



Role of social media in Basirhat communal conflict, 2017: A case study

*¹ Neeraj Kumar, ² Dr. Manoj Dayal

¹ Research Scholar, Department of Communication & Management Technology, Guru Jambheshwar University of Science and Technology, Hisar, Haryana, India

² Professor, Department of Communication & Management Technology, Guru Jambheshwar University of Science and Technology, Hisar, Haryana, India

Abstract

Social media is a very powerful communication tool for common man but in recent times many incidents came to light in which it is grossly misused. Social media is used in mobilizing people for a movement and so it is misused in creating tensions among communities. When there is a vast growth in android smart phones, it is very easy to share any incident quickly. Technology is misused in morphing photographs and videos and circulating fake news that leads not only to disparage personal reputation of an individual but also has damaged the fabric of society wide and apart. The objective of the study is to find out the prime reason of Basirhat communal riots, 2017 and to discover whether social media had contributed in instigating the riots. During our investigation of facebook posts at the time of riots, we found that maximum number of people wrote and shared highly inciting posts and even they appealed to attack on people of Muslim community. Just one fourth of total users included in the study talked about peace and harmony in their posts and least number of users discussed about law and order situations.

Keywords: social media, communal riots, facebook, Whatsapp, smart phones, internet, website, e-paper

Introduction

“Internet has given a platform to majority of people to produce and reproduce media.” - (Lovink, 2012). Social Media is such a powerful tool in the hands of common man that they are no longer much dependent on traditional media like print, radio or TV to express their opinion and concerns. It is an interactive medium where unlike mass media many people can post their views and counterviews simultaneously. And so, social media has greatly expanded the networked individual's reach to information. On one hand its power lies in its easy access, but on other hand it is creating a great challenge for the authorities and civil society in times of crisis. Altogether, absence of gatekeeper in social media is a monumental challenge.

With vastly growing internet enabled smart phones in India, people from cities to towns to rural areas are connected through social networking sites like WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter and SMS. According to a report of investing firm Omidyar Network, Indian mobile users spend 70% of the time on Facebook and WhatsApp and music and entertainment apps. Also, WhatsApp and Facebook constitute 95% of social app in India. It further claims that a user spends 200 minute every day on mobile internet. According to a report in Hindustan Times, due to boom in smart phone users, the internet users base is set to grow from 350 million to 650 million by 2020. With growing internet users and reducing internet data packs rate by telecom companies, it is easily accessible to low income families also. A small incident in a remote part of country is reaching to people residing far away very quickly. This lightening speed of internet is boon in many ways. But in recent times many incidents happened that

sparked fears in civil society.

In August 2012, in major cities of India like Pune, Bengaluru, Chennai and other cities people from north-eastern states got panic and started returning to their home due to rumours circulating on social media that their safety is in danger. Images related to violence against Muslims in Assam were circulated and they were threatened of retaliatory violence. Agitations are being run by social media. In Maharashtra, huge silent protest marches were managed through about 50,000 WhatsApp groups, a face book page, Twitter handles in 2016 by Maratha community. This was a well organized movement through social media in which 50,000 WhatsApp groups working for protests were divided into district, tehsil, village level and smaller sub groups. Many violent incidents were blamed to be fanned by social media in recent times. A major communal riot broke out in Muzaffarnagar district of Uttar Pradesh in 2013, and a fake video circulated on face book was blamed to spread rumours during one of the worst riots in recent times.

Basirhat is a sub-division of North 24 Parganas district located in West Bengal. According to census of 2011, the total population of town is 1,25,254 out of which population of Hindu community is 97,196 which accounts for 77.60% of the total population of the city. Population of Muslims are 27,823 i.e. 22.21% of the total population of Basirhat. These two are major religion of the city whereas Christian, Sikh, Jain and Buddhist are only 0.04%, 0.02%, 0.02% and 0.01% respectively. The literacy of Basirhat city stands at 87.35%. Baduria town falls under Basirhat sub-division which was also badly affected during riots.

Objectives and Methodology

Main objectives of the study is to find out (a) the prime reason of Basirhat communal riots, 2017 and (b) whether social media had contributed in instigating the riots.

To find out the problem, researchers have collected data from primary sources as well as secondary sources. For primary sources we have collected data from 60 credible facebook accounts that have posted materials related to riots in the month of July, 2017. In secondary sources we searched many websites which deals with news and current affairs but only 8 mainstream news websites were taken into study which gave due coverage of Basirhat riots. We also went through the electronic edition (e-paper) of main two newspapers published from Kolkata. We included The Telegraph, which is largest circulated vernacular English daily in West Bengal and The Times of India which is second largest English daily in West Bengal and also a leading national daily (RNI annual report 2015-16).

The articles published on websites between July 04, 2017 to July 16, 2017 were taken for study, because stories published after that time period is only follow up of the main incident. The stories published in newspapers on July 05, 2017 were included in the study, because riots started from July 03 and both the newspapers hadn't carried stories related to riots the next day i.e. on July 04, 2017. During research we found three variables – (a) abusive languages and comments that were used in facebook posts, (b) posts related to peace and harmony, and (c) contents related to law and order.

Review of Literature

Badal (2017) [13] states that a rumour build up on social media that an objectionable post on facebook regarding Prophet was circulated by a Hindu youth, that led to set fire to at least Hindu houses in Bangladesh.

Narrain (2017) [9] found that emergence of social media and internet enabled smart phones creating a big challenge for law enforcement agencies. Agencies are unable to find the source of hate speeches circulating on social media.

Roy *et al.* (2016) [5] suggest that administration should take effective steps to check the broadcasting of objectionable material through facebook and twitter.

Chowdhury, *et al.* (2015) [6] conclude that social networking sites have a lot of advantages and disadvantages simultaneously. On one hand people get information through this medium, but cyber crimes and anti-social activities also take place.

Roy (2015) [10] argues that governments of north-eastern India have not used the full potential of social media in engaging with civil society to ward-off the ill image of the region. People of north-eastern part of country have a golden chance to broadcast their voice through new medium.

Win (2015) concluded that there is a strong linkage between anti-Muslim hate speech and anti-Muslim riots in Myanmar, and before anti-Muslim riots, there is a general trend of hate speeches.

Wuest (2015) [8] conclude that with user groups with thousands of members on social networking sites, there are always possibilities to spread false information and propaganda by ill-intention people. Also clicking a link poses a risk of malicious worm.

Datta (2014) [12] argues that India is a communally fragile country where social media is playing role of adding fuel to the fire and dealing with new medium is litmus test for Indian government and its agencies.

Gangopadhyay, *et al.* (2014) [7] suggest that social networking sites provide every bit of information, but young techno-savvy generation doesn't care about threats that posed online.

Eckert (2009) [11] found that communal violence in India is orchestrated by saffron brigade and it is a well planned mass movement.

Findings

Out of 60 facebook posts we searched, 66.66% of the posts were highly instigating in nature where people used very offensive languages against Islam and Muslim community. They exhorted people to take revenge from Muslims. They wrote posts as - "A Hindu was stabbed to death by bunch of Muslims," and in comment box people used very aggressive languages and attacked on state political leadership. People in comment box appealed to take out swords and fight against Muslims and teach a lesson to Bangladeshi migrants. They have used abusive languages against Muslims. Two politicians had written posts that Hindus are being targeted and so they should wake up. In such one social media post there are 1200 likes, 96 comments and 509 shares. Some people had said that victims are Hindus, so secularists are silent. In some posts, they have suggested to dismiss state government considering them supporter of Muslims.



Fig 1: A grab from Facebook posts

25 % of people shared articles from websites such as indianexpress.com and altnews.in, where they have talked about communal harmony. In these posts they said that how Muslims have collected money to help their Hindu neighbours and objectionable images posted on social media are fake. They asked questions who are gaining from flaring up riots in a state where religion was never an issue.



Fig 2: Posts shared during riots

8.33% have considered riots just a law and order problem and they see hands of politicians behind these riots for their political mileage.

We found a significant difference between the users who used abusive languages and comments and those who didn't use such languages. We also found a significant difference between the users who commented on peace and harmony and those who didn't commented about it. There was also a significant difference between the users who talked about law and order and those who didn't talked about it.

Observations

News website Scroll.in, published a story on July 14, 2017 whose headline was - 'In-depth: How a facebook post broke the decades long communal peace of a West Bengal town.' This story is related to Basirhat riots, whose heading clearly speaks the cause of riots were a facebook post. It describes that on June 30, 2017, a screenshot of facebook post became viral on WhatsApp which was shared on the timeline of a teenager. The teenager had posted an objectionable cartoon of Prophet. Subsequently, riots spread from Baduria town of Basirhat sub-division to whole area.

Firstpost on its website carried news under headline, 'West Bengal communal riots: Decoding the violence that has scarred Baduria, Naihati and Dhulagarh.' It analysed that following an "objectionable" facebook post, communal clashes started on July 04 in West Bengal's North 24 Parganas district. It states that in recent times social media was grossly misused to spread hatred across the state. Police officers were quoted in the article who confessed that controlling hate messages on social media is very difficult.

Deccan Chronicle published story as, 'Facebook post instigates riot in WB; 4 BSF companies deployed'. The website writes that riot erupted over a facebook post of Sourav Sarkar. The 'objectionable' post had hurt the sentiments of minority community leading to clashes. Following violence, internet services were stopped in North 24 Parganas.



Fig 3: A screenshot of Deccan Chronicle website carrying story of Basirhat riots

The Asian age carried story on July 06 under heading, 'WB : Fresh clash in Basirhat after 1 dies; Amit Shah constitutes panel, seeks report' which describes that riots broke out in Baduria and Basirhat areas of North 24 Parganas in West Bengal over a facebook post. It adds that the main accused, a teenager, arrested but people continued violence, ransacked shops and homes and torched the home of accused.

Scoop whoop News also reported that main cause of riots was a blasphemous facebook post of teenager and in its sub-head 'What triggered the unrest?', website stated that it all started with a facebook post of a class 10 student who posted a cartoon of Prophet Mohammad and Islamic holy site Kaaba.

Leading news channel NDTV on its website wrote that a Hindu teenager offensive post on facebook about Prophet Mohammad triggered a long cycle of arson and violence. Website has quoted some political observers who opined that people with vested interests trying to take advantage out of this malicious post.

The Times of India on its website described in first and second paragraph that communal violence broke out over an "objectionable" post on facebook. Quoting official sources in Delhi it further stressed that clashes triggered on a facebook post about a holy site.

Leading English daily Hindustan Times in its very first paragraph of the story mentioned that violence started over a derogatory meme posted on facebook by a class 11 student. It states that despite accused was arrested, people went on rampage and looted many shops and torched vehicles.



Fig 4: A screenshot of heading in website of Hindustan Times

Coverage of riots in newspapers

The Telegraph had published the news of riots under the headline - "CM exploded on governor 'threat' call." In the seventh paragraph of the story, details of the incident had been mentioned which stated that a facebook post had created trouble at Baduria in Basirhat and adjoining areas of North 24 Parganas. In the next two paragraphs whole incidents of riots and violence were covered.



Fig 5: News of riots published in third paragraph

The Times of India covered the incidents of riots under the

headline - “Humiliated, threatened by governor.” The details of riots had been described in 4th paragraph in which it is mentioned that an objectionable facebook post by class 12th student triggered riots.



Fig 6: A screenshot of newspaper on July 5, 2017

Conclusion

The stories published in news portals and newspapers clearly mentioned that a facebook post by a teenager had created trouble in Basirhat. Every website and newspaper covered in the study has given only one reason that triggered riots was a facebook post, and screenshot of that post which went viral through WhatsApp. So, from our observation it is clear that the prime reason of Basirhat riots was a blasphemous facebook post. Also it is clear that social media had played role in aggravating the situation. During our investigation of facebook posts at the time of riots, we found that maximum number of people (66.66%) wrote and shared highly inciting posts and even they appealed to attack on people of Muslim community. In such scenario, it is clear that social media add fuel to fire. Just one fourth of total users included in the study (25%) talked about peace and harmony in their posts and least number of users discussed about law and order situations. This means people who used facebook during riots, thought only about personal opinions and commented against Islam and used abusive languages and comments. What is worth noting here is that the websites and newspapers which are included in the study have different and exclusive sources for their stories related to Basirhat riots, 2017, but still they all pointed out the same thing that the main reason of the riot was instigation due to social media. If such similar information is coming from different sources then reality of facts can't be denied. In main stream media like newspapers and television news channels, there are responsible persons who filters news that have potential to harm our society but in social media there is no gatekeeping mechanism. Anyone can write anything according to their whim and people like, share and comment without knowing its authenticity. Some fake news and morphed photographs were circulated during Basirhat riots which had further damaged social fabric of the region. In the recent times people with vested interests have misused the intensity and speed of social media in rumourising things. So, it is proving to be a big challenge before the governments and law enforcement agencies to contain the rumours and fake news spread through social media.

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