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Are Social Media Trends Reshaping Indian Feminism for Better or Worse? A Philosophical Analysis

ORIGINAL ARTICLE



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Abstract

This paper seeks to analyze the effect of digital media on Indian feminism. The central philosophical analysis seeks to fathom how platforms like Twitter, Instagram etc., have democratized feminist discourse and amplified marginalized voices and therefore enabled rapid and effective mobilization on campaigns such as #MeToo. Digital environments can mimic and reproduce social hierarchies thereby excluding a great number of rural and non-English speaking populations and commodify activism within the confines of neoliberalism. New forms of patriarchal constructs, online harassment and engagement farming threaten the very credibility of feminist discourse. It concludes that social media has provided many tools for transformation and yet has introduced risks that threaten diversion and dilution of fundamental feminist praxis. Ultimately the positive aspects of international feminism and its ethnocentric tendencies are also discussed. We

must therefore use social media tools to carefully attenuate and amplify feminist agenda instead of fragmenting it.

Key Words

Popular Feminism, Feminist Praxis, Intersectionality, Affective Publics, Performative Feminism, Epistemic Violence.

Introduction

The fourth industrial revolution has not only transposed and redrawn political, social and socio-economic boundaries but also made its mark on almost every major subject or discourse of the 21st century. It has fundamentally redefined the undulations and the trends of activism and feminist discourse in India. It has also created a complex feedback mechanism between algorithms on one hand and social transformation on the other.

Drawing upon intersectionality theory, postcolonial feminism and critical media studies, we attempt to state that while the opportunities for democratization of feminist voices and their mobilization have multiplied due to penetration of social media and its trends, it has also aided in the development of new forms of exclusion, commodification and epistemic violence that have emerged as new roadblocks on the road to envisioned egalitarianism and the feminist movement's transformative potential.

Digital Emancipation: Inclusion and Diversification

Digital media led internet feminism represents a profound and perhaps permanent shift in the traditional modes of feminist organizing. The conceptualization of “alternative counterpublics” by these new channels of information and ideology dissemination challenge the traditional hegemonic structure of both mainstream media and established feminist institutions.¹ This democratizing potential merits our serious consideration.

Previously marginalized voices have found it easier to voice their plights and concerns, often becoming mainstream agendas of discussion in circles that otherwise have been long engrossed in “imported issues”- topics of little concern to the subaltern woman, whose entire existence fades beyond the narrow confines of academia. Campaigns such as #MeToo, #PinjraTod and #IWillGoOut have created safe spaces for survivors, activists and audiences alike. They share their grievances and their narratives without the mediation and control of any gatekeepers.

Being an organic bottom-up phenomenon, digital feminism has facilitated intersectional feminist discourse that addresses the complex interplay of women’s rights and caste, class, religions and other identities.² Dalit and Adivasi feminists along with other marginalized groups have found it easier to articulate their specific experiences and challenges, thereby countering the universalizing trends of mainstream feminist movements, which although beneficial in certain cases, tends to asymmetrically favor the privileged and traditionally educated sections in India. This development aligns in an Indian context to Kimberley Crenshaw’s intersectionality framework.

The enhanced speed of digital dissemination of information has allowed for faster digital mobilization and has resulted in rapid responses to cases of specific gender-violence and discrimination. The phenomenon of ‘virality’ has created a sphere for “affected publics” – networked groups of individuals connected by shared feelings of empathy, outrage and counter action. As a result, public attention to issues such as domestic violence, workplace harassment and statutory gender-based discrimination has increased.

Digital Exclusion: Same Story as Before

Sadly, a critical philosophical perusal reveals to us that digital feminism in India is not without its limitations and deficiencies. This is because of the pervasive inherent contradictions in the value system of the Indian society. The celebratory nature of our discourse takes a back seat when we realize that digital media sometimes results in the reproduction and even amplification of the existing social hierarchies.

The most fundamental challenge is of the digital divide. While it is often easier to pay attention to the accessibility gulf that exists between men and women, the divide amongst the female section of the population itself is also eye opening. Despite growing internet penetration, significant regional, class and caste-based differences exist. As of 2021, only 14.9% percent of women in India use the internet on a regular basis.³ This number is further eschewed to favor upper class, urban and upper caste women. Digital technologies thus remain not only innocent neutral tools but become enmeshed within existing power structures that determine who has a voice and who has visibility.

This exclusion is qualitative too. The overwhelming dominance of the English language in feminist discourse on major social media platforms creates a form of “epistemic violence”- using Gayatri Spivak’s formulation, that shines the light on certain iterations of knowledge and expression and discriminates against other.⁴ Feminist discourse on national digital media often overwhelmingly becomes a space formed and led by the perspectives of urban, upper-caste women, thereby reproducing the very challenges that feminism seeks to eliminate.

Commodification

The engagement focused and algorithm led content moderation on social media platforms has created a problem of commodification of resistance. Sarah Banet-Weiser’s observations regarding “popular feminism”

show how feminist messages often become enmeshed into market-driven logics that prioritize individual betterment over wider social transformation.⁵ This problem manifests itself in several dangerous forms.

The engagement driven social media platforms are often held hostage to short sighted algorithms which prioritize sensationalism and virality over nuance and mature discussions or intersectional discourse. This often results in mere performative actions and gestures, where people chase likes, reach and constant digital gratification over substantive political engagement and tangible social change. Further, the internet of today being an American cultural institution often prioritizes neoliberal thoughts that give precedence to individual authority and choice rather than common structural transformation. As Anhiti Pathak argues, this leads to “techno-productivity” that places the burden of social change on divided masses of individual women activists rather than the mass itself and this results in non-action as far as the challenge to systemic inequalities is concerned. As feminist content becomes integrated to social media platforms, who primarily function as profit seeking corporate entities, it becomes subject to corporate censorship and manipulation. This dependency on private equity controlled digital infrastructure means that feminist discourse happens within constraints and is not a completely democratic deliberative exercise.

Challenges from the Patriarchy

From a philosophical point of view, the most potent challenge to feminism that has emerged due to digitalization is perhaps what can be termed as “digital patriarchy”- the systematic use of online platforms to harass, bully, intimidate and consequently silence feminist voices. It is not merely a culture of random individual hostility but represents an organized attempt to maintain patriarchal hegemony through technological control, narrative building and demonization.

The rise of such targeted bullying campaigns against feminist activists showcases how social media technologies can be weaponized to initiate gender-based violence in virtual spaces. Organized trolling [sometimes by paid anonymous accounts, other times by computer generated profiles(‘bots’)], doxxing (personal information being made public without consent, often with intent to cause harm) and even direct violent threats are some of the tools used against feminists as they engage in online discourses. This is often done to scare and suppress them and has already made many such activists abandon immediate issues and sometimes in extreme cases the surrender of their entire digital presence.

The emergence of “right wing counter feminism” that seeks to appropriate feminist language and personalities while engaging in reactionary politics and reinforcement of gender-based divisions is another way in which the patriarchy acts in digital space this time masquerading as a group of ‘unheard’ conservative women. They claim to represent authentic feminist voices, allege that feminism takes the high road while ignoring perceived or made up ‘real’ issues and thereby seek to delegitimize the entire feminist discourse in the Indian digital space. The #ReadyToWait campaign regarding the temple entry movement in Sabarimala is one such case. They represent what Antonio Gramsci addressed to as a form of cultural hegemony the co-optation of oppositional discourse to act against progressive trends and serve dominant interests.

Thus, potent fundamental questions regarding the relationship between technology and human agency. In an ideal situation, we tend to consider technology as value neutral tools which can be liberally used for digital emancipation. However, technology is actually often deployed embedded within social power structures. Drawing upon Jacques Ellul’s criticisms of a technological society, it can be argued that social media technologies have taken the form of what he referred to as “technique” a set of systems that develop according to their own self attenuated logics rather than human intentions. The platform dependent nature of digital communication along with algorithmic moderation and commodification of attention, ensures that the feminist discourses are bridled by technology generated constraints and thus are limited in their transformative potential. It is also important to note however, that such deterministic views must be balanced against very real evidence of genuine agency and resistance that takes place on social media each day. The creative use of hashtags, the

strategic leverage of social media for offline mobilization and even the creative development of alternative platforms all suggest that technology is far from a runaway train and remains subject to human intentionality and political struggle.

The intersection of digital technologies and India's complex social structure reveals the limitations of universal approaches to digital feminism. The assumption that access to internet can automatically translate to attention to feminist issues of the ignored subaltern activists is far from reality and fails to address how caste-based discrimination operates in digital spaces. Research on online targeted and non-targeted harassment reveals that women from marginalized castes face distinctly different forms of abuse than their upper-caste peers and such attacks often take casteist dimensions. The geographic distribution of internet accessibility shows that it is largely concentrated in urban areas. This means that rural women, who constitute the majority of India's female population, remain excluded or at best find a proxy voice in the national digital feminist spaces. This is a total reproduction of historical metropolitan orientations of the feminist movement in India.

This means that digital feminism must develop more nuanced ways to analyze and address how intersecting identities shape online experiences of feminists.

The Question of Authenticity

Social media has also raised questions on the authenticity of feminism and of representation within it. The ease of access both in terms of reception of content and of creating new content and circulating it has led to concerns about "pseudo-feminism" and the dilution of feminist political analysis. These concerns actually reflect deeper philosophical questions about the cause-and-effect relationships that exist between popular culture and political movements. On the one hand, popular dissemination of feminist ideas through social media represents a process of democratization and challenges the age old 'gate keeping' traditions of the old intellectual circles. However, on the other hand criticism is often levelled that such popularization has stripped feminist analysis of its more radical provisions and has reduced complex structural critiques to individual lifestyle choices and consumer preferences.

There is also a perceived crisis of representation in the Indian feminist domain which is chiefly due to the emergence of multiple, often contradictory feminist voices on social media platforms. They represent various social, political and economic hues and often attack each other's authenticity in the quest to grab eyeballs. The question of who speaks on feminism, by what authority and on whose behalf has thus become very complex within digital environments because traditional structures and institutional boundaries exert far less authority in the digital domain.

Any evaluation of social media's effects on Indian feminism must also try to analyze the broader conflict between technological skepticism and technological optimism. Supporters of tech led feminism vouch for the endless opportunities for feminist transformation it provides by enabling new and more efficient forms of expression, organization and solidarity.⁶ This side emphasizes on the creative power and the disruptive and subversive capacity of digital media while downplaying the structural limitations. However, it fails to account for how digital spaces reproduce traditional structures as discussed before. The male coded culture of technological industry and its corporate nature might organically be against a movement such as feminism. This is the viewpoint of the technological skeptics. Here it may be reemphasized that technologies are neither inherently liberating nor oppressive but rather contested spaces where different social forces struggle to dominate. This view emphasizes the importance of political struggle over digital development rather taking a more synergistic approach among the two.

Conclusion

Finally, social media technologies have complicated the relationship between global feminist movements and local Indian activism. They enable Indian feminists to connect to global audiences and their peers and also draw inspiration and support from international campaigns. However, global activism for local issues an

inadvertent by product of such constructive interactions has led to ethnocentric cultural imperialism of western gender values and frameworks on the Indian contexts and social backdrops.

The #MeToo campaign exemplifies this issue as Indian participants freely appropriated global templates while addressing specifically Indian forms of gender-based violence and discrimination. This ensured increased attention and remedial actions. At the same time, the Indian audience was unaware of such mobilization strategies and at times even with the nuanced nature of what constitutes gender-based violence. Questions might therefore be raised on the effectiveness of the movement as a whole. This process of adaptation reveals both the effectiveness and the limitations of transnational feminist solidarity, especially in the digital domain.

Further, the dominance of West-led social media platforms in Indian framework raises questions about digital colonialism and the reproduction of neo-colonial power structures through technological means. That Indian feminism must leverage American mediums to interact within itself suggests a form of dependency and might limit the autonomy of Indian movements both via soft culture means and by information warfare.

Technology by itself cannot resolve the fundamental challenges that Indian feminists or for that matter, Indian women face. While they do create potential spaces and provide creative tools, their effectiveness is bridled by the historical ineffectiveness of Indian feminism to assimilate and include women and subjects from all fields and strata.

As a whole, the impact of social media trends on Indian feminism resists a simple evaluation. It descends into base questions regarding democracy, representation and the disruptive transformational capacity of technology. We must therefore carefully analyze how feminist movements can engage as meaningfully as possible with digital media while staying true to their fundamental beliefs. A critical approach that combines technological engagement with structural analysis offers the best ways to realize the emancipatory potential of digital feminism while avoiding its pitfalls.

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