INDIAN POPULAR CULTURE

Lecture39

Cyberpolitics and the Millenials of India

In this lecture, we'll be discussing the changing phases of activism, specifically cyber activism, how it began, and where it stands today. We'll also examine its impact and the key features of cyber activism within digital media spaces. In the last lecture, we explored cyber activism, focusing on the Zapatista movement, which emerged in opposition to the Mexican government. We discussed how digital spaces were utilized to mobilize and channel people, leading to social change. Following that, we observed the rise of Anonymous, though it took a longer time to develop.

No one knows who started Anonymous, but it has become a significant force in hacktivism. They hacked the Iranian government and exposed various frauds that occurred during the Arab Spring and in other Arab countries. Moving forward, we observe a changing landscape of activism. There has been considerable scholarship on global digital policies, highlighting the growing importance of digital infrastructures for political expression over the last two decades. This research emphasizes internet-based organizations as a key aspect of contemporary political movements.

Currently, many political agitations, whether for or against specific issues, originate online. The organizations driving these movements are rooted in digital spaces. Focusing on activism in India, we see that Indian millennials, particularly those from the overlapping age groups of millennials and Gen Z, utilize digital media to mobilize, satirize, and express their political interests.

These individuals use digital platforms to voice their opinions and share their ideologies regarding political matters. While they come from diverse class backgrounds, the voices that dominate these discussions tend to be those of urban elites or semi-urban individuals who have internet access and can engage with the ongoing dialogues in these digital spaces.

Digital political campaigning and propaganda, enabled by data analytics and targeted messaging, are crucial aspects of contemporary digital politics. As

discussed earlier regarding the IT cells of various political parties, they actively engage in digital campaigning and utilize data analytics to appeal to their voter bases. The evolution of political campaigning in the 21st century has become remarkably sophisticated.

Studies indicate that Indian politicians and political parties increasingly utilize the internet for their campaigns. However, surveys suggest that the direct impact of social media on voter turnout is relatively low. According to Lok Niti, the data shows that the influence of social media on Indian politics is not as significant as one might expect, though this may change in the future as digital engagement evolves.

In addition, state surveillance and biopolitics represent important dimensions of digital politics. State surveillance involves the monitoring of individuals, and during the COVID-19 pandemic, citizens were required to obtain vaccination certificates to travel or book hotels. This situation raises questions about biopolitics—the politics surrounding the individual body. Does a person have the authority to refuse vaccination, and what are the consequences of such a refusal? These practices of state surveillance and biopolitics are critical for understanding digital politics, particularly since individuals shared their vaccination certificates online, often unaware of the implications of biopolitical control.

The variety of participations and contestations in digital politics relies on a diverse range of social media practices, including hashtag activism, slogan exchanges, and video capture and circulation on platforms like YouTube. These activities facilitate engagement and contestation, as people share hashtags and statuses, capture videos, and circulate content. Many news channels have even adopted the idea of encouraging viewers to support a particular campaign by sending a missed call to a designated number, further illustrating how digital engagement shapes political discourse.

While digital campaigning and social media may not yet have a profound impact on voting behavior, their role in shaping public opinion and political engagement continues to grow. The sophistication of data analytics and targeted strategies employed by political parties reflects an increasing recognition of the importance of digital platforms in contemporary politics. As digital infrastructures evolve, so

too will the dynamics of political engagement, potentially leading to more significant shifts in voter behavior and participation in the political process.

Understanding these dimensions of digital politics—ranging from the influence of social media on public discourse to the implications of state surveillance and biopolitics—provides crucial insights into how political participation is being redefined in the digital age.

The realm of digital spaces in India is increasingly organized and interconnected, spanning metropolises, smaller cities, and the diaspora. Digital practices are intricately linked to the politics of caste, religion, region, and class, offering a glimpse into the networked forms of political action that have emerged alongside digital media. The government and political parties are actively engaging with citizens through these platforms. Notably, the Digital India program, launched in 2015, aimed to connect the entire nation, providing rural populations with access to broader resources and information—a commendable initiative.

However, the impact of digital media extends beyond the borders of the country, affecting the diaspora as well. These digital practices interact with the politics of caste, religion, and race, illustrating their significance in shaping contemporary political discourse. A key feature of this networked political action is the self-organization of ordinary citizens. Individuals are increasingly influenced by digital spaces, leading them to engage in voluntary political activities.

With the proliferation of internet media and affordable Wi-Fi, avenues for amplifying political voices have expanded for everyday citizens. Movements like #MeToo, which focused on gender-based harassment, and online Dalit activism highlight the disruptive potential of social media. However, caution is warranted against celebrating participation as empowerment alone. Millennial India reflects two conflicting aspects of digital politics: the potential for activism and the alarming rise of mob vigilantism.

These conflicting faces of digital platforms illustrate both the positive and negative outcomes of digital engagement. While digital activism fosters mobilization, it can also escalate tensions, resulting in incidents of mob violence. Traditionally, news reporters would cover grassroots events such as mob lynchings or communal riots on-site. Now, however, the narrative is often shaped by sensationalized media portrayals. As a result, public perceptions of specific

localities and their inhabitants—often based on race, religion, or caste—are influenced by these portrayals.

In response to this climate, authorities sometimes impose internet bans in certain areas to prevent the dissemination of videos that could escalate violence. This approach aims to control narratives and limit the spread of inflammatory content, but it underscores the duality of digital politics in India. On one hand, we witness a transformation in political activism; on the other, there is an unsettling rise in mob vigilantism.

The dynamics of Millennial India reveal a society grappling with the complexities of digital engagement. While the growth of digital spaces has empowered voices previously marginalized, it has also created an environment ripe for conflict and violence. The self-work of ordinary publics in these spaces demonstrates their ability to mobilize around issues of social justice, yet this mobilization can sometimes provoke backlash.

Moreover, the interconnectedness of digital media and traditional politics presents challenges. The speed at which information spreads can lead to hasty judgments and actions that escalate tensions. The instances of mob vigilantism fueled by digital narratives serve as a stark reminder of the darker side of digital engagement, where misinformation and sensationalism can lead to real-world violence.

Millennial India embodies multiple publics navigating the complexities of digital politics. The intersection of digital media with traditional power structures highlights the need for a nuanced understanding of these dynamics. As the landscape of political engagement continues to evolve, recognizing both the opportunities for activism and the potential for violence is essential. Understanding these dualities is crucial for grasping the changing nature of political participation in the digital age.

India has 450 million internet users, with digital media cultures flourishing across major social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. This growth highlights the presence of multiple publics in various digital spaces. On Twitter, we find individuals engaged in discourse—often avid readers and responders—who enjoy political discussions. In contrast, Facebook,

Instagram, and YouTube host a broader spectrum of users from diverse backgrounds.

Facebook leads in subscriber numbers in India, second only to the United States, and the platform has recently expanded its WhatsApp services, now reaching close to 200 million users. India has become one of the fastest-growing markets for Twitter in terms of active users. The Over-The-Top (OTT) media segment has similarly surged, with India being one of the largest and fastest-growing markets in internet penetration rates, which stand at 173.42 million in rural areas and 338.84 million in urban areas, according to the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India. Notably, almost a third of the world's population that remains unconnected to the internet resides in India, as noted by Iyengar in 2018. However, this situation may have shifted by 2024, particularly after the pandemic and the increase in OTT usage.

Despite these challenges, the continued growth of digital markets and state-led digitization agendas is evident. Digital tools are increasingly becoming a means for political communication. Internet media serve as sources of information, spaces for community engagement, and subjects of state policy. Political parties are leveraging these digital platforms to disseminate their agendas, conduct propaganda, and raise political awareness among the populace.

With a digitally savvy young population and the widespread use of digital media, it is crucial to examine the possibilities and limitations of internet-enabled political participation in contemporary India. To explore this further, we will consider two interlinked concepts: digital visibility and digital temporalities.

First, we will discuss digital visibility, which pertains to one's presence in the online landscape. It involves assessing how long an individual has been active on the internet and how this visibility affects their political engagement. The nature of one's digital footprint can significantly influence political discourse, shaping how individuals and groups interact and mobilize around various issues.

As we delve into these concepts, it is essential to understand how digital visibility intersects with the broader political landscape in India. This understanding will provide insights into the evolving nature of political participation in the digital age,

illuminating both the opportunities and challenges that arise in this dynamic environment.

By examining the nuances of digital engagement, we can better grasp the implications for civic participation and political activism in India. The interplay between visibility and temporal dynamics will reveal much about how individuals and communities navigate the complexities of political life in a rapidly digitizing world.

What factors contribute to our understanding of digital visibility? Arvind Kumar Thakur argues for "new ways of seeing from below," documenting the surge of online expression among historically disadvantaged Dalits, who belong to one of India's most oppressed castes. Seeking to overcome their historical marginalization and challenge caste-based discrimination, Dalit groups have become active in creating online networks, discourses, and archives. Given the severe under-representation of Dalits in mainstream media—still largely controlled by upper-caste groups—digital media offer alternative avenues for political publicity, leveraging the potential of social media virality.

Thakur emphasizes the importance of seeing from below, focusing on the Dalit community's perspective. Historically marginalized, they are now asserting their voice in digital spaces, forming networks and sharing their narratives. While digital media can create opportunities for visibility, the conditions for Dalits in mainstream media remain stagnant. Their online virality may provide temporary attention, but it does not alter the broader systemic issues they face.

Thakur also points out that violent attacks on Dalit youths often go unnoticed without viral diffusion. While digital spaces have the potential to amplify these incidents, the reality is that significant events can remain largely unrecognized. In this context, social media's role is complex; while it can facilitate democratic deliberation, it can also contribute to rumor-mongering and serve different political agendas.

As voices of the Dalit community seek to disrupt the structured invisibility maintained by mainstream upper-caste political consciousness, civic campaigns organized by activists and everyday citizens are emerging as vital digital resources. These campaigns address issues such as corruption, public hygiene,

environmental protection, and urban poverty, increasingly using social media as a platform to mobilize ideas and actions.

These grassroots movements reflect the determination of ordinary citizens to enact change, independent of political parties. By leveraging digital platforms, they aim to create a desired future, though challenges remain in effectively mobilizing these efforts. Asa Doron's research indicates that India's youth are particularly adept at using social media networks to organize campaigns, showcasing the potential for digital tools to facilitate political engagement and activism.

While digital visibility offers new possibilities for marginalized communities like the Dalits, significant barriers persist in mainstream media and society. The interplay between online activism and systemic issues raises important questions about the effectiveness of digital engagement in fostering genuine political change. As we explore these dynamics, it becomes evident that while digital platforms have the potential to amplify voices, they must also contend with the realities of entrenched social hierarchies and power structures.

For example, campaigns focused on the cleanliness of public streets reflect citizens' impatience with the state's apparent inability to manage waste effectively. One notable initiative involves youth organizing cleanliness drives in their cities, especially when the government pays little attention to these pressing issues. In these civic-minded initiatives, digitally enabled actions serve as a powerful means to signal a desired future. Participants mobilize community members for weekend clean-up efforts, encouraging them to volunteer and contribute to the cause.

Digital media have provided more than just coordination tools; they have co-created a public culture of aspirational, change-oriented citizens. Many individuals initiate these transformative changes through digital platforms, demonstrating the inspirational potential of online engagement. While change-oriented citizens predate the digital era, as they relate to long-standing rights-based agendas and urban revival efforts, the networked nature of online communities has opened up new channels for mobilization.

It is important to emphasize that these change-oriented citizens are not merely a product of the digital age; they have been active for a long time, even before

widespread internet access became common. Digital platforms have simply enhanced their ability to mobilize larger groups of people for collective action. One illustrative example is the Ugly Indian Movement in Bangalore. This grassroots initiative began as an anonymous Facebook group where community members coordinated clean-up drives. Through social media, they gathered volunteers and maintained momentum, ensuring that these efforts extended beyond single-day events. Their sustained engagement led to significant improvements in public spaces and heightened civic participation among residents.

The community of change-oriented citizens extends its influence, encouraging broader participation from others in the neighborhood. This digital visibility associated with civic engagement and change-oriented political action has also facilitated new connections with the Indian diaspora. Those living abroad may not participate directly in local initiatives, but they support these causes through online communities, which has been made possible by digital platforms.

Moreover, this reflects a broader global trend of diaspora activism, where members of the Indian diaspora leverage internet-enabled networks to engage in civic and political campaigns related to their homeland. For example, movements like Narmada Bachao and various Dalit initiatives have attracted diaspora participation, allowing individuals to connect with local activists and contribute to these movements from afar. This form of engagement demonstrates the power of digital media to unite communities across geographical boundaries.

The interplay between digital media and civic engagement has fostered a vibrant culture of change-oriented citizens in India. By leveraging online platforms, these citizens not only address local issues but also connect with broader movements that resonate within the diaspora. The result is a dynamic network of activists who are able to amplify their voices and initiatives, demonstrating the transformative potential of digital visibility in civic activism.

As we continue to observe the evolution of these movements, it becomes increasingly clear that the digital landscape offers both opportunities and challenges. While it enhances mobilization and visibility, it also requires careful navigation to ensure that the core messages of these campaigns are not diluted or lost in the noise of the online world. The future of civic engagement will likely

hinge on the ability of these change-oriented citizens to maintain their momentum and continue fostering connections that can lead to meaningful societal change.

In this ethnographic study of the Aam Aadmi Party, volunteers in the United Kingdom reveal how digital platforms have enabled the Indian diaspora to participate in electoral campaigns and articulate the ideals of pan-Indian civil-mindedness. These volunteers promote the Aam Aadmi Party through digital campaigns while residing in the UK, highlighting the immense presence of political digitalization facilitated by diaspora participation.

Utilizing their technical skills and experience from the high-tech industry, these volunteers implement self-directed and flexible working practices typical of the global IT sector for political campaigning. Many in the diaspora are unable to return for voting, so they leverage their IT skills to support electoral efforts from abroad.

A common thread in these campaigns is a moral critique of the establishment, distinctly oriented towards the middle class and driven by digitally savvy youth. This demographic is notably more engaged in activism. Furthermore, Doron argues that prefigurative projects circulating across social media networks are often used by the middle class to favor the interests of the propertied class in Indian cities. Thus, the middle class plays a crucial role, aligning with the interests of the affluent.

Social media circulation can be policed for its potential visibility and its capacity to reveal the messy, turbulent politics of everyday life. Digital platforms expose the complexities of daily politics; whenever a minister attends a public event, individuals armed with cell phones record and circulate statements or incidents. This process highlights how everyday political turbulence is rapidly disseminated to the masses.

Additionally, issues related to remixes and unofficial uploads arise. These digital spaces often raise concerns about censorship, particularly with phenomena like deep fakes or unauthorized remixes. While the consequences may not always affect the uploader directly, they can have significant repercussions for those featured in the videos.

These considerations are crucial when discussing digital activism. In India, citizens relentlessly circulate and annotate material, frequently questioning the supremacy of official narratives regarding events and controversies. The prevalence of unofficial uploads can obscure actual narratives, leaving the public uncertain about the truth behind various incidents.

In a way, they are restricting the real narrative from moving forward. The virality of unofficial uploads continues to serve in the background. By injecting new circuits of witness and capture, digital platforms have thus created visibility and connections that defy naive celebration. Furthermore, alongside digital visibilities, the second interrelated axis concerns the temporality of digital media. Questions arise around the temporality of digital media and how these visibilities will evolve over time, especially as new digital elements are added to the present ones.

These digital temporalities refer to emergent forms of instantaneous coordination for political action, particularly through instant messaging services such as WhatsApp. In this era of digital temporalities, WhatsApp is used for instant messaging, highlighting the immediate nature of their communication. Kodi further notes a modality of spontaneous assembly and publicity in the southern state of Tamil Nadu. This brings us to the concept of cinematic populism, which is not new but has reached new heights with advancements in digital technologies. When an actor with a substantial fan base joins a political party, their followers often align with that ideology, effectively acting as a vote bank. This phenomenon is referred to as cinematic populism.

Moreover, the new mediations of political community under current conditions of digitalization function in response to cinematic populism. Referring to recent episodes of public agitation that followed intense online coordination, Kodi illustrates how social memory and regional pride are brought together through WhatsApp and Facebook circulation. Whenever political issues arise, they become intertwined with social memory, or the collective memory of a particular community, alongside regional pride. Through WhatsApp and Facebook, messages circulate to generate regional pride and reinforce social memory.

Asking people to refresh their memories about that particular incident, bringing together individuals from the same community through the circulation of collective memory and regional pride. These digitally coordinated mobilizations

led to effective publicity of spectacular proportions and popularity. Two such examples are Black Lives Matter and Dalit Lives Matter. This coordinated mobilization created a strong sense of activism and transformed these movements into significant phenomena. Both of these movements became very spectacular in nature.