

‘Social Media’ The Indian Success Story / Twitter Diplomacy”

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The world has discovered fast and furious ways of communicating and social media is prime among them. The Indian government has not only quickly adapted to the new technological revolution in connecting with people but also taken lead which is why five of its Twitter handles figure among the top ten most followed in the world. These are of Prime Minister Narendra Modi ([@NarendraModi](#)), his office ([@PMOIndia](#)), External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj ([@sushmaswaraj](#)), Ministry of External Affairs ([@MEAIndia](#)) and President of India ([@Rashtrapatibvn](#)). PM Modi has the third largest following on Twitter in the world and he is the highest following on Instagram. Swaraj is the most followed Foreign Minister in the world. MEA is among the top most followed government offices in the world.

Be it connecting with its citizens in a distress situation, facilitating documentations, visas, helping foreign nationals, or a means to connect with foreign leaders – Indian government has made most use from #Hashtag Diplomacy. In fact, in order to bridge the gap between government and people, Indian leaders and diplomats have perfected the art of speaking in 140 characters (on Twitter). India is one of the few countries that has all its missions and top diplomats highly active on Twitter, disseminating diplomatic news, information giving details of its initiatives and efforts apart from providing support to the Indians abroad.

In India the revolutionary shift by the government and diplomacy to the social media platform took place in May 2014, when the NDA government under PM Modi took charge. Not only is PM Modi himself active on social media but his entire government has strong presence on platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram. PM terms use of social media as ‘Direct Dialing’ where the government interacts directly with its citizens and gets their response immediately.

In a short span of three years, PM Modi has become the third most followed leader on Twitter (after Pope Francis and US President Donald Trump), with 32.1 million followers. According to ratings by Twiplomacy, Modi is the top most followed leader in Asia. He is also most followed and effective world leader on Instagram with 6.8 million followers, closely followed by Trump (6.3 million). Each of Modi’s posts received on average 223,000 interactions, highest for all Instagram users. Modi’s Facebook (FB) page has 42,119,451 followers. PM effectively uses the platform to announce his visits to foreign countries and discuss the issue he plans to take up. He happily takes suggestions from people on their concerns.

During his conversation with FB CEO Mark Zuckerberg in 2015, Modi explained the importance of social media for his government saying he finds it as a guide to know about things, how it allows for accountability and provide governance instantly. Modi added that it helps government connect directly with its people, and get a feed back on a real time basis.

Indian diplomacy that has traditionally lived a conservative, protected life, has transformed itself to be the most active and interactive. Starting from Foreign Minister Swaraj, all Indian missions and embassies are actively present on the social media.

EAM Swaraj is the world's most followed Foreign Minister (8.75 million) while MEA's Twitter handle remains the third most popular Foreign Ministries in the world on the social media with 1.42 million followers. MEA's Public Diplomacy another Twitter handle @IndianDiplomacy has touched 1.3 million followers in a short span and together @MEAIndia and @IndianDiplomacy have 2.7 million people actively engaged with Indian diplomats, taking digital diplomacy to a new height. MEA's passport division's Twitter handle @passportsevamea and @CPVIndia (belonging to senior official handling passport division) is another major hit among people to resolve delays and other issues with regard to the travel document. Besides, the two Ministers of States –VK Singh and MJ Akbar too remain highly active and popular on the Twitter having 1 million and 90, 000 followers, respectively. MEA's activities on other social networking sites are equally impressive. On FB, Swaraj's has 2,853,852 followers and MEA's is followed by 2,030,480 people.

MEA in particular has created a mechanism where action begins in less than 24 hours on all grievances and issues are usually sorted out in the following next hours. All messages are handled with a sense of urgency, acknowledged and resolved in no time. This has not only generated a great deal of confidence among the citizens, but also created an environment for effective governance, empowered people, removed red-tapism, and made grievance redressal faster. Besides, a message has been clearly gone that an Indian stranded on a foreign soil, or needing help of the government will not be left alone at God's mercy.

“People feel empowered about the thought that if you find yourself in a difficult situation abroad, you can send a tweet to your foreign minister, embassy asking for help—with the very real expectation that they will respond and help you,” Michael Kugelman, senior associate for South Asia at the Woodrow Wilson Center told the *Quartz India* magazine.

Swaraj's Twitter handle is an active 24x7 office in itself where a lot the activity takes place. She effectively uses Twitter to help Indians and foreigners who need help. She is swarmed with requests for visas, passport, rescue calls not only from Indians but sometimes foreign nationals. The minister has a record of responding in no time, sometimes even at odd timings like 2 am and 4 am. Be it rebuking Amazon to withdraw the flip flops and doormats having Mahatma Gandhi's picture, or providing last minute passport to a honeymooning couple – India has an #active FM. Possibly that's why some use Twitter to resolve their household problems. One person tweeted Swaraj to help him with a faulty fridge. Swaraj responded: “Brother I cannot help you in matters of a Refrigerator. I am very busy with human beings in distress.” Another humoured: “I am stuck on Mars, food sent via Mangalayan (987) days ago is running out. When is Mangalayan II being sent?” Pat came her response: “Even if you are stuck on the Mars, Indian Embassy there will help you” – a statement that has now become the catch word for Indian diplomacy.

Swaraj also uses the platform to deliver political messages to foreign countries – sometimes extending a hand of friendship and sometimes rebuking them like she did to Pakistan Foreign Advisor Sartaz Aziz recently.

The Indian success story is evident not only by the increasing number of followers but also the increasing number of issues addressed effectively and in a fast paced manner. Social media was the most effective way to reach out to the government, whether it was the humongous rescue mission in Yemen, or saving stranded Indian seafarers in UAE, rescue operations against sea pirates, or bringing back abducted Indians, responding to earthquake in Nepal, helping out Indians in distress.

“Diplomacy in an age of social media is beginning to leave its ozone chamber, its protected past, to become interactive, better networked and more people-centred and people-friendly... Indian embassies and diplomatic missions across the world are active on Facebook, YouTube and Twitter these days and what was considered as a no-go for Indian officialdom until a few years ago is now *de rigueur*” former Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao said at a speech delivered at UNESCO in Paris.

An active Indian government on social media has also kept people updated about foreign relations. From sending Naval ship to Maldives, swift response during Nepal earthquake, supporting Afghanistan in its development and reconstruction, forcefully putting forth India’s concerns at diplomatic foras and so on.

Social media is also a fresh way to connect with world leaders breaking typical diplomatic protocols. PM Modi uses the platform to directly connect with other foreign partners in a more informal setup. Modi used Weibo to connect with the Chinese President Xi Jinping. He tweeted in Japanese to connect with its leader Shinzo Abe. Congratulated Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu in Hebrew and got response in Hindi. Besides, there were selfies with Australian PM Malcolm Turnbull in Delhi Metro, Chinese PM Li Keqiang, and with Fiji PM Frank Bainimarama shared on social media that made complicated body language in diplomacy easier for a common man to understand. Thanks to social media, Twitter Diplomacy or #Hashtag Diplomacy is the new face of Indian Diplomacy: Fast, furious and effective.