Emerging Digital Feminist Voices and Activism in India

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Abstract
The advent of technology and virtual media have changed the way it helps to create more multidimensional connections. Feminism too has taken the virtual media as an important channel of communicating and creating global networks. Empowerment of women in the new technological realm is an ongoing need of the current digital age as it paves way for essential socio-economic and political empowerment. Digital feminism an avant-garde phase of the feminist activism is a growing phenomenon across the world as well as in India, which is being shaped by various social, cultural and political factors. It goes far ahead of former feminist waves that conceived women as a universal and homogenous group, whose interests could be represented by a singular framework. This research paper aims to trace the emergence of Digital Feminism in India, along with analyzing its effect and solidarity of these movements and activism on women's lives and issues. It also examines the way in which women are using digital media platforms to challenge the gender stereotype and gender inequalities in their everyday lives. The paper also dwells upon the arena where the use of digital media platforms enables, newer forms of exposure and connection previously unavailable to women and allowing them to redraw the boundaries between themselves and society.
Keywords: Digital Feminism, Technology, India, Fourth Wave, Women Issues, Stereotypes, Gender Inequality

Digital feminism can be defined as activism or engagement with feminism and feminist ideologies on the internet (Daniels 405).It also refers to the use of digital technologies and platforms to advance feminist cause and goals, along with discussing diverse women, gender and sexual issues, as well as providing contemporary feminist acknowledgement and awareness. Indian feminism like its western counterparts have gone through various phases or waves, but their feminist activism addresses different kinds of disparities, such as various kinds of problems and situations and the ways to intercept those complications that they encounter in India's contemporary patriarchal society. Feminist activism in the second decade of twenty first century has occupied the virtual space. Feminism in the virtual world initially emerged as a means of gathering support for offline movements especially protests and activisms. Feminist activism through the aid of technology has become a powerful tool of resistance

and activism for women's issues across the world. This means it is not an additive to the feminist marches and protests that tackles misogyny, patriarchy in a newer form. Haraway in her famous work "Cyborg Manifesto" suggest various optimistic arguments about the opportunities and wide recognitions that can bring radical social and political transformation if we rely on the developing techno science arena. This idea has in fact "brought new prospects in the feminist analyses and explore the ways how these technologies are entangled with our everyday life of women, conveying the idea that technology is fully part of all of us" (Wajcman 148). The postcolonial feminist Gayatri Spivak would often accuse the past of not representing the discourses and realities of the indigenous people of their region despite of her strong advocating on women of third world countries. Various writers such as Plant are interested in revalorising the feminine, bringing in woman her radical alterity, difference, rights, and individuality into being. For them, the internet, digital world, and cyberspace are seen as feminine media, providing the technological basis for a new form of society that is potential enough for the liberating for women. Wajcman continues, "according to this view, women, rather than men, are uniquely suited to life in the digital age" (148). Because it becomes a part of our identity, an aspect of our life and embodiment, and "conceiving ourselves as cyborgs which provides a tool for transforming the gender relations of technoscience" (148). Haraway notes the great power of science and technology is powerful enough to create new meanings and new entities, to make a brave new world.

Henry and Powell, states that "new technologies dismantle traditional constructions of gender and sexuality, which become increasingly irrelevant and multiple, diverse and shifting" (762). Therefore, the debates among the traditional and digital feminists along with other feminist activists have heightened the discourses of relationship between gender and technology. Digital feminists like Sadie Plant, notices that "digital technologies as blurring of boundaries between humans and machines, and between male and female, enabling their users to choose their disguises and assume alternative identities" (147). She in her most accomplished work "Cyborg Manifesto" explained the role of technology in creating different versions of identity which is beyond the societal stereotypes and binaries and how technology is integrated into the process of creating subjective identity formation for both the sexes.

Digital feminism an avant-garde phase of the feminist activism is a growing phenomenon across the world as well as in India, which is being shaped by various social, cultural and political factors. More or less, it surpasses traditional feminism by being more inclusive and intersectional. As Meena. T. Pillai states "inevitably, they (Digital Feminism), represent the myriad feminism in India, as in many parts of the world, that face the urge to reckon with each other and to engender common political project and platforms between them (15). It came up with a need of involving women in the realm of technology in order to promote feminist scholarship as of before women were totally excluded from the history of technology (Chun). The Fourth World Conference on Women (1995), which supported and promoted gender parity, highlighted technology as a means to empower women and enhance their capabilities. It has stated that, "to ensure women's equal access to economic resources, including land, credit, science and technology, vocational training, information, communication, and markets, as a means to further the advancement and empowerment of women by means of international cooperation". When coming to Indian scenario, with the advent of economic liberalization and surfacing of modern technologies "by the first decade of twentieth century, women in India witnessed a rapid cultural shift" (Jain 3), that focused on the rights of women's independence, individuality, subjectivity, freedom and choice. It helps to shape the contemporary feminist discourse which would be more focused on relevant scenarios and current issues. The gender gap was a major topic of discussion during the 11th Five Year Plan (2007–2012), and it was believed that technology was necessary to help women become educated,

autonomous, self-sufficient, and economically powerful. "None other offers so many possibilities and paradoxes for interconnected feminism as digital space do" (Pillai 16).

Coming to the Indian context, as Radha Kumar mentions, Indian feminism can be chronologically divided into pre- and post-independence phases. So, the emergence of colonial rule dominates the pre-independence period, and the experience of democracy rules the post-independence period. She continuous by bringing the 3 stands of feminist movements in India. The first phase happened around the mid of nineteenth century that Indian social reformers took up the issue like Sati, child marriage and widow remarriage and they were introduced in the social reformations process in order to completely transform the social and cultural Indian scenario. The second phase from 1915 to Indian independence where Gandhi incorporated women's movements into nationalist struggle and independent women's organization began to emerge and the third phase is the post-independence which has focused on individuality and subjectivity of women both in her public and private sphere, their right to political parity etc. Digital feminism or the "cyber feminism is being regarded as the fourth wave of feminism" (Martin & Valenti), has emerged with the popularity and propagation of web and digital technologies through which contemporary feminism and feminist activism are "concerned more in challenging traditional patriarchal, sexism, stereotypical gender and sexual discourse, misogyny, which fosters a collective call-out culture" (Mendes, Ringrose & Keller 128). It itself creates an alternative media world which empowers global solidarity among women. Faulkner says that "we cannot transform gender relations without engaging women in technology" (92). Breaking through the increasingly intricate relationship between gender and technology is crucial. Even though "the 4th wave of feminism is still in its nascent stage in India" (Jain 5), digital feminist movement rely mainly on social media platforms. It has added a new dimension to women's struggle in India.

The 'Slut Walk' in Toronto in 2011, "was the first time when women used Facebook and Twitter to gather support for a protest being labelled as sluts for dressing in revealing clothes" (Davis301). Subsequently these kinds ofrallies and marches have continued all over the world. In India also, a similar movement called Besharmi Morcha began in Delhi in 2011(Mitra257). Next comes the campaign # Me Too by 2017, which has become a worldwide movement on sites including Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and others. It entered the international conversation against workplace sexual assault against women. The 'Everyday Sexism Project', launched by Laura Bates in 2012, similarly showed the participation of "women all over the world writing about sexual harassment at the workplace" (Philips & Cree936). This is one among the many online movements that had marked the beginning of the fourth wave of feminism. It encouraged 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" (Jain 5). In India the focus on digital feminist activism was more on caste differences and social hierarchies (Menon 54).

As a response to the 2012, 'Nirbhaya rape case', Blank Noise launched a 'Safe City Pledge'.In the Nirbhaya rape case, a young woman, age 22, was brutally raped and tortured while on a moving bus in New Delhi. The victim faced severe injuries. Thousands of protestors took march across the streets in the country agitating the security forces and pointed out the government's failure to protect women on the public platforms. Many others also expressed their sorrow, indignation, and anger via social media and networking sites like Facebook and WhatsApp. A protest online petition was signed by thousands of people in opposition to the occurrence. They started initiatives such as #Delhibraveheart to fight for the victim's rights. Protests also extended to Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and South Asia. Around the world, including in Paris, protesters marched. In 2013, various facets of society staged rallies online and offline, leading to the passing of the Criminal Law (Amendment) Ordinance by then President Pranab Mukherjee. "After considering

around 80,000 suggestions received, several new laws were passed, and fast track courts were set up to hear rape cases" (Das3).

Digitization of feminism in India acts an outlet for new opportunities for the empowerment of other marginalised and minority women, most of them became the victims of patriarchal violence and subjugations. For example, in 2013, acid attack survivor Laxmi Agarwal collected around 27,000 signatures through an online petition, named 'Stop Acid Sale,' to limit acid sales, and the issue was taken to the Supreme Court. Numerous more victims of acid attacks were able to express their support for the sale of acid being prohibited because to the campaign's widespread media coverage. In 2013, the Supreme Court granted the request, imposing limitations on the sale of acid and designating it as a criminal offense under Section 326 of the Indian Penal Code. This section classifies actions that intentionally cause great harm through the use of dangerous weapons or methods. Thus, in many respects, digital feminism responds directly to the toxic offline and online environments and offers hope for ending the cycles of violence and subjugations. It speaks"publicly about these issues offers women the benefits of catharsis, as well as a sense of solidarity" (Jain 10).

"The Pink Chaddi" in 2009,was started by a Delhi journalist named Nisha Susan, who launched a Facebook group naughtily named 'Consortium of Pub -going, Loose and Forward Women', which urged women to send pink chaddis (under wears) as a gift to the leader of the Hindu organization Valentine 's Day. The Sri Ram Sena office received around 2000 chaddis and the organization became an object of ridicule across the world."Why Loiter", strives for women's rights to occupy public spaces in 2011, Shilpa Phadke showed that "the act of 'loitering' is more prevalent among men, while women are rarely alone in public spaces like parks and beaches, because they become the victim for male gaze, sexual gestures, and mostly feels uncomfortable while they are alone". #Whyloiter became more trending on Twitter in 2017 which led to women reclaiming public spaces and resisting patriarchal domination in virtual and physical spaces. the "Pinjra Tod" in 2015 against curfew hours in hostels played an important part in India's feminist movement. As Azad mentions, "the main goals of Pinjra Tod were to end the imposition of curfews on women, to provide affordable accommodation for women, to regularize the situation for paying guests, and to obtain the formation of elected Internal Complaint Committees for prevention, prohibition and redress of sexual harassment in universities".Yet another movements was the #Lahukalagan happened on Twitter in 2017, which literally translates to "blood tax." It concentrated on the 12% sanitary napkin tax, which was eliminated in 2018 as a result of the movement. In September 2020 a campaign was created, named "#MyBodyMyMethod: Because Contraception Matters," with the tagline "So, what is the best contraceptive method? Who gets to choose it for you?" This pose some pertinent questions about our sexual and reproductive health that need to be answered. #MyBodyMyMethod, because "contraception matters. The goal of the campaign was to raise awareness and have a conversation about contraception, a topic that is frequently shrouded in rumors, taboos, and topics that are not freely discussed. "It also calls out the uteropolitics around contraception which is gendered with women bearing the burden of childbearing" (Bhatia 39).

Traditional offline activism functioned through"mobilizing people through street or door-to-door campaigning, with the help of existing social organizations, networks" (Anees), political parties or various kinds of other institutions especially educational institutions. On the other hand, compared to offline activism, digital activism may organize a significant number of people in a matter of minutes. Additionally, it encourages an interactive strategy in which various groups of people can engage with one another and contribute through internet blogs, petitions, and articles. It is also much more inclusive and intersectional than the traditional feminist activism, which garners voices from different strata of the society like the queers, dalits and minority women, who were forcibly made silent in all these years. It has been understood that women's involvement in handling and designing and "creating new technologies through digital feminism can empower them socially

and economically" (Masika & Bailur 48), making them aware about their rights, duties and by providing various opportunities be financially independent. Online hate and attacks against women have increased in tandem with the rise in the number of women using the internet. Digital misogyny is also very common in social media both men and women become the perpetuators of misogyny in online space. But this digital space handles online misogyny by bringing more focus and attention all these threats, violence, gender stereotypes and hypocritical social values that prejudices women and her exposure in the digital space. It paves the way to change the socially constructed norms regarding women, her identity, subjectivity and individuality.

Digital feminism in India is not a monolithic or homogeneous phenomenon, but a diverse and dynamic one that reflects the complexities and contradictions of Indian society and culture. It provides a space for women to express their opinions, experiences, and identities, and to connect with other like-minded individuals and groups. For most of the post-modern feminist in the world. Regardless of linguistic, cultural, or geographic barriers, it offers a new channel for worldwide and universal feminist networking and plenty of chance to actively participate in their own revolution. They participate and create their own content. For many of them, the internet offers a 'safe space' and a way to not just share common experiences, but also to organise and resist repressive gender regimes. Even though there are various positive impacts for digital feminism, it sometimes can be insular and myopic in their sudden responses. Mostly it induced the spark response very quickly even before knowing the actual causes of an event. Compared to offline movements, which are proactive, it is more frequently reactive. In contrast to the traditional on-ground participants, online participants may experience a greater burnout rate due to short-term and spontaneous planning, as well as a high incidence of hate speech online. These online feminist movements have a rapid burst of energy and a quick burnout. Another level is the exploitation, where the co-option and commodification of feminist narratives and symbols by corporations, celebrities, and politicians who use them for their own interests and agendas. Digital platforms can also be used to manipulate, misinform, and exploit women, especially those who are vulnerable or unaware. Apart from these undesirable consequences,this dynamic form of new feminist activism has gone beyond the previous feminist waves that saw women as a monolithic group whose interests could be represented by a single agenda. It welcomes more diversity, inclusivity, decentralization, and democracy which are necessary in cyberfeminism in order to prevent it from reproducing the harmful universalism of traditional feminists. To conclude with, digital spaces are not end goals, but are an alternative means to further honour the agenda of making feminist reactions and resistance more individualistic, inclusive, and transparent with unanimity and solidarity.

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