

## #TwitterTimes

In 1996-97, when people started using the internet for the first time in India, access was extremely difficult. Broadband was still a possibility somewhere in the future. Like many others, I bought a dial-up connection. After dinner, late at night, I would be busy dialling my telephone to get connected. It was tiring, this unending button pushing. But suddenly, you were connected! I breathed deeply in happiness. As I hurried to send an email to someone in another part of the world, I had an exhilarating feeling swishing through me – I was already part of another world! Close to midnight, in my home in an unfancied suburb of the city, I was conversing to the world –uninterrupted. A reply to the letter I had clicked off a while ago, sneaked into my inbox. I recalled the aerogrammes sent to overseas addresses taking a month to fetch a response. My desk, bookshelves, speakers of the music system, the treadmill – everything seemed so unreal. The sites opening on the screen, the web pages I was reading, endless visuals emerging from all possible corners – that was the new reality, the magic world beckoning me.

Then suddenly, the computer screen went blank. I was disconnected. I returned to the old world.

The internet service launched by the government-controlled VSNL on 14 August 1995 offered a speed of 9.6 Kbps. Plagued by hardware and network issues, ham-handed planning and sloppy execution, the service faced criticism for poor connectivity. Still, 10,000 subscribers signed up for the service in the first six months. That number has swelled to 460 million by now, making India the second-largest internet market in the world. Some of the private service providers now offer a broadband internet speed of up to 100 Mbps. The gossamer-like ephemeral world of dial-up connectivity has by now turned into a mighty surge and almost supplanted the one on the ground. The internet connection is now like air or water – it's what life rides on, uninterrupted, a constant in the 21st-century life. From the window seat of a Delhi Metro coach, you can tweet a new idea moments after a brainwave. You can also WhatsApp a picture taken on the plane before the take-off.

Looking back on those days from a distance of almost a quarter century, it now seems that the intense period of sweeping technological overhaul of our society marked a cut-off, a turning point in the Indian journey since Independence. If the economic reforms of 1991 set the stage for change, the new Indian calendar truly began in 1996, with internet connectivity.

The generation that had taken the inefficiency induced by government monopoly in key sectors – such as telecom, broadcasting and civil aviation – as normal, woke to a brave new day when India changed. A young man from Patna no longer would have to take the train to Delhi to collect the form to apply for an army job. Your Diwali celebration was not held hostage anymore by the MTNL linesman who made sure your telephone remained dead unless you gave him a little baksheesh.

Before, buying an Indian Airlines ticket needed a trip to their office and spending three-four hours there. A politician addressing a big gathering at Shivaji Park in Mumbai, the joke went, would call the civil aviation minister to delay the evening flight so he could come back to Delhi!

Early one morning, a man had to rush to the nearest railway booking office to buy a train ticket, because that was the opening day for the three-month booking period. And television meant the uninterrupted wretchedness of Doordarshan.

The millennials who now buy air tickets on smartphones and even do web check-ins, tell devices based on artificial intelligence to play the music of their choice or do household chores, and have at least a dozen airlines to choose from for flying anywhere in the country, cannot conjure up that bleak world. It's beyond them.

Every era, when starting off, needs a few rubrics for guidance, to flag its milestones. In another time, mighty emperors would raise gigantic structures, build arches and mausoleums as signposts of their achievements. Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram – the powerful virtual platforms are the flagpoles of the internet age. They are like what the Chinese Wall, Leaning Tower of Pisa, Eiffel Tower, or Taj Mahal used to be – markers of civilizations. More importantly, life now has moved onto social media to discover the superhighway of connectivity; explore the farthest corners of the earth; and remove the last outposts of inhibitions, inequities and entrenched biases like patriarchy.

But for social media, sexual harassment at work would have been accepted as a normative price that women needed to pay if they wanted to pursue careers of their choice. After the turmoil of the past few months, it can be assumed with a degree of certainty that the workplace will be a lot safer than ever before for women. When this actually happens, give the credit to a particular Twitter hashtag.

Before Twitter, a political party would be extremely perturbed if a major newspaper or television news channel had turned against it. They still worry but have learnt to live without the broadsheet. The party bosses and their spokesmen tweet their lines and visuals to the world without spending the night in sleepless uncertainty to face the front pages the morning after. They upload videos of their public rallies and press conferences on YouTube for borderless viewers. Social media is now the mainstream of news and information; the so-called big newspapers and news channels have fallen by the wayside – shamefaced and apologetic.

This exciting new world, redefining the egalitarian and equitable, was beyond imagining a couple of decades ago. Intelligence agencies had experts to estimate the turnout at a top-billed Boat Club rally. If the crowd swelled beyond India Gate, they would know how many lakhs that meant. If it stretched to Krishi Bhavan and the adjoining lawns across the water channels, the figure would be even bigger.

Amongst the largest rallies held on the lawns below Raisina Hill were those addressed by Indira Gandhi, Charan Singh and Devi Lal. Well, the Boat Club lawns have been off limits to political activity for many years now. More importantly, rallies mean very little. What matters more is a leader's social-media following, the crowd gathering at the cyber maidan.

In another couple of years, by 2021 to be precise, almost half the Indian population will be connected to the internet. With that, most of your politics, entertainment, creative activity, social engagement, and commerce will migrate to the virtual zone. This world promises you speed,

transparency, efficiency, instant fame – everything. But it concedes no ground to the inefficient and uninformed, the regressive and roguish. The question is not whether you want to be on social media, but if you will survive on this new terrain.■

**Bhaskar Roy**