

Digital Authoritarianism in India: Twitter Outcries

Ayesha Zafar*

Introduction

Twitter has filed a lawsuit against the BJP government in India, extending its battle in the country as the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi pursues greater control over crucial online statements. Twitter's petition, submitted to the Karnataka High Court in Bangalore, challenges the Indian government's recent instructions for the platform to erase content and deactivate thousands of accounts.¹ Twitter complied with the governmental directive, which had a deadline, but subsequently filed a legal challenge. The complaint is the first lawsuit filed by the company in response to regulations approved in February 2021 that expanded the Indian government's censorship authority. The guidelines granted the government with control over Twitter and other social media platforms, allowing officials to dictate the censorship of critical tweets or accounts.

India's Information Technology Rules 2021

After working for years, the Indian government published the '**Information Technology (Guidelines for Intermediaries and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules 2021**'² in February 2021. With direct government oversight, the new laws require that if a government ministry identifies the information as unlawful or damaging, it must be deleted within 36 hours. With enhanced compliance burden, the guidelines also require WhatsApp to permit the identity of the 'first originator' of the information, requiring

them to violate their end-to-end encryption procedures; resultantly paving the path for the creation of a surveillance state. Furthermore, the guidelines come with the provision of penalising company executives with criminal charges in case of non-compliance.

Prodding Social Media for BJP's Narrative Building

With seeping authoritarianism in the digital spaces, India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi seems to be tactically making efforts to protect his narrative in the country. The foundation of Modi's power in India is his narrative building with the plentiful ingredient of nationalism. From controlling state media to changing curricula, Modi is now embarked on the politicisation of the digital platforms to serve his Hindutva-based discourses and narrative.³ This effort of the Indian Prime Minister not only seeks to strengthen BJP's social media propaganda but also aims to shut the voices of common people who protest, present facts and truths, and raise concerns about government inadequacies. By labelling such content as 'anti-national', the Bharatya Janta Party (BJP) government is taking away people's right to experience unhindered receipt of unbiased information. Also, the Indian administration is apparently limiting and suffocating the speech of its opponent parties as twitter, in its lawsuit, stated that some of the block orders refer to political content provided by official accounts of Indian political parties. In the aforementioned context, it is noteworthy that previously in India, election fever would

* Ayesha Zafar is an Intern at the Institute of Regional Studies (IRS), Islamabad. She is working with the Cybersecurity Program at the Institute.



linger on in the air for a couple of months, lasting until the polling day. Conversely, the BJP administration workers are now guaranteeing that India remains in election mode throughout the year with their excessive and hysteric use of social media. With stricter governmental regulations and repressive controls on social media, BJP seems to have an upper hand in presenting its electoral narrative and influencing Indian voters with biased content. No other party in India can replicate this technique due to a lack of resources and limited control.

Post Truth Ecosystem in India⁴

The governmental control over twitter, which the Indian Information and Broadcasting Minister Prakash Javadekar (in 2021) termed as 'responsible freedom'⁵, is actually a creation of government-controlled online environment in India which renders the users to only view and experience what the government wants them to view and experience. Widespread online hatred, misinformation, and fake news, which the Indian administration claims to expel, can be potentially propagated by the Indian government itself. This here brings the definition of post truth,⁶ the conundrum of which was already present in the sinews of the Indian political culture. It is believed that we all are living in a post truth era. However, the Indian people, seamlessly, are more vulnerable to the colour coded truths and alternative facts, given the post truth political climate being generated by Modi with the help of social media tools. With the resolution of altering the whole sense of reality and subjectivisation of truth on social media, Modi aims to shape public opinion based not on objective facts but appeals to emotions and beliefs of the Indian people. Stricter controls along with excessive oversight and arbitrary

involvement of the government in the social media are symptoms of extreme online post truth ecosystem within the country which would prove extremely difficult for the Indian people to escape. Under the deeply ingrained agenda narrative labelled "Modi ji ne kia hai to sahi hi kia hoga (If Modi has done it, he must have done it right)," the promise of secular and democratic India appears to be losing against populist passions within the morphed spectrum of truth.

Indian Administration Pioneering for Orderism⁷

Owing to its popularity and the abundance of news and opinions on daily basis, social media particularly Twitter, has not just maintained itself as a critical element of globalisation but also has become a major supplement to every state's media and journalism. Pluralistic media is a principle tenet of democracy. India's overbearing and repressive measures towards social media delineate how the country is shifting from a democratic state to an orderist state, i.e., a state which prioritises societal order over neo-liberal values, particularly individual freedom. The threat to free speech on social media platforms is linked with the global decline of democracy itself with the arrival of right-wing populism (i.e., Hindutva), to which India is the greatest victim.⁸ Not only the world order is shifting (from unipolar to multipolar), but also the era of globalisation and neoliberal values are also shifting towards de-globalisation⁹ and the emerging global concept of orderism, generating downward spirals for certain liberties. India's repressive legal posture towards social media freedom to post unbiased content is a pioneering effort that will pose ramifications beyond India giving opportunistic nations a handbook for how to silence their dissidents under the veneer of nebulous

justification like social harmony and national security.

Comprehending the Implications

The case of the Twitter suit is less about one big tech company fighting a certain government, and in fact, more about basic human rights vs. the autocratic statures of governments. The Twitter lawsuit is alarming for the Indian people themselves who need to realise that the current issue raised by the big tech is an issue of the Indian people; forceful compliance is a contributor to the breakdown of other democratic institutions and principles in the country. The definition of offensive or harmful content is subjective; this definition in India is controlled by the BJP authorities in the country according to their orderist orientations and political agendas. If the Indian administration is successful in controlling the social media in the country completely, not only the Hindutva narrative will prevail inexorably, but also the government will be successful in facilitating its corruption activities and hiding its flaws with morphed and moulded content, and shaping public opinion in favour of the government. Here the infamous statement of Amit Shah "We can keep making messages go viral, whether they are real or fake, sweet or sour"¹⁰ is noteworthy. With that, this needs to be realised that the Indian government with this excessive control is trying to suppress the Indian people's right to privacy, right to freedom of speech, right to information, and right to enjoy civil-political liberties. Additionally, with the populist orientation of the BJP, the voices of minorities (for which social media was an effective tool) will likely be suppressed leaving them unheard and unaddressed. With that, it is important to underscore that these regulations are just one shade of BJP's tactical surveillance spectrum. Highlighting Modi's digital authoritarianism,

Chief Minister of West Bengal Mumta Banerjee rightly stated in 2021, "You (Narendra Modi) are trying to turn a democratic country into a surveillance state."¹¹

Lastly, reiterating, India's governmental threat to social media will set a precedent and may also fuel a global menace to media freedom. Consequentially, with the fear of excessive government-created regulatory and financial pressures along with legal restrictions, future big techs will be hesitant to enter the Indian market despite its huge population and smaller start-ups in India with less resources might be stifled as a consequence.

No Lesser Perils for Pakistan

Pakistan is also not safe from the digital authoritarianism of India. The official accounts of Pakistani Diplomatic Missions in Egypt, UN, Iran, and Turkey are banned in India, and for that Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Pakistan recorded a protest as well in August.¹² Also, Twitter's whistle blower Peiter 'Mudge' Zatkó's alleging¹³ that India tried to permeate the security system by forcing twitter to appoint Indian representative is alarming for Pakistan. These threats evince how India's digital authoritarianism is shrinking Pakistan's voice and representation. Desolately, cyber security negotiations between India and Pakistan were one of the few potential doors opened for collaboration and cooperation between the two countries but India seems to be leaving no stone unturned to exacerbate the distraught ties between the two countries.

Conclusion

India is a major source of government demands for content takedowns and blocking accounts to Twitter Inc. and Meta Platforms Inc. Twitter's complaint does not seek to repeal the laws, but it claims that the government construed them too extensively with little

justifications. Shutting down internet services in critical areas, imposing draconian laws on social media companies, and unnecessary censoring of content have become the policy priority of the Indian Administration. Indian administration must be heedful of the fact that online speech is protected by the Indian constitution under article (19)(1)(a).¹⁴ Considering the increasing interplay of technology with democracy, the Indian government must realise the sensitivity of the ongoing suit; it must revise its authoritarian

moves in the digital spaces and allow social media giants to maintain their rights. With the present conservative digital orientation, India is clearly portraying itself as nothing but an authoritarian country with widespread surveillance of its citizens posing digital threats to their privacy and speech. However, two very perplexing rather crucial questions have reappeared on the surface with this suit: should social media be regulated by the governments? If yes, then how can this be done?

Notes and References

- ¹ Karndeeep Singh and Kate Conger, "Twitter, Challenging Orders to Remove Content, Sues India's Government," *The New York Times*, 5 July 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/05/business/twitter-india-lawsuit.html>.
- ² Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, Information Technology (Guidelines for Intermediaries and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules 2021, (New Delhi, 2021), <https://mib.gov.in/sites/default/files/IT%28Intermediary%20Guidelines%20and%20Digital%20Media%20Ethics%20Code%29%20Rules%2C%202021%20English.pdf>.
- ³ Pal Joyojeet, Priyank Chandra, and V. G. Vinod Vydiswaran, "Twitter and the Rebranding of Narendra Modi." *Economic and Political Weekly* 51, no. 8 (2016): 52–60, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44004416>.
- ⁴ Ravi Joshi, "The Contours of India's Post-Truth State," *The WIRE*, 27 June 2021, <https://thewire.in/politics/the-contours-of-indias-post-truth-state>.
- ⁵ "Spreading Rumours Not Part of Press Freedom: Prakash Javadekar," *NDTV*, 7 February 2021, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/spreading-rumours-not-a-part-of-press-freedom-says-prakash-javadekar-2365082>.
- ⁶ Taylor Meckley, "Post Truth Era: What does it mean, and are we living in one," *ZU Media*, 3 November 2019, <https://zunews.com/2019/11/post-truth-era-what-does-it-mean-and-are-we-living-in-one/>.
- ⁷ Jochen Bittner, "The New Ideology of the New Cold War," *The New York Times*, 1 August 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/02/opinion/the-new-ideology-of-the-new-cold-war.html>.
- ⁸ Arvind Sharma, "On the Difference between Hinduism and Hindutva," *Association of Asian Studies*, 2020, <https://www.asianstudies.org/publications/eaa/archives/on-the-difference-between-hinduism-and-hindutva/>.
- ⁹ Joseph Stiglitz, "Getting De-Globalisation Right," *Social Europe*, 7 June 2022, <https://socialeurope.eu/getting-deglobalisation-right>.
- ¹⁰ "Real or Fake, We Can Make Any Message Go Viral: Amit Shah to BJP Social Media Volunteers," *The WIRE*, 26 September 2018, <https://thewire.in/politics/amit-shah-bjp-fake-social-media-messages>.
- ¹¹ Sanjay Kumar, "Indian Opposition accuses of BJP of Turning Country into Surveillance State," *Arab News*, 22 July 2022, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1898176/world>.
- ¹² "Diminishing Space of Plurality: India Blocks Twitter Accounts of Several Pakistani Diplomatic Missions," *DAWN*, June 28, 2022, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1697138>.
- ¹³ Pakistan Seriously Concerned at India Infiltrating Twitter's Security System," *Express Tribune*, 6 September 2022, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2373763/pakistan-seriously-concerned-at-india-infiltrating-twitter-security-system>.
- ¹⁴ Ministry of Law and Justice Government of India, *Constitution of India*, (New Delhi, 2022), 9, https://legislative.gov.in/sites/default/files/COI_English.pdf.