

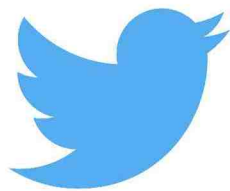
TWITTER TRAUMA

Why Twitter Fails to Pick Up Steam in India

Research Report by Rakesh Raman

August 2022

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



This report explains the use of social media network Twitter in India. It begins with Twitter operations in the country and the doubts about the number of followers on the microblogging site. It is being observed that a number of users including Bollywood actors, cricketers, and politicians proudly flaunt their followers without realizing that the majority of followers on Twitter are fake, which are bought from the market at very cheap rates. [*Photo: Twitter Logo*]

The report also sheds light on Twitter's business journey in India and its continuous conflicts with the Indian government which has been trying to censor content on the social media site. Although Twitter should stay away from politics in India, it runs campaigns to influence the voters.

Today, almost all the heavy users in India are living in a fool's paradise to believe that they are very popular because of their number of followers. But since most of these followers are fake, they hardly interact with the tweets of the users, as there is a negligibly small number of interactions - comments, retweets, likes - with tweets posted by users who may have millions of followers on their profile pages.

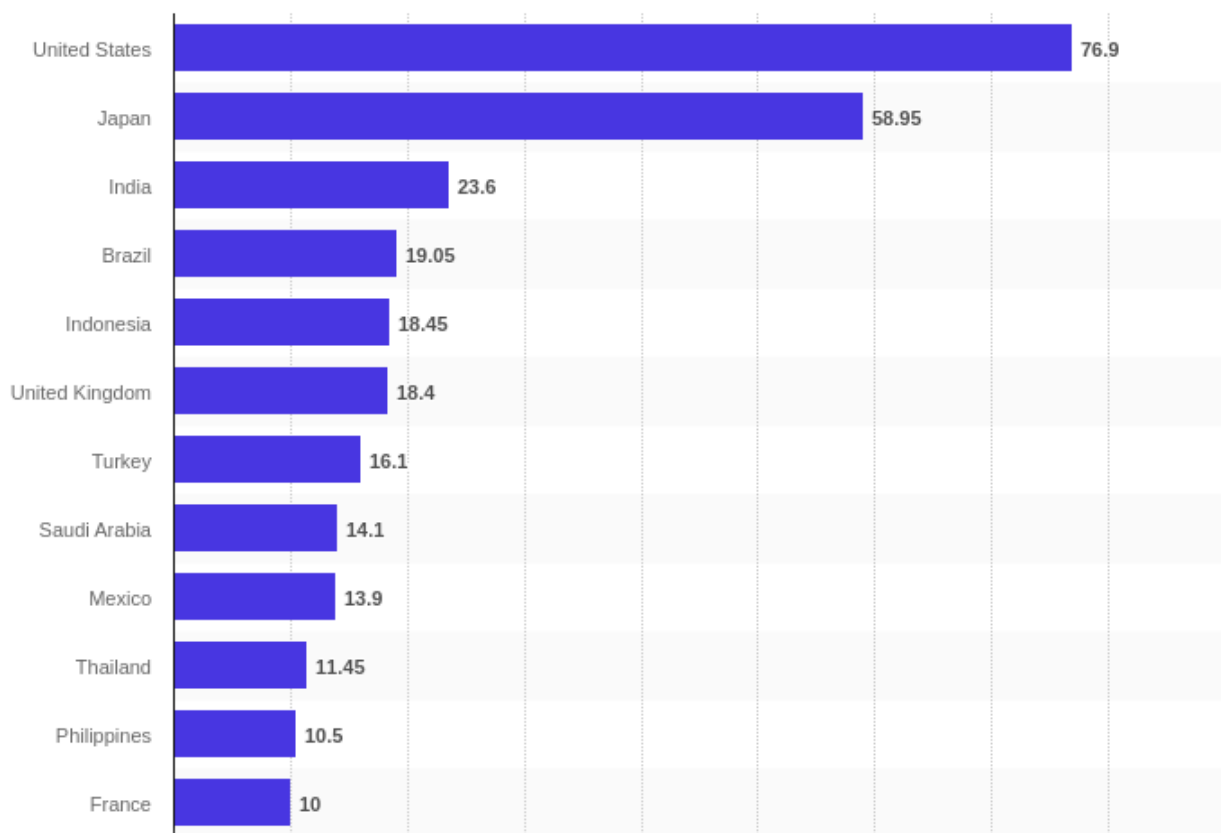
Political parties and politicians who believe that Twitter can help them perform better in elections are, in fact, deceiving themselves as they are clueless about the social media structure, messaging rules, and impact analysis.

TWITTER USERS IN INDIA

It is being observed that Indian politicians and celebrities have been showing an exaggerated infatuation for Twitter for the past few years. As most of them are semi-literate, naive, or unskilled, they live under a false impression that the microblogging site can help them convey their messages to most Indian citizens. The politicians, particularly, are heavily dependent on Twitter to woo the voters with the hope

to win elections. But can Twitter help them? No. The politicians and their so-called Twitter management teams do not understand that Twitter is a fragile network that operates with umpteen limitations.

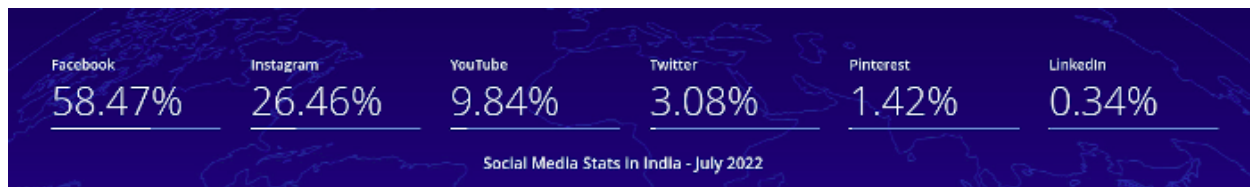
It began its business in India in 2006. But in the past 16 years of its operations in the country of 1.4 billion people, it could rope in only 24 million users. According to research company [Statista](#), Twitter had just 23.6 million users as of January 2022 in India. That means, on average, only 1.5 million new Indian users joined Twitter in a year.



Leading countries based on number of Twitter users as of January 2022 (in millions). Source: Statista

Only a miniscule percentage of Indians use the microblogging site. According to research company [StatCounter](#), as of July 2022, only 3.08 percent people in India were using Twitter. A careful analysis of data reveals that these numbers also include fake accounts. Therefore, the real number of users may not be even 24 million. This fact is stated in the *Newsweek* [report](#) of September 2021 which says that India has only 11.45 million Twitter users. The real active users are estimated to be just around 100,000.

However, the density of Twitter users is much higher in countries such as the U.S. which has 77 million users for 335 million Americans and Japan which is next on the Twitter user chart has 59 million users for a country of 125 million people.



Social media accounts in India. Only 3.08 percent of people in India use Twitter. Source: StatCounter

As of July 2022 as shown in the image above, only 3.08 percent Indians used Twitter as compared to 58.47 percent Facebook users, 26.46 percent Instagram users, and 9.84 percent YouTube users.

Note: Since fake accounts are in abundance on all social media sites, the actual percentages may be different.

TERMINATED TWITTER ACQUISITION

When Tesla CEO Elon Musk decided to [withdraw](#) from the \$44-billion Twitter takeover deal, he indicated that the real identities of most of the estimated 486 million worldwide Twitter [users](#) cannot be established. Musk - who is facing a [lawsuit](#) for suspending the planned acquisition of Twitter - also complained that the interactions with almost all Twitter accounts seem to be much lower than Twitter claimed.

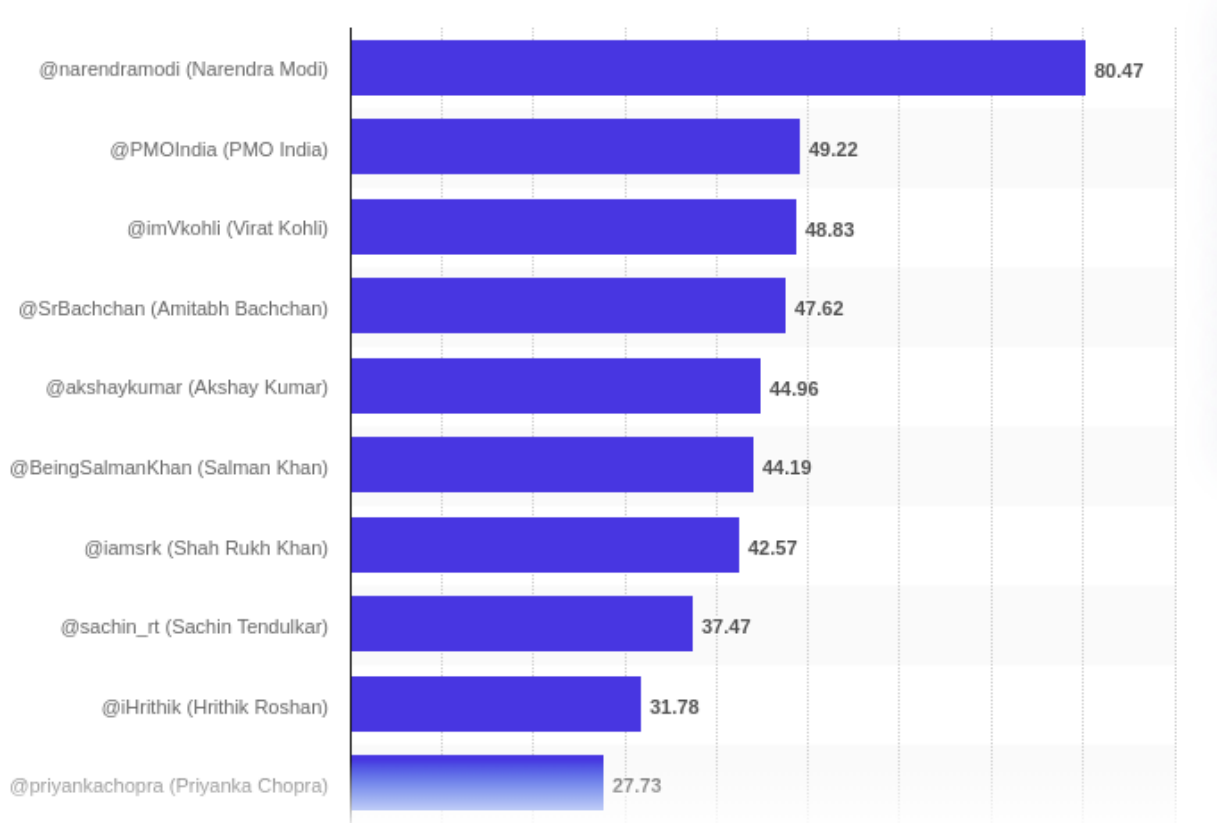
The concern over a large number of fake accounts on Twitter prompted Musk to terminate the deal on July 8, 2022. He had put the deal on hold in May 2022 and asked his team to check the veracity of Twitter's claim that less than 5 percent of accounts on the platform are bots or spam. Musk believed that Twitter has a large number of bogus accounts and he said that the number of interactions such as comments, retweets, and likes with tweets has also reduced significantly.

The fake Twitter accounts are either real persons with multiple profiles or bots. A [bot](#) is a computer program that is designed to automatically post tweets and follow other users. Rogue bots are deployed to follow users who buy them from the market. They can be dormant or active accounts which post innocuous tweets or spread misinformation to harm government critics, influence elections, and impact stock markets. The online

sellers that sell fake social media [followers](#) as well as interactions such as comments, retweets, and likes have proliferated on the Internet.

FAKE TWITTER ACCOUNTS

According to the data given above, the total number of Twitter users in India is just 24 million. But surprisingly some local users claim that their followers are more than the number of users in the entire country. Among them are India's Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi who claims to have more than 80 million Twitter followers, Bollywood actor Amitabh Bachchan claims that he has over 47 million followers while cricketer Virat Kohli shows more than 48 million followers and actress Deepika Padukone displays over 27 million followers on her Twitter profile.

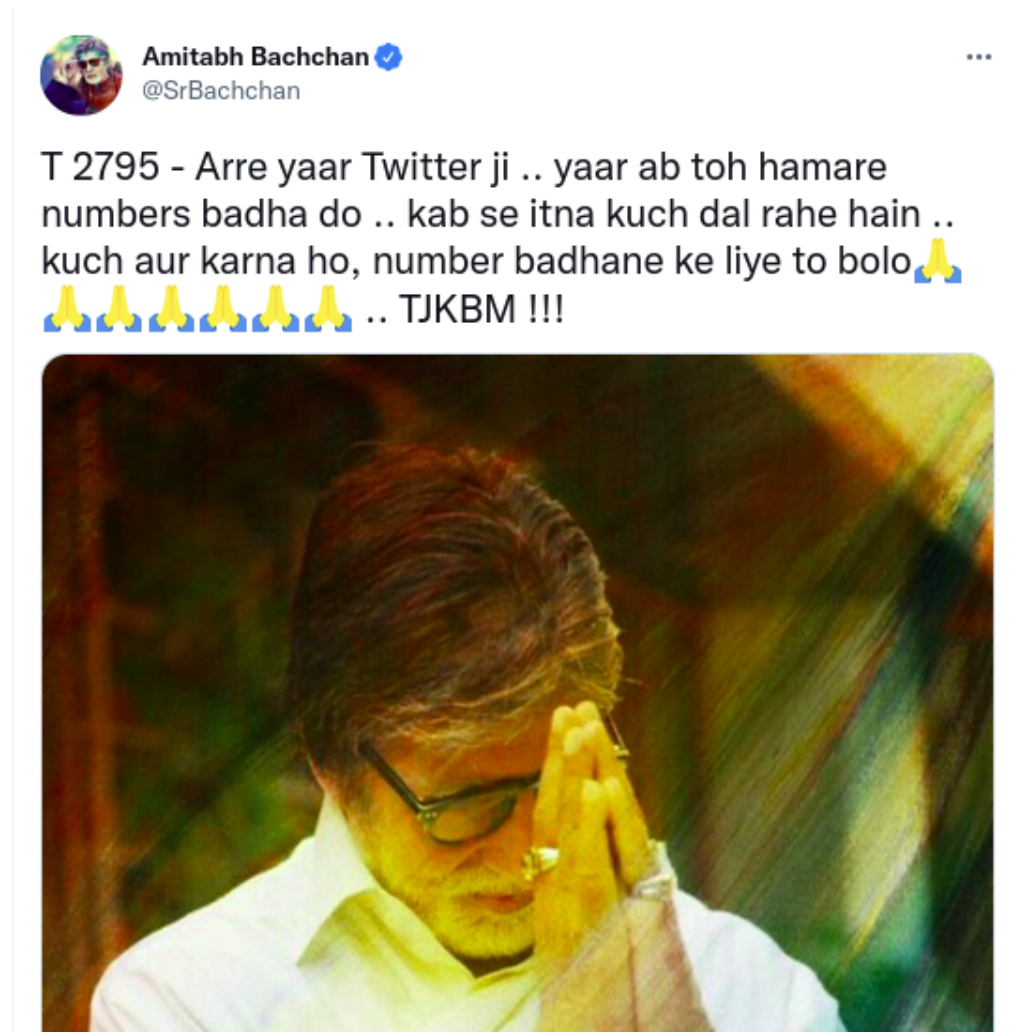


Most popular Twitter profiles in India as of July 2022, by number of followers (in millions). Source: Statista

In fact, as of July 2022 as shown in the image above, all the top 10 local [Twitter users](#) had more followers than the total number of users in India. These high-profile users may have some followers from other countries, but the discrepancy is so glaring between the

number of their followers and the total number of users in India that there are serious doubts about the claims of these celebrity users.

This mismatch lends credence to the fact that most of the Twitter followers of these famous people are bogus [profiles](#) bought from the market, as there are countless online sellers who sell fake social media followers as well as interactions such as comments, retweets, and likes.



Amitabh Bachchan requested Twitter to increase his number of followers.
Photo: Amitabh Bachchan / Twitter

The craze for having Twitter followers is so high among Indians that in May 2018 Amitabh Bachchan even [requested](#) Twitter with a tweet to increase his number of followers. Then surprisingly his followers increased. Sometimes, the celebrities do not know that fake

followers exist on their Twitter accounts because these accounts are managed by rogue ad agencies or agents who buy fake followers surreptitiously to show their performance.

TWITTER FOLLOWERS ON SALE

It is very easy to buy artificial social media followers from [follower suppliers](#) who operate their businesses on the Internet. People who want to show their fake popularity buy these fake followers by paying a little amount of money.

One person creates multiple accounts with different user names while they appear as dummy followers on the Twitter profiles of buyers such as celebrities. These artificial followers usually do not interact with the tweets of the buyers. This fact can be assessed from the interactions including comments, retweets, etc. under the tweets of accounts.



For example, *The Wire* news service [claims](#) that it has 1.2 million Twitter followers. But there are almost no interactions with its stories posted on Twitter. In three hours, as

displayed above, *The Wire* could get only one comment, five retweets, and 16 likes on its Twitter post.

Congress, which is largely a Twitter party heavily dependent on [Twitter](#) for all its work, claims that it has 8.7 million Twitter [followers](#). But since these followers are presumed to be fake, they usually do not interact with Congress tweets as shown below.



With more than 8 million Twitter followers, Congress gets a negligibly small number of interactions as shown in the image above. In this example, in nine hours, Congress could get only 212 comments, 1,484 retweets, and 5,440 likes on its Twitter post. As the defunct Congress does not have any social media messaging strategy, it uses Twitter primarily to curse PM Modi from morning to evening everyday.

While these are only examples, the situation of interactions on almost all Twitter accounts in India is very bad. Even when these account holders show millions of followers, only a fraction of interactions appear under their tweets. For example, if an account has 10 million followers, only a few hundred interactions appear under its tweets. But when the buyers purchase the comments, retweets, and likes, the bogus followers interact by

writing their comments, retweets, or likes depending on the deal. That means Twitter is a deceptive service which cannot be trusted.

You can buy fake Twitter followers in India at a [typical rate](#) of one rupee per follower, but with a little more search on the web, you can even get the followers along with comments, retweets, and likes at cheaper rates in integrated deals, which can cover your other social media accounts such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. It appears that the business of selling fake followers and interactions is flourishing in India. Although there are some audit [services](#) which claim that they can calculate the number of real and fake followers, they are not reliable.

NOTICE

Currently, as a Wikipedia editor, I am studying inconsistencies, irregularities, frauds, and information manipulation by miscreants hired by political parties and other organizations to misuse the free online encyclopedia for their nefarious activities. You can support this effort. ~ *Rakesh Raman*

LEGAL CONFLICTS OF TWITTER IN INDIA

In addition to the problem of fake accounts and low interactions, the Twitter business is also facing other hurdles including regular litigation in India. In August 2022, Tesla CEO Elon Musk, who is facing a court case filed by Twitter over the suspended acquisition bid, blamed the [company](#) for hurting its business in the Indian market by failing to disclose a risky litigation against the Indian government. In a [countersuit](#) filed on August 5, 2022 in a Delaware court, Musk claimed he was "hoodwinked" into signing the deal to acquire Twitter. He also expected Twitter to follow the local law in India.

In July 2022, Twitter [petitioned](#) an Indian court to overturn some government orders to remove content from the microblog. Alleging that it is an abuse of power by the Indian authorities, Twitter asked the court to get a judicial review of the orders. Twitter is being repeatedly forced by the Indian authorities to remove content including accounts that support an independent Sikh [state](#), tweets related to an ongoing [protests](#) by farmers, and tweets that expose the Indian government's mishandling of the Covid-19 pandemic that led to over 4 million [deaths](#) in the country. Twitter [claims](#) that India made the highest number of legal demands globally to remove content posted by verified journalists and news outlets on Twitter during July-December 2021.

In May 2022, Twitter banned over 46,000 [accounts](#) of Indian users for posting allegedly objectionable content and violation of its guidelines. Twitter removed 43,656 accounts for child sexual exploitation, non-consensual nudity, and similar content, while 2,870 accounts were banned for promoting terrorism. The microblog received 1,698 complaints in India through its local grievance monitoring system between April 26, 2022 and May 25, 2022.

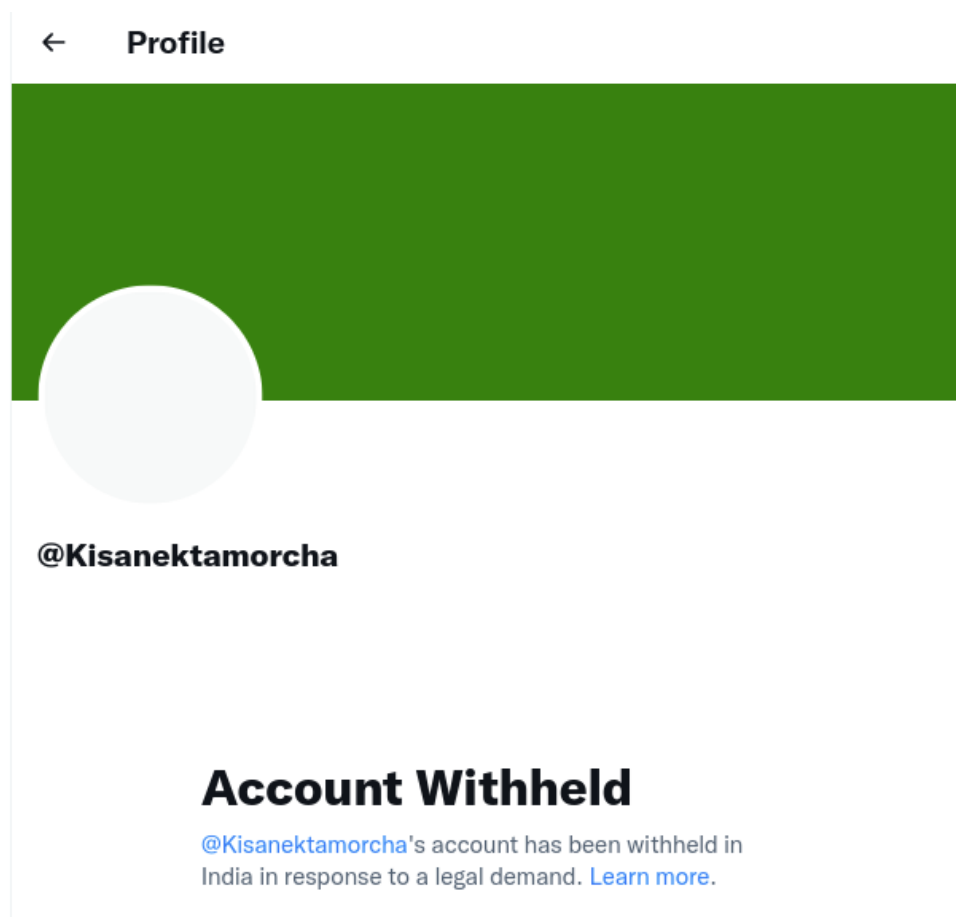


Image of a banned Twitter account

The complaints were about online abuse or harassment (1,366), hateful conduct (111), misinformation and manipulated media (36), sensitive adult content (28), impersonation (25), among others. Twitter also took action against 1,621 uniform resource locators (URLs) during the period. It included URLs for violating norms related to online harassment (1,077), hateful conduct (362), and sensitive adult content (154). Twitter published these details in its monthly compliance [report](#) for India released in July 2022. First published on July 2, 2012, the biannual Twitter Transparency Report highlights data,

trends, and insights into global Legal Requests, Twitter Rules enforcement, and Security & Integrity issues. These reports include information about legal requests sent to Twitter and its responses.

In June 2021, India's then technology minister Ravi Shankar Prasad said Twitter, Inc. deliberately defied and failed to comply with the country's new [IT rules](#), which became effective in May 2021. He said Twitter has [chosen](#) "the path of deliberate defiance" when it comes to following new Internet regulations. Prasad also accused Twitter of denying him access to his [account](#) due to alleged violation of the Digital Millennium Copyright Act of the USA. However, he was allowed access to the account later.

TWITTER IN INDIAN POLITICS

Although Twitter should not have any influence on the Indian political system, it actively participates in election campaigns with the stated objective of spreading awareness among the voters. In the 2022 elections in five Indian states, Twitter announced a slew of initiatives to engage with voters. With its 'JagrukVoter' (informed voter) [campaign](#), Twitter said it will empower citizens with the right knowledge before they cast their vote, adding that its initiatives aim to ensure a high voter turnout and inform the voters throughout the election period.

Twitter also published a detailed [report](#) on the 2019 Lok Sabha election in India. A research, published by the International Communication Research Journal in the U.S., focused on the use of Twitter by politicians in India's 2019 parliamentary election. According to the [research](#), PM Modi used Twitter to attract the urban middle class and communicate with his party colleagues.

It is generally seen that Twitter succumbs to the threats of the ruling party of PM Modi and restricts the accounts of Modi's critics and opponents. Congress leader Rahul Gandhi's Twitter account was temporarily [locked](#) by Twitter in August 2021 after the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights issued a notice to the microblog and asked it to remove the allegedly objectionable tweet. It was a major setback for Congress which is a weak political party that operates mainly on Twitter instead of holding its protests in the streets.

With a number of bogus accounts and negligibly small number of interactions, Twitter cannot have any impact on any election result in India. As the number of Twitter users is only about 24 million (including fake accounts) in 2022 and the number of voters is more

than 900 million in India, Twitter cannot help political parties win elections, including the next Lok Sabha election which is expected to take place in 2024. Since a very small fraction of voters uses Twitter, these users - who are mostly in urban areas - cannot have any impact on the election results.

The main factors that will influence the 2024 Lok Sabha [election](#) results are selective manipulation of electronic voting machines ([EVMs](#)), managed violence such as Pulwama terror [attack](#), false pre-poll promises by politicians, [bribes](#) to voters, expensive advertisements to deceive the voters, corrupt [media](#) manipulation, and communal hate campaigns. Obviously, Twitter has no role in the outcome of elections.

TWITTER TROLL ARMY

There are multiple reports of Twitter being misused by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) of PM Modi to attack Modi's critics and opponents. An investigative [book](#) "*I am a Troll: Inside the Secret World of the BJP's Digital Army*" details the modus operandi of BJP's unruly Twitter trolls whose identities cannot be verified.

Writing about the book, *The Wire* new service explains that Modi follows such Twitter handles which regularly spread hate including rape threats, death threats, and tweets that incite communal animosity among communities. The [article](#) titled "*General Narendra Modi and His Troll Army*" adds that Modi is the only leader in the world who follows such rogue Twitter users.

With an investigative report, *The Wire* also [exposed](#) the manner with which BJP exploits Twitter to persecute and harm the critics of the Modi regime. The report, "*How BJP-Linked Trolls Weaponised Twitter—and the Law—to Jail Mohammed Zubair in Fake Case*," [explains](#) that the complicit Delhi Police - which is controlled by the Modi government - colluded with a BJP-linked Twitter troll to arrest fact-checker Zubair in June 2022 in a fabricated case related to his old tweet.

As Twitter has become a virtual enemy for the Indian government, in May 2021, a special team of Delhi Police [raided](#) Twitter India's offices in Delhi and Gurugram. The police took action under directives of India's Home Ministry when Twitter added the 'manipulated media' tag to some obnoxious tweets by members or supporters of Modi's BJP.

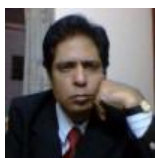
Since Twitter is facing numerous hurdles in its business in India, a new Indian microblogging app Koo aspires to beat Twitter in the local market. In February 2022, Koo

said it expects to surpass Twitter's 25 million-strong user base in India this year. Koo is available in 10 languages, including English. Co-founder Mayank Bidawatka [told](#) the BBC at the company's headquarters in Bangalore that the app will be available in all of India's 22 official languages. Koo was launched in 2021 as an alternative to Twitter when the conflicts between Twitter and the Indian government increased.

CONCLUSIVE COMMENTS

- In a country of 1.4 billion people and more than 900 million voters, Twitter could get only 24 million users (including fake accounts) during the past 16 years of its operations in India.
- Surprisingly, all the top 10 local Twitter users have more followers than the total number of users in India.
- Fake Twitter followers as well as bogus interactions such as comments, retweets, and likes are easily available on the Internet at very cheap rates.
- Twitter can at best be used as a local platform to exchange birthday or marriage messages among family members. But it cannot be used as a medium of mass communications.
- At the current level of Twitter performance in India, it is not useful for political outfits, businesses, governments, or celebrities. Some individual users can use it for mundane activities such as announcing their travel preferences, exam results, or hate for others.
- Businesses and political parties can leverage Twitter to some extent if they hold hybrid campaigns to promote their products and services or convey their specific messages to small target groups.
- Any similar microblogging service is unlikely to succeed in India.
- There are digital media experts who can do qualitative analysis of a particular Twitter account to reveal the real popularity of the account holder.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



The author and researcher of this Twitter report Rakesh Raman is a national award-winning [journalist](#) and founder of the humanitarian organization RMN Foundation, which is working in diverse areas to help the disadvantaged and distressed people in the society. Nowadays, for the past 12 years, he has been running his own global news services on multiple news sites. He

runs various environment protection, education awareness, and anti-corruption campaigns, and publishes digital [magazines](#) and research reports on different subjects.

Earlier, he had been associated with the United Nations (UN) through the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) as a digital media expert to help businesses use technology for brand marketing and business development.

He has approached different Indian as well as international authorities and organizations through legal [petitions](#) and advisory representations with the appeals to stop corruption and get people's human rights and environmental rights protected with democratic reforms.

Recently, he has [launched](#) a comprehensive research project to compile an exclusive research report on corruption in India. Its working title is "India Corruption Research Report 2022 (ICRR 2022)". He has also launched a nationwide [campaign](#) to introduce social democracy in India in order to build an egalitarian society in which all citizens could enjoy equal rights, opportunities, freedoms, and access to justice.

Rakesh has launched a public [campaign](#) which aims to get the directionless school education system in India revamped so that students could acquire contemporary skills that can help them progress in the modern information-driven world. He has launched a new editorial section / [microsite](#) "Power Play: Lok Sabha Election 2024 in India" to cover the election news, events, and political campaigns.

In his anti-corruption activities, he participated in a global [petition](#) led by Germany-based international organization Transparency International to call for the UN General Assembly Special Session against Corruption, UNGASS 2021, to direct all countries to set up central, public registers of beneficial ownership.

Rakesh has also [participated](#) in the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project for 2022 as a Country Expert for India to provide expert research inputs on multiple topics pertaining to democracy and governance. The V-Dem Project is managed by V-Dem Institute under the University of Gothenburg, Sweden.

He runs a community-driven anti-corruption social [service](#) "Clean House" to help the residents of Delhi raise their voice against the growing corruption and injustice in housing societies where millions of people suffer because of rampant corruption and

lawlessness. He has also [formed](#) an environment protection group called Green Group in New Delhi, which is the most polluted national capital in the world.

As Rakesh has been facing constant threats including death threats for his editorial and anti-corruption work, the Paris-based international organization Reporters Without Borders ([RSF](#)) that defends freedom of journalists has urged the Indian government to save him from threats and persecution. You can [click here](#) to download and read his full profile.

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