

## **Unleashing the Power of Digital Activism: A Tool for Rural Communities to Bring Social Change**

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### **Abstract**

Digital Activism as a phenomenon has evolved tremendously since the inception of the Internet. This article highlights the evolution of digital activism in the global and Indian scenario and transformation during COVID-19. It also observes current digital activism trends in Odisha regarding how rural communities use social media, especially Twitter, to seek redressal from government authorities. The study also briefly discusses the importance of collective action and how a collective-to-connective approach can drive social change.

### **Background**

British scientist Tim Berners-Lee invented the World Wide Web (www) in 1989. Four years later, in 1993, WWW became accessible publicly. Around the same time, the 2G network was introduced, and digital mobiles started selling commercially. From the late 1990s till 2012, scores of social media tools were developed for human interaction. But as these grew, they began to be used for multiple purposes – accessing news, marketing, building online communities, rallying people, and launching protests and campaigns.

Starting with MSN Messenger in 1999, the world witnessed the birth and growth of many social media tools, including:

- LinkedIn (2003)
- Orkut (2004)
- Facebook (2004)
- Twitter (2006)
- Pinterest (2010)
- Instagram (2010)
- TikTok (2016)

People discovered their power to create awareness and share facts about economic, political, and social struggles affecting people worldwide. It became a tool to create communities, mobilize, amplify, and support a cause remotely.

The Humanitarian Academy of Development (HAD) defines Digital Activism as “the process of using digital tools such as the Internet, social media, email, and mobile phones for mobilization, political action and to incite change.” It has recently gained widespread

recognition and increased usage. However, as a phenomenon, it has existed in some form or the other since the 1990s.

Many consider the Zapatistas movement in Chiapas, Mexico (1994), the first significant Internet-savvy justice movement. When news of the movement got limited to print media and what the media houses deemed necessary to circulate, solidarity groups in Mexico started typing the Zapatista's messages into e-text form. They sent these to worldwide receptive audiences – newsgroups, conferences, humanitarian groups, indigenous people's networks, and feminist networks, making it a global movement. After a prolonged struggle, the Zapatistas and the Mexican government finally signed the San Andrés Accords peace agreement in February 1996. It gave the Zapatistas a level of autonomy in Chiapas for some time.

From its evolution in 1990 to its current form, digital activism has contributed to creating a global space where information is readily accessible, instantly sharable, and easily actionable. In recent times, digital activism has amplified social movements and their outreach. Examples include the #Metoo movement, #blacklivesmatter, #savetheplanet, #EndSARS movement, and more. The impact of these campaigns – be it action taken, outreach, or creating awareness, makes it even more appealing.

Of India's total population, 833 million (68.84%) live in rural areas, while 377 million (31.2%) live in urban areas (2011 census). The Parliamentary Standing Committee report said, "About 70% of the country does not have Internet connectivity access, and available connectivity quality is poor." Despite its poor connectivity data, COVID-19 accelerated the integration of digital technology in all areas of work and life – healthcare, education, food delivery, banking, and governance.

In November 2019, the total number of Internet users above the age of 12 in India stood at 504 million (IAMAI-Nielsen Report on Digital India). In 2022, Nielsen released its (Bharat 2.0 Internet study) and provided some pertinent data:

- The number of active Internet users grew to 592 million (aged 12 and above)
- Compared with 2019, active Internet users above the age of 12 years have shown an impressive growth of ~37%
- Rural users' growth of 45% continues to outshine urban users' growth of 28% in 2019
- Female users' growth in the last two years is a whopping 61% compared to male users, who grew at 24%
- One in every three female Internet users in rural is actively using the Internet
- Mobile phones have remained the key device for all Internet usage across sectors

COVID-19 altered the social media landscape. During India's lockdown to fight the pandemic, social media emerged as the primary tool to stay connected and work with government machinery. Twitter became a redressal mechanism for COVID-19-related issues like education, safety, vaccinations, hospital resource availability, health/food items distribution, travel arrangements for migrant workers, and more. Now, it is a rather expansive process incorporating multiple issues across geographies. COVID-19 expanded the reach of digital activism to people who were earlier excluded from direct participation. This exclusion

involved remote rural areas and marginalized communities that lack electricity, phone connectivity, phone devices, or the skills to operate them. From 12 million users in 2013 to 24 million in 2022, the number of Twitter users in India grew steadily. Besides Twitter, various digital tools are now available:

- Websites for online petitions (such as Change.org and Avaaz.org)
- Social networks (Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Myspace)
- Blogs (as a form of citizen journalism)
- Micro-blogging (Twitter)
- Mobile phones

The digital activism trend in Odisha is no different; having taken root during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is now growing rapidly, addressing many community issues.

Upendra Mahanand from Odisha uses Twitter to highlight community issues and get relief. In a day, he travels to about 4-5 villages, meets villagers, takes pictures, and collects statements for sharing with relevant authorities requesting immediate action. Upendra is among the many people in India using social media to address issues. This is the new generation of 'Digital Activists.'

Atmashakti Trust, a not-for-profit organization, builds people's collectives in rural districts of Odisha. It has supported the creation of 23 district-level collectives with two state-level collectives, Odisha Shramajeebee Manch (OSM) and the Mahila Shramajeebee Manch Odisha (MSMO). Both these collectives have been instrumental in organizing state-level campaigns leading to policy-level changes. COVID-19 gave the organization an opportunity to change its strategy from collective-to-connective, mobilizing marginalized communities for collective action through the digital medium. It raised a cadre of rural Digital Activists who emerged to highlight issues and mentor communities using digital tools. The network of activists collated issues from rural Odisha (drinking water, health, education, social security, livelihood), amongst others, and shared them on social media platforms, especially Twitter, for redressal.

Collectivism has sustained social movements in rural India, with people taking up community issues and using collective action for redressal. With its easy accessibility and entry points, digital activism became popular, inclusive, and mainstream. Now, people can launch protests and reach millions of like-minded individuals online; a powered word on Twitter can begin a global action. Now is the right time to harness the power of rural communities through digital activism to bring in social change.

Despite digital activism being considered 'lazy activism' by many, there is no denying its ability to mobilize, amplify issues, and bring widespread impacts. It has generated engagements and debates to advocate, influence, and bring policy-level changes. It has given a platform to the unheard and allowed minorities, Dalits, indigenous tribes, LGBTQI+, and women to play a central role, making for a more inclusive narrative. The way forward would be to incorporate digital activism with conventional activism methods to hasten the process of social change instead of looking at both as separate entities.

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