

Social Media and Protest: A Case Study on Anti CAA Protest in India

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Abstract

The study aims to understand the role of Social Media in the current chain of events of various activist protests that have happened in the 21st Century or are going around the world. It specifically focuses on the student led protest in India against the Citizenship Amendment Act (bill) which was floored in the Lower House of the Indian Parliament (Lok Sabha) meeting on December 09, 2019 and passed on December 11, 2019. Starting from North-East to rest of the cities in India, the protestors took over the street in numbers to protest the Citizenship Amendment Act (bill) or commonly to be called as the CAA protest. Role of Social Media thus was recognized as one of the major influences in organizing and facilitating these protests across the country. In this study we unfold the active role of Social Media Apps such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram into creating awareness about the issue, advocating for one's rights and organizing protests. Thus, looking at a new narrative of activism through online means or to say emergence of "Online Activism" and its impact on on-ground protests.

Keywords: Social Media, Acitvist Protest, Citizenship Amendment Act, CAA, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, North East India, Online Activism

1. Introduction

Social Media has a growing uprising in today's world. The biggest power that Social Media has provided us humans with is the power of "connectivity". Every possible person, news, current affair, or information is now on our fingertips. It has not only helped bring people closer but has also enhanced communication between communities. In a country as diverse as India, connectivity and communication are the two important factors which binds us together.

- **About**

Digital world in the 21st century has given the birth to Social Media applications, which has enhanced communication than before. Today, the role is not just of bringing like-minded people together but also to spread a message across the world. While earlier it was difficult to spread messages and have dialogues, today with the role of Social Media this problem has been curbed. Currently, we have seen an uprising of what is to be said as "online activism" in the form of independent people, print journals and various social media accounts advocating for the rights of the minorities worldwide. The new apparatus of social media has reinvented social activism in an unprecedented manner. With Facebook, Twitter, blogs and other platforms, the traditional relationship between political authority and popular will has been transformed, it has become easier for the people of poles apart to collaborate, coordinate, and give voice to their concern.¹(Biju & Gayathri, 2011)

India celebrates itself as the largest democracy in the world, virtual presence thus provides itself as a biggest tool for connectivity and spreading across one's narrative, ideas, and words. In the chilling December winters of 2019, India saw an uprising against the CAB Bill. The Bill seeks to amend The Citizenship Act, 1955 to make Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi, and Christian illegal migrants from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, eligible for citizenship of India. ²(The Indian Express, December 2019) The fundamental criticism revolves around the violation of Article 14 of the Constitution, which guarantees Right to Equality as it is especially targeted towards the Muslims. Nation-wide protests have been since then come into play starting from the North-east itself. Various student unions of the North East like All Assam Students Union (AASU) and North East Students' Organisation (NESO) did not only take the streets but also voiced out their dissent and plight through Social Media services provided by Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Soon the #NOCAB became trending on Twitter and Instagram, respectively. Following which, the country capital – New Delhi also saw an uprising by various left organisations and student union led by Jawaharlal Nehru University Student Union (JNUSU) and Jamia Milia Islamia University. Post which cases of Police Brutality came into light on the students of Jamia Milia Islamia, New Delhi and Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, Uttar Pradesh. Since then, various students led organisations such as Student Federation of India, All India Student Association, *Pinjra Tod* and other independent

¹ Biju & Gayathri, 2011

² The Indian Express, December 2019

communities and individuals took the streets to protest against such incidents. The only reason why such protests were so well maintained and in number was because of the role of ICT and its connectivity. Various organisations started using Social Media channels to spread out the word of what's happening and what's not and where to gather through Facebook – messages, posts, Twitter, Instagram features like – story share, posts and direct messages and rest was done through personal WhatsApp messages to various individuals to assemble and spread the word.

- **Scope of the Study**

The contribution of the study is to identify and understand the role of emerging Social Media Apps in the current scenario of worldwide unrest. Wherein, we observe news of protests in every other corner of the world how has Social Media played an important factor – in terms of mobilizing, organising and creating awareness. Special focus has been given to role of social media in the Anti CAB protest led by various Student Organizations of India.

- **Methodology**

The current study unfolds an extensive analysis of literature review. First, the study focuses on explaining Social Media as a Public Sphere and how it has impacted our offline world through digital means. From expression, collaborations, affiliations and circulations – the study gives an indepth analysis of Social Media in Public. Second, the study documents the transformation of on-ground activism to online activism – not limiting to advocacy, action group and community oriented. Lastly, the study brings out the core case study the following documentation is based upon i.e., CAA protest in India and its online presence to navigate offline protests. The study has been primarily gleaned from newspaper articles; public academic paper/studies available in the public domain.

- **Present Study**

The present study begins with an analysis of The Citizenship Amendment Bill (CAB) by the Government of India and then talks about the recent developments in regards to the critique of the bill and following protests against The CAB led by Student Organizations. In this chain of events, the role of social media has been observed closely into organizing these Student Protests and creating awareness about the injustice of the Bill.

2. Literature Review

- **Understanding Social Media as a Public Sphere**

In this era of dialogue and discourse, communication is not just the key but rather a way forward. The way we used to interpret Social Media has gone forward than its initial

understanding. Social network sites are defined as web-based services that allow individuals to³:

- a. Construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system
- b. Articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and
- c. View and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.

According to Habermas's theory a public sphere is a place where anyone, with any set of beliefs, could provide immeasurable value to the sphere by challenging ideas and making the community stronger by changing, confirming or forming new beliefs.⁴ (Mapr , 2017) The term "public" in public sphere is representation of the idea of the people taking part in such discussions are acting not as private citizens, but as a public role by speaking in public and discussing issues of relevance to the wider public, issues of governance.⁵ Currently, social network sites have completed this shift from interactivity to 'relational' and from 'relational' to 'participation'.⁶ (Mazali, 2011) Henry Jenkins defines typologies of participatory culture' as follows⁷(Jenkins, 2006):

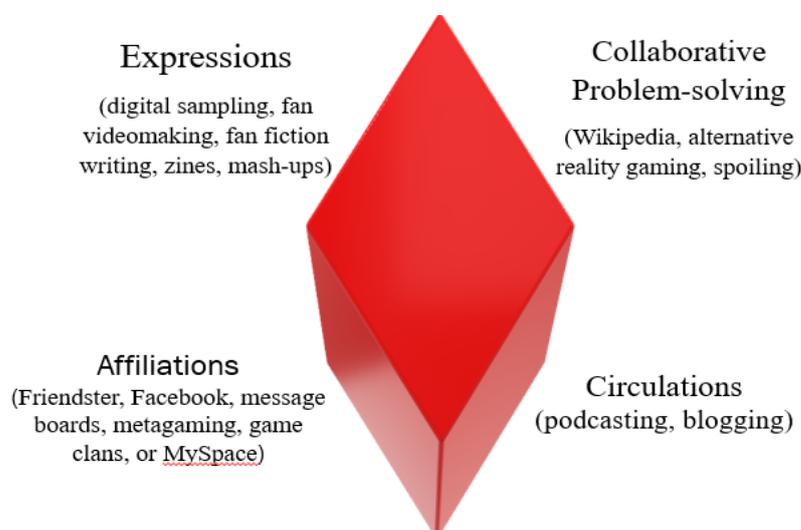


Figure 1 Social Media as a Public Sphere

³ Biju & Gayathri, 2011

⁴ Mapr , 2017

⁵ Biju & Gayathri, 2011

⁶ Mazali, 2011

⁷ Jenkins, 2006

- i. Affiliations (Friendster, Facebook, message boards, metagaming, game clans, or MySpace).
- ii. Expressions (digital sampling, skinning and modding, fan videomaking, fan fiction writing, zines, mashups).
- iii. Collaborative Problem-solving (Wikipedia, alternative reality gaming, spoiling).
- iv. Circulations (podcasting, blogging).

Digital media and various social media apps today have made this as a possible solution. Apps like Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and Instagram not only help connect people but also allow share and flow of ideas – regarding public concerns and grievances, new opportunities, allowing new ventures to grow and tap potential users and reach out to consumers. Facilitating political discourse too has been observed as a major role of various social media platforms now.

• **The Transformation of Activism to Online Activism**

A rift between people and formal politics flourishes under a climate of cynicism, suspicion, and apathy ⁸(Amutabi et al., 1997; Bennett, 2004; Dahlgren, 2004). Social activists⁹ (Hoist, 2007) strives to empower people to recognize these social inequities and also struggle with the disenfranchised to overcome their exclusion and marginalization through increased civic engagement.¹⁰ (Adler & Goggin, 2005) In the forms of education, action, or resistance¹¹ (Foley, 2004; Hoist, 2007; Norris, 2002; Schugurensky, 2005).

Recognizing a crisis of democracy in the formal systems of political engagement¹² Dahlgren (2004) points to civil society¹³ (Habermas, 1989, 1996; Salter, 2003). In such a turmoil, Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) provides itself as a major role player. Not only it helps in bringing the community closer to each other but also provides a means to engaging the citizens in a dialogue and discourse. Thus, increasing citizen participation and engagement. Similarly, advocating for one's rights through online social platforms provides such social activists a platform to address these grievances faster and easily.

There are three general categories of online activism¹⁴ (Rosenkrands, 2004; Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2004; Vegh, 2003). The first type of online activism, "awareness/advocacy"¹⁵ (Vegh, 2003), views the Internet and other ICTs as a channel of access to independent and

⁸ Amutabi et al., 1997; Bennett, 2004; Dahlgren, 2004

⁹ Hoist, 2007

¹⁰ Adler & Goggin, 2005

¹¹ Foley, 2004; Hoist, 2007; Norris, 2002; Schugurensky, 2005

¹² Dahlgren, 2004

¹³ Habermas, 1989, 1996; Salter, 2003

¹⁴ Rosenkrands, 2004; Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2004; Vegh, 2003

¹⁵ Vegh, 2003

alternative media groups for information that tends to be ignored or often suppressed by mainstream media. As a second form of online activism, "community-oriented sites"¹⁶ (Rosenkrands, 2004), seek to build relationships and share dialogue. The third variety of online activism, "action groups"¹⁷ (Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2004), try to raise public support in favour of specific social causes. In this respect, for online activism to contribute to civil society, there must be some translation from online to the real world¹⁸ (Dahlgren, 2004).

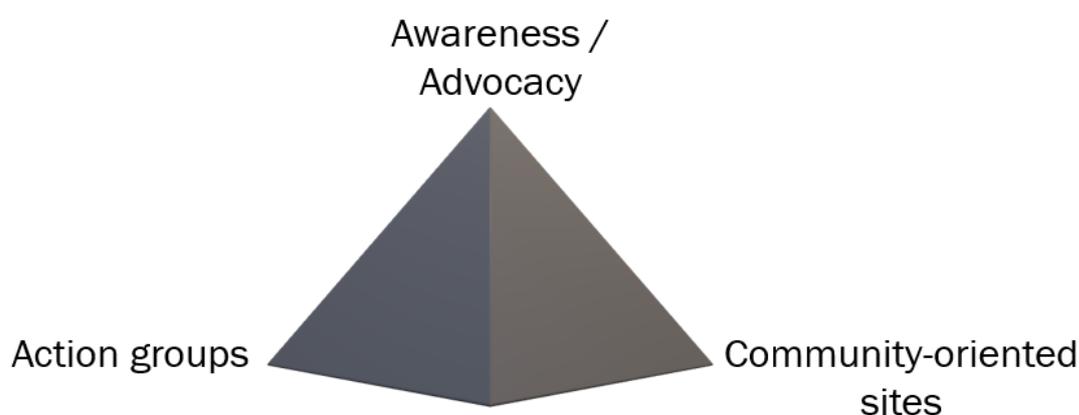


Figure 2 Categoris of Online Activism

The Internet facilitates for social activists the establishment of, or at least the potential to establish, collaboration as well as raising public awareness, building popular consciousness, communication, and coordination of action and the sharing of knowledge.¹⁹ (Mazali, 2006)

- Online Activism and the World

China

Internet activism has emerged as one of the most important forms of citizen activism in China. It broadly refers to claims-making contentious activities associated with the use of the Internet. And its vitality in China derives from its diverse forms, ranging from oppositional dissidence to cooperative community action.

First appeared in the mid-1990s, when Internet penetration was still low, Internet activism has since gathered great momentum and currency. The Chinese party-state initially reacted to it with alarm. However, over the years the party-state has cultivated an approach that combines repressive policing with gentler methods of social management. And far from being static or monolithic, the Chinese Internet control system has evolved in response to changing forms of

¹⁶ Rosenkrands, 2004

¹⁷ Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2004

¹⁸ Dahlgren, 2004

¹⁹ Mazali, 2006

Internet activism. The sites of Internet incidents change with the development of new technologies. In the 1990s and early 2000s, incidents took place in the Bulletin Board Systems (BBS); expanded to blogs; and moved to microblogs such as Twitter, the equivalent of which is known in China as Weibo. The most popular Twitter-like service in China is Sina Weibo. Since its launch in August 2009, Sina Weibo has become a favourite venue for both protest and chitchat. Its clipped 140-character format and enormous social networks make it especially hospitable to a kind of muckraking citizen journalism that is as entertaining to the consumer public as it is nettling to censorship-prone propaganda official.²⁰ (Yang, 2014)

There is a growing tendency for online protests to move offline and into the street. The environmental protests in Xiamen, Dalian, Shanghai, and Ningbo in the past five years were all involved with intense interactions between online mobilization and offline protests. And the Southern Weekly protest in January 2013 is one example of how an online protest incident can spill out into the street.²¹ (Pomfret, 2013) In these ways, Internet activism both retains its own distinct features and merges into the larger trend of popular contention in contemporary China.

Given the ability of online activism to raise awareness and rally support for different political or social movements, it places great challenge for the Hong Kong and Mainland Chinese authorities to keep their power intact.²² ("The Impact Of Online Activism On Hong Kong") Five years after the pro-democracy Umbrella Movement of 2014, in which high-profile individuals led mass occupation of the city center, only to be arrested or exiled in the aftermath, Hong Kong's youth have decentralized their protests. They are impeccably organized, yet no one is in charge. Many groups are participating in a growing wave of grassroots dissent. Unions, student associations, churches and activist organizations like Demosisto, a nonviolent resistance group led by Joshua Wong, the now-imprisoned face of the Umbrella Movement, have all called on members to participate in marches, rallies, and other forms of direct action. Most participants in the protests are not coming as part of any organization, Law said, but finding out about different activities through social platforms online.²³ (Su, 2019)

South Korea

In the Candlelight Movement of 2016–17, demands were formulated in a way that did not appear radical, thus made the cause appealing to middle-class Koreans. Critical discussion of politics had moved to online platforms over the previous decade. Under the Lee Myung-bak (2008–13) and Park Geun-hye (2013–17) administrations, South Korea experienced numerous setbacks in terms of political liberties. Many journalists and reporters who were tackling the

²⁰ Yang, 2014

²¹ Pomfret, 2013

²² "The Impact Of Online Activism On Hong Kong"

²³ Su, 2019

issues were sensitive to these presidents had to leave their positions or were demoted. These journalists and producers chose online outlets as spaces for continuing their work. In places where the government exerts strict controls on the media, the Internet can be an important tool for people to disclose injustice, as research on China has shown ²⁴(Kim, 2019).

In the case of South Korea this particular turn towards online platforms did little to diminish the standing and credibility of these new media organisations. The Internet is where most people in South Korea go to get their news. According to the Reuters Journalism Research Centre at Oxford University, 77 percent of Korean news readers access media content through an Internet portal website, compared to an average in other countries closer to 30 percent²⁵ (Kim, 2019). As critical journalists left for online media, citizens followed. This led to a radical transformation of the media landscape, with the emergence not only of new outlets but also of new formats.

For instance, political podcasts have now become a form of online media that has grown in prominence over the past several years. Online media figures are extremely successful in pulling in listeners. Political programmes gain larger audiences than other traditional formats. The main platform, Podbbang, hosts 10,000 audio podcasts alone. Of their top ten podcasts, seven address politics. Second, online modes of political engagement were not only critical, but also entertaining. The most prominent podcasts are humorous and fun to tune into. Online platforms have produced entertaining ways of talking about politics. ²⁶(Kim, 2019) One example is a discourse around ‘spoon theory’ (sujeoron), which describes people born with or without privileges, respectively, as ‘gold spoon’ and ‘dirt spoon’²⁷ (Kim, 2019). Collectively, these were the most searched terms of 2015 on South Korean online portals²⁸ (Kim, 2019). Actors and singers whose parents were also celebrities were among the first to be labelled ‘gold spoons’—they were criticised for making their way through their of social mobilisation, spreading jokes about ‘spoons’ or watching someone laugh and curse the president simply does not fit with the images expected of ‘pro-North Korean’ forces. This style is far removed from what could be identified by conservatives as a radical—and therefore illegitimate—movement.²⁹ (Kim, 2019)

²⁴ Kim, 2019

²⁵ Kim, 2019

²⁶ Kim, 2019

²⁷ Kim, 2019

²⁸ Kim, 2019

²⁹ Kim, 2019

3. Online Activism and India – Anti CAB Protests

Social media has been growing rapidly since its inception in the human world. The work of many scholars suggests that there is a clear connection between the Internet and the public sphere. However, the Internet is a network of networks and over its history has continually changed in terms of technology, both underlying and on the user end. That "the Internet" is like a public sphere may be an intuitive statement, but it must be empirically grounded.³⁰ (Biju & Gayathri, 2011)

Today, Indians use a range of social media sites and are increasingly changing these platforms to get news and information, thus, emerging as key venue for political debate and discussion and sometimes to engage in civic-related activities. The same has been providing platform for political activism as well. Earlier, political activism could only be associated with voting and writing to your representative. With gradual times it became more organized wherein various independent organisations and student led communities came together to take the streets with their protests and be heard. All this to be an inclusive citizen of the country to bring the change they wish to see. With Digital Age coming and rise of Social Media this organizations have now become more active and found its way to be more inclusive. Now participation is not only through physical presence but also through online solidarity.

In the rise of recent chain of events wherein the Government of India floored the Citizenship Amendment Bill a huge uprising has been observed by the citizens of India against its implementation. The Citizenship (Amendment) Bill, 2016 was introduced in Parliament to amend The Citizenship Act, 1955, so that people could be made eligible for citizenship of India.³¹ (The Indian Express, December 2019)

Two prominent student bodies - the North East Students Organization (NESO) and All Assam Students Union (AASU) – have been at the forefront of the agitation against the bill, which they say will encourage more Hindus from Bangladesh to immigrate to India diluting the local culture and will compete for limited resources.³²(Aljazeera, 2019) Another critique, includes of discrimination on the basis of religion against the Muslim community and has been the major reason of uproar of protests around the country. Starting from North-East, a wide protest was observed against the Bill on October 3, 2019 by North East Forum for Indigenous People. Following, this on December 10, 2019 Activists under the banner of Naga Students' Federation (NSF) expressed solidarity with people in other North Eastern States protesting against the Citizenship Amendment Bill (CAB) by holding a sit-in protest. Furthermore, independent students to spread the word also took their personal Instagram handles, Facebook, and Twitter to spread messages and awareness about the happenings in their homeland to turn national attention towards the unrest in North East. Considering the same, student protestors protesting

³⁰ Biju & Gayathri, 2011

³¹ The Indian Express, 2019

³² Aljazeera, 2019

the implementation of The CAB and in solidarity with the North-East, were then harmed and mishandled by the police at Jamia Milia Islamia, New Delhi. Furthermore, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, Uttar Pradesh was also under threat and attack by the police. Not only these incidents left a major impact on the protestors but also to the rest of nation which now stands united against such brutality and violence.

Since December 15, 2019 the country has been witnessing everyday turn out of thousands and lakhs of people in an organized march against The CAB and cases of Police Brutality. Places like *Jantar Mantar, Red Fort, Jama Masjid, Shaheen Bagh, ITO, Mandi House* and major cities like Mumbai, Kolkata, Bengaluru and Hyderabad have been organizing and joining protest. While this is what happens at the forefront the back of how these protests is being organized are left alone led by social media campaigns and messages. Social Media in a case has established itself to bring people together faster and easily. The organization has been successful to such an extent that Internet Blackouts were observed quite frequently done by the Government of India. People wherein were not able to join the protest then led social media campaigns into educating and creating awareness about recent happenings through sharing social media stories and posts by people who are attending protests. Making pictures slides and writing posts on Social Media apps about the chronology of events, spreading awareness about any recent protests nearby etc. While most were to be silent protest and peaceful ones, they eventually turned into violent by protestors getting detained and lathi-charged by the present police constables at the spot of protests. In such a case, social media was taken by a storm of numbers and contacts of available lawyers, doctors, practitioners from various professions to come together and extend their help and solidarity with the protestors.

Every day, one can observe individual sharing posts and stories on Instagram of various protests, dates and time of protests, interviews which campaign Anti-CAB, explanation of the bill, contacts of people who can come forward to help a person if one is detained or attacked and to create awareness about the current situation. Not only this, but Twitter also observed #AntiCAB and #CABProtest as trending hashtags to extend their thoughts, concerns and solidarity towards the protestors. Various images and videos from the protest are also being shared to keep everyone involved and share their concern with their fellow protestors. Social media has not only curbed the gap of communication but has given so many people the space to voice their opinion against injustice and unjust.

Examples of social media in gathering a protest could be seen at Delhi Police Headquarters, Ito, New Delhi wherein students gathered in large numbers to condemn against police brutality. In Mumbai, wherein 1.5 lakh people came out on the streets to protest The CAB and Police Brutality. Similarly, Bengaluru, Kolkata, Hyderabad was also observed voicing their opinion.

Role of ICT has further enhanced and helped in formation of the groups of protestors and bring in light the student unity irrespective of the presence of any single leader or political party. Social Media apps like Instagram and Twitter are used more vividly than before to create and

share posts around “What the CAB Bill is”, “Upcoming Protests”, “Live Updates from the Protests” and sharing concerns and expressions. Not only this, observing the current scenario awareness on safe places for any protestor to visit to in case of unrest and violence, contacts of lawyers and medical practitioners or people opening their spaces for violence inflicted students was also shared on these platforms. Furthermore, various help groups and donation drives which are and were conducted for the Students of Jamia University and protestors at *Shaheen Bagh* also gained massive support because of such Social Media presence. It was observed that various violence and unrest report first came up on social media and then followed by various media channels, thus, imposing the greater power of the former over the latter.

Social media enraged a new wave of dissent. Not only pertaining to individual thought process it also brought a new wave of looking at past literature. All these protests saw a heavy emphasis on contemporary and historical literature. For instance, in India contemporary writers such as “Faiz Ahmed Faiz” was highly quoted with his poem *Hum Dekhenge*. Twitter storm and Instagram stories were narrated around this poem and his other various writings.

Concluding Remarks

The dissent towards injustice today isn't just limited to the activists. In a country like India, Social or Online Activism has become a new wave of dissent and dialogue. Through the means of ICT and Social Media today everyone can advocate their voice and dissent towards such cases of unjust. With no leader at power, the mass can gather together as one unit to stand against the injustice faced by a certain community. And it's not limited to a certain section but to everyone who associates one with the Social Media Age. From students to household workers to service men, these young protestors have not only taken over the Internet with their narratives but also gained mass support in organizing street protest without a single leader. Activism and protesting have evolved itself into new age of digitization, wherein you can show and express your disinterest and discontent through sharing, writing or even recording.

In the digital age, activists can easily raise awareness, share videos and opinions through various online platforms. The amount of information generated online on various protests, advocacy and awareness is far more than what print media publishes. Not only just Social Media apps but Blogs have also contributed equally in this fight against injustice. This new space of discussion has also entitled those who earlier were excluded from issues of governance to have a voice. Social Media Apps itself is a space that allows many who could not have done so easily before to discuss political issues.³³ (Biju & Gayathri, 2011) As a parting thought, I would like my readers to analyse more about their social media presence and how they're knowingly or unknowingly participating in these protest. Online protest are not just limiting to dissent but providing awareness through public digital spaces. In the near future do we see online

³³ Biju & Gayathri, 2011

protests as the new mode of dissent and creating awareness or do we get entrapped in the web of surveillance because of this Social media activism.

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