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Q7(b)

Do you think that the social media has brought significant changes in the forms of protest? Argue your case

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2023 · Sociology GS 1 · 20 marks · Sociology

Sociology - The Discipline: Modernity and social changes in Europe and emergence of sociology; Scope of the subject and comparison with other social sciences; Sociology and common sense.

Core demand of the question

- Do you think that the social media has brought significant changes in the forms of protest?
- Argue your case
- Keep the argument within a 20-mark length

Revision summary

Social media lowered the cost of calling, framing, and witnessing protest.

Castells and **Tufekci** describe leader-light networks of outrage with real limits in bargaining.

Indian CAA, farmers', and #MeToo campaigns show hybrid online and street repertoires.

Shutdowns, trolling, and influencer oligarchy are the other side of the same tools.

The change of form is significant. Street, union, and court remain decisive.

Introduction

Social media are platforms that let users publish, share, and assemble without passing through a newspaper or party office. Forms of protest are the repertoires people use to claim, disrupt, and persuade. The case argued here is yes, the changes are significant in speed, scale, and visibility. They are not a replacement of street, union, and party.

Body

What has changed

- **Manuel Castells described networks of outrage and hope:** rapid assembly without a single headquarters, as in parts of the **Arab Spring and Occupy**.
- Hashtags, livestreams, and encrypted groups lower the cost of calling a crowd and of documenting police action.
- Transnational mirroring lets a local injury travel as a template, which Zeynep **Tufekci** analysed as a strength and as a weakness of leader-light movements.
- **Everyday Goffman-like presentation now includes the protest profile:** symbols, frames, and counter-frames compete in the same feed.
- New forms include online petitions, coordinated rating campaigns, leak drops, and hybrid sit-ins that are both camp and channel.

Indian illustrations

- The 2011 anti-corruption mobilisation used television and early social media together.

- The 2019-20 **Citizenship Amendment Act** protests and the 2020-21 farmers' movement used WhatsApp, YouTube, and Twitter to coordinate langar, legal updates, and counter-narratives.
- #MeToo in Indian workplaces showed a repertoire of naming that bypassed slow internal committees, with risks of defamation law and unequal digital access.

What has not been abolished

- Occupying a physical place, blocking a road, and striking still decide outcomes when platforms can be throttled.
- Michels's oligarchy reappears as influencer hierarchies and as parties that harvest online anger.
- The state uses the same tools for surveillance, shutdown, and organised trolling, which changes the risk of protest rather than ending protest.
- Digital divides of language, gender, and rural bandwidth mean the feed is not the people.

Argument

- **Significant change is in the repertoire:** faster framing, wider witnessing, and weaker formal leadership at the start.
- Significance is not the same as success. Leader-light networks can occupy a square and then fail to bargain, which **Tufekci** noted.
- **Marx** still asks who owns the platforms. **Weber** still asks who holds the monopoly of force. Those questions bound the new forms.

Judgement

- Yes, forms have changed significantly. No, the street, the union, and the court are not obsolete.

Flow diagram

Social media -> New repertoire
 New repertoire -> Fast frame witness assemble
 Street strike court -> Outcomes
 Fast frame witness assemble -> Outcomes
 State shutdown surveillance -> Fast frame witness assemble

Conclusion

Social media has changed protest by speeding assembly, witnessing, and framing, as **Castells** and Indian hybrid movements show. The change is significant in repertoire. It is limited by shutdowns, oligarchy of influencers, and the continuing need for physical disruption and organisation. The fair case is significant change without replacement of older forms.

Facts & figures

Castells

Analysed networked social movements that assemble through digital communication.

Tufekci

Argued that easy assembly can coexist with weak capacity to sustain and negotiate.

Arab Spring and Occupy

Early twenty-first century cases of square plus stream as a protest form.

Farmers' movement 2020-21

Indian protest that combined highway camps with intense platform messaging.

Internet shutdowns

State interruptions of service that show platform dependence as a vulnerability.

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