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roopahari.7@gmail.com**The potential of social media in preventing identity based conflicts**

The relevance of a 19th century leader like Gandhi in a 21st century is primarily due to his teachings of nonviolence. The increasing massive violence of contemporary society cannot lead people towards wellbeing and peace because of the inherent violence's present in many of foundational edifices of contemporary societal living. In a context of this sort, the teachings of Gandhi acquires immense significance because he showed a path and victory of nonviolence in the war of injustice and violence perpetuated of any source and nature. The contributions of media in the socio-political events have been immense since the freedom struggle, eventhough, in course of time, the structure, the form, ownership and content of media had underwent changes, but in no way, it had dwindled its popularity among people. In this post-globalisation age, the influence of new digital media has been pervasive in all spheres of society. Social media, the virtual community network of people is making a mark in all socio- economic cultural life of people. This paper attempts to explore the potential of social media in preventing identity based conflicts from the perspective of Gandhian teachings. It is carried out by analyzing the Facebook pages started on the theme of communal harmony, one humanity notion etc.

Key Words: Social media, Gandhian secularism, people-centric, Identity, Feminine political strategies, Gender conflicts, communal harmony.

Inclusive nature of social media

Social media which belongs to new media forms is a platform where possession of media by few is dissolved and the door of accessibility is open to a wider group. In other words, media is getting decentralized in digital age. Initiating a debate or generating an opinion / support for a social cause from all over the world have gone into the hands of ordinary people. Hitherto, people were at the receiving end of media content never the participator in content formation. In other words, the boundaries of communicator and receiver are blurred. As a consequence, the agency of people experience more space in order to control media than in the past. This is a positive contribution a social media can offer in this conflict ridden world. Gandhi, throughout his political life believed in mass participation of people at all levels of societal engagements. In his times, he restored to travelling to meet people. Now in this digital age, a different scenario of infrastructure in order to reach out to public is present in society.

On the face of it, a quick look at the active Facebook pages on the above theme in cyber world reveals, the less discriminating nature of social media while incorporating its members to the group. It operates to welcome people to join the group because inherently, a social media group functions in a direction to expand the group/ followers list. In other words, online interactions indicate the presence of various identity groups in the cyber world of which most of them in a face to face interaction may continue to exist as completely unknown people. This has largely to do with the unique nature of interactions happening in the cyber sphere, which privileges an individual to connect with people without travelling to the time and space of the other fellow and also the absence of stress of inviting somebody to come to our own time- space for an interaction. Moreover, memberships to a Facebook group happens without much of a moral or institutional criteria's; unlike the other social groups. Therefore, the unstructured nature of social media facilitates more number of people to join.

Moreover, it is socially and psychologically less straining to be part of a diverse identity network group in a cyberspace than in a face to face interaction. The insignificance of the orientation of your body, the freedom to time your response, separation of actions and words accounts for the above character. Excessive institutional interventions and consensus are being minced in social media's in comparison to earlier forms of media, is in a way, providing a platform for the voices of people. The language of the ordinary people in a commonsensical world forms the major part of texts posted in social media sites. Language of intellects and experts do not receive any special privileges. Gandhi spoke in the language of ordinary people. This helps to easily connect and relate with one another among people though it is a public forum in spirit.

The network society of information age is evident from the profile of the people who follows these social media sites. A Sikh, a Muslim, an African, a Hindu, a Korean belonging to same group interacting about similar topics and interests in a non-hierarchical manner is something that as of now, social media is only capable of offering. Because communication

systems of earlier times were hierarchical and highly unidirectional. In the past, such a group was only part of bureaucracy or institutions. But now, it is started by common people who share similar interests. This new trend of media in the hands of people is creating ruptures in the already empowered state institutions and arrogant legitimacy of national and international policies. Platform for Expression of dissent was very limited for ordinary people in pre-globalisation times. But things have considerably changed with the arrival of social media. Gandhi, in his life time used to write personally and separately the responses to each letter. Because, he acknowledged and respected the diversity of the agency, contributions and interests of each individuals and also he believed in a communication of mutual interactions.

The increased frequency of global connectedness happening in social media can provide insights and critiques of our own social flaws to people. Gandhi believed in the notion of learning from other value systems, without giving up one's own. The possibility for this sort of practice can be significantly high in a social media sphere because of its continuous exposure to the entire global events.

On the other hand, certain sections of society are quite invisible in this space, particularly, marginalized sections primarily on account of lack of accesses to internet technology and their abysmal circumstances. (Carr , Deborah 2007 : The global the digital divide.)

Popular critics of Face Book accounts and other social media opines of the phatic communication (Vincent Miller: 2008) happening in this group. It is not necessary that a discussion on serious issues can only prevent identity conflicts. In fact, it can be more a fulfilling experience towards identity harmony since we are able to chat about the mundane activities with a wider group thereby demonstrating certain amount of solidarity. Harmony among Groups sustains through continued participation and interaction of serious and non-serious matters. Thus social media helps to bring the diverse groups on the platforms of public and private sphere in hand in hand effortlessly. Dismissing the potential of social media on this account is a matter for reconsideration. In other words, a continuous dialogue between people on mundane activities can enhance the harmony building processes. Because, everyday activities of commonsensical world reflects the social value systems and its intricacies. A more and more interaction can facilitate an environment for accommodation of values of various social groups.

Modernity, Social media and Gandhi

The western notion of state institutions as responsible for the prevention of identity based conflicts dominates Face Book pages. This is very much evident from the criticisms and comments regarding the legal and judicial systems of our nation, whenever there is a conflict outbreak. Reposing security and prevention of conflicts primarily in the hands of law and state is a notion that modernity introduced to the society. Eastern philosophy had always believed in

the role of social institutions, communities and people in this regard. Gandhian approach very much falls in later category. Externalization of the sources for conflict rather than locating the same within oneself hardly finds the space in new media engagements. Gandhi believed and practiced that each individual has a moral responsibility in abjuring the skirmishes of any magnitude, at any part of the world. Violence perpetuated in the outside world were always understood as flaw within oneself in Gandhian life. The fasting carried out by Gandhi during Hindu -Muslim riots after independence exemplifies it at its best. Any text/posts in social media on personal initiatives are very lacking in number. A strong condemnation of violence and critiquing of state structures are happening; but not much of a reflective thinking and actions at the individual level.

As a continuum to this trend, the increasing discharge of surveillance activities on people in the name of prevention of conflicts finds space and acceptance in social media pages and the changing discourses on peace keeping.

Similarly, a trend of abhorrence to tradition than correcting the flaws within tradition dominates the social media pages, which in a way is reflecting, traces of colonial influence and the mood of larger section of middle class. Photos like `caste away caste` corroborates the above notion because instead of appealing for equal status of all castes, abolition of caste is preferred. This is indicating a deep internalization of western ideologies. The injustice perpetuated via caste system can be fought by winning equality of all caste groups and most importantly the solution is not ostracizing of caste system from traditions because traditional identities of this sort instills a sense of depth in the culture and identities of common people. Gandhi, constantly talked about the need to critique one`s tradition by standing inside in it. The untouchability propagated via caste system was opposed vehemently by Gandhi, but simultaneously, he insisted on performing the so-called menial jobs of society by every individual and not advocated for western model of equality, in which caste never had any role.

The dynamics of gender identity in social media and the Gandhian strategies.

The Facebook groups started on communal harmony related topics mostly figure the gender conflicts happening across the globe. The posts on increasing rape incidents , Afghan women`s education, honour killings, Saudi Arabian women driving a car etc. invites the responses of people in the network group. At the peripheral level, this, in a way indicates the attention received for these issues in online community.

Women participation in matters of common concern have always existed with its share of complexities. The direct and active participation of large number of women in political matters was confined only to movements led by Gandhi. In all other cases, masculinity of a woman have brought her into public sphere because of the foundational violence involved in political strategies. Gandhian approach and practice being essentially feminine, reached out to

participation of women in freedom movements. On a different note, the social media of online community is encouraging once again for women participation and viewpoints in the common concerns of public sphere. As all of us know, an online interaction as a public forum do not entails the physical presence of participating individuals. From women point of view, this is extremely determining factor for the smooth participation because it relieves her from the unconscious burden of carrying and orienting her own body to public and the subsequent patriarchal gaze and oppression associated with it; even though the invisible and influential hand of patriarchy can be subtly observed in the cyber sphere too. Still, one cannot dismiss the promise of social media for women in participating processes which facilitates gender equity and other peace keeping events. Supporting evidences of the patriarchal nature of public sphere are found in Nancy Frazer's work 'Rethinking the public sphere' in which she argues that public sphere was constituted by a number of significant exclusions and how the public sphere conceptualized by Habermas in his work 'the structural transformation of public sphere was essentially the common concern of privilege'. Also, if at all, the Talks of women liberation happened in that sphere, it was done largely by men only, with very rare exceptions. The agencies of an ordinary women are seldom visible. In this context, women been able to contribute in texts on a wider variety of issues in social media pages are very encouraging signs. The actions mediated and carried out in social media for common concerns are highly feminine in nature in comparison to earlier forms of media and political approaches. Governments of present times, have bowed to the pressures of social media supports which is nothing but supporting a cause or a guarding a principle by sitting at our homes in whatever parts of the world.

The mentioning of Gay rights on a communal harmony FaceBook page indicates wider concerns of identity conflicts in society. In a way, a sensitive issue like gay rights are better discussed to a wider group without much of an emotional fuzz in an online interaction than social interactions or other forms of media. The space for these issues indicates the vast potential of the platform called social media in dealing with identity issues.

Liberal approach

The Facebook group on communal harmony, onepeople.sg etc. reflect predominantly the encouragement for the co-existence of multiple religion among people's life. Acknowledgment and greeting for various religious festivals elucidate the above argument. Moreover, social media celebrates the intermixing of people in a religious festival like that of a Muslim child dressed up in the lord Krishna's attires on the eve of *krishnajayanthi*, a Hindu greeting Eid Mubarak on the eve of Ramzan in terms of circulating images and comments. This is reflecting the everyday secularism of ordinary people, spoken by Gandhi. In Gandhi's view, the ordinary people of Indian society had always practiced to take part in other religious festivals without losing or compromising on one's own religious consciousness. Critiquing of one's own

religion was recommended by being part of it rather than distancing or separating from it. Gandhi, though practised Hinduism, incorporated various elements of other religions throughout his life. The forgiveness and unresorting to violence towards one's enemy in his politics of non-cooperation and non-violence are something that was inspired from Christianity. For Gandhi, religion is a form of consciousness which involves simultaneous innateness and transcendence in one's life. All this notions and approach of religion invariably ensures communal harmony without sacrificing one's personal choice of religion.

In his work, *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi is acknowledging the need to get rid of flaws of our tradition like untouchability, sati but he never embraces the western state institution like law, railways, medicine rather he holds his feet deeper into the tradition of our civilizations.

In such a context, social media texts and observations, do not in any way intent to convey that earlier such practices of everyday secularism of ordinary people do not existed; instead only on the wider reach of such continued reaffirmation of positive practices among people. Because, earlier images on these occasions were more institution propagated rather than people propagated though the commonsensical ordinary world of India had practiced secularism. Moreover, the secularism adopted by Indian state have always been criticized for its extreme institutional, unfitness to Indian state because of the values practiced and advocated in our civilizations from all quarters of society including Gandhi.

The dynamics of patriotism and its unfolding in Facebook accounts is revealed primarily through our understanding of relations shared with neighboring countries. In fact, a demonstrative Indianans is lacking in these online pages. This can in a way be attributed to the globalisation culture. As all of us know, nation-state lost its active role in the life of citizens with the implementation of neo-liberal policies and the subsequent structural adjustment programmes. Privatization of many sectors dwindled the demonstrative patriotic loyalties among ordinary people significantly.

On the other hand, addressing Pakistani's as friends, a passing thought on the painful partition of India and Pakistan on the eve of independence, teachings of Gandhi, a reflection on the deep pains and regrets induced mutually in wars etc. indicates the aspiring oneness. Gandhi have always envisioned actions and principles for the larger humanity and not limiting to any territorial boundaries. He believed more in creative anarchy and compassion of ordinary people than in an established state. The discharge of emotions regarding the welfare of human kind from people on a wider platform would not have been heard in the pre-digital age of media or before. Because, until then the language of state and its institutions were heard throughout the world with few exceptions here and there. State institutions and structures being soulless would not have been inherently sensitive to the wellbeing of the whole of humanity. But on the other hand, the ordinary people may have been corrupted by injustice of their circumstances but will never loss the spirit of humanity in their actions however little it may be. Feeling equally for the fellow Indians and Pakistanis in a war perpetuated by state reveals this undying spirit of oneness.

Conclusion:

Identity interactions, solidarity and prevention of conflicts can only be done effectively by working with people on a large and wide scale. Mediated and unmediated continuous interpersonal dialogues are essential to it. Social media can contribute significantly in this context primarily for the reason that the content of media can be discharged by people. Gandhi, who believed in the potential of a mobilized masses for pursuing social causes had given a new phase and shape in our freedom struggle movements. Until then, common people were never part of our independence movement that significantly. With the demise of Gandhi, we have been drifting away from the ordinary people and their voices. Social media of present times, have emerged as an ally for the ordinary people and their voices in this context, unlike those state mediated structures and few private owned arrangements.

On the other hand, these social media group helps to understand the mood of large middle class of our country. It was very rare a sight to see a text on the personal initiatives taken by people in their personal life. In other words, non-victims is lacking an empathetic understanding to these issues of identity conflicts. Their responses are more impulsive, sympathetic and lacking coordinated sustained actions and views. Social media is also throwing light on the changing middle class aspirations and conceptualization of societal change.

In the study of identity conflicts, it is often found that a strong sense of 'we' and 'they' feeling and the subsequent deprivation of resources as one of the reasons for identity conflicts. Interestingly, social media never promotes such a sense of intense 'we and 'they' feeling. In other words, the network of people engaged in social media encourages and rewards for global acceptance of and by people or the larger humanity. The sense of rootlessness and ephemerality experienced by an individual engaged in such social media is also a matter for thought.

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