

Age of Demagoguery and Surveillance Capitalism: A Case Study of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)

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Abstract

Using the theoretical framework of surveillance capitalism, this paper analyses the election campaigns of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) of India during the 2014 and 2019 elections. It endeavours to find out how BJP has weaponised information during these two elections: a) to convince voters, b) to consolidate power at home. By doing content analysis of both primary and secondary sources, the research finds out that massive targeted advertisements were used by BJP's social media cell during these elections. Third parties (proxy) sources were especially helpful for BJP on Facebook for a wider outreach of its message on social media. The research further elaborates that the timing of targeted advertisements is shaped in a way that it ensures that people click the ad, thus achieving the desired political outcomes for BJP. Towards the end, it formulates a vehement case of taking back control of Indian digital lives by bringing cyberspace under greater democratic oversight and legal accountability.

Keywords: Surveillance Capitalism, User Data, Electoral Politics, BJP.

Introduction

The age of the internet comes with its benefits and challenges. It offers access to information and increased social connectivity. However, it presents humans with a new challenge of living a digital life with its past, present and future. Since digital human lives are an extension of our physical being, it becomes essential to establish our bearings in both the “real” and the digital worlds to fully exercise our autonomy. It is this autonomy which is imperilled by a new logic of accumulation — surveillance capitalism¹

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¹ Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (New York: New York Public Affairs, 2019).

operating in the digital realm. Under this new logic, human experience is objectified, commodified and sold towards others' benefit. In surveillance capitalism, human experience is taken as raw material and is sold into the digital markets. With time, surveillance capitalists realised that the extraction of human behaviour is not sufficient; therefore, they started to mold human behaviour as well. This notion becomes alarming while living under democratic societies where human autonomy and freedom to choose their leaders are few of the most cherish able values. Surveillance capitalists have posed a direct challenge to these values by playing a pro-active role in Brexit and Trump elections in the past.

The case study of Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) politics is befitting in this regard where the party has bombarded the netizens in India with pro-Modi campaigns and advertisements to attain the desired outcomes. Consequently, BJP enjoyed a hallmark victory in 2014 and then again in 2019's general elections. This paper analyses the tools deployed by the media team of BJP with special reference to *Facebook* during the 2014 and 2019 elections. By doing so, it makes a valuable contribution to existing research by extending the theoretical framework of surveillance capitalism on BJP's politics. Demagoguery is generally believed as a political activity or practice which makes an appeal to the prejudices of ordinary people rather than making a rational argument.² This research uses it in the same meaning. In this regard, social media has provided new platforms for the demagogues to exploit and manoeuvre the public opinion to achieve desired outcomes. Towards the end, the paper formulates a case for taking back control of our digital selves and for bringing cyberspace under strict legal accountability to ensure the privacy and safety of internet users. This research aims to establish how surveillance capitalism as a concept is used by BJP for weaponising information to: a) Convince voters and b) Consolidate power at home.

The paper is based on the content analysis of both primary and secondary sources including *Facebook* Ad-Library,³ campaign songs and advertisements by BJP, speeches, social media handles and their activities,

² "Demagoguery," Cambridge Dictionary, Translation and Thesaurus, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/demagoguery>

³ "Ad Library Report," *Facebook*, <https://www.facebook.com/ads/library/report/?source=archive-landing-page&country=IN>

newspaper clippings etc. It especially focuses on the content of the electoral campaign, *Main bhe Chowkidar*⁴ (I am also a security guard), and the slogan *Chaiwala* (Tea-seller) in the “*Chai pe Charcha*” (discussion over tea) electoral campaign⁵ in the 2019 and 2014 elections respectively to analyse their effect on voters.

Surveillance capitalism is an emerging framework. Being a novel concept, it has not been extended to many theoretical fields including the socio-economic, political and digital arenas research. It indicates the research gap existing in theory. This research fills this gap by applying the construct of surveillance capitalism to the populist politics by taking BJP as a case study. By doing so, it extends the framework of surveillance capitalism and provides a new lens to view the electoral politics of BJP. For this research, the paper has been limited to the electoral politics of BJP during the elections of 2014 and 2019s. Furthermore, it also provides the fields of political science and international relations with a new direction to look at power dynamics and the future of communal politics.

Literature Review

This part of the paper analyses the already existing literature and explains how various tools have been deployed by major powerful actors to discipline people (masses) in various phases of human history. It further explains how the methods of control and discipline have changed by the advent of new technologies and how social media has altogether altered the landscape of power and control. Analysing the scandal of Cambridge Analytica,⁶ this part of the paper explains how democracy is under threat in modern political apparatus where the online user data is sold and weaponised against the user itself to achieve desired outcomes. It further identifies the gap in existing literature when it comes to applying the framework of surveillance capitalism on politics.

⁴ “PM Modi Launches ‘Main Bhi Chowkidar’ Campaign for 2019 Elections,” *Times of India*, March 16, 2019, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/pm-modi-urges-people-to-be-a-proud-chowkidar-of-nation/articleshow/68435831.cms>.

⁵ “Modi Connects with the People Through His ‘Chai Pe Charcha’ Campaign,” *Times of India*, February 12, 2014, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/modi-connects-with-the-people-through-his-chai-pe-charcha-campaign/articleshow/30292508.cms>

⁶ A scandal about using the data of millions of *Facebook* users without their consent, predominantly for political advertisements.

States have always tried new methods to control its citizens, the use of panopticon has been a famous method in this regard. Invoking Bentham's panopticon, Foucault argues that at the centre of the panopticon there is a tower from which light emanates. There are cells around the tower and the inmates in prisons are being monitored by people sitting in the tower through that light.⁷ By doing so, the prisoners in cells, are under constant surveillance. Consequently, these inmates regulate their behaviour fearing that they are monitored all the time. In this way, disciplinary power is exerted on them without applying any physical power and their behaviour is regulated by mere visibility.

The inmates then internalise their constant surveillance and "become the principle of (their own) subjection."⁸ Mathieson has extended the same panoptic internalisation of discipline to technology and mass media. He claims that through these technologies especially television and the celebrity culture, a synopticon is being generated where instead of few watching the many, "the many see the few."⁹ The viewers scrutinise the celebrities through the internalised gaze of the panopticon which has immense control over the human body.¹⁰ However, the age of the internet and the invention of the smart TV brought a shift from conventional TV to computers where people started to skip ads. This called for a new mode of advertisement. The advertisers formulated new tools to reach their audiences "therefore, they use dataveillance, the practice of monitoring online data of users including their personal details and online activities, to carve the population into a series of discrete groups."¹¹ These groups are then targeted for specific advertisements. It is the direct marketing method where personalised ads are targeted towards customers. The surveillance capitalists did this initial behavioural targeting by using cookies.¹² Cookies are the packets of data saved by the web-browser. Through cookies, the login details, passwords, shopping card etc. is stored in the web-browser. This information can be retrieved later whenever the website is accessed again through the same

⁷ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London: Penguin UK, 1991), 202-03.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Thomas Mathieson, "The Viewer Society," *Theoretical Criminology* 1, no. 2 (1997): 215.

¹⁰ Richard V. Ericson and Kevin D. Haggerty, *The New Politics of Surveillance and Visibility* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 5-6.

¹¹ Ibid., 16.

¹² Ibid., 299.

server. It revolutionised the entire notion of targeted advertisement for cookies provided vital information about the users to the marketing companies allowing them access to huge amount of personal user data. By doing so, the synoptic quality then shaped the behaviours of individuals and applied a reverse synoptical power relation¹³ where again the many (internet users) were being targeted by the few (surveillance capitalists, case in point, big tech giants bombarded the internet users with targeted advertisements) by collecting their data and exploiting their vulnerabilities.

The advent of digital platforms has further aggravated the situation. They provided immense power to certain groups to mold and shape human behaviour and to control the futuristic outcomes. The 2018 Cambridge Analytica scandal is a befitting example in this regard in which the psychological profiles of 50 million *Facebook* users¹⁴ were sold without their consent. Cambridge Analytica was a British political consultancy firm. Christopher Wylie, who worked at Cambridge Analytica till 2014, became a whistleblower and leaked several documents indicating the breach of privacy and data theft of millions of Americans by the firm.

This has been the largest known leak in social media particularly *Facebook*'s history where the psychological profiles of the users were sold by the firm to mold voter behaviour in favour of Trump in the 2016 elections. It was also reported by various newspapers that people at Cambridge Analytica and its British affiliate, Strategic Communications Laboratories (SCL) Group had contacts with Lukoil Kremlin-based oil giants.¹⁵ According to the insiders at Cambridge Analytica, Lukoil was interested in knowing how user data was used to attain favourable outcomes in the US elections. However, the claims were denied by both SCL and Lukoil by contending that the oil group never became a client of Cambridge Analytica.¹⁶ Moreover, the entire episode does not end in the US and Russia

¹³ *Ibid.*, 345.

¹⁴ Mathew Rosenberg, Nicholas Confessore, and Carole Cadwalladar, "How Trump Consultants Exploited the Facebook Data of Millions," *New York Times*, March 17, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/17/us/politics/cambridge-analytica-trump-campaign.html>

¹⁵ Nicholas Confessore, "Cambridge Analytica and Facebook: The Scandal and the Fallout So Far," *New York Times* April 4, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/04/us/politics/cambridge-analytica-scandal-fallout.html>.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

alone. According to Reuters, a report published by British lawmakers provided evidence that the Leave EU campaign also took advantage of Cambridge Analytica. Although, the same news reports the refusal of Alexander Nix, Chief Executive Officer of Cambridge Analytica, to have worked with the campaign,¹⁷ it was speculated that the firm had played its share in Brexit. For example, it was widely believed that Cambridge Analytica had helped by sharing a video based on the false claim of Turkey entering the EU in 2020 with voters who were concerned with “borders.”¹⁸ In this way, the fear of Britons being flooded by migrants was exploited for political gains by fuelling their anti-migrant sentiments and consequently attaining the desired outcomes.

India, home to around 700 million internet users is no exception to it when it comes to such incidents. According to one of the tweets by Chris Wylie, SCL conducted behavioural profiling in at least six Indian state elections between 2003 and 2012, including the national election of 2009.¹⁹ Though he claimed that Congress — a leading political party in India was a client of Cambridge Analytica, he highlighted that numerous other projects were also conducted in India. Against the backdrop of these allegations, India’s Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) launched a probe into the matter in August 2018²⁰ and created a preliminary enquiry (PE) in this

¹⁷ “Lawmakers Publish Evidence that Cambridge Analytica Work Helped Brexit Group,” *Reuters*, April 16, 2018, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-facebook-cambridge-analytica-britain/lawmakers-publish-evidence-that-cambridge-analytica-work-helped-brexit-group-idUSKBN1HN2H5?feedType=RSS&feedName=worldNews&utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+Reuters%2FworldNews+%28Reuters+World+News%29.

¹⁸ Joe Murphy, “Cambridge Analytica Bragged: We have Vast Data for Brexit Vote,” *Evening Standard*, March 23, 2018, <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/uk/cambridge-analytica-bragged-we-have-vast-data-for-brexit-vote-a3797441.html>

¹⁹ Vidhi Doshi and Annie Gowen, “Whistleblower Claims Cambridge Analytica’s Partners in India Worked on Elections, Raising Privacy Fears,” *Washington Post*, March 28, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/whistleblower-claims-cambridge-analyticas-partners-in-india-worked-on-elections-raising-privacy-fears/2018/03/28/1168c04c-328a-11e8-b6bd-0084a1666987_story.html

²⁰ Munish Pandey, “What Happened to Cambridge Analytica and Facebook Data Theft Case,” *India Today*, August 19, 2020, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/what-happened-to-cambridge-analytica-and-facebook-data-theft-case-1712793-2020-08-19>

regard. Till 2019, the PE concluded that no concrete evidence was found that Congress used Cambridge Analytica and *Facebook* to influence the voters.²¹ However, it must be noted that *Facebook* shared with the Indian government that the data of estimated 562,455 Indians may have been accessed by Cambridge Analytica through installations of the app developed by GSR and installed by Indians.”²² It is pertinent to note that in electoral politics, each and every vote counts and has ramifications for the election results. Given that India is a market of 700 million internet users, such allegations raise serious concerns about the state of democracy in India. If voter perceptions on the internet were influenced in favour of one party against the other it undermines the fairness of the entire electoral process.

This leaves a lot of room for further exploration about the potential and actual role played by powers like Cambridge Analytica where psychographic profiles of internet users are sold and used to attain desired political outcomes. This research aims at redressing this research gap by extending the framework of surveillance capitalism on the electoral politics of BJP, especially during the 2014 and 2019 elections.

Analysis

Surveillance Capitalism

In 2018, Shoshana Zuboff presented a new theoretical framework of surveillance capitalism to view the market forces in the digital realm. She has defined it in the following terms: “an economic order that claims human experience as free raw material for hidden commercial practices of extraction, prediction and sales;” “the foundational framework of surveillance economy; a parasitic economic logic in which the production of goods and services is subordinated to a new global architecture of behavioural modifications;” a movement based on total certainty; “an expropriation of critical human rights that is best understood as the coup from above: an overthrow of the people’s sovereignty.”²³

In surveillance capitalism, human experience is taken as raw material and is sold into the digital markets. Zuboff calls these the “behavioural

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Zuboff, *Surveillance*, Definitions.

future markets” where human experience is sold as a commodity to obtain a “utopia of certainty.” Extracting the raw experience of human beings in the form of behavioural data is the central theme of the entire framework. Some of this data is used for service improvement while the rest is termed as “behavioural surplus.” Different manufacturing processes called “machine intelligence” operate on behavioural surplus.²⁴ These are the means of production through which surveillance capitalism operates. The main aim of these means of production is to create “prediction products,” which then forecast what do the users feel right now and how will they feel in the future. It is essential to keep in mind that the surveillance capitalism tech firms do not sell the raw material i.e. the personal data, but they generate their profit by earning the “predictions” on this data.²⁵

According to Zuboff, the discovery of *behavioural surplus* is a big leap forward for surveillance capitalists. *Google* is the pioneer of surveillance capitalism followed by *Facebook*, *Microsoft*, *Amazon*, and *Apple*. *Google* started as a search engine but soon realised the significance of individualised advertisements. Till the early 2000s, *Google* used human data only for service improvement. Zuboff calls it the “Behavioral Value Reinvestment Cycle.” However, in late 2000 this cycle took a new undertaking. *Google* decided to match ads with different queries posted on its search engine. The idea was to use cache memory collected from behavioural data and to apply computational expertise to it.²⁶ By doing so, ads were made more relevant to the persons rather than the queries they posted on the internet. It was at this point that the fusion of machine intelligence and behavioural surplus opened the gateway for huge profits for tech companies.

This led to the creation of new data sets called “User Profile Information (UPI).”²⁷ These profiles gave birth to the possibility of predicting human actions to the extent of certainty. These data sets possess the ability to predict a person’s feelings, thinking, activities and location at a certain point in time. Not only did these data sets help in formulating the predictions of human action but they also paved way for the ‘physics of clicks’ where clicks were used for successful targeted advertisement by making it relevant

²⁴ Ibid., 8.

²⁵ Ibid., 95.

²⁶ Ibid., 74.

²⁷ Ibid., 78.

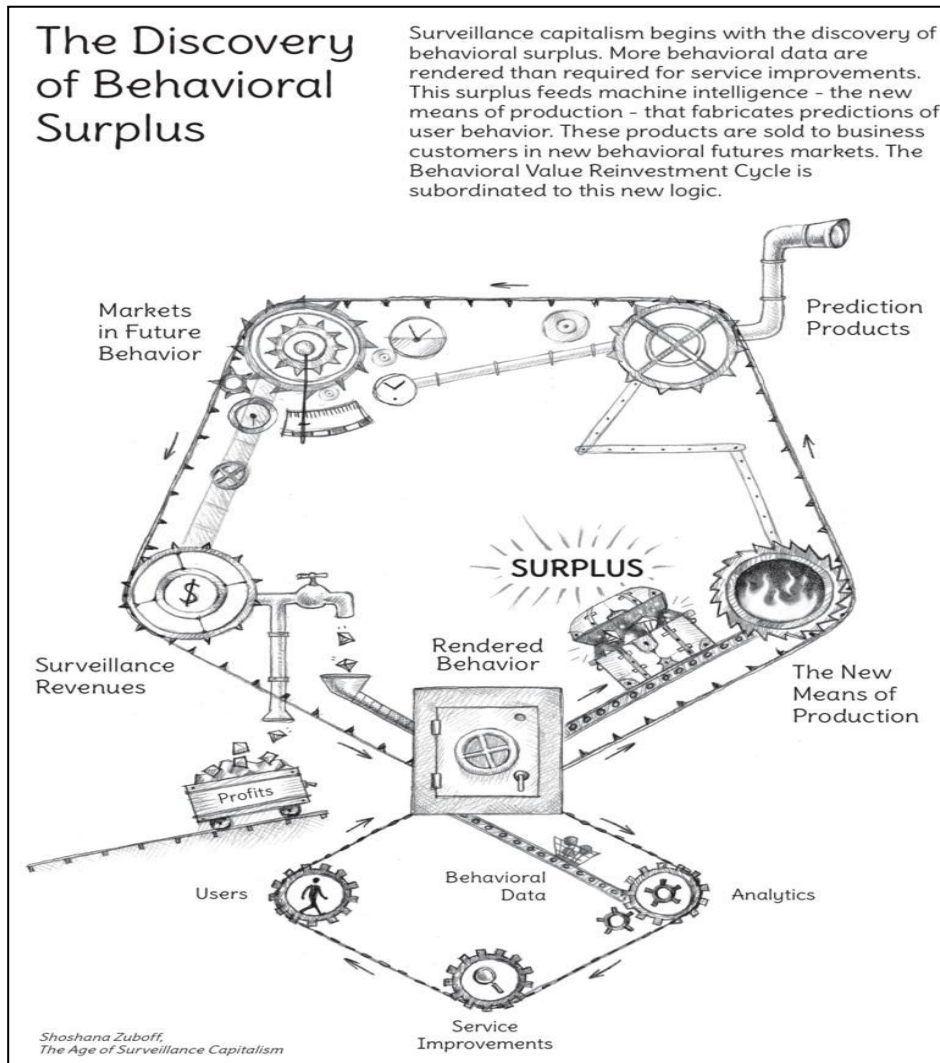
for the users. For example, Google started to generate revenue from real estate based on the clicks it could guarantee on certain ads. *Google* earned profit “based on the per-click multiplied by Google’s estimate of the likelihood that someone can actually click on the ad.”²⁸ This relevance was determined from all the information gathered through a person’s online search history. The cache history stored online of various internet users could identify their age and other personal information. This information was then complemented with other searches and some people were chosen as a befitting target for certain advertisements. For example, it is widely known that males after the age of 45 are more prone to cancer. Therefore, the advertisements for prostate cancer are specifically targeted towards males who are 45 years old or above. The sex and age of the persons could be easily identified by their UPI. Their relevance to the issue increased the chances of getting the likelihood of “click” on the advertisement.²⁹ For example, “inserting a specific phrase on your *Facebook* news feed, timing of appearance of a BUY button on your phone” will make sure the desired outcome is attained. In this way, our behaviours are modified by nudging, tuning, herding and manipulating. All of it is done for achieving a desired and definitive commercial result.³⁰

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 77.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 79.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 199-201.

**Figure No.1:
The Discovery of Behavioural Surplus**



Source: Book, The Age of Surveillance Capitalism by Shoshana Zuboff, 97.

At this point, it becomes pertinent to explore the context in which surveillance capitalism originated and expanded. It is crucial to identify why surveillance capitalism has been operating with impunity for so long and why the power of the surveillance capitalists has remained unchecked to this date. There are three main reasons for this. First, to this date, a huge chunk

of cyberspace is free from the constraints of the law. Surveillance capitalists have relentlessly pursued exploring and dominating this lawless space. They have repeatedly lobbied against any regulation of cyberspace. While speaking to *Washington Post*, Google's Ex-Chairman Eric Schmidt said that "the high tech runs three times faster than normal businesses and the government runs three-times slower than normal businesses. So, we have a nine times gap... And so, what you want to do is you want to make sure that the government does not get in the way and slow things down."³¹

They have widely circulated the idea that regulation is necessarily a hindrance to innovation and has been successful in propagating it so far. Second, the entire episode of 9/11 changed the notion of security. States took an unprecedented interest in prediction models and behavioural surplus analysis in the name of security and safety. The new shift in the approach aimed at ensuring security even at the cost of privacy³² which further paved the way for the unhindered growth of surveillance capitalism. It created a 'surveillance exceptionalism' where the government's interest in *Google* and its predictive behaviour capacities created an elective affinity between the two. As a result, the governments which were previously considering bringing the surveillance capitalists under the legislative umbrella dropped this idea. Third surveillance capitalists have used every tool at their disposal to not only keep their companies undemocratic but, also free from any scrutiny.³³ Until 2017, Sergey Brin and Larry Page (co-founders of *Google*) had 51.1 per cent of shareholder voting power in the company.³⁴

It is interesting to note that surveillance capitalism preys on users' disconnect from how they (the user) believe their online data is used and how it is actually used. Therefore, operating in the dark and free from user awareness is crucial for surveillance capitalism to thrive. Moreover,

³¹ Lillian Cunningham, "Google's Eric Schmidt Expounds on his Senate Testimony," *Washington Post*, October 1, 2011, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/on-leadership/googles-eric-schmidt-expounds-on-his-senate-testimony/2011/09/30/gIQAPyVgCL_story.html

³² Peter Swire, "The Second Wave of Global Privacy Protection: Symposium Introduction," *Ohio State Law Journal* 74, no. 6 (2013): 845.

³³ Zuboff, *Surveillance*, 101.

³⁴ Tess Townsend, "Alphabet Shareholders Want More Voting Rights but Larry and Sergey Don't Want it That Way," *Recode*, June 13, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/2017/6/13/15788892/alphabet-shareholder-proposals-fair-shares-counted-equally-no-supervote>

surveillance capitalism is also different from the usual surveillance economy as it has bypassed the traditional means where “cookies” are used to collect human data. It is now working on “flash cookies” and beacons which can re-install the cookies in the system even after they are deleted.³⁵ Advertisers working under surveillance capitalism use “cross tracking devices” which grant them access to all the smart gadgets including watches, phones, TV, car, apps, etc used by a person to formulate a more comprehensive behavioural profile of that person.

All this data is then used against the same user without their knowledge or consent. The ignorance of users is crucial because they cannot ask for any rights unless they know that their rights are being threatened and violated. For example, the right to breathe is not written in any constitution because it is not being jeopardised yet. Humans can freely breathe and feel no threat to this freedom so far. Once, this freedom is threatened, efforts would be made to ensure that this right is protected. It applies to the right to privacy, too. So far people are not aware of how their right to privacy is infringed by these surveillance capitalists. However, once they realise it, there will be no stopping them from ensuring its protection. Therefore, user ignorance is crucial for big tech firms to thrive, or it might jeopardise their entire venture.

Surveillance capitalism operates on the logic of instrumental power which uses human beings as a means towards other’s ends. This logic allows the governments and corporations to use technology to manipulate people in subtle ways. It renders humans as mere instruments, operating in a predictable way, thus allowing the governments or the corporation to attain desired goals. The same logic when applied to the current nature of politics poses an existential threat to democracy as the later is formulated on the principles of cherishing human autonomy, choice and freedom. However, stealing user data without their (user’s) consent and using it for gaining political ends, defeats the very values celebrated by democracy. India’s case study is important in this regard for it is one of the largest democracies with more than 30 per cent of the population with internet access. This part of the paper analyses the last two elections for BJP through the framework of surveillance capitalism.

³⁵ Electronic Privacy Information Centre, “Online Tracking and Behavioural Profiling,” EPIC – Electronic Privacy Information Centre, June 21, 2020, <https://epic.org/privacy/consumer/online-tracking/>

BJP And Surveillance Capitalism

India's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) rose to power in 2014 after a land slide victory securing 282 seats out of 543³⁶ seats in the general elections. It was the biggest victory by any political party in the last 40 years of Indian political history. BJP maintained its power in the 2019 elections, too. BJP is an important case study when it comes to the role of social media in politics. Over the years, it has formulated a formidable grip over social media where it has developed an unprecedented reach, recognition and influence due to its enhanced infrastructure in the technological domain.

One of the hallmarks of modern political leaders is their interaction and continuous political communication with their voters. It was due to these reasons that in 2019, Modi became the most liked leader on *Facebook* with 43.5 million likes on his *Facebook* page. He became the third most followed leader on *Twitter* with 42 million followers and the most followed elected leader on *Instagram* with 30 million followers.³⁷ The 2019 elections were unique because at that time half the voting population had access to digital platforms and one-third of the population had access to social media. According to the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI), the number of internet users in India went up from million 65.3 million in May 2014 to 581.51 million in May 2019. It is an around eight times increase in five years.³⁸

Social media worked wonders for BJP for it helped the party to make convincing appeals, especially to the young voters. The tactics deployed by BJP during its electoral process indicated that their social media teams had mastered the art of swaying voters in its favour. They adopted targeted advertisement and messaging on social media and achieved their desired outcome. BJP repeated the same social media tactics in the election of 2019,

³⁶ Idrees Ali, "Social Media Played Big Role in India's Election," *Voice of America*, June 6, 2014, <https://www.voanews.com/silicon-valley-technology/social-media-played-big-role-indias-election>

³⁷ Anuradha Rao, "How did Social Media Impact India's 2019 General Election?," *Economic and Political Weekly* 54, no. 51 (December 2019), <https://www.epw.in/engage/article/how-did-social-media-impact-india-2019-general-election>

³⁸ Nalin Mehta, "Digital Politics in India's 2019 General Elections," *Economic and Political Weekly* 54, no. 51 (December 2019), <https://www.epw.in/engage/article/digital-politics-2019-election-spending-strategies>

but with greater vehemence and better style, and once again secured its government. In this regard, analysis of two campaign slogans, “*Chaiwala*” and “*Main Bhe Chowkidar*” clearly indicates the power of social media in formulating a winning candidate out of Modi.

After being nominated as BJP’s Prime Ministerial Candidate, Modi first used the term “*Chowkidar*” in 2013. He declared in a rally that he would be the *chowkidar* of the nation and not the Prime Minister. However, the main slogan for 2014’s election was “*Chaiwala*.” It started with a jibe when a prominent politician, Mani Shankar Aiyar mocked Modi at the end of an All India Congress Committee meeting in January 2014 by saying, “I promise you in (the) twenty-first century, Narendra Modi will never become prime minister of the country ... But if he wants to distribute tea here, we will find a place for him.”³⁹ This idea was then hijacked by Modi’s media team and they launched events called “*Chai pe Charcha*” (discussion over tea). All of this referred to Modi’s humble background, as he used to serve tea on railway stations. By incorporating this narrative into his political campaign, his media team allowed his voters to connect with him. Consequently, people sitting on tea stalls while having tea started to relate with him more directly. It becomes similar to the *Brexit* chant of “take back control” where people started to resonate with their leaders and chose to vote in their favour after receiving the message through social media. Therefore, it makes it a befitting example of the effective use of social media and how it can turn the tables and public opinion in favour of certain candidates.

The idea of the second slogan was also conceived by Congress’ critique over Modi. In 2018, Rahul Gandhi referred to Modi’s purchase of high-value fighter jets from France and the allegations of corruption surrounding it by saying “*Chowkidar Choor Hai*” (security guard is a thief).⁴⁰ Later, in 2019 Modi’s media team launched “*Main bhe Chowkidar*” campaign on *Twitter*. On March 16, 2019, Modi declared in one of his tweets that he is the *Chowkidar* of the nation. To this date, Modi’s tweet has received around 55,000 retweets and 148k likes.

³⁹ “Modi Can Never Become PM, Can Sell Tea: Mani Shankar Aiyar,” *Indian Express*, January 17, 2014, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/politics/modi-can-never-become-pm-can-sell-tea-mani-shankar-aiyar/>

⁴⁰ Dev A. Wadhawan and Kaushik Deka, “Hindustan Ka Chowkidar Chor Hai: Rahul Gandhi Calls PM Modi a Thief in Rajasthan,” *India Today*, September 20, 2018, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/hindustan-ka-chowkidar-chor-hai-rahul-gandhi-calls-pm-modi-a-thief-in-rajasthan-1344775-2018-09-20>

Such tweets are one of the many examples of the use of social media by BJP to connect to the people. Especially in 2019, BJP deployed all tools at its disposal to reach out to the masses. For example, On April 8th, 2019 just three days before the Lok Sabha elections,⁴¹ BJP uploaded a video on its *YouTube* channel to make a mass appeal to young voters, in which the youngsters were seen rejoicing at a rap song cherishing how Modi deserved the first vote of many youngsters. The video highlighted important government schemes like “Digital India,” “Skill India,” “*Ujjwala Yojana*” (lighting scheme).⁴² It went viral across the country, especially among the youth. The clever marketing tactics coupled with the right tools of social media formulated a fertile ground for the masses to relate to their government. The major success of “My first Vote for Modi,” “*Modi Hai to Mumkin Hai*” (Modi makes it possible) and “*Main Bhi Chowkidar*” campaigns lay in the fact that they resonated well and catered to different social classes of the country. Consequently, Indians who were previously indecisive started to feel closer to BJP.

However, the success of these campaigns and songs is not without deliberate efforts by BJP. Many users were bombarded with targeted advertisements about these campaigns and songs. The use of third parties has been advantageous for BJP in numerous ways. According to *Facebook* Ad-Library, a database of advertisements on *Facebook*, BJP has ranked second among the top spenders on political advertisement on *Facebook* from February 21, 2019, to 24th April 2021.⁴³ *Google* declared receiving the advertisement of 29.3 crores, while *Facebook*’s Ad Library of India shows receiving 132,419 advertisements worth 29.28 crores between February and May 2019.⁴⁴ A serious reservation about these figures is that most advertisements on these platforms are not done directly by the political parties. They were done by the proxy, affiliate, or sympathetic groups working for political parties. Due to the deliberate anonymity of sponsors,

⁴¹ Bharatiya Janata Party, “My First Vote to the One, One and Only One Who has Got Everything Done,” *YouTube*, April 8, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=313nuAADXcc>.

⁴² Saumya Tewari, “How Smart, Viral Content Helped BJP Trump Congress on Social Media,” *Livemint*, June 4, 2019, <https://www.livemint.com/politics/news/how-smart-viral-content-helped-bjp-trump-congress-on-social-media-1559663323348.html>

⁴³ “Ad Library Report,” <https://www.facebook.com/ads/library/report/?source=archive-landing-page&country=IN>.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

there was no way to identify which ‘independent’ group is working as a proxy with which political party. This is where the classic surveillance capitalism comes into play where the user is bombarded with information and advertisement without even realising its source. It is how the ignorance of the user is taken as a bliss by the exploiters. People click these ads without realising that they are carefully directed in their newsfeed, allowing the magic of “physics of clicks” to work its wonders.

Throughout both the elections, BJP has used many apps and proxies to enhance its influence. A study by OZY,⁴⁵ a modern media company unravels that many shadowy political advertisements have been launched on *Facebook* and other digital platforms to support Modi. They appear as an independent support group that helps BJP; however, further studies into the matter suggest otherwise. For example, a quiz called “How well do you know PM Modi” was the line of one of *Facebook* advertisement that social media users in India used to see during pre-election times. The Ad was created by the platform, “My First Vote for Modi” whose purpose was to encourage first-time voters to vote for him. However, the address provided by the platform matched the address of BJP’s national headquarter in New Delhi. Moreover, the email provided by the platform is also bogus and the phone number is non-responsive. My First Vote for Modi is the fourth largest spender on political ads on *Facebook* in India. Since February 2019, the platform has spent 200,000 dollars⁴⁶ on political advertisements, convincing young voters to vote for Modi. It is just one example of the tools deployed by Modi to mold public opinion in his favour.

The study further reveals that millions have been spent on political advertisements on social media platforms to present and sell a formidable and invincible image of Modi to the voters. Out of ten most spenders of political ads on *Facebook*, three are hard-core BJP proxies. Moreover, among the top 60 spenders, eight are BJP supported groups. Their accumulative spending is more than US\$800,000 on political ads alone in a

⁴⁵ Maroosha Muzaffar, “The Hidden Facebook Rules Modi Is Using to Create an Image of Invincibility,” *OZY*, last modified September 16, 2020, <https://www.ozy.com/html/the-new-and-the-next/the-hidden-facebook-rules-modi-is-using-to-create-an-image-of-invincibility/316627/>.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

year and a half, surpassing BJP itself which has a total expenditure of \$680,000⁴⁷ during the same amount of time.

Table No.1
Top Pro-Modi Proxy Advertisers

Top Pro-Modi Proxy Advertisers	Amount Spent (\$)	Number of Facebook Ads
Bharat ke Mann Ki Baat	320,155	3,730
My First Vote for Modi	197,748	7,996
Nation With NaMo	173,859	2,497
Phir Ek Baat Imaandar Sarkar	37,085	4,765
Distoy Farak Shivshahi Parak	31,056	1,748
Aghadi Bighadi	19,671	1,074
New India Junction	17,773	55
The TruePicture	14,976	14
TOTALS	\$ 812,323	21,879

Source: OZY, April 4, 2019⁴⁸

The total number of advertisements by BJP proxies is 21,879.⁴⁹ The three major spenders on *Facebook*, *Bharat Ke Mann Ki Baat*, *Nation with NaMo*, and *My First Vote For Modi* have addresses that are directly linked to BJP. The total number of ads run by these three is more than 14000 ads since February 2019.⁵⁰ The amount is troublesome for it raises the pertinent question of “Who is giving them the money?” *Facebook’s* policy in this regard is all political advertisements have to go through “two-factor authentication” and have to provide a verifiable address, phone number, and documents approved by the government. However, OZY’s studies find out that the majority of these pro-BJP spenders cannot be traced or reached out and their addresses are non-existent. *Facebook*, says that the phone number provided by the sponsors has only to be reachable at the time of submission. So the fact that most of the

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

proxy groups in India cannot be reached out later, is not even a violation of *Facebook* rules. It is the classic you scratch my back, and I scratch yours where these surveillance capitalists are looking out for each other and are benefitting from the loopholes of the system. Users' ignorance coupled with their government's willingness to breach their privacy to attain political ends is reaping desired results for these exploiters.

Moreover, it must also be noted that initially any politically sponsored ad, carries a tag saying "paid content" or "sponsored" on *Facebook*. However, once such advertisement is shared by a user, these disclaimers vanish and that ad is then treated as "organic content" by *Facebook*. It is the classic model of how surveillance capitalism operates i.e. under the shadows and without the user knowing where the content is coming from and whether they are clicking and sharing sponsored or paid content or an organic one. They no longer have the "freedom" to decide whether they want to click that paid ad or not for it is presented to them at exactly the right time where the probability of "click" is the highest. By doing so, humans are divorced from their autonomy and self-determination. They have no longer access to their online past and have no control over their digital future. They are reduced to mere pawns on the chessboard of the surveillance capitalists who only aim at maximising their profit even if it is at the expense of diminishing the humanity in humans. Therefore, this research calls for the dire need to bring cyberspace under democratic rules and laws to preserve human dignity and their control over their digital present and future. This can be done by formulating comprehensive laws to protect the privacy and data of users in digital realm and by bringing big tech firms under democratic scrutiny. Policies should be devised to regulate the cyberspace by keeping user at their heart, rather than these giant firms.

Conclusion

By analysing the tools deployed by BJP in the elections of 2014 and 2019, this paper makes a valuable contribution to the existing theory by providing a new framework to view populist politics. It argues that Modi and his media team, by bombarding Indian internet users with targeted advertisements, exploited their vulnerabilities and used them as mere means to attain political ends. In this way, Modi and his team weaponised

information to attain desired political outcomes and were successful in consolidating power at home by winning elections twice.

The paper further opens new gateways for future research by providing a unique and developing framework to view emerging political phenomenon. The giants of surveillance capitalism have a nexus with political powers, as evident through the Cambridge Analytica Scandal. This paper also redresses a gap in research by extending a new analysis to 2014 and 2019 election campaigns of BJP. By doing so, it ushers a new era in the political and strategic research by introducing a novel framework for understanding the behaviour of states. It also provides a new lens to analyze the tools and methods adopted by political parties during their digital election campaigns to persuade voters in their favour. By doing so, this paper also presents a unique approach for understanding the rights of citizens in the current age of internet and to advocate a formidable case for protecting their socio-political rights in this age. Towards the end, the paper argues that it is high time that humans start taking back control of their digital lives. One way of doing it is to bring cyberspace under democratic and legal accountability. More laws need to be made to redress this gap; ensuring data privacy and safety. It is only by ensuring the safety of the virtual self that the “real” self can feel safe and secure while living under the current information age.