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CYBER FEMINISM**Introduction**

Cyber feminism is a term coined in 1994 by Sadie Plant, director of the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit at the University of Warwick in Britain¹, to describe the work of feminists interested in theorizing, critiquing, and exploiting the Internet, cyberspace, and new-media technologies in general. The term and movement grew out of “third-wave” feminism, the contemporary feminist movement that follows the “second-wave” feminism of the 1970s, which focused on equal rights for women, and which itself followed the “first-wave” feminism of the early 20th century, which concentrated on woman suffrage². Cyber feminism has tended to include mostly younger, technologically savvy women, and those from Western, white, middle-class backgrounds. The ranks of cyber feminists are growing, however, and along with this increase is a growing divergence of ideas about what constitutes cyber feminist thought and action.

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

¹ <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/196259577.pdf>

² <https://books.google.co.in/books?id=YgVzAwAAQBAJ&pg=PA108&lpg=PA108&dq=The+term+and+movement+grew+out+of+%E2%80%9Cthird-wave%E2%80%9D+feminism,+the+contemporary+feminist+movement+that+follows+the+%E2%80%9Csecond>

contemporary cyberfeminism through postcolonial and postmodern feminist theories. The brief also highlights the strengths and deficits of digital activism.

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 independence³. 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 cyber feminists make use of blogging and social media as a measure of political mobilisation and community building. 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.

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 movement⁴. 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.

Intersectional Cyberfeminism

³ <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000120683>

⁴ <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-globalization/>

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 countries⁵. 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.”

Even in India, several feminist scholars provided the intellectual representation but held on to Western ideas. They failed to address the needs of the minority. For instance, with the Shah Bano⁶ 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. 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 & Cyber feminism

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

⁵ https://literariness.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Ann-Brooks-Postfeminisms_-Feminism-Cultural-Theory-and-Cultural-Forms-1997.pdf

⁶ 1985 AIR 945, 1985 SCR (3) 844

survivors to voice their support for the ban on acid sale⁷. 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 means⁸.

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 groups⁹. 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."

However, cyber feminism 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. 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 acknowledged¹⁰.

Cultural Restrictions

Postcolonial feminists like Mohanty claim that Western feminists tend to rely only on their value system and view themselves as saviours for other women. 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

⁷<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/entertainment/events/jaipur/acid-attack-survivor-laxmi-agarwal-after-first-two-surgeries-i-thought-i-would-look-prettier-than-before/articleshow/68797628.cms>

⁸ <https://articlesonlaw.wordpress.com/2015/03/27/the-theory-of-hurt-and-grievous-hurt/>

⁹ <https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/31144/3/SITES%20OF%20EXCEPTION-%20GENDER%20VIOLENCE%2C%20DIGITAL%20ACTIVISM%20AND%20NIRBHAYA%E2%80%99S%20ZONE%20F%20ANOMIE%20IN%20INDIA.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5374864/>

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. The digital age is characterised by fault lines that restrict women at grassroots level from accessing the same privileges as other women.

Digital Division

Cyber feminism 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 cyber feminism. The gap between those with and without digital access, including digital devices and internet, creates a schism in the idea of a 'universal' cyber feminist 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 areas¹¹. 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 agencies¹². 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.

¹¹ <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000261791>

¹² <https://eltalondeaquiles.pucp.edu.pe/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Oxford-Handbooks-Rawwida-Baksh-Wendy-Harcourt-The-Oxford-Handbook-of-Transnational-Feminist-Movements-Oxford-University-Press-2015.pdf>

Women's material conditions must be taken into account when considering how best to advance feminist ideas, online or otherwise. Beyond the root idea that gender equity, particularly in new-media technologies, is a desired goal, cyber feminism itself, a growing area of thought and study, is not a unified set of ideas concerning women and new technologies. Cyber feminists explore many areas of theory: that women are naturally suited to using the Internet, as both share important commonalities; that women can best empower themselves by becoming fluent in online communication and acquiring technological expertise; and that women would do best to study how power and knowledge are constructed in technological systems, and how and where feminists can disrupt and change these practices for the betterment of all members of society.

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; cyber feminism 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. Cyber feminist movements can gain momentum quickly and can die down just as fast.