

CAN ARMCHAIR ACTIVISM TRULY BRING SOCIAL CHANGE?
ANALYZING ARMCHAIR ACTIVISM

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What is Armchair Activism?

Scrolling through Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, and while checking WhatsApp groups, we often come across posts that talk about social issues such as climate change, poverty, LGBTQ rights, terrorism, domestic violence, feminism, right to privacy, police atrocities, and whatnot. Being part of the Gen-Z, we often tend to post about issues that we feel are of social significance and need to be talked about to spread awareness. Some do it because they are genuinely concerned about the issue while others may do it just to appear socially aware, responsible, and "woke" as they call it. This is essentially what Armchair Activism entails.

Armchair Activists are those individuals who keep on sharing and posting content about social issues and injustices happening across the world on social media, without necessarily taking any proactive measure or direct action to solve those issues. Activists are often criticized for their *modus operandi* wherein they function from a mere theoretical position, acting as an activist from a metaphorical armchair¹, providing information or solutions on significant social issues, without actually doing anything to contribute to social change. And for this reason, Armchair Activists or Armchair Revolutionaries are also known as "**Slacktivism**", i.e., slacking in their activism.

"It is not enough to be compassionate – you must act."

-The Dalai Lama

¹ Megan Elias, *Armchair Activism: how social media changed the way we make the change*, The Current (Jan. 16, 2021), <https://thecurrentmsu.com/2021/01/16/armchair-how-social-media-changed-the-way-we-make-change/>

Does Armchair Activism exist in India?

Recently, the custodial death of Jayaraj and Bennix, the father-son duo by the Tamil Nadu police for allegedly violating the COVID-19 lockdown rules were widely criticized on social media. Similarly, the Me-too Movement too gained a lot of traction online. The infamous killing of George Floyd in the USA for racial reasons had also gone viral all across the globe.

From climate change, veganism, feminism, human rights, discrimination on any basis, to the smallest acts of injustices, everything is shared on social media these days. But why is it important to understand and analyze the type of content shared on social media? It is because India itself has a whopping 624 million² internet users and 448 million³ active social media users as of 2021, which is approximately 45% of the total population of India. Especially in times where everything is shifting to the online world, smartphones are easily accessible and internet connectivity is available almost everywhere, social media plays a pivotal role in igniting the spark of social change. But just like everything else, social media and Armchair Activism also have their pros and cons.

Armchair Activism: Good or Bad?

Armchair Activism is not all bad as portrayed by the critics. Besides, COVID - 19 has shifted most of the world online, activism has never been an exception. Armchair Activism allows everyone to do their part, even if it is the very least. An NGO or organization, working on some project or movement may turn to people for support and donations. According to a study⁴, 64% of the Gen-Z population believes that online activism is more effective than solving local issues in their community as a larger audience is reached and impacted.

Moreover, if we look at issues like climate change or ocean revival, a lone person cannot do anything about it. The most they can do is speak about it, create awareness, and demand action. When enough people speak about the issue, entire communities are impacted and this may lead to greater support and effectiveness of the moment. The COVID-19 relief fund by the Indian Government to help curb the impact of COVID 19 in India can be seen as a subset of the same,

² The Global Statistics 2021, *India Social Media Statistics 2021*, The Global Statistics (2021), <https://www.theglobalstatistics.com/india-social-media-statistics/>.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Porter Novelli/Cone, *Undivided 2019 Gen z purpose study*, [://static1.squarespace.com/static/56b4a7472b8dde3df5b7013f/t/5da883bc77e66471a09a6240/1571324862662/2019+GenZ+Report+Layout+TO+PRINT+-+SinglePages.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/56b4a7472b8dde3df5b7013f/t/5da883bc77e66471a09a6240/1571324862662/2019+GenZ+Report+Layout+TO+PRINT+-+SinglePages.pdf) , (last visited Sep. 8, 2021).

where people sat in their homes and raised funds for the Government, who in turn, created the real change.

However, it is pertinent to note that Armchair Activism, or Slacktivism⁵ has been in the negative light for quite some time and good reasons. As observed in *Slacktivism: How the Social Observability of an Initial Act of Token Support Affects Subsequent Prosocial Action*⁶ by Kirk Kristofferson et. al., there is a huge downside of armchair activism wherein a person who publicly supports some cause, sitting in the comforts of his home, is very much inclined to lose interest or motivation to make some actual contribution. It stems from the sense of belief that their token support has made an impact and they have done their part. In the same paper, it was observed that people who support their causes privately are more likely to be invested and make greater contributions to the cause.

The concept of **Interested Bystanders** is also important to Armchair Activism. The concept talks about people who look around the world, see issues but do not voice their opinions or take any real actions against them. People feel that there have been times when real activism has not been able to make any substantial change, Slacktivism would not even be a blip on the radar.

The reversal of Net Neutrality by the Federal Communications Commission in the USA, despite a huge uproar against it on social media and other internet sources⁷, leads to a conclusion that Slacktivism has no real substance or power to make the change. People share an issue, like it, or comment about it but never go and talk about it, or approach their electoral representative, and in the end, they end up forgetting about the issue and move on to the next. While movements like #MeToo and #BLM owe a large part of their success to the people at the periphery, i.e., the Armchair Activists, their role was limited to spreading the information to people who would do something about it.

Moreover, the concept of Armchair Activism does not bode well in all issues and with all sections of society. Slacktivism has often been defined as a tool to generate awareness but there

⁵ Stefaan Verhulst 2021. *A new vocabulary for the 21st Century: "slacktivism"*, The Governance Lab. (May. 18, 2020), <https://blog.thegovlab.org/post/a-new-vocabulary-for-the-21st-century-slacktivism>.

⁶ Kristofferson, K., White, K. and Peloza, J., *The Nature of Slacktivism: How the Social Observability of an Initial Act of Token Support Affects Subsequent Prosocial Action*. 40(6) JOURNAL OF CONSUMER RESEARCH, 1149 (2014), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/674137>.

⁷ David Shepardson, *U.S. FCC votes to maintain 2017 repeal of net neutrality rules*, REUTERS, (Oct. 27, 2020), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-internet-idUKKBN27C2EO>.

is a large section of society, especially in third world countries, that does not even have necessities, let alone access to the internet. Moreover, in cases like dowry induced torture or death, poverty, education (especially female education), or creating legal and social awareness amongst the people with no access to education and internet, it becomes pertinent to go to the ground, use resources and spend actual time to make any meaningful impact, because such issues require the human touch on the ground level.

What can be the solution?

"I wish to do something Great and Wonderful, but I must start by doing the little things like they were Great and Wonderful."

-Albert Einstein

The important question here is how can you positively contribute to social change? In all honesty, social media indeed helps in spreading awareness and bringing the burning social issues to the forefront, especially given the wide range of audiences and popularity of social media. However, it is also imperative that you do not merely keep posting about the problems and not actively do anything about them because 'actions speak louder than words and only acting upon the problem by proactive participation is something that will truly bear the fruits of social change.

The first thing that comes to our mind when we talk about contributing to social change is volunteering with NGOs. In 2009, the Central Statistical Institute of India announced that there were 3.3 million NGOs⁸ registered in India. These NGOs work on a plethora of social issues. This is one of the easiest and most convenient options to directly contribute to social change as you can simply do a Google search of NGOs in your city and you can volunteer with those NGOs which work on issues that you are passionate about. That way, you will also be able to understand the ground realities of the issue and you will also witness the tangible benefits that people reap from your actions. This will again serve as an incentive for you to further work for the cause. Because on social media, your activism is largely confined to the number of likes, comments, shares, and saves of your post. You never really understand how your post brought about social change, if at all it did, and there is no reward for your service. But in NGOs, when

⁸ INDIA – INTERNATIONAL CENTER FOR NOT-FOR-PROFIT LAW, ICNL, <https://www.icnl.org/resources/civic-freedom-monitor/india> (last visited Sep 8, 2021).

you are working on the front line, you directly work and witness the effect of your actions which, in turn, serves as an incentive to work more on that cause.

Secondly, you can take small steps and start from your home. For instance, if you realize that your maid is a victim of domestic violence, you can educate her on her rights or inform her husband of the repercussions of his actions. Or if you see a young child working in a factory or shop nearby, who should ideally be studying in a school or college, you can take the initiative of crowd-funding his educational fee. Even these small steps matter because ‘the man who moves mountains begins with carrying stone’.

Thirdly, you can also take legal action by filing a PIL in matters of public interest. The concept of PIL was introduced by Justice PN Bhagwati in India, wherein a very liberal interpretation of *locus standi* was provided to enable any person to approach the court on behalf of those who are socially, economically, or physically disadvantaged to approach the court themselves if their Fundamental Rights are infringed.

In this way, you will truly be a part of the process and not merely be a spokesperson of social change.