

# FOURTH WAVE FEMINISM IN THE DIGITAL AGE IN INDIA: DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY AND EXPERIENCES

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**Abstract:** This study explores the emergence of Fourth Wave Feminism in India, examining its intersection with digital technologies and democratic participation. Through a critical analysis of online feminist activism, social media campaigns, and interviews with Indian feminist activists, this research investigates the ways in which digital platforms have transformed feminist discourse, mobilization, and democratic engagement in India.

The study highlights the experiences of Indian feminist activists in the digital age, including opportunities for amplified voices, challenges of online harassment, and navigating the complexities of digital activism. It also examines the impact of Fourth Wave Feminism on democratic participation in India, including increased civic engagement, feminist policy advocacy, and challenging patriarchal norms.

This research contributes to our understanding of the complex and multifaceted nature of Fourth Wave Feminism in India, shedding light on the ways in which digital technologies are shaping feminist activism, democratic participation, and social change in India.

Keywords - Democratic Participation, Fourth Wave Feminism, Digital Activism, Public Sphere.

## Introduction

The advent of the digital age has revolutionized the way feminist activism is conceptualized, mobilized, and practiced in India. The emergence of Fourth Wave Feminism, characterized by its emphasis on intersectionality, inclusivity, and digital mobilization, has transformed the feminist landscape in India. This new wave of feminism has leveraged digital technologies to facilitate deliberative democracy, amplify marginalized voices, and challenge existing power dynamics.

Feminism in the twenty-first century lacks a clear definition. The idea of Gender equality is shared by everybody, yet there are currently as many different interpretations of feminism in existence as there are feminists, based on their own ideas, history, and society. Feminism is an ideology and socio-political movement centered on women. Every feminist thinker believes in the idea that “*women should share equality in society’s opportunities and scarce resources*” (Delaney, 2005). Feminism is “*the belief and aim that women should have the same rights and opportunities as men; the struggle to achieve this aim,*” according to the Oxford Dictionary.

The feminism is described by “*the activism for the purpose of challenging and changing women’s subjugation to men*” (Ferree, 2006).

Feminism has undergone significant transformations over the years, from the first wave of feminism in the 19th century to the present day. The first wave focused on women's education and property rights, while the second wave emphasized women's empowerment and equality. The third wave, which emerged in the 1990s, focused on issues such as violence against women, reproductive rights, and LGBTQ+ rights.

In India, where patriarchal norms and power structures have historically silenced women's voices and marginalized their experiences, Fourth Wave Feminism has created new opportunities for feminist activism, mobilization, and advocacy. Through social media platforms, online campaigns, and digital storytelling, feminist activists in India are challenging dominant narratives, promoting feminist discourse, and fostering a culture of inclusivity and diversity.

### **The Idea of Fourth wave feminism**

The fourth wave of feminism, which has emerged in the digital age, is characterized by its use of digital technologies to mobilize, organize, and advocate for feminist causes. This wave of feminism is more inclusive, diverse, and intersectional, recognizing the multiple forms of oppression that women face.

Fourth wave feminism is defined as feminism that emerged from social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter (Rivers, 2017). Women engage in these kinds of interactions and encounters, most of which happen online (Rampton, 2015). Social justice movements like #MeToo and #TimesUp have exploded on social media at this time. Founded in 2008 on the basis of the "culture of call out," which establishes hubs for women as "consciousness-raising groups," Ealasaid Munro has dubbed it "Hashtag Feminism" (Baumgardner, 2011; Munro, 2013; Blevins, 2018).

Technological mobilization is a key element of fourth wave feminist projects. Youth are increasingly taking up multiple and contradictory online identities through interactions with others on Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, Tinder, and other social media outlets. The ability and desire to live online is facilitated by our technology-centered culture (Baumgardner, & Richards, 2011). For some, especially women on the margins, the internet has become a space to “call out” everyday forms of sexism and misogyny. While potentially liberating, these projects are often overwhelming individuals and disconnected from any larger political programs.

Recognizing the need to mobilize isolated expressions of online resistance, feminist projects have begun to use the internet to politicize local programs on a global scale. An example of the internet as a feminist mobilization tool in the fourth wave is the hollaback! campaign, which allows users from across the world to map their local experiences with street harassment on a global platform. This online tool was developed to aid growing grassroots “movement to end harassment in public spaces powered by local activists” (hollaback.com). The

focus of this campaign, then, is to highlight the continued prevalence of sexual violence and provide a forum for women and men to share their local experiences and feel empowered to incite change globally.

This movement uses social media as a powerful tool to combat gender-shaming, media sexism, professional discrimination, and harassment of women. It seeks to empower transgender individuals, women, and men by advancing the acceptance of any body type (Maclaran, 2015; Phillips & Cree, 2014). It has a lot to do with using social media, including blogs, YouTube, Tumblr, Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. Justice for women and an end to male sexual harassment and violence against women are the goals of this wave (Chamberlain, 2017).

It should be noted that the digital environment is also a challenging space, since many feminists using the internet as a tool for change face backlash and harassment. Anita Sarkeesian, a Canadian-American blogger famous for her video series exploring sexism in gaming, *Tropes vs. Women*, has faced repeated death and rape threats (McDonald, 2014). Brianna Wu of the #GamerGate controversy has also faced similar backlash in recent years (McDonald, 2014). In this context, important questions remain as to whether internet campaigns that confront sexism bring about any real social change and/or are connected to Fourth wave feminism: theory 7 real-world conflicts. Whether the current digital landscape demarcates a shift from third wave feminism is still being discussed, but contemporary technological innovations have unquestionably enabled the emergence of numerous online feminist communities (Munro, 2013).

Digital feminism or the “cyber feminism is being regarded as the fourth wave of feminism” (Martin & Valenti), has emerged with the popularity and propagation of web and digital technologies through which contemporary feminism and feminist activism are “concerned more in challenging traditional patriarchal, sexism, stereotypical gender and sexual discourse, misogyny, which fosters a collective call-out culture” (Mendes, Ringrose & Keller). It itself creates an alternative media world which empowers global solidarity among women. Faulkner says that “we cannot transform gender relations without engaging women in technology”. Breaking through the increasingly intricate relationship between gender and technology is crucial. Even though “the 4th wave of feminism is still in its nascent stage in India”, digital feminist movements rely mainly on social media platforms.

### **Interrelating Deliberative Democracy with Fourth Wave Feminism**

Digital technologies have enabled new forms of deliberative democracy, allowing citizens to participate in online discussions, debates, and decision-making processes. Deliberative democracy is a form of democracy that emphasizes informed discussion, collaboration, and collective decision-making among citizens. It is a participatory approach to democracy that seeks to involve citizens in the decision-making process, encouraging

them to engage with diverse perspectives, debate issues, and work towards mutually acceptable solutions.

Deliberative democracy is grounded in several key theoretical frameworks:

1. Habermas' Communicative Action - Jürgen Habermas' theory emphasizes the importance of rational discourse and communication in shaping public opinion.
2. Dewey's Participatory Democracy: John Dewey's work highlights the value of citizen participation in decision-making.
3. Rawls' Public Reason: John Rawls' concept stresses the need for citizens to engage in reasoned deliberation, respecting diverse perspectives.

In India, digital technologies have also enabled feminist activists to mobilize, organize, and advocate for feminist causes. Social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram have been used to raise awareness about feminist issues, mobilize support for feminist causes, and challenge patriarchal norms and power structures.

Digital feminism has provided a platform for women to express their opinions, experiences, and identities, and to connect with other like-minded individuals and groups. It has also enabled women to participate in online activism, which can be more inclusive and intersectional than traditional offline activism.

Feminist activists in India have reported a range of experiences using digital technologies for deliberative democracy. Many have reported feeling empowered by the ability to connect with other feminists, share their experiences, and mobilize support for feminist causes. However, many feminist activists have also reported facing online harassment, patriarchal backlash, and digital exclusion.

## Exploring the Experiences

The 'Slut Walk' in Toronto in 2011, "was the first time when women used Facebook and Twitter to gather support for a protest being labelled as sluts for dressing in revealing clothes". Subsequently these kinds of rallies and marches have continued all over the world. In India also, a similar movement called Besharmi Morcha began in Delhi in 2011. Next comes the campaign # Me Too by 2017, which has become a worldwide movement on sites including Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and others. It entered the international conversation against workplace sexual assault against women. The 'Everyday Sexism Project', launched by Laura Bates in 2012, similarly showed the participation of "women all over the world writing about sexual harassment at the workplace". This is one among the many online movements that had marked the beginning of the fourth wave of feminism. It encouraged thousands of women around the world to write about the "sexual harassment, workplace discrimination and instances of body shaming they encounter in their everyday lives". In India the focus on digital feminist activism was more on caste differences and social hierarchies.

As a response to the 2012, 'Nirbhaya rape case', Blank Noise launched a 'Safe City Pledge'. In the Nirbhaya rape case, a young woman, age 22, was brutally raped and tortured while on a moving bus in New Delhi. The victim faced severe injuries. Thousands of protestors marched across the streets in the country, agitating the security forces and pointing out the government's failure to protect women on the public platforms. Many others also expressed their sorrow, indignation, and anger via social media and networking sites like Facebook and WhatsApp. A protest online petition was signed by thousands of people in opposition to the occurrence. They started initiatives such as #Delhi Braveheart to fight for the victim's rights. Protests also extended to Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and South Asia. Around the world, including in Paris, protesters marched.

In 2013, various facets of society staged rallies online and offline, leading to the passing of the Criminal Law (Amendment) Ordinance by then President Pranab Mukherjee. "After considering around 80,000 suggestions received, several new laws were passed, and fast track courts were set up to hear rape cases".

Digitization of feminism in India acts as an outlet for new opportunities for the empowerment of other marginalized and minority women, most of them became the victims of patriarchal violence and subjugations. For example, in 2013, acid attack survivor Laxmi Agarwal collected around 27,000 signatures through an online petition, named 'Stop Acid Sale,' to limit acid sales, and the issue was taken to the Supreme Court. Numerous more victims of acid attacks were able to express their support for the sale of acid being prohibited because to the campaign's widespread media coverage. In 2013, the Supreme Court granted the request, imposing limitations on the sale of acid and designating it as a criminal offense under Section 326 of the Indian Penal Code. This section classifies actions that intentionally cause great harm through the use of dangerous weapons or methods. Thus, in many respects, digital feminism responds directly to the toxic offline and online environments and offers hope for ending the cycles of violence and subjugations. It speaks "publicly about these issues offers women the benefits of catharsis, as well as a sense of solidarity."

"Why Loiter," strives for women's rights to occupy public spaces in 2011, Shilpa Phadke showed that "the act of 'loitering' is more prevalent among men, while women are rarely alone in public spaces like parks and beaches, because they become the victim for male gaze, sexual gestures, and mostly feels uncomfortable while they are alone". #Whyloiter became more trending on Twitter in 2017 which led to women reclaiming public spaces and resisting patriarchal domination in virtual and physical spaces. The "Pinjra Tod" in 2015 against curfew hours in hostels played an important part in India's feminist movement. As Azad mentions, "the main goals of Pinjra Tod were to end the imposition of curfews on women, to provide affordable accommodation for women, to regularize the situation for paying guests, and to obtain the formation of elected Internal Complaint Committees for prevention, prohibition and redress of sexual harassment in universities."

Yet other movements were the #Lahukalagan happened on Twitter in 2017, which literally translates to “blood tax.” It concentrated on the 12% sanitary napkin tax, which was eliminated in 2018 as a result of the movement. In September 2020 a campaign was created, named “#MyBodyMyMethod: Because Contraception Matters,” with the tagline “So, what is the best contraceptive method? Who gets to choose it for you?” This poses some pertinent questions about our sexual and reproductive health that need to be answered. #MyBodyMyMethod, because “contraception matters. The goal of the campaign was to raise awareness and have a conversation about contraception, a topic that is frequently shrouded in rumors, taboos, and topics that are not freely discussed. “It also calls out the utero politics around contraception which is gendered with women bearing the burden of childbearing”. R G Kar Case 2024, #Reclaim the night/ #Night is ours.

## Conclusion

Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and other online platforms are being used by fourth wave feminists to express their emotions and raise awareness among women. The 21st century has shown society that women need to be self-sufficient and make decisions for oneself in public and private settings including education, social service, employment, professions, and marriage. Eliminating all kinds of patriarchal oppression, including racism, sexism, class oppression, imperialism, etc., is necessary to create a developed and sustainable society.

Feminist activists in India have reported a range of experiences using digital technologies for deliberative democracy. Many have reported feeling empowered by the ability to connect with other feminists, share their experiences, and mobilize support for feminist causes.

However, many feminist activists have also reported facing online harassment, patriarchal backlash, and digital exclusion. Online harassment has taken many forms, including trolling, cyberbullying, and hate speech. Patriarchal backlash has also been a significant challenge, with many feminist activists facing resistance and opposition from patriarchal groups and individuals.

As India continues to grapple with the challenges of patriarchy, inequality, and social injustice, the role of digital technologies in facilitating deliberative democracy and feminist activism will be critical. By amplifying marginalized voices, challenging patriarchal norms and power structures, and creating new forms of feminist activism, Fourth Wave Feminism in India is helping to create a more just, equitable, and participative democratic society.

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