



Social Media as a Tool for Empowering Marginalised Groups

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Abstract

Social media has transformed the landscape of public discourse in India, offering marginalised communities an unprecedented platform for visibility, expression, and resistance. Historically excluded from mainstream narratives, groups such as Dalits, Adivasis, religious minorities, and LGBTQ+ individuals are increasingly using digital spaces to articulate concerns, share lived experience, and organise collective action. Drawing on a qualitative comparative analysis of four case studies, the #DalitLivesMatter movement, the #SaveHasdeo campaign, LGBTQ+ digital advocacy, and the Anti-CAA/Shaheen Bagh protests, this paper examines how social media enables democratic participation while also reproducing structural inequality through digital-literacy gaps, hate speech, surveillance, and algorithmic bias. The comparison shows that digital visibility alone does not determine outcomes: campaigns backed by pre-existing legal or organisational infrastructure and greater mainstream-media salience achieved more concrete policy traction than a campaign facing structural media invisibility and diffuse economic-political opposition, even though all four generated substantial online visibility. The paper concludes that realising social media's democratic potential in India requires addressing these underlying structural asymmetries, not only expanding platform access.

Keywords: Social Media, Digital Activism, Marginalised Groups, India, Digital Inclusion, Algorithmic Bias, Participatory Governance

I. Introduction

Social media has emerged as a defining force in India's public sphere, allowing voices from the margins to reach large, diverse audiences, alongside traditional gatekeepers rather than only through them. By January 2024, India had more than 467 million active social media users, making it one of the most digitally connected populations worldwide (DataReportal, 2024). These platforms bridge geographical, social, and cultural divides, offering spaces where marginalised communities

can engage in dialogue, share knowledge, and organise movements.

Historically, groups such as Dalits, Adivasis, religious minorities, and LGBTQ+ individuals have been sidelined in both media representation and political discourse (Oxfam India & NewsLaundry, 2019). For many, digital platforms have become important tools for self-representation and advocacy. Yet challenges persist from unequal internet access to targeted harassment, which complicate the transformative promise of these spaces. This paper explores the dual nature of social media: as a platform for empowerment and as a contested space shaped by existing inequalities.

Existing accounts of digital activism in India tend either to celebrate its democratising potential or to catalogue its risks, without systematically explaining why some digitally mobilised movements achieve tangible legal or policy change while others, despite comparable online visibility, do not. This paper addresses that question through a comparative analysis of four cases spanning caste, indigenous rights, sexuality, and religious-minority citizenship. Section 2 reviews the relevant literature and situates the paper's theoretical framework; Section 3 sets out the theoretical framework in more detail and Section 4 the methodology; Section 5 presents and compares the four case studies; Section 6 discusses the findings; Section 7 situates them within India's legal and human rights framework; and the paper closes with recommendations, a conclusion, and limitations and directions for future research.

Contribution of the Study. This paper's contribution is threefold. Empirically, it brings together four movements: caste, indigenous rights, LGBTQ+, and religious minority mobilisation that existing scholarship has generally treated as separate literatures, allowing direct comparison within a single national context. Theoretically, it extends Fraser's (1990) counterpublics framework and Castells' (2012) and Tufekci's (2017) accounts of networked movements into a specific, testable comparative claim: that digital visibility converts into tangible outcomes conditionally, depending on pre-existing legal or organisational infrastructure



and mainstream-media legibility, rather than uniformly or automatically. Practically, this reframes digital-inclusion policy: expanding access and literacy, while necessary, is unlikely by itself to equalise outcomes across marginalised groups unless paired with investment in the legal-advocacy and representational infrastructure that determines whether visibility translates into change.

II. Literature Review

Two strands of existing scholarship inform this paper. The first documents structural exclusion from legacy media. Mainstream Indian media has long been dominated by upper-caste, male ownership and leadership, limiting the diversity of perspectives presented to the public (Oxfam India & Newslaundry, 2019). Coverage of issues affecting Dalits, Adivasis, and other marginalised groups has often been minimal, selective, or framed through stereotypes, a pattern documented in detail in relation to upper-caste dominance of Indian newsrooms and its extension into digital media (Mandal, 2020). This control over narratives has constrained public awareness and policy debate, leaving marginalised communities without reliable means to tell their own stories; the advent of social media offered a partial corrective, allowing these groups to communicate more directly with audiences on their own terms, though, as this paper shows, not on equal terms with one another.

The second, more directly relevant strand studies specific instances of digital activism in India and its diaspora: caste-justice mobilisation and digital archiving of caste-based testimony (Paul & Dowling, 2018; Baishya, Sreedhar Mini, & Soundararajan, 2023), the political economy of hate speech and majoritarian digital politics (Banaji & Bhat, 2022; Udupa, 2018), and networked protest more broadly (Castells, 2012; Tufekci, 2017). Udupa's (2018) concept of "enterprise Hindutva" is particularly instructive: it demonstrates that the same platform affordances that enable marginalised-group mobilisation also structurally favour majoritarian and well-resourced political actors, a tension this paper's comparative cases make visible from the other side.

What is largely absent from this literature is a systematic comparison across movements representing different marginalised constituencies within the same national context. Most existing work treats caste activism, queer digital advocacy, indigenous rights campaigns, and religious minority protest as separate literatures rather than asking what explains their differential outcomes when

using broadly similar platforms and tactics. This is the gap the present paper addresses.

Research Gap. Despite a growing body of scholarship on digital activism in India, there is no systematic comparative account of why structurally similar uses of social media hashtag campaigns, livestreamed protests, and testimonial content produce divergent real-world outcomes across different marginalised communities. This paper addresses that gap.

Research Objectives. 1. To document how four marginalised-group movements in India used social media for mobilisation and advocacy. 2. To compare the tactics, reach, and outcomes of these movements. 3. To identify structural factors, legal infrastructure, mainstream media visibility, and state response that explain differences in outcome. 4. To situate these findings within India's legal and human rights framework and derive evidence-based policy recommendations.

Research Questions. - RQ1: How did each of the four movements use social media to pursue empowerment and advocacy goals? - RQ2: What differences in tangible outcome (legal, policy, or material change) emerged across the four cases, and why? - RQ3: What structural and legal conditions enable or constrain social media's empowerment potential for marginalised groups in India?

III. Theoretical Framework

This paper draws on Nancy Fraser's (1990) concept of *subaltern counterpublics*, alternative discursive arenas in which marginalised groups formulate identities and interests that are excluded from the dominant public sphere, to interpret the role of social media in amplifying the voices of marginalised communities in India. It further draws on Manuel Castells' (2012) theory of networked social movements and Zeynep Tufekci's (2017) analysis of digitally enabled collective action, particularly her distinction between movements' capacity for rapid, low-cost expansion of public visibility and their comparatively weaker capacity to sustain long-term organisational structures traditionally provided by formal institutions.

Building on these perspectives, this study proposes a testable analytical expectation: **digitally visible counterpublics supported by pre-existing legal, political, or organisational infrastructure are more likely to translate online visibility into tangible social and policy outcomes than movements that rely primarily on digital mobilisation.** The comparative analysis of the four case studies presented in Sections 4 and 5 evaluates this proposition by examining how varying levels of



institutional support influenced the effectiveness of digital activism across different marginalised communities.

Accordingly, the study conceptualises this relationship as follows:

Digital Visibility → (Moderated by) Pre-existing Legal/Organisational Infrastructure + Mainstream Media Legibility → Tangible Social and Policy Outcomes

IV. Methodology

This paper employs a qualitative, comparative case-study design based on secondary-source document analysis. Four cases were purposively selected to represent distinct axes of marginalisation recognised in Indian human rights discourse: caste (#DalitLivesMatter), indigenous and environmental rights (#SaveHasdeo), sexuality and gender identity (LGBTQ+ digital advocacy), and religious-minority citizenship (Anti-CAA/Shahen Bagh) — allowing comparison across, rather than within, a single identity category.

Data sources include news reporting, NGO and civil society reports, and available peer-reviewed scholarship on each case (see References). Each case was analysed along four dimensions: (1) digital tactics used; (2) scale and nature of visibility achieved; (3) opposition or backlash encountered; and (4) tangible legal, policy, or material outcome. Findings were then compared across cases to identify patterns explaining divergent outcomes (Sections 5–6).

As a secondary-source design, this study cannot establish causal mechanisms with the certainty afforded by primary data interviews, platform analytics, or surveys. Reliability is addressed by cross-checking each case against more than one independent source type where available, and by explicitly noting where source positionality (for example, advocacy-affiliated authorship) may shape the account. No primary human-subject data was collected, so no ethical clearance was required; nonetheless, secondary material concerning violence, harassment, and persecution of vulnerable groups has been handled with attention to accuracy and non-sensationalism.

Limitation of design (addressed further in Section 10): this study relies on secondary, largely English-language, and in places advocacy-affiliated sources; it does not claim to establish causation, only to identify patterns consistent with the theoretical framework set out in Section 3.

V. Case Studies

5.1 #DalitLivesMatter

Sparked by incidents of caste-based violence, including the 2020 Hathras case, the #DalitLivesMatter movement used Twitter to share testimonies, mobilise legal support, and challenge mainstream media silence, continuing a longer tradition of digital caste-justice archiving and mobilisation documented in the Indian and diasporic context (Paul & Dowling, 2018; Baishya et al., 2023). The campaign fostered cross-community solidarity but also faced sustained online harassment, misinformation, and content suppression, a pattern consistent with the broader, though not India-specific, evidence on gendered and identity-based online abuse documented by Amnesty International (2018). Its outcomes have been primarily discursive, shifting public conversation and increasing scrutiny of mainstream media's coverage gaps rather than juridical, a pattern this paper connects below to the absence of an equivalently mature legal-advocacy infrastructure compared with the LGBTQ+ case.

5.2 #SaveHasdeo

Led by Adivasi communities in Chhattisgarh, this campaign sought to protect the Hasdeo Arand forest from mining activities (Down To Earth, 2022). Through videos, petitions, and live updates, activists linked local environmental struggles to broader issues of indigenous rights and climate change. Awareness grew, but entrenched economic and political interests limited the campaign's immediate success, the weakest tangible outcome of the four cases examined here, notwithstanding digital tactics broadly comparable to the other three.

5.3 LGBTQ+ Digital Advocacy

Social media has played a transformative role in the visibility, community-building, and rights advocacy of LGBTQ+ individuals in India. Influencers such as Alok Vaid-Menon have used Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter to challenge normative gender binaries and advocate for mental health awareness, acceptance, and legal equality. Collectives such as Gaysi Family have created online safe spaces where queer youth can share stories, art, and resources without fear of stigma or reprisal (Scroll.in, 2021). The #PrideMonth hashtag has become a globally recognised annual campaign that Indian queer activists use to celebrate identity, commemorate struggles, and mobilise allies.

This online advocacy contributed to significant milestones, including the 2018 Supreme



Court decision in *Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India* to decriminalise consensual same-sex relations by reading down Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code (India Today, 2018). Social media enabled rapid mobilisation during the judgment's lead-up and aftermath, with activists disseminating legal analyses, organising events, and fostering a pan-Indian queer network. Nonetheless, queer activists continue to face persistent online harassment, cyberbullying, and content censorship, underscoring ongoing challenges to free expression and safety in digital spaces.

5.4 Anti-CAA Protests and the Shaheen Bagh Movement

The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), passed in late 2019, sparked widespread protests across India, with the Shaheen Bagh sit-in becoming a symbolic epicentre of resistance. Muslim women, students, and civil society groups occupied public space to oppose legislation they viewed as discriminatory toward Muslim citizens (The Wire, 2020). Social media amplified the movement by broadcasting live streams, protest art, and speeches on Twitter and Instagram; hashtags such as #ShaheenBagh and #AntiCAA trended nationally, connecting local protests to a global audience. Digital platforms enabled rapid coordination of protests, fundraising, and solidarity, making the movement resilient despite police crackdowns and internet restrictions.

The movement highlighted how women-led grassroots activism used digital tools to challenge political narratives and assert minority rights. Participants also experienced misinformation campaigns, targeted online harassment, and state surveillance and content takedowns aimed at delegitimising their dissent. This paper analyses the movement's digital mobilisation and rights implications; it does not adjudicate the CAA's legislative merits, which lie outside its scope.

5.5 Cross-Case Comparison

The four cases share broadly similar digital tactics, hashtag mobilisation, testimonial content, and livestreaming, yet diverge sharply in tangible outcome. LGBTQ+ digital advocacy culminated in a landmark legal victory, but this outcome was not produced by digital mobilisation alone: it followed

nearly two decades of prior litigation (*Naz Foundation v. NCT of Delhi*, 2009; *Suresh Kumar Koushal v. Naz Foundation*, 2013) and organised legal advocacy. Social media's role here is best understood as amplifying and sustaining momentum around an already-existing legal campaign, consistent with this paper's theoretical expectation that digital visibility converts most readily into outcomes when paired with pre-existing formal infrastructure.

The Anti-CAA/Shaaheen Bagh protests similarly achieved substantial national and international visibility and direct engagement with national policy debate, aided by their concentration in the national capital and their framing around a single, clearly identifiable piece of legislation, which made the movement legible to mainstream media despite that same media's documented history of underrepresenting minority perspectives (Oxfam India & NewsLaundry, 2019).

By contrast, #SaveHasdeo, despite comparable digital tactics, achieved markedly less policy traction. This is consistent with the same structural media-exclusion literature: Adivasi communities face some of the most severe and longest-standing marginalisation from mainstream Indian media among the groups considered here, and the campaign's antagonist (diffuse mining and state-government economic interests) is less narratively legible than a single named law or court case, making it harder to sustain national attention.

#DalitLivesMatter falls between these poles: it achieved significant visibility and cross-community solidarity following a specific triggering event, but like Hasdeo and unlike the Section 377 campaign, was not backed by an equivalently mature legal-advocacy infrastructure, which may help explain why its outcomes have been more discursive than juridical.

Taken together, the comparison suggests that the empowerment potential of social media for marginalised groups in India is conditional: it is most likely to translate into tangible change when digital mobilisation supplements, rather than substitutes for, pre-existing legal, organisational, or agenda-setting infrastructure, a pattern the recommendations in Section 8 are designed to address.



Table 1. Comparative summary of the four cases

Case	Digital Visibility Achieved	Pre-existing Legal/Organisational Infrastructure	Mainstream-Media Legibility	Tangible Outcome
LGBTQ+ Digital Advocacy	High	High (decades of litigation)	Medium	High (2018 decriminalisation)
Anti-CAA / Shaheen Bagh	High	Medium (organised civil society, no prior litigation trajectory)	High (single named law, capital-city location)	Medium (sustained national debate; no legislative reversal)
#DalitLivesMatter	High	Low–Medium (no equivalent legal campaign)	Low–Medium	Low–Medium (discursive, not juridical)
#SaveHasdeo	Medium–High	Low	Low (diffuse antagonist, Adivasi media invisibility)	Low

Note: Ratings are qualitative, author-assessed characterisations derived from the case evidence discussed above, not independently measured or scaled data; they are offered to illustrate the comparative pattern rather than as precise metrics.

VI. Discussion

Returning to the research questions: social media consistently expanded the visibility and reach of all four movements (RQ1), but tangible outcomes varied systematically with the presence of pre-existing legal or organisational infrastructure and with each group's baseline visibility in mainstream media (RQ2). This supports the counterpublics/networked-movement framework's expectation that digital mobilisation is best understood as an amplifier of existing capacity rather than a substitute for it (RQ3).

The practical implication is that policy interventions aimed solely at expanding platform access or digital literacy, while necessary, are unlikely, by themselves, to equalise outcomes across marginalised groups. Interventions must also address the underlying legal-advocacy and mainstream-representation gaps that determine whether digital visibility converts into change, a point developed further in the legal framework and recommendations below.

Two structural obstacles cut across all four cases and merit separate discussion:

Digital access. India crossed 820 million active internet users in 2023, with rural India now accounting for a slight majority (approximately 53%) of the total user base; however, per-capita internet penetration continues to lag in rural areas relative to urban India and varies substantially by state, with some states still well below the national average (IAMAI & Kantar, 2023). Digital literacy remains a further barrier layered atop raw access.

Algorithmic bias and platform governance.

Content from marginalised groups is frequently constrained by platform moderation systems and recommendation algorithms whose criteria are not publicly transparent (Noble, 2018); more India- and platform-specific evidence on this dynamic remains an important area for future research (see Section 10).

VII. Legal and Human Rights Framework

The four case studies engage rights protected under Articles 14 (equality), 15 (non-discrimination), 19 (freedom of speech and assembly), and 21 (life and personal liberty, judicially expanded to include privacy) of the Indian Constitution.

Two further Supreme Court judgments are directly relevant to this paper's digital-rights concerns, even though they do not arise from the case studies themselves. *Justice K.S. Puttaswamy v. Union of India* (2017) recognised privacy as a fundamental right and is directly relevant to state surveillance and content takedown concerns raised in Section 5, as well as to the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023. *Shreya Singhal v. Union of India* (2015) struck down Section 66A of the Information Technology Act as unconstitutional on free-speech grounds and remains the leading precedent against which the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021 are frequently assessed by digital rights advocates (Internet Freedom Foundation, 2022).



At the international level, India is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), whose Articles 19 (expression) and 21 (assembly) are directly engaged by the state responses content takedowns, internet shutdowns documented in the case studies, and to the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), whose treaty body has previously addressed caste-based discrimination in India under its descent-based discrimination jurisprudence.

Domestically, the IT Rules, 2021, seek to regulate digital platforms for accountability but have faced criticism for enabling censorship and weakening user privacy protections (Internet Freedom Foundation, 2022). The Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023, introduces a comprehensive framework for data privacy, promising stronger safeguards if enforced transparently. Protecting marginalised users requires balanced regulation that ensures platform accountability without curbing the right to free expression, a tension that this paper's four cases each illustrate in different ways.

VIII. Recommendations

To maximise social media's empowering potential, and drawing directly on the comparative findings in Section 5.5, the following steps are recommended:

- **Digital Literacy Expansion:** Develop community-centric programmes in regional languages to build digital skills among underserved groups, addressing the access barrier documented in Section 6, without which even well-organised campaigns cannot reach their intended audience.
- **Platform Accountability:** Advocate for transparent moderation policies and algorithms prioritising inclusive content, directly responding to the algorithmic-bias concern raised in Section 6.
- **Legal Safeguards:** Ensure content regulation respects due process and judicial oversight to protect free speech, consistent with the *Shreya Singhal* precedent discussed in Section 7.
- **Legal-Advocacy Infrastructure:** Extend sustained legal-aid and advocacy support to caste- and indigenous-rights digital campaigns comparable to that which underpinned the LGBTQ+ rights litigation, the single clearest structural factor this paper's comparison identifies as separating higher- from lower-impact campaigns (Section 5.5).

- **Infrastructure Development:** Invest in rural connectivity and affordable devices to reduce digital divides, particularly for Adivasi and rural communities, shown here to face compounding media and infrastructure exclusion.
- **Multi-Stakeholder Dialogue:** Foster collaboration among civil society, government, academia, and technology firms to build equitable digital ecosystems, including transparent channels for underrepresented movements such as #SaveHasdeo to gain mainstream media legibility they currently lack.

IX. Conclusion

This paper has shown that social media meaningfully expands marginalised communities' capacity for visibility and mobilisation in India, but that this capacity does not translate uniformly into tangible outcomes. The comparison across caste, indigenous-rights, sexuality, and religious-minority-citizenship movements indicates that outcomes depend substantially on factors external to the platforms themselves, on pre-existing legal infrastructure, on baseline mainstream-media visibility, and on the legibility of the movement's central antagonist. Realising social media's democratic potential for India's most structurally excluded communities, therefore, requires policy attention not only to digital access and literacy but also to the legal advocacy and representational infrastructure that determine whether online visibility can translate into lasting change.

X. Limitations and Future Research

This study relies on secondary data and selected case studies, primarily from English-language sources. Several sources used for the case studies involve authors with direct advocacy affiliations. For example, Soundararajan's co-authored 2023 study draws on her own activist positioning as founder of Equality Labs rather than being purely independent academic accounts; this is disclosed rather than treated as disqualifying, but readers should weigh these sources accordingly. It should also be noted that the Baishya, Sreedhar Mini, and Soundararajan (2023) study examines anti-caste digital activism primarily in the US diasporic context rather than within India itself; it is cited here as the closest available peer-reviewed treatment of the broader caste-justice digital organising tradition from which the #DalitLivesMatter case draws, not as a direct academic account of that specific Indian campaign.



As a secondary source, qualitative comparative design, this paper identifies patterns consistent with its theoretical framework rather than establishing causal mechanisms; primary data (interviews with activists, platform analytics, systematic content analysis) would be needed to test the infrastructure-conditional empowerment thesis more rigorously.

Future research should incorporate mixed methods, including ethnographic fieldwork, cross-platform analyses, and regional-language perspectives, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of digital empowerment among marginalised groups in India, and should test the comparative pattern identified here that pre-existing legal and organisational infrastructure conditions whether digital visibility converts into tangible outcomes, against a larger sample of cases and, ideally, primary data.

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