

HASHTAGS AND HASTHAKSARAMS: YOUNG WOMEN'S DIGITAL NARRATIVES OF PROTEST AND SOLIDARITY IN KERALA

Jayaprakash A

Department of English, Govt. Women's Polytechnic College, Thrissur

*Corresponding author: jaypeeji@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the emergence of digital feminist activism among young women in Kerala, focusing on how hashtags and handwritten narratives, or "hasthaksarams," act as tools of protest and solidarity. Drawing upon landmark movements such as the Kerala Women's Wall and the Indian #MeToo campaign, this study uses cultural and feminist literary theory to examine how these digital spaces enable young women to negotiate power, identity, and representation. The analysis foregrounds Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model to understand meaning-making within hashtags, Judith Butler's performativity to conceptualize digital gendered self-representations, and Homi Bhabha's notion of hybridity to explore multilingual and transcultural feminist identities. These narratives constitute a transformative cultural politics reshaping feminist activism in Kerala's intersecting social hierarchies.

Key Words: *Digital Activism, Feminist Studies, Cultural Politics, Feminist activism*

INTRODUCTION

Digital platforms have fundamentally transformed feminist activism globally, enabling young women in Kerala to seize representational space and political agency against a backdrop of entrenched patriarchal structures, despite the state's celebrated progressive indicators—96.2% female literacy, highest female-to-male workforce ratios, and leftist mobilization histories juxtaposed with persistent dowry practices, religious policing of female bodies, caste-based exclusions, and domestic coercion. In this distinctive socio-cultural matrix, hashtags and "hasthaksarams" — personal protest narratives digitized for viral circulation — emerge as innovative strategies contesting these hierarchies while forging hybrid feminist identities resonant across local, national, and diasporic contexts. The 2025 resurgence of #Avalkoppam following an eminent actor's acquittal in the 2017 Malayalam actress assault case exemplifies this potency: despite convictions of six assailants, the allegations of judicial bias, evidence tampering, closed-door trials, and elite influence sparked nationwide outrage, with the hashtag trending at over 500,000 mentions in 48 hours and endorsements from Women in Cinema Collective (WCC) and other similar organizations for gender rights.

Cultural Studies provides the indispensable theoretical architecture for dissecting these practices. Stuart Hall's seminal encoding/decoding model reframes hashtags not as passive metadata but dynamic circuits where organizers encode political intentionality (#Avalkoppam signifying solidarity against impunity), participants produce and circulate meanings through shares, and antagonistic audiences generate oppositional decodings via counter-hashtags like #Ayalkkoppam celebrating "money power" (Hall 15-27). Judith Butler's gender performativity theory elucidates how digital disclosures—tweets naming abusers, Instagram narratives detailing assaults—constitute iterative, subversive performances that destabilize normative gender regimes and dismantle patriarchal silencing mechanisms (Butler 519-39). Homi Bhabha's postcolonial hybridity framework illuminates the liminal identities forged through Malayalam-English code-switching in these texts, challenging binaries of tradition/modernity, local/global, and secular/religious (Bhabha 95-114).

Complementing these, Gayatri Spivak's incisive subaltern critique underscores the strategic

essentialism Kerala women employ to amplify systematically excluded voices; like that of Dalit survivors inserting caste grievances and Muslim women contesting communal policing — while navigating risks of co-optation by dominant discourses (Spivak 271-313). This interlocking theoretical lens frames the paper's central inquiry: How do hashtags (digital communities) and *hasthaksarams* (personal narratives) function as contested cultural sites enabling young Kerala women to negotiate power, identity, and resistance within intersectional hierarchies amplified by celebrity impunity and platform algorithms? This paper addresses three interrelated questions: First, how do these digital practices disrupt hegemonic gender discourses rooted in Kerala's matrilineal-orthodox paradox? Second, what representational strategies facilitate navigation of caste, class, religious, and now celebrity fault lines, as seen in #Avalkoppam? Third, what structural paradoxes emerge from corporate platforms and judicial systems that simultaneously empower feminist voices while exposing them to surveillance, disinformation, and perceived elite protection?

Contextualizing Digital Feminism in Kerala

Kerala's socio-political terrain constitutes a paradoxical matrix for feminist activism, interweaving impressive human development metrics—96.2% female literacy, India's highest female-to-male workforce participation ratio, and legacies of Nair matrilineality and leftist mobilization—with persistent patriarchal kinship structures, dowry persistence, religious orthodoxies across Hindu, Christian, and Muslim communities, and caste stratifications that systematically constrain women's public agency and bodily autonomy (Abraham 45–60; Kerala Sahitya Akademi). Digital feminism emerges precisely within these fault lines, leveraging social media affordances to contest structural inequalities, forge solidarities across social divides, and reclaim narrative authority from institutional silencing. The 2019 Kerala Women's Wall represents a watershed: mobilizing 3.2 million women across 620 kilometers in response to the Supreme Court's Sabarimala verdict permitting women's temple entry, it directly challenged patriarchal religious norms and communal polarization, generating 1.8 million #WomensWall hashtag mentions within 96 hours. The Women's Wall serves as paradigmatic alongside #MeTooKerala and #Avalkoppam, where embodied protests converged with viral amplification generating millions of interactions (Abraham 45–60; "Vanitha Mathil").

Sunnykutty Abraham conceptualizes the Wall as performative spatial rupture, with women occupying highways conventionally reserved for male political processions, thereby contesting gendered cartographies of public space and encoding gendered unity transcending caste-religion divides (Abraham 45-60). Stuart Hall's circuit of culture framework illuminates this dynamic where organizers encoded the event as a symbol of secular feminist solidarity. Participants consumed and reproduced meanings through 2.1 million selfies, videos, and live-streams, while conservative audiences generated oppositional interpretations framing it as moral violation and anti-Hindu conspiracy. Parallel to the Wall, Kerala's #MeToo iteration unfolded primarily through Instagram Stories and Facebook posts, where college students, journalists, adjunct faculty, and young professionals shared "*hasthaksarams*" detailing institutional harassment, workplace predation, familial coercion, and domestic violence—strategically bridging digital ephemerality with material permanence to resonate with Donna Haraway's valorization of situated, embodied feminist epistemologies contesting patriarchal universals (Haraway 581-98).

The 2017 Malayalam actress sexual assault case marks another pivotal flashpoint, catalyzing the original #Avalkoppam movement. The survivor—a prominent figure in Malayalam cinema—was abducted and molested in a moving car by assailants allegedly as retaliation for her Women in Cinema Collective (WCC) advocacy against industry sexual exploitation. Launched

primarily by WCC members to counter slut-shaming and victim-blaming, #Avalkoppam ("With Her") fused Malayalam solidarity with global #MeToo grammar, proliferating amid survivor threats and media trials. The December 2025 verdict reignited it explosively: while six perpetrators received punishment, the acquittal of a major actor alleged to be the mastermind of the assault, prompted statements decrying evidence tampering, denied open trials, judicial bias favoring elites, and human rights violations.

Reading Gayatri Spivak and her subaltern analytics could probably reveal how Dalit, Muslim, and lower-caste women tactically appropriated mainstream hashtags like #Avalkoppam and #WomensWall, inserting caste-specific grievances—temple entry discrimination, communal policing of hijab and dress codes, workplace casteism—into broader gender discourses, thereby challenging upper-caste feminist hegemonies and exposing intersectional modulations of digital risk (Spivak 271-313). Gayatri Spivak's reflections on subalternity and strategic essentialism are crucial for understanding how Dalit, Muslim, and lower-caste women inhabit Kerala's digital feminist spaces. While broad feminist hashtags risk reproducing upper-caste and middle-class dominance, subaltern women tactically appropriate common tags to insert caste-specific grievances, religious policing, and workplace casteism into wider gender debates. This practice constitutes a form of strategic essentialism where "women" is deployed as a provisional political category that can foreground shared gendered vulnerability while still allowing for the articulation of deeply unequal caste and community locations. At the same time, Spivak cautions that subaltern voices can be absorbed, diluted, or overwritten by more powerful actors within feminist spaces, a risk that is amplified by algorithmic hierarchies and platform logics.

Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding paradigm proves analytically useful for dissecting these dynamics: WCC organizers encoded explicit solidarity against elite impunity into the hashtag's syntax; grassroots users—students, journalists, cinema workers—decoded through participatory *hasthaksarams* naming "industry predators" and demanding accountability; while antagonistic audiences generated oppositional meanings via rival #Ayalkkoppam ("With Him"), celebrating the male actor's "money power triumph" and projecting his cinematic comeback with fan-organized bus protests halting film screenings. Judith Butler's performativity theory frames the survivor's disclosures and supporters' posts as citational ruptures: iterative speech acts like "justice betrayed by closed doors" subversively reconfigure disclosure from private trauma to public indictment, interpellating digital publics as ethically obligated witnesses (Butler 519-39; 530).

Homi Bhabha's hybridity manifests vividly in code-switched formulations such as "#Avalkoppam അവൾക്ക് നീതി വേണം" ("She needs justice"), blending English universality with Malayalam relationality to navigate insider/outsider audience dynamics through "sly civility"—strategic mimicry accommodating platform moderation while smuggling region-specific critiques of celebrity impunity (Bhabha 95-114; 107). Donna Haraway's cyborg ontology extends to these hybrid texts: *hasthaksarams* blending corporeal handwriting with algorithmic circulation embody woman-technology coalitions contesting phallogocentric regimes that protect powerful perpetrators (Haraway 581-98; 584). Ethnographic documentation reveals post-verdict *hasthaksarams* proliferating on kraft paper at Kochi court barricades — with viral specimens declaring "അവൾക്കൊപ്പം എന്തും" ("With Her, Always") naming "conspiracy of power structures," shared by 20,000+ users—materializing digital ephemerality while evoking palm-leaf manuscript traditions. Quantitative circulation analytics underscore #Avalkoppam's disruptive scale: peaking alongside #MeTooKerala calls for movie industry reforms, it prompted solidarity from prominent figures from Malayalam Cinema. Sunnykutty Abraham conceptualizes these as "digital thira" (protest songs), reviving folk

resistance aesthetics within algorithmic feeds to maximize affective resonance amid judicial disappointment (Abraham 45-60; 48). The whole movement could be seen to highlight Kerala's evolving digital feminist grammar where justice denied becomes justice mobilized.

Hashtags as Sites of Feminist Meaning-Making

Hashtags in Kerala's digital feminism transcend organizational metadata, functioning as semiotic engines propelling contests over gender justice, resistance, and community formation across movements like #WomensWall, #MeTooKerala, and #Avalkoppam. Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding paradigm remains analytically central: organizers encode explicit political intentionality into hashtag syntax—#Avalkoppam signifying solidarity against celebrity impunity and judicial betrayal; grassroots participants decode through multimodal content production including selfies, videos, live-streams, and text narratives; while conservative and celebrity-aligned audiences generate oppositional interpretations via counter-hashtags like #Ayalkkoppam, memes celebrating "money power," and organized disinformation campaigns (Hall 15-27; 24). Sunnykutty Abraham conceptualizes these responses as "digital thira" (protest songs), strategically reviving folk resistance aesthetics—intricate Malayalam calligraphy evoking temple inscriptions—within algorithmic feeds to maximize affective resonance and cultural continuity amid technological rupture (Abraham 45-60; 48). Judith Butler's performativity theory elucidates their citational force: iterative speech acts such as "#MeTooKerala അവൾക്ക് നീതി വേണം" ("She needs justice") or "#Avalkoppam" subversively reconfigures the illocutionary function of disclosure from private confession to public indictment, destabilizing normative gender regimes and mechanisms of patriarchal silencing through repeated, collective enunciation (Butler 519-39; 530).

Homi Bhabha's hybridity framework manifests vividly in these code-switched formulations, blending English universality ("#MeToo") with Malayalam relationality ("അവൾക്കൊപ്പം") to navigate complex insider/outsider audience dynamics through "sly civility"—strategic linguistic mimicry that accommodates platform moderation protocols while smuggling region-specific critiques of caste, religion, celebrity power, and judicial bias (Bhabha 95-114; 107). Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity sheds light on the linguistic and cultural negotiations embedded in Kerala's digital feminisms. Hashtags and hasthaksarams frequently combine Malayalam and English, mobilising what Bhabha describes as "in-between" spaces that unsettle binaries such as tradition/modernity and local/global. Donna Haraway's cyborg ontology further extends to these hybrid artifacts: hasthaksarams (handwritten/handwriting-like), inscribed corporeally on kraft paper then digitized via smartphone optics for Instagram carousels and Stories, embody partial woman-technology coalitions contesting phallogocentric epistemic regimes that protect powerful abusers from accountability (Haraway 581-98; 584). These dynamics underscore hashtags not merely as connective tissue but contested battlegrounds where Kerala's young women engineer resilient meaning-making amid existential algorithmic and judicial antagonism.

The Paradoxes of Digital Platforms

Corporate digital platforms embody acute structural paradoxes for Kerala's feminist movements, simultaneously amplifying marginalized voices while facilitating unprecedented surveillance, algorithmic fragmentation, and organized backlash ecologies intensified by celebrity power dynamics. Judith Butler cautions that public gender performances inevitably invite interpellation by disciplinary power (Butler 519-39; 528). Stuart Hall's encoding framework illuminates platform-mediated hegemonic rearticulation (Hall 15-27; 21). Feminist hashtags like #Avalkoppam trigger outrage algorithms privileging polarizing replies—trolls, counter-hashtags like #Ayalkkoppam—from elite fanbases, generating feedback loops that submerge solidarity

signals within noise amplification. Hall's model thus illuminates the contested nature of Kerala's hashtag publics as ongoing struggles over signification rather than stable communications from sender to receiver.

Paromita Pain's quantitative analysis of #MeTooKerala and #Avalkoppam confirms 72% of posts encountered hostile engagement, with platform algorithms systematically surfacing troll content over supportive amplification, particularly penalizing vernacular Malayalam by 3.8x visibility reduction versus English/Hindi equivalents—materially reproducing linguistic hierarchies isomorphic with caste and class stratifications (Pain 857-873). Facebook dominates Kerala connectivity with millions of users, monetizing attention via engagement metrics that favor manufactured controversy over nuanced discourse, while infrastructural asymmetries—rural 2G/3G coverage gaps, prohibitive smartphone costs for subaltern households—systematically exclude Dalit, Adivasi, and working-class women from digital publics, compounding geographic marginalization. Ultimately, platforms constitute double-edged terrains where Kerala's digital feminists engineer resilience amid existential precarity, contesting not merely gender hierarchies but the very architectures of algorithmic capitalism intertwined with celebrity impunity and judicial opacity.

Narrating Experience and Reclaiming Narrative Authority

Narrative reclamation forms the affective-political core of Kerala's digital feminism, transmuting individualized trauma into collective ethical indictment and systemic critique, particularly evident in #MeTooKerala and #Avalkoppam testimonies that bridge personal violation with institutional betrayal. These disclosures instantiate Judith Butler's illocutionary performativity paradigm. They transcend mere description to constitute performative ruptures, interpellating digital audiences as ethically obligated witnesses demanding institutional redress, judicial transparency, and elite accountability (Butler 519-39; 530). Judith Butler's theorisation of gender performativity helps frame #MeTooKerala and #Avalkoppam disclosures as reiterative performances that challenge normative femininity, silence, and shame. When survivors and supporters post testimonies, name perpetrators, and articulate demands for justice, these acts do not simply describe injury but performatively enact new subject positions—fighters, witnesses, and political agents—within digitally mediated publics. Kerala's rich literary heritage indelibly shapes these practices, forging continuities between digital and analog resistance. Malayalam OTT platforms host feminist "digital thira" sessions reviving 1980s protest balladry; *hashtaksarams* echo Kamala Das's confessional erotics, embodying raw vulnerability defying bourgeois respectability protocols while linking to historical *satyagraha* scrolls from 1930s temple-entry movements (Abraham 45-60). Sunnykutti Abraham traces genealogical lineages from Vaikom Satyagraha women's handwritten petitions to deities—imploping divine intervention against caste barriers—to contemporary digital petitions naming academic predators, judicial enablers, and celebrity conspirators with institutional precision (Abraham 45-60).

Yet narrative reclamation demands agonistic negotiation of profound tensions: pseudonymity safeguards familial honor and personal safety versus full nomenclature risking retaliation and doxxing; graphic specificity mobilizes empathy but precipitates vicarious traumatization for both survivors and witnesses. These constitutive tensions illuminate digital narration as praxis—agonistic worldmaking constituting feminist publics amid existential precarity, where justice denied becomes justice rearticulated through persistent *hashtaksaram* testimony.

Toward Digital Feminist Futures

Kerala's digital feminism demands urgent infrastructural, policy, and theoretical interventions to expand equitable access, fortify against platform precarity, and critically theorize entanglements with celebrity impunity and judicial opacity, building on the resilient counterpublics forged through #WomensWall, #MeTooKerala, and #Avalkoppam. Donna Haraway's cyborg manifesto inspires "feminist server collectives"—autonomous, decentralized platforms prioritizing Malayalam content curation, ethical moderation protocols, and data sovereignty against Meta's extractive architectures (Haraway 581-98; 584). These archives could integrate and enable Gen Z interaction with calligraphic protest poetry and amplify vernacular #Avalkoppam evolutions beyond algorithmic censorship. Hashtags and hasthaksarams herald emergent feminist imaginaries—not utopian digital escape but grounded utopia-work engineering digital ecologies where Kerala women author intersectional multiplicities: matrilineal daughters traversing caste barriers, code-switching cyborgs negotiating platform precarity and judicial betrayal, survivors and supporters scaling "car assault" testimonies to industry reckonings. Cultural studies scholarship must track these trajectories longitudinally, theorizing digital feminism as Kerala's contemporary chapter in gendered worldmaking praxis continuous with historical satyagrahas. These practices transform justice denied into justice mobilized, constituting Kerala's hybrid feminist grammar where handwritten defiance endures as viral permanence.

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