

SOCIAL MEDIA, EMOTIONS AND VIOLENCE

Dr. Shubhra Jamwal, Mr. Mohinder Verma

Assistant Professor in English
Govt. College of Education,
Jammu (UT of J&K)

Senior Journalist
Daily Excelsior
Jammu (UT of J&K)

Abstract

Social media has become an increasingly important part of our private and professional lives. Generally people chat, share ideas and visual material and feel that they satisfy their needs of belonging along with the groups they have joined. However, the use of social media differs according to the socio-cultural and psychological aspects of the individuals. Social media is not only a domain of freedom where individuals express themselves overtly or secretly but also an area where several ways of violence emerge or even a means used for some aspects of violence. Being an interactive medium and addressing quite a large number of users, social media issue has become rather sophisticated and problematic as this platform is being put to use for exploiting the emotions of the users through objectionable contents. Videos of excessive violence, venom spitting speeches, campaigns of abuse towards certain people or sections of the society and institutions as well as negative propaganda, attributing negative aspects and misdirecting people by assuming fake identifies are some of the elements in the social media that immediately trigger emotional response from the gullible people and then stoke violence, disharmony and disturb the social fabric of the society. Hence, it is rightly said, "if the content is fire and the social media is the gasoline....make sure you are throwing the gas in the right direction".

The purpose of this paper is to highlight how social media has been instrumental in exploiting the emotions of susceptible people particularly youngsters in Kashmir valley and some areas of Jammu region of the erstwhile State of Jammu and Kashmir (presently J&K is the Union Territory) during the past some years, especially when the mobile internet reached every nook and corner of this part of the country, just to generate anti-India and pro-separatists feelings.

Moreover, social media was aggressively used for launching black propaganda against the security forces, which otherwise are continuously doing commendable job in not only tackling the ongoing insurgency but also bringing the misguided young to the mainstream. (The argument of black propaganda cannot be extended to the period beginning on August 7, 2019 as internet services were completely snapped ahead of scrapping of Article 370 of the Constitution of India conferring special status to Jammu and Kashmir and restored in the month of March 2020).

This paper contains certain instances (from different parts of the world but most specifically of Jammu and Kashmir) which clearly indicate the extent of misuse of social media in exploiting the emotions of the people to foment trouble, unrest and violence and how the volatile situation was controlled by the Governments by putting curbs on social media although sensible users of this platform particularly students community suffered immensely during such period. The paper also highlights the lessons required to be taken from the incidents of social media aiding and abetting violence and restricting its use for the constructive purposes.

INTRODUCTION

Social media began as a way for all of us to reconnect with old friends and we looked forward to sharing pictures of our families and friends, our travels and our personal and professional accomplishments and that still occurs. With the passage of time, social media has emerged as a top platform for market research and decision making process and billions of people are using social media for learning, marketing and shopping etc. However, observers have noted wide range of negative impacts of social media use. This platform has also become hub for exploiting emotions of people by spewing hate, intolerance, and in many cases depicting acts of graphic violence and aggression indicative of a total disregard for human life.

Are we---especially our children, adolescents and adults becoming desensitized to hatred, intolerance and violence depicted on social media? We are sure that most of us would agree that it does, at least to some extent. Every day we are exposed to a constant barrage of violence, negativity, intolerance and hatred in one form or other on news networks especially on social media and such contents affect our emotions in one way or the other. A minor incident in any part of the country, which carries the potential of hurting the emotions of the people, rapidly infiltrate the social media and then begins the stream of rumors and misinformation without

regard for its potential impact on the feelings and emotions of others which most of the times lead to violent reaction/incidents.

If we recall our childhood...of course there were acts of violence---abductions, murders, global conflicts etc but they didn't seem to consume every waking hours of our daily lives. But today such contents continue to flood the social media sites on hourly basis mainly because wider viewership of the same is readily available particularly the youngsters. As social media has made each and every one of us dependent on it one way or the other, this situation is being exploited by the elements which are inimical to the peace and harmony in the country by using this platform for exploiting emotions and sentiments just to foment trouble and violence.

Here are certain instances of how fake and misleading contents on the social media led to violence by playing with the sentiments/emotions of the users. In the month of March 2019, fake news on social media sparked anti-Roma violence in France (Source: CNN). "Social media rumors of child abductions by members of the Roma ethnic minority have sparked a wave of violence with crowds attacking people they believed were responsible for the rumored abductions", the CNN reported.

"Sri Lanka has temporarily blocked some social media networks and messaging apps including Facebook and WhatsApp after attacks on mosques in the worst unrest since Easter bombings by ISIS", reported Reuters news agency in March 2019. The unrest was sparked by a dispute started over comments on Facebook. (Source: NDTV News).

"In April 2017, the Government of Jammu and Kashmir was compelled to ban 22 social networking sites and applications as these were being misused by anti-national and anti-social elements for transmitting inflammatory messages for vitiating peace and instigating violence". (Source: Daily Excelsior Newspaper).

"The Jammu and Kashmir Police have a new task at hand---identify 'keypad jihadis', who spread hate on social networking sites to try and provoke violence". (Source: NDTV New Channel)

Social media and Kashmir situation:

The new, post-internet phase has distinct trends and patterns that set it apart from the previous phases of militancy in the Kashmir valley. These include the wide and clever use of social media just to exploit the sentiments of youngsters and garner their support. The mobile internet has played an important role in the rise of new militant movement---popularizing terrorists and their ideologies and glorifying violence. There was a time when outfits of the militants used to send fax messages to certain media organizations in Kashmir valley particularly after carrying out attacks just to claim responsibility for the same. But, now-a-days large number of pictures of militants and their videos are available on social media and these includes the dying declarations of militants trapped in the encounters, video clips of their trainings in forest areas and selfies branding weapons and showing bonhomie among the cadre.

Burhan Wani, a regional commander of the Hizbul Mujahideen, became popular due to social media, a platform which allowed him to reach out to young Kashmiris and even made him something of a local hero. Few days after the killing of Burhan Wani on July 8, 2017 a video surfaced on social media showing him and an accomplice tapping their rifles and humming a Kashmiri song playing in the background. The sole objective behind this video on social media was to exploit the emotions of the youngsters and inspire them to join the militants' ranks. On the second death anniversary of Burhan Wani, a message appeared on some social media sites from the Hizbul Mujahideen outfit appealing youngsters to get ready as shortly they will have to play a role like that of Burhan.

The social media has also played key role in making Zakir Musa, who dissented against Hizbul Mujahideen and floated his own group, in making him household name in the Kashmir valley. The viral videos that capture militants at play and leisure, doctored videos showing excesses of the security forces, the alleged use of instant messaging platforms to mobilize stone pelters and recruit foot soldiers for militants are the clear examples of blatant misuse of social media platform to exploit emotions and sentiments of youngsters in the Kashmir valley.

Until imposition of Governor's Rule in Jammu and Kashmir in June 2018, stone pelting protesters were also found shooting videos of clashes and then uploading them onto social media almost in real time just to exploit sentiments of vast population of Kashmir valley and generating anti-India and anti-armed forces sentiments. Without social media, the emergency of new militancy and gun culture might not have been possible in Kashmir valley. Most importantly the public support that a few hundred untrained militants galvanized would have been impossible.

The scale of the social media operations of terror outfits is not yet know as there is no exact information on how many groups existed in past or still do, since it is not easy to track encrypted messenger platforms. Some of these groups have localized branding. For instance, a group that has members from Pulwama was operating under the name---"Pulwama tigers". (Pulwama is the place where terrorists had rammed explosive laden car with a convoy of CRPF killing over 40 troops). These social media groups circulate militancy-related contents and issue announcements when known militants get trapped in the cordon launched by the security forces. There are numerous reports that several social media groups in Pakistan-occupied-Kashmir are actively campaigning against the Indian armed forces and exploiting emotions of the youngsters there by showing doctored photographs of violence due to armed forces in Kashmir valley.

Keeping in view the potential these social media groups carry to foment trouble and vitiate atmosphere in Kashmir valley, the Jammu and Kashmir Police is leaving no stone unturned to reverse this increasing trend. On

February 19, 2020, Director General of Police J&K said, “some miscreants are instigating people by misusing social media to stoke violence in the valley. We have evidence whereby social media was used through Virtual Private Networks to tell militants to carry out attacks at certain places”. (Source: Daily Excelsior Newspaper).

“The police are investigating various social media accounts propagating videos of executions carried out by the militants recently. These crimes (on-camera executions carried out by militants are terror and gruesome crimes. Their propaganda on social media is also a crime”, the then IGP Kashmir had told the media on November 19, 2018. (Source: Daily Excelsior Newspaper).

Ever since the social media has become a tool for the anti-national and anti-social elements to exploit the sentiments/emotions of the people of Kashmir valley, the successive Governments had to snap the internet services to check misuse of this platform. Undoubtedly, such measures on the part of the administration have proved to be detrimental to the interests of the general public like traders, tourism operators and students community, who otherwise believe in using social media platform for their professional activities.

CONCLUSION

All this indicates that social media being significant part of everyday life has a massive negative impact on the behavior and minds of the people in different parts of the world in general and Jammu and Kashmir in particular. This is the appropriate time to introspect whether we use social media for information, to make new friends, to express our opinion and for healthy exchange of ideas or making it a tool to play with the sentiments/emotions of others just for the sake of creating wedge in the society and to vitiate the peaceful atmosphere by stoking violence.

It is an undeniable fact that technology has somehow pacified mankind. Once introduced, it is almost impossible to intervene in the advancement of technology. Obviously not every social media channel is the same nor does each person have the same motives for using social media. We all must understand that unconscious or uncontrolled use of the power of social media may lead to the spread of negative discourses. We should not be so vocal in openly sharing those contents which can have potential impact on the feelings and emotions of others. What happened to that thing we once called empathy? Why do we judge the actions of a few and project those thoughts on the many? Why do we stereotype an entire group of people based on the actions of a few crazed, rogued or extremist radicals? These are the moot questions we all must ponder upon before making use of social media platform.

Tackling misuse of social media platform would require a multifaceted approach but what we are more concerned about is how our emotions to acts of violence have become normalized and far from shocking and surreal. What happened to empathy, tolerance and respecting our differences?

SOURCES

CNN News Channel
NDTV News Channel
Daily Excelsior Newspaper
All the social media sites and leading news channels