

A COWARD'S POLITICAL WEAPON

Troll Armies Go on Settling Scores

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Trolling – loosely defined as an act of making a deliberately offensive or provocative online post with the aim of upsetting someone or eliciting an angry response – is often used in India as an online weapon of slaying political enemies.

It can easily be described as the most distasteful misuse of social media to tarnish the image of an opponent. All India Congress Committee (AICC) president Rahul Gandhi has been a fair game for the countless trolls who took pot shots at him, lampooned him and uncharitably dubbed him a Pappu (immature, incompetent or a bumbling fool), ever since social media emerged as a powerful medium for political messaging. At a time when the rest of the political parties were still oblivious to the power and capabilities of social media in shaping perceptions,

the principal opposition party then, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) raised an army of online warriors for the electoral battle in 2014. Trolling as a political weapon did add to the overall armoury of a very powerful and successful BJP campaign to anoint Narendra Modi as the Prime Minister. More so, because the narrative was built around presenting Modi as a tough leader who would slay the demons of corruption, bring back the black money and fulfil the aspirations of a nation hungry for growth.

How trolling helped the BJP was in making its opponent – the UPA government of Dr Manmohan Singh and a Congress party led by Rahul Gandhi and his mother Sonia Gandhi – look ugly and repulsive to the voter. The Congress did itself no favours by adding to

the overall perception that it was a government steeped in corruption and unable to take key policy decisions that affected the pace of economic growth in the country.

It was only much later, after Modi romped home with a brute majority, that the Congress woke up to the beast called social media and began to engage with it. Here, the old guard and even the not-so-old guard of the party were all at sea till a young and creatively-inclined party leader from Karnataka, Divya Spandana, also a popular actress, took charge of the social media activity in May last year. And within no time, she began to make a difference, showing that even the Congress party could play the game and match the BJP internet warriors on an equal footing. What she did with her witty, pungent and

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hard-hitting tweets targeting the ruling dispensation was to occupy the digital space with a Congress narrative. Till then the BJP had a field day with no one to challenge it in an arena that appeals to the youth voters' segments that live a digital life.

Spandana is also a former member of Lok Sabha from Mandya, in Karnataka. She is widely believed to be the person looking at the tweets emanating from the official handle of Rahul Gandhi, which since then are being watched with a bit of jitter by the right wingers. The Pappu of yore – lampooned as a novice and failed politician – was beginning to get under the skin of the BJP leaders with his catchy

one-line tweets. Soon, ministers were holding press conferences to counter Rahul Gandhi, whom they continuously attack on Twitter. Clearly, the game is on and the Congress too is very much in the field. And a few of its leaders and workers have also hit back with equal and opposite force by trolling. The Congress too is now staffed with its own IT army to take on the BJP's famed IT cell.

Divya Spandana herself has got into trouble with a few of her controversial tweets. Most recently her post on the Statue of Unity with the picture of Modi ji standing near the gigantic statue of Sardar Patel with the caption – "Is that bird dropping?"

generated huge amount of abuse and criticism for showing disrespect to the Prime Minister.

While politicians have largely escaped facing action, a Manipuri journalist was not so lucky, as he was sentenced to a year in jail for criticising Chief Minister N Biren Singh and Prime Minister Narendra Modi. This is the latest in a series of penal actions against media persons and those criticising the government. Several media associations have demanded the release of Kishorechandra Wangkhem, detained under the National Security Act for 12 months. A local TV journalist in Manipur, Wangkhem had uploaded a video on social media in which he criticised the Chief Minister and the Prime Minister. This arrest is being seen as a warning to independent-minded media persons to mend their ways and has brought the issue of freedom of speech and expression under sharper focus once again as the country gets ready to get into election mode. The arrest has been condemned by some of India's most respected media associations and civil rights groups.

Although the jury is out on whether the video by the Manipur TV journalist constituted trolling, there is no denying that trolling per se has tremendous harm potential. It damages the image of an individual or an entity, often leaving the victim with little or no recourse. A case in point is that of the Tamil

singer Chinmayi Sripaada from Chennai, who was trolled for airing accusations of sexual harassment against noted lyricist Vairamuthu. She had the courage to speak out her #MeToo story and became the target of abusive trolls. A few of her friends like actress Samantha Nagarjuna jumped into the arena to her rescue. She stood her ground and fought back the trolls.

When it comes to the field of politics, digital assassination has huge impact in India, which has a growing internet penetration and rapid spread of Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and YouTube. The troll/meme industry is one of the biggest in certain states in India. Such is the impact of trolls that even established personalities can be demolished in no time. For the political parties, much to their grief, this was the takeaway of 2014.

The social media soldiers of the BJP, by then the most efficiently managed social media outfit, successfully worked on the minds of the masses, and made a difference to its campaign. The party also picked its targets and unleashed trolls who were satirical, witty and acerbic. It used comedy, when needed, to tarnish the image of an ideological opponent. What made the digital assassination of character easy was that the perpetrators could do anything while hiding behind the screen of anonymity.

But what can the law enforcement agencies do if

those holding Constitutional positions follow people who spew venom and hatred in their tweets? However, this did not stop the Bengaluru police from arresting Mahesh Vikram Hegde in July for allegedly spreading false information about a Jain monk being attacked by a Muslim youth. According to the police, the monk had been injured in an accident. Hedge, one of the founders of Postcard News, a publication leaning towards right wing ideology, had no less a person than the Prime Minister following him. In fact, critics of the PM have raised questions on why he followed some individuals whose tweets contained objectionable material.

The digital attacks have no boundaries and could be launched from anywhere against anyone. Even union ministers are not entirely free from this menace as the relentless trolling of External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj showed. Swaraj came under attack from vicious trolls for issuing a passport to an inter-faith couple. A Twitter goon wondered if it was her "Islamic Kidney" which needed to be blamed for her decision of passport issuance. One troll suggested that Swaraj's husband be beaten up. Congress spokesperson Priyanka Chaturvedi too became a target of the troll army. A troll had issued rape threat against her 10-year-old daughter. However, swift action was taken by the police in this case.

No one is safe from trolls who provide ammunition to hate campaigns. Also a close cousin of trolling is fake news, which is described variously as deliberate disinformation or hoaxes. This battery of lies, in turn whips up frenzy and can lead to mob violence, lynching or communal clashes. As technology can spread such messages with electrifying speed and vitiate the atmosphere, checking this becomes imperative. Often, the authority resorts to snapping the internet and suspending telecom services till the situation is brought under control.

Between May 2017 and April 2018, there were as many as 82 instances of internet shutdown in India. Says former NASSCOM Chairman Kiran Karnik in his latest book, *Evolution, Decoding India's Disruptive Tech Story*: "The romantic idea of technologies of freedom has been neutralized by the harsh truths of the real world." In the strife-torn border state of Jammu and Kashmir, often internet shutdowns are enforced to maintain law and order, but, in the case of trolls across India, the situation and the threat perception are different. Which is why, the trolls are free to carry out their concerted sniper attacks from wherever they may be located.