



Amitrakshar International Journal

of Interdisciplinary and Transdisciplinary Research (AIJITR)

(A Social Science, Science and Indian Knowledge Systems Perspective)

Open-Access, Peer-Reviewed, Refereed, Bi-Monthly, International E-Journal

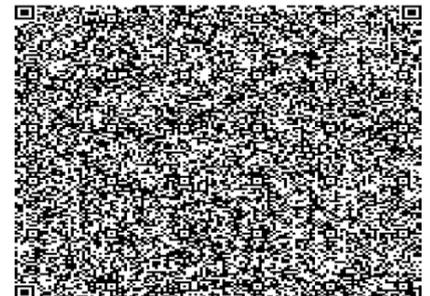
The Impact of Social Media – Driven Misinformation on Migrants and Politics in West Bengal, 2011-2024

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Abstract

This research investigates the impact of social media – driven misinformation on the behavior of culturally diverse voters and migrant voters and its impact on the West Bengal form 2011-2024. The study explores how targeted disinformation campaign, communal narratives influenced voting patterns, political opinion and democratic participation across the ethnical, cultural lines of the voters in the West Bengal. Employing a mixed methods approach, content analysis of misinformation across the social media platforms, some case studies also included with this paper. This study concludes one step beyond the policy recommendations for curbing digital misinformation and enhancing digital literacy in electorally sensitive populations in this digital era. Also, this study contributes a nuanced understanding of digital misinformation's role in shaping electoral outcomes in multicultural democracies in West Bengal.

Keywords: Social Media, Misinformation, Migrant, Marginalized, Democracy.



AIJITR - Volume - 2, Issue - V, Sept-Oct 2025



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INTRODUCTION:

West Bengal is home to numerous ethnic groups including over 200,000 tribal individuals from approximately ten tribes in Birbhum showcasing a multilingual and multicultural society, (Basak & Bandyopadhyay, 2014). West Bengal has witnessed internal migration over the decades. Particularly in Asansol, where migrants have introduced distinct cultural traits, contributing to the region's cultural integration, (Singh & Siddique, 2020). Migrant voters have emerged as an influential group in the state's electoral landscape. Misinformation of social media how much influence the culturally diverse voters and migrant voters, and there are many policies and recommendations to mitigate the influence of the misinformation, this paper examines this impact on the West Bengal's politics between 2011 to 2024.

POLITICAL CONTEXT OF WEST BENGAL:

The political landscape of West Bengal in 2011 has significant transformation. After 34 years of ruled of Left front, faced a major electoral defeat in 2011. Primarily, due to public discontent over land acquisition issues in Singur and Nandigram, (Chakrabarty,2021). All India Trinamool Congress capitalized on this discontent, uniting various opposition factions and presenting itself as a viable alternative to the left's governance model, (Chakrabarty,2021).

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DOI Link (Crossref) Prefix: <https://doi.org/10.63431/AIJITR/2.V.2025.25-31>

AIJITR, Volume 2, Issue –V, Sept – Oct, 2025, PP.25-31

Received on 27th Sept 2025 & Accepted on 02nd, Oct, 2025 Published: 30th October, 2025



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In this time period another change happened that is the rise of BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party), as a formidable opposition. BJP has emerged as dominant mode of political campaigning in the state West Bengal since 2016 state assembly election. 2011 to 2024 has witnessed of changing of political campaigns patterns also political campaigning has evolved, with the BJP's strategies emphasizing professionalization and the use of social media as a modern platform of political campaigning and that contrasting with the traditional methods of Left front and AITC, (Nath & Roy, 2022). This shift has resulted in a more aggressive political atmosphere where communal identities are increasingly politicized, (Nath & Roy, 2022).

MIGRANT VOTERS IN WEST BENGAL:

The migrant voters in west Bengal from 2011 to 2024 encompass a diverse demographic influenced by various factors such as economic opportunities, marital status and historical migration patterns.

- a. **Internal migration:** Approximately 36% of West Bengal's population are migrants with significant internal migration from neighbouring states and inter-district migrations, (Marsh, 2022). Especially the deficiency of local employment, low agricultural wages and landlessness are the primary reasons for internal migration in West Bengal.
- b. **International migration:** A considerable number of migrants originate from Bangladesh and Nepal, influenced by historical events and economic prospects in sectors like coal mining and tea gardens, (Debnath & Roy, 2019).
- c. **Marital status:** Even married females constitute a substantial portion of female migrants, while male migration is predominantly driven by job opportunities, (Das et al. 2021).

Migration patterns differ significantly across regions in West Bengal. Some areas in West Bengal, like Murshidabad and the West Rarh Plateau, experience migration influenced by environmental factors such as droughts and floods, besides economic factors. These factors are push people to migrate to more prosperous and stable areas.

According to census of 1919-2011 the number of migrants in West Bengal is 33,448,472.

THE RISE AND SPREAD OF MISINFORMATION BY SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS:

The manifestation of social media in politics has significantly transformed political engagement, communication and campaigning. Social media serves as a vital source of political information, enabling users to access real time updates and diverse perspectives, (Hussain et al. 2023). Despite its benefits, social media also poses challenges, such as the spread of misinformation and creation of echo chambers that can polarize public opinion, (Marwala, 2023). The unlimited freedom of made social media platforms is capable to spread misinformation and fake news in world wide. In the last few years, social media has turned out to be a massive player in shaping public discourse in a democratic space, (Marda & Milan, 2018). West Bengal voters also faced that kinds of problems. Especially culturally diverse migrant voters. Misinformation often portrays migrants negatively, framing them as threats to national identity or economic stability, which can influence voter perceptions and behaviours.

MISINFORMATION AND CAMPAIGN IS A TOOL OF VOTER MANIPULATION:



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SOME CASE STUDIES-

a. Communal tensions in Basirhat (2017): 2017 in July, communal violence erupted in Basirhat, North 24 parganas district, and it was sparked by a Facebook post allegedly insulting prophet Muhammad. That post was made by a teenage boy, but the real trigger was the viral spread of edited screenshots and inflammatory messages across Facebook and WhatsApp. At that time a viral fake video showed the attacks on Hindu by Muslims in West Bengal and that news created violence, and polarization between communities. Political parties especially BJP and TMC accused each other of either inciting or failing to prevent the violence. This incident led to consolidation of Hindu voters in favour of BJP in 2019 Lok Sabha. An official BJP is not a Hindu party but it is affiliated with Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a Hindu nationalist organization so due to BJP's ideological roots they widely identified as a Hindu nationalist party.

b. Wave of fake videos (2019-2021): In 2021 Chief minister of West Bengal Mamata Banerjee suffered a leg injury during campaigning in Nandigram. That time a fake video became viral and video claimed to show her walking easily after incident and suggesting she lied and that created polarized public sentiment. And she lost by a narrow margin in Nandigram in 2021. Another doctored clip showed TMC supporters celebrating with weapons and that such clips inflamed communal tensions and focused on migrants, depicting them as threats to law and identity.

c. Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA)2019: CAA, passed by the parliament in 2019, aims to provide fast-tracked Indian citizenship to six minority communities- Hindu, Sikh, Jain, Buddhist, Parsi and Christian foreigners who arrived in India before December 31, 2014, as a result of religious persecution in Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan. After that announcement Muslim and migrant communities getting confused in West Bengal. not only West Bengal all over India it was happened. Social media played a key role in amplifying misinformation during this period. False and misleading content often shared from various social media platforms. Among the migrant population, particularly Bangladeshi origin Muslims, misinformation suggested that the NRC would lead to mass deportations, loss of voting rights or even detention in camps. That news causing panic among migrant labourclass and marginalized voters.

Rajat Kanti Sur a researcher with Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group said, "we carried out a study in 2021 in a few districts and found that the majority of migrant workers came back and voted in favour of TMC to keep BJP away from office. They felt a BJP win would lead to the implementation of CAA and NRC". Mamata Banerjee, chief minister of West Bengal and TMC chairperson, assured cross-border migrants and other members of minority communities that new citizenship amendments would not be implemented during her election campaigns in border district, which helped to mobilise votes.

d. Polarization in religious and migrant communities (2019): The substantial influx of information disseminated through social media platforms has precipitated and escalation in communal violence. The prevalence of fabricated news reports emanating from Barasat, Basirhat, Diamond Harbour and Krishnanagar- regions characterized by pronounced religious



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polarization particularly concerning. “Social Media has functioned as a catalyst for provocation”, asserts Maidul Islam, esteemed professor of political science at the centre for studies in social sciences, Kolkata.

Accusations of Muslim appeasement directed towards Mamata Banerjee in response to specific administrative measures have exacerbated the rift between Hindu and Muslim communities. Controversial topics such as the rescheduling of

Durga puja immersion due to Muharram have been strategically leveraged by Pro-Hindutva factions to incite communal discord. This type of polarized and hostile religious and political climate serves as an ideal incubator for the proliferation of misinformation and spurious narratives with social media frequently acting as a conduit for the amplification of such content.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

To curb the influence of social media-driven misinformation on India's politics, many policies and recommendations are available. Those are mentioned below-

a. Election commission of India: Model code of conduct (MCC) is a set of guidelines issued by the Election commission of India for the guidance of political parties and candidates. MCC prohibits use of any kind of speech which can cause tension between different castes and communities, religious or linguistic, misinformation and personal attacks in campaign material and speeches.

Election commission of India actively works to counter fake news and misinformation through initiatives like ‘verify before you amplify’ and ‘Myth vs Reality’. Election commission of India also launched an app like cVIGIL app, where voter can report on about violations, disinformation and hate speech.

There are so many extant regulatory frameworks of Election commission of India available to mitigate of propagated misinformation, section 505 of the India penal code (IPC) deals with statements conducing to public mischief. It describes the penalties for individuals to create, make or circulate statements, rumour that are likely to cause of fear or commit an offence against state or public tranquillity.

b. Digital literacy and Fact-checking: Most of the people of migrant and marginalized, in rural and semi-urban area are using the social media but they are not that much aware about the fake news about community, culture, election etc. Main problem of that is they are unable to fact-check due to lack of digital literacy. Linguistic gap is the most significant barrier for fact-checking. Most of the misinformation in West Bengal spreads in Bengali, Hindi and Urdu but the major fact checkers operate in English or Hindi. We need region specific and culturally relevant digital literacy programs to be digitalized to the people. For that community-based interventions needed to counter misinformation driven by social media. Need to train local panchayat leaders, SHG women, ASHA workers and Anganwadi teachers as digital first responders. Because they can easily connect with diverse people.

c. Accountability and Transparency: Social media platforms should have transparency and accountability for the content they host to prevent the spread of misinformation .



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Also, they need consistent policies for removing harmful content.

CONCLUSION:

West Bengal is a culturally diverse state, such as linguistic, religious, ethical and regional.

West Bengal is one of the migrants receiving state from neighbouring states (Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha, Assam) and Bangladesh, (Chatterji, 2021) for economical opportunity, marriage and study.

This study especially emphasis on the time period of between 2011 to 2024. And that time period social media platforms (YouTube, WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter) increasingly served as vehicles political messaging but also became fertile ground for the dissemination of misinformation. Misinformation defined as 'false or inaccurate information deliberately created and spread' through channels like social media platforms. This misinformation basically affects to the culturally diverse, marginalized and migrant voters for the lack of digital literacy and linguistic barriers.

Misinformation related to some sensitive topic such as the CAA, NRC and alleged "infiltration" by undocumented migrants became central and electoral propaganda. This content not only influenced public opinion but also polarized communities along religious and ethnic lines. And that study shows how unchecked social media driven misinformation can distort democratic participation among vulnerable groups such as culturally diverse and migrant voters in West Bengal.

There are so many policies and recommendations are available to the mitigate misinformation and misuse of social media. one substance is more important beyond the making laws and policy recommendation, that is continuous observation, ongoing monitoring, ground level understanding, regular basis awareness programme are essential in countering the spread of misinformation especially on culturally diverse and migrant voters in multicultural democracy such as West Bengal.

LIMITATION OF THAT STUDY: This paper focuses on the time period of 2011 to 2024 in West Bengal, using secondary sources such as research papers, online articles and news articles, and includes a few case studies from the 2011 to 2024. This paper only investigates the impact of social media driven misinformation on culturally diverse and migrant voters in West Bengal election.

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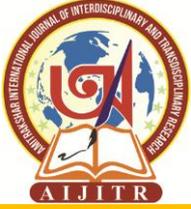
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