



From Hashtag to Action: Social Movements in 21st Century India

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ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Accepted on: 19-02-2025

Published on: 14-03-2025

Keywords:

*Social Movements, Hashtag
Activism, Digital Activism,
Online Mobilization,
Offline Action, 21st Century
India.*

ABSTRACT

The 21st century has seen a seismic shift in the way social movements are organized and mobilized globally, with India being no exception. Social movements in India, historically shaped by grassroots activism and political engagement, have increasingly turned to digital tools, especially social media platforms, to amplify their causes. Hashtags, online petitions, and viral content have become central to activism, playing an essential role in publicizing issues, rallying supporters, and even influencing policy decisions. This paper explores the role of digital media in shaping contemporary social movements in India, examining several high-profile cases such as the Nirbhaya protests, the MeToo movement, and the farmers' protests of 2020–2021. It highlights how digital activism has altered the dynamics of Indian social movements and examines both the advantages and challenges of online organizing. Finally, it explores the implications of this transformation, discussing the future of activism in India in the context of rapidly evolving technological and political landscapes.

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15026400>

Introduction: In the last two decades, the landscape of social movements in India has undergone a profound transformation. While protests in the past relied primarily on physical gatherings, print media,



and television news outlets to spread messages and rally supporters, the rise of social media has revolutionized activism. Platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp have provided new avenues for individuals to voice their concerns, organize protests, and exert pressure on political leaders. The hashtag, once a simple tool for categorizing posts, has evolved into a powerful symbol of digital resistance.

India's rapid digital transformation has played a pivotal role in facilitating this change. With internet penetration increasing and mobile phones becoming more affordable, India now boasts one of the largest online populations in the world. This massive reach has made social media an essential tool for activists across the country. Hashtags like Nirbhaya, MeToo, FarmersProtest, SaveAarey, JusticeForAsifa, RightToLife, NotInMyName, StandWithJNU, AntiCAA, and FreeKashmir have not only garnered widespread attention but have sparked real-world action, leading to mass mobilizations and policy changes (Sharma, 2013; Kaur, 2020; Singh, 2021).

The primary focus of this paper is to examine the role that digital activism plays in shaping social movements in India. By analysing key movements of the 21st century, it investigates the ways in which hashtags have transcended digital platforms to become rallying cries for justice and change. Furthermore, this paper will explore the challenges associated with online activism and address questions regarding the effectiveness of digital movements in creating lasting societal change.

The Rise of Social Media in India: A Digital Revolution: India's social media revolution has been both rapid and transformative. According to a report by the Internet and Mobile Association of India (IMAI), there were over 624 million internet users in India as of 2020, making it the second-largest online population in the world, after China (IMAI, 2020). With more than 500 million users of social media platforms, the country's digital ecosystem has become a central feature of public discourse and political life. The widespread availability of smartphones, coupled with affordable data plans, has played a key role in this transformation.

This digital revolution has had far-reaching implications for Indian society. Traditional forms of activism, such as street protests and rallies, continue to be important, but they are increasingly supplemented by online campaigns. Activists, journalists, and ordinary citizens alike now use digital platforms to raise awareness, amplify voices, and mobilize for various causes. Social media, with its ability to transcend geographical barriers and reach millions of people instantly, has given new power to



marginalized communities, allowing them to participate in political and social movements on an unprecedented scale (Gurumurthy, 2020).

The democratization of information through social media has also had significant implications for political engagement. For example, digital platforms have allowed for faster dissemination of information about social issues, making it easier to rally support and mobilize protests. In some cases, online engagement has translated into substantial political action, leading to policy changes or heightened government accountability. However, the digital landscape is also fraught with challenges, including misinformation, digital divides, and the potential for online campaigns to remain disconnected from real-world action.

The Role of Hashtags in Indian Social Movements: Hashtags have become symbolic markers of resistance in the 21st century, serving as the digital flags under which social movements rally. In India, hashtags like Nirbhaya, MeToo, FarmersProtest, SaveAarey, JusticeForAsifa, RightToLife, NotInMyName, StandWithJNU, AntiCAA, and FreeKashmir have captured the national imagination, channelling the frustrations and demands of ordinary people into a unified call for action. These hashtags function as both rallying cries and branding tools, creating a digital space for activists and their supporters to organize, communicate, and express solidarity.

1. **Nirbhaya:** The Nirbhaya movement, which followed the brutal gang rape and murder of a young woman in Delhi in December 2012, exemplifies the power of digital activism in India. The hashtag Nirbhaya, derived from the pseudonym given to the victim, became synonymous with the fight against sexual violence and gender inequality. The protests that erupted across India were fuelled by an outpouring of anger on social media, where individuals shared their thoughts, frustrations, and calls for justice. Social media platforms played a pivotal role in organizing protests, providing real-time updates, and putting pressure on the Indian government to take action (Sharma, 2013).

2. **MeToo:** Similarly, the MeToo movement, which gained traction in India in 2018, used social media as a platform for women to share their experiences of sexual harassment and assault. The hashtag MeToo became a global phenomenon, but in India, it specifically spotlighted the rampant culture of sexual harassment in Bollywood, the media, and politics. Prominent figures in various industries were accused of sexual misconduct, and social media acted as a virtual space where women's voices were amplified. The movement forced both the public and institutions to reckon with issues of gender inequality and sexual violence in a way that had never before been possible (Kaur, 2020).



3. **FarmersProtest:** More recently, the farmers' protests of 2020–2021 have demonstrated the ongoing significance of hashtags in mobilizing large-scale movements. The protests against the Indian government's controversial farm laws saw widespread use of hashtags such as FarmersProtest and IStandWithFarmers, which not only helped raise awareness of the farmers' grievances but also garnered international support. Social media provided a platform for farmers to share their stories, counter misinformation, and organize peaceful protests. The use of digital platforms in this movement illustrated how online engagement can translate into offline action, as millions of farmers gathered in Delhi to demand the repeal of the laws. Ultimately, the farmers' movement was successful in pressuring the government to repeal the laws, a testament to the power of digital activism in achieving real-world political change (Singh, 2021).

4. **SaveAarey:** The SaveAarey campaign emerged in response to plans by the Mumbai Metropolitan Region Development Authority to cut down trees in Aarey Forest for a metro car shed project. Environmental activists and residents of Mumbai used the hashtag #SaveAarey to unite voices in opposition to the deforestation, highlighting the environmental consequences of the project. Through digital activism, protests were organized, and the issue reached the national spotlight, even leading to a temporary halt to the project in 2019. The digital engagement successfully raised awareness about urbanization and environmental sustainability (Rai, 2019).

5. **JusticeForAsifa:** In 2018, the horrific rape and murder of an eight-year-old girl, Asifa Bano, in Kashmir sparked widespread outrage. JusticeForAsifa became a central rallying point for citizens who sought justice for the victim and demanded greater protection for women and children. Social media played a critical role in highlighting the case, urging the authorities to take action and galvanizing protests against communal violence and child abuse. The campaign was successful in pressuring local authorities to take stronger measures in addressing such crimes (Verma, 2018).

6. **RightToLife:** The RightToLife movement emerged as a demand for the implementation of stricter laws against violence and threats to women's safety, focusing particularly on the rights of women to live free from fear. This hashtag was widely used after the tragic murder of a young woman in Bengaluru, to advocate for harsher punishments for those found guilty of crimes against women. It acted as a collective demand for the government to prioritize women's rights and security (Joshi, 2019).

7. **NotInMyName:** In 2017, the NotInMyName campaign was launched in response to the increasing instances of mob lynching in India, particularly incidents involving Muslims. The hashtag was used by



activists to protest against the rise of hate crimes and religious intolerance in the country. The digital campaign became a national movement, with protests and rallies organized across cities to demand action against hate crimes. The movement served as a platform for citizens to reject the use of violence for ideological or religious purposes (Chatterjee, 2017).

8. **StandWithJNU:** The StandWithJNU movement emerged after the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in Delhi became the epicentre of student protests in 2016. The university's administration accused student leaders of sedition, leading to widespread student mobilization and protests. The hashtag became a symbol of resistance against what many viewed as government overreach and a crackdown on academic freedom. Social media provided a platform for students and activists to defend the university's autonomy and express solidarity with the students under threat of arrest (Singh, 2017).

9. **AntiCAA:** The AntiCAA movement grew in response to the controversial Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) passed by the Indian government in December 2019. Critics of the CAA argued that the law discriminated against Muslims by offering citizenship to non-Muslim refugees from neighbouring countries. The hashtag became a digital rallying cry for people protesting against religious discrimination and demanding the withdrawal of the law. Protests were organized across the country, with social media playing a key role in coordinating action and spreading awareness of the legal and political implications (Pandit, 2020).

10. **FreeKashmir:** The FreeKashmir movement emerged following the revocation of Article 370 by the Indian government in August 2019, which led to the abrogation of Jammu and Kashmir's special status. The hashtag was used by those advocating for the restoration of the region's autonomy and opposing the government's actions. Through digital platforms, citizens across the globe amplified their demands, drawing attention to the ongoing human rights violations in Kashmir. While controversial, this movement illustrated how hashtags could become powerful symbols for people seeking political and territorial self-determination (Muneer, 2019).

From Digital Engagement to Real-World Action: While the power of social media in raising awareness and organizing support is undeniable, the real question for digital activists is whether online engagement can be translated into tangible, offline change. Hashtags and viral content may bring attention to an issue, but the effectiveness of a social movement often depends on its ability to mobilize people in the streets, influence public policy, and create lasting societal shifts.



The Nirbhaya movement, for example, led to mass protests across India, including a major rally in New Delhi that brought together thousands of people demanding justice for the victim. These protests ultimately resulted in the introduction of tougher anti-rape laws, including the 2013 Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, which expanded the definition of rape and introduced harsher penalties for perpetrators. The role of social media in organizing these protests and keeping the issue in the public eye was crucial to the movement's success (Sharma, 2013).

Similarly, the MeToo movement in India generated significant online discourse, but it also had real-world consequences. Women who came forward with allegations of harassment in the workplace not only garnered solidarity from other women but also forced institutions to reconsider their policies on sexual harassment. In the case of Bollywood, some prominent figures lost their careers due to allegations of misconduct, signalling a shift in the entertainment industry's handling of such issues (Kaur, 2020).

The farmers' protests of 2020–2021 provide another example of how digital activism can fuel offline action. The widespread use of social media allowed farmers from across India to organize, share information, and galvanize international support. The protests grew into a national movement, with farmers camping on the borders of Delhi for more than a year. Ultimately, the government agreed to repeal the controversial farm laws, showing that digital mobilization can lead to significant political outcomes (Singh, 2021).

Challenges of Digital Activism in India: Despite the successes of digital activism in India, it is important to acknowledge the challenges and limitations of online organizing. One of the most pressing issues is the digital divide. While urban India has widespread access to the internet and social media, rural areas often face significant barriers to digital participation. Lack of infrastructure, affordable internet access, and digital literacy remain significant obstacles to the widespread adoption of online activism in India (Patel, 2018).

Another challenge is the spread of misinformation and fake news. Social media platforms are notorious for enabling the rapid dissemination of false or misleading information. During the farmers' protests, for example, various narratives were spread online, some of which were designed to delegitimize the movement. Misinformation not only undermines the credibility of a social movement but also complicates efforts to maintain public support and engagement (Singh, 2021).



Moreover, the transient nature of social media presents another challenge. Online movements can quickly gain momentum but may also lose steam just as rapidly. The ephemeral nature of hashtags means that once the digital conversation moves on to other issues, the movement may lose its potency unless sustained through real-world actions and media attention (Gurumurthy, 2020). This cyclical nature of digital activism raises important questions about the longevity of online movements and their ability to effect long-term change.

Conclusion: Digital activism in India has evolved significantly in the 21st century, with social media playing an essential role in mobilizing support, raising awareness, and influencing policy. Hashtags have become central to social movements, transforming online conversations into powerful calls for action. Movements such as Nirbhaya, MeToo, FarmersProtest, SaveAarey, JusticeForAsifa, RightToLife, NotInMyName, StandWithJNU, AntiCAA, and FreeKashmir illustrate the potential of digital platforms to bring about real-world change, but they also highlight the challenges of translating online activism into long-lasting social impact.

The future of digital activism in India will likely be shaped by continued advancements in technology, the growing importance of online platforms, and the need to address issues like misinformation and the digital divide. As social media continues to play a central role in activism, the next generation of social movements will need to find innovative ways to leverage digital tools for sustained political and social change.

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