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UNITING NETIZENS DURING COVID CRISIS: A CASE STUDY OF INDIAN AND PAKISTANI TWITTER USERS

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Abstract

In a situation where there has been little face-to-face interaction between Pakistan and India, it is exciting to see how groups have used the Internet to establish a dialogue, with many of them using online platforms to arrange virtual dialogues from both countries with a focus on promoting South Asian peace. In the light of the Covid-19 crisis, this paper reflects on how the twitter users of India and Pakistan have responded to each other during the COVID crisis. The study carried out a CDA of the tweets made under the hashtags of #CovidIndia #PrayersForIndia #PakistanstandwithIndia. Majority of the tweets made under the selected hash tags reflected dominant elements of euphemism. The aspects of actor depiction and victimization were considerably lower. The findings endorsed the proposition that most of the Pakistani and Indian netizens employed constructive and supportive patterns of communication in order to extend support and prayers to each other during the COVID crisis.

Keywords

Netizens, COVID, Twitter, #CovidIndia
#PrayersForIndia #PakistanstandwithIndia.



1. Introduction:

The "SARS-CoV-2" virus causes COVID-19, a communicable disease. More than 1.2 million people died as a result of Covid-19, which infected at least 51 million individuals globally. Several prohibitions & closures have been imposed by the

governments to fight the proliferation of SARS-CoV-2. The ramifications for the economy are enormous. According to the most recent outlook of the world economy, the actual GDP growth was -4.4 percent in 2020, the lowest since 1945 (Ide, T., 2021). Today, policymakers & researchers prioritize

strengthening care, minimizing viral transmission, mitigating negative economic consequences, and developing a vaccine. Ties between Pakistan & India have remained tense in the run-up to the Covid-19 crisis since 2019, following the Pulwama attack in the Indian-administered Kashmir area. In a situation in which there was little face-to-face contact between Pakistan & India, it is exciting in seeing the way groups have used the Internet to create a discussion, with plenty of them using online forums to organize virtual dialogues involving academics from both countries with an emphasis on fostering peace in South Asia. Virtual activities such as "COVID-19 and regional cooperation in South Asia" were coordinated by the "Sustainable Development Policy Institute of Pakistan" (Shahab Ahmed, Z., 2020). These gatherings put people from both countries together to engage in intimate experiences that aren't available over the Internet. The government of Narendra Modi was uninterested in dialogue with Pakistan, feeling that Pakistan and, especially its politically powerful armed forces, had taken advantage of India's previous rapprochement. Economic & social upheavals resulted from India's national lockdown. If the coronavirus manages to evade government attempts to eradicate it, the states and the federal government will face severe strains on healthcare systems & facilities while still dealing with an escalating crisis of economy. This is not a condition in which India will seriously consider departing from its present Kashmir policy or negotiating with Pakistan (Staniland, P., 2020). This confluence of domestic & foreign stressors could provide an impetus for the current Indian regime to escalate tensions with Pakistan or to showcase its

staunch credentials of security; however, a serious public health emergency would be disastrous, putting Indian and Pakistani establishment to the test & displacing other issues. Instead, as the bureaucracy and political leadership struggle with the coronavirus's many important consequences, it is more likely to generate inertia in key foreign & defense policy decisions. In the light of a political environment that has failed to make significant changes in Prime Minister Imran Khan's governance and a stagnant economy, Pakistan is witnessing a rising amount of confirmed cases of Covid-19. The military has become more visible in attempts to contain the virus, and it is apparent that a catastrophic public health challenge is on the horizon. In a pervasive coronavirus epidemic, Pakistan, like India, is likely to turn inward, attempting to reduce economic risk while managing the pandemic and keeping the central state's institutions & services operational. Anything is likely because the Pakistani Army has previously shown its readiness to take chances, but a large coronavirus outbreak will push the military to focus its resources domestically. There will be no opportunity for Pakistan's key military & civilian actors to commit political attention to foreign policy (Staniland, P., 2020). The path of the coronavirus in South Asia is still unknown, and drastic changes are likely. Strengthening the status quo, on the other hand, is the best bet since both the general population & state players center their resources and energies on resolving the pandemic. After the repeal of "Article 370 of the Indian Constitution" in August 2019, which revoked Jammu & Kashmir's "special status", relations deteriorated further. The move

enraged Pakistan, which lowered ties of diplomacy with India and ousted the high commissioner of India in Islamabad. Pakistan has also cut all ground, air, and rail connections to India, as well as suspending rail & commercial services. The year 2020 saw a recurrent war of words on the matter of Pakistan-sponsored cross-border terrorism, without a collapse in icy bilateral ties. In June 2020, India asked Pakistan to cut staff on its mission in the Indian capital by 50% & announced a mutual cut of staff at its high commission in the Pakistani capitals (The Economic Times., 2020). But a recent exchange of tweets between the two heads of state and some sort of resumption of dialogue is a good omen. The main objective of the study is to comprehend that how the twitter users of India and Pakistan has responded to each other during the COVID crisis. Critical discourse analysis of the selected tweets was carried out to analyze the response patterns of the Indian and Pakistani Netizens.

2. Literature Review:

COVID-19's effects on military conflict are investigated in a study by Ide, T., 2021. The pandemic has major health, fiscal, and political ramifications. This can alter the mechanisms of opportunities & grievances related to military conflict, potentially increasing or decreasing conflict threats. He also added details on the Indo-Pak dispute after analyzing information from many nations. He went on to say that armed clashes between Pakistan & India in Kashmir increased dramatically during the Covid-19 era. The battles between the two countries' armies are the product of long-standing conflicts and had little to do with the

pandemic. However, as per the report, there is evidence that Pakistan has raised its support for pro-Pakistan rebels in order to raise pressure on India during the COVID-19 crisis. The study was based on qualitative & quantitative analysis of secondary data. The strength of the study is that it collected evidence of armed conflict from 9 different countries. The weakness is perhaps that it is not so deeply elaborative about Indo-Pak but sufficient nonetheless. In another study, Schofield, V., 2021 systematically analyzes the behavior of the key players that, throughout history, have contributed to the valley's ongoing militarization, drawing on studies in the state of Jammu & Kashmir, India, Pakistan, and a number of historical sources. She considers the aspirations and concerns of all stakeholders, including India, Pakistan, and the people of Jammu and Kashmir, who are separated not only by cultural & linguistic customs but also by their ambitions, through various interviews. The study is a qualitative study of primary data based on interviews. The strength of the study is that the Kashmir conflict is analyzed deeply from the partition of the subcontinent up until the recent scenario during Covid-19 times. The weakness of the study is probably the lack of quantitative data and stats. After reviewing the literature, a review article by Jafri, Q., 2020 addresses the work of civil society groups in Pakistan and India, and describes how civil society activists' social media strategies minimize the chances of harassment and conflict, and improve the chances of long-term stability among India and Pakistan. Based on data gathered on civil society activity on social media (including Twitter) in India and Pakistan, as well as fieldwork

on civil society in Pakistan in 2018-2019, the author has sought to analyze civil society activism strategies and methods, as well as the possible impact of this peace activism in South Asia. It's a high-quality secondary research project. The study's strength is that it aims to provide fresh insights into civil society's use of social media to promote unity. The research also points at how civil society leaders use digital mobilization platforms like social media and other ways to plan, coordinate, and practice events like conferences, protests, and marches.

Its only drawback is that it lacks sentimental analysis. In yet another article, Hafeez, E., 2019, the author argued that if social media reflects true public and political will, it will play a positive and unprecedented role in developing an environment conducive to improved relations between India and Pakistan. In the other hand, it seems that the press, including television stations and publications, exaggerate political results and business income. Social media seems to be an effective tool for citizen journalism & public diplomacy. Several new, ancient, and well-known media tactics have been spontaneously studied and selected on social media and in the news media.

The author used a simple random sampling based on the availability of relevant secondary data and the subject's importance on the public and political fronts between the two countries. Examples on how social media, like Twitter, has been used to bring people together in positive ways are the study's strength. He concludes that social media solely cannot be used to ascertain the real facts about India-Pakistan ties on the field, despite the fact that he seems to be without flaws.

3. Research Methodology:

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) helps in examining the choice of lexical items, themes and phrases in a given content. The study carried out a CDA of the tweets made under the hashtags of #CovidIndian#PrayersForIndia,#PakistanstandwithIndia. The hash tags were purposively selected as a preliminary analysis of the tweets pointed that the above mentioned hash tags were more frequently used by the Pakistani and Indian twitter users to tweet about the COVID crisis. Tweets made under the selected hashtags during April 30-May 11, 2021 were selected for the CDA. A total number of 1250 tweets were analyzed. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) techniques developed by Van Dijk were employed in the study. The linguistic devices of comparison, generalization, description of actor, victimization, euphemism and hyperbole were examined to comprehend the construction of discourse (Van Dijk, 1997). Comparison includes the contrast of in-group and out-group ideologies, members and actions. Actor description refers to the negative or positive portrayal of 'Us' and 'Them'. Generalization includes the process in which the meaning of a word or phrase is interpreted as broad or inclusive in comparison to its earlier original meaning. Victimization referred to the persecution and oppression of a particular group or person. Hyperbole is a linguistic device which referred to the extreme use of exaggeration for creating emphasis or strong impression. Euphemism referred to the replacement of harsh and negative phrases with

polite and subtle expression (Siddiqua & Yousafzai, 2019).

4. Findings:

Some of the tweets reflected 'actor depiction' and 'comparison' as a Pakistani twitter user said that he does not know "how India reached to such level" and also compared the COVID crisis in India to an "Apocalypse". Actor depiction in terms of labeling the "Us" as more "good" and "beautiful" was also reflected especially in the tweets of some of the Pakistani twitter users. Us vs Them approach with respect to actor depiction was also reflected in the tweets of Pakistani twitter users where Indian policies towards Kashmir conflict were compared with the trends of showing solidarity with the Indian public. The reflection of euphemism was also present in some of the tweets as the Indian and Pakistani public was depicted as "United". Some of the tweets focused more on ground realities instead of sharing mere sentiments. In one such example of a tweet the status of oxygen production and vaccine manufacturing was mentioned along with the challenge of transport of vaccine and oxygen in India from one place to another. An Indian twitter user extended thanks in reply to a Pakistani retired Justice's video message in which he expressed his solidarity with the "Indian friends in times of catastrophe". From another Pakistani twitter handle it was stated that the suffering of the Indian people is "heartbreaking". In most of the tweets as the "Covid Tsumnami" was termed as "devastating". Prayers were also sought for the healthcare workers of India. It was requested from the Indians to stay indoors and try to

extend a "helping hand". Pictures were shared with the caption of "Dukhi hai aaj pura Hindustan...Get Well Soon India". Some of the international organizations and foundations also extended their support to India in order to deal with the COVID crisis. The number of deaths per day in India was also mentioned in some of the tweets. In another tweet the significance of nature's system of reward and punishment was highlighted and the "importance of balance and coexistence" was highlighted. Many public figures also tweeted under the selected hashtags. A renowned actor from Pakistan Adnan Siddiqui stated the fight against COVID as a global fight and reiterated "prayers for India". He also shared and endorsed the song made by a Pakistani boy to convey solidarity with the Indians. The song was endorsed with gratitude by the Indian twitter handles. In another tweet by a known Pakistani social activist Ammar Ali Jan a tweet for showing solidarity with the Indians was endorsed and it was stated that "Pakistani youth is choosing solidarity & empathy over hate & division in this moment of crisis". Another renowned Pakistani singer Ali Zafar sent his "heartfelt prayers for India amidst the COVID-19 pandemic" which was well received by the Indian twitter handles. The interview of renowned Indian Journalist Barkha Dutt was re tweeted by Pakistani policy analyst Mosharraf Zaidi. Pakistani cricketer Babar Azam tweeted "Prayers with the people of India in these catastrophic times. It's time to show solidarity and pray together. I also request all the people out there to strictly follow SOPs, as it's

for our safety only. Together we can do it". Indian actress Urmila Matondkar tweeted about the competing sentiments of "frustration, anger, despair, helplessness, hope, faith and gratitude" during the pandemic crisis and also urged that "it's time to bow your head, say a prayer n weather the storm". Generalization and hyperbole were reflected mostly through sharing historical pictures of Ghandi and Quid-e-Azam standing together. From another twitter handle which was managed by a group of Progressive Students who tweeted @PSCollective it was said that for all those who were working against the "tyrant governments in India and Pakistan" the group extended its support. The members of the group also released a song with the caption of "Hosla na Haro". A number of video messages and tweets were also shared through the twitter handle of Aaghaz-e-Dosti which is an "IndoPak Peace initiative group".

5. Conclusion:

The main objective of the study was to comprehend that how the twitter users of India and Pakistan have responded to each other during the COVID crisis. Critical discourse analysis of the selected tweets was carried out to analyze the response patterns of the Indian and Pakistani Netizens. The findings revealed that the majority of the tweets made under the selected hash tags reflected dominant elements of euphemism. The aspects of actor depiction and victimization were considerably lower. The findings endorsed the proposition that most of the Pakistani and Indian netizens employed constructive and supportive patterns of communication in order to extend support and

prayers to each other during the COVID crisis. This research will help future researchers and students in developing context and understanding of how social media can play a vital role in times of crisis to bridge gaps between countries such as India and Pakistan regardless of their bitter relationship.

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