

Socio-Political Movements and Digital Activism In The Cyber Space: An Indian Perspective

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Abstract : In a country like India, cyber space has proved to be one of the successful medium in mobilizing social and political movements. With the decreasing price of the smart phones and the easy internet connectivity especially with reference to 4G connection, youth are the more passionate users. Recently India has witnessed an upsurge in socio-political movements ranging from anti corruption movements to anti-rape movements to anti sexual harassment movements etc. the last few years there is a notable change in the socio-political movements not only in India but globally. With the advent of new media platform, the social and political movements got a new avenue. This paper tries to outline the various socio political movements and digital activism in the cyber space with special reference to India.

IndexTerms - Digital Activism, socio political movements, cyber space, public sphere

I. INTRODUCTION

Socio-political movements are not new to India. Since independence it has been a powerful tool championing the cause to challenge the status quo in society, politics and public life. Through these movements the Indian citizens got the opportunity and space to clear their demands and hopes and to motivate the process of socio-political changes. Recently India has witnessed an upsurge in socio-political movements ranging from anti corruption movements to anti-rape movements to anti sexual harassment movements, Right to Privacy, Education, Food etc. On this Kumar (2010) once remarked that social movements on the issue of dignity of women, autonomy over the bodies and freedom without fear have also been prominent. Movements by the socially marginalized Dalit activists for respect and against the caste discrimination and repression and tribal activists regarding the claim over 'Jal-Jangal-Jamin' (water-forest-land) have also been common. There are many others small, decentralized, and localized issue based mass movements going on all over the country. Many times they come together, form rainbow coalitions and raise their voice in support of their demands.

Political scientist Rajni Kothariⁱ argues that the institutions of the state have been captured by elites. Due to this, electoral representation by political parties is no longer an effective way for the poor to get their voices heard. People left out by the formal political system join social movements or non-party political formations in order to put pressure on the state from outside. Today, the broader term of civil society is used to refer to both old social movements represented by political parties and trade unions and to new nongovernmental organizations, women's groups, environmental groups and tribal activists.

Over the years India has been a place of various socio-political movements. These movements got ignition either with the traditional media or the mainstream media. But in the words of Keval J Kumar (2012) the relationship between the mainstream mass media and social political movements has been a complicated as it was supportive in some cases and ignoring or giving little or partial coverage to their causes in most cases. This relationship deteriorated further, post 1990s, when India whole heartedly adopted neo-liberal economic policies which in turn set in the marginalization of socio-political movements, especially movements that challenged the corporate hegemony over natural resources new liberal economic resources.

But over the last few years there is a notable change in the socio-political movements not only in India but globally. With the advent of new media platform, the social and political movements got a new avenue. Internet and social media is now the buzzword in the circles of social activists

Ethan Zuckermanⁱⁱ once remarked in 'The cute cat theory of digital activism': *The Web was invented so physicists could share research papers. Web 2.0 was invented so we could share cute pictures of our cats. The tools of Web 2.0, while designed for mundane uses, can be extremely powerful in the hands of digital activists, especially those in environments where free speech is limited.* By Zukerman's quote we can clearly understand that Internet has a positive effect on the participatory democracy. It is also an important platform for digital activism. We can easily see that our Facebook timeline are full of so many posts about political subjects. Activists are very effective on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and many other social networking sites (SNS) and they also have wide audience on their pages/accounts. They organize demonstrations, protests or some political events through their SNS pages. But according to Hardy (2014), there are skeptics who doubt the power of new media especially social media in launching and organizing the role of new media, including social media in providing vital tools to activists and socio-political movements to reach out to the concerned public are not over optimistic about the role of new media, especially social media in the movements. These scholars and activists stress that most of the recent social political movements are outcomes of socioeconomic

and political conditions and have employed traditional communication tools as well as new media including social media platforms. They argue that the role of social media should be seen in the broader context of critical political economy of media and power.

In this framework it would be interesting to make an effort to study the role of new media in socio-political movements and digital activism.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF SOCIO-POLITICAL MOVEMENTS

Thomas Burger (1989)ⁱⁱⁱ outlined the growth of democratic public sphere. He defines the public sphere as the sphere of private people who join together to form a "public" and calls it the bourgeois public sphere. Internet as the mediated public sphere serves this purpose by giving free space for public debate that is possible through weblogs and social media allows unidentified persons to interact over digital platforms to form a public driven by some common interest which may be multifarious like political, social, economic etc.

According to Gerhards & Schafer (2009) the structure of the internet mirrors that of the public sphere in that several levels can be distinguished that differ in the extent of organizational structure, the level of participation and the impact they have on society. The online counterpart of the traditional 'encounter public sphere' is internet based interpersonal communication such as e-mailing or instant messaging. The organizational pre requisites to keep this forum going are rather low, and the opportunities for participants to make themselves heard are high, but the impact on the larger societal debate remains low due to the small amount of people reached. Internet forum, discussion boards and blogs constitute the second level of the internet public sphere.

Whereas Kavada (2013) posits another way of looking at how social movements utilize new media is to classify them as 'horizontal' and 'vertical', with the former having a more bottom-up approach and a participatory internal democracy, using an inward-oriented qualitative form of mobilization. The verticals on the other hand, seek to transform society at large and have a majoritarian democracy, along with a top down approach.

Kavada (2016) further points out about social movement research challenge in the digital age. He had presented two fold arguments. First, digital media destabilize long-held assumptions about the nature of collective action, about social movements and their capacity to effect change. Second, digital media highlight the need to take communication seriously in how we conceptualize both collective action and political agency.

Calling for a cyber realist approach to societal issues, Morozov (2011) says radical shifts in the value system of the political apparatus could not or should not happen under the pressure of the internet alone.

III. APPROCHES OF SOCIO-POLITICAL MOVEMENTS IN CYBER SPACE

Mattoni (2017) mentioned that the year 2011 was the year of protester, as indicated by Time magazine. That year hundreds of thousands mobilized in Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Yemen, Libya, Bahrain, Spain, Greece, Chile, the United States, Russia and other countries across the world. A portion of these protests rapidly ended up radical movements, other remained very reformist in their requests and claims. Some kept going weeks, in spite of the fact that established in long stretches of minor uprisings, other endured for quite a long time. Mattoni (2017) further added the digital native protesters equipped with smart phones and laptops, connected with the world through Twitter and Facebook. As also happened with past upsurges of protest, one of the outcomes of these mobilizations was a renewed interest in social movements and, more specifically, on how the latest digital technologies supported their development.

One of the very first occurrences of political activism built in huge part through new media was the 'Arab Spring'. According to Bekurov et.al (2015) in the Arab world, a more effective mechanism to mobilize and intensify protest movements is the approach of so called "word of mouth." At the same time, basic purpose of Twitter, Facebook and YouTube was to use them for informing, organizing meetings and providing legal assistance.

Taking the clue of Iran and Egypt Karagiannopoulos (2012) mentions that the internet's role in the political activities of the Iranian "Green Movement" was considered so apparent and crucial that the protests were dubbed a "Twitter Revolution," while in Egypt internet-facilitated protests were characterized as a "Facebook Revolution." These struggles and the surrounding rhetoric also reopened a discussion on the internet's and social media applications' role in revolutionary events and their potential for democratization.

Another instance had been noticed when in 2011; the Occupy Wall Street movement began as a protest against the growing inequalities. The initial activity yielded some iconic visual and verbal frames, including the famous "we are the 99 percent" slogan that spread quickly after an activist created a tumblr page for it in August 2011^{iv}. In the words of Ganesh & Stohl (2013) the word "Occupy" itself along with a host of other symbols, some appropriated from elsewhere, also came to be associated with the Occupy movement. This included the "Revolution" logo, with love spelled backward, which the libertarian Ron Paul popularized during his 2008 bid for the Republican US presidency nomination. Gerbaudo (2015, p.83) remarked on expression such as 'people of the Web', 'people of the internet' or 'power to the Internet people' as being an adaptation of populist traditions, identifying the people with one medium and thus building a social base.

IV. HASHTAG AND TAG: HARBINGER OF DIGITAL ACTIVISM IN INDIA, SOME INSTANCES

a. Anna Hazare-#Anti Corruption Movement

According to Mohapatra (2013) social worker and anti-corruption crusader from Maharashtra, Anna Hazare started the national movement for a strong anticorruption law. He and some like-minded people from different parts of India came together to form a loose consortium to protest against the 2011 central government's anti-corruption Lokpal bill which was to be discussed in parliament. The protesters felt that the Lokpal bill was too weak and needed much more executive power to become effective in curbing corruption. The protest climaxed with a fast unto death at Delhi by Anna Hazare. All along the mass media were highlighting the sequence of the protests and lot of discussions were on in the social media with netizens giving opinions in chat rooms or having petitions circulated and signed. 'The question is whether mainstream media helped in giving shape for a huge movement or media had no choice than establishing its credentials in a democratic set up to claim for its continuous guardian and fourth pillar status. Some scholars also believe that it was the social media which provided momentum for a huge movement that the main stream media could not ignore. As a result the subsequent intervention of electronic and print media has made the agitation into a mass movement.'

Karna (2012) say that this was the first ever movement which had a Twitter handle, a Facebook page, an Orkut presence, a LinkedIn group, an email address, an Interactive Voice response system. By August 15th, 2011, the number given on the website of India against Corruption (IAC) for expressing support had 13 million missed call. The Twitter hashtags #isupportannahazare, #janlokal and #lokal was also trending.

b. Pink Chaddi Campaign:

In the year 2009, under the guidance of Nisha Susan, an employee of Tehelka political magazine, Pink Chaddi campaign was started. The Pink Chaddi (PC)^v campaign will probably be remembered as a brilliant example of how an idea can transcend the offline and online media divide, thereby acquiring a traction which any brand would want. It soon attracted support from like-minded people who used the platform to express their disgust of the hardliners and support for the initiative. Support was not restricted to Indians from all parts of the country, but it soon gained well wishers from Kabul, Singapore and Los Angeles among other places. When restrictions by Facebook didn't allow the group to talk to its members, they started a separate group where people could become fans of the Consortium and exchange messages. Banerjee (2015) mentioned that Nisha Susan, launched a Facebook group naughtily named Consortium of Pub-going, Loose and Forward Women⁴ which urged women to send pink chaddis to the leader of the Hindu outfit as a gift on Valentine's Day. The Sri Ram Sena office received over 2000 chaddis and the organization became the butt of ridicule across the world.

c. #Indian Rape Stories:

In December 2012, a young physiotherapy intern was brutally gang raped and critically injured in a moving bus in Delhi. Few days later this braveheart Nirbhaya (name coined by media) died due to internal injuries in a Singapore hospital. The entire nation's outrage emerged in the public domain not only through mass media but also in a major way through social media. Ordinary citizens led demonstrations and candlelight vigils all across the country to demand that the central government take some strong action against the culprits and bring major changes in the existing rape laws. It seems the social media was able to galvanise the public to take this sort of action. The massive protests led the government to set up Justice Verma committee to bring changes in the rape law. For the first time in the history of India many citizens come forward to report the events. As Citizen Journalists they were actively posting photographs and videos online and the main stream media was taking user generated content. The young technology savvy Indians spread their outrage across the country and came together to voice their opinions against the weak law and the flaws in our legal system. Within days it became a place for social change in India. (Mishra & Krishnaswami, 2014).

A kind of similar incident was noticed in the mid of 2018 when twin cases jolted people countrywide. Protests took place across the country in a demand for justice in the cases of the Kathua girl who was kidnapped, raped and murdered, and the Unnao teen who was raped while being kept in confinement. Thousands of people protested across the country on Sunday as outrage grew over the rape and murder of an eight-year-old girl in Jammu's Kathua and the sexual assault of a teenager in Unnao, a day after another case of the brutal rape and murder of a minor girl was reported in Surat. The Twitter hashtags #justiceforasifa was also trending.

d.#MeToo Movement:

The Me Too movement^{vi} (or #MeToo movement) is a movement against sexual harassment and sexual assault. #MeToo spread virally in October 2017 as a hashtag utilized via social networking media trying to exhibit the far reaching predominance of harassment and sexual assault particularly in the place of work. Following the global outrage over the Harvey Weinstein incident in the West, where the noted Hollywood producer was accused of sexual harassment by over 70 women, the #MeToo movement has finally arrived in India, engulfing the whole media and entertainment industry. Several women have bravely come out with stories about harassment and sexual abuse at workplace at the hands of the powerful and higher-ups. Ever since Tanushree Dutta, in an interview, alleged that Nana Patekar misbehaved with her while filming a special song for Horn Ok Pleassss in 2008, many well-known comedians, journalists, and actors have been named and shamed on social media in the past few days as allegations of sexual misconduct continue to burst out. The movement gained steam in India after former AIB comedian Utsav Chakraborty was accused of sexual harassment by a writer and fellow comic, who also said that the company had not taken any action despite her complaints. Following the incident, AIB founding member and CEO Tanmay Bhat "stepped away" from his role, while another founding member Gursimran Khamba, who has also been accused of sexual misconduct, has been asked to go on temporary leave.

Next in line was Queen Director Vikas Bahl, who has been accused of sexual harassment by a former employee of Phantom Films, which has now been disbanded. On Monday, the swell of accusations knocked on the door of Union Minister MJ Akbar, with six women journalists accusing him of sexual harassment and inappropriate behaviour when he worked as a newspaper editor.

V. CONCLUSION:

In a country like India, cyber space has proved to be one of the successful medium in mobilizing social and political movements. With the decreasing price of the smart phones and the easy internet connectivity especially with reference to 4G connection, youth are the more passionate users. According to Shah, et al (2014) the Internet and Mobile Association of India has projected that by 2018, there will be over 500 million internet users in the country. The digital media platform is used to augment the smart mass for the social and political movement.

But there are two most dangerous factors which are affecting the digital activism in the country like India. One is 1. Corporate control and another is 2. Political control. Only a truly democratic political government could develop regulations favoring the public. Offering the state's authorities the power to control the Internet providers is by no means less dangerous than the formation of monopolies and cartels. The deregulated information market protects the intellectual rights to the direct benefit of major media corporations while creating digital divides" and placing the marginalized population outside the world wide web. The state control over the Internet providers protects mainly the political leaders. This leaves very little room for the public willing to freely discuss political topics in the digital arena.

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^{iv} (<http://wearethe99percent.tumblr.com>)

^veconomictimes.indiatimes.com/articleshow/4186421.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst

^{vi} <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/metoo-movement-india-5396200/>

