

## The Role of Communication in Shaping Indian Democracy-A Systematic Review of Literature

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### Abstract

In the world's largest democracy, communication acts as a foundational pillar of public participation, accountability, and state legitimacy. This study investigates how different communication channels—from traditional print media to contemporary digital platforms—have influenced the evolution and functionality of Indian democracy. Through a systematic review of literature, the paper examines the dual impact of communication as an enabler of civic engagement and as a tool of political persuasion. The findings indicate that while communication has significantly enhanced democratic processes in India, it also presents challenges such as misinformation, media bias, and digital exclusion. A democratic communication system that is inclusive, ethical, and transparent is vital to sustain and deepen India's democratic culture. India's complex socio-political landscape makes the role of communication particularly vital in bridging gaps between diverse linguistic, regional, and socio-economic communities. This paper considers the historical trajectory of media in India—from colonial resistance journalism to post-independence development communication, the liberalization-induced media boom, and the current era of algorithmic and real-time digital discourse. By critically engaging with interdisciplinary frameworks, this study highlights how communication technologies shape political behavior, influence public opinion, and redefine citizen-state interactions. It also outlines potential reforms and interventions necessary to mitigate emerging threats such as disinformation, polarization, and unequal access in order to promote a more participatory and equitable democratic communication environment.

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### Introduction

Communication is the bedrock of democratic societies. In a democracy, where governance is predicated on the will of the people, the ability to inform, persuade, deliberate, and mobilize becomes essential (McQuail, 2010). Nowhere is this more apparent than in India—the world's largest democracy, where over 1.4 billion people, representing diverse religions, languages, castes, and socio-economic backgrounds, rely on communication as a medium to engage with democratic institutions, express dissent, access rights, and participate in governance (Thussu, 2007).

In the Indian democratic context, communication serves as both an enabler and a battleground. From the early nationalist press that galvanized anti-colonial sentiment to modern digital platforms that amplify voices and challenge narratives, communication has played a vital role in shaping political

culture and democratic engagement (Narasimhan, 2004; Rajagopal, 2001). The communicative infrastructure of Indian democracy is expansive, encompassing traditional oral narratives, print journalism, radio, television, and the more recent explosion of internet-based media, including social media platforms and mobile-based communication.

After independence, India adopted a development communication model through state-controlled media such as All India Radio (AIR) and Doordarshan, aiming to foster national unity and socio-economic transformation (Pavarala & Malik, 2007). These channels were instrumental in disseminating information related to literacy, health, agriculture, and civic rights, especially in rural and marginalized regions. The top-down structure, however, limited public participation and feedback, often mirroring the paternalistic orientation of the state (Chatterjee, 2015).

The liberalization of the Indian economy in the 1990s marked a pivotal transformation in the media ecosystem. Deregulation led to the proliferation of private television channels, newspapers, and internet access, thus introducing pluralism and market competition (Thussu, 2007). This commercial turn brought benefits such as greater media outreach and journalistic independence, but also resulted in the commodification of information, editorial bias, and a shift from public interest journalism to sensationalism and infotainment (Jeffrey, 2000).

The 21st century has ushered in an era of digital democracy, where platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and WhatsApp have become central to political communication. Political parties use these platforms for targeted campaigning, while civil society actors and citizens use them to raise awareness, mobilize movements, and demand accountability (Kapur & Mehta, 2020). Notably, the 2014 and 2019 general elections witnessed unprecedented levels of digital campaign engagement and online political discourse.

However, these developments are not without challenges. The digital divide in India, driven by disparities in access to the internet, digital literacy, and language, restricts equal participation in democratic processes (Sen, 2019). Furthermore, the rise of misinformation, hate speech, and algorithmic echo chambers on social media platforms threatens informed discourse and social cohesion (Banaji & Bhat, 2020).

Despite these contradictions, communication remains indispensable to the democratic project in India. It facilitates citizen engagement, enhances governmental transparency, and strengthens accountability. At the same time, it can be manipulated to distort facts, polarize public opinion, and marginalize vulnerable groups. Thus, the relationship between communication and democracy is complex, evolving, and deeply consequential.

This research paper seeks to explore these dynamics through a systematic review of literature. It aims to critically assess how different communication forms: traditional, institutional, and digital-have shaped democratic participation, political awareness, governance practices, and civic identity in India. Drawing on a multidisciplinary body of scholarship, this study provides insights into the potential and pitfalls of communication in a pluralistic, multi-layered democratic society like India.

### Research Objectives

1. To evaluate the role of traditional and modern communication systems in India's democratic evolution.
2. To assess the influence of media and communication on electoral processes and civic engagement.
3. To analyze challenges posed by misinformation, media bias, and the digital divide in democratic communication.

### Review of Literature

Narasimhan (2004) emphasizes the centrality of vernacular print media in India's nationalist movement. Newspapers such as *Kesari*, *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, and *The Hindu* not only disseminated anti-colonial rhetoric but also served as spaces for public dialogue. The Indian press of this period fulfilled the Gramscian function of creating a counter-hegemonic discourse against British imperial narratives, thereby fostering a shared national consciousness. Gandhi's use of communication, particularly through *Young India* and *Harijan*, showcased the strategic use of mass media for ideological mobilization.

His writings were characterized by simplicity and moral clarity, which resonated with a broad audience and demonstrated the power of persuasive and ethical communication in a nascent democracy.

Rajagopal (2001) discusses the post-independence transformation of media as a nation-building tool. With the establishment of All India Radio (AIR) and later Doordarshan, the Indian state aimed to foster unity and educate citizens. These institutions adopted a developmentalist model of communication, disseminating messages related to agriculture, health, and education under what was termed "communication for development."

Pavarala and Malik (2007) argue that while state-run media promoted informational equity, it was also top-down and lacked participatory feedback loops. The model mirrored Lasswell's transmission model of communication, focused more on dissemination than interaction.

McQuail (2010) and his Democratic Participant Media Theory advocate for localized, citizen-driven communication structures. This is particularly relevant in India, where decentralized communication-such as community radio and regional press-has allowed marginalized communities to express their concerns, challenging elite-dominated media discourse.

Habermas' Public Sphere Theory (1989) is often invoked to examine how communication contributes to rational-critical debate in democratic societies. In India, however, scholars like Ninan (2007) and Chakravarty & Roy (2013) caution that structural inequalities-literacy gaps, linguistic divides, and caste hierarchies-often restrict the formation of a truly inclusive public sphere.

The advent of the internet and smartphones has dramatically reshaped Indian political communication. Chatterjee (2015) emphasizes that platforms like Twitter and WhatsApp have enabled direct citizen engagement and real-time feedback loops. However, these platforms are double-edged swords.

Kapur & Mehta (2020) document how political parties use digital tools for micro-targeting and narrative control. The 2014 and 2019 general elections serve as case studies of strategic digital mobilization, where communication technologies were used to engineer public opinion.

Sen (2019) cautions against digital exclusion, noting that rural and underprivileged communities often lack access to digital infrastructures. This has led to a digital divide, wherein only a segment of the population actively participates in online democratic discourse.

Banaji and Bhat (2020) raise concerns about the proliferation of misinformation, hate speech, and polarizing content on social media platforms. They argue that unchecked digital communication can destabilize democratic norms, especially when misinformation influences electoral behaviour.

Ghosh (2018) discusses the need for robust media regulation in India, stressing that current mechanisms like the Press Council of India and IT rules are often ineffective or politically compromised. A balance between freedom of expression and regulatory oversight is essential to preserve the integrity of democratic communication.

### Research Methodology

**Research Design:** Qualitative, thematic analysis using secondary data. **Data Sources:** Scholarly articles, government reports, and case studies. **Frameworks:** Democratic communication theories, media effects models.

## Outcomes

- Enhanced political literacy and public engagement.
- Media shapes opinion but also spreads misinformation.
- Social media fosters voice but deepens polarization.
- Regulatory mechanisms require reform.

## Conceptual Model Derived From Review of Literature

Positive Impact	Negative Impact	Mitigation Strategy
Civic Participation	Spread of Misinformation	Strengthening Media Literacy
Inclusive Political Discourse	Media Bias and Corporate Ownership	Transparent Media Regulation
Electoral Mobilization	Digital Divide	Infrastructure Investment in Rural Connectivity
Accountability via Journalism	Hate Speech and Online Polarization	Enforce Cyber and Ethical Communication Laws

## Future Research Directions

Future studies may explore the intersection of AI and political communication, the long-term impact of algorithmic media on public discourse, and the effectiveness of government communication during crises.

## Conclusion

Communication is the bloodstream of Indian democracy. From the anti-colonial nationalist press to the rapid rise of digital platforms, communication has consistently served as the bridge between the governed and those in power. It facilitates the exchange of ideas, fuels civic engagement, enables transparency, and supports political mobilization. The literature reviewed in this study affirms that communication whether mediated through print, broadcast, or digital platforms have played a transformative role in shaping democratic participation and institutional accountability in India. However, this evolution has been accompanied by significant contradictions. While digital platforms have democratized access and allowed for real-time citizen engagement, they have also intensified polarization, spread misinformation, and enabled political manipulation. The same technologies that empower grassroots voices are being exploited to propagate fake news, incite communal tensions, and suppress dissent through algorithmic control and surveillance. Moreover, issues such as the digital divide, media ownership concentration, and regulatory ambiguity hinder the ideal of a fully participatory and equitable communication landscape.

An inclusive and responsible communication ecosystem must therefore be a national priority. To strengthen India's democratic framework, media literacy must be institutionalized across educational systems, particularly in rural and underserved areas. Regulatory frameworks must balance freedom of expression with accountability, ensuring transparency in both state and private media practices. Equally important is the need to foster a culture of critical engagement, where citizens are not passive consumers but active participants in shaping democratic discourse.

In a country as pluralistic as India, communication is not merely about transmission of information-it is about representation, dialogue, and negotiation. If wielded ethically and inclusively, communication can continue to serve as a powerful catalyst for democratic deepening. But if left unchecked or monopolized, it risks becoming a tool for exclusion and authoritarian drift. Therefore, sustaining the vibrancy of Indian democracy in the 21st century depends on reimagining communication as a participatory, pluralistic, and justice-oriented process that empowers every citizen, irrespective of caste, class, gender, or geography.

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