

**Environmental Activism: Unveiling the Dynamics of the Anti-Sterlite Protests through Social Media Mobilization**

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**Abstract**

This paper explores the vital role of social media platforms like Facebook in enabling civic engagement and environmental activism, through a case study of the local movement against Vedanta's Sterlite Copper plant in Thoothukudi, Tamil Nadu. Specifically, it analyses Facebook posts during peak months of protests from February to May 2018, culminating in tragic violence but ultimately resulted in plant closure. The study conducts discourse analysis on Facebook posts from the "Ban Sterlite. Save Thoothukudi" and "Thoothukudi People" pages which were key coordinating platforms for anti-Sterlite protesters with over 22,000 and 138,000 followers respectively. Historian Ramachandra Guha (2000) highlighted the importance of media participation for realizing environmental movements' democratic potential. This paper upholds his argument, demonstrating how through enabling marginalized voices, social media facilitated the anti-Sterlite movement. By studying the nuanced role social media played in a contentious environmental movement, this paper highlights implications for leveraging digital platforms strategically to advance social change causes. Critically, this study is important because it provides an in-depth examination of how public and marginalized communities use social media for activism amidst structural oppression and state-sanctioned violence. As digital media permeates more aspects of civic and political life globally, understanding its dynamics is key to promoting sustainable environmental and social movements.

*Keywords: environment movement, social media activism, anti-sterlite, digital activism*

## **Introduction**

India has a long, vibrant history of environmental movements driven by affected local communities. Environmental debate in India was at its intense in the 1980s. Some prominent environment movement include the Chipko Movement of the 1970s, where village women in Uttarakhand hugged trees to prevent deforestation, and the Appiko movement where activists hugged trees in Karnataka's Western Ghats region to stop logging. There was also Narmada Bachao Andolan of the 1980s which opposed the construction of large dams on the Narmada River. In more recent years, local fishing communities organized widespread protests against the Kudankulam nuclear power plant in Tamil Nadu over radiation and environmental concerns. While these decentralized grassroots campaigns relied heavily on direct action tactics, mass media has played an increasingly important role in mobilizing participation and garnering national attention around them. Historian Ramachandra Guha's seminal research on Chipko highlighted the power of protest images hugging trees to circulate across India in newspapers, sparking widespread environmental consciousness. Guha emphasized how mass media brought crucial visibility and networks for Chipko's localized activism to expand into a coordinated eco-feminist movement uniting rural Himalayan villagers. He noted mass media transformed isolated grassroot struggles into interconnected environmental awareness and demands for accountability across India (Guha, 2000). This way mass media proved crucial in channeling these voices on environmental struggles to mainstream discourse and policy positions on ecological sustainability.

A few examples like images of Chipko protesters embracing trees became a powerful visual symbol and representative image that resonated widely across the country. This incident brought renewed national attention to the impacts of rapid industrialization and echoed numerous grassroots environmental movements in India over the preceding decades. These decentralized, community-led movements represented local resistance to harmful environmental practices and projects seen as prioritizing profits over people.

In covering the Narmada Bachao Andolan, the media brought national visibility to the issue and leader Medha Patkar's calls for displaced locals to get proper rehabilitation. For the Kudankulam protests as well, media narratives elevated local opposition into a larger anti-nuclear debate. Hence mass media, across print, television and eventually social media, has proven crucial in bringing grassroots environmental struggles into mainstream discourse and consciousness. It has enabled otherwise isolated rural groups to link up under common causes, bringing strong voices and numbers to demand accountability from governments and corporations.

### **Sterlite Copper Ltd- A Timeline:**

The Sterlite copper smelter, a subsidiary of the London-based Vedanta Resources Limited founded by Indian businessman Anil Agarwal, set up operations in Thoothukudi in 1996 despite strong community opposition and concerns about pollution. In 2011, a study by National Environmental Engineering Research Institute (NEERI) at the plant finds high levels of copper, lead, cadmium and fluoride in the locality's groundwater. Later in 2013, a toxic gas leak occurred, resulting in a fine of 100crores and brief closure of the plant.

In February 2018, protests began against Sterlite's alleged plans to expand the smelter. However, for over two decades, the local residents were protesting against the plant's toxic emissions and the resulting health and environmental impacts. However, it took a massive protest on May 22, 2018 and the police killing of 13 civilians for the Tamil Nadu government to finally shut down the smelter. This sparked further outrage and actions against Sterlite. Immediately after the police brutality, Tamil Nadu government formed an enquiry commission headed by retired high court Judge Aruna Jagadeesan to probe the police firing. Tamil Nadu pollution board ordered the plant's closure on May 24<sup>th</sup>, and the state government subsequently sealed the plant on May 28<sup>th</sup>.

The anti-Sterlite protest that erupted in Thoothukudi, Tamil Nadu in 2018 represents a pivotal moment in India's long history of environmental movements seeking to balance industrial growth and ecological sustainability. This protest tapped into an ongoing Indian tradition of environmental activism. However, the large-scale mobilization and violence in Thoothukudi also signaled both the Indian government and corporations' increased willingness to silence dissent through force. It showed that marginalized communities will continue fighting environmental injustices even in the face of grave personal risk. As India continues on a path of rapid economic development, balancing sustainability goals with industrialization remains an immense challenge. The Sterlite protest thus represents only one flashpoint in the much larger, ongoing struggle in India to build an equitable and ecologically conscious growth model for the future. The objective of this study is to analyse the use of social media as an activist tool during the 2018 Sterlite protests in Thoothukudi. The goal is to understand how a social media platform like Facebook and other digital platforms enabled civic engagement and environmental activism, as well as the broader implications and lessons from this movement for driving social change in the digital age.

### **Social Media and Protest Movements**

In defining social media, we follow a foundational conceptualization of social networking sites proposed by Boyd and Ellison (2007), considering them to be internet-based software that enable users to create digital profiles, either public or quasi-public, and develop a network of follower-following relationships, either unidirectional or bidirectional. Social media allow users to communicate with their network connections and/or broadcast messages publicly via short status updates or newsfeed posts.

Castells (2012) argues that protests in Tunisia, Egypt, and elsewhere spread virally due to digital networks like Facebook and Twitter. Activists were able to quickly mobilize, organize, and get messages out to a wide audience online. Hashtags like #Jan25 (referring to protests on January 25<sup>th</sup> in Egypt) unified the communication.

The Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement began in September 2011 as a protest against economic inequality, greed, and the influence of corporations and the wealthy on American politics and policymaking. The movement was sparked by the Canadian anti-consumerist magazine *Adbusters*, which put out a call via social media for protesters to "flood into lower Manhattan" and "Occupy Wall Street" (Manhattan, 2011). Castells emphasizes how these digital tools allowed the movement to transcend physical boundaries and engage a diverse and dispersed group of activists. He argues that OWS was a product of the networked social structure of contemporary society, facilitated by the use of social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and online forums.

Segeberg and Bennett's study on climate change protests at the 2009 Copenhagen summit illustrates that environmental activism and communication is changing due to advances in digital technologies and social media platforms. They found that Twitter enabled new forms of crowdsourced gatekeeping and networking about the protests in real-time (Segeberg & Bennett, 2011). This means as events evolved on the ground, the social media conversations about them also shifted fluidly. So social media allows environmental activists and communicators to rapidly spread information, coordinate responses, and involve large decentralized crowds in processes like narrative-framing and determining authoritative versus fringe sources (Segeberg & Bennett, 2011). It also enables cross-movement alliances as diverse causes can easily support each other across digital platforms (Segeberg & Bennett, 2011). These technologies disrupt older, centralized media systems and hierarchies (Segeberg & Bennett, 2011). They open new areas of research on how digital platforms may aid grassroots environmental activism and communication. Key questions of the study include how movements leverage such tools and networks, and how their strategies may need to evolve to take advantage of the affordances and structures of these information systems.

While many research are done analysing Twitter's discourse there are select studies that have examined other social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube etc. A study by Katz-Kimchi and Manosevitch (2015) analysed the Greenpeace International Facebook campaign called "Unfriend Coal" which was aimed at pressuring Facebook to change its data centre energy policy and use clean and renewable energy instead of coal power. With over 700,000 likes/followers globally, the Facebook page enabled transnational public engagement allowing Greenpeace to mobilize web activists from around the world. This showed the potential of social media platforms like Facebook for international environmental campaigning and grassroots organizing across geographic boundaries. A study by Padmanabhan (2018) found that anti-nuclear groups used Facebook effectively for elements like "support", "encouragement", "compassion", and "admiration" - rallying people to their cause. Pro-groups had more sporadic activity and less organized messaging.

## **Methodology**

This study aims to analyse Facebook posts from the "Ban Sterlite.Save Thoothukudi" page and "Thoothukudi People" pages during peak months of protests against the Sterlite copper smelting plant. The timeframe of February 2018 to May 2018 has been chosen as during this period the protests built momentum, culminating in the tragic shootings on May 22<sup>nd</sup> and the subsequent closure of the plant on May 28<sup>th</sup>.

The "Ban Sterlite. Save Thoothukudi" and "Thoothukudi People" page has been selected due to its position as the main coordinating platform for anti-Sterlite activists with over 22,000 + and 1,38,000+ followers respectively. It featured regular posts and live video streaming from protests, making it a rich source of grassroots perspectives.

- **Discourse Analysis:** Building on (Parker, 1992), it's evident that discourse is not just a mere collection of texts. These texts, when woven together, form a comprehensive mosaic that conveys a broader narrative. Each individual text, while meaningful on its own, gains profound significance when seen as a part of this larger discourse. As the study of how social realities are linguistically constituted, discourse analysis examines the interplay between text, discourses, and wider contexts (Philips & Hardy, 2002).
- **In-depth Interviews:** Boyce and Neale (2006) define In-Depth interviews as, "open- ended, discovery-oriented qualitative research method that involves conducting intensive individual interviews with a small number of respondents to explore their perspective on a particular idea,

program or situation”. In-depth interviews are useful for understanding personal contexts, experiences, and perspectives around a focused topic or situation. The qualitative data and insights gleaned can inform research questions related to behaviours, program evaluation, organizational processes, or culture. In specific to social movement studies, Kathleen Blee (2013) observes, “Personal interviews with activists are a common strategy for gathering data on current social movements”. Interviewees in life history and in-depth methods uncover individual motivations, experiences and meaning as well as internal movement dynamics, particularly where other information is scarce. These interviews bring the human agency to the centre of movement analysis. There are two main categories of interviewees: informers and participants. Informers provide expertise or first-hand experience about the research topic. They offer thick descriptions, they may be experts in a particular field or it was a part of their life history or they may have witnessed an event or situation that is relevant to the research (Weiss, 1994). Participants are people who belong to the population that we are interested in studying. They are chosen through purposive, selective, or theoretical sampling based on relevance to the research focus. For the study, interviews were done with two prominent climate activists in Tamil Nadu. They are,

***Nityanand Jayaraman, Writer, Journalist, Climate Activist, Founder- Vettiver Collective***

He has been instrumental in raising awareness about the issues related to the Sterlite plant. He has used various platforms, including writing articles, giving interviews, and speaking at public events, to inform the public about the potential dangers posed by the plant's operations. He is associated with this movement since 2003. During Covid-19 pandemic, on the second anniversary of Sterlite shooting the virtual “Stay at Home Satyagraha” was organized by him. This event demonstrates the resilience and commitment of activists to continue advocating for justice and accountability while adapting to the challenges posed by the public health crisis.

***G. Sundarrajan, Director, Poovulagin Nanbargal and Climate Activist***

G. Sundarrajan is a notable figure in the realm of environmental activism and advocacy in Tamil Nadu. As the director of "Poovulagin Nanbargal," a prominent environmental organization based in Chennai, his dedicated efforts have left a lasting impact on various environmental causes starting from Kudankulam. His online presence and vocal advocacy on social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter have significantly amplified his impact and outreach. His work reflects his deep concern for the region's ecosystems and the well-being of

its people. His organization issued two essential books in Tamil, ‘Sterlitin Soolaliyal Padukolai’ (Environmental massacre of Sterlite), ‘Sterlite Valga Makkal Oliga’ (Hail Sterlite and Down People) that provided comprehensive insights into the Sterlite issue, serving as invaluable resources for researchers, activists, and policymakers. *Poovulagin Nanbargal’s* release of the Tamil Nadu Environment Report Card in June 2021 marked a significant milestone. This comprehensive report covers a wide array of environmental issues, offering insights into challenges like groundwater crises, air pollution, solid waste management, and more. The report also marks the grave effect of the Sterlite Protest.

## Analysis and Discussion



This first post on the "Ban Sterlite.Save Thoothukudi" page indicates the beginning of a local movement against the Sterlite copper smelting plant located near Thoothukudi, India. The post conveys a strong opposition to Sterlite, viewing the company's operations as imposing a critical threat to the area's residents. It foreshadows an escalating conflict, referring metaphorically to a "revolution" against Sterlite. The high level of shares also points to significant local engagement on this issue even a year prior to the tragic Thoothukudi shootings in May 2018 involving police firing on protestors demanding Sterlite's closure due to environmental and health hazards. The 2008 health study on villages near Sterlite revealed several major health hazards linked to the factory's operations and emissions. Key findings show high iron content in local groundwater, making it unfit to drink; a 13.9% prevalence of respiratory diseases in

surrounding areas, over double the state average, tied to air pollution; increased rates of pharyngitis, sinusitis and other ENT disorders; a high incidence of asthmatic bronchitis at 2.8%, more than double the state average; and widespread reports of general body pain and menstrual abnormalities among women. Even at a fraction of its current operating capacity, Sterlite has perpetuated alarming health hazards to local communities through contaminated water and toxic emissions.

This post marks early public organizing against the controversial plant. It was posted on June 19, 2017, received two comments and 113 shares.



This post was made on February 7, 2018, two days after the anti-Sterlite protests had started in Thoothukudi on February 5<sup>th</sup>. It was the first post about the protests from the “Thoothukudi People” page after they had begun. The admin uses a popular movie “Gilli” meme to frame the emerging conflict between the people of Thoothukudi and the Sterlite Copper Ltd. The reactions to the post were mixed, some followers laughed at the humour while others simply 'liked' the meme.

By remixing a popular movie scene with new textual meaning, the post tried to generate interest in the protests and position Sterlite as the villain encroaching on the town. The varied reactions indicate the meme resonated but views differed on how seriously to take it early on in the protest timeline. As the first post about the protests from the page, the multimodal meme attempted to start building momentum and situate Sterlite as an antagonist. By remaking a famous movie scene, the post tried to spark initial interest in the emerging protests. However, reactions showed both amusement and agreement, highlighting the uncertainty around protests in their initial days. A famous movie reference chosen to resonate with Tamil cultural context. "Coming soon" as the caption hints at impending major protest action. This aligns Thoothukudi residents against Sterlite through movie analogy. Protesters framed as "heroes" defending their town.

The post sought to align the audience with the viewpoint of Thoothukudi residents and invoke a sense of collective identity. The caption hints at urging the audience to anticipate upcoming protest action and participate. The mix of laughs and likes show the post resonated but the audience's stance was still doubtful or looked as sarcastically this early. Signals affiliation with the wider anti-Sterlite movement by using "our town" wording. It also affiliates with Tamil movie fans by using a cult film, Gilli's reference.

*Hashtags used in the post are #wakeup #thoothukudi #cancer* which contextualizes the post as related to pollution concerns.

The post's number of reactions and comments show it has resonated with followers. Its visible acknowledgement amplified its reach to some extent among the followers. Initial reactions and shares led Facebook algorithm to boost reach. Increased visibility brought more interactions, further spreading the post. The multimodal movie meme generates anticipation of the protests, frames Sterlite negatively through cultural references, and rallies collective identity - leveraging text, image, and platform affordances for engagement and mobilization.

Van Dijck (2013)'s conceptualisation on socio-technical shaping of social media discourse emphasizes that rather than treating technology and society as two separate entities, look at them as mutually shaping one another. So features like reactions and algorithms do not just facilitate discourse, they actively shape how we communicate and interact online. For instance, the number of reactions and comments on a post signify its popularity and worth. They are not neutral metrics but configure value and resonance. Tufekci (2018) echoes Van Dijck in arguing that social media platforms are not neutral for organising but reshape activism based on their technological affordances. She mentions Twitter's open, broadcast-style feed

enabled rapid information sharing during protests, facilitating real-time coordination. But it also led to risks like arrest based on posts, which is also the case in anti-Sterlite protest.



Anti Sterlite Protest at Kumareddiyapuram village in Thoothukudi. One of the first protests where school kids, large number of women from the town participated.

From the interview it is inferred that social media was useful for spreading information and alerting people about the Sterlite protests, but it has limitations in translating online engagement into real-life impact. WhatsApp was the most widely used platform among protesters to spread information. However, social media also enables the spread of misinformation by governments and corporations to discredit protests. Hashtags and online campaigns did not generate much reach or engagement beyond the existing supporters. While social media enables decentralized coordination, its ultimate impact is limited without on-the-ground actions.

He added that specifically, WhatsApp had the best reach in gathering and informing protest participants according to the speaker. Twitter did not play a major role among the protestors themselves, though it was used by outside supporters. For the 3<sup>rd</sup> anniversary commemoration in 2021, organizers ran a completely virtual campaign since pandemic restrictions prevented in-person gatherings. However, the speaker felt online events were lifeless and did not match the energy or engagement of physical events. Some specific examples of social media enabling coordination were a nationwide youth campaign against Adani and an online relay hunger strike which engaged 1500 participants across cities.

In general, though, he is sceptical about the influence of Twitter trends and metrics, since the platform represents a tiny fraction of the Indian population. The ability of governments and politicians to manufacture trends also limits how much Twitter reflects genuine public sentiment. So while social media furnishes tools for decentralisation and broader reach, translating digital activism into concrete impact requires on-ground actions and coordination with clear goals. Virtual engagement alone is limiting. The speaker advises using social media for efficient information sharing but cautions against assuming online metrics directly correspond to real change.



Source: “Ban Sterlite. Save Thoothukudi” page

For the very first time in Tamil Nadu, internet was suspended on May 23, 2018 a day after police firing happened which also marked 100<sup>th</sup> day of protest. Along with Thoothukudi two neighbouring districts- Kanyakumari and Tirunelveli also had ban on broadband and mobile data services for two days. Mobile phone services were also stopped which created a panic state among public without able to reach their families through any means. During the protest they used WhatsApp to know about missing children or any of their kith and kin by sending their pictures. But internet ban came as a curse in the crucial days, right after police killed 13 protestors. In the report issued by the Chief Secretary on internet shutdown, mentioned that the mass gathering of more than 20,000 people was achieved through messages passed through

social media and it played a major role in organising the protest (Rao, 2018). This was similar to the Egyptian Revolution where the government tried both violent repression and internet suppression. It was said to be a daring attempt that no regime had tried before, a monopoly of violence in their sphere of action (Castells, 2015). It should be noted that English news channels that are national did not give any airtime for these protests before the killings of protestors (Vijayan, 2018). In fact, even inside the state, the protest gained attention only after the images, and videos of mass rally in March spread across social media.



Source: Times of India; Date: 28.05.2018

When there was no internet and mobile services for the next few days after firing, police began to barge inside houses and detained hundreds of men including minors. They were taken to reserved camps and beaten for days. They used fired rubber bullets inside streets where people lived. One of the video of this inhumane act of violence was shared in social media where 22 year old Kaliappan, was dragged to the street killed by the police and one of them saying, “Stop acting, get up”.

After few days, when Information and Publicity Minister Kadambur Raju, a native of Thoothukudi visited the Government hospital to meet those injured, a mother of an injured son confronted angrily on the merciless action of police. This video of this exchange between mother and officials went viral on social media platforms, that more than 30k viewed in Facebook and Twitter and retweeted several times. It was also widely spread in WhatsApp and

YouTube. The news story was covered by main papers like, *The Hindu* on its front page the story of a mother who openly asked him, “Why did you shoot us? Please don’t try to fool the people. How much money did you get from Sterlite? We’ll give you twice that, shut down the plant.” After the public backlash the state government ordered shut down the state plant on 28 May, 2018.

The Anti-Sterlite protests bear some striking similarities to the Occupy Wall Street movement in the United States in 2011, particularly in their lack of centralized leadership and reliance on social media for organization and information sharing. Both the movements arose in opposition to corporate power - Sterlite Industries' copper smelting plant in Thoothukudi and the big banks and financial institutions in the case of OWS. And neither had an identifiable central leader or leadership group directing activities. Decentralized decision-making at the local level was a hallmark. As one report on Anti-Sterlite noted, "Their leadership functions were discussed in their wards/villages respectively and a collective decision was said in the public space" (Senthalir, 2018).

However, this lack of formal hierarchy had disadvantages. With Occupy and its hundreds of autonomous local groups, messaging lacked coordination (Castells, 2015). Anti-Sterlite saw a proliferation of Facebook pages, WhatsApp groups and hashtags in support of the movement, but without centralization. One report cited the creation of "more than Five Facebook pages in the same name, multiple hashtags, multiple groups which did not help in channelizing the messages" (Senthalir, 2018).

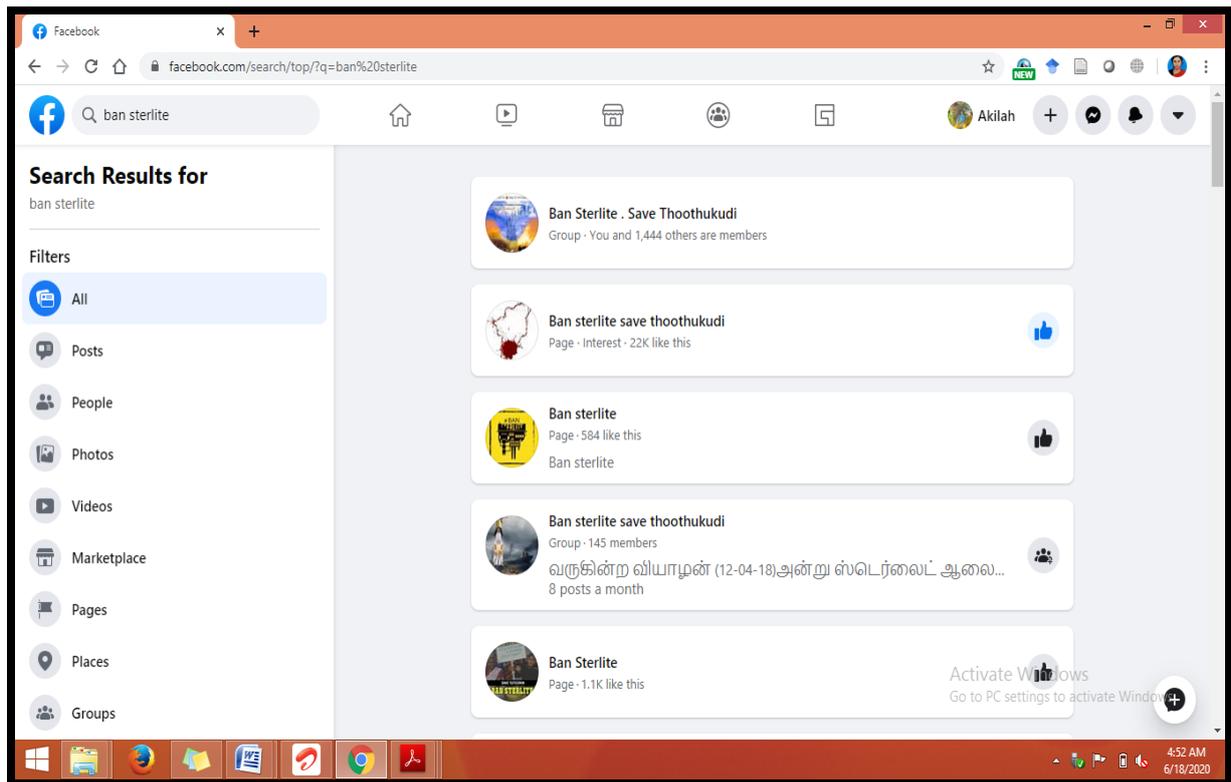
In contrast, Occupy Wall Street, while also considered a "leaderless movement," maintained only one website and one Facebook page for each locality in which protests erupted. This allowed for consistent messaging and information sharing under common hashtags (Castells, 2015). The decentralized nature of both movements can be attributed in part to their reliance on social media for internal communication and external promotion of their causes. Key demographics within both protest groups lined up with the most intensive users of platforms like Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp.

In Anti-Sterlite, the bulk of protesters were youth under the age of 22. As one account put it, "A major group of protestors in Anti-Sterlite were without doubt young who were below 22 years of age". For these digital native youth, social media played a ubiquitous role in their lives prior to the protests. A report on this cohort noted, "their maximum usage of internet

earlier was to do their school/college work and to stay in touch with friends, create new friends in Social Media" (Senthalir, 2018).

Likely because of their familiarity and expertise using social platforms, these youth participants were able to quickly leverage their networks and skill sets to support mobilization efforts, even in the absence of a leadership hierarchy dictating messaging or tactics. Decentralized groups with strong digital expertise acted as force multipliers, analogous to the worldwide spread of Occupy Wall Street under its unifying banner, but without a central organizing authority (Castells, 2012). But social media and Internet fluency were likely much lower for the average fisherman or villager over the age of 35 participating in the Anti-Sterlite protests. While educated, a report characterized these groups as generally "lacking knowledge in technology or how to use social media profoundly". So while their involvement gave a grassroots authenticity to the movement, more direction from organised leadership on social media strategies may have streamlined online organisation and consistency of messaging.

In general, both movements struggled to transition digital mobilization into enduring political change, unlike more traditional, centrally-organized movements led by prominent leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. or Mahatma Gandhi with concrete policy goals (Castells, 2015). Once Occupy's petered out after struggles with weather and police, maintaining momentum was difficult. Grassroots protests helped pressure Sterlite Industries to shut their smelter, but they maintain it was unjustly targeted and emphasize their commitment to reopening. Sterlite supporters protested in Delhi on November 28th, appealing to the Supreme Court ahead of the December 6th hearing to reopen the controversial smelter. Their placards read "Open Sterlite now, enough protests!" and "Seeking lost livelihoods, pleading from Jantar Mantar," referring to the jobs and economic losses after the plant's closure while urging the court to allow operations to resume despite longstanding environmental concerns (Shabimunna, 2023).



## Conclusion

This study aimed to elucidate the role of social media platforms like Facebook in enabling impactful environmental activism. The key findings of the study are- first, social media activated widespread civic participation - mobilizing over 100,000 online and spurring regular protests by thousands, despite attempts to censor local mainstream media coverage. Second, Facebook facilitated vital logistics of on-ground demonstrations in terms of organising, documentation and global visibility. Third, through countering pro-government narratives, social media discourse increased accountability and overturned official stances to ultimately enforce the plant's permanent closure. This study upholds arguments by scholars like Ramachandra Guha regarding the democratic potential of integrated media participation. Findings reveal strategic implications for protests globally. Though these tools expand civic engagement, oppressive systems may respond with disproportionate force, especially within authoritarian environments. So integrated digital and ground activism remains vital, strengthened through global solidarity on pressing issues like environmental justice.

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