

Towards Participatory Democracy
Can digitalization help women in India?

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The context

Digitalization has changed the very way we live, work and think. It is not just about something we do strategically or specifically, but the way we perceive ourselves and connect to the world around us. Even our language is structured by digital technologies. Ubiquitous like air, it is invisible. It has not only invaded economic politics but also political markets. Today we live in a world where the 'virtual' has drastically and rapidly overtaken the 'real' and governmental controls. It has weakened territorial, racial, religious and other identities. As such, we need to redefine ourselves.

We are living in a world where global forces are simultaneously binding and tearing us apart. Earlier people connected with others at familial, work and community level but with the advent of globalization and technological innovations, we find cyberspace replacing the places of conviviality with 'virtual' communities. Digitalization today has allowed ordinary people, groups and parties to voice their opinions more openly and vigorously, making a shift from representative to participatory democracy possible. It has helped in focusing more on 'issue-based politics' in lieu of 'interest-based politics' in a hybrid setting.

Digitalization has made a strong appeal to the people to move towards democratization of politics and society due to access to personal computers and the Internet on a massive scale worldwide. The Internet happens to be a medium that is interactive instead of one-sided communication through print and broadcasting media earlier. It has enabled the users to transform themselves from being passive viewers, listeners or readers to become active participants. It has provided a platform on which everybody is treated as equal and it has also provided opportunities for collective action through networking, that is not only very fast but also cost-effective (van Dijk, 2013).

Digitalization has come a long way during last three decades. In the 1990s, the internet was seen as something to deal with science fiction and the World Wide Web was still in the nascent stages. There was a clear distinction between the 'real' and 'virtual'. The digital was presumed to be just an escape, technology as a 'prosthesis' and internet as something that a few geeks engaged with during their free time. Today the distinction between the virtual and real life has become redundant. Digitalization, like a revolution, has changed our lives drastically. Far from being a tool, it has become 'a condition and context that defines our understanding of the self, society and political governance' (Shah, 2016).

In fact, digitalization has affected the very concept of democracy in many ways. Today, democracy has come out a long way from territorial representation to participatory and deliberative mode primarily due to the breath-taking innovations in information and communication technologies. In 1980s the idea of teledemocracy emerged where the citizens could 'perform politics' through networking without any intermediaries, such as, political parties or pressure groups. The removal of space barriers was supposed to lead towards some sort of direct democracy (Arterton, 1987; Becker, 1981 and Barber, 1984).

In early 1990s, the concept of virtual community emerged with the expectation that it would make up for the lost community in modern society by stimulating both online communities and supporting physical communities (Rheingold, 1993). However, it was only at the dawn of the new millennium that the Internet hype spread on a massive scale in society. With the prospect of mass participation in politics and policymaking through the Internet, the concept of ‘new democracy’ came into being. It made possible for the citizens to bypass institutional politics and the state by creating political space for themselves in reality. The governments, too, started experimenting online consultation with citizens to seek their approval and legitimacy through broadened participation (Shapiro, 2000).

With the sharp rise in the social and political use of the Internet in the current scenario, we find a transition from representative to participatory democracy. Today, it has become possible for the citizens to produce ‘user generated content’ and contribute to policymaking through online petitions, civic journalism, referendum and plebiscite, etc. It has definitely enhanced the speed of deliberation and democratization of digital media. By digitalization of democracy we imply the ‘pursuit and practice of democracy using digital media in online and offline political communication’ (van Dijk, 2013). It is different from the classical legalistic view of democracy based upon procedures, laws and constitution as the foundation. The earlier democracy emphasized representation and efficient decision-making by elites/leaders.

The idea of digital democracy is based upon an altogether different strategy. Its supporters focus more on ‘socialization of politics’ rather than ‘government-centric orientation’. It looks forward to a more proactive role by the citizens and non-government organizations. It aims at influencing politics through opinion making bypassing the institutional politics. It presumes the participants to be highly educated people with requisite technological skills to be able to use the online facilities effectively. Now a day, it has become possible to hold online discussions, electronic polls, referendum or plebiscite on single issues implying direct democracy in a way (Reedy and Wells, 2009). Another alternative could be the ‘pluralistic democracy’ where the emphasis is more on opinion formation within and between non-governmental organizations. Under this perspective, the democracy is seen not as the ‘will of the majority’ but the ‘will of constantly changing coalition of minorities’ (van Dijk, 2013). It recognises pluralism and open discussions in online and offline debates, thereby providing a combination of direct and representative democracy.

The participatory democracy promotes and supports ‘socialization of politics’ by encouraging proactive role by the citizens. It lays emphasis on opinion formation about short term and long term political issues and day to day affairs. The digital media provides equal opportunities and access to all through public debates, education and participation. It helps in building virtual community, holding online polling and organizing public debates which could be helpful both in opinion formation and decision-making. Digitalization of democracy helps the citizens in forming their own associations through ‘horizontal communications’ through technological networks in general, and Internet, in particular. It also helps in improving communication among government bodies, public administrators, political representatives, lobbyists and individual citizens. E-participation is seen as useful in agenda setting, preparation of policy, decision-making, policy execution and policy evaluation. In practice, it amounts to interest articulation, interest aggregation and interest adjudication (Jose, 2014: 35-38).

Impact on participation by women

It is true that digitalization of democracy has helped in creating community, forging social movements, fighting for the marginalised, highlighting dissent by women and others who feel left out in economic growth and/or social development due to lack of strong political voice by insisting on change through organised networking but it remains to be seen whether it can actually lead to enhanced political participation on equal basis? Can digital space lead to political terrain by women on an equal footing? Can digitalization help women in dealing with political and economic hegemony in any given society? Can more reliance on technology help in re-aligning gender relations? Can technology be seen as gender neutral and apolitical? Can digitalization help in curbing apathy towards political participation by citizens in general and women, in particular? It needs further research and investigation on the impact of digitalization on women's political participation in developing countries and emerging economies with digital divide, such as India.

With digitalization we find change in the very nature of politics from 'social protests on a massive scale' to 'online twitters, messages on social media, YouTube or Facebook'. Millions of people are now using WhatsApp for day to day messages. No wonder, a message or adverse remark goes viral very soon resting into protests worldwide. As such, politics has become prominent on anytime-anywhere basis. Moreover, the 'social discourse of politics' has become more open, diffused and decentralized (Gurumurthy, 2013: 25). Surprisingly, the digital technology has helped in enhancing the faith of ordinary citizen in the information posted on the Internet. When people explore through the Internet, they think they are not alone. For them the 'known' becomes acceptable as common knowledge and they become willing to come together to find out new ways of dealing with a problem concerning them all. The problem could be the 'rise in the number of rapes', 'environmental decay and shortage of water resource', 'lack of physical activity among children' or 'too much addiction to Internet itself' (Price, 2011).

Today, the women, in fact, can use the digital mode to inform, organise and mobilise others within and beyond national boundaries. Women activists, women organisations and women movements can take the advantage of the 'in-between' space created by the digital technologies to build collective political articulations, as citizens, to fight injustice even at the state level. It can also help in individuation by converting 'material life experiences on a day-to-day basis' into 'contextual struggles for life'. It can provide women the space of their own and also help them in deconstructing authoritarianism and rampant consumerism prevailing in their day to day life and cultural environment. It can also help them in forging 'trans-local solidarities' for 'real world action' (Gurumurthy, 2013: 26).

Digitalization can provide immense opportunities to marginalised sections of society including women towards participatory democracy. The access to the new technologies related to information and communication by women across a wide spectrum can help in 'self discovery of political subject-hood' and 'bonding with a community of fate' in order to exercise active citizenship and seek new paths towards justice (Fraser, 2005: 4). The women may have to deal with politics arising through new technologies intertwining with old hierarchies of power because the information received and community created keep changing in the fluid world around. They may find the contemporary societies reflect contradictions in terms of consolidation of power through new alliances with the powerful whether in the old regimes or in the new regime where they find the emergence of a new class of digital citizens wielding substantial power. Under this scenario those who do not have access to the latest

technology might again be left out, such as the marginalised sections of society, including women.

On the other hand, digitalization can provide abundant opportunities for new forms of subjectivity and community in a networked society. It can also help in women's empowerment and gender equality by providing women 'digital space' that they can use for making public marginalities faced by them at private level every day. It can help women in converting their adverse experiences into fights for their rights as political subjects. They can also take the local events to international community without wasting any time, forcing the concerned person/authority to be more responsible and accountable. The young techno-savvy women can use technology as 'sites of contestation' for negotiating and deconstructing the 'consumerism and authoritarianism encoded in their everyday cultural environment' (Gurumurthy, 2013). Though it is true that digitalisation can help in community building by women but we should not forget that web 2.0 or web 3.0 remain attached to the market for being 'commodified space' subject to surveillance and control by the state and non-state actors in the name of morality or public interest.

The Indian scenario

India happens to be the second most populous country, biggest democracy and the largest market for social networking. About 60,000 new users get connected every day. In 2014, 190 million Indians had direct access to the Internet out of a total population of 1.25 billion (Pande and Shukla, 2016: 380). It is expected that the use of twitter is likely to rise from 22.2 million in 2016 to 39.5 million by 2018 (Anderson, 2015: 5). Twitter is the fastest growing market in India. Surprisingly, despite being a telecom giant, the mentality towards gender based bias has not changed much. Despite ten-fold rise in internet access in the last ten years, only 11.6% men and 8.4% women used the Internet in 2014 (Gurumurthy and Chami, 2014: 2). Despite modern education that is supposed to inculcate the values of personal and economic independence, self-reliance and assertiveness, most of the women in India have taken leading to dependency, submissiveness, passiveness and conformity due to socialization process. Very few women have chosen the activist role despite access and ample opportunities and political space provided by the digital technologies (Johnson, 2012).

Though the digital communication and political participation has the potential of empowering women in India but in reality it only replicates real world inequalities in a patriarchal, hierarchical and caste-ridden society. Most of the girls in India through socialization processes learn quite early to contain and limit themselves as 'objects' to be pitied as weak or given alms but certainly not as subjects having their own voice in decision-making. In fact, the perceived female smallness is not rooted in their biological disposition but in their socio-cultural upbringing. Females start confining themselves to the space around women in their own imagination and they deter from moving beyond unless and until there are pressing reasons to do so. Politics is also generally seen as the 'male space'. In a survey about tweets on political topic during June17-21, 2015 and July 18-22, 2015, it was found that only 7.72% women had tweeted as against 46.15% men, 34.83% organizations, news outlets and other civic society groups, and 11.30% by those who did not disclose their gender (Anderson, 2015: 4).

In fact, very little research has been carried out about the use of digital space designated as political by the women in India despite its potential of enhancing participatory democracy. The gender divide becomes more obvious when we move down the social strata. Often the

women are discouraged from occupying certain spaces through politics through the ‘process of othering’ even in the real world. Significantly, a tiny percentage of female journalists, politicians and famous personalities are found engaged in deeper political conversations on line. Many fear trolling and online violence for expressing their views freely and courageously against gender discrimination and marginalisation in their day to day lives and workplaces. They are often seen as ‘trespassers in male space’. No wonder, we find instances where female bloggers and activists were forced to delete their accounts for their personal safety. Some feminists chose to remain anonymous to be able to express their views somehow (Dutt, 2017).

The low percentage of women utilising digital space for political participation also reflects their dismal representation in the Parliament, state assemblies and other decision-making bodies. In 1952, women constituted only 4.4% of members in the Lok Sabha (House of Commons). It rose to mere 11.2% in last elections in 2014. Though we find a sharp rise in the number of women representatives at the *Panchayati Raj* (village level) after the 73rd and 74th amendments in 1993, we still do not find genuine participation by women due to ‘men ruling by proxy’ (Anderson, 2015: 6). In a study it was found that women active on social media received ‘huge threats of rape threats, calls for violence, misuse of images, and sexuality based attacks’. Generally the vocal and liberal minded women are ‘seen as a threat to a male dominated Internet structure in a manner similar to the way in which the visible, loitering woman is seen as a threat to male dominated public street’ (Kovacs et al., 2013: 4). First of all, in order to increase women’s political participation both online and real world, it would be necessary to deconstruct the myth that politics falls under the ‘male space’.

There are many political, socio-economic, cultural and psychological factors responsible for women’s apathy towards political participation in India. The political model is seen as based upon masculine model of ‘winners and losers’, ‘too much competition’, ‘a lot of confrontation instead of a model based upon mutual respect’, ‘collaboration and consensus’, more suitable to women participants. Even the contents and priorities seem to differ as women prefer to give priority to social welfare rather than international diplomacy. Even though women in India played a proactive role in national freedom movement despite socio-cultural barriers and enjoyed equal rights under the constitution of India after independence, they could not chalk out an important role for themselves in the mainstream politics. Most of the political parties chose women candidates only as tokenism. Most of the women candidates lacked proper education, training and grooming conducive to political leadership. No wonder, most of the women candidates lacked the necessary self-confidence, familial and media support. Despite the fact that India had the privilege of having a woman Prime Minister and a woman President, women were generally projected as home-makers by the media (Sinduja and Murugan, 2017: 565).

Another reason for low participation of women on social media is their ‘low technology participation rate’ (Antonio and Tuffley, 2014: 676). We find remarkable gaps both in terms of technological skills and physical access to information and communication technology. Most women have technophobia and have little interest in gaining access to the Internet even if they have access to a computer in their homes or kiosks. Generally, women in high socio-economic strata use the Internet for rapid connections rather than for political participation. Even though we find instances of a large number of people using the digital media during 2014 elections in India, including Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Delhi’s Chief Minister, Arvind Kejriwal, opposition leader, Rahul Gandhi, general public is found ‘politically expressive without being engaged’ (Howard, 2005: 153). In India, women in particular, are

encouraged to look after family well-being and leave politics and use of technology to men folk. In a village in Aligarh in North India, even the use of mobile phone by unmarried girls was banned by *Khap Panchayat*. A *Khap Panchayat* is the union of a few villages, mainly in North India, that acts as quasi-judicial body that pronounces harsh punishments 'based on age-old customs and traditions, often bordering on regressive measures to modern problems for having corrupting influence' (Chauhan, 2016) and there were also cases of surveillance by family members reported in some homes. For instance, in an interview, Jyoti, a 16 year old girl, told that her elder brother kept an eye on what she was accessing on the Internet. She was allowed to use online dictionaries for completing her homework but she was not allowed to access the Facebook (Subramanian, 2017). Some complained about financial and institutional constraints as well (Antonio and Tuffley, 2014: 679).

With the launching of 'Digital India' by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the Government of India, NGOs and corporate sector have initiated many plans to provide computer literacy to women in India. For instance, the Department of Women and Child Welfare under the Ministry of Human Resource Development in India submitted a report on enhancing women empowerment through information and communication technology (<http://wcd.nic.in/Schemes/research/ict-reporttn.pdf>). The Indian state has been cognisant in integrating the ICTs in school education system, its programmes and policies. It has also started partnerships with private companies vide Common Service Centres Scheme. The government has already launched demonetization scheme in November 2016 and distributing benefits directly to individuals including women through Aadhar. It has an ambitious plan of linking a large number of *panchayats* digitally by 2019 (Sharma, 2015). The women are supposed to be playing an active role at the *panchayat* level in India despite the fact that only 28% of Indian women own a mobile phone in comparison to 40% ownership by men and lack proper bandwidth (Gurumurthy and Chami, 2014: 2).

In practice, enhancement of women empowerment remains a dream to be realized since it is not enough to provide access to the Internet. What really matters is the quality of participation. It is easy to get information quickly these days but it requires lot of sagacity to convert it into wisdom. In a country like India, we find a gender gap not only in terms of digital divide but also in terms of literacy as only 66% of the women were literate in comparison to 80% literacy of men in 2014 (Desai, 2014). Though the ICTs are supposed to provide mechanisms to men and women to share knowledge openly and freely but, in fact, the information provided and consumed is tightly controlled by the state and corporate sector. Nor should we forget that the processes by which technologies are 'developed, designed, produced, marketed and consumed' and the 'institutional frameworks in which they are embedded, are themselves gendered' (Huyer and Sikoska, 2003: 2). The regulation of technologies also reflects 'male experiences, interests and needs' (Wajcman, 2000: 452).

For instance, the Google launched a campaign 'Helping Get Women Online' in November 2013 with the aim of helping women in overcoming the barriers which impaired their participation online. It launched another campaign 'Internet *Saathi*' in July 2015 to promote digital literacy among rural women in India. However, all such efforts have proved inadequate in having real transformative impact on power relations that are highly gendered. Unless and until, serious efforts are made towards addressing the gender based structural inequalities prevailing in our society, digitalization of democracy cannot really enhance women's empowerment, in true sense of the term. There are instances where we find commercialization of digital ICTs and their regulation to the detriment of woman's personal or collective empowerment (Tagny, 2013). In fact, the corporate sector is supposed to be

more interested in making women use digital space as skilled labour and/or informed consumers rather than decision-makers (Vijaykumar, 2015).

That's why, the digital space is controlled by the state, corporate sector and other stakeholders. For instance, in the case of *pink chaddi* (panty) campaign, the contents posted by a women's group against violence meted out to women pub-visitors by the right-wing, male, Hindu political activists in Mangalore in Southern India were obstructed/hacked by the vested interests. It shows that even if digital spaces, social media and other social networking sites are accessible to all, in reality, they are not 'open' as the corporate sector owning these sites have the power to 'choke or block these sites to clamp down' adverse political or social activities (Gurumurthy and Chami, 2014: 45).

To Vandana Shukla (2017), 'online feminism in a misogynist society becomes toxic'. In fact, the *pink chaddi* campaign got viral as it reflected the concerns of upper middle class, urban, educated, aspirational' women. Often the online activists neglect the caste based or patriarchal cases of oppression widespread all over India in poor dwellings, lower middle class families or remote villages. The women, who are highly educated, urban and privileged, generally do not bother to take up the issues concerning the underprivileged women at the grass root, such as, the problem of child marriage, triple *talaq* (divorce) among Muslim women, circumcision of female genital, feminization of poverty, etc. Unfortunately the online feminism in India remains elitist. That's why despite making some ripples within online circuit, it has failed in making impact on women's political participation in real life (Shukla, 2017).

In real life, there are many barriers to women's political participation in India online. Unless and until women have access to critical information and unless and until they engage in deliberative democracy, they cannot be effective in getting their voices heard and/or implemented by those who matter. Mere access to digital technologies does not make women empowered (Aneja, 2016). It requires careful planning and execution. The women online must realise the vast inequalities prevailing at the socio-economic and cultural level. In fact, the limited usage of digital space by women from upper strata can exacerbate the pre-existing gender as well as digital divide in a country like India where 79.8% of women had to seek permission from their family members even for visiting health centres according to Indian Human Development Survey (2012). Many women lack affordability, computer literacy and other necessary skills. Some dread online trolling and violence by certain patriarchal and regressive groups.

Nevertheless, some women in India took the initiative in forming women's groups during late 1970s and 1980s to deal with authoritarian structures within family, educational institutions, religious foundations and society at large. During 1977 to 1980, many women's workshops, conferences and gatherings were organised to enable Indian women to share their political views against gender based discrimination, oppression and denial of human rights. In 1980s we found proliferation in women organisation in the wake of anti-rape campaigns, such as, the *Forum against Oppression* in Mumbai, *Saheli* in Delhi, *Stree Shakti Sanghatana* in Hyderabad, *Vimochana* in Bengaluru, etc. These organisations were quite successful in creating the new cadres of women who were 'intellectually enlightened', 'politically articulate', well-informed' and enjoyed 'intimate working relationships based upon collective decision-making processes'. Such groups brought out documents, position papers, manifestoes and pamphlets dealing with immediate problems of women on day to day basis (Patel and Khajuria, 2016: 6).

At the dawn of the new millennium, feminist groups in India started making use of social media by setting up cyber forums, twitter accounts, blogs and other outlets for quick communication and collective action. They started sharing their information, resources, archives, photographic memories, reports, posters and ‘documentaries on women’ online. They used sites, such as, the Feministsindia@yahoo.com, www.Prajnyaarchives.org, www.sparrow.com, www.avaarchives.com, www.cwdsss.com, effectively for art, music and humour to mark their resistance against certain practices and policies (Patel and Khajuria, 2016: 27). There has been sharp rise in the number of protests against stalking, molestation and rape online. For instance, in a recent case, there was active resistance by women groups against stalking and kidnapping attempt of Varnika Kundu, daughter of an IAS officer in Chandigarh on August 7, 2017 by Vikas Barala (son of local Bhartiya Janata Party’s Chief, Subhash Barala) and his friend Ashish Kumar.

Potential benefits of the ICT

In fact, the new spaces provided by the Internet and social media have helped in recasting the political sphere by providing opportunities to hitherto marginalised sections of society, including women, to raise their political voice. It has also helped in building transnational ties bypassing controls by the national governments though it is finding it difficult to exercise control over the contents posted online as the laws of the land do not allow infringement of privacy and freedom of expression. Rather, the Government of India has provided an outlay of Rs 81,378 crore (approximately US \$12.5 billion @ Rs 64 per US \$) during 2012- 2017 for e-government, e-learning, e-security, e-innovation, e-inclusion, etc. (DNIS News Network, 2012). No one can deny the potential benefits of ICTs in enhancing women’s political participation and reducing digital gender divide thereby. Digital technologies are not only faster and cheaper but also more effective in strengthening relationships among family, friends, colleagues and social networks.

There is no dearth of social network sites in India that allow women self-expression. They also provide opportunities to women to learn about the outside world beyond their geographical locations. For instance, in 2007, a project on the ‘Feminist Approach to Technology’ launched in New Delhi prepared the girls to give voice to their own concerns while maintaining certain amount of anonymity (Women and the Web. *Intel*, 2013). One of the participants shared her experiences as a survivor of domestic violence. Others shared the joys of resorting to community radio for voicing the women’s concerns. In fact, the ICTs do have the potential of reshaping the socio-economic and political systems to do away with vast disparities including gender divide. They provide ample opportunities to women on anytime-anywhere basis to not only raise their voices against oppressive policies but also challenge the past political practices and help change the political culture of the country *per se*.

For instance, in the Nirbhaya case where a girl was raped brutally, the public protests through emails in large number forced the Justice Verma Committee to give a report in favour of death penalty to the rapists. The three men committee headed by Justice Verma had to scan about 80,000 suggestions received from India and abroad (*The Economic Times*, May 6, 2017). To provide justice in this case, even the Criminal Law Ordinance had to be amended in 2013. In fact, by transforming the ways in which interests can now be articulated and aggregated through the ICTs, we find a paradigm shift from representative to participatory democracy (Jose, 2014: 35-38).

Under the participatory model of digitalised democracy, the women are expected to play an active role by building virtual communities, forging social movements, organising dissent and seeking gender justice. It provides women activists a safe harbour to give expression to their suppressed feelings in patriarchal and hierarchical societies by exercising micro power attained due to online solidarity. For this, they may have to deal with the politics of old craft continuously on day to day basis to be able to change the patriarchal mindset and power relations. By gaining access to digital technologies and political space, women can increase their power and control. Even if, women individually or in groups are active online, they may have to continue their struggles offline as well to remain visible and influential. It is not enough for women to aspire 'power over' others rather they need 'power to' be able to do something on their own by building a new set of capabilities. Digital technologies do provide the women ample opportunities to express their views, interests and preferences specifically.

The digital technologies can help young girls and women in enhancing their self-confidence by enabling them to grow beyond their traditional roles based upon gender. By relying on their 'power within' they can examine their traditional roles critically and play an active role in public life by crossing the barrier between their private and public lives. The new communication technologies do support women's individuality and reflexivity. The access to digital and social media also helps women in understanding themselves better as individuals and not as familial or institutional unit. Whereas social construction of gender roles creates obstacles in free expression by women about matters concerning their day to day lives, the digital devices provide them space to act as 'public-political' person by taking a giant leap from 'womanhood to personhood' (Gupta, 2007). The Internet can provide women diverse viewpoints on an issue, increasing their political awareness and consciousness thereby. The use of digital skills can also enhance their social status, self-respect and sense of independence. It can also help in building solidarity at the local, national and international level (Cummings and O'Neil, 2015: 16).

The limitations

However, even in a networked society, decentralization of information does not necessarily imply 'decentralization of power'. Generally women have been excluded from sharing political power in a patriarchal society like India. Even the women's activities on web are subject to surveillance, moral policing and control by the family members, corporate sector and state. Moreover, the political actions taken by women through the appropriation of digital space amount to be mere 'fragments of micro-power' that generally lack the chance of converting themselves into 'political agora' (Habermas, 2006). In fact, the networked society and digitalised democracy call for new forms of representation and participation on terms of equality and gender justice. It is possible for women to push online participation towards 'post-feminist' or the 'fourth wave of feminism' where gender does not constitute a single unit'. Women from different socio-cultural and economic backgrounds may depict different political views (Munro, 2013). It is also possible that gender divide may be retained even in the virtual environment as most of the information and data is collected and retained by men. Often the information shared by women is not authenticated as they have no means to do so (Gurumurthy, 2013: 27).

Hence it remains yet to be seen whether the network-based politics revolving around issue based groups or organisations would emerge into powerful social movements for women's rights or would the 'bottom up' decentralised women be able to provide a 'shared vision of democracy'? In fact, it would be premature to say how the women's groups or organisations

forged on the Internet would succeed in defying 'ideology-based groups' who might also use digital devices to promote their political agenda. The later are definitely better organized politically and have more funding. As such, digitalization can only provide women the prospects of 'representative closeness', 'mutuality', 'coherence' and 'empathy' without expecting them to become 'full-time participating citizens' (Coleman, 2005). In fact, digital media may provide plurality to representative democracy but it cannot be a substitute for the 'public space' in reality. Nor can the need for leadership and monitoring be undermined in the case of digital participation where the membership and group affiliation remains fluid and ever changing. Social media provides opportunities with 'tacit consent from the state' to allow the disgruntled individuals or groups to 'vent out' their anger, without changing the socio-political norms substantially.

That's why in post-welfare neoliberal states we find little change in the structural aspects of women's exclusion despite their having political rights on an equal footing with the men. Moreover, it is found that despite the digital environment, a large number of women, even from affluent sections of society, need technological skills and access. Further, despite the claims of inclusiveness and openness, the Internet campaigning remains dominated by small groups and vested interests. Generally, most of the participants, including men, are unable to go 'beyond an agenda of negation'. In fact, saying no to a proposal is easier than having a serious discourse on an issue (Tufekci, 2013). In fact, the recourse to the digital technologies has further helped in corporatization of governance in current times.

Moreover, it is also important to realize that digitalization can, in fact, throng new actors and constellations, changing the old political equations and structures thereby. In actuality, for most of the women all over the world, digital participation amounts to renegotiation of unequal relations of power. It is also true that women's political participation through digital media can lead to advancement of their struggles only if they are able to raise their voices effectively and use their micro-power thus attained strategically towards transformative change without becoming the 'raw material' for new knowledge-based and technology-driven modern economies (*IT for Change*, 2013). They should also be prepared for the backlash from those affected due to change in power relations.

Though about 28% of women in India own mobile phone now, it does not amount to rise in their political participation to same amount (Aneja and Mishra, 2017). Political participation implies wider and deeper participation on continuous bases and not on 'convenient log on, log off basis' by the 'dot.com generation' without having any sense of belonging. We can call appropriation of digital technologies as political participation only if women in India are able to raise their voices seeking discursive equality in their everyday fights for survival and identity struggles as individuals and collectives. Moreover, they must have the courage to use digital technologies as 'legitimate participants' and not as 'isolated groups'. In fact, women's political participation through digital mode should be seen as intrinsic to the future of democracy in India, facilitating the re-politicisation of information and communication technologies *per se*. It would require women to run their own telecentres, collect authentic information and prepare data on their own to be able to deal with public authorities more effectively, online or offline. Indian democracy needs full participation of women (Patel and Khajuria, 2016).

The process of digitalisation of democracy can make it more inclusive and deliberative as it provides a voice to hitherto marginalised sections of society, including women, on an equal footing. E-participation does not only help in enhancing the number of participants online but

also enhance the quality of participation by focussing on groups and pressing issues. It can provide the space where serious and meaningful deliberations can take place not ‘once in two or four year slab basis’, but on ‘continuous basis’. Digital participation can also make the government more accountable and transparent by leading to interactive public administration. Through digital participation, women can effectively fight for efficient delivery of public services and goods. They can also report cases of domestic violence and other crimes swiftly online and hope for quick action on the part of authorities. Quite interestingly, digitalisation of democracy can make representation ‘less virtual by virtual means’ (Pogrebinschi, 2017) as it not only enhances participation but also improves democracy by promoting inclusion, responsiveness and social equality.

The Future prospects

The questions arise: can digitalization lead to participatory democracy and can it help women in India? It is true that technologies not only perform certain functions but also play an important role in shaping ‘our sense of who we are’ and prescribing new templates of ‘who we are going to be’ (Shah, 2016). The revolution in information and communication technologies has thrown new challenges to modern democracies afflicted by ‘civic apathy’, ‘scepticism’, ‘general disillusionment with politics’ and ‘conventional political processes’ (Papacharissi, 2010). Digitalization, on the other hand, reflects the heightened spirit of citizens towards political participation through emails, blogging, twitter, Facebook, social media, etc. It has provided ample opportunities for ‘dissemination of information’, ‘democratization’ and political participation through e-voting, holding public debates and valuing individual opinion. Digitalisation can be seen as a move away from the role of oligarchy in the name of ‘majority’ and/or representative democracy. Still it is premature to say whether it would lead to direct democracy or not as it is difficult to handle the vast diversities of opinions received online. Most of the online public debates have to ‘contend with increasingly personalized, attack-style, oversimplified, manipulative and deceptive messages or misinformation’ (Helbing and Klauser, 2017).

Digital democracy is primarily based on ‘collective intelligence’ that is hard to be managed by Google’s ‘omniscient algorithm’ or IBM’s ‘cognitive computer’ known as Watson. Smart citizens require smart handling. It is not enough to express one’s opinion in monosyllabic of ‘yes’ or ‘no’. It requires a platform where serious deliberations can take place representing diverse interests and minds. The future calls for digitally upgraded democracy that is both participatory and decentralised. It calls for a system where citizens can engage on continuous basis in deliberation and decision making processes. Women and other minorities can take advantage of the opportunities missed earlier by using the digital technologies and the digital space creatively. It can also help in curbing the polarization of society into opponent groups or parties. But to achieve this target, it would be necessary to create new platforms that are more ‘balanced, conscientious, substantive and comprehensive’ and not commercial (Helbing and Klauser, 2017).

By the digital democracy we do not simply imply ‘democratic processes in a media dominated and digitalized world’ (Helbing and Klauser, 2017). It is more than that. It implies inclusive participation of citizens in political affairs through the latest technologies on continuous basis. For this it would be necessary to focus on the changing relationship of state in citizens, changing notion of rights and duties of citizens in digitalized democracies, the role of civic societies and non-state organisations, political behaviour of citizens as individuals or collectives, the existence of ‘public sphere today in comparison to the one

available in the past', etc. It calls for rethinking and redefining political discourse and democracy today. It also requires pondering over the crucial question: how digital technologies shape and are shaped by contemporary democracies and political culture (Papacharissi, 2010). Moreover, we should be ready for the likely trends, such as, putting democracy on a fast track by accelerating the digitalisation processes, making way for the new actors, replacing old power structures, blurring of domestic and foreign participation, eroding central coordination, etc (Ashbrook, 2016).

In the studies carried out by the National Council of Women's Organization and Association for Women Entrepreneurs under the leadership of W20, it was found that digital transformation could be the game changer as far as the issue of gender equality is concerned. It provides ample opportunities towards economic and political participation to women through programmes of lifelong learning by government organizations and non-government organizations. These can also help women in equipping digital and social skills to be able to exploit full benefits from technological and communication devices. In fact, digitalization can accelerate the inclusion of women in economic markets and political sphere by providing access to necessary information and links. It can also help in 'unlocking women's full potential' to bridge the gender divide (Rosin, 2017).

In India (one of the 5 telecom giants), digitalization has affected women in a remarkable way by changing them from being mere housemakers and diffident citizens to politically conscious citizens. Digitalization has the potential to achieve what lawmakers and social reformers could not achieve — changing the mindset of men and women in India towards an equal and just society. It is in the interest of India to use the full potential of women as an 'emerging economy' and 'world power in making'. India cannot chalk out a place amongst the top countries if its women and other minorities are left out of the developmental process due to socio-cultural barriers. Policymakers and women's rights advocates must see to it that public agoras of digital space are open to the women in India and they are allowed to collaborate with other women and groups freely.

Whereas in advanced democracies, like the United States, UK and Germany, gender equality and social inclusion of women is seen as a pre-condition, in a country like India, these remain the 'cherished goals to be achieved'. Digitalization provides ample opportunities to women to claim their dignity and social equality through proactive participation. Where there is will, there is way. If women in India could play an active role in the national liberation movement under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, they can certainly become the beckoning force in modern India where constitutionally they enjoy equal rights in all fields since 1950 when the Constitution came into force. What they need is social awareness, economic independence, political assertiveness and digital skills. At present out of 191 million Facebook users in India only 24% are women (Subramanian, 2017). It means that despite the potential for enhancement of political participation by women in India, the issue of digitalization of democracy has to be seen in wider socio-economic and cultural framework. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that the network politics has the potential to subvert old political equations, shifting democracy in favour of gender equality and a just society.

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