

## The Rising Fourth Wave: Feminist Activism on Digital Platforms in India

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**ABSTRACT** Feminist movements have historically lacked inclusivity, often growing within a limited Western upper-class psyche, based on their own challenges and needs. The digital revolution has paved the way for a new iteration of feminism. The digital space can bolster feminist activist movements by encouraging inclusion and improving accessibility in organising collective action. It also helps weave local stories with global narratives to highlight common structural inequalities. At the same time, however, the digital space can also become a breeding ground for sexism and misogyny. This brief attempts to analyse how digitisation can affect women's movements, especially in emerging economies like India. It does so by viewing contemporary cyberfeminism through postcolonial and postmodern feminist theories. The brief also highlights the strengths and deficits of digital activism.

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## INTRODUCTION

Feminism consists of social, economic and political movements and theories that are concerned with gender inequalities and gaining equal rights for women. In the West, the evolution of the feminist struggle is often referred to as ‘waves’ of change, reflecting peaks and troughs of the movement. The first wave of feminism began in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century in the West, with the primary goal of securing voting rights.<sup>1</sup> The second wave emerged in the 1960s amid a rising self-consciousness for minority groups, and against the backdrop of civil rights and anti-war sentiments. The movement largely focused on empowering minority groups over issues like reproductive rights and sexuality.<sup>2</sup> The third wave of feminism began in the early 1990s, surging from the new postcolonial and neoliberal world order. The third wave deconstructed the idea of “universal womanhood,” with the focus moving from communal objectives to individual rights.<sup>2</sup>

This brief borrows the wave analogy to establish the chronology of Indian feminist politics. The foundation of Indian feminism—the first wave—was laid by the reform and anti-colonial movements of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The aims of the movement centred around including women in public life with better political rights, access to education and employment in the context of the colonial state.<sup>3</sup> Various social reformers took up specific issues to improve the status of women. Reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, for instance, argued against the ideas of sati,

polygamy, early marriage and permanent widowhood.<sup>4</sup> Further, the Brahmo Samaj gave impetus to mass education of girls and women. The movement for education and social reform was largely led by upper-caste Bengali Women.<sup>5</sup> The reformist movement, as a result, led to various social gains such as the legalisation of widow remarriage in 1856 and the abolition of sati.<sup>6</sup> The later part of the struggle remained preoccupied with the issues on property and inheritance, limiting the composition of the movement to upper-caste and elite class women.<sup>7</sup>

After independence, India began to look inward to resolve social issues and create a systematic development plan for women. This second wave of feminism became broader as the intersectionality of caste, class and culture were recognised by the state. The movement entered the private sphere to claim equal rights pertaining to marriage, divorce, succession, justice for dowry and sexual violence, and economic opportunities.<sup>8</sup> An exemplification of this can be found with the passing of Hindu code bills in 1950s, which provided equal rights to women through laws on divorce, marriage, adoption and inheritance.<sup>9</sup> With the improvement in literacy levels and free movement, Indian women were beginning to determine their place in society and develop identity-consciousness. The key difference between the first and second wave was that the former was espoused by men on behalf of women and did not seem to challenge the hegemony of the Indian patriarchal social structure, instead focusing on specific cultural issues that conflicted with the idea of Western liberalisation. The

latter was largely led by women and women's organisations. The lines between women's social, economic and political rights became blurred in this period. The Chipko movement in 1973, for instance, saw women protest for their rights against environmental and economical calamities.<sup>10</sup> This movement is key in Indian feminism because not only was it a demand for constitutional rights, it also stood against the patriarchal social structures at a grassroots level.

In 1980, the Five-Year Plan decided to focus on the health, employment and education of women, marking the beginning of the third wave of Indian feminism.<sup>11</sup> Women-led non-government organisations proliferated in a bid to provide support to other women. The movement also took up the rights of Dalit and marginalised women.<sup>12</sup> The developmental programmes and women's groups largely directed their effort to raise the economic and social status of women. Principally, women's groups sought the empowerment of women to integrate them into the mainstream.

With the effects of economic liberalisation and the advent of modern technology, by the 2000s, women in India witnessed a cultural shift that stressed on rights such as women's freedom, choice and independence. Although the term 'fourth-wave feminism' originated in the West, it emerged in India almost synchronously due to the widespread use of social media.

## THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY

The merging of technology with the physical world has revolutionised the global economic, social and political landscape. In theory, technology—as embodied by the digital revolution—provides an opportunity to policymakers to create a more inclusive future. Tools like blogging and social media have led to the democratisation of the feminist movement by providing accessibility, encouraging diversity, and inspiring leadership in a movement that has historically been lacking these elements. Online or cyberfeminists make use of blogging and social media as a measure of political mobilisation and community building.<sup>13</sup> Social media allows for the swift dissemination of knowledge and information across borders, and thus enables transnational feminist networks. Using digital tools, feminists have appropriated the internet culture with the use of humour and other creative satirical formats as a mode of communication.<sup>14</sup>

In 2014, two US-based feminists created the #FeministsAreUgly hashtag on Twitter to satirise the notion that feminists are unattractive, and to allow women of colour to speak about cultural privilege and the dominant norms of beauty. This challenged the prevailing body-shaming practices online, as well as the perceptions of what is considered 'beautiful' or 'attractive'.<sup>15</sup> The discourse around sexual harassment has also gained momentum around the world,

and has the potential to expose the latent toxic culture of sexualised power in people's everyday encounters. For instance, the 'Me Too' movement against sexual harassment, led by American activist Tarana Burke, gained worldwide popularity through Twitter in 2017.<sup>16</sup> Several bloggers have called for "micro-rebellions", spreading feminism in the free pathways of cyberspace. The 'When Women Refuse' blog, for instance, was started after several women were killed in California, US, for rejecting the advances of men, and has since been used to report women's experiences with sexual violence.<sup>17</sup> In countries like Saudi Arabia, these micro-rebellions engage with issues beyond sexuality and body, such as those against discriminatory state regulations.<sup>18</sup>

Historically, feminism has been viewed within a restricted Western lens. 'Third world women' are often seen as a 'powerless' victimised group in comparison to liberated Western feminists, creating an impediment to an inclusive, transnational feminist movement. However, as more women of different nationalities, races, classes and cultures gain digital access, the feminist discourse expands to include the voices of those who have previously been excluded. This promotes a postmodernist and postcolonial perspective of feminism, which acknowledges diversity in the movement and accepts multiple truths, roles and realities as part of its focus. It lets marginal groups of women reconceptualise feminism based on their own experiences and beliefs.

According to a study by Pew Research Center, 39 percent of internet users engage

in social and political issues on social media. About 45 percent are between the ages of 18-29 years.<sup>19</sup> Young cyberfeminists also make use of the internet and pop culture references to connect with their contemporaries. The youth are thus made to feel a part of something larger, by not only consuming this content but also creating it.<sup>20</sup>

At the same time, digital feminist activity can also be exclusionist because dominant cultures and languages have a significant role in selecting those who can be heard, included and seen in the movement. Disparity in internet access within geographical locations and socio-economic class structure is often a barrier in reaching out to the masses.<sup>21</sup>

The digital space has also become a hotbed for online harassment, bullying and sexual exploitation. It not only facilitates prevailing forms of misogyny but also gives rise to new ones that are intricately connected with the algorithmic politics of certain platforms, the cultural bias that permeates while producing these technologies, and the communities that use them.<sup>22</sup>

## DEMOCRATISING FEMINIST MOVEMENTS

The internet separates the women from their material selves and has been considered as a promising new avenue. According to feminist activist Faith Wilding, "there is a tendency though among many cyberfeminists to indulge techno-utopian expectations that the new e-media will offer women a fresh start to create new languages, programs, platforms, images, fluid identities and multi-

subject definitions in cyberspace; that in fact women can recode, redesign, and reprogram information technology to help change the feminine condition.”<sup>23</sup>

Traditional offline activism mobilised people through street or door-to-door campaigning, with the help of existing social networks and membership of organisations, political parties or educational institutions.<sup>24</sup> Digital activism, on the other hand, can mobilise a large number of people within minutes, far quicker than offline activism. It also fosters an interactive approach, where diverse groups of people can participate through online blogs, petitions and articles while connecting with others. Prior to the advancement of digital tools, global feminist movements were largely shaped by a few through academic discourse.<sup>25</sup> Although academia continues to form the backbone of most movements, cyberfeminism has paved a new path for feminist activism.

The ‘Everyday Sexism Project’, an online initiative launched in 2012 by British feminist writer Laura Bates, is one of many online movements that marked the beginning of the fourth wave of feminism. It has encouraged tens of thousands of women around the world to write about the sexual harassment, workplace discrimination and instances of body shaming they encounter in their everyday lives. About 6,000 of these stories, related to cases of sexual harassment, were used to train 2,000 police officers to prevent harassment cases in London.<sup>26</sup> It has also helped create public awareness, with the reporting of sexual harassment cases on London public transport increasing

significantly after the initiative.<sup>27</sup>

Although the fourth wave of feminism is still in its nascent stage in India, women are using digital tools to demand accountability from their governments, corporations and leaders. In India, digital feminist movements largely rely on social media platforms. In 2017, the #LahuKaLagaan hashtag took over on Twitter to campaign against the 12 percent tax on sanitary napkins, with the “period tax” being scrapped in 2018 as a result of the movement.<sup>28</sup> In 2012, in the aftermath of the death of a 23-year-old rape victim in Delhi, widespread protests broke out under the ‘Nirbhaya movement’. The protests spread to social media as well. Hashtags like #Delhibraveheart were used by millions in support of justice for the victim. This online rage coupled with the street protests garnered global attention and compelled an otherwise apathetic government to take quick action.<sup>29</sup> Subsequently, India’s rape laws were amended to expand the definition of rape, the punishment for rape convicts was revised to a prolonged life term and even the death penalty, and stringent punishments were determined for offences like acid attacks, stalking and voyeurism.<sup>30</sup> A special fund and fast-track courts were also made available for the safety and security of women, to be administered by the Indian government.<sup>31</sup>

The Delhi rape incident brought women’s safety in public places to the forefront of policy discourse. In the ethnographic work ‘Why Loiter,’ feminist sociologist Shilpa Padke showed that the act of “loitering” is more prevalent among men, while women



are rarely alone in public spaces like parks and beaches.<sup>32</sup> In 2017, this culminated in the #WhyLoiter hashtag trending on Twitter, with women posting pictures and stories of how they were reclaiming public spaces, creating the narrative of resisting male domination and patriarchy in the physical and virtual spaces. By 2018, the #MeToo movement gained momentum in India, enabling women to share their stories of sexual harassment on social media. It also led to activists successfully lobbying the government to strengthen the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013, which previously had many weaknesses.<sup>33</sup> Several activists also raised concerns over the discriminatory defamation laws in India that enable women to be prosecuted if they are unable to prove their accusation.<sup>34</sup>

## INTERSECTIONAL CYBERFEMINISM

The virtual nature of the Internet and its interconnectedness allows people to participate in ongoing dialogues on various issues, from patriarchy and gender politics to personal experiences. With cyberfeminism becoming the norm, it is increasingly important to consider who controls the discourse and how it relates to race, class and other social structures. Transnational and postcolonial feminists, such as Chandra Talapade Mohanty, recognise that western forms of feminism tend to homogenise and universalise the experiences of all women, no matter where they are. Mohanty writes, “Western feminists appropriate and “colonise” the fundamental complexities

and conflicts which characterise the lives of women of different classes, religions, cultures, races and castes in these countries. It is in the process of homogenisation and systemisation of the oppression of women in the third world that power is exercised in much of recent Western feminist discourse and this power needs to be defined and named.”<sup>35</sup>

Even in India, several feminist scholars provided the intellectual representation but held on to Western ideas.<sup>36</sup> They failed to address the needs of the minority. For instance, with the Shah Bano case, which sought to discuss the controversial maintenance of aggrieved divorced Muslim women, despite having a strong intellectual representation, women’s groups failed to garner unanimous support on the issue because they were unable to envisage the predicament and limitations of Indian Muslim women. The issue turned political instead of remaining one of women’s rights, and several women’s groups held polarising views, further fragmenting the support for it.<sup>37</sup> Consequently, the passing of The Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act, 1986, represented the massive failure of the Indian government to enforce equal rights for Muslim women. It also showcased the inability of women’s groups to mass mobilise and arrive at a consensus on the cause.

Digitisation, to a certain extent, allows for wider feminist discussions to occur, overcoming spatial limitations and redefining what activism and social movements can look like. It provides an outlet for new opportunities for the

empowerment of other marginalised women. For instance, in 2013, acid attack survivor Laxmi Agarwal gathered 27,000 signatures through an online petition, 'StopAcidSale', to curb the sales of acid and took the issue to the Supreme Court. The campaign gained nationwide attention and allowed several other acid attack survivors to voice their support for the ban on acid sale. In 2013, the Supreme Court ruled in favour of the plea and introduced restrictions on the sale of acid, and recognised it as a crime under Section 326 of the Indian Penal Code, which categorises acts voluntarily causing grievous hurt by dangerous weapons or means.<sup>38</sup>

Another study of women's movements on social media by Sujatha Subramaniam, who interviewed a Dalit feminist activist, noted, "In Kerala, the voices of subaltern groups are very prominent on social media, especially sexual minorities and Dalit groups. On social media, all of us are publishers. Only some communities get the space to get published in mainstream media. Social media allows marginalised voices the possibility of being heard in the public discourse."<sup>39</sup>

On the internet, the option of anonymity enables women to construct their identity on their own terms. They can discuss issues that are otherwise considered too 'sensitive' for the public domain. For women of colour, the online political organising of African American women globally reflects how cyberfeminism can transcend nations, states and economic classes. For instance, #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen was initiated by digital feminists to counter the discrimination present in online feminist

debates, which highlight issues only related to middle-class white women. The hashtag went viral and gave women of colour an opportunity to reclaim their narratives online.<sup>40</sup> For many, the Internet is a "safe space" to vent against a repressive gender regime in the offline world.<sup>41</sup> The rise in global awareness and opposition to the repressive Taliban regime by the Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan is another example of the successful use of the Internet by a global feminist organisation.<sup>42</sup>

However, cyberfeminism has created a rift between the ideologies of the older and younger generation of feminists. In India, the divide mainly emerged due to the structural difference of power between feminist groups. A Facebook page managed by Dalit women (Dalit Women Fight) states the importance of recognising the unequal caste structure that exists in feminist discourses and academia.<sup>43</sup> It stresses that there are linkages between caste and patriarchy, and that the 'Me Too' movement will not be relevant for Dalit women unless intersectional marginalities are acknowledged.<sup>44</sup>

## CULTURAL BARRIERS

Postcolonial feminists like Mohanty claim that Western feminists tend to rely only on their value system and view themselves as saviours for other women.<sup>45</sup> By assuming that global sisterhood exists, they fail to realise that the women across the world do not necessarily share the same conditions of discrimination as women in Western countries. Like most other feminists in the Global South, Indian feminists borrow from

mainstream Western feminism on social media to advance their agenda, typically addressing upper and middle-class women. However, often without recognising that the movement does not affect all women equally, such an agenda conversely defeats the very purpose of the movement by silencing the marginalised. The movement must, therefore, mould itself whilst considering the historical and cultural context of the issue. For instance, feminism may hold a different meaning for rural Indian women who struggle to access necessities like food, healthcare and education. Issues like equal pay, sexual harassment and reclaiming public spaces will mean little to them.

Further, language barriers not only make grassroots-level research difficult, but also challenge the assimilation of marginalised voices into the larger global movement. As most mainstream online feminist movements are Anglicised, the lack of content in local languages limits women's participation at the grassroots.<sup>46</sup> The digital age is characterised by fault lines that restrict women at grassroots level from accessing the same privileges as other women.

## **DIGITAL DIVIDE**

Cyberfeminism cannot be viewed as the panacea for a universal claim of gender equality. The issue of a 'digital-divide' continues to be a concern for cyberfeminism. The gap between those with and without digital access, including digital devices and internet, creates a schism in the idea of a 'universal' cyberfeminist movement. The poorest and most marginalised are least

likely to have internet access; until 2018, only 30 percent of women had access to the internet, of which only about 12 percent were from rural areas.<sup>47</sup> Hence, India still has a long way to go for democratic online feminism to function independent of offline activism.

To realise the full potential of digital activism, it is necessary to recognise the importance of accessible and affordable information and communication technologies. The focus needs to be on creating educational programmes to teach underrepresented groups how to access and use these technologies. To reach the women who are not yet online, it is also necessary to forge a connection between online activism and offline on-ground initiatives. In 'Gender and the Politics of Possibilities: Rethinking Globalization,' Manisha Desai demonstrates how women use the internet to network horizontally and vertically to organise into their own networks and communicate with transnational agencies.<sup>48</sup> Desai also illustrates how online activism is closely intertwined with on-ground resistance movements. For instance, Mexican activists "repackage" cyber information into radio and print information to make it available to women who lack access to the internet.<sup>49</sup>

In 2014, following the kidnapping of 276 schoolgirls by Boko Haram in Chibok, Nigeria, an international campaign (#BringBackOurGirls) was launched to pressurise the authorities to do more. The campaign was embraced by former US First Lady Michelle Obama and gained tremendous international media coverage.<sup>50</sup>



The movement not only helped rehabilitate some students after their rescue, but also grew to highlight some of Nigeria's most important issues—corruption, invisibility of the poor, and lack of security.<sup>51</sup> This women-led social movement then extended its focus to include the demand for good governance—the safety of citizens, better healthcare, better infrastructure and a better economy.<sup>52</sup> Traditional feminist movements and online activism have a symbiotic relationship. The #BringBackOurGirls campaign illustrates how online networks can enable large-scale offline decentralised movements with participation of different communities, identities and voices.

## ONLINE MISOGYNY

The rise in the number of women on the internet has been accompanied by a similar growth in online hate and attacks against them. About 41 percent of women in the US have been sexually harassed online.<sup>53</sup> Studies also indicate that those who face such backlash suffer a range of psychological, professional and financial impacts.<sup>54</sup> Across all countries, 61 percent of those who said they had faced online abuse or harassment also said they had experienced loss of self-confidence or lower self-esteem as a result.<sup>55</sup> Digital misogyny in the form of hate speech, physical threats and obscene language have a deep impact on women's voices online, that results in self-censoring, assuming an anonymous identity or a pseudonym, or withdrawing from online domains altogether.<sup>56</sup>

Online abuse is also linked to domestic violence against women. According to research by Women's Aid, 48 percent of women in the UK who had experienced violence at the hands of a partner also reported experiencing online abuse once they had left the relationship. The study also revealed that 38 percent of women had been stalked online after they had left their partners.<sup>57</sup> Such data indicates that the internet not only allows violent ex-partners to use it as another tool to abuse women, but also to incite others to join in their attacks. Technology, thus, enables the continuation of assault beyond the scope of physical space.

According to research conducted by UK think tank Demos, women in the public eye received the most abuse on Twitter.<sup>58</sup> The research also found that, surprisingly, much of the online abuse is perpetrated by women themselves. About 55 percent of the propagators were found to be women and were almost as likely to use the same derogatory language as had been used by their male counterparts against them.<sup>59</sup>

The digital space enables one to assemble country-specific resources and data that can help victims and survivors of domestic violence to empower themselves. Several survivor forums and groups have enabled women to seek support, help and advice on domestic and gender-based violence.<sup>60</sup> Online technologies are key in terms of disseminating information. Online forums often play a crucial part for many women to

realise that their relationship may be abusive. Access to the internet helps the victim to find the right information regarding the legal system, financial support and refuges. It also enables them to reintegrate into society, share their knowledge, offer peer support, and raise awareness about domestic violence. In this way, women traverse through public and private boundaries that are mostly local and community-based but also, increasingly, transnational.

Although online misogyny may be a new phenomenon, it resonates with patriarchal attempts to limit women's public presence and stifle their voices, viewing them as inferior. Patriarchal systems also warn that women who overstep their mark will be punished. Cyberfeminism is in many ways a direct response to the toxic offline and online space, and perhaps a way through which the cycle can be broken. Speaking publicly about these issues offers women the benefits of catharsis, as well as a sense of solidarity. The presence of online misogyny could be symptomatic of the widespread gender disparity, that is being replicated in the cybersphere, making it a profoundly inequitable space. Cyberfeminism still follows the patterns of third-wave feminism, wherein individual action and emancipation are highlighted. The 'call-out' culture focuses on micro-rebellions and shifts the onus for change onto the individual instead of society. Highly individualised forms of feminism encourage intersectional differences and varied voices to emerge. Yet, it can also make the potential of a wider and more united transformation difficult to achieve.

## CONCLUSION

For some feminists, the digital space replicates oppressive hierarchies that are embedded in a global political economy. For others, it represents a new avenue for global feminist networking and an opportunity to be active participants in their own revolution, irrespective of geographical boundaries. For still others, the internet offers a "safe space" and a way to not just share common experiences, but also to organise and resist repressive gender regimes. Despite the positive contributions of digital activism in building a new movement of feminism, it is often perceived to be myopic in its vision. Instances such as the Nirbhaya movement indicate that digital feminism is typically episodic or in response to an event; cyberfeminism is more reactive while offline movements are proactive. Short-term planning and high incidence of online hate could lead to a higher burn-out rate among online participants as opposed to traditional on-ground participants. Cyberfeminist movements can gain momentum quickly and can die down just as fast.

Cyberfeminism goes beyond previous feminist waves that conceived women as a homogenous group, whose interests could be represented by a singular agenda. To avoid replicating the damaging universalism of old-style feminism, it is essential that cyberfeminism becomes more diverse, decentralised and democratic. Narrowing the existing digital divide can play a crucial role in increasing the participation of

marginalised women. India currently lacks the tools to encourage inclusive online movements independent of on-ground activism. There are several cultural impediments, such as language barriers, that restrict the participation of women at the grassroots level. Other factors such as the extent of digital or internet penetration and the degree of freedom of speech may influence the effectiveness of the movements. Online activism should be able to translate into offline participation, wherein they form a symbiotic relationship to support and boost each other's cause. The voices of the marginalised must be represented in a fair manner to broaden the agenda. Feminist

groups and organisations must consider assimilating local cultural and sociological factors while advocating for rights online. Further, increased pressure should be applied to governments, corporations and other public institutions to step up and assist in building the legislative and social structures required to recognise and deal with online misogyny. It is important to recognise that although online misogyny appears new, the problem is deep-rooted in the gender mechanisms of power and control. Digital spaces are not end goals but are means to further the agenda of making feminist resistance more inclusive and transparent. [ORF](#)

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