# Political Culture and Electoral Participation in Digital India

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**ABSTRACT:** *India has turned out to be one of the fastest digitalizing countries of the world. One of the objectives of the BJP government is to transform the country into a Digital India. The lightening speed of the new media in this digitalized era has its impact on every walk of life and political system and political culture are undergoing tremendous changes. The new media has been in the profound use in electoral politics from the last century on words and its use has altered different dimensions of electoral politics. Now, India is at the verge of another general election. The status of the social networking and social media has changed a lot. It is important to observe the changes brought in the political culture of India by digitalization.  The new media would bring the citizen very close to politics and political systems. Therefore, it is expected that there shall be a marginal increase in political participation, especially in electoral politics. Conversely, the villain roles of political apathy, political cynicism and political alienation shall not be discarded. A cent percent voter turnout is one of the targets of every democratic nation. To the realization of this goal many nations have introduced compulsory voting, making voting a duty of the citizen. There are also demands for introducing compulsory voting in India to ensure higher rates of electoral participation.*
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## I.    INTRODUCTION

In this highly digitalised world the lightening speed of the new media has its impact on every walk of life and politics is not an exemption to this. Today, politics and political system of a country is so widely influenced by the social media. It has transcended the social culture, shaping and reshaping the political culture of a nation. Political communication and political participation is also undergoing dramatic changes in this digital era. The new media has been in the profound use in electoral politics from the last century on words and its use has altered different dimensions of electoral politics. New media has played an active role in election propaganda, collecting and instructing the followers, debating on electoral aspects etc… What is expected in this digital era is that the new media would bring the citizen very close to politics and political systems. Therefore, in political participation, especially in electoral politics a high marginal growth is expected. Now, India is at the verge of another general election. The status of the social networking and social media has changed a lot. Their use has been doubled or quadrupled now. Experiencing from the last general election and other elections held in state levels thereafter, it is expected that the voter turnout would further increase. However, the villain roles of political apathy, political cynicism and political alienation shall not be undermined. So long as political apathy, political cynicism and political alienation persist and pervades in the society, the new media even in this digitalised society will fail to bring in greater participation in electoral politics. The march of Indian political culture from the wretched parochial culture to subject, participant and subcultures is indeed appreciable and unveils the rosy picture of electoral politics in India. Perhaps, the advent of new media might have helped these cultural shifts. The Indian villages where poverty pervades and illiteracy exists, have more electoral participation than the highly educated and rich urban regions.  This contradiction draws our attention to the other reasons for political apathy in digital India. Looking from another perspective, it could be also rationalized that the new social media in the digitalized world could influence the so called political apathy, political cynicism and political alienation.

**Digital India and Political Culture**

There is a general perception that digitalization leading to digital democracy would bring forth sporadic changes in electoral participation and political culture.  The reason underlying this stand is digitalization would quadruple the information about governing system and public response via modern social media.  Generally, in this digital era new social media shall provide greater opportunity for public discourses. This can certainly reshape the voting behaviour and electoral participation of people.  The political cultures are transforming. Parochial will have no place in this digital era.  Perhaps, subject culture will be at minimum and participant culture will shine.  These cultural shifts shall be primarily reflected on electoral behaviour of people.

The freedom struggle has brought about a kind of participant culture in India. Moreover, the political structures and systems provided by the constitution always stand for a participant culture. However, the socio-

economic and educational conditions of the country have limited it to a more-less subculture. The journey of Indian political culture form a very passive participant culture to a very active participant culture is expected to produce better voter turnouts in this digital era, especially in the upcoming elections. Perhaps, this might be true to happen as the last general election in India had the highest voter turnout ever in the history of the nation.

Indian political culture is so much so is interwoven with the general customs, traditions, belief and practices of the society. The influence of belief and practices of each religion, caste, ethnic groups and clans can be seen in the political decision making of the country (Paul; 2018). More particularly, the electoral politics have been very much influenced by religion and caste. These institutions stand at the forefront among the agents of political socialization. In the nascent stage, the legacy of freedom struggle brought about a quasi-participant political culture in India. Moreover, subject and parochial cultures were also present. The freedom struggle acted as very powerful agent of political socialization and in the initial phases of Independent India, the values and ethos of the freedom struggle shaped the political culture. The educational and economical advancements could not wipe away the role of religion and caste in India politics. Meanwhile, a kind of 'mafia culture' crept into the politics and created political apathy and alienation among the people. The socialising agents in the rural area and in the urban area were different and therefore, the political cultures of the urban and rural areas were not always the same. Nevertheless, the political culture of India always stood for democracy. Further, there was always somewhat a stable political culture promoting democracy, unlike in the neighbouring countries, namely Pakistan, Sri Lanka etc… Due to the presence of parochial, subject and participant political cultures, many scholars viewed that India has a sub-political culture.

The process of digitalization has been very active in the last two decades. The political culture in digital India shall be a blend of Participant and subject cultures. The spread of very active social media in this digital era helps in creating awareness about political system and process among the people. In this digital era "digital technologies, the spaces that permit social interaction, may facilitate forms of political engagement. Indications are engagement that can further lead to citizen mobilization and participation in some forms of civic life from the very local level to the supranational" (Bimber & Copeland, 2013). Therefore, presence of parochial culture either will be the minimum or will not be at all. Though people have better knowledge about the political system and structures, political apathy, alienation and cynicism will not allow cent percentage political participation. Moreover, in the digital era, since the there is limited scales of political apathy, alienation and cynicism, the presence of subject culture will be lesser than the participant culture. The following figure represents the various combinations of participant and subject cultures in digital India. The Y- axis represents participant culture and the X- axis represents the subject culture. In the figure, the political participation curve is upward slopping to the right and the slop is greater than one, indicating that the participant culture is always greater than the subject culture. Further, there is no space for parochial culture as people have good knowledge about the political institutions of the country.
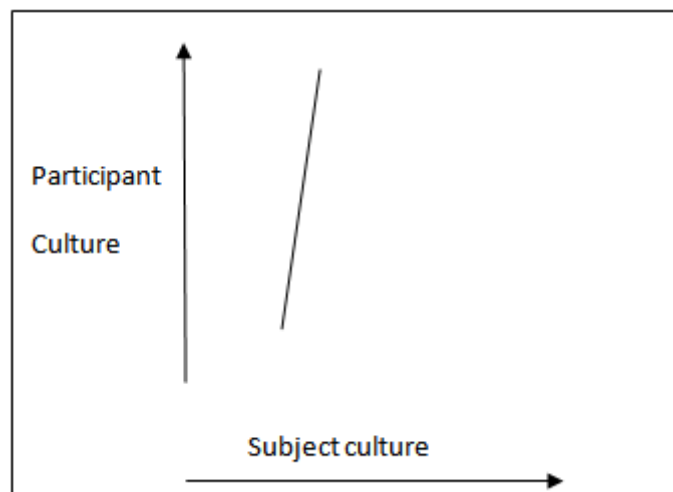


**Fig. 1** Political Culture in Digital India

**Electoral Participation in digital India**

India is said to be one of the largest democracies of the world. In the history of seventy years of independent, democracy was always upheld, except for the period when the nation was under national emergency in 1975-76. The credit of this great achievement shall be given to the people, especially for their attitude towards electoral politics. The following table represents the voter turnout in the general elections held in India.

| Year | Voter turnout in% |
|------|-------------------|
| 1951 | 61.2 |
| 1957 | 62.23 |
| 1962 | 55.42 |
| 1967 | 61.04 |
| 1971 | 55.27 |
| 1977 | 60.49 |
| 1980 | 56.92 |
| 1984 | 63.56 |
| 1989 | 61.98 |
| 1991 | 56.7 |
| 1996 | 57.94 |
| 1998 | 61 |
| 1999 | 59.9 |
| 2004 | 58.07 |
| 2009 | 58.14 |
| 2014 | 66.39 |

(Source: Election Commission of India)

From the very first general election to the last (sixteenth) general election, India had never a voter turnout below 50%. Voter turnouts tended to be higher whenever elections were held closely and wherever literacy was higher. The national average voter turnout for these 16 general elections is 60%. Except in the State of Jammu & Kashmir All other states in India, the voter turnout always remained above 50% in the general elections.

A special mention about the participation of women and youth in the electoral politics shall be made here. Youth and women are the two groups who usually keep away from electoral politics. However, there is an argument that digitalization, with the growth of social media, would bring them very close to electoral politics. Even during the period when women population was greater than that of men the voter turnout never went above that of men. This indicates that traditionally the women in India had a very limited participation in electoral politics. Conversely, since 1990's there is a considerable increase in women participation in electoral politics, especially in the local governing system (Rai; 2017). The indifference of youth in electoral process is a common scene in India. The voter turnout of youth and their representation in the legislative bodies evinces the very limited participation of the youth in the electoral politics. However, the process of digitalization will alter this attitude of women and youth in the electoral politics. Women and youth will be provided a better space in the digital era for easy gathering of political information and responding timely to the political system. Political parties' as well as organizations' messages reaching citizens through social media have the strongest mobilizing effect, highlighting the move to a more issue-based civic culture (Lilleker; 2017). This could bring in an active participant political culture Moreover, unlike in the case of older generations, the problem of digital divide seldom affects the youth.

. A contradiction in our expectation about the impact of digitalization in electoral participation is to be discussed here. Madhya Pradesh/ Kerala, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra and Chhattisgarh are regarded as the most digitalized states in India. The voter turnout in these states in the last two general elections were lower than that of the less digitalized states and union territories such as Nagaland, Thripura, Lakshadweep and Dadra Nagarhaveli. There is also an observation that a large proportion of urban population is associated with lower turnout. This infact, indicates the role of other aspects in urban electoral politics, especially the diasporas' culture.

It is observed that political apathy has turned out to be a pernicious threat in the digital democracies. Apathy to electoral participation in urban areas of the developed countries is a truism now. Analysing the last election held in USA, the IDSA observes that the voter turnout was 56%. In the election held in 2015 to the Swiss Parliament, the voter turnout was 39%. A large proportion of the city dwellers in these countries did note cast their votes. This voter turnout is comparatively lower than many underdeveloped non-digitalised countries.

The following figure illustrates the level of electoral participation in digital India. The X axis represents the process of Digitalization and Y axis represents the electoral participation. The electoral participation curve (EPC) is Upward sloping to the right until point E and then the curve turns to be horizontal. In digitalized India the political culture will be a subject-participant culture even though hundred percentage digitalization is carried out. This is because a minimum level of political apathy, political cynicism and political alienation will persist. Therefore, the electoral participation will never become hundred percentage and the EPC turns to be a horizontal curve from E.
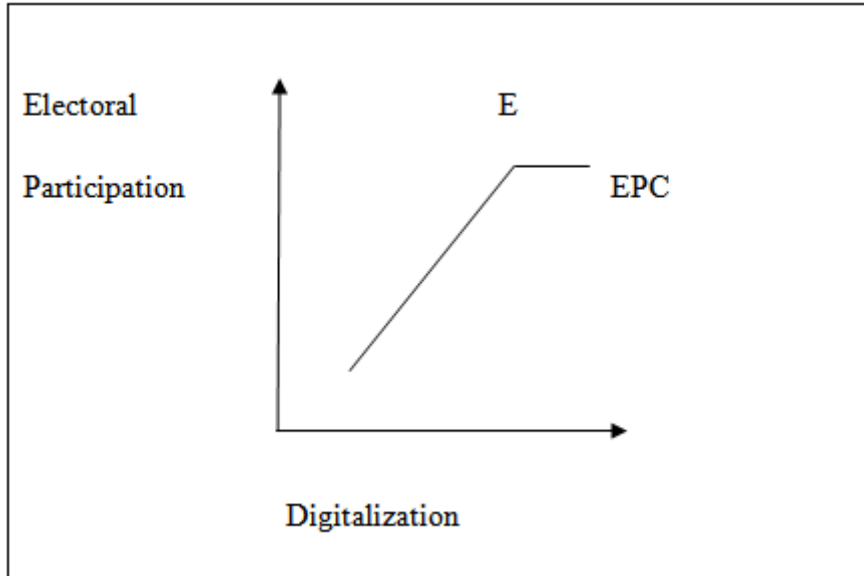
**Fig. 2** Electoral participation in Subject-participant Culture

## II.    CONCLUSION

Political culture determines the electoral behaviour of a given society. The changes in political culture affect the electoral behaviour of the people. Political culture, being a subculture of the total culture of the society, shall be influenced by the shifts in the general culture. On the one side, new social media in this digital era influences political culture directly altering the electoral behaviour of the people and on the other, new social media influences the general culture of the society which indirectly causes changes in the political culture and thereby the electoral behaviour. Political culture is the result of combination function of social, cultural and psychological process (Nanda; 1998). For instance, the new social media could alter the caste sentiments of the people which in turn alter the role of caste in electoral politics.  Since political apathy, political cynicism and political alienation are so closely related to the general culture of the society, the changes in the general culture would reduce the challenges of political apathy, political cynicism and political alienation.
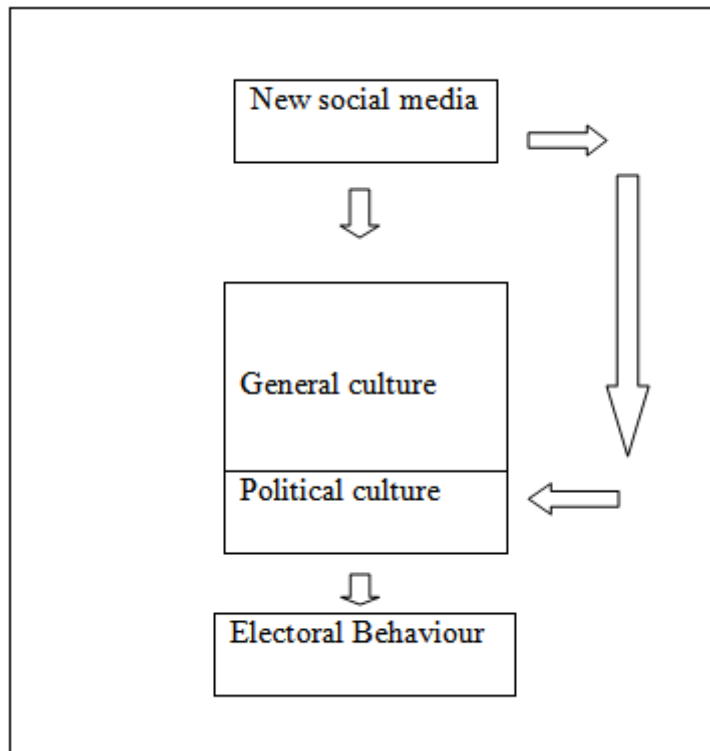


**Figure.3**

It is expected that in this digital era political apathy, alienation and cynicism shall be diminished by the new media. Poor governance, criminalization of politics which are the root causes of political apathy, alienation and cynicism could be restricted through digital democracy. The difficulties people face in the electoral process such as enrolling their names in voters register, collecting voter identity card, inspecting voter register etc… has been reduced with the modern technologies. Further, the new media and the advanced technologies have helped in lessening malpractices associated with election. If political apathy is not a matter of concern, we could assume that digitalisation will certainly cause very positive changes in electoral participation

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