

Rise of Cultural Protest Performance in Cyberspace in India

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Abstract

Performance in protest movements have always been the instrument that produces the cultural material of an era with its alternative meanings, values and identities; and strengthening as well as aligning the movement with the society. Resistance as an antidote to submissive forces are injected in the society through the cultural images and practices that challenges power and tries to subvert the meanings and values imposed by it. So, social movements have now and then offered themselves as a platform for different type of performances, asserting the essence of resistance. From the Woodstock festival to Gandhi's Non-Cooperation Movement, either the emergence of a genre or a huge addition to literature and art is made during and post the movements. With the advent of internet activism, protest movements have found a new channel to host as well as archive cultural material of resistance. Other than the 'hashtag' and 'Tiktok' activism, revival of indigenous and regional literature also takes place with the help of cyber performances. Therefore, a rise in protest performances over the cyberspace can be determined in the last two decades. Thus, the objective of this paper is to investigate the new online platforms that help foster the cultural resistance with a copious number of cyber performances,

especially in the 2019-2020 Shaheen Bagh protest movement, which acts as a specimen of digital practice of the arts as well.

Keywords: protest, performance, cultural resistance, cyberspace

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The word protest etymologically stems from the Latin word *protestari* which means declare publicly, testify or protest and the equivalent Middle English and French terms mean ‘solemn declaration’. But the first meaning “statement of disapproval” as known in the present times was first recorded in 1751. In spite of the delayed lexicological development of the word, the idea and concept of protest was almost omnipresent and like second nature to man. The universal binary of ‘absence-presence’ has been a constant since the genesis of universe. The universe itself has been a representative of opposite forces, of negatives and positives. For every motion, there has been a grain rolling against the motion. In words of Sir Isaac Newton, presenting his third law of motion in *Principia Mathematica Philosophiae Naturalis* (1687), “For every action (force) in nature there is an equal and opposite reaction. In other words, if object A exerts a force on object B, then object B also exerts an equal and opposite force on object A”, he means that opposing forces are co-dependent. Thus, it can be said that protest as an idea germinated as a twin of power. Whenever power escalated towards gaining the prefix ‘over’, protest got activated and took charge. The history of mankind has never been frictionless and a continuous struggle between power and protest has resulted into apexes of change and has redefined survival. Evolution was born and with it an embrace towards “Change is a constant” became an accepted quote to live by.

Protest as an act of resistance in different revolutions through different mediums of expression was born at the onset of the idea of resistance or as mentioned earlier “disapproval”. The fundamental concept of disapproval can be traced back in various streams of history, one being the event where the different opinion of one of the angels (Lucifer) occurred and he disapproved God’s sole authority. A rebellion commenced and with it, the idea of disapproval was sown. As pages of history flipped through, protest became mainstream and it started crawling into other categories. Protest as a concept became ambiguous in its usage with the arrival of social movements, revolutions etc. The uniting idea of ‘disapproval’ or say ‘disagreement’ branched out into various active arenas where people acted out objectively as well as subjectively and protest was liquified as a political dissent of an idea or action by the target. And one of the major areas was of culture. Protest mutually co-exists with culture, becoming an active-receptive zone of cultural production and interpretation of texts. It further advanced the development of “cultural field”, a term coined by Pierre Bourdieu which means the ‘social space where cultural texts exist in relation to each other and in relation to texts in other social, political and economic fields’. (Reed, 2005) Protest itself arises as a counter-culture, piercing through the existing culture and policies of government or other organisations that bring dissatisfaction to those affected and when they cannot voice their opinions through a regular channel, they protest. And the very first thing that initiates the act of protest is a slogan. A slogan is a short, attracting phrase that represents the cause of protest in rallies. Be it the motto “Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité” that functioned as a slogan during the French Revolution or the very recent “Black Lives Matter”, slogans have been weaponised against the arms of the target representing the fundamental belief, “A pen is mightier than a sword”. Thus, it has always been literature that paved way for culture to enter the rallies in protest movements. At times,

these slogans influence the formation of an era, creating a repository of literary works and at times, the already existing works lend a hand to the protestors to gain volume in their expression and this continuous sharing enhances the cultural field, multiplying its effect thoroughly. All in all, protest functions as a driving force of change. A change that causes development in culture and society; a change that might not always be politically successful but a social and cultural change nevertheless. The range of the change varies from small to large. Small being removal of an authority on account of protest by the labour union and large being formation of nations for example, India. So, the seed of protest germinates change that pushes ‘the whole system towards a position which it really ought to be in anyway’. (Boulding, 1967, p. 50) And culture irrigates the whole process. Thus, culture can be seen as a cumulative essence of the society at a particular time in history of a particular region. The power of language churns the vehicle of literature to produce various works that define a protest or a movement and with it launches songs, plays, performances dedicated to protests at sit-ins, marches and parades. The site of a protest or movement gains momentum with the incoming of such dramatic action. Charles Tilly, a scholar of social movements argues that “repeated public displays” of different political and cultural values by a group of people together outside an institution or structure creates the essence of a movement. (Reed, 2005, p. xiv) Thus sloganeering, singing, performing street plays, dancing became vital for a protest and its aim.

With the arrival of digital age, the cultural field moved from streets to computer tables in early 2000s, only to be popularised in the later decade. Internet activism developed as a fast-paced and effective form of activism that communicates via social media, e-mails, podcasts and moderately connected with media activism as well. With the advent of online globalisation and effortless connectiveness throughout the world, news started spreading faster all over.

People could access a magnified look into all sorts of issues and events happening on earth and even beyond. Platforms like Facebook and Twitter soon gained popularity and converted into a space, a wall where people could express their freedom of speech. Campaigns and companies found a new place to advertise. The ‘walls of democracy’ of universities transferred the pamphlets into soft copies and shared ‘status’ and ‘posts’ on social media. The digital world was successfully conquered by mankind. As Roland Barthes rightly expressed about toys being “the microcosm of the adult world” in his book *Mythologies*, the virtual world converted into another such microcosm of the world, where the extended discussions of the physical world were hosted. And with this succession, a new digital culture was born. Soon terms like keyboards activists, Twitter wars, hashtags etc. became a part of everyday culture and society. And soon protests and activism joined the bandwagon online. E-petitions and emails were distributed, doodles and graphic artworks posted, songs and anthems recorded and performed live, hashtags created, shared and re-shared- all in all, the virtual space was religiously converted into a praxis arena, empowering it as a medium that would lend a structure to upcoming movements.

Online activism rose as a site of resistance and vehicle political activism. Sandor Vegh in his chapter in *Cyberactivism: Online Activism in Theory and Practice* defined online activism as ‘a politically motivated movement relying on the internet’ and with the whole world converging as a single, social, online community to control and resist exploit, the idea of protest itself developed. Moving cultural activism to internet was a slow and gradual process. Like any other development or course of change in the world, it started with the written word and it is still mostly about the language of the protest. Being so closely intertwined with culture, this language has further diverged into various other forms and took shape of performances.

The ground of protest performance in India was heavily influenced by the formation of IPTA. Binayak Bhattacharya in *People's Art or Performance of the Elites?: Debating the History of IPTA in Bengal*, while talking about the prominent growth of cultural performativity in Bengal around the Great Bengal Famine of 1943, comments how the social reality then stood as the 'first historical encounter' for the cultural community and IPTA. With relief camps trying and failing to balance the loss, the cultural activists got the opportunity and platform to present their political ideology through performances. Bijan Bhattacharya's *Nabanna* (1944) terrorized the political, social as well as the performative culture with its new theatrical experiment, validating presence of organizations like IPTA. Thus, a performance became a social example to be further used as a device of protest.

In April 1990, *Lotus Marketplace: Households* contributed in an online protest by forming a database of thousands of customers, who wanted to opt out of the list that violated their privacy and revolutionized the company by sending more than 30,000 mails. Since this event as a practice produced alternate meanings, ideas and positioned the consumer's identity at the centre, it is noted as a performance. Thus, the online presence of almost 30,000 Americans, coming together to reject an action is marked as the first online protest performance. Online presence itself has been under the radar and in contemporary times, it is read as performative. There has been a segregation among the Indian audience in this context, divided into two politically charged groups- one that of the Right and another aligning with the Left. Out of these two groups, the Left being the opposition and mostly comprising of the Bengali intelligentsia, the very idea and image of the activist is popularly aligned with that of an academic person, invested in either literature or any other form of art, as validated by Sudhi Pradhan in *Marxist Cultural Movement in India*: "The metropolitan artist was attracted to the

movement not only because he was inspired- genuinely no doubt, but transiently in some cases by anti-fascists and pro-socialists ideals, but also because a means of enriching his art” (Bhattacharya, 2013, p. 184).

So, the involvement of literature in protest culture become a ‘given’. As literature, art, theatre and cinema started evolving and produced materials of resistance, protest grew stronger all over the world. Taking into account the idea of ‘emotions’ as the original driving force of protest, it is only through art and literature that the ‘shadow existence’¹ of it can be explored and devised to successfully run a protest. And soon, the cyberspace followed the footsteps of physical movement and culturized the political emotion of public. The thought of protest that germinates in the mind finds its expression in performance but due to the obstacles in early technology when social media was still in its developing stage and mobile phones didn’t have built-in cameras, it was only the mind that could invest itself in any political criticism without any performance. Media wasn’t personalised then and it was only through mails where people could object or show signs of objection against an act. With the incoming of social media and new technological advancements, cyberspace was introduced to cultural protest performance and fully accomplish the mind/body dualism needed for a protest to be successful.

Jeffrey S. Juris in his essay “Embodying Protest” narrates the existence of two theoretical traditions mounted by Ann Swidler (1995) in culture of social movements. One of them is the Weberian tradition, focusing on the action brought at the individual level and the other being the Durkheimian tradition that constitutes collective representations. (Juris, 2014, p. 229) With the advent of the cyberspace, the figure of flâneur changed as well. A cyberflâneur² was born who was feeding on the information available online and practised flânerie by deciphering

‘virtual reality and hypertexts’ as defined by Steven Goldate in his “The Cyberflâneur- Spaces and Places on the Internet” (1998). This shift towards the cyberspace opened opportunities for activists to conduct protests without the barriers and obstacles of a physical movement. And the individual activist was influenced by the figure of cyberflâneur to stroll through the internet and then break the pattern of anonymity by raising voice. Ravi Srinivasan, a Puducherry-based businessman exhibited the powerful use of internet by tweeting against a politician in 2012 and getting arrested for it under the section 66A of India’s Information Technology Act. It further demonstrated the presence of ‘online free speech’ and weaponised the cyberspace for activism. Though this was not the first instance of online protest recorded in India. In 2009, Nisha Susan of Tehelka Magazine launched the Pink Chaddi campaign³ against the infamous pub brawl that took place in Mangalore in 2009. The conservative right-wing activists of Sri Ram Sena attacked a group of women and men for observing unorthodox cultural practices of the West by going to a pub. In association with Facebook, an online group named “Consortium of Pub-Going, Loose and Forward Women” was formed and the members participated in the campaign which marked India’s first successful achievement of digital activism by sending over almost 500 pink underpants to Pramod Muthalik’s office on Valentine’s day. So, an individual voice collecting multiple others followed both the traditions noted by Ann Swidler, with the performative aspect of sending pink underpants. Thus, an orthodox cultural practice which instigated a violent action was fought off with a non-violent, modern approach through cyberspace, contributing itself as another cultural practice for the upcoming digital protests in India.

Digital activism soared a new height in India with the recent anti-Citizenship Amendment Act protests conducted mainly around Shaheen Bagh in Delhi from December

2019 to March 2020. Citizenship Amendment Act is an act passed by the Parliament of India on 11th December, 2019 which seeks to amend citizenship for minorities on basis of religion (Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis and Christians) from neighbouring Muslim-majority countries for those who arrived India before December 2014. The religious exclusivity of this amendment raised a havoc and flagged off the large-scale protest. Since this amendment saw the light of the day under the current government, the ruling party bore the criticism. With the age-old tradition of non-violent protests and sit-ins, art and culture paved way and changed the face of this movement. As the student community started voicing against the incoming of obvious communal distress due to the introduction of the act, social media was flooding with hashtags and raw clips of police brutality on campuses. T.V. Reed in *The Art of Protest* (2005) notes how social movements are getting established around the world with the increasing speed of communication via internet. And India witnessed the same during the uproar coming from the students of Jawaharlal Nehru University, Jamia Millia University and Delhi University in Delhi. Soon the protest shifted base at Shaheen Bagh with Muslim women as major participants, sitting in with placards bearing phrases, “No CAA, No NRC”. As people started following the hashtags online, it garnered the young crowd and others to facilitate the protest better and make sure it succeeds in its agenda. The online network of social media recuperated cultural activism and changed the relationship between political authorities and popular will as observed by Biju and Gayathri in “Towards Online Activism and Public Sphere in India”. Twitter accounts of ministers were tagged on posts, memes, recorded performances and even raw footage from the ground level areas. Internet opened the possibility of reaching out to the concerned authorities faster than imagined in the preceding decades. Online sources accumulated more than enough data to educate the masses and even culturally highlight them

about the issue. ‘*Hum kaagaz nahi dikhaenge*’ gained a rhythmic momentum with *Hum Dekhenge* whose lyrics supported the germinating idea of the protest and became the anthem of anti-CAA protests all over. All the artists in support of the protest performed the song written by Faiz Ahmed Faiz to enunciate the voice of the masses. The genre of protest music was re-established on ground and shared unanimously online by the participants. A ‘protest playlist’ was born. New artists like Sumit Roy, Armaan, Poojan Gohil came up with songs that narrated the whole incident and the rage that infuriated public. The song *Poorna Swaraj* by Sumit Roy (2020) attacked the ruling government as how the freedom of expression has been violated under their regime:

Poorna swaraj

Par shabdo pe laathi kyun?

Ghista hai haath, main likhne se daru kyun?

Poorna swaraj

Sawaalon pe kyun ho bawaal?

Kya yehi hai ache din?

All the major media houses and news channels started flowing their content online, mostly on the social media platforms for better reach. A bifurcation between them sprouted when the channels were labelled as ‘right-wing’ and ‘left-wing’ supporters. The fourth pillar of democracy whose real work is to present the whole truth, was itself in a conflict. And this conflict turned the space into a performative zone with each drawing on different cultural aspects of the protest. YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Tiktok, Twitter and even WhatsApp were flooding with videos of performances, sloganeering, opinions accessorizing the protest

culture. While media houses like Quint and Scroll processed the cultural awakening of India via the protest and explored the rise of a 'New India' that looked back at the monumental figures like Mahatma Gandhi, Savitribai Phule and others of the Independence struggle and swiped through pages of history to extract verses that gave a depth to the movement, other channels like Republic TV were showcasing another face of the protest that was depreciating the growth of country and criticising the protestors half-soaked knowledge about the bill. The difference in narratives of the Indian media encouraged more and more people to produce raw footage and first-hand narratives from the area of action. A cultural sphere was created online with social media replacing as a stage to express dissent. Dahlberg's idea of an online space that can be considered as a 'public sphere' is almost fulfilled by the Shaheen Bagh protest. (Biju, Gayathri 480) The cultural discourse that the cyberspace hosted proliferated mass participation and awareness. Shaheen Bagh went on to become a synonym for cultural awakening. Instagram and Facebook posts celebrated the murals decorated by the student community, highlighting words of celebrated Muslim poets. New writers like Varun Grover and Iqra Khan cultivated the protest poetry and new artists on the block showcased their creative might with artworks and installations like the 40-feet-high Iron Map of India. Libraries were set where books on history, independence struggle, revolution etc. were available. The progressive intelligentsia almost replaced ticketed shows and the stage with streets to showcase their performative might. It diluted the effect of violence from protest and culturized it more than politicizing it for the social concern. The cultural extravaganza wasn't adhered only to these offline and online performances but extended to the palate with regional cuisines and 'secular chai'. A cultural renaissance was embraced via online and offline activism. With the incoming of the Covid pandemic in India around March 2020, the sit-in came to a halt. But it did not stop the willing

protestors. The protest was shifted online. In an article by Ishika Seal titled as “Har Ghar Shaheen Bagh- Is the future of protests digital” (2020), she narrated the effort of the student community who arranged a live protest with almost 300 women participating from Shaheen Bagh. The presence of IT cells that propagate the ruling party’s propaganda stood as a cause of concern to which Kanchan Yadav, a graduate from Asoka University responded, “If the digital space through fake news and paid news is being used so actively to spread propaganda and misinformation, it becomes absolutely crucial that civil society groups use it too to express dissent.” With a growing number of 376 million social media users⁴ in 2020, the growth of digital activism in India can be prophesized. Thus, the power of cyberspace cannot be denied and its role in functioning as a cultural space that was explored through the recent activism may hint at an overall digitalisation. With the pandemic still preventing physical movement and offline activities, the cyberspace activism modelled the space as an apparatus for people to acknowledge and practice the digital lifestyle.

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Endnotes

1. In the essay, "The Return of the Repressed: The Fall and Rise of Emotions in Social

Movement Theory” by Jeff Goodwin, James M. Jasper, and Francesca Polletta, ‘shadow existence’ of emotions was poorly registered in the discourse of social movements.

2. A cyberflâneur is the virtual substitute of a flâneur, strolling through information space on the internet.
3. Pink Chaddi campaign is India’s first non-violent protest movement started online by the Facebook group *Consortium of Pub-Going, Loose and Forward Women* in February 2009 against the attack on a group of women in a pub in Mangalore by an orthodox group in association with *Sri Ram Sena*.
4. In a survey published by Sandhya Keelery on *Statista.com* on 16 October 2020, the number of social network users in India stands at 376.1 million.

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