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IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN A DEMOCRACY

THIS ARTICLE COVERS 'DAILY CURRENT AFFAIRS' AND THE TOPIC DETAILS OF "IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN A DEMOCRACY". THIS TOPIC IS RELEVANT IN THE "SOCIETY" SECTION OF THE UPSC CSE EXAM.



CONTEXT

Social media has emerged as a significant force in shaping elections across the world. Almost every prominent world leader uses social media as a tool to propagate their message. It has increased the reach of the political leaders and made the political messaging more efficient.

At the same time, social media has democratized society by providing a platform for the citizens to gain information and express their views directly. It has empowered the citizens in real ways, Providing information about the various countries political system and the socio-political movements, for eg. the Metoo movement shaped initiated the sexual harassment discourse across the world.

Gandhiji said that 'I understand democracy as something which gives the weak equal chance as to the strong'. Social media is in line with this thought of Gandhiji as with the rising penetration of the internet it has become a potent voice for the disadvantaged population to express their views.

It is said that a lie can revolve around the entire world until the truth put its boots on. That's why it is important to see the other side of the picture, which is the threats posed by social media on democracy

in the age of the internet. In this article we will analyze the impact of social media on Democracies around the world.

THE POSITIVE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON DEMOCRACY

Social media has brought several positive impacts on democracy:

1. **Increased Access to Information:** Social media platforms provide a vast array of information sources, allowing citizens to access news and political content from diverse perspectives. This **democratization of information** empowers individuals to stay informed about political issues and engage in public discourse.
2. **Enhanced Political Participation:** Social media **facilitates political engagement by enabling citizens to interact with political leaders, participate in discussions**, and express their opinions on various issues. Platforms like Twitter and Facebook serve as forums for political debate, allowing individuals to voice their concerns, mobilize support for causes, and organize grassroots movements.
3. **Broadened Civic Engagement:** Social media has expanded opportunities for civic engagement by providing **platforms for volunteering, activism, and community organizing**. Citizens can use social media to coordinate efforts, raise awareness about social issues, and collaborate on initiatives to effect positive change in their communities.
4. **Transparency and Accountability:** Social media has increased transparency in government and politics by **enabling real-time reporting, live streaming of events, and direct communication** between officials and constituents. Elected representatives are held more accountable for their actions and decisions as they are subject to public scrutiny and feedback on social media platforms.
5. **Political Education and Awareness:** Social media serves as an educational tool, helping citizens learn about political processes, policies, and candidates. **Platforms like YouTube, podcasts, and online forums provide accessible resources for learning** about democracy, civic rights, and electoral systems, empowering individuals to make informed choices as voters.
6. **Global Connectivity:** Social media transcends geographical boundaries, connecting people across the globe and **fostering cross-cultural dialogue and collaboration**. Citizens can learn from the experiences of others in different countries, exchange ideas, and **support democratic movements**(The Metoo movement) worldwide, promoting international solidarity and cooperation.
7. **Empowerment of Marginalized Groups:** Social media amplifies the voices of marginalized communities, allowing them to share their stories, advocate for their rights, and challenge systemic injustices. **Minority groups, women, and LGBTQ+ individuals**, among others, can use social media to raise awareness about issues affecting their communities and demand greater representation and inclusion in the political process.

OTHER SIDE OF THE PICTURE

The negative impacts of social media on democracy include:

1. **Disinformation and Misinformation:** Social media platforms can be breeding grounds for the spread of false information, rumors, and propaganda. Misleading content can manipulate public opinion, distort facts, and undermine trust in democratic institutions and processes.
2. **Polarization:** Social media algorithms often **prioritize content that aligns with users' existing beliefs and preferences**, creating **echo chambers** where individuals are exposed only to

information that reinforces their worldview. This can exacerbate political polarization, diminish empathy for opposing viewpoints, and hinder constructive dialogue.

3. **Manipulation and Election Interference:** Social media has been exploited by foreign actors, political campaigns, and malicious actors to manipulate public opinion and influence electoral outcomes. Tactics such as fake accounts, bots, and targeted advertising can be used to spread propaganda, sow division, and undermine the integrity of democratic elections.
4. **Online Harassment and Intimidation:** Social media platforms can be used to harass, threaten, and intimidate individuals, particularly women, minorities, and marginalized groups. Cyberbullying and hate speech can silence dissenting voices, discourage participation in public discourse, and create hostile environments that erode democratic norms of civility and respect.
5. **Privacy Concerns:** Social media companies collect vast amounts of personal data from users, raising concerns about privacy, surveillance, and data security. The misuse of user data for political purposes, such as micro-targeting political ads or manipulating voter behavior, can infringe on individuals' privacy rights and undermine the integrity of democratic processes.
6. **Filter Bubbles and Echo Chambers:** Social media algorithms may reinforce users' existing biases by filtering content based on their preferences, limiting exposure to diverse viewpoints and alternative perspectives. This can contribute to the polarization of public opinion and hinder the exchange of ideas necessary for a healthy democratic discourse.
7. **Undermining Trust in Institutions:** The proliferation of fake news, conspiracy theories, and misinformation on social media can **erode public trust in traditional media outlets, government institutions, and democratic processes**. Skepticism and cynicism about the reliability of information sources can undermine the foundation of democratic governance and foster disillusionment with the political system.
8. **Digital Divide:** Access to social media and digital platforms is not uniform across society, leading to disparities in political participation and representation. The digital divide, characterized by unequal access to technology and internet connectivity, can exacerbate existing inequalities and marginalize certain groups from democratic processes.

NEED OF THE HOUR

Moving forward, addressing the negative impacts of social media on democracy requires a comprehensive approach involving various stakeholders. Here are some key strategies:

1. **Regulatory Measures:** Governments should enact regulations to hold social media companies accountable for addressing harmful content, protecting user privacy, and promoting transparency in political advertising. Regulations should strike a balance between safeguarding free expression and combating online harms, such as disinformation, hate speech, and election interference.
2. **Transparency and Accountability:** Social media companies should implement measures to increase transparency about their algorithms, content moderation policies, and data practices. They should also be held accountable for enforcing their policies consistently and effectively, with mechanisms in place for users to report abusive behavior and appeal content moderation decisions.
3. **Media Literacy Education:** Promoting media literacy and critical thinking skills is essential to empower users to navigate the digital landscape responsibly. Education programs should teach individuals how to evaluate information critically, identify misinformation, and engage in constructive dialogue with others across diverse viewpoints.
4. **Technological Solutions:** Social media platforms should invest in technology and tools to combat the spread of disinformation, such as **fact-checking mechanisms, content moderation**

algorithms, and user-friendly reporting systems. They should also prioritize algorithmic transparency and fairness to mitigate the risk of filter bubbles and echo chambers.

5. **Collaborative Efforts:** Addressing the challenges of social media requires collaboration **among governments, civil society organizations, academia, and technology companies**. Multi-stakeholder initiatives should foster dialogue, share best practices, and develop innovative solutions to promote digital democracy and protect civic space online.
6. **Promoting Digital Inclusion:** Efforts to bridge the digital divide and promote digital inclusion are crucial to ensure that all individuals have equal access to information and opportunities for political participation. Governments, NGOs, and private sector partners should invest in infrastructure, affordability, and digital literacy programs to close the gap in access to technology and internet connectivity.
7. **Protecting Human Rights:** Upholding human rights, including freedom of expression, privacy, and non-discrimination, is fundamental to safeguarding democracy in the digital age. Governments and social media platforms should respect and protect these rights while addressing online harms and promoting responsible online behavior.

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BIMSTEC ACHIEVED “LEGAL PERSONALITY” STATUS

THIS ARTICLE COVERS ‘DAILY CURRENT AFFAIRS’ AND THE TOPIC DETAILS OF “**BIMSTEC ACHIEVED “LEGAL PERSONALITY” STATUS**”. THIS TOPIC IS RELEVANT IN THE “**INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS**” SECTION OF THE UPSC CSE EXAM.

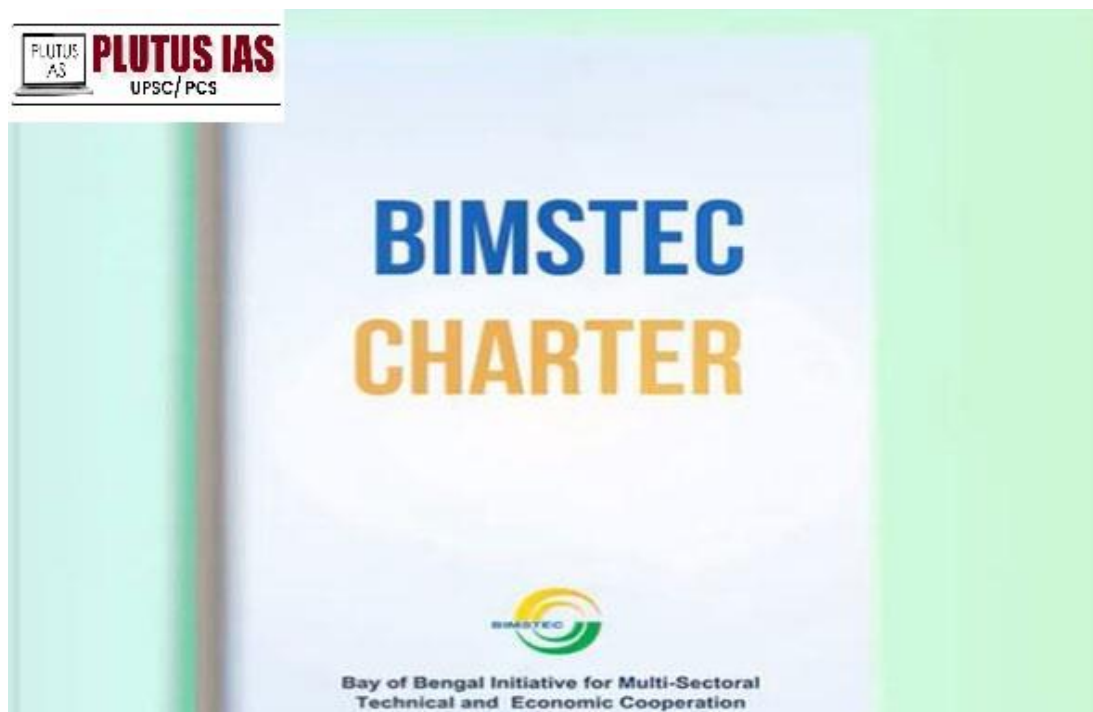
Why in the News?

Recently, The BIMSTEC Charter came into force, which was adopted by BIMSTEC leaders at the 5th summit held on 22 May 2022 in Colombo. Implementing the **Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) charter** marks a pivotal development, enabling the organization to welcome new members and observers.

SIGNIFICANCE OF CHARTER

- The **charter confers legal status on BIMSTEC**, allowing it to enter into agreements with countries as well as sub-regional, regional, and international organizations and institutions.
- This legal framework strengthens the organization’s ability to promote deeper integration, meaningful cooperation, and shared prosperity among member states.
- Furthermore, the Charter embodies its members’ collective history, culture, vision, and mutual respect, supporting India’s Neighbourhood First and Act East policies.
- The implementation of the BIMSTEC Charter marks a significant step toward enhancing regional cooperation, economic integration, and peace and stability in

the Bay of Bengal region. It highlights the member states' dedication to achieving common goals and mutual prosperity.



KEY COMPONENTS OF THE CHARTER

Trade, Investment and Development:

- Sub-sector: Blue Economy

Environment and Climate Change:

- Sub-sector: Mountain Economy

Security:

- Sub-sectors: Counter-Terrorism and Transnational Crime, Disaster Management, Energy

Agriculture and Food Security:

- Sub-sectors: Agriculture, Fisheries & Livestock

People-to-People Contact:

- Sub-sectors: Culture, Tourism, Poverty Alleviation, People-to-People Contact

Science, Technology, and Innovation:

- Sub-sectors: Technology, Health, Human Resource Development

Connectivity

ABOUT BIMSTEC

- BIMSTEC, or the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation, is a regional multilateral organization comprising seven countries in the Bay of Bengal region.
- **Member countries:** Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Thailand.
- **Established in 1997 through the Bangkok Declaration**, the organization initially used the acronym BIST-EC (Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, and Thailand Economic Cooperation). It was renamed BIMST-EC in 1997 following the inclusion of Myanmar, and eventually became BIMSTEC in 2004 when Nepal and Bhutan joined.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF NEW MEMBERS JOINING THE BIMSTEC

- **Enhanced Regional Representation:** Adding new members can broaden BIMSTEC's geographic scope, enabling it to represent more countries in the Bay of Bengal region. This expansion can increase the organization's legitimacy and influence in both regional and global forums.
- **Increased Economic Potential:** The inclusion of new members can introduce additional economic resources, markets, and investment opportunities, potentially driving regional economic growth and development. With a current combined GDP of \$3.6 trillion, BIMSTEC is already an economic force, and new members could further boost its economic power.
- **Diversified Expertise and Resources:** New members can offer their unique expertise, resources, and experiences, enhancing BIMSTEC's ability to tackle regional challenges and opportunities. This diversity can lead to more effective and sustainable cooperation in various sectors such as security, connectivity, trade, agriculture, environment, science and technology, and cultural exchanges.
- **Strengthened Regional Integration:** The inclusion of new members can promote deeper regional integration by increasing economic interdependence, cultural exchanges, and people-to-people connections among member states. This can create a more cohesive and stable region that is better equipped to address shared challenges and opportunities.
- **Enhanced Global Influence:** A stronger and more diverse BIMSTEC can present a united and influential presence in global forums, allowing the organization to more

effectively advocate for the interests of its member states and shape the global agenda.

- **Increased Opportunities for Cooperation:** The entry of new members can introduce fresh perspectives and ideas, leading to new areas of cooperation and collaboration. This can help BIMSTEC remain relevant and dynamic, effectively responding to emerging challenges and opportunities in the region.
- **Support to Least Developed and Land-Locked Countries:** By admitting new members, especially the least developed and land-locked countries, BIMSTEC can provide them with access to technical assistance, capacity building, and economic opportunities, aiding their development and promoting greater regional equity.

WHY HAS INDIA SHIFTED ITS FOCUS FROM SAARC TO BIMSTEC?

- **Indo-Pak rivalry:** SAARC has been hampered by the ongoing India-Pakistan rivalry, with Pakistan frequently blocking key initiatives. In contrast, BIMSTEC, which excludes Pakistan, offers a more favourable platform for regional collaboration.
- **Alignment with India's foreign policy:** BIMSTEC supports India's "Neighborhood First" and "Act East" policies, facilitating engagement with countries in the Bay of Bengal region and fostering connections with ASEAN. This maritime focus complements India's continental strategy in South Asia.
- **Geographical advantages:** BIMSTEC provides India with opportunities to utilize its geographical advantage to promote connectivity projects in the northeastern states and with Myanmar and Thailand, potentially unlocking the region's economic potential.
- **Sidelining Bilateral rivalry:** India has also used BIMSTEC to sideline Pakistan diplomatically, such as by boycotting the 2016 SAARC summit in Islamabad and inviting BIMSTEC leaders to Prime Minister Modi's 2019 swearing-in ceremony, avoiding the need to invite Pakistan.
- **Sector specific cooperation:** BIMSTEC's agenda is more focused on specific sectors like trade, investment, connectivity, security, and cultural exchanges, compared to SAARC's broader scope, leading to more tangible results.
- **Cordial and peaceful relations:** BIMSTEC member states generally maintain cordial relationships, unlike the often tense dynamics within SAARC, creating a more conducive environment for cooperation.

CHALLENGES FOR BIMSTEC AS AN ORGANIZATION

- **Leadership deficit and lack of commitment:** There are concerns about the lack of enthusiastic engagement from key stakeholders such as India, Thailand, and Myanmar in advancing BIMSTEC initiatives. It is speculated that these countries

may prefer to strengthen their ties with ASEAN rather than commit fully to BIMSTEC's development.

- **Weak Institutions:** BIMSTEC has struggled with a lack of a proper Charter and vision documents, resulting in considerable flexibility in its processes. The establishment of a Permanent Secretariat took 17 years, highlighting institutional weaknesses that impede effective cooperation and integration.
- **Limited Progress and Inactivity:** BIMSTEC has been criticized for its slow progress and inactivity, which has been marked by significant delays between summits and a lack of regular high-level meetings. This sluggish pace has limited the organization's ability to achieve tangible outcomes and effectively promote economic integration. There are only 5 High level summits in the last 25 years.
- **Divergent National Priorities:** The varying economic needs and priorities of BIMSTEC member states present challenges in aligning their interests toward greater economic interdependence. Differences in national policies, such as India's ban on Chinese apps, can create obstacles in cybersecurity cooperation and regional economic integration.
- **Security Concerns:** Differing security concerns and apparatuses among member states pose challenges to developing a unified security framework within BIMSTEC. Without a shared vision of a stable global order and common security norms, progress in economic integration and other sectors may be slow and incremental.
- **Limited Funding:** BIMSTEC operates on a modest budget of approximately US\$200,000, which is a persistent concern. Adequate funding is crucial for the organization to effectively implement projects and programs and achieve its objectives of regional economic integration.

WAY FORWARD FOR INDIA

- **Strengthening the BIMSTEC Secretariat:** Increasing the human and financial resources for the BIMSTEC Secretariat can actively advance the organization's objectives.
- **Focus on Connectivity and Infrastructure:** Emphasizing sustained physical connectivity and high-quality infrastructure is essential to facilitate greater regional movement of goods, services, and people.
- **India's Leadership Role:** India's leadership can enhance cooperation in sectors such as transport and communication, tourism, environmental and disaster management, and combating terrorism and transnational crime.
- **Countering China's Influence:** BIMSTEC offers India a platform to counter China's expanding influence in the region, particularly through infrastructure initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Strengthening BIMSTEC can help balance China's presence.

PRELIMS BASED QUESTION

Q1. Consider the following statements about BIMSTEC:

1. Nepal and Bhutan were the last to join BIMSTEC in 2004.
2. Defence cooperation is one of the major sectors of the BIMSTEC charter.

Choose the correct answer using the codes given below:

- (a). 1 Only
- (b). 2 Only
- (c). Both 1 and 2
- (d). Neither 1 nor 2

ANSWER: A

MAINS BASED QUESTION

Q1. How does the BIMSTEC Charter's legal framework contribute to the organization's goal of deeper regional integration and cooperation among its member states?

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