

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN SHAPING POLITICAL IDEOLOGY IN RURAL INDIA

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ABSTRACT

In India, the rapid expansion of mobile internet and digital platforms has significantly transformed political communication, especially in rural areas. This study examines how social media influences the formation of political ideology among rural populations in India. The research highlights how platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and YouTube act as informal learning spaces that shape political awareness and opinions. While social media has improved access to information and increased participation in democratic processes, it has also contributed to the spread of misinformation, political bias, and social division. This paper uses a qualitative review of existing studies related to India to analyze both the opportunities and challenges. The findings suggest that social media plays a powerful role in shaping political thinking in rural India, but its impact depends on digital literacy, education, and regulatory measures. The study concludes with recommendations for improving media literacy and responsible use of digital platforms.

Keywords: Social Media, Political Ideology, Rural India, Digital Literacy, Political Awareness

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1. INTRODUCTION

India is one of the largest democracies in the world, where political awareness and participation are essential for effective governance. In recent years, the expansion of affordable smartphones and internet services has led to a rapid increase in social media use, even in rural areas. According to recent reports, rural India is becoming a major user base of digital platforms, which has changed the way people receive and understand political information.

Traditionally, political ideology in rural India was shaped by family, community leaders, and local institutions. However, social media has introduced new sources of information that influence opinions and beliefs. Platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook have become key tools for sharing political messages, news, and opinions [1].

While this development has improved access to information, it has also raised concerns about the quality and reliability of content. Many rural users rely on forwarded messages without verifying their accuracy. This situation makes it important to study how social media shapes political ideology in rural India [2].

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Several studies have examined the impact of social media on political awareness in India. Darshan and Suresh (2019) found that social media has become an important tool for political communication and public engagement. Their study shows that political parties actively use digital platforms to influence voters [3].

Neyazi (2017) highlighted that social media in India often leads to political polarization, where people are exposed mainly to opinions similar to their own. This creates a situation where individuals develop strong but sometimes biased political views [4].

Sharma and Sivakumar (2023) studied the role of social media during elections in India and found that digital platforms play a major role in shaping political narratives. Similarly, Madhulaa (2025) observed that social media increases political awareness among both urban and rural populations, but rural users are more vulnerable to misinformation [5].

Trigun (2024) emphasized that in rural areas, social media acts as a source of political education, but the lack of digital literacy limits its positive impact. Overall, the literature shows that social media is a powerful but complex influence on political ideology in India [6].

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is based on the following ideas:

- Political Socialization: People learn political values through interaction with society and media.
- Media Influence: People depend on media for information, especially where other sources are limited.
- Learning by Interaction: People form opinions by engaging with content and discussions online.

In rural India, these processes are strongly influenced by social media because it is often the fastest and most accessible source of information.

4. METHODOLOGY

This research is based on a review of existing studies related to social media and politics in India. The study focuses on rural areas and analyzes patterns such as:

- How people receive political information
- How opinions are formed
- What challenges exist in understanding information

Only reliable academic and research-based sources were considered.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Social Media as a Source of Learning

In rural India, social media has increasingly emerged as an informal yet powerful platform for political learning. Unlike traditional education systems, which may be limited in reach and accessibility, social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and YouTube provide immediate and continuous access to information. Rural users often engage with short videos, voice messages, and regional language content, making political information easier to understand [7].

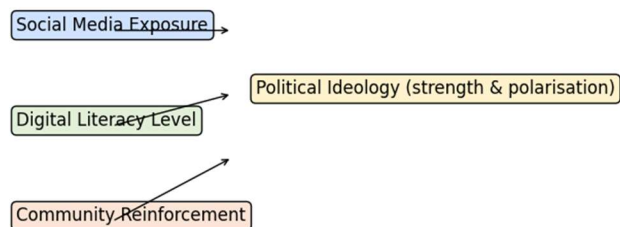


Figure 1. Conceptual model of social media exposure, digital literacy, community reinforcement and political ideology among rural citizens.

For example, government schemes, election campaigns, and public policies are widely circulated through social media. This allows individuals who may not have formal education to stay informed about political developments. In many cases, local leaders and influencers also share information through these platforms, further increasing engagement [8].

However, this form of learning lacks structured verification. Users often accept information without questioning its source or accuracy. As a result, while social media expands access to knowledge, it also creates the risk of misunderstanding and misinformation [9].

5.2 Formation of Political Ideology

The formation of political ideology in rural India is now strongly influenced by repeated exposure to social media content. Individuals tend to consume information that aligns with their beliefs, which gradually shapes their political views. Over time, this selective exposure leads to the development of strong ideological positions.

In rural communities, where social relationships are closely connected, shared content often influences group thinking. For instance, if a particular political message is widely shared within a village or community group, it can quickly become a commonly accepted belief. This collective reinforcement plays a significant role in shaping political ideology [10].

Illustrative Growth in Rural Internet and Social Media Use (Youth 15-24)

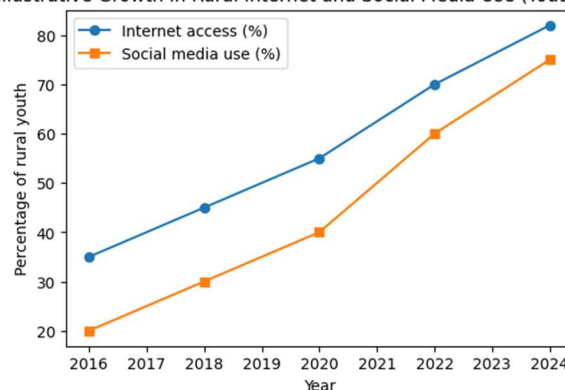


Figure 2. Illustrative trend in rural youth internet access and regular social media use between 2016 and 2024, reflecting rapid growth in connectivity and platform adoption.[5][15]

Moreover, emotional content such as speeches, slogans, and symbolic messages has a strong impact on rural audiences. These elements often appeal to identity, culture, and local issues, making them more influential than factual information.

5.3 Misinformation and Political Bias

One of the most critical challenges associated with social media in rural India is the spread of misinformation. Due to limited digital literacy, many users are unable to verify the authenticity of information. Forwarded messages, edited videos, and misleading headlines are often accepted as truth [11].

Political bias is also amplified through social media. Content is frequently designed to support a particular political group or ideology, which can influence users' perceptions. This creates an environment where individuals are exposed to one-sided information, leading to confusion and division.

• Case Study 1: WhatsApp Misinformation During Indian Elections

During recent elections in India, WhatsApp played a major role in spreading political messages in rural areas. Several reports highlighted that false information and manipulated content were widely circulated through group chats. In many villages, such messages influenced voters' opinions and created misunderstandings about candidates and policies. This case shows how easily misinformation can shape political ideology when critical evaluation is absent [12].

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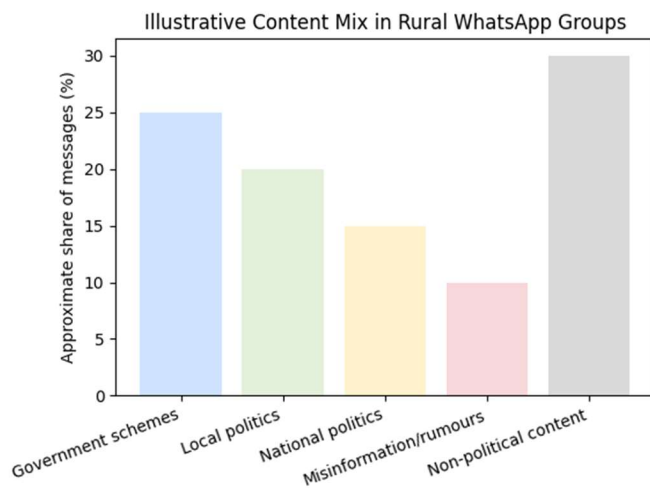


Figure 3. Illustrative distribution of political and non-political content types circulating in rural WhatsApp groups, highlighting the presence of rumours and misinformation alongside information on schemes and local issues.[3][16]

5.4 Digital Divide and Education

Although internet access has improved significantly in rural India, there is still a gap in digital literacy and quality of usage. Many users know how to operate smartphones but lack the skills to critically analyze information. This creates a situation where access exists, but understanding remains limited.

Education plays a crucial role in addressing this issue. Schools and colleges can introduce digital literacy programs that teach students how to evaluate information sources, identify false content, and use social media responsibly. In addition, community awareness programs can help older populations develop basic digital skills [13].

- **Case Study 2: Digital India Initiative in Rural Areas**

The Digital India program has expanded internet access and digital services in rural regions. While this initiative has increased connectivity and access to information, studies show that many users still struggle with understanding and evaluating online content. This highlights that infrastructure alone is not enough; education and awareness are equally important for meaningful use of technology [14].

5.5 Social Media Penetration in Rural India

Recent national surveys indicate that over 80% of rural youth aged 15-24 years now have access to the internet through mobile phones, and more than 95% can operate basic smartphone functions, reflecting unprecedented digital inclusion in rural regions.[5][15] The availability of affordable data plans and expansion of 4G networks under government programmes such as Digital India and BharatNet have transformed social media platforms into everyday communication tools in villages, thereby deepening their role in political information flows and opinion formation.[5][15] However, studies on digital literacy among rural citizens consistently show that a substantial proportion of these new users lack critical skills to evaluate online content, which

increases their susceptibility to political misinformation and emotionally charged partisan narratives.[6][13]

- **Case Study 3: Farmers' Protest and Digital Mobilisation**

The 2020-2021 farmers' protest in India demonstrated how social media can amplify rural voices and reshape national political discourse, as farmers and supporters used Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and WhatsApp to disseminate real-time updates, counter official narratives, and coordinate protest activities across states.[7] Analyses of the protest's digital footprint reveal that social media facilitated the construction of a shared political identity among geographically dispersed rural communities, while also exposing them to online disinformation campaigns and polarised debates, illustrating both the empowering and disruptive potential of networked communication for rural political ideology.[7][16]

6. POLICY RESPONSES AND MEDIA LITERACY

Policy initiatives under the Digital India programme, including the expansion of Common Service Centres and the Pradhan Mantri Grameen Digital Saksharta Abhiyan (PMGDISHA), seek to bridge the urban-rural digital divide by combining infrastructure rollout with basic training in the use of digital devices and online services.[9][14] These schemes have enabled lakhs of rural citizens to acquire foundational digital skills; nonetheless, empirical evaluations suggest that more advanced competencies such as critical evaluation of political information, identification of false news, and responsible sharing behaviour are rarely addressed in a systematic manner.[9][13] Integrating media literacy modules into school curricula, community training through village-level entrepreneurs, and collaborations with civil society organisations could strengthen rural citizens' capacity to navigate social media content and reduce the ideological impact of misinformation.[9][10]

7. CONCLUSION

Social media has become an important factor in shaping political ideology in rural India. It provides new opportunities for awareness and participation but also creates serious challenges. The impact of social media depends on how it is used and understood.

To ensure positive outcomes, there is a need for better digital education, awareness programs, and responsible use of technology. Government and educational institutions must work together to improve media literacy in rural areas.

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