

Amplifying Voices: The Role of Social Media in Accelerating Social Justice Movements

Dr. Moumita Chakraborty

Assistant Professor, Department of Journalism and Mass Communication,

Swami Vivekananda University, Kolkata.

Abstract

Social media has radically changed the way individuals engage with any social movements, from far-flung efforts into global campaigns. Various social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, etc. serve as catalysts for awareness, and action by amplifying the marginalized voices and bringing the matter to the attention of the public and government. The present paper examines the impactful role of social media in facilitating social justice movements, analysing how it contributes to rapid information dissemination, encourages collective action, and challenges any injustices in the society. The research will follow a qualitative research method where content analysis of #MeToo movement will be employed. The paper will also analyse other social media activism like The Black Lives Matter (BLM)# ,JusticeForManipur, #Global Climate Strikes, farmers' protest (2020-2021), Dalit Women's Activism and LGBTQ+ Rights, The anti-CAA protests. The study further examines the strengths and limitations of digital activism. While social media effectively amplifies voices, eliminates the gap of geographical divides, and disseminates information globally, it is also hindered by some challenges like misinformation, digital divides, digital literacy etc. These limitations underscore the need for ethical and inclusive digital practices to enhance the efficacy of social media activism and hashtag movements. This research evaluates the transformative potential of social media as a tool for social change, offering a platform for marginalized communities to advocate for justice and equality. It emphasizes the

importance of fostering digital literacy, promoting responsible online behavior, and implementing strategies to mitigate the challenges associated with digital activism.

Key words- social media, digital movements, marginalized voices, digital activism, social change.

Introduction

Social media has revolutionized the way people communicate, obtain information, and engage with various activities. The development of the Internet and social media has given a new platform for people to participate in controversial social discussions. In recent years, social media has played a significant role in mobilizing social protests around the globe, such as the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street (Browning, 2013; Castells, 2015; Vatikiotis, 2016). It has significantly changed people's modes of communication with near and dear ones and also with the whole world, and became a critical marketing and communication tool for businesses. In many ways it influences politics and civic participation. Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp, have become indispensable tools for maintaining and sharing relationships. Social media is immensely used to raise awareness about social issues and how they impact people and can encourage users to make changes in their own lives too. From buying more sustainable clothing after watching content on the climate crisis to donating to charity or attending marches. We need to replace ignorance with tolerance, unity and inclusion, the greater chance we will have at improving social justice. Businesses nowadays use social media sites to reach out their target market audience and increase their product promotion, give feedback to their customers in real time, and reach global markets. People visit websites like Twitter and Facebook for the breaking news as well as information on what's happening around the world; as such social media has changed the way in which news is relayed. However, there is a reservation regarding spreading false information and influencing public opinion. Social media goes beyond the familiar realms into personal, professional, political, and cultural elements, so it indeed is a very common and formidable force that continues to change how we coexist with the world. Social media has

played a pivotal role in challenging systems of oppression and promoting equity by transcending geographical barriers and democratizing access to information. It has redefined how individuals and communities engage with inequality, discrimination, and social in justice through real-time communication, awareness-building, and mobilization tools. Social media permits citizens to document and share their experiences, breaking with the gatekeeping barriers that once limited the reach and prioritized whose stories could be told. As a part of modern communication, social media is increasingly impacting how news and ideas are disseminated and opinions are formed.

Methodology

The researcher has followed Content analysis of various social media posts, and campaigns associated with prominent social justice movements, #MeToo, The Black Lives Matter (BLM) #, JusticeForManipur, #Global Climate Strikes, farmers' protest (2020-2021), Dalit Women's Activism and LGBTQ+ Rights, The anti-CAA protests.

Objectives

- To study the impact of social media on the public and empowering marginalized communities.
- To analyze the role of social media in facilitating social justice movements in common people.
- To identify the challenges and limitations of using social media for social justice activism, focusing on misinformation, censorship and digital divides.
- To assess the role of hashtags, viral campaigns, and online petitions in driving social change.

Theoretical Framework:

Public Sphere Theory (Jürgen Habermas)

The Public Sphere Theory by Jürgen Habermas states how individuals engage in open, critical discourse about societal issues around the globe. In Habermas's view, the public sphere is an arena where citizens can gather to discuss and influence

public opinion. It emphasizes democratic participation and rational debate in shaping opinion societal progress.

Critical Theory (Frankfurt School)

Critical theory offers a critical investigation of how social media platforms can both challenge and sustain current social institutions. It focuses on power dynamics, social inequities, and the impact of media on society. It is a useful paradigm for examining social media's involvement and impact in social justice and campaigning for more equitable outcomes. "Critical theory" generally refers to the theories that aim at a critique and transformation of society by integrating normative perspectives with empirically informed analysis of society's conflicts, contradictions, and tendencies. This theory refers to the work of several generations of philosophers and social theorists in the Western European Marxist tradition known as the Frankfurt School. Beginning in the 1930s at the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt, it is best known for interdisciplinary research that combines philosophy and social science with the practical aim of furthering emancipation.

Literature Review

The literature examines much of the features of the MeToo movement in India among employees who have suffered sexual harassment and talks about the same, though due to it being a quite recent movement, a very few numbers of research has been conducted on the topic. The scarcity of the research is more felt in the Indian background as the matter has not acquired much research studies yet. (NareshEshaEskasmayi et al., 2022).

In October 2018, the #MeToo movement was done adequately in India. When the well-known Indian actress Tanushree Dutta accused well-known actor and filmmaker Nana Patekar of sexual harassment on a film set in 2008, the Indian film industry took the lead. A few days later, prominent government minister M.J. Akbar was charged with sexual harassment by journalist Priya Ramani. Many other women who work in different sectors like government, public sectors, private companies, actresses, media people have got the chance to come forward with confidence. (Shareen & Joshi, 2019).

Since its inception in October 2017, the #MeToo movement in India, an international expression of the worldwide #MeToo movement has been a part of the empowerment of Indian women. The #MeTooIndia movement is successful in bringing attention to various sexual offenses, harassments, and rapes social media platform like Twitter. It has made use of the digital public sphere to help urban Indian women

feel more comfortable coming out with their own personal stories. Women in India also posted huge number of stories of sexual harassments done by people who are sitting on powerful positions even before the #MeToo movement went viral worldwide (NANDITHA, N. 2021). Like many other global movements, the #MeToo movement in India did not happen overnight. rather , it was the culmination of years of simmering resentment. The 2012 Delhi Nirbhaya rape case marked the beginning of a new wave of feminist activism in India, as the first author has documented elsewhere (Dey, Citation2020a; Molyneux, Dey,Gatto, &Rowden, Citation2020). It was the first movement in India to use digital technologies and social media on this scale to unite people around for social activism (Dey, Adrija, 2021). Over the past few decades,

Gender relations at work have undergone tremendous change in India. The emergence of the multinational call center and IT industries [119] has led to a sharp rise in the number of women working in professional settings since the economic liberalization of the nation in the 1990s [99]. Organizational policies and practices have changed with this, as many have strived to make workplaces gender-neutral. For better or worse,

According to our respondents, the growth of #MeToo has scared men away from working in the workplace. These men are actually afraid that they will be included on the list of sexual harassers. Consequently, it is reported that tensions in the workplace between men and women have increased since the rise of the #MeToo movement due to a lack of clear definition about what constitutes sexual harassment. For instance, a lot of the respondents said that men are not willing to joke around or discuss trivial matters with their female

colleagues. (MOITRA APARNA et al., 2021) It is also claimed that #MeToo has created a broad fear of recruiting women in some sectors, which makes the employers recruit men for the same positions where they used to recruit women. This avoidance strategy stems from the belief that women are the sources of the problem, and not hiring these people will spare employers from issues related to sexual harassment at the workplace.

Women in India who had been discussing sexual abuse and harassment on social media platforms were part of the global #Metoo movement. The main cause of this exclusion is the growing awareness of the elite class in India over sexual abuse issues. This includes journalists, politicians, Bollywood stars, and famous media personalities coming on Twitter to “come-out”. Absence of conversation

Another indicator of non-inclusion is that their stories, along with the struggles about sexual abuse and harassment in the lives of Dalit women, trans women, women from lower castes and classes, and other marginalized and gendered communities—experiences of which differ much from the elite urban woman—is completely missing. Lack of personal narratives under the same hashtags shows exclusion in toxic masculine language and the setting of unsafe spaces where the minorities won’t feel comfortable sharing their stories (Nanditha,

Narayanamoorthy, 2021). Indian newsrooms gradually stopped covering sexual harassment and other infractions. Despite the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic has only made online sexual harassment worse (Ahuja and Padhy 2021, 325), policy-related dialogues have not received much attention, either in newsroom discussions or media coverage (Network of Women in Media India 2021, 27).

The media sector and higher education happened to be initial focus areas when #MeToo started in 2017 and #MeTooIndia when it began in 2018. This movement might, following four years of elections and one pandemic, be refocused more on inclusiveness and policy so that no woman—no caste, class, ability, and geography—remains left back to suffer some form of actual or virtual sexual abuse.

Social Media facilitating Social Justice Movements

Social media activism In India primarily began with online campaign movements like the Greenpeace campaign, Pink Chaddi, Save Tiger, etc. By identifying the need for people to represent, speak freely, and aware the masses through social networking the function of social media is crucial.

By breaking down the geographical and socio-economic barriers, Social media has facilitated mass mobilization, awareness generation, and real-time documentation of injustices in our society. In order to bring the social issues in front of the eyes of the government, the common public, hashtags are used to attract attention.

#MeToo movement, focused on sexual harassment and assault, has gathered a huge global attention all because of social media platforms. Tarana Burke was the movement's creator, who accelerated the movement's quick spread to social media. There are articles like "The #MeToo Movement: A Study of the Media's Role in Transforming Tweets into News" by Nyhan and Reifler [8] were published for the movement. The movement encouraged survivors of sexual harassment and assault to share their stories on social media, thereby providing a safe and supportive environment. It also enabled survivors to identify and bring perpetrators accountable, resulting in global attention on high-profile cases such as Harvey Weinstein. The exposure of the movement resulted in a cultural shift in how society views and confronts sexual harassment and assault, prompting talks about consent, limits, and power relations. Online groups and hashtags like as #BelieveSurvivors helped survivors build support networks, while social workers and advocates used these platforms to provide information, therapy, and guidance. The movement has had an impact on legislation, with social media campaigns urging lawmakers to implement stronger sexual harassment laws and employment regulations. The role of social media in these movements demonstrates its capacity to advance social justice causes and shape social work practice in addressing complicated challenges. which empowered survivors of sexual harassment where they shared their experiences on platforms like Twitter and Instagram. The

movement sparked conversations about gender equality and accountability, leading to policy changes and legal actions against perpetrators around the globe. The **farmers' protest (2020-2021)** is a landmark movement in social media. People used Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram to share the struggles of Farmers, counter misinformation, and gain global attention. The hashtag #FarmersProtest trended worldwide, exemplifying the digital solidarity of millions.

Social media platforms played a pivotal role on Dalit Women's Activism and LGBTQ+ Rights Advocacy in Nepal. Dalit women, who were marginalized in Nepal, have endured discrimination and social marginalization for a long time. Social media platforms have raised awareness of their challenges, coined topics for debate about caste-based discrimination which resulted in policy changes and greater government attention to the issue. LGBTQ+ people in Nepal have suffered immense harassment and stigma, but social media has enabled them to raise their voice, tell their part of the story and reach a larger audience, develop public support for legal amendments, and foster an online community. These initiatives have resulted in favourable policy changes, increased public awareness, and the empowerment of the vulnerable populations.

The anti-CAA protests came into existence after the government of India decided to move ahead with the Citizenship Amendment Bill (CAB) and National Register of Citizens (NRC) that refused to grant Indian citizenship to 'illegal' migrants belonging to Muslim and other communities, Rohingya refugees, Tibetan refugees and Sri Lankan Tamil refugees, who migrated to India post-2014. Also people from economically weaker communities not having the legal documents to prove their Indian citizenship faced the threat of being stateless (BBC News, 2019). At that moment people stepped out to protest against the discriminatory nature of the government's move. Social networking sites, especially social media, were used to amplify the voices of the activists. People witnessed that social media was flooded with slogans, poems, posters, images, artworks, protest videos and various comic cartoons, songs made against the CAA-NRC act by the

activists and the people in tandem. Artists got the opportunity to showcase their creativity in the protest and used social media to popularize the concept of using art as a form of resistance during that protest time.

Digital Activism, Strength and Limitations.

Digital activism refers to the use of digital tools and online platforms to advocate for social, political rights, fight for social justice, or environmental causes. It has revolutionized the way individuals and groups mobilize. It creates opportunities for widespread awareness and engagement of common people throughout the geographical boundaries. Digital activism is able to amplify the voices of the marginalized through several media platforms, including social media, blogs, online petitions, crowd funding platforms, etc. Attempting to provide checks against these oppressive systems. Movements like #MeToo, #BlackLivesMatter, showcase just how easily and rapidly digital activism can spread information and hold to account the powerful and the mightier for their actions, but then a few challenges include misinformation, digital surveillance, and marijuana to add, “slacktivism,” where a huge section of the population shows superficial support to a particular cause online disguised silver lining against certain injustices without putting more effort into meaningful offline actions. Digital activism is always vulnerable to misinformation, echo chambers, and polarization, where biased algorithms amplify especially divisive content, undermining any prospects for constructive dialogue. Digital platforms are also vulnerable to surveillance, censorship, and cyber-attacks creating limitations on the expression of free speech also posed by the digital divide, where within the world those in disadvantaged communities or rural settings who have little to no access to the Internet share exclusion from these movements. Digital activism in the end, creates awareness but in putting that awareness to hook or ankle level nothing substantial will happen on policy or any social level change until it is supported by the classical form of mobilization via work with lobbying or grassroots organizing.

Internet blackouts as a barrier to Social media communication

Internet blackout is also known as virtual curfews, network shutdowns, blackouts or kill switches. Internet shutdowns are issued by the government or non-state actors that can last for a specific time or can run for days and sometimes even for months. According to reports India had 771 blackouts between 2016 and 2023, and 51 so far this year in 2024. On September 10, 2024, when Manipur, the northeast Indian state, announced a five-day internet shutdown in response to student-led protests, citizens were disappointed and infuriated but strangely not surprised as they have seen this for a long time. The various reasons for the blackouts in India have included the government's attempts to control agitation of Citizenship Amendment Act, suppress the farmers' protests, and curb cheating during various govt exams. However the majority of shutdowns in India have historically occurred in Jammu and Kashmir, in August 2019, it experienced 552 consecutive days of internet blackout, the world's longest shutdown in history. This blackout is a challenging situation for people to be able to connect with the world in a situation of crisis and when disseminating the information gets important.

Foreign countries like The United Nations consider internet access a basic human right. According to them, blackouts can adversely affect education, employment, and social services in various platforms as they hinder access to food and medical care.

Social Media's Impact on Social Movements

Social media has become a very important tool in amplifying social movements and addressing all kinds of social injustices. It acts as a platform for raising awareness, providing support, and globally disseminating awareness about the critical issues. In the digital age, marginalized voices often don't get space in the mainstream media, but definitely find representation on various social media platforms, which enables them to narrate their stories and demand accountability from the government and justice system. Prominent movements like #BlackLivesMatter, #MeToo, and climate activism

have gained global momentum due to the accessibility and engagements of the people in social media platforms. These social media platforms allow people to circumvent traditional gatekeepers, reaching millions of people instantly through hashtags, live streams, and posts that touch people emotionally and intellectually.

Nowadays as we know that social networks are the tools used to reach and influence the public sphere. According to German philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas, the public sphere consists of a group of people who come together to discuss general and various important issues. Platforms that earlier used to be considered as a public sphere for discussion includes cafés, universities, public places, clubs, etc. (Habermas, Burger, & Lawrence, 2001)

The advent of the Internet in the 1990s became a turning phase for the interpersonal communication. The number of people connected to the Internet started increasing in numbers with time. This has resulted in change in the social networking structures, where social media networks replaced the pre-existing networking and socializing structures. Social media has a great influence on social movements. It firstly accelerates mobilisation, communication and dissemination of information which were not present in traditional mobilisation techniques (Eltantawy & Wiest, 2011, pp 1209-1210). Social movements can reach millions of people around the globe through Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. This rapid spread of information immensely helps to validate and expand information.

Conclusion - Social media has been acting as a truly effective force behind the acceleration for social justice movements: a platform to amplify voices with solidarity and demand accountability. Platforms such as #MeToo has shown just how much power digital spaces hold in allowing the exposure of systemic injustices, as this also allows victims to share their stories and gain power over expectations surrounding gender and power dynamics. The same detailed steps were taken by movements like #BlackLivesMatter and climate action groups bringing together peoples from different communities to garner support all over the globe while bridging, at times, vast

geographic and cultural divides to unite in key issues. Even with misinformation, digital censorship, and performative activism, the power of awareness-raising and making action happen through social media cannot be overemphasized. Social media will keep changing the face of activism by promoting live communication, empowering the voice of the marginalized, and creating a ground for global collaboration, while isolated struggles become worldwide movements for equity and justice.

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