

Voices from the Margins: Digital Media Activism and Intersectionality in the Age of Social Justice

Arijit Das

Senior Technical Assistant and Branding & Placement
Coordinator, Department of Journalism and Mass
Communication

Swami Vivekananda University

Abstract

Intersectionality is a guiding principle for organizing that calls attention to the fact that one should be reflexive when analyzing social characteristics, lest one form of marginalization displaces another, and personal experiences are recognized as distinct rather than as a homogeneous group. The critics of intersectionality have warned that it will splinter the fight against systemic oppression. We are promoting the possible gains of a sensitive use of intersectionality rather than total rejection as it should be used as a method of research. Personal experiences would therefore be very handy to analyze how intersectionality actually works in practical settings.

Social justice is at its core a belief that everyone in a society has equal rights and opportunities. This central idea is built upon the principles of empowerment and engagement that allows for individuals to influence decisions that will affect them. Social justice advocacy, as a logical extension of these principles, safeguards the marginalized and vulnerable from being oppressed by those with more power.

Contemporary feminism is represented through blogs, hashtags, e-magazines, and digitally organized protests via online communities that address the urgent issues faced by feminists today. This approach to digital activism aims to reclaim technological power, which is often dominated by hegemonic and masculine influences, by creating alternative spaces and methods of protest. Online discussions are

increasingly shaping transnational feminism, with the new digital landscape allowing social movements to foster feminist solidarity and complex identities among netizens.

Keywords: intersectionality, feminism, Dalit, hashtags, Metoo Movement, Online Activism, social Media, Social Justice

Intersectionality

Black feminist activists in the US during the 1980s and early 1990s are most often credited with coining the term “multiple and compound discrimination and inequality.” Kimberle Crenshaw first used the term “intersectionality” to describe how the US’s antidiscrimination laws did not adequately reflect the experiences of Black women. Scholars and activists argued that social movements, the state, and the law were more likely to turn a blind eye to the lives of those whose racial identity (marginalized) and sex (Black women) intersected. A broad spectrum of social scientists have pointed out the importance of taking an intersectional perspective in understanding inequality, injustice, and discrimination based on various grounds, such as disability and race, across different parts of the world.

Kimberle Crenshaw first introduced the concept of “intersectionality” in her 1991 article titled ‘Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics and Violence Against Women of Colour’. While acknowledging the success of identity politics in recognizing and tackling large-scale systems of oppression, she pointed out that identity politics “often conflates or overlooks intragroup differences.” By examining the experiences of black women in instances of domestic violence and sexual assault, she contended that they encounter distinct and heightened forms of discrimination. Their marginalization, discrimination, or violence results not just from their race or gender but from the combined effect of the race factor and the gender factor.

Intersectionality Indian Context

However, the theory of intersectionality first took pragmatic shape in the discipline of law primarily due to Black feminist critiques of the judiciary. The concept has developed over

time from merely being an academic theory into a “way of being” and has become an important analytical framework in different fields. “Being intersectional” is understood as a methodological tool as well as a theoretical and political stance. Through a wide range of methodological modifications, feminist studies have actively theorized the interaction of multiple identities and their experiences of exclusion and discrimination at multiple intersections. According to feminist literature, it is impossible to describe intersectionality in its broadest sense.

It is not new to understand that the existence of several identities affects a person’s lived experience and social standing in the Indian setting.

In India, caste is a pervasive system of inequality and persecution. Those who are at the intersections of caste and other identities, such as sex, gender identity, or handicap, face highly severe forms of discrimination. In Indian tradition, caste and gender inequalities are inextricably intertwined since controlling women’s bodies preserves the “purity of caste.”. Women are grossly limited since they are viewed as “entry points” or “gateways” of caste mobility for men from lower castes, safeguarding the caste system.

Because of the systemic disregard by the police and other authorities for their claims, those at the intersection of caste and gender are now especially exposed to exacerbated discrimination.¹³

The severe marginalization of Dalit women in Indian society, influenced by both patriarchal and Brahmanical ideals, has been observed by leading Dalit activists and academics. To consider the experiences and give more weight to the views of Dalit women, Rege has argued for a “standpoint feminist” approach.¹⁴

Apart from theory-based writing, a variety of studies used the intersectional approach to understand how gender and caste interact regarding human rights violations, commercial surrogacy, the devadasi system, gender-based violence, access to education, and livelihoods.

However, the mainstream Indian women's movement did not take on the concept of intersectionality to construct social reality. A monolithic category of the marginalized woman, at best split into the categories of class and rural or urban, was accepted without debate by the movement. The mainstream Indian feminist movement has been a little reflective of these limitations, even though its upper-caste, middle-class, and urban affiliations mark it as elitist. Consequently, the majority of its campaigns on sexual violence and/or livelihood have focused on poor and rural women (John 2005). Poverty has been described as the principal cause of marginalization because caste and religion were collapsed into categories of economic marginalization, as exemplified by the idea of women as "backward classes."

Feminism

However, the mainstream Indian women's movement did not embrace the concept of intersectionality to define social reality. The women's movement accepted a monolithic category of the marginalized woman, at best divided between class and rural/urban categories. The mainstream Indian feminist movement has been somewhat reflective of these constraints, even though its upper-caste, middle-class, and urban affiliations make it elite. As a consequence, most of its campaigns regarding sexual violence and/or livelihood focused on poor and rural women. Poverty has been identified as the primary cause of marginalization as caste and religion became subsumed into categories of economic marginalization, with the idea of women as "backward classes."

Women whose unification is sought on the basis of systematic overlapping patriarchies are divided along caste/class lines and through their consent to patriarchies and their compensatory structures. This has led to the reproduction of those margins and hierarchies within the women's movement, where the power imbalance between the castes has persisted and been rendered invisible. Feminist modes of organization and struggle should "encompass all of the social inequalities that patriarchies are related to, embedded in, and structured by" in order to challenge the materiality of women's marginalities.

This can be seen in how the Dalit feminist perspective emerged as a critique of the savarnization of women (and women/feminist studies) and the masculinization of the Dalit (and Dalit studies). An intersectional perspective like this recognizes the diversity, heterogeneity, and even contradiction that exists in people's and groups' lived experiences as well as the hierarchical, multiple, and shifting power relations of caste, class, race, and ethnicity that shape their social realities. Such an intersectional analysis has recently been used in works to explore caste and gender.

Argument against understanding the intersectional category of the Dalit woman as a self-standing homogenous category was made by focusing on two case studies. The first case study underlines the necessity of understanding how the category of Dalit women is co-constituted with the category of the upper-caste lady, and thus it becomes important to interpret the two categories together. It attempts to refute the idea that the Partition caused Bengal's traditional caste and gender hierarchies to collapse through an anthropological study of Dalit/Bahujanii women from Partition-migrant households in a non-metropolitan town in West Bengal.

The second case study makes the case against viewing Dalit women as a homogenous group that has been unduly shaped by oppression and violence. It emphasizes how, in spite of discrimination, Dalit women in post-constitutional India have affirmed their agency and sense of self in a variety of ways. It contrasts two instances of caste-based violence in Uttar Pradesh, one in Hathras and one in Shabbirpur. This theory assumes that the resistance levels have varied along with varying mobility in terms of economic and political. The acts of violence conducted by members from the higher castes against them were vigorously opposed by the women of Shabbirpur, and the ground base for such struggles was provided through Ambedkarite politics in the form of Dalit constitutional rights.

Digital media activity and its transformation

One of the key features of digital transformation in activism is the ability to connect and work together across

geographical, cultural, and ideological divides . Social media and online platforms can easily form global networks of supporters and activists. Information, assets, and tactics shared among movements can lead to better-coordinated and successful advocacy campaigns. The internet age has brought about a new era of advocacy strategies. Although they are still valid, traditional modes of campaigning and protest are now frequently improved or supplemented by internet platforms. Virtual protests, crowdsourcing, viral campaigns, and online petitions have all become mainstays of modern activism. Digital transformation has transformed activism, but there are also disadvantages and ethical dilemmas along with it . A few major problems include the spread of misinformation, online harassment, and privacy issues. Moreover, ethical issues regarding hacking and cyber attacks associated with digital activism need proper deliberation. As the digital revolution in activism gradually takes its shape, understanding these issues without losing the integrity of the movement becomes an important matter to talk about. The future of digital activism is bright, but also quite complex. The plans and tactics of activists will change with the technology. Interest in using breakthroughs such as blockchain and artificial intelligence for activism is increasing. There will likely be more debates about digital rights and freedoms in the future and a growing fusion of activities offline and online. To understand activism's lasting influence on politics and society, one must understand how it is changing in the digital age. Future social movement will be defined by the commitment to intersectionality and the presence of diverse voices. Movements will increasingly acknowledge the interconnected nature of social issues, including those of race, gender, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status. This implies a more egalitarian and holistic approach to advocacy as it addresses root causes of social injustices. Future social activism will also have to grapple with moral and legal concerns. Digital rights and online activism will become more pressing issues in the near future. Activists will be required to walk a tightrope between civil disobedience and criminal activity while pushing for change in a society that is becoming increasingly digitally

connected. Moreover, the laws regulating activity—such as those relating to freedom of expression and surveillance—will keep changing, defining the parameters of what constitutes acceptable activism. In conclusion, it is important for activists and society to understand the consequences for social activism's future. It is a call to action to adapt to these changes and ensure that the activism of tomorrow endures as a reflection of the dynamic forces shaping our world.

Feminism through digital activation

The technological fusion of the digital and the physical has utterly changed the political, social, and economic climate of the world. Technologically, or through the prism of the digital revolution, there is an opportunity to construct a more inclusive future, at least on paper, for decision-makers. By allowing accessibility, promoting diversity, and motivating leadership in a movement that, throughout its history, lacked those very elements, tools such as blogging and social media have helped democratize the feminist movement. Online or cyber feminists make use of social media and blogging as a means for community building and political activism. Transnational feminist networks become possible through social media's facility for the easy flow of information and knowledge across borders.

The term "digital feminism" refers to online activism or engagement with feminism and feminist ideas. It not only refers to discussing diverse women, gender, and sexual issues but also mentions making use of the digital platforms and technology to advance feminist agenda and goals and to offer a new feminist consciousness and sensibility. Like its western counterparts, Indian feminism has experienced several waves or phases, but their feminist activism addresses a range of inequalities, including different kinds of issues and situations and approaches to addressing those problems that emerge in India's contemporary patriarchal society. In the twenty-first century's second decade, virtual feminism conquered virtual space, wherein it appears it first found applications as an engine to move populations behind actions or protests carried in the street like activism, among others. Given this utilization, feminist action would grow and gain

to be very powerful weapon not only against violence but even social and human evil in their societies. Accordingly, it's more than supplement action for demonstrating to the street feminine action versus the issue of misogyny.

An emerging trend in India and across the globe, digital feminism is an avant-garde form of feminist action that is influenced by a number of social, cultural, and political elements. Since it is more intersectional and inclusive, it essentially transcends traditional feminism. Technology was highlighted at the Fourth World Conference on Women (1995) as a means of empowering women and broadening their options, supporting and promoting gender parity. It has been declared that "to ensure women's equal access to economic resources, including land, credit, science and technology, vocational training, information, communication, and markets" to improve the advancement and empowerment of women through international collaboration. India's #MeToo movement through the lens of the well-known digital zine *Feminism in India (FII)* in order to advance research on digital activism, sexual harassment, and structural feminist intersectionality. Indian women authors, editors, journalists, and activists are the creators and curators of FII, a digital safe place and inclusive media platform that is well recognized. Five major perspectives were identified through a thematic analysis of digital pieces regarding #MeTooIndia that were published in FII between 2018 and 2020, a period that corresponded with the social movement's urgency. Themes include the normalization of victim-blaming and shaming, the systemic use and abuse of privilege and power, and the testimonies of survivors of sexual harassment. At the same time, other forms of cultural toxic misogyny and sexual violence that are intersectional and uniquely local to the Indian contexts of #MeToo have also come under the lens, including the role played by Indian media in either raising or suppressing awareness about sexual harassment and by social media in offering support or solutions to victims and survivors. According to our chapter, the digital platforms managed by women, like *Feminism in India*, can build a mutually beneficial relationship with their connecting audiences and are able to offer all women and

activists the tools they need in order to understand social injustices and carry out culturally aware solutions.

Feminism has traditionally been seen through a narrow Western perspective. An inclusive, international feminist movement is hampered by the perception of “third world women” as a victimized, “powerless” group in contrast to free Western feminists. But as more women of various colors, ethnicities, socioeconomic backgrounds, and cultural backgrounds get access to the internet, the feminist conversation broadens to incorporate the perspectives of those who were previously marginalized. This supports a postmodernist and postcolonial view of feminism that accepts a variety of facts, roles, and realities as part of its focus and recognizes the movement’s diversity. It enables marginalized female groups to rethink feminism in light of their personal convictions and experiences.

Social media platforms are a major component of digital feminist movements in India. In order to protest the 12 percent sanitary napkin tax, the #LahuKaLagaan hashtag took over Twitter in 2017. As a result of the campaign, the “period tax” was eliminated in 2018. Following the death of a 23-year-old Delhi rape victim in 2012, the “Nirbhaya movement” sparked massive demonstrations. The demonstrations also made their way onto social media. Millions of people used hashtags like #Delhibraveheart to support the victim’s right to justice. Together with the street demonstrations, this internet outcry attracted international attention and forced the normally indifferent administration to act quickly. Building upon this, rape laws in India were reformed to widen the meaning of rape, enhance punishments for crimes such as acid attacks, stalking, and voyeurism, and enhance the life sentence even to death for rape criminals. It also set up fast-track courts and a special fund toward women’s safety and security, which would be maintained by the Indian government.

Conclusion

In order not to view lived experiences as generic and undifferentiated and not to substitute one marginality for another, intersectionality is essentially an organizing

principle that requires reflexivity in the study of social characteristics.

Such constraints imposed the monolithic category of a marginalized woman as, at the least, divided by class and categories of rural versus urban. Again, the Indian women's movement's mainstream has sometimes been reflective of the above constraints while clearly its upper caste middle-class and predominantly urban affiliations render it more than elitist, leading to huge portions of this sexual violence related campaigns and /or livelihood advocacy to be held among the economically impoverished and predominantly rural women of the country.

Social media is a strong space for Dalit activism in the digital era. It has advanced social justice issues, garnered support, and empowered the voices of the voiceless. The more online campaigns and hashtags that surface, along with platforms specifically targeting the problems of the Dalits, the greater awareness and belonging become. Still, there are several issues at stake, including prevention of hate speech online and offline influence. We need to continue efforts at using social media for change in order to combat caste-based prejudice and inequity. The digital age, especially on social media, has brought a significant change to the social justice movements in India and elsewhere. Besides granting the Dalit community a more prominent voice, social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter have enabled them to share their stories and issues with a global audience. The increased exposure has led to some major paradigm shifts in the discourse, as it has also led to some much-needed legislative reforms and uprooted several age-old stereotypes. Social media has proven to be a potent tool for advocacy, education, and mobilization because it allows for direct contact and raises awareness about injustices based on caste. The resilience of Dalit activists inspires and propels change despite the digital divide and online persecution.

References:

Bertrand, M., Mullainathan, S., Council of Economic Advisers, University of Chicago, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, NBER, CEPR, & Department of Economics. (n.d.). *Are Emily and*

Media and Social Change: Literacy, Representation, the Quest for Social Equity
Greg more employable than Lakisha and Jamal? A field Experiment on labor Market Discrimination.
http://recherche.enac.fr/~steve.lawford/teaching_papers/reading/bertrand_mullainathan06.pdf

Carbado, D. W., Crenshaw, K. W., Mays, V. M., & Tomlinson, B. (2013). INTERSECTIONALITY. *Du Bois Review Social Science Research on Race*, 10(2), 303–312.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/s1742058x13000349>

Crenshaw, K. (n.d.). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black Feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. Chicago Unbound.
<https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8/>

Dalit women talk differently a critique of 'Difference' and towards a Dalit feminist standpoint position. (n.d.). EconBiz.
<https://www.econbiz.de/Record/dalit-women-talk-differently-a-critique-of-difference-and-towards-a-dalit-feminist-standpoint-position-rege-sharmila/10007527765>

Gasdaglis, K., & Madva, A. (2019). *Intersectionality as a regulative ideal.* <https://philarchive.org/rec/GASIAA-2>

Harnois, C. E., & Ifatunji, M. (2010). Gendered measures, gendered models: toward an intersectional analysis of interpersonal racial discrimination. In *Ethnic and Racial Studies* (Vol. 6, pp. 1006–1028) [Journal-article]. Taylor & Francis.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2010.516836>

Rege, S. (n.d.). Dalit Women Talk Differently-A Critique of Difference and Towards a Dalit Feminist Standpoint Position. *Kedarunipune.*

https://www.academia.edu/4852869/Dalit_Women_Talk_Differently_A_Critique_of_Difference_and_Towards_a_Dalit_Feminist_Standpoint_Position

Rege, S. (1998). Dalit Women Talk Differently-A critique of difference and towards a Dalit Feminist standpoint position. *Kedarunipune.*

https://www.academia.edu/4852869/Dalit_Women_Talk_Differently_A_Critique_of_Difference_and_Towards_a_Dalit_Feminist_Standpoint_Position