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Indian women finding voice and visibility through social media support

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Abstract

Social media has brought a social reformation for Indian women who has been otherwise restricted and suppressed since ages in the name of societal norm and traditions. It has given our women a platform to discuss issues that otherwise considered too 'sensitive' in the public domain of Indian society. Their presence, visibility and voice in the social media has led to women empowerment, cyber activism and a rise of new 'feminism'. Indian women can be seen to be more vocal, confident and expressive due to the existing social media's support.

The paper will look into such social media events and campaigns to establish the fact that social media support has successfully empowered the women giving them a voice and visibility. It will further discuss how the social media participation has helped the Indian women to raise concern and voice on issues related to them.

Keywords: social media, social status, social media support, social movement

Introduction

Social media besides dealing with the various aspects of society and its issues and concerns, has pro-actively presented women related matters and issues. It has given the women a platform to come out and express themselves in the public sphere. The social media has acted as a strong advocate of the women's rights, freedom and wants. It has helped changed the aged-old perception of the patriarchy world which has treated women as the 'second gender'. The Indian women through the social media's support and digital activism are re-introducing feminism. The social media features like selfies, snaps, hashtags, challenges, posts, likes, dislikes and shares have helped them to communicate to the world. Their life, success stories and work on the social media platform are inspiring others. They are using this virtual support to connect, create and express themselves to the real world. There are number of cases where we can see issues related to women injustices, atrocities, domestic violence and infringement of freedom of speech, thought and expression which were not possible to discuss in the mainstream media were discussed and shared in the social media.

The social media campaigns and online protest have helped women to come out in open to ire their grievances, anger and concern on violence and injustice against each other. A small movement in the social media supporting women cause has often seen changed to people's movements, mass demonstration and protest in a short time. Such movements have forced the people to change their outlooks and even the government to bring changes in the legal and social system function.

The social media support has given the Indian women the confidence to speak before many, speak on camera and taking a stand. Though Tik Tok is banned for now by the government, but such apps and social media sources have

given confidence to many Indian women to talk to people with a source of income too. The social media has empowered those providing socio-economic opportunities and narrowing the gender inequality. The social media is not only changing the lives of women living in cities and metros but slowly of women staying in Indian villages and remote places with the spread of telecommunication and internet users in India.

Review of Literature

The relationship of social media and women is important because whatever image women have in our country that because of media portrayal. Media is the mirror of the society which shows the real status of women of our country. So, the visibility and voice of women is crucial for any society which is possible through extensive media coverage. But if we go through the mainstream media like T.V, print, radio we can find these mediums emphasis more on 'male voice'. As male can voice freely themselves without fear in our patriarchal society. But if we go by the reports, according to Women's Media Centre report 2007, women are underrepresented in traditional media as they receive only 38 percent of bylines in print, TV and wire news. Hence, the women very much in need of such platform where they could be heard and understood. The emergence of new media technologies and the social media has made for them this easier and convenient. Sue Thornham (2007) in her book the relationship between 'feminism, women and new media' have profoundly found out that the new technologies have changed the gendered identities^[1]. Social media has given a momentum to the women empowerment and women equality. It successfully mobilizes public attention putting them in the centre of public discourse. Women use social media as a tool to create and strengthen social networks and communities to share information and as a tool for feminist consciousness-raising

and feminist hashtag activism^[2]. All over the world the social media with its online platforms and increasingly powerful mechanism is mobilizing public support. India is no exception to it. If we look back, the media coverage of the horrific Delhi gang rape case and the online responses changed the mindset of the youth and it seem that people no longer willing to accept rape and sexual assault as 'a simple fact of life'^[3]. In India, not with the local communities but people are joining hands globally through groups and communities to help women. The social media is emerging as a platform to share and raise the restricted voices of women^[4].

Along with the women voice, their visibility in the social media is being established through the financial security and opportunities available through the social media entrepreneurship. Women are using social media to drive everything from social exchanges to transactions^[5]. Rani and Sripriya (2013) has stated that social media plays a significant role in creating financial opportunities for the female. Entrepreneurship has changed the way of commerce by adding creativity^[6]. A study conducted by NITI Aayog showed that forms of communication through WhatsApp and Facebook has recorded fastest growth in reaching women. Therefore, Indian government has increased the use of social media as it a key medium to reach to women beneficiaries in villages.

Research Methodology and Data Collection

The study has made an exhaustive study of online secondary data available on the growing significance of the social media thus encouraging women participation and empowerment. Campaigns and events have been studied to see how the social media is providing them a platform to be more visible and vocal. The study has also employed primary research and data collection through a survey of 75 women chosen randomly within the age group of 20 to 40. Women who are active users of social media were selected for this study. The Questionnaire Survey was used to know how the social media has been instrumental in strengthening and empowering the women and if in any form they have participated in social media public discourse on specific given women-related issues asked in the questionnaire.

Social Media, Social Taboos and Indian Women

The Indian women faces a range of social, cultural and religious taboos, stigmas, myths and superstitious belief due to our age-old societal structure. They are not expected to speak on subjects like mensuration, breastfeeding, sex, their relationship status, equal distribution of household work in the public arena. Instead they are expected to have long hairs, perfect and covered body, fair complexion, soft voice and a sober personality being born as women. The Indian women who have struggled hard to live to these taboos and stigma finally able to break them with the support of social media. Women who take this path have had to talk about things that they previously thought were private^[7].

Recently, the World Health Organisation to break down the stigma about breastfeeding in public by calling women to share breastfeeding selfie "Brelfie" of their own or someone they know. Similarly, there is initiative being taken from time

to time to come over the 'fair complexion' taboo associated with every woman with the support of social media. Similarly, India's first digital model- A 20-year-old Nila, with a wide-eyed and dusky, entered the world of fashion and made her debut on social media. Her dusky color instead of fair is a symbolism of digital feminism and activism against body shaming and to accept the women the way they are. Women are coming openly in the social media against social taboos like menstruation spreading awareness on it. Aditi Gupta, a social cause entrepreneur and co-founder of Menstrupedia, has created a website on menstruation which educate girls and women on periods with illustration and graphics.

There are many examples of women not being able to exercise a right to choose assignments and work in compare to their male counterpart. The lack of equal opportunity has widened the gender inequality. In such case the social media has helped women to put the cause of empowerment and gender equality. The women with the support of social media are also raising voice against the unequal distribution of work during the pandemic situation with the help of online petition.

An Indian woman has started an online petition on Change.org urging Prime Minister Narendra Modi to tell Indian men to share household chores equally with women. At present, her petition has 70,060 signatures, and aims to reach 75,000. "Unequal distribution of unpaid household work has rendered the harshest blow to women across India during this lockdown. Yet, women's care work continues to be invisible and no one wants to address this gross imbalance," Subarna Ghosh from Mumbai, co-founder of an NGO called ReRight Foundation, wrote in her petition. The absence of domestic helps under lockdown, has also reinforced existing sexist gender roles^[8].

Similarly, in 2009, a campaign called 'Pink Chaddi' was popular which started to oppose the moral policing on women by *Sriram Sena*, a socio-political group. Through the social media, the women gave a clear message that others have no right to control their life and the way they live.

The pink chaddi campaign started as a group on Facebook on February 5 by a young woman, Nisha Susan in 2009. Thousands of people joined the Facebook group, urging their friends through emails and other messages to send pink underwear to Sri Ram Sene. Over 3,000 people joined 'The Pink Chaddi Campaign' to send a bagful of pink underwear to the office of the Sri Ram Sene, on Valentine's Day. Indian culture^[9].

Other movements like #curvy or #curvee for positive body image are many among such online protest and movement which has given confidence to every Indian woman to embrace their bodies. Thus, breaking the taboos of perfect body and perfect shape.

Social Media, Social Justice and Indian Women

Today Social media has become a crucial tool of getting social justice. It bringing to light not only crimes and violence that is reported but also that goes unreported. The active link between the social media and social justice has helped many to get judgement and justice in a fair manner. No one can forget the Nirbhaya, Priyanka Reddy rape cases where digital online protest pressurised the government and the

administration to take quick and justified actions. Social Media become so powerful that it becomes the voice of people overnight. Everyone starts sharing, tweeting, #hashtagging their views, rage and demand for justice on social media. In order to do so they often even change their profile pictures with campaign picture to show their absolute support. As in the Delhi Gang Rape case, the users use a simple black dot with a white background as a profile picture throughout social media seeking justice.

On Google Trends' search volume Index, "Delhi gang rape", "Rape in Delhi" have been among the top search phrases in India till 20 December 2012. Change.org, an online petition platform, received more than 65,000 signatures for an appeal seeking the president intervention^[10].

Social media has given the women the space to speak up and be heard in the public discourse. Those voice which was not represented in mainstream media could be heard in the social media. The social media made it possible for them as they get a supportive platform and supporters to join them. The same happened in case of Priyanka Reddy rape and murder case also. Along with normal citizens, celebrities and sport personalities also came in large number in the support of the victim demanding justice. Social media was trending with hashtags like #RIPHumanity and #HangRapists. Not only women, but men also could be seen in large numbers posting posts and expressing anger against this heinous act of crime against women.

Twitter used @ Ravigupta_0 posted: "Speechless, shocked, ashamed, angry....The judiciary, police, governments, society. It's a big failure. We can't protect our daughters, our sisters, our friends. From Nirbhaya to Priyanka... #Priyankareddy"^[11].

The social media has also raised concern on domestic violence like violence against which often ends with a silence as the victim and against whom the allegation is made belong to the same family. The women therefore chose to keep quiet considering their own and family reputations. Many famous women personalities like Madhuri Dixit, Kangana Ranaut, Tapasee Pannu have urged women through social media to strong take action against domestic violence amid lockdown.

In wake of the rising domestic violence in India, National Bodies and Twitter India has launched search prompt of related keywords for domestic violence. The twitter social media team will search related words like #dowry, #gender violence, #maritalrape #ghareluhinsa, #mahilaaatyachaar # lockdown violence in English and Hindi to have a check on the violence against women^[12].

The posting of monochromatic and black and white selfies of women in the social media using the hastags #Challenge Accepted, #Women supporting Women, #Mee too movement is a trend to support other women across the world for the injustice and violence they face through the social media platforms. Such online protest, petitions, challenges and campaign has made justice delivered to them faster in most of the cases.

Social Media, Social Status and Women

The social media is supporting and reaching to the women providing them the opportunities and increasing their social status. It has opened new frontier for Indian women thus empowering them financially and socially. With the constant development in the Indian startup ecosystem, more and more women are chasing the entrepreneurial dream and succeeding in their ventures. This is empowering other Indian women still confined to the traditional homemaker role to think for themselves. As the social media wave sweeps India, the housewives are using their creativity and potentiality to make their business, through blogs, Food, craft designs. Indian women are using social media to turn passion into business they are responding to queries, posing videos, visuals, pictures, even getting the confidence to accept the negative feedback which further built their confidence.

With rising penetration of smartphones, internet, social media, ecommerce and on demand service platforms becoming part of our daily lives. These changes in lifestyles have also given rise to thousands of micro entrepreneurs, particularly women who now had now a chance to be financially independent for the first time. A slew of online platforms has also come up enabling women to be online sellers and entrepreneurs from the comfort of their homes^[13].

The Ecommerce Company Amazon partnering with SEWA (Self Employed Women Association) has launched 'The Saheli Store' to sell products of women entrepreneurs in India. Facebook has launched also 'Pragati' to boost women entrepreneurship in India. It is providing digital literacy and is working towards spreading awareness and adoption of technology among women in India^[14]. The social media has also become most effective medium during this COVID 19 bridging the gap between the women of urban and rural in India. During this crisis, many city-based women-led business owners on Facebook, Instagram and other social sites have taken the entrepreneurial plunge to help provide a steady flow of income for the women artisans of villages helping their products direct sell in the e-commerce sites. The social media is creating an identity of women inspiring others who look up to them with pride and honour.

Result and Findings

When asked the women respondents whether they have ever joined the social media protests, debate or campaign to support or criticise or raise voice, the majority of the respondents 48percent said that they have joined social debate at their own will to give their opinions, while other 30percent and 22 percent said they have joined the social media protest and social media campaigns respectively at different point of time to take a stand on topics they don't agree with or to support other women or any socio-political issues they feel has affected them or the country.

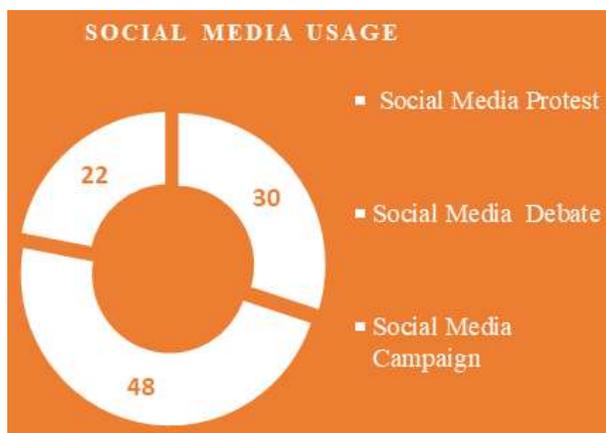


Fig 2

The majority of women respondents about 49percent feels the social media has played a crucial role in giving them an identity of their own. They feel now people recognize women on social media, read to their posts, understand them and their fields. Even housemakers have made their identity now with their post of thoughts, poems, recipes, entrepreneurship. While other 35 percent believes the social media has changed the image of the women. They are now bolder, assertive, straight forward and extrovert in their expression and words thus breaking the social taboo image of submissive and 16percent feels it has raised the status of Indian women giving them social and financial freedom.

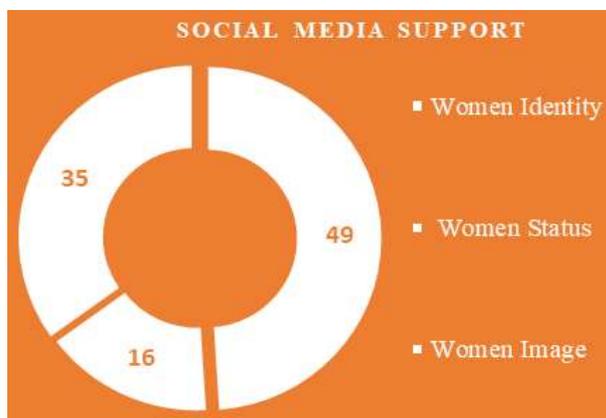


Fig 2

The respondents when asked about the way of representation of women in the social media that is more prominent for social empowerment, 64percent of respondents unanimously kept the view that more and more visibility of women has helped. They irrespective of their color, physic, views, class and creed has come out in the public platform with selfie photos, images and videos that has helped other women to gain confidence. It has helped to believe the real women instead of ‘beauty standard and photoshopped women’ on screen unlike other mass media like TV and Print. 36 percent feels the women using their freedom to expression ‘voice’ has helped bring changes. Women representation through voice in the social media using their opinions has ended social taboos and help raise concern on injustice and discrimination against women.

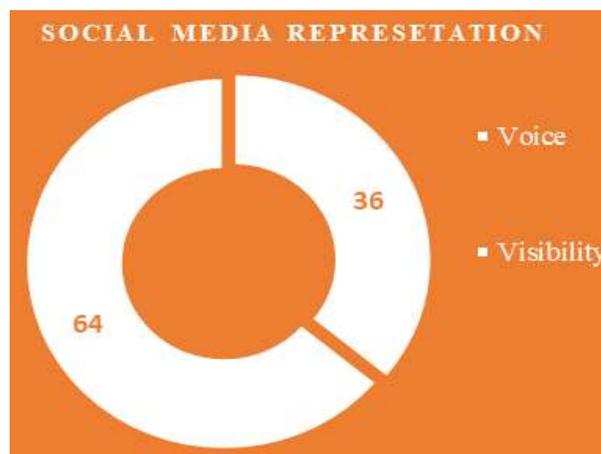


Fig 3

The women respondent asked on their social media participation on topics concerning or affecting them being in a patriarchy society, 24percent of them accepted that they have talked about gender inequality and posted video, posts, given likes, dislikes, express view and opinions on it. Second most talked, criticised topic was rape (20percent) followed by a very sensitive topics hardly discussed earlier by women in open i.e Menstruation (12percent) followed by issues like Domestic Violence (10percent), Divorce, Breastfeeding (8percent), Honour killing (7percent) Workplace Harassment (6percent) and on their sexual preference (5percent). The respondents felt that issues concerning the women which were not so comfortable to talk about in public domain or mainstream media has been possible to talk freely with the support of social media in India.



Fig 4

Conclusions

The social media in India has no doubt provided a platform to be more visible and vocal regarding issues pertaining to women. More visible women are, more helping them to create an identity and reshape their image. Social media has no doubt strengthening them and proving them a place where they could be heard and listened. Women are communicating freely and boldly on many topics and issues now that has been considered ‘sensitive’ in our society since ages. They are

actively participating in public debate, public protest and campaign that goes on social media. It's not that the issues that they face being a woman matters to them only but they taking a stand for other genders and sections also. Their participation in social media public discourse can be seen in various issues other than women-oriented that affect the country from political, economic to social.

The women have to face wrath of being open and extrovert and for taking such topics and discussion on the social media platform. They even face threat calls, bullying, derogative and vulgar comments on their remarks and posts. Despite this they are willing to come forward and have their right of freedom of expression through the social media. It has helped in the transformation of women making their presence felt in the patriarchal society. The social media has provided an online progressive culture for the sustainable development of the Indian women.

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