
THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON FREEDOM OF SPEECH IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

India has given its citizens the right to speak and express their opinions freely under Article 19(1)(a) of the constitution. This right has always been important elements of constitution, but after the emergence of internet and social media came into existence, it became even more powerful. Today, platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube allow anyone to share their thoughts with the entire world within just few seconds.

This paper looks at how social media has changed the way people in India use their right to free speech. It explores the good side of the right of freedom of speech like how social media has given a voice to ordinary people, helped to spread awareness, and made government more accountable. It also looks at the problems like fake news, online bullying, hate speech, and how social media can sometimes divide people rather than bringing them together.

The paper also discusses the laws that govern free speech online in India, such as Article 19(2) of the Constitution, the Information Technology Act, 2000, and the IT Rules, 2021. These laws try to make sure that freedom of speech is not misused while still protecting people's right to express themselves. In the end, the paper argues that social media is a great tool for free speech, but it needs to be used responsibly and regulated wisely.

INTRODUCTION

Freedom of speech and expression is one of the most important rights in India. It is given under Article 19(1)(a) of the Constitution of India, which allows people to share their thoughts, opinions, and ideas freely. However, this right is limited. The government can put some reasonable restrictions to maintain public order, safety, and morality.

Earlier, people expressed their views mainly through newspapers, television or through public speeches. But after globalisation in India in 1991 and with the growth of the internet, especially social media, the way people communicate has completely changed. Platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube have made it very easy for everyone to share their opinions with a large number of people.

Social media has given a voice to everyone, including those who were unheard earlier, like people from rural areas or weaker sections of society and now anyone with a smartphone and internet can speak about their issues. It has also helped people to raise awareness and take part in social and political movements. For example, events like the Farmers' Protest and the CAA Protests became widely known because of social media.

At the same time, social media has also created some problems. Since information spreads very fast, fake news and wrong information can also spread easily. Sometimes, people face online harassment and trolling. This creates fear and reduces true meaning of freedom of speech.¹

To control these issues, the government has made laws like the Information Technology Act, 2000 and the Information Technology Rules, 2021. These laws aim to regulate online content and make platforms responsible.

POSITIVE OUTCOME OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON FREEDOM OF SPEECH

1. Global reach

Social media allows people to connect with each others worldwide. A person sitting in one

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country can share their thoughts and ideas with a global audience within seconds. This helps important issues gain international attention and support, which was not possible through traditional media.

2. Amplification of voice

Social media gives a platform to everyone, including ordinary people and minorities. Earlier, only powerful people or media houses could share their opinions, but now anyone can speak and be heard. This strengthens freedom of speech by making it more inclusive.

3. Engagement and interaction

Social media encourages direct communication between people. People can comment and share their opinion which creates discussions and debates. This communication helps in exchanging ideas and promotes active participation in social and political matters.

4. Information dissemination

Information spreads very fast on social media. News and information reach people instantly. This helps individuals stay informed and aware of what is happening around them.

5. Public accountability

Social media acts as a powerful tool to hold governments, organizations, and public figures accountable. People can raise their concerns and expose the wrongdoing of the government workers, and demand justice. This transparency strengthens democracy and protects freedom of speech.

6. Transparency between government and citizens

Governments use social media to communicate directly with citizens of the country. This reduces the gap between authorities and the general public. Citizens can ask questions, give feedback, and express their views openly, which improves trust and transparency between government and citizens.

7. Cultural exchange

Social media connects people from different cultures, backgrounds, and countries. It allows

users to share their traditions, beliefs, and experiences. This exchange promotes understanding, tolerance, and respect among other diverse communities.

8. Education

Social media has become an important educational tool. Students and learners can access knowledge through internet and social media. Sharing ideas and participation in discussions helps in spreading awareness about social, political, and legal issues and enhance knowledge beyond textbooks.

9. Voice of the voiceless

Social media provides a platform for those people who were often ignored in society. People who did not had access to traditional media can share their struggles and experiences in social media. This ensures that every voice matters and is heard.²

10. Spreading awareness

Social media plays a key role in spreading awareness about important issues such as human rights, environmental protection, and social justice. Campaigns and movements can reach millions of people, encouraging action and change.³

NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON FREEDOM OF SPEECH

1. Spread of misinformation

Social media allows information to spread instantly to millions of people. However, this spread also leads to the rapid circulation of false or misleading information. Such misinformation can

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confuse people, influence their beliefs, and lead to poor decision making in areas like health and politics

2. Hate Speech and abusive content

Sometimes in social media people post hurtful or hateful comments about others religion, gender, caste or race. This can make the social media environment feel unsafe and uncomfortable. Because of this, many people feel scared or hesitant to share their opinions freely.

3. Cyberbullying and online harassment

People who express opinions online freely may face trolling, threats, or harassment from other people. This can cause mental stress, fear of safety and emotional harm, ultimately discouraging individuals from participating in public discussions.

4. Filter bubbles

Social media algorithms are designed to show users the same content that matches their existing beliefs. As a result, people are exposed to only similar viewpoints, limiting their understanding of other people's perspectives and reducing the chance of open debate.

5. Interference in democracy

False information or manipulated content can influence elections and political opinions. This can mislead voters, reduce transparency, and weaken the fairness of democratic systems.

6. Public health risks

During global health crises like COVID-19, misinformation on social media led to confusion, fear among the people. This shows how free speech, when misused, can affect public health.

7. Lack of Accountability

Many users and groups misuse social media because there is limited accountability. The global and anonymous nature of platforms allows harmful and misleading information to spread quickly and since these platforms have end-to-end encryption it is difficult for government to

find the culprits and make them accountable for their actions.

8. Social division

Continuous exposure to harmful content, misinformation and wrong information on social media can reduce unity in society. It creates mistrust between people and makes it harder for them to live peacefully and work together.

9. Damage to Image and Finances

False information or negative rumours shared on social media can damage the image of a person or their business and when people start believing this information, it reduces the consumers trust and can even lead to loss of customers and money.⁴

IMPORTANCE OF FREEDOM OF SPEECH ON THE INTERNET IN INDIA

1. Meaning of article 19(1)(a)

Article 19(1)(a) guarantees every citizen the right to freedom of speech and expression, which means a person can freely express their thoughts, ideas, and opinions. This right is essential because it allows individuals to share their views without fear, communicate ideas in society and expression their points freely. It acts as a basic human liberty and is necessary for personal development and participation in public communication and debate.⁵

2. Scope of freedom of speech and expression

The scope of the article 19(1)(a) is very wide and not limited to just speaking. It includes different forms of expression such as verbal expression like speaking in public or private. Written expression like writing books, newspapers, articles. Online expression like social

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media posts, blogs, comments. Artistic expression like films, paintings, music etc. Symbolic expression like gestures, signs and peaceful protest.

3. Role in democracy

Freedom of speech and expression is considered the backbone of democracy. It encourage people for open discussion and debate, allowing citizens to criticize government policies, promoting transparency and accountability, allowing people to participate in decision making process. Without this right, democracy could not have function properly because people would not have been able to express their dissatisfaction to government and demand change.⁶

4. Significance in the online world

Social media has greatly expanded the right to freedom of speech and expression. Today anyone can share their opinions globally within seconds, spreading awareness about social and political issues. Social media acts as a powerful tool for communication and activism, making Article 19(1)(a) more relevant than ever.

5. Security against state interference

Article 19(1)(a) protects citizens from unjustified government control. The government cannot restrict free speech of citizens, any restriction government applies must be lawful and reasonable, citizens have the right to question and criticize authorities. This ensures that power is not misused by authorities and that individuals can speak freely in a democratic system.

LIMITATIONS OF FREEDOM OF SPEECH ON THE INTERNET IN INDIA

1. Constitutional restrictions under article 19(2)

Freedom of speech and expression in India is guaranteed under Article 19(1)(a) of the Constitution. However, this right is not absolute and is subject to reasonable restrictions under

INDIA CONST. art. 19(1)(a), 19(2), <https://www.indiacode.nic.in/handle/123456789/1522>

Press Information Bureau, Gov't of India, Press Release, PRID No. 2205140,

<https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2205140>

Ministry of Electronics & Information Technology, Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021,

https://www.meity.gov.in/writereaddata/files/Intermediary_Guidelines_and_Digital_Media_Ethics_Code_Rules-2021.pdf

Information Technology Act, 2000, § 69A, <https://www.indiacode.nic.in/handle/123456789/1999>

Article 19(2). These restrictions include sovereignty and integrity of India, security of the State, public order, decency, morality, defamation, and incitement to an offence. In the terms of social media, this means that users cannot freely post content that violates these conditions, This reduces freedom of expression on online platforms.

2. Regulation under the information technology act, 2000

The Information Technology Act, 2000 is the rules for how online communication and digital platforms work in India. Section 69A of IT law 2000 allows the government to block or remove any content from social media or any websites if it is considered Threatening to national security, country's unity, or public order. Because of this, people's freedom of speech on social media is limited to some extent.

3. Impact of IT Rules, 2021

The Information Technology (Intermediary guidelines and digital media ethics code) Rules, 2021 have rules for social media platforms to make them responsible for what is shared on their platform. These rules require platforms to remove illegal content within a certain time and provide a place where users can make complaints. Because of this people's freedom to express their opinions online depends on how these platforms follow these rules.⁷

4. Governments authority over online content

According to the press information bureau, the Government of India has the authority to regulate online content to prevent misuse of digital platforms. It can issue directions to intermediaries to block or remove unlawful content that is dangerous public order or national interest. Such powers is necessary for regulation but this limits absolute freedom of expression in the digital world.

INDIA CONST. art. 19(1)(a), 19(2), <https://www.indiacode.nic.in/handle/123456789/1522>

Press Information Bureau, Gov't of India, Press Release, PRID No. 2205140,

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Information Technology Act, 2000, § 69A, <https://www.indiacode.nic.in/handle/123456789/1999>

CONCLUSION

Social media has completely changed the way people speak, think, and connect. Just a few decades ago, if an ordinary person wanted to share their opinion, they had very few options. But today, anyone with a phone and internet connection can speak up, share their story, and reach out to thousands of people.

For many people like farmers, students, workers and people from small towns and villages, social media has been like finding a voice they never had before. Movements like the Farmer's protest and the CAA Protests showed the world how powerful the voice can be when people come together online.

But just like any powerful tool, social media can be misused too. We have all seen how quickly fake news spreads, how people are trolled and harassed for sharing their opinions and thoughts, and how hateful content can create tension between some communities. These are real problems that affect people in day to day life. When someone is afraid to speak up online because they are afraid of being bullied or threatened then that is not true meaning of freedom of speech. It is the exact opposite of it.

The Indian government has tried to address these issues through laws like the IT Act, 2000 and the IT Rules, 2021. These laws are important, but they must be used carefully. Regulating harmful content is necessary, but restricting the genuine opinions and criticism is not acceptable in a democracy.

At the end of the day, freedom of speech is not just a legal right but it is a demo country's citizens need. Citizens need to feel safe enough to speak the truth, share their ideas, and question the government. Social media, when used responsibly can make that possible for every single citizen in India. The challenge for us as a society is to enjoy this freedom while also being kind, honest and responsible with the words we put out into the social media.

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