

From Likes to Movements: The Role of Social Media in Indian Social Activism

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Abstract- Social media has fundamentally reshaped the landscape of social activism in India, transforming digital expressions such as likes, shares, and hashtags into powerful tools of civic participation. With over 820 million internet users, platforms like Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and X (formerly Twitter) have become central arenas where citizens construct public debates, mobilize support, and challenge institutional power. This paper explores how these platforms facilitate a shift from passive digital engagement to active collective movements. Drawing upon significant Indian case studies—including the Anti-Corruption Movement (2011), the Nirbhaya Protests (2012), #MeTooIndia (2018), Kerala Flood Relief (2018), and the Farmers' Protest (2020–21)—the study illustrates how user-generated content, emotional storytelling, and hashtag activism create a participatory culture that empowers marginalized voices and decentralizes movement leadership. The analysis highlights how social media functions as a catalyst for agenda-setting, rapid mobilization, and narrative framing within India's evolving digital public sphere. However, the paper also critically examines the limitations of digital activism, including the spread of misinformation, algorithmic biases, online harassment, and the persistent digital divide that restricts equitable participation. Findings suggest that while online activism contributes significantly to awareness-building and collective identity formation, sustainable social change in India continues to rely on hybrid models that integrate online energy with sustained offline action. Ultimately, this research argues that the transformational power of social media lies not in superficial engagement but in its ability to convert

everyday digital interactions into meaningful, inclusive, and organized social movements.

Index Terms- Social Media Activism, Hashtag Movements, Digital Public Sphere, Indian Social Movements, Civic Participation.

I. INTRODUCTION

Social media has become central to the way Indian citizens understand, discuss, and challenge social issues. With over 820 million internet users, India represents one of the largest digital populations globally (Kemp, 2024). The widespread penetration of smartphones and reduced data costs have led to an unprecedented rise in online civic engagement. Movements that once relied on physical gatherings now begin with viral posts, emotional narratives, and rapidly spreading hashtags. Social media creates what Castells (2015) terms “networked publics”—spaces where individuals collectively construct political meaning and action. In the Indian context, this networked solidarity has transformed social activism from scattered, localized efforts into nationwide conversations driven by emotional connection, digital identity, and shared purpose.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Researchers have increasingly explored how digital tools reshape civic participation. Bennett and Segerberg (2012) describe “connective action,” where individuals engage through personalized content rather than formal organizations. Indian studies show similar patterns: citizens respond to ethical narratives, personal testimonies, and expressive hashtags more readily than to institutional

calls (Udupa, 2020). Social media simplifies political conversations, allowing ordinary users—students, women, marginalized communities—to voice their concerns without requiring organizational membership (Thomas & Bhatia, 2021).

Scholars argue that Indian activism has shifted towards “everyday politics” where people engage through memes, reels, tweets, and short videos (Nayar, 2022). Additionally, research highlights how digital platforms amplify issues ignored by mainstream media. For instance, the #MeTooIndia wave demonstrated how survivor stories can bypass traditional gatekeeping (Dutta & Sircar, 2018). However, the literature also warns of risks: misinformation spreads faster than verified content, digital abuse frequently targets activists, and algorithmic biases can silence minority voices (Rao, 2023). Thus, social media functions as both an enabler and a disruptor of democratic participation.

Social Media as a Catalyst for Indian Social Movements

Social media provides visibility, speed, and emotional resonance—three essential ingredients for modern mobilization. The Anti-Corruption Movement led by Anna Hazare in 2011 used Facebook pages and YouTube videos to convert citizen discontent into a nationwide anti-corruption discourse. Similarly, the 2012 Nirbhaya protests witnessed unprecedented digital grief and anger; hashtags like #JusticeForNirbhaya unified millions across linguistic and regional divides (Kumar, 2014).

WhatsApp groups have also become a grassroots organizing tool, especially in rural and semi-urban India. During Kerala's 2018 floods, crowdsourced relief efforts coordinated through WhatsApp and Twitter enabled rapid volunteer mobilization (Menon & Rajan, 2019). In the Farmers' Protest (2020–21), social media became both a mobilizing hub and a narrative battlefield, as farmers live-streamed protests, countered misinformation, and built international solidarity (Jain & Singh, 2022). Such examples demonstrate that digital activism is neither passive nor symbolic; it translates online energy into real-world action.

Hashtag Activism and Narrative Building

Hashtag activism—such as #MeTooIndia, #DalitLivesMatter, #SaveAarey, #NotInMyName,

and #FarmersProtest—has become a defining feature of Indian social movements. Hashtags act as rallying points, allowing dispersed individuals to join collective conversations and co-create meaning. According to Sharma (2021), hashtags operate as “digital slogans,” framing issues in emotionally compelling ways that encourage participation.

User-generated content plays a crucial role in narrative building. Photos, testimonies, memes, and short videos personalize otherwise complex issues. These micro-narratives turn the abstract into the relatable, helping attract public empathy and media attention. This aligns with Jenkins' (2016) concept of participatory culture, where users are not passive consumers but active creators shaping public discourse. In India, marginalized groups—Dalits, Adivasis, LGBTQIA+ communities, and women—have used social media to resist erasure and assert identity, challenging dominant narratives mainstream media often neglects.

Challenges: Misinformation, Digital Divide, and Polarization

Despite its transformative potential, social media also presents serious challenges. The rapid spread of misinformation, particularly on WhatsApp, has led to mob violence, communal distortions, and manipulated narratives (Arun, 2019). During major protests, activists often face coordinated trolling, harassment, and surveillance, which discourages participation—especially among women (Banaji & Bhat, 2020).

The digital divide further limits who gets to participate in online activism. While urban, English-speaking, and tech-savvy populations dominate digital spaces, millions of Indians remain excluded due to poor connectivity or limited digital literacy. This creates unequal representation, making online activism appear more inclusive than it actually is. Moreover, algorithm-driven echo chambers intensify polarization, narrowing perspectives and enabling ideological manipulation (Rao, 2023).

Discussion: From Symbolic Clicks to Real Mobilization

The Indian experience demonstrates that “likes,” shares, and hashtags are not merely symbolic. They

act as emotional triggers that create momentum, encourage solidarity, and expand reach. Digital tools help activists bypass bureaucratic hurdles and media filters, creating an alternative public sphere where collective anger or empathy can grow rapidly (Castells, 2015). However, successful movements require hybrid strategies—combining online visibility with offline organization. The Farmers' Protest, Shaheen Bagh protests, and environmental movements like Save Dehing Patkai succeeded because digital mobilization was supported by sustained physical participation.

III. CONCLUSION

The evolution of social media in India over the past decade has radically redefined how citizens understand, negotiate, and participate in social activism. What once required face-to-face mobilization, organizational structures, and mainstream media support can now emerge from a single tweet, an emotional Instagram reel, or a viral hashtag. This transformation reflects a deeper cultural and technological shift in Indian society—a shift toward a participatory digital public sphere that transcends geography, class, and, at times, even political boundaries. The findings of this study underscore that social media's power lies not merely in its ability to disseminate information rapidly, but in its capacity to humanize experiences, forge emotional solidarities, and convert dispersed individual expressions into cohesive, large-scale movements.

Throughout this paper, it becomes evident that digital activism in India thrives on a sense of immediacy and emotional connectivity. Movements like the Nirbhaya Protests, #MeTooIndia, and the Farmers' Protest grew not through traditional hierarchical leadership but through decentralized collective expression. This decentralization represents a paradigm shift in civic engagement: activism is no longer confined to activists. Ordinary citizens—students, homemakers, professionals, artists, and marginalized groups—now function as storytellers, chroniclers, and amplifiers of injustice. Their participation reinforces the idea that in the digital era, every voice carries potential resonance. Social media democratizes this resonance by enabling individuals

to bypass institutional gatekeeping and engage directly with national conversations.

However, the movement from “likes” to “movements” is neither automatic nor linear. A critical insight emerging from this research is that digital engagement, while powerful, is not inherently transformative. A hashtag, no matter how popular, does not guarantee structural change unless it is accompanied by sustained pressure, coherent demands, and offline mobilization. This hybrid model—where online visibility supports offline activism—has been central to the success of movements in India. For example, the Farmers' Protest combined digital storytelling with months-long physical occupation of public spaces. Similarly, #MeTooIndia used online testimonies to demand accountability within workplaces, political parties, media houses, and academia. These cases show that digital activism is most effective when it serves as a catalyst rather than a substitute for real-world engagement.

A recurring theme in this paper is the importance of narrative construction in digital movements. Social media thrives on storytelling. Photographs of protestors, personal accounts of trauma, short-form videos explaining issues, and symbolic hashtags all contribute to building emotive, relatable narratives that mobilize public empathy. The strength of these narratives lies in their personalization: instead of abstract statistics or policy discussions, users encounter human faces, lived experiences, and moral appeals. This emotional grounding is particularly relevant in a country like India, where cultural expressions, social identities, and moral values strongly influence public action. Social media provides the tools for citizens to craft, share, and collectively negotiate these narratives, thereby shaping the moral tone of movements.

At the same time, the conclusion cannot overlook the challenges that threaten the integrity and inclusivity of digital activism. Misinformation remains one of the most pervasive dangers, capable of derailing movements, distorting public perception, or inciting violence. WhatsApp forwards, unverified posts, and manipulative content often spread faster than factual information. This misinformation ecosystem

undermines trust and forces activists to continually engage in counter-narratives and fact-checking, diverting energy from core issues.

Another limitation is the digital divide, which continues to restrict participation. Despite enormous growth in India's internet penetration, millions still remain outside the digital realm due to socio-economic constraints, gender disparities, limited digital literacy, or inadequate connectivity. As a result, digital activism often reflects the voices of relatively privileged groups, even when the issues disproportionately affect marginalized communities. This gap raises important questions: Who gets to narrate movements? Whose voices gain visibility? And who is left behind in the creation of digital public discourse? Addressing this digital inequality is crucial for ensuring that online activism does not reproduce the same exclusions it seeks to challenge.

Online harassment and algorithmic biases further complicate the landscape. Activists—especially women, Dalits, religious minorities, and queer individuals—frequently face trolling, abuse, surveillance, and character attacks. These tactics serve as digital intimidation, attempting to silence dissent and discourage participation. Moreover, platform algorithms often privilege sensational content over nuanced analysis, thereby shaping what issues gain traction and what voices remain unheard. This commercial logic embedded in digital platforms means that activism must constantly compete with entertainment content, celebrity culture, and viral trends.

Yet, despite these limitations, the transformative potential of social media remains undeniable. It has enabled India's citizens to document injustices in real time, organize relief during disasters, expose institutional failures, and keep conversations alive even when mainstream media remains silent. It has facilitated transnational solidarity, allowing global communities to support Indian movements through shared hashtags, petitions, and digital campaigns. This interconnectedness expands the moral and political reach of Indian activism beyond national borders, creating a new form of global public witnessing.

The future of social activism in India will likely be defined by this interplay of digital and physical engagement. As technologies evolve—through AI-powered content moderation, augmented reality protests, or decentralized digital collectives—activism will continue to adapt. However, the essence of social movements will remain rooted in human experiences: empathy, injustice, hope, anger, and solidarity. Social media provides the infrastructure for these emotions to circulate widely, but it is human agency that ultimately transforms them into action.

In conclusion, social media has expanded the imagination of what activism can be in India. It has created spaces where marginalized voices can be heard, where collective outrage finds expression, and where everyday users participate in shaping the country's socio-political landscape. Digital activism is not a replacement for traditional movements; rather, it is an amplifier that magnifies voices, accelerates mobilization, and deepens democratic participation. The journey from likes to movements reflects the growing awareness among citizens that digital actions—no matter how small—carry the potential to contribute to larger struggles for justice, equality, and human dignity.

As India continues to navigate its complex socio-political realities, social media will remain a contested yet indispensable tool in the fight for social transformation. Its power must be harnessed responsibly, critically, and inclusively. Ultimately, the most enduring impact of social media lies in its ability to remind people that change begins not with institutions, but with individuals who choose to speak, share, and stand together—online and offline—in the pursuit of a more just and humane society.

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