagaland, Meghalaya, and Mizoram, and in all Union Territories except Delhi” (“Panchayati Raj System in India - Evolution, Objectives, Types of Committees,” 2020).

Women's participation at the local self- government was ensured, by the historic 73rd and 74th amendments in the Indian constitution in the year 1992, by facilitating 33% reservation for women in the Indian rural governance process. This landmark amendment enabled women to participate in Gram Panchayats and other local institutional level meetings (Phukan, Kumar, & Majeed, 2018). “Karnataka was a stellar example, being the first State in the country to implement the Panchayat Raj Act, which mandated 25% reservation for women, in 1987 prior to the Amendments. As many as 14,000 women were elected in the first elections held in 1987 in Karnataka” (Bageshree, 2009). Local communities have been stigmatized by anxiety generated by lockdowns, concerns of COVID-19, and the fear of contamination. The “infodemic”—distinguished by an overload of reporting, mixing facts, bickering, and “mis”news—is a central factor in our societal stigma in times before. Conspiracy theories and false (prevention) treatments can render the war on COVID-19 more complicated and lethal (Nava, Tonelli, & Clini, 2020). Participatory development requires proactive engagement with the people for a prolonged period. The use of social media is ideal for the same in the changing times of technology especially during the pandemic.

2 Research Methodology

2.1 Objectives

To the best of our knowledge, social media has been efficiently used in the participatory development communication by women representatives of Panchayati Raj in India mainly during this pandemic. Hence, this study has the following research objectives.

- To explore nature, pattern, and purposes of social media usage by women representatives of PRIs.
- To explore the use of social media for participatory development, especially on important societal issues; sanitation and health by elected women representatives of the PRIs during COVID-19.
- To study the women representatives’ experience of using social media for life and work, at PRI and its impacts on them.
- To study the barriers in utilizing social media in facilitating development of their constituencies.

2.2 Research Questions

The following research questions were framed to conduct this study:

RQ.1: Does social media play a crucial role in participation of women in PRIs as EWR and in influencing their personal growth and development?

RQ.2: Has woman’s participation as EWR in PRI increased her chances of better mobility, network and sphere of interaction with Panchayat members at different levels, community and higher level through social media?

RQ.3: Does participation of EWR in PRI increase her influence and participation in social and community activities through social media?

RQ.4: Does the attitude of husband, community and male PRI members change towards women in respect to her empowerment in social media?

2.3 Theoretical Framework

E.M. Rogers in 1962 introduced the Diffusion of Innovation Theory, which is a social science theory. “Diffusion of Innovation theory reaffirms that in communication, over time, how an idea or product attains momentum and merges (or spreads) through a certain population or social system. The result of this diffusion is people adopt a new idea, behavior, or product as a part of social system. Adoption means an individual will do things differently than how they did previously (i.e., buy or use a new product, gain and perform a new behavior, etc.). The person must recognize the idea, behavior, or product as new or innovative, which is paramount to adoption. It is only through this mechanism that diffusion becomes possible” (Diffusion of Innovation Theory & Behavioral Change Models, 2019). Rogers’ innovation theory is helpful for conceptualization of technology and their adoption in the context of social media usage by EWRs. Hence, this theory has been used here as the theoretical framework to verify and explain the impact of factors, in particular, usage and adoption of social media for participatory development in rural India.

2.4 Sampling and Tool of Data Collection Methods

Here, the social media usage of EWRs of PRIs for participatory development, especially during COVID-19 is explored among 16 village Panchayats of Bengaluru, Mysuru, Kalaburgi, and Belagavi divisions of Karnataka state in India. 32 women Panchayat leaders were interviewed face-to-face both and online. Written consent was taken from EWRs to conduct the interview. Data are analyzed anonymously. The research design was approved by the institutional ethics committee.

2.5 Data Analysis

The qualitative data that emerged from the in-depth interview are analyzed using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis method. This is a qualitative research method for identifying, analyzing, organizing, describing, and reporting themes found within a data set. This study uses the six steps prescribed by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarizing with collected data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report.

2.6 Socio-demographic details of the participants

The participants had substantial years of experience as elected representatives, with 24 having five years of experience, 6 having ten years, and 2 having seven years of experience. Most were qualified with 12th standard (18), followed by 10th standard (10), and graduation (4). 26 participants were affiliated to different political parties, while six did not have any active political affiliations. The age range of the participants was 28-47 years. All participants were married except two. Apart from four participants, the others were not involved in any other occupation. All 32 participants had a history of social media use, with 20 of them having used it for 5-6 years and the rest for 3-4 years. The most used social media platform was WhatsApp and Facebook.

3 Thematic Analysis and Interpretation

EWRs seem to have multiple levels of connections on social media – an official group of which the President, Vice president, Secretary, and Panchayat Development Officer, are

members, apart from a village- and a ward-level group. Information, including notices from higher authorities and COVID-19 related updates, are posted so that everybody can stay up to date.

“Our village WhatsApp group has around 180 participants. I also have a separate WhatsApp group that includes our respective wards' residents. If there are any problems in the ward, or any infrastructure related issues, the residents revert back to us with queries and even pictures in some cases, and we are able to respond accordingly. Social media has indeed proved to be a boon for us during this pandemic”, said a 30-year-old woman representative.

Fig. 1. Women Panchayati president conducting a meeting to create strategies to fight against COVID-19 (Photo: Authors).

The analysis revealed four overarching themes, including 1) Creation of awareness about COVID-19, 2) Ease of communication during COVID-19 3) Increased involvement in development issues during the pandemic, and 4) Challenges faced.

3.1 Creation of Awareness about COVID-19

Ever since the onset of the pandemic, people have grown increasingly curious to know about the disease and everything related to it. EWRs especially have found it easy to extend their duties onto the digital world by sending useful COVID related information and updates to the people in their constituency.

A 41-year-old participant noted, *“My children were always spending too much time on social media like Facebook and WhatsApp, and I used to think that they consumed only trivial and unnecessary content. Fast forward two years to today, I feel that my children have taught me the best thing that helps sensitize citizens during the COVID-19 pandemic: how to access verified information and news about the disease and preventive measures against it, and how to share that information to people who need it, via social media. We also attended the social media training session along with ‘ASHA’ health workers to create awareness among our wards['] citizens. Thanks to our efforts, nearly everybody in my constituency knows how to protect themselves against COVID-19 and prevent infection, while also educating the people they know in the neighbouring constituency about social distancing and proper use of masks.”*

Fig. 2. EWRs and “ASHA” health workers attending the session on social media usage (Photo: Authors).

A 36-year-old women representative states, *"we have effectively created social awareness within our ward on avoiding COVID-19 related stigmas - shunning affected people, forcing them to vacate from rented houses, giving them 'other feeling'. And minimizing celebrations and limit participation in our village festivals through WhatsApp and Facebook, messages and illustrated posters were circulated in these social media platforms."*

Although social media use has bridged the communication gap in terms of creating awareness about COVID-19, awareness about digital interventions for gram Panchayats seem to be low. For example, a 40-year-old EWR noted, *"It seems that the Prime Minister has introduced an online portal for Panchayats all over the country, called 'e-Swaraj', that provides a lot of useful information and knowledge, especially about how to tackle COVID-19. But my colleagues and I were unaware of it till recently. I have noticed that even if some people are aware about important things like this, they do not let us women representatives know. This is a really big challenge, especially during this pandemic."*

3.2 Ease of Communication

Social media usage, in general, has facilitated effortless communication. Especially during the time of COVID-19, when social distancing is being highly encouraged and venturing out into public spaces is being discouraged, the challenges posed to the work of women elected representatives have only increased. In these circumstances, social media has come to their rescue. The increased use of social media and its preference is the result of flexibility. The theme, ease of communication, corresponds to the perspectives of participants about the comfort levels they experienced in using social media for communication during the COVID-19 outbreak.

In the words of a 39-year-old EWR, *"I started using social media like WhatsApp for four years only, exactly after being an elected representative. In the initial days, I had to go to each person or to paste a public notice to inform the public about any program to be organized, including Gram Sabha. Most of the time, people complained that they were not aware of crucial information. During the pandemic, I was motivated to use WhatsApp. Now I know everything, how to use it and to be able to communicate to the people effectively."*

3.3 Increased Involvement in Development Issues

The third theme that emerged was increased involvement in development issues. With the pandemic in full-force, it is especially important that constituencies be developed enough in terms of infrastructure, facilities, etc., to be able to brave COVID-19 with the least casualties possible. The constant interaction with the people of the constituency and appropriate interventions are central to participatory development. The increased integration of social media is perceived as having positive impacts on such interventions.

A 28-year-old participant said, *"Social media is a great platform to sensitize the people about various issues, and about stigma attached to COVID-19 especially. It is the primary source of information for me about the different problems in the ward, identifying people with travel history, vulnerable people such as older or disabled people, pregnant or lactating mothers and even cases of domestic violence. Whenever there is a problem, people keep me informed about it through social media. Social media has helped me increase my engagement with the development issues in the constituency."*

Another young participant explains, *"I use social media to raise awareness about issues such as water, sanitation, road condition and cutting of trees and also find solutions for them. It helps people to connect with me and vice versa. COVID-19 has not been able to stop us, thanks to social media."* (32-year-old elected representative of PRI). *"We have been very advertent towards the fact that during this pandemic public hygiene is the primary concern to be up against Covid-19. Having gathered information through Facebook post regarding drainage overflow in some other Panchayat limits, I became vigilant and watchful about any such problematic cases in my Panchayat limits"*, she added.

Fig. 3. Villagers highlighting their problems related to public hygiene on Facebook. (Photo source: Facebook public domain).

3.4 Challenges

Evidently, social media has brought positive changes in terms of communication and involvement for development issues despite COVID-19. However, the participants also encountered problems. The theme, challenges, refers to the participants' perspectives on the difficulties they encounter while using social media for participatory development. The challenges are potentially preventing the elected representatives from reaching the voters and getting involved in the development activities.

A participant having seven years of experience as an elected representative says, *"Social media like WhatsApp is significant for the developments in the wards and Panchayat. But the problem is most people do not have such facilities, especially women. Most of the young people have it, but they use it for purposes that suit them. The economically weaker section cannot afford mobiles and recharges. Hence, they are deprived of it, and sometimes they miss important information, and the restrictions placed due to the COVID-19 pandemic aren't helping much either"* (A woman representative aged 43 years).

Access and digital literacy are not the only challenges. *"It might appear to others that as a member of the Panchayat in my constituency, I have a say in important decisions. But since my ward was reserved for only women, my husband couldn't contest the elections himself and made me a candidate instead. When I won, it was he who won through me. My husband has taken over all the work and even the social media activity, The COVID-19 pandemic has become his excuse for not allowing me to step out much. Even though I might be free, I'm still a prisoner of patriarchy."* said 37-year-old women representative.

4 Discussion

For elected women representatives, social media has turned out to be more of a boon than a bane. It is a highly effective weapon against all the negative changes brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, while also being a platform for creating awareness/ sensitizing citizens against the disease itself. Social media has made communication easy. It has enabled wider participation of leaders and their wards in solving developmental issues and maintaining a flow of important information. Though it has its own limitations and there are challenges, social media comes as a ray of hope for all elected women representatives who want to keep doing their bit for the country.

Social media usage was perceived as beneficial by most participants for better involvement in the development issues of the constituency. The participants experienced instances of positive outcomes, overcoming the limitations caused by COVID-19 pandemic and fighting against it. Through this, the elected representative became more accountable and sensitive to the development issues arising in their constituency and looked for ingenious ways to solve them. Apart from the administrative and Panchayat related activities, social media platforms were also used to extend help and services to the poor and disadvantaged sections of the society during this difficult time. The critical development issues like water and environment protection were also dealt with in a better manner through social media platforms. Studies have also found that people's engagement through social media has positive impacts. A study from Mexico reports that social media has improved public participation in the process of planning and better decision making (López-Ornelas, Abascal-Mena, & Zepeda-Hernández, 2017). Another study reports that access to social media is influential in ensuring rural communities' participation (Stern, Adams, & Boase, 2011). Porter and Hellsten (2014) also highlight social media's potential in addressing social problems through people's active engagement. The urgency to fight various issues related to the pandemic through EWRs of PRIs cannot be stressed enough as

they can become key agents against the pandemic and help boost participatory development in their unique ways. Women Panchayat members are able to communicate COVID related information better and become the main link between service providers and villagers.

Nevertheless, challenges pertaining to the use of social media for participatory development by EWRs are manifold. The first one is awareness about digital Panchayat interventions. The second is the accessibility and affordability of facilities. A significant portion of people are still unaware or deprived of digital devices and internet access. The third challenge is the lack of digital literacy among people. The lack of knowledge about operating mobile phones and social media also prevents people from using facilities. The ultimate result of such deprivation is being disconnected from important information, empowerment, and awareness about various issues like COVID-19 pandemic and being out of touch with current events. Studies also show that the digital divide is prevalent in India and contributes to social inequality (Ragnedda & Muschert, 2013).

The issue of proxy involvement of men is another prevalent issue. Tiwari (2014) has addressed the role of proxy participation in highly male-dominated socio-cultural environments, pointing towards an initial role-reversal of males taking on a nurturing role to help assist novice woman members of the Panchayat, with the women asserting their independence within a short span of time. However, we come across a situation where the EWRs lack the confidence to do so and are unsure of their capacity to play an active role in participatory social media communication due to patriarchal pressures.

5 Conclusions, Implications, and Significance

Social media has turned out to be more of a boon than a bane for EWRs. Switching to social media for participatory communication and enacting developmental changes has paved the way for empowering EWRs. Social media usage is perceived as beneficial by most participants for better involvement in the constituency's development issues. However, challenges regarding social media usage for participatory development are manifold. The primary challenge is creating awareness about digital Panchayat interventions. The second is the accessibility and affordability of infrastructural affordances for social media communication. A significant number of villagers are still unaware or deprived of digital devices and internet access, despite the "Digital India" push. The third challenge is the lack of digital literacy among people. With the given provision of reservations to women in the local bodies, there has been an increase in the number of women representatives in the Panchayati raj institutions, in a high number. However, empowerment of women is neither an easy process nor does it come by sheer institutional arrangement, for women representation. Women from various cultural backgrounds, classes, and communities have duly assumed the role of people's representatives. However, the patriarchal culture, attitudes and interferences are the main causes for limitations, in which women function in these institutions have become major hindrance in the performance of their expected responsibilities. The lack of knowledge of operating mobile phones and social media also prevents people from using facilities. The ultimate result of such deprivation is the disconnect from significant information, empowerment, and awareness about various issues like the COVID-19 pandemic and being out of touch with current events.

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