


The internet, inclusion and democracy: Shakuntala Banaji on the media under Modi (Part 2)

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Following Modi's visit to Canada last month, **Christian Ledwell** spoke to **Shakuntala Banaji** about journalism and the media in India one year into the Modi government. In part two of the interview, they discuss social and traditional media in relation to democratic inclusion, and the threat to democracy posed by a self-censoring press.



Click [here](#) to read part one.

This article forms part of our [Modi's Government 1 Year On](#) series.

Modi: The Social Media Politician

The *New York Times* recently called Modi "[The Social Media Politician](#)," and his election campaign has been compared to Obama's 2008 Presidential campaign in its effective use of social media.



In addressing the question of whether or not Mr. Modi is in fact a 'social media politician', Banaji responds: "To the extent that Modi has employed various resident and non-Resident media strategists and PR gurus to change his image in the aftermath of Gujarat in 2002, he has become the social media politician *extraordinaire*. On websites, on Twitter, on Pinterest, on Facebook, pretty much everywhere you look, there's his image and he is attempting to communicate — if not with the man and woman on the street, then with the middle class man and woman in their living room — and to reach out to those kind of people in very particular middle class communities across the country to suggest what he is doing to better the image of the nation and the well-being of Indians."

The problem with this approach, she qualifies, is that "in some societies, I think there is an assumption that the everyday man and woman on the street are online, that they are all equally *au fait* with social networks, that they are on Facebook and Twitter, and that actually by taking politics online, people are making politics more accessible to people. To a certain extent this is absolutely true amongst a group of the middle classes in India. Taking politics online is a way of popularizing things with this group."

However, in India as well as in Western countries with rampant wealth inequality and unequal access to literacy, many people are marginalized by digital divides, political skills divides and a lack of education opportunities.

"A lot of my research with some of the poorest children in some of the poorest communities suggests that not only are they 'not online', they are so far offline that they've almost been forgotten about," says Banaji. "There are several ways in which a complete focus on doing politics online — a focus on a digital sphere as opposed to the real sphere — marginalises people in communities where people are *not* particularly well-connected and certainly not particularly well-educated."

Not only are people excluded from political debates on social media, but the political causes of marginalized people are also ignored in the larger media discourse. The recent wave of Maharashtra farmers' suicides is a particularly sinister symptom of this exclusion.

"I think this is worth seeing this as an issue of the 99% and the 1%," says Banaji. "While decades of regimes at state level and national level have never really been pro-poor, and have often had overt links to land-owning and business interests, over the last six months, it's become evident that the current regime represents the 1%. Their changes to

the 2013 land acquisition ordinance, which is currently hotly fought — by opposition parties, by farmers groups, by NGOs, some say even by the government’s allies — is going to dispossess small peasant farmers, landless farmers in rural areas, in absolute swathes in order to give more land to [multi-billionaires], [the richest 1% in India](#). And this is payback time, as these are the people who funded and contributed to the [BJP’s election] campaign. So making public information on these people, and their interests, and their deals, is a must for the media, and yet discussing this is one of the areas which can get journalists into a lot of trouble.”

Opportunities for media to support democratic inclusion in India

Banaji does see some ways in which new media has the potential to promote democracy in India.

She says, “Amongst connected communities, I think the internet can also be a wonderful and flourishing place where you can get information: you can get information about other systems, other democracies and ways of going beyond mere representative democracy, and access to public interest records, information that is crucial for collective action.”

Banaji mentions the recent [online campaign](#) to protect net neutrality and encourage the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) to prevent telecoms operators from bundling content for basic charges on data use that restrict the number of sites users can browse without paying additional fees.

She says, “When companies with their own interests are trying to limit internet freedom in India even more but suggesting that they are doing this for the sake of the poor so that people can have cheap data access, I think it’s very important that we speak up for the role the internet can play in relation to new media.”

She also notes that there have been a number of initiatives that have supported “grassroots citizen-to-citizen communication” such as [Shubhranshu Choudhary’s phone app](#) designed to allow villagers to upload radio stories via mobile phone connections and broadcast them to the regional *adivasis* and other regional populations.

However, the key limitation to such initiatives is that they are being driven by those outside of communities the project is intended to help empower.

“There is always a hierarchy,” says Banaji. “A technological hierarchy, a skills hierarchy, a hierarchy relating to sustaining funding and to acquiring the kind of infrastructure which will allow this. I’m very positive about the role that different online and offline media can play in allowing marginalised people to make their voices heard at least horizontally amongst themselves, but I am also very aware of the barriers, the high opportunity costs, and the dangers of yet another level of exclusion.”

“Ultimately, what you want these groups to be doing is mobilising for their social freedoms, for political and economic freedoms. If media is being touted as the solution to wider political and social problems, then it’s ceased to be useful, and become part of the problem.”

Critiquing Modi’s regime is not a critique of India

Given the serious concerns about minority rights and the marginalisation of India’s poorest citizens under the BJP, I was highly conflicted on how to view Modi’s official visit to Canada. The Indian diasporic community in Canada (estimated to be over 1.3 million people in a country whose total population is 35 million) deserves to be recognised and celebrated, but how does one balance this with wanting to be an ally to those in the Indian diaspora working to hold Modi to account?

“I think it’s very important not to get drawn into a discourse which sees any critique of the current BJP-led regime as a critique of India,” says Banaji. “Actually, what that entails is accepting the regime’s propaganda, which is that they represent India, that they are the only patriots and that they define nationalism. Which they do not.”

The trade deals signed during Modi's visit to Canada will do little to address the problems driving hundreds of farmers in Maharashtra and elsewhere to suicide, and the high-profile visit may in fact divert from the urgent political attention called for by the situation of both rural and urban poor.

"It's a very classic example of someone drinking wine and eating cake while people are starving on the doorstep," says Banaji. "It is a very French 18th century situation. The urban poor in India are desperate, they struggle for the smallest amenities, children's limbs and even lives are lost every day in miserable labour conditions, millions sleep on the streets. Small farmers are desperate and those who lease land and live on hand-to-mouth budgets, their land is being washed away, and in fact the legal issues are threatening to take even more land away from them to give to those who already own so many companies and live in huge cavernous mansions."

As journalism is so often held up as a democracy's fourth estate and credited with holding democratically elected governments to account, it is also important to recognise when institutional media as a whole is failing to fulfill this role and allowing elected officials to abuse power with impunity.

In Banaji's view, despite the efforts of dozens of regional, independent journalists, and conscientious individuals in national media houses, the status quo of an intimidated, self-censoring, under-regulated mainstream media that is failing to effectively hold Modi's administration to account is a disservice to India's democratic grassroots, and it is naively optimistic to view new media as a straightforward democratic quick fix that some prophesied it to be at the outset of the Arab Spring.

For those watching the media spectacle surrounding Modi's [recent spate of international visits](#), Banaji says, "We as common people in any of these countries absolutely have the right to question whether other common people in other countries are benefiting from any of these deals, and from any of these friendships. And actually if they're *not*, there is no point in extending the hand of friendship to a regime rather than to a people."

Click [here](#) to read part 1 of this interview.

A version of this article originally appeared 1 May on [Christian's personal blog](#).

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the India at LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

About the Authors

Christian Ledwell is a writer from eastern Canada. He graduated from LSE's Media and Communications Department in 2013. Twitter: [@CALedwell](#)



Dr Shakuntala Banaji lectures on International Media and the Global South, Film theory and World Cinema, and Critical Approaches to Media, Communication and Development in the Department of Media and Communications at the London School of Economics.



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