

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE NORTHEAST INDIA AND ITS CHALLENGES ON INDIA'S NATIONAL SECURITY

P. J. Khache

Ph.D. Research Scholar and UGC-Senior Research Fellow (SRF)

Department of Defence and Strategic Studies, Savitribai Phule Pune University

Poashemai [at] gmail.com

Abstract

People from the Northeast region of India have been racially and culturally often found discriminated when they move out of the region to different parts of the country. Some commentators point out that it was due to the lack of information about the people of the Northeast and their culture and suggested to include the information in the school text book as well as more media coverage about the people. Interestingly, although every Indian school children learn about the geography of the country, particularly the map of the country, the information about the people and the culture of the Northeast has not been well informed, for such reasons many North Easterners were questioned about their nationality or throw racial slur at them despite sharing the same nationality. Today due to the advance in technology and the coming of internet, education about the culture and people living in different parts of the country were familiarise through various platforms, particularly social media. Social media plays an important role in disseminating about the people not only living in different parts of the country but also living in different parts of the world. However it also provides a platform for disinformation as well as it could be used for disruptive purposes. The infamous Northeast exodus that happened in 2012 posed serious question on two reasons: about the people of the Northeast and the challenges on India's national security, particularly from social media. The role of social media on national security has posed a new field in security studies today. With new development and advancement comes with new challenges. The role of social media in the Northeast region have pros and cons. Connectivity and accessibility of information with the other part of the world are becoming much more familiar and easier, on the other hand containing false/fake news is becoming more common. While understanding the role of India's national security, this article study and analyse the role of social media in the Northeast region of India. Conflict prone region like Northeast region, with the concentration of numerous ethnic groups in a small geographical space along with numbers of separatist groups is an interesting subject to delve with.

Keywords: *Northeast India, National Security, Non-traditional Security, Social Media, Culture*



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National Security and Social Media

The definition of national security is not static. The concept may differ in different period, different situation and to different people. However it can be broadly understood as
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safeguarding national core values and national interest. Safeguarding the elements of nation-state is the top most priority of every nation. Traditional concept of national security is mainly safeguarding territory and political sovereignty. However according to K. Subramanyam, it goes beyond the threats of territorial integrity and sovereignty; it encompasses economic development plans and communal harmony.¹

The term national security was often misused as something to do with military forces. The broadening of the concept of security (prominently by the Copenhagen School of Security Studies) which transcend into broad aspects has introduced new challenges. The non-traditional security which brought about information security, cyber security, social security, political security etc., brings attention to various national security threats.

In different era there exist different security challenges or new types of challenges, these challenges are both from traditional and non-traditional security threats. The broadening of security concept also introduced several scopes of understanding national security. Today, one of the most significant security challenges comes from cyber security. And the role of internet or social media have direct and indirect impact on national security, for instance the direct threats may consist of those threats which directly disrupt law and order, and the indirect threats may be those cultural elements in the social media which in due course of time wash-away or largely manipulated the old traditional social-cultural life of the people.

Due to the efforts of globalisation and the advance in information technology, internet became useful instruments but on the other hand several security threats were born. The introduction of internet has brought a drastic change in response to addressing issues such as security, polity, economy and social and cultural life. Hence cyber security is a great deal in security studies today. The information warfare and cyber terrorism possesses a significant national security threats to disrupt social peace and harmony and there are several cybercrimes such as thief, fraud, manipulating data, illegal business etc., which challenged personal security and community security or national security in general.

And today, social media plays an important role in availing excessive information and contribute better and advance connectivity also at the same time posed security challenges. Social media introduce a new field of interest in national security studies. Some of the security threats from social media are cybercrime, cyber terrorism, social-cultural manipulation, riots and other social chaos from fake/false news etc.

Security perception in the Northeast

Today, the term ‘security’ is a very broad topic and has complexity while defining. Post WWII, security studies became a synonym to strategic studies and post-cold war security concept has grown into issues that threaten or could threaten individual, state and international systems. According to Barry Buzan,

Security is taken to be about the pursuit of freedom of threat and the ability of states and societies to maintain their independent identity and their functional integrity against forces of change, which they see as hostile. The bottom line of security is survival, but it also reasonably includes a substantial range of concerns about the conditions of existence.²

Also, Buzan has point out five sectors of security namely, political, military, economic, societal and environmental, that these five sectors do not operate in isolation from each other.³

In the Northeast, security issues were usually looked from the point of traditional view of national security problem, that the presence of militants posed a great threat to national security and the security problem were dealt with military forces. So, tackling security problem of the region are mostly confine to countering insurgency or countering the militants, although non-traditional security threats constitutes large part of the security problem in the Northeast. In reality, the security threats coming from economic, political and social issues are great burden in the region. Some of the prominent security threats of non-traditional security in the region are, terrorism, trafficking of arms and drugs, illicit business, illegal immigration, cybercrimes and cyber terrorism, human security and threats to socio-culture of several ethnic groups.

Significant role of Social Media and the challenges

The public broadcast media such as radio, television and newspaper provides information to people. The development of internet has brought a drastic change in media. Today, social media act as a medium of communication devices which introduce new advancement because of the availability of excessive information and also the information can easily disseminate to the common mass in short span of time. It holds a very significant role as it provides medium of communication where information are exchanged or disseminate to the people, particularly in terms of closing the gap of accessing to information. It functioned in bridging the gap between ‘information rich and information poor’⁴. Hence accessing to various types of information is a privilege.

The nature of media has drastically changed with the transformation in communication fields due to the advancement of technology. Access to information is at ease, people are more

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informed and more connected and the world seems to be closing the gap of distance due to better accessibility and connectivity. On the other hand, excessive information brings new challenges, authenticating and monitoring the information demands in maintaining peace and stability. Possibilities in diffusion of misinformation and countering false/fake news build new level of challenges. Today, social media become a major concern in political polarisation, extremism and other security related issues today.

The advancement of technology has developed social media for social networking. Usage of social media is one of the most popular online activities. According to *statista*, a database industry, it was estimated that in 2018 the number of 2.65 billion were using social media worldwide and was projected to increase to almost 3.1 billion in 2021. Social networking has become more popular in social life. Some of the popular social networking apps are WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube etc. Since the introduction of smartphones and various mobile apps, low-cost or free chat, social messaging apps have proven themselves as a cheap alternative to operate-based text messaging via SMS.⁵

India, which has a huge young population, has a good market for smartphone. According to a survey by eMarketer in 2015, India is estimated to have over 800 million mobile phone users in 2019 and India will account for about 12.5 percent of the global smartphone market by 2020.⁶ The number of social media users in India is 326.1 million in 2018 and is expected to increase to 448 million in 2023.⁷ Amongst all the social media, WhatsApp and Facebook are very popular in India. There are 400 million active WhatsApp users in India and Facebook messaging app had reported 200 million active users in India in February 2017.⁸ The massive population of the country exposed to internet provides advantages and disadvantages as well. Social media provides one of the most efficient ways of accessing to information. It provides the platform for expression of thoughts and concerns. It counter societal polarisation for the functionality of a democracy. Social Media has developed that an ordinary people as opposed to professional journalists create user-generated news.⁹ On the other hand, social media have contributed to the rise of populism throughout the globe as it gives the platform for ordinary citizen and politician to express their viewpoints uncensored by the professional and ethical rules of the traditional mass media.¹⁰ Mobilising agitators or mass movement is much easier today due to the introduction of electronic media and digital media. Northeast region in this sense is very much vulnerable, the communal elements can come from 'they' vs 'us' as there are serious concerns of illegal immigration in the Northeast, also the geographical space in the region is concentrated with numerous ethnic groups and several separatist groups.

During the protest of Citizen Amendment Act (CAA) there was shutting down of internet at several areas in the Northeast out of concern from circulating the anti-CAA protestors. Social media which provide the facilities to circulate information, images and videos within a short span of time to great number of audience troubled the concerned authority while controlling the protester to de-escalate the conflict.

Role of Social Media in the Northeast

As far as social media in Northeast India is concern, it facilitates connectivity and excessive information accessibility. Though the region may be geographically isolated or has geographical barrier, through social media it connects with the rest of the country as well as with the other parts of the world. Another important factor of social media in the Northeast is the very nature of social media which is participatory, where the concern or the voice of the common person can be shared or addressed in this platform.

Today, a tweets or a post in any social media can be circulated and spread in a short span of time. It has the potential to serve the information regarding schemes or other governmental programs and reach out to the common mass within a short span of time, moreover it can also provide to check whether the funds or schemes has reached to the targeted people. The Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region (MDoNER) which is a vital government agency also recognised the importance of social media to reach to the targeted audience. On development of the region, MDoNER's secretary Naveen Verma said that, "social media with its presence will not only disseminate information about important government schemes, but also pave way for two-way interaction with the people of Northeast"¹¹. One of the prominent regional political parties in the region, the National People's Party (NPP), used social media for election campaign and to reach out their objectives to the common people.¹² Using social media to campaign during election and selling propaganda during election has become very common today.

Cultural integration and conversion

Social media can play a vital role in soft power agenda. It has the potential to alter the culture and the perception of the people. There are several civil society in the Northeast region who have such fear of manipulating the tradition and cultural of their existing society. For instance, cultural consciousness was imposed by the Manipuri militants and they banned Bollywood movies from playing in the theatre or even selling the compact disc (CD) in the market. Although the militant group alienate Hindi movies in the theatre, but English, Korean and Manipuri movies are screened in the theatre.¹³

Today one of the most popular social media influencer in the Northeast is Korean drama and K-pop culture. The behaviour and costumes of many young people in the Northeast resembles the people in the Korean drama and K-pop. Particularly, ‘youngsters are the main Korean media consumers mostly movies and dramas in Manipur as they are very fond of it. This phenomenon makes the youngsters tendency in adopting Korean culture.’¹⁴ No doubt Bollywood have touched the region in many ways but in today’s context it may not be as effective as Korean drama and K-pop culture. Apart from them, the region has been heavily influence by Hollywood and western music. In many aspects, social media facilitate cultural and social integration.

Social media as a new security challenge

Security challenges coming from social media is mostly in the form of all kinds of cyber security threats and information security. As information can pass beyond border within short interval of time, social media has become one of the most influencing factors in security disruption. Today almost every social movement are broadcasted in the social media platform and terrorist groups used social media in multiple ways to maintain their organisation. Terrorists used social media for various reasons such as financing, recruitment and to promote agenda/propaganda. For instance, terrorist groups like Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) are actively using social media in their strategy documents as the *mujtahidun*, the highly engaged core of ISIS’s social media machine which drives the success of ISIS’s effort to promulgate its message on social media.¹⁵ One of the primary objective of terrorist is to create fears in the mind of the people, thus social media which facilitate to pass information to audience gave the terrorist to spread propaganda and terror messages to the targeted people. Moreover, recruitment and radicalizing through social media are becoming common. In a research carried out by Majid Alfifi, Parisa Kaghazgaran, and James Caverlee, it was found that ISIS tweets posted by the reported ISIS-related accounts are 23, 880 accounts that generates 17,424,323 tweets; all re-tweets of ISIS tweets including those from themselves are 10,436603 re-tweets posted by 551,869 users; and all tweets that mention any of the ISIS accounts are 19,570,380 generated by 745,721 accounts.¹⁶

Another regular experience, especially in security disturbed region, for resolving security problem was shutting down internet. Shutting mobile internet is common where there are riots, agitation or intensity of conflict is worsen, to stop from spreading rumours and information which could fume up the situation, for e.g. the internet shut down in Kashmir post abrogation of Article 370. In 2019, during the agitation against Citizen Amendment Bill

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(CAB), internet was shut down in several parts of the Northeast. As stated by government authority, the reason for internet shutting down was to maintain the security issues. During CAB agitation, the Tripura's Home department states that, "SMS, WhatsApp, and social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are being widely used for transmission of fake images and videos as well as text messages which have potential to incite violence in the state"¹⁷. Internet was banned in order to maintain from spreading rumours and to maintain law and order. Prabhakaran Paleri observes that 'as distorted information, rumours can cause simple misunderstanding to gut-wrenching riots, and beyond. Spreading rumours is an act that has criminal intonations. Most of the time, rumours actually cause damage at various levels and intensity.'¹⁸

A significant study on the role of social media as a new security threats can be drawn from the Northeast exodus in 2012. In the mid of 2012 the violence erupted between indigenous Bodo community and Begali speaking Muslim in the districts of Assam which causes a huge mass movement not only from the conflict area in the State of Assam but from various major cities of the country. Northeast community living in Pune, Bangalore, Hyderabad, Chennai and some of the other major cities of the country were threatened by some local Muslim populations in reaction to the doctored videos and images circulated in the social media. The morphed images and videos circulated in the social media contain inflammatory clips of anti-Muslim violence that ignited the tension. The doctored images and videos believed to have come from Pakistan have created an intense chaos in several cities.¹⁹ In response to the threats and rumours circulated in the social media, thousands of Northeast students and working people left for home State in panic fear.

The infamous Northeast Exodus has taught that social media has a huge potential to disrupt social fabric and the security of India. The incident also exposed various elements like racial discrimination and lack of political and social integration of the Northeast region. The incident exposed the alienation of the Northeast people in which they have felt themselves apart from the rest of India.²⁰

Conclusion

The changing nature of conflict and broadening the concept of security has brought more responsibilities to address in the field of security studies. The news from other part of the world influences the local activities, and the manipulated news could disrupt the social and communal harmony. Social media which facilitates common people to access to excessive information and which are easily accessible has the liability to influence while choosing a

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leader or could influence the society to great extent. The holder of the information has the potential to change the perception of the audience. And today, the role of fake/false news has become a new scope of study.

Social media can play a huge role in social, cultural and even economic integration of the Northeast region with the rest of the country. Today there are various music videos and television shows in Hindi as well as other regional languages of the country followed by Northeast people in the social media. Also, there are many videos about Northeast India available in the internet which promotes the land and natures, people and festivals of the Northeast which endorses tourism. There is a huge scope that through social media the people and the land of the Northeast can be familiarise and promotes which in turn the problem of discrimination of the Northeast might found some solutions. The event like Northeast Exodus taught various lessons that not only racial discrimination faced by Northeast community but there can be greater threats to national security from social media.

Though it is difficult to maintain social media from fallen into the wrong hand, careful monitoring cyber related issues is much required. Cyber terrorism and Cybercrimes are two areas where Northeast region can fall into its prey. As the region composed of several ethnic groups with porous borders, lives in the peripheral of drugs producing countries and the numbers of militant groups, there are potential chances that the region could be trapped from the issues related to cyber terrorism and cybercrimes.

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