

General Studies-1; Topic– Salient features of Indian Society, Diversity of India.

Impact of Social Media on Society

1) Introduction

- Social media plays an integral role in our lives today and has a huge bearing on society and individuals.
- Social media has revolutionized the way people communicate and socialize on the web.
- There is a positive effect on business, politics, socialization as well as some negative effects such as cyberbullying, privacy, and fake news.

2) Positive Impact

- "The Power of Social Media is that, it forces Necessary Change."
- It is generally agreed that social media provided crucial source of news during the Arab Spring.
- It helped in creating awareness about several issues, eg the fight for LGBTQ rights etc.
- Social media has definitely made us closer to other parts of the world.
- WhatsApp is important for rural users, as it helps them cheaply connect to family members far away and send pictures of their products to clients across India.
- Social media platforms provide a platform to raise their voice against injustice and inequality.
- Voices previously excluded from conversations can now find a channel.
- A few decades ago, if a farmer died due to non-repayment of loans, only the family mourned for the loss.
- Today if the same happens, the entire nation seems to empathize with the death of such farmers.
- Social media have increasingly been adopted by politicians, political activists and social movements as a means to engage, organize and communicate with citizens.

3) Negative Effects

- Technology is double-edged. There are reasons to cheer as also to despair.
- Social media has various negative impacts like privacy issues, information overloads and internet fraud.
- Researchers have found that hyper-networking leads to negative health behaviour leading to laziness, obesity, depression, drug abuse, isolation or in the worst cases it may even lead to suicide.
- Social media has made the world a small space by allowing mass cultural exchange and intercultural communication.
- India being a secular country is a home for the people of various religious and cultural beliefs.
- When these beliefs clash the consequences are unpleasant.
- A mere comment or opinion on a certain belief on social media spreads like fire leading to riots and destructive rallies.
- Its heavy usage has ill effects on health issues and there is cyber bullying, online harassment and trolling.
- The trolling of women has brought to the fore the disturbing reality of online violence and abuse women face in India.

4) Consequences

- A study was conducted to determine the extent to which a person's opinion is influenced by a group.

- According to it, an individual was willing to give a wrong answer just to conform to the majority view.
- This also explains the impact of fake news online, which is said to contribute to a polarised society.
- A study found that factors like user homophily and algorithmic filtering have created the cycle of enforcing and reinforcing belief systems.
- This ensures that we don't open our minds to diverse opinions.
- User homophily means users in a social system tend to bond more with ones who are similar to them than to ones who are dissimilar.
- We are getting trapped in narrower world views that are seeping into not only voter behaviour but everyday personal interactions.
- WhatsApp faced severe criticism as lynching incidents flared up by free flow of fake news on the platform.
- Twitter along with Facebook came under intense scrutiny of policymakers in the US for its failure to stop the spread of misinformation during the 2016 election.

5) Spread of Fake News

- We live in a world where we aren't only consumers of information but creators as well.
- Free service has given access to everyone to post whatever they want and thus create a trend in fake news spreading like wildfire.
- Competition among websites and social media platforms has sometimes resulted in the generation of fake news.
- Everyone is in hurry to LIKE/SHARE/COMMENT rather than checking the authenticity of the news.
- The most common fake stories revolve around politics and the attempt is to polarise society, particularly during political events.
- Experts have warned that the Indian elections are at risk too with fake news.
- There is no regulator in social media platform as we have in Print or Television media.

6) Recent Campaigns by Social Media Platforms

- WhatsApp launched a nationwide campaign called "Share Joy, Not Rumours" to help prevent the spread of rumours and fake news.
- Facebook launched #Socialforgood campaign to address issues such as cyber bullying, mental wellbeing, and entrepreneurship and was targeted primarily at young users.
- Twitter launched #PowerOf18 campaign to encourage youth to contribute to public debate and participate in civic engagement in the upcoming election season.
- These campaigns are a way to take ownership of what's happening on these platforms and find ways to weed out negative content.

7) Way Forward

- A better and more effective approach to limit the influence of hoaxes on WhatsApp and other platforms is to increase media literacy.
- Data leaks at Facebook and Uber in the recent past have proven that the encryption has to be so high.
- The government should bring out a policy framework on the possible harm due to the internet messaging platforms to engage at a deeper level.
- The need of the hour is to tackle the gendered aspect of online abuse and uphold the rights of women in India.