

Social Movements and Digital Media: A Sociological Study

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Introduction:

Social movements are considered symbols of the dynamism of society. A social movement refers to the collective action taken against injustice, exploitation, inequality and deprivation in society. In Indian society, social movements have played a significant role, from social reforms to political transformation. The history of social movements in India has been highly influential. In the 19th and 20th centuries, social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Mahatma Jyotiba Phule, Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar fought prolonged struggles for the rights of Dalits, Adivasis(tribal community), women and against social evils. Traditionally, these movements were based on direct public contact, meetings and rallies. However, due to rapid developments in information and technology, the 'information-based society' has now transformed into a 'knowledge society'.

Digital media has emerged as a new platform for social movements in the age of information and communication technology. The internet, social media and mobile technology have made it easier for movements to gain widespread public support. Marshall McLuhan's concept of the "Global Village" has become a reality due to digital media, eliminating the barriers of time and distance and connecting people worldwide emotionally and intellectually.¹ In contemporary society, platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and WhatsApp enable information to spread instantly.² This technology has not only changed communication but has also transformed the way citizens respond to socio-political issues. Therefore, a sociological study of the increasing use of digital media in social movements has become highly relevant.

Objectives of the Study:

1. To study the concept of social movements and their role in social transformation.
2. To understand the concept of digital media and its importance in social life.
3. To analyse the role of digital media in social movements.

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4. To examine the changes in social movements due to digital media.
5. To understand the impact of digital media on democratic processes.

Research Methodology:

The researcher has adopted a descriptive research method for this paper. Secondary sources have been used for data collection, including books, research articles, academic journals, newspapers, online articles, websites and various databases. Based on the data gained from these sources, an in-depth understanding of the research topic has been developed and conclusions have been drawn.

Concept of Social Movement:

A social movement refers to organized collective action undertaken by citizens to bring about change in existing social, political, economic or environmental conditions. Networks of organizations, shared collective identity, mobilization of people toward a common objective and the pursuit of social or political goals are the major characteristics of social movements.³

According to J. R. Gusfield, social movements consist of collective demands aimed at bringing about change in the proposed social structure. Rudolf Heberle states that organized efforts at various levels to bring about fundamental transformation in the structural framework of society or to establish a new social order are called social movements.⁴

Social movements are not merely temporary reactions; they are long-term, goal-oriented and organized in nature. Their aim is not only to protest but also to transform social structures, value systems and power relations.⁵ A social movement emerges when a group within society becomes dissatisfied with its social conditions and organizes collectively to bring about radical change. Today, due to advancements in information and communication technology, digital media has become a new platform for social movements.

Concept of Digital Media:

Digital media refers to media based on information and communication technology, through which information is created, stored, transmitted and exchanged electronically. The development of the internet and computer technology has transformed human life. Technology has influenced all spheres of life. Ogburn demonstrated that even the use of radio had around 150 types of impacts on human life.⁶ With technological



progress, digital media has become faster, more interactive and wider in reach compared to traditional media. From a sociological perspective, digital media is not just a means of information dissemination but an important social structure influencing social relationships, public opinion formation and collective action.

Digital media includes social media, blogs, websites and mobile applications. Social media platforms allow individuals to express opinions, discuss social issues and organize collectively. Blogs and websites are effective tools for spreading ideas and intellectual dialogue. Mobile applications provide instant access to information, making communication more dynamic and accessible.⁷ Overall, digital media has transformed communication processes and provided new dimensions to social movements, awareness campaigns and democratic participation.

Digital Activism: Concept and Nature-

Digital activism refers to the use of digital media and information technology to create awareness, mobilize people and exert pressure for change on social, political, economic, or environmental issues.⁸ Compared to traditional forms of protest, digital activism is faster, cost-effective and broader in reach. The internet and mobile technology enable ordinary citizens to actively participate in social movements.

Digital activism takes various forms, including social media posts, hashtag campaigns, online petitions, blog writing, video campaigns and digitally organized protests. These platforms provide wide publicity to social issues and influence public opinion.⁹ Digital activism has given traditional social movements a new dimension, strengthening the link between online and offline protests.

Role of Digital Media in Social Movements:

Today digital media has become a powerful tool for social movements. It has provided a broader platform beyond the limitations of traditional media, increasing visibility of social issues and citizen's participation.

The 2011 anti-corruption movement led by Anna Hazare marked a significant phase in the use of digital media. Social media compelled mainstream media to cover the movement extensively. In 2012, during protests against the Delhi 'Nirbhaya' rape case, Facebook and Twitter played a major role in raising awareness. Movements such as #FarmersProtest and #CAAProtests attracted global attention through hashtags. WhatsApp has emerged as an effective tool for information dissemination and organization in both rural and urban areas. In 2018, the #MeToo movement in India provided women a platform to share



experiences of sexual harassment.¹⁰ The #StandWithJNU movement in 2016 emerged after student protests at Jawaharlal Nehru University, becoming a symbol of resistance on social media.¹¹ Digital media has fundamentally transformed the functioning of social movements through rapid dissemination of information, broader outreach, ease of mobilization and free exchange of ideas.

Changes in Social Movements Due to Digital Media:

Digital media has brought fundamental changes in the nature and functioning of social movements. Online campaigns, hashtag movements, e-petitions and digital propaganda have expanded the scope and impact of movements. Online mobilization has strengthened street protests, making them more effective.

Digital media has reshaped democratic processes by increasing citizen participation. Social media and digital platforms provide opportunities for citizens to express opinions, engage in discussions and improve decision-making. From the perspective of freedom of expression, digital media offers a platform for open articulation of thoughts and experiences. Thus, digital media has evolved into an important social institution in modern democracy.

Findings:

- Social movements are powerful tools of social transformation and digital media has fundamentally changed their nature and functioning.
- Digital media has provided a broad platform for movements, facilitating rapid information dissemination and awareness.
- Social media and digital activism have increased citizens' social and political participation.
- Organizational structures of movements have become more decentralized, participatory and democratic.
- The relationship between online and offline protests has strengthened.
- Despite promoting freedom of expression, challenges such as misinformation and the digital divide persist.
- Digital media has become a significant social institution in modern democracy and social movements.



Conclusion:

Due to advancements in information and communication technology, digital media has transformed social movements into powerful tools for awareness, mobilization and support-building. Digital activism has democratized expression and increased citizen participation. Coordination between traditional and modern methods has made movements more effective. However, challenges like the digital divide and information reliability remain. Overall, digital media plays a decisive role in contemporary social movements and democratic processes.

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