

SOCIAL MEDIA AND ACTIVISM IN ASSAM: CATALYZING CHANGE THROUGH DIGITAL PLATFORM

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Abstract

Social media has become a powerful tool for civic expression in recent years, especially in areas that are experiencing social and political unrest. Assam, with its unique cultural identity and history of protest, has witnessed a striking transformation in the way activism takes shape. Earlier it used to only happen in physical places like college campuses, street corners, and union meetings. Now, it has quickly and greatly spread to the digital world. This study looks at how social media and activism affect civic participation in Assam. It looks at early waves of digital activism in 2010, when Facebook campaigns run by teens and young adults brought attention to important issues like the safety of women, the need for media responsibility, and immigration issues. People began to use technology to reach more people after this event. The paper also examines how LGBTQ+ activism has grown in Assam particularly through groups like XUKIA and the role of digital platforms in giving marginalized voice greater visibility. The study looks into how digital expressions affect the real world. Examples include online campaigns that turn into street protests, graffiti projects started by individual artists, and community-led efforts to raise awareness. These examples show that social media is not only a place to share information, but also a way to get people to do things in the real world. The research also explores not just the success stories but also the challenges and obstacles faced by digital activists in Assam.

Keywords: Digital activism, digital platforms, social media, youth and queer resistance.

I. INTRODUCTION

Social media has changed a lot in the last ten years. It is no longer just a place to connect with people; it has now become an important place for protest, support, and civic engagement. In India, where political and business interests often control traditional media, digital platforms have given people, especially young people, a way to speak out on their own. Assam is a state in Northeast India that is culturally rich and politically sensitive. It offers a unique and relatively unexamined context for looking at the digital shift in activism. Historically, Assam has experienced significant political unrest, ethnic movements, and identity-related conflicts. The Assam Movement in the late 20th century and the recent protests against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) illustrate a pattern of collective dissent in the state. The recent decade is distinguished by the increasing reliance of protests on digital platforms, including Facebook posts, Instagram stories, Twitter hashtags, and viral videos, for the purposes of organization, amplification, and sustained public engagement. As Castells says, “The Internet and wireless

communication networks are not simply tools, but the very space where the new forms of power and counter-power are played out, constructing the autonomy of the social actor” (*Networks of Outrage and Hope* 9). In Assam digital activism is very much important to bring about social change, especially among young generation and marginalized community.

There are so many obstacles that digital activism in Assam has to face as it grows. Because of social media like Facebook and Instagram it has become possible for people to talk about the issues like gender rights, indigenous identity and queer solidarity. But at the same time, they have exposed activists to state surveillance, false information, and online harassment. Shreya Khaund, in her paper “Building Solidarity through Digital Activism in Assam”, highlights how queer collectives in Guwahati have found both community and vulnerability in online spaces (4). As Castells asserts, “The same networks that facilitate communication and mobilization can also be used by states and other actors to monitor, repress, and manipulate social movements” (221). This dual nature of exposure and empowerment raises significant concerns regarding the effectiveness, inclusivity, and sustainability of social media-based activism.

Although digital movements in Assam have gained visibility in recent years, the region continues to be marginal in national academic discussions. In India, much of the academic discussion surrounding digital activism tends to overlook the Northeast, focusing predominantly on urban regions. The region's distinct political struggles, ethnic diversity, and cultural realities are often subsumed within broad national narratives that inadequately reflect its unique context. As Castells reminds us, “to understand a movement, we must situate it in the specific context of its struggles and networks” (145) — a context that, in the case of Assam, remains underexplored.

II. OBJECTIVES

- To examine how social media has influenced and reshaped the landscape of activism in Assam.
- To study key digital activism campaigns and its impact on real-world social or political outcomes.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

The emergence of activism in the digital age has increasingly captured the attention of academic inquiry, especially in contexts undergoing social and political changes. The northeastern Indian state of Assam is an intriguing case study in the use of social media for activism because of its diverse population, dissatisfied young and strong cultural identity. This research looks at several parts of that change.

Manuel Castells contends in *Networks of Outrage and Hope* that digital networks enable individuals to circumvent conventional power structures and collaboratively organize from the grassroots level. His work is mostly about global movements, but his framework also helps explain how online platforms in Assam have made it possible for young people and marginalized groups to form horizontal networks of protest and solidarity.

Shreya Khaund's "Building Solidarity through Digital Activism in Assam" (Zubaan, 2020) offers a regional perspective. Khaund examines how LGBTQIA+ and feminist communities in Assam, particularly in Guwahati, have created digital safe spaces on Instagram and Facebook. Her research shows that these online platforms are evolving community-building and opposition spaces.

A notable addition is the essay "Cyber Youth and Social Media in Assam: A Case of Facebook Activism" by Rituraj Dutta and Ankur Saikia (*Journal of Literature, Culture and Media Studies*, 2013). This study looks into how Guwahati's youth protests against gender violence and unethical media coverage were organized using Facebook. Dutta and Saikia say that Facebook was not only a place to talk about things, but also a way to get people to act. It gave young people a place to plan protests, question the status quo, and take part in political discussions.

Cultural critiques like Ananya Baruah's "The Wall Speaks: Street Art as Protest in Assam" (*Art & the Public Sphere*, 2021) provides a roundabout look at how graffiti artist and activist Neelim Mahanta rose to prominence. Baruah examines how art became a visible form of protest during contentious periods, such as the anti-CAA demonstrations through social media platforms like Instagram and Twitter. In her research, she highlights the interdependence of physical activism and its digital legacy.

While much of the literature celebrates the empowerment that social media provides; there are also cautionary notes. Robert W. McChesney's book *Digital Disconnect: How Capitalism is Turning the Internet against Democracy* warns about the commercial and surveillance-driven architectures of digital platforms. When discussing how state surveillance, trolling, and the dissemination of misleading information can harm online organizing throughout the region, not just in Assam — this criticism is crucial.

The literature review indicates a growing interest in the ways that social media is influencing activism in Assam. It highlights the potential and difficulties of digital mobilization, particularly in an area as diverse and dynamic as Assam.

IV. RESEARCH GAP

Despite the increasing volume of studies on digital activism in India, most of it concentrates on prominent cities such as Bengaluru, Mumbai, and Delhi. These researches frequently overlook the distinct social and political circumstances in northeastern states such as Assam. The studies of Khaund (2020) and Dutta and Saikia (2013) offer significant insights on Assam, however their scope is fairly constrained. Much of the current study focuses on specific events or movements, rather than examining the broader, continuous impact of digital technology on activism across time. Researchers have increasingly focused on young and queer activism; however, they have not yet explored its linkages with rural areas, indigenous viewpoints, or the influence of visual and artistic expression on internet platforms. A further vacuum exists in the insufficient examination of the interaction between digital activism in Assam and state institutions, media, and surveillance measures. In light of the ongoing discussions on citizenship, migration, and identity in the region, it is essential to examine the impact of social media on public opinion, mobilization, and resistance.

This study aims to address these gaps by offering a comprehensive, context-specific account of digital activism in Assam—its evolution, diversity, constraints, and future directions—situated within both regional and national political dynamics.

V. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts qualitative methodology of research, employing secondary sources such as scholarly articles, case studies, news reports and online archives.

VI. ANALYSIS

Digital Resistance: A New Face of Activism in Assam

Social media has changed activism all over the globe by giving a voice to the people who were not heard by mainstream media before. In Assam, a state with a long history of unrest, social media has become more than just a way to talk to people. It's also a place where art, politics, and personal identity all come together. Social media can go beyond physical borders, which has opened up new and exciting ways for youths to get involved in politics, raise awareness of issues, and help their community's development.

Student unions, grassroots movements, and cultural resistance have historically been the main sources of activism in Assam. But now that we live in the digital age, it's much easier for people to share their political ideas and work together. Social media has changed how people talk to each other, plan things, and take action on their problems. Several digital activism groups in Assam have had a big impact on both politics and society over the past ten years. They have organized street protests, challenged dominant narratives, and given a louder voice to communities that are often ignored.

The protest against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) in 2019 and 2020 is a well-known example of this. During this time, social media was very important for organizing protests, fighting false information, and getting the whole country to pay attention to the specific problems and experiences of Assam. For weeks, hashtags like “No-CAA”, “Assam Rejects CAA”, and “Stand with Assam” were trending on Twitter and Instagram. Facebook pages and WhatsApp groups were used to plan where to protest, share art and slogans, and spread protest songs in Assamese, which gave the resistance a cultural aspect. Hussain and Goswami wrote in *Economic and Political Weekly* that these platforms “not only created a sense of immediacy and urgency but allowed protestors to bypass traditional gate keeping by mainstream media” (42). The result was a huge mobilization on the ground in cities like Guwahati and Dibrugarh, where thousands of people took part in peaceful protests. The campaign brought back political awareness in the region, made local leaders take clear positions, and had a lasting effect on the identity of young people in Assam, even though the law was eventually passed.

Shreya Khaund, in her paper “Building Solidarity through Digital Activism in Assam”, articulates that the potency of social media extends beyond mere reach; it encompasses its capacity to forge emotional and ideological bonds among individuals (5). This has been especially important for groups that have been left out, like LGBTQ+ communities, who have historically not had safe places to organize. The emergence of the queer rights movement, spearheaded in part by the Guwahati-based collective XUKIA, was another pivotal moment in Assamese digital activism. The first public show of support by LGBTQ+ communities in

Assam was the Global Day of Rage protests in 2013, which followed the reinstatement of Section 377 and represented a significant step toward visibility and recognition. What started as a small gathering grew on sites like Facebook and Instagram, and in 2014, the first Queer Pride Walk in the Northeast took place. In her paper “Building Solidarity through Digital Activism in Assam,” Shreya Khaund says, “Social media offered a space where queerness could be articulated without fear, especially for individuals living in remote or conservative areas of the region” (8). These online campaigns made things more visible, which helped break down stereotypes, got people talking about gender and sexuality, and led to the creation of safe spaces in colleges and community centers all over Assam.

Visual campaigns also have left a significant mark in the world of artistic activism. A well known artist Nelim Mahnta’s graffiti went viral during a time of political unrest in Assam. His mural “Bleed With Dignity”, which calls for better menstrual hygiene and respect for women in detention centers, first became popular on Instagram and then in the news. In her article “The Wall Speaks: Street Art as Protest in Assam,” Ananya Baruah observes that these public artworks, disseminated via social media, function as both protest and narrative (78). A number of NGOs launched awareness campaigns and hygiene product donation drives as a result of the campaign, which raised awareness of the conditions in Assam’s detention camps. As Ananya Baruah observes, “the conversion of public art into digital content created an echo chamber of empathy, provoking action in ways traditional protests could not” (80).

A remarkable aspect of social media driven activism in Assam is the active participation of youths, who are using these digital platforms to voice their concerns, organize movements and drive social change. Platforms such as Facebook played a crucial role in the 2012 student protests in Guwahati against media insensitivity that followed a public assault case. Rituraj Dutta and Ankur Saikia in “Cyber Youth and Social Media in Assam: A Case of Facebook Activism” contend that these early digital mobilizations were a crucial juncture in the development of political participation among urban youth (42). It marked the beginning of a shift from passive internet use to active digital citizenship, with students speaking out against injustice and motivating their peers to do the same.

These campaigns share common traits; they are visually engaging, emotionally resonant and rooted in local identity. Most significantly, though, they show a change in the way activism is carried out in Assam. The boundaries between the online and offline are increasingly blurred. A social media post can lead to a street protest. A mural shared on Instagram can trigger policy conversations. Even an anonymous blog post can provide courage to someone who is hesitant to speak in public.

The importance of digital campaigns extends beyond legislation, even though not all of them resulted in instant policy changes. These initiatives have improved community ties, changed public dialogue and created momentum for further action.

Thus, digital platforms in Assam have provided new ways to express themselves as artists, activists and advocates. They not only fight against unjust systems, but also create a culture of resistance and solidarity which has deep ties to the history and culture of the region.

Unseen Struggles: Challenges and Limitations faced by Digital Activists in Assam

Although social media in Assam has given people new paths to unite and take collective action, it has faced a number of problems and challenges that are not often talked in public. At first glance digital activism seems rapidly accessible and empowering; however for various activists navigating Assam's complex social, political and geographical terrain, it often turns out to be far more complicated. Instead of being just empowering, it can also bring moments of vulnerability, negotiation and sometimes even disillusionment

The digital divide is one of the big issues that keeps a lot of people from rural areas of Assam from being engage in digital platform. People in different parts of the state use the internet in different ways. As for example, rural areas like Dhemaji and Karbi Anglong do not use it as much as like Guwahati. Many people at the grassroots level are still offline, not because they don't want to be, but because they don't have good digital skills or internet access. The Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI) in a report said from 2022 that less than 40% of rural Assamese households have the digital skills to use social media, and even fewer have reliable internet access. Because of it, digital activism often focuses on cities, leaving out communities that are most affected by problems like state violence, tribal displacement land rights conflicts.

Activists, particularly women, LGBTQ+ individuals, and people from marginalized groups, are at risk of being harassed and abused online all the time. People who speak out for gender equality or progressive public policies are often the targets of insults, threats, and smear campaigns. This kind of online hatred not only makes people less likely to participate, but it can also have serious affect in the real world, such as making people alienated and causing mental health issues. Shreya Khaund in her scholarly article, "Building Solidarity through Digital Activism in Assam" notes, "digital spaces, while empowering, can quickly turn hostile, especially when activists challenge dominant caste, gender, or religious hierarchies" (*Building Solidarity through Digital Activism in Assam* 12). Because of this toxicity, activists are frequently forced to self-censor or avoid all online environments, which weakens and shortens the lifespan of movements.

State censorship and surveillance are other problems for the people who want to be active online. In Assam as well as in India, ddigital communities have come under more strict scrutiny, especially during the time of political unrest and tension. For example, during anti-CAA protests, internet services were suspended in various districts, and numerous online posts that criticized the government were either flagged or deleted. The principle of free speech and the idea of agitation have a complicated relationship because in some instances, people advocating for change were detained for their online statements. In her book *Digital Freedoms and Indian Law*, Usha Ramanathan says, "what begins as surveillance in the name of security often becomes a tool for suppressing dissent" (88). As a result, activists in Assam live in constant terror, knowing that the government could see every online communication as a potential threat.

Moreover, transitory and performative nature of online communication has its own drawbacks. Social media draws quick attention for movements and at the same time it can also encourage "clicktivism" in which supporters show their support by liking, sharing or commenting without committing to its significance and

long term action. Campaigns that rely too much on digital momentum sometimes have trouble keeping people interested when the initial excitement wears off. This is particularly evident in Assam, where many internet efforts, no matter how effective in the time, have difficulty turning into long-term policy advocacy or structural change. Rituraj Dutta and Ankur Saikia, in their article “Cyber Youth and Social Media in Assam: A Case of Facebook Activism” pointed out that “while Facebook mobilization brought thousands to the streets, many campaigns failed to maintain traction once media attention shifted” (48).

There is another issue of cultural and linguistic misrepresentation. India’s digital activism is primarily dominated by Hindi and English language and often seen ignoring Assamese and other tribal languages of Assam. Local issues frequently lose their impact due to filtration of mistranslation. This kind of discrepancy may result in simplistic accounts that ignore the intricacies of local movements.

Despite these obstacles, Assamese digital activists keep working and expanding their efforts. A lot of individuals are using regional languages on encrypted messaging apps and other networks that combine offline preparation with online outreach. The persistence of these individuals and organizations underscores the enduring relevance of internet activism, especially during challenging the difficult periods.

If digital platforms are going to be useful for social change in Assam, safety, fairness, and sustainability must come first. Long lasting and successful online activism require more than just technical fixes. These include addressing the gap in digital access, holding platforms for harmful practices, protecting activists’ privacy and giving more power to local voice.

VII. FINDINGS

This study highlights how social media has left a great impact on activism in Assam. The LGBT+ community, artists and particularly youths now use social media site such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and Whatsapp as crucial and important platform to express themselves and for teamwork. Besides, using for basic communication, these digital platforms are used to spread stories, organize movements and amplify complaints, resulting in a dynamic online environment for social and political participation.

The study also shows that digital freedom has its own limits. It is hard to keep people engage online because of platform’s limit, poor internet connectivity in rural areas, online harassment and the risk of being observed. The majority of digital activism is conducted by urban youths; nevertheless, technological and linguistics obstacles hinder rural individuals from voicing their concerns.

Furthermore, social media does not always result in long-lasting political change, even though it can quickly increase awareness of movements. Many campaigns or movements lose their momentum as the media stops paying attention, which show how important it is to keep working offline to support online action.

The study indicates that social media does not consistently lead to enduring political change, despite its capacity to rapidly elevate awareness of movements.

VIII. POLICY IMPLICATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

The growing digital environment in Assam offers both opportunities and challenges for educators, policymakers and the general public. This study examines how these digital social media have been paid attention and used by people, especially by young people, marginalized groups and artists. If we want this digital trend to lead to real and long-lasting civic involvement, we want smart and proactive policy steps. One essential policy requirement is to mitigate the digital divide. As a matter of policy, it is very important to deal with the digital divide. In many parts of rural Assam still does not have reliable internet access or resources for how to use technology. Government programs need to do more than just build infrastructure; they also need to include education, training, and making digital tools in regional languages. This will make sure that online activism spreads beyond cities.

Additionally, it is crucial to prioritize data protection and online safety. Assamese activists are frequently the targets of cyber bullying, surveillance, and harassment. Policy should include stronger standards for content control, legal protections for digital freedom, and sanctions for coordinated online harassment. As Usha Ramanathan asserts, “without transparency and accountability, digital spaces risk becoming tools of control rather than platforms for freedom” (*Digital Freedoms and Indian Law* 91). In addition, it is very important to carefully improve regional stories and points of view by using media platforms and cultural policies. It is to make sure those digital archives that kept and contain information about local movements, grassroots stories and content in Assamese and Tribal languages, are not watered down or misrepresented in the national conversation.

Finally, government agencies, educational institutions and civil societies must work hand in hand to promote a type of activism that combines online and offline methods. Digital venture can have a big impact and lasting effect only when it is backed by strong community networks and active local participation.

IX. CONCLUSION

Social media has transformed activism in Assam by altering the methods which individuals from marginalized communities articulate their dissent, forge connections and engage with diverse cultures and locales. Digital campaigns have the potential to catalyze tangible outcomes, as evidenced by anti CAA protests, queer pride marches, and the emergence of visual protest art. Shreya Khound observes that digital activism in Assam presents a duality: they empower activists while simultaneously revealing vulnerabilities within societal structures and institutions (*Building Solidarity through Digital Activism in Assam* 13). Many campaigns do not bring about lasting structural change because online attention is short-lived and people don't engage with them enough offline.

The resilience of Assamese digital activists is truly remarkable, especially considering the challenges they face. Their creativity, bravery, and ability to adapt show that there are many ways to resist that are meaningful. For example, hashtags that bring people together from different areas and murals on city flyovers that make strong statements in public places. Castells asserts, “the power of social movements lies not only in their demands, but in the networks they create” (*Networks of Outrage and Hope* 145).

The future of digital activism in Assam depends on linking online energy with long-term offline organizing, using regional languages to make it more inclusive, and keeping activists safe from systemic risks. The digital movements in Assam demonstrate that individuals from distant remote location can significantly influence national discourse on democracy and citizenship. Assamese activism shows that digital platforms cannot substitute traditional methods of fostering collaboration among individuals. They serve as potent instruments that enhance collective objectives and actions of defiance by highlighting local issues within broader networks.

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