

Digital Shakti: Redefining Womanhood in 21st Century India

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Abstract

Social media has emerged as a powerful tool for Indian women, enabling them to voice their opinions, challenge societal norms, and participate in economic and political spaces like never before. Digital platforms have facilitated the rise of women-led businesses, activism against gender-based violence, and greater political engagement. Movements such as #MeTooIndia and #PinjraTod have highlighted the role of social media in mobilizing public discourse, while entrepreneurs and politicians have leveraged digital platforms to expand their influence. However, despite these opportunities, significant challenges persist. Cyber harassment, misinformation, and the digital divide continue to limit women's participation, particularly in rural areas where access to technology and digital literacy remains low. Women journalists, politicians, and activists often face online abuse, discouraging them from fully utilizing these platforms. This paper explores both the empowering and restrictive aspects of social media for Indian women, analysing real-life case studies, statistical data, and expert insights. It examines key trends in digital participation, the threats women face in online spaces, and the socio-economic impact of social media on their lives. Additionally, the study discusses ongoing efforts to bridge the gendered digital divide and enhance online safety for women. By highlighting both the opportunities and risks, this research offers recommendations for creating a more inclusive and secure digital environment where Indian women can freely express themselves and thrive in the digital age.

Keywords: Digital Gender Divide, Online Harassment, Political and Economic Participation and Social Media Empowerment

1. Introduction

Social media has changed the way people communicate, learn, and do business, making it one of the most powerful tools of the 21st century. For Indian women, digital platforms like Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube have become a space to express their opinions, raise awareness about social issues, and build careers. Unlike earlier times, when women's voices were often ignored or suppressed, social media now allows them to connect with a larger audience, share their experiences, and even influence policy changes.

For example, activist Laxmi Agarwal, an acid attack survivor, gained national attention through social media, using platforms to advocate for stricter laws against acid attacks and inspire other survivors.

Movements like #MeTooIndia and #PinjraTod have shown how social media can bring attention to gender-based violence and discrimination. Many women have also used digital platforms to start businesses, promote their work, and reach customers beyond their local communities. In politics and journalism, social media has helped women engage directly with the public, challenge stereotypes, and shape important conversations. For instance, journalist Rana Ayyub, despite facing online threats, has continued to use Twitter to expose social injustices and hold those in power accountable. Similarly, politician Smriti Irani has effectively used social media to connect with voters, share policy updates, and counter misinformation. However, this digital empowerment comes with its own challenges. Many women face cyber harassment, online abuse, and misinformation, which discourage them from participating freely. According to a 2022 report by Amnesty International, female journalists and politicians in India receive nearly three times more abusive tweets than their male counterparts, with much of the content being sexist and threatening. Additionally, the digital divide, especially in rural areas, prevents many women from accessing the benefits of social media due to a lack of internet connectivity, digital skills, or financial resources. A 2021 report by the Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI) found that only 33% of internet users in rural areas were women, highlighting a significant gender gap in digital access. Despite these challenges, efforts are being made to make digital spaces safer and more accessible for women. Organizations and governments are introducing initiatives to improve digital literacy and create stronger legal protections against online harassment. For example, the Digital India initiative has launched programs to increase internet accessibility in rural areas, and online safety campaigns such as the 'We Think Digital' initiative by Facebook have focused on educating women about cyber security.

This paper explores how social media is giving Indian women a voice while also examining the difficulties they face. It looks at real-life examples, discusses key trends, and suggests ways to make digital spaces safer and more inclusive for women in India.

2. Research Objectives

1. To analyse how Indian women use social media for activism, business, education, and political engagement.
2. To identify the challenges Indian women face in digital spaces.
3. To propose recommendations for fostering a safer and more inclusive digital ecosystem.

3. Literature Review

Several studies have examined the intersection of social media, gender, and digital influence in India:

Ghosh (2019) highlights how digital platforms have facilitated women's entrepreneurship by reducing traditional barriers to business ownership and market access.

Research indicates that social media has enabled women to participate in civic discourse and challenge societal norms. According to Banaji & Bhat (2020), online campaigns such as #MeTooIndia have had a significant impact on public conversations about gender equality and workplace harassment.

Despite its benefits, social media is also a site of gendered discrimination and violence. Studies by Patel (2021) and Sharma & Verma (2022) suggest that online harassment discourages women from fully utilizing digital platforms. Additionally, Singh (2023) notes that the digital divide disproportionately affects rural women, limiting their access to education and economic opportunities.

The literature suggests that while digital platforms have opened new doors for women, systemic barriers still exist, necessitating policy interventions and digital safety measures.

4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach, relying on secondary data analysis to explore how social media empowers Indian women while also highlighting the challenges they face. The research examines academic literature, policy reports, and case studies of digital activism, entrepreneurship, and political engagement. By synthesising information from multiple sources, this study presents a comprehensive understanding of the role of social media in shaping the voice of the 21st-century Indian woman.

5. Discussion

The Impact of Social Media on Indian Women:

5.1. Online Activism and Advocacy: social media has been instrumental in mobilizing gender rights movements in India. Campaigns such as #MeTooIndia, #GirlsCount, and #PinjraTod have raised awareness of gender-based violence and workplace harassment. These movements have influenced policy discussions and legal reforms. Case Study: The #MeToo Movement in India: The #MeToo movement in India gained momentum in 2018 when women shared their experiences of sexual harassment on social media. The movement led to resignations of high-profile individuals and forced organizations to reassess workplace policies.

5.2. Digital Entrepreneurship and Financial Independence: Women are increasingly using social media to launch businesses, leveraging platforms like Instagram and YouTube for marketing and customer engagement. Example: Nykaa's Digital Success- Nykaa, founded by Falguni Nayar, utilized digital influence to create a billion-dollar beauty brand, demonstrating how social media enables women entrepreneurs.

5.3. Women in Politics and Digital Engagement: Social media has allowed women in politics to directly engage with citizens, advocate for policy changes, and counter misinformation. Case Study: Priyanka Gandhi Vadra's Digital Strategy: Priyanka Gandhi Vadra has effectively used Twitter and Instagram for voter engagement, demonstrating the power of social media in political mobilization.

5.4. Education and Digital Learning: Online learning platforms and digital initiatives have expanded educational access for women, promoting skill development and career advancement. Example: SheThePeople's Digital Initiatives- SheThePeople offers digital literacy programs and networking opportunities, enabling women to access knowledge and mentorship.

6. Challenges Faced by Women in Digital Spaces

6.1. Cyber Harassment and Online Abuse: Women in digital spaces often face trolling, threats, and character assassination. Online abuse discourages many women from fully participating in social media

discussions. Example: Online Attacks on Women Journalists: Journalists like Rana Ayyub and Barkha Dutt have been targeted with online threats, illustrating the hostile environment for outspoken women online.

6.2. Digital Divide and Access Barriers: Many women, especially in rural areas, lack access to digital devices, reliable internet, and digital literacy training, preventing them from fully utilizing social media.

6.3. Misinformation and Gendered Disinformation: False narratives are often used to discredit women leaders and activists. Algorithmic biases in social media platforms can further suppress women's voices.

7. Recommendations for a More Inclusive Digital Space

To ensure that social media becomes a safer and more empowering space for Indian women, several steps need to be taken:

7.1. Stronger Laws Against Online Harassment: Existing cyber laws should be enforced more strictly, and new policies should be introduced to provide better legal protection against online abuse, threats, and gendered disinformation.

7.2. Better Implementation of Reporting Mechanisms: Social media platforms must improve their reporting and content moderation systems to ensure swift action against abusive content, fake news, and online harassment targeting women.

7.3. Digital Literacy Programs for Women: Training programs should be expanded, especially in rural areas, to teach women how to navigate digital spaces safely, identify misinformation, and protect their privacy online.

7.4. Bridging the Digital Divide: More investment is needed to improve internet access in rural and semi-urban areas so that women can fully benefit from the opportunities social media offers.

7.5. Encouraging Women's Entrepreneurship: Government and private sector initiatives should support women-led digital businesses through funding, mentorship, and online marketing training.

7.6. Safe Spaces for Women Online: Women-only discussion forums and support networks can be encouraged on social media to allow open conversations on issues like harassment, mental health, and career growth without fear of online abuse.

7.7. Involving Social Media Companies in Gender Equality Initiatives: Tech companies should work with policymakers and women's rights organizations to create safer digital spaces and promote gender-sensitive algorithms that do not amplify harmful content.

7.8. More Women in Tech and Media: Encouraging women's participation in technology, journalism, and content moderation roles can help bring gender-sensitive perspectives into decision-making processes on digital platforms.

7.9. Public Awareness Campaigns: Nationwide awareness campaigns should be launched to educate people about online gender-based violence and responsible social media behaviour, ensuring that digital spaces remain respectful and inclusive.

By implementing these measures, India can create a digital ecosystem where women feel safe, heard, and empowered to use social media for personal growth, activism, and economic success.

8. Conclusion

Social media has given Indian women a platform to express themselves, advocate for gender equality, and achieve financial independence. However, significant challenges, including online abuse, misinformation, and digital access barriers, must be addressed. Ensuring a safer and more inclusive digital space requires stronger laws, better digital education, and active efforts by social media companies to protect women users. By addressing these challenges, India can harness the full potential of digital influence to empower women in the 21st century.

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