INDIAN POPULAR CULTURE

Lecture40

Cyberactivism and its impact on Social Movements

In this lecture, we'll continue discussing digital spaces and cyber activism. Last time, we explored how cyber culture functions, especially in Tamil Nadu, where we witness what is called cinematic populism. Followers from the realm of art move into the realm of politics, largely becoming a vote bank. When talking about these cyber spaces and activism, we see phenomena like self-work and colloquialism emerging. What is self-work? The people in these spaces engage in self-directed efforts. We see that dynamic assemblies and coordination are increasingly shaped by the self-work of ordinary publics.

These individuals do not follow the trajectory of legendary figures; instead, they actively contribute themselves. These are ordinary people. Political controls, including paid trolls and organized forms of digital propaganda, have prompted governments and political parties to make heavy investments in digital infrastructures in recent years. As ordinary people engage in self-work, we find that they are undertaking two kinds of self-work.

One could be the selfless work that people often talk about regarding citizens who motivate others to carry on these cleanliness drives and maintain the momentum. Then we have the paid trolls and organized forms of digital propaganda, where these individuals, often unwittingly, become part and parcel of this political control, with paid trolls receiving compensation because parties have invested heavily in digital infrastructures. This self-work is inseparable from the structures of political support and amplification.

We also see the scale shifting, with coordination, horizontal and effective networks, and a public culture of change-oriented activities occurring around what we call self-culture. The affordability of data plans has contributed to this change. The introduction of regional language services by major local social media companies over the last decade has facilitated what can only tentatively

be defined as the democratization of participation and colloquialism. Because of cheaper plans and the availability of services in multiple languages, everyone can participate.

By colloquialism, we mean a form of easy, almost playful language and visual practices. Internet meme cultures best illustrate the playfulness of political discussions. As I explained earlier, memes are significant in studies aimed at understanding political discourse. They also refer to forms of circulation through online self-work. People initiate actions and use colloquialism to circulate their messages.

Further, these practices have posed new challenges, if not eroded. The circulation of memes has created new challenges but has not yet been eroded. We see documentation of new protests around linguistic nationalism in Tamil Nadu, which we previously discussed regarding the formation of the province of Madras and the push for a Tamil-speaking state after the syndicate of the South and Mrs. Gandhi's departure. Cody notes the rise of digitally enabled millennials as a political generation asserting their independent voice.

For instance, in the Marina Beach occupation, a major agitation that drew nationwide attention, educated youth organized public demonstrations largely through social media to demand the right to continue the annual bull wrestling sport event famously associated with the region. Although this is a regional issue, we see its integration through digital media in these spectacular public demonstrations.

There are agitators actively resisting attempts by establishment parties to join the rally and claim a representative function. This acts as an opportunity for these parties to align themselves with the movement. Thakur later notes a similar trend in Dalit mobilization. We discussed how Thakur addresses Dalit mobilization.

Young online Dalit activists now feel they are no longer dependent on non-Dalit leaders and the intelligentsia to express their political views. Previously, they needed the support of non-Dalit leaders, but now they understand they do not need them anymore. Although Dalit leadership remains a prominent feature of resistance and political organizations, one such party being the BSP in Uttar Pradesh.

Thakur illustrates this by documenting the protests that erupted following the tragic suicide of Rohit Vemula, a Dalit student leader at the University of Hyderabad, which became so effective that it spread to other universities across India. This happened largely due to digital media. Comparing online mobilization with older forms of political movements, Cody suggests that many of the political challenges to existing structures fueled by newer media forms appear as shorter-term events. He notes that earlier political challenges tended to have a longer lifespan, whereas now they often have a very short life, coming to an end rapidly.

Contrasted by fluctuating temporality, digital actions nonetheless share the potential to obliterate customary limitations of here and now. Furthermore, while pre-digital media could circulate beyond national and local boundaries, the speed and user-driven nature of digital circuits mark a significant shift. These online mobilizations have facilitated scale shifting, allowing actors to connect local issues with global politics.

For example, climate change has emerged as a significant global issue. Climate activists may protest locally, but their messages reach audiences everywhere. Next, we have hashtag movements such as #DalitLivesMatter and #BlackLivesMatter, which aim to articulate a global subaltern project and connect people across the globe. This echoes similar efforts to forge networks of hope. These hashtags and communities represent networks of hope, supported by transnational activism from NGOs networking in India and sometimes abroad, mobilizing campaigns that are sustained over decades.

What is hashtag activism in India, and in which digital spaces do we often see this activism? Does it even work? These questions arise when considering hashtag activism. In India, feminist activism on social media, particularly Twitter, gained momentum after the horrific Delhi rape. Notable hashtags included #Nirbhaya and #Damini, where individuals expressed their outrage.

From 2015 to early 2017, the era of women's issues saw growth in hashtags. For instance, the #BoardTheBus campaign and the #SafeCity campaign used YouTube videos to document women's treatment in public spaces. In November 2015, regarding the Sabarimala Temple incident, 20-year-old Nikita Azad started the #HappyToBleed campaign against sexism. The BBC in India reported that

since its launch, Happy to Bleed received considerable responses, especially from young urban Indian women.

In April 2017, when sanitary pads were classified as a luxury commodity with a 14% tax, another activism emerged, called #LahuKaLagaan, referring to the tax on menstruation. The government was compelled to repeal this tax. Through such activism and hashtags, we see that the government often has to intervene and retract policies. A similar situation occurred with the farmers' protests, which also marked a significant digital presence. Ultimately, after the first farmers' protest, the government had to reverse its policies. Alongside these movements were "Let There Be Clamor" from Jadavpur University and "Pinjra Tod," initiated in July 2015. Unlike #LahuKaLagaan, hashtag feminism in India has not always achieved its goals.

Safe City hashtag Safe City has more than 6000 recorded testimonials of harassment. As the Holaback hashtag records, instances of such aggravation are only increasing, but nothing is happening. Azad's happy to bleed ensured conversation about menstruation, which actually started in the public sphere. if not anything more. Hashtag activism is on the rise, but gender stereotyping plays out with impunity even in the digital spaces.

Halder and Jaishankar have shown their seminal work on cybercrimes and women. But the presence of women in social media is viewed as a dark threat to the notion of masculinity, which encourages women to live up to unrealistic demands of demureness and chastity. Men often want women to be chased as also docile, very simple and who should not open their mouth in front of anyone. But even then we see that things have not changed in the digital spaces or digital spaces has not been successful in changing the predicament of women. The online spaces with trolling that includes name calling, sexual slurs, public shaming algorithms like the kind used in social on social media platforms themselves can be sexist as a result of gender bias implanted in the language data sets.

An eye-opening issue we see is the problem with the algorithms and the language used in the datasets, which influence the outcomes. Besides participation in online activism, intense digital labor—both informational and emotional—can also be involved. Furthermore, notions of digital labor in feminist

movements in India are extremely understudied. There is a dire need for research on digital labor in these movements.

Mendis notes that such activist endeavors can be mundane and time-consuming, often yielding very little immediate reward. Thus, they are often relegated to the tedium and invisibility associated with tasks like child-rearing and housekeeping—generally regarded as women's work and therefore unimportant. Mendis emphasizes how digital labor in feminist movements parallels the mundanity and time consumption of these domestic responsibilities, both viewed as demeaning.

Prior studies of hashtag feminism and online activism in India have shown that careful hashtag use reflects the policy and organizational decisions of activists. Scholars have indicated that feminist hashtag campaigns in digitally emerging countries like India need mainstream media coverage to garner wider support. However, mainstream media often does not back these social media movements, limiting their visibility and impact.

Research emphasizes that Twitter in India primarily reflects the opinions of tech-savvy youth, mirroring elite views rather than representing the broader population. Thus, while social media has made it easier for women to participate, hashtag feminism often showcases only a specific type of woman who can and does engage, reinforcing the idea of feminism in India as a site of inspirational contradiction. There is inspiration, but it is contradictory, as many women remain excluded from participation.

Women’s rights are at the forefront, yet the visibility of illiterate and poor women is often overshadowed by those from economically stronger classes. What about the representation of these marginalized women? The harbinger of the Me Too movement in India was a list of alleged sexual predators in academia, compiled by law student Raya Sarkar in 2017. Sarkar's list faced criticism from influential older feminists, who argued that it resembled a witch hunt.

Scholars have shown that, in the face of such backlash from established feminists, youth and feminist movements in India have strengthened through resilience, enabling potential supporters to become more politically mature and nuanced. This illustrates the two phases of digital activism, characterized by both

backlash and the evolution of youth and feminist movements regarding the Me Too movement.

In this multi-hybrid millennial India, media channels contribute to the ongoing violence. During the 2019 elections, political parties built WhatsApp networks based on older face-to-face community networks for campaign purposes.

When we talk about using older techniques in the newer phase of social networking, Cody describes this as heterogeneous time, where the old and new are mixed. He illustrates the digital sphere in the southern states of Tamil Nadu, marked by the rise of caste-based politics. Here, forms of collective political identity were largely subsumed under the broader non-Brahminical politics of Tamil nationalism and cinematic populism. Cody discusses how caste and cinematic populism are integrated, functioning differently in various contexts. However, when it comes to vote banks, these identities get assimilated.

We also observe a new form of public hate arising from these movements. This public hate often comes from other communities or, in gender-based contexts, from the other gender. There is a phenomenon called vigilante action, similar to vigilante mob action, targeted against what right-wing attackers describe as love jihad. This conspiracy theory suggests that Muslim men are deceiving Hindu women into marriage, leading to some form of submission, which is termed love jihad. This idea represents a violent expression of broader politics regulating female sexuality and is a core element of online Hindu nationalism, manifesting as shaming and abuse.

Moving on to enduring hierarchies in the digital media landscape, we see two conflicting phases of digital politics in contemporary India. Networked political action is neither distinctly inclusive nor a straightforward process of direct participation that diminishes the role of traditional intermediaries. Despite this, network politics has enabled greater access to public discourse for ordinary people.

The dynamics of millennial India highlight the enduring hierarchies in the age of digitalization. Rapidly changing digital media platforms now place a premium on acquiring the know-how to use different networking platforms, apps, and data packages. This creates an emerging hierarchy among internet users, based on the quality of internet knowledge, search strategies, and broadband and mobile

connections. Consequently, we see a digital divide, where some have access to better broadband and data, while others do not.

Concepts like protest collectivity argue that digital social media have led to more open structures for organizing protests. Digital social media have created an arena for structuring and organizing protests effectively.