VIOLENCE IN THE INTERNET AGE: GENDER AND TROLLING

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DECLARATION

I, Ayushi Khemka, hereby declare the thesis entitled 'Violence in the Internet Age: Gender and Trolling' submitted by me for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy of Jawaharlal Nehru University is my own work. The thesis has not been submitted for any other degree of this university or any other university.

Ayushi Khemka

CERTIFICATE

We recommend that this thesis be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

Dr. Lata Singh

(Chairperson, CWS)

Dr. Lata Singh

(Supervisor, CWS)

For my parents

and theirs

(none of whom will ever read this)

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Introduction

"The first boy who held my hand,

Told me boys don't want to hear about vaginas bleeding.

Younger me could smell the misogyny.

Vaginas only meant to be fucked,

Breasts only meant to be sucked,

Mouths only meant to blow.

It's true, I know.

My waist meant to be compared to an hour glass,

My voice only meant to quiver, "Ugh, please, fast."

Yet, I am silenced."[1]

('A Brown Girl's Guide to Gender', Aranya Johar)

Silencing of women has been one of the most striking feature of patriarchy. The poem, 'A Brown Girl's Guide to Gender' by Aranya Johar illustrates the paradoxical existence of women and women's bodies that patriarchy demands. Women are expected to respond to sexual interactions in a manner which boosts the ego of the man involved. They are expected to verbalise their praise for the man, as Johar succinctly mentions in her poem. However, they are silenced when they try to use their voice and speak out their opinions and ideas. Women's voices are kept hostage by the entitled men in the existing patriarchal structures, expected to be utilised by the patriarchy in whichever way it wants and whenever it wants. Women's bodies become a playground for entitlement of men, to suit their own pleasure and desires. A woman's agency is seen as a deterrent in the existing social structure which has its own power dynamics well-defined. This agency can be in any form, be it

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[1] Aranya Johar, "A Brown Girl's Guide To Gender," YouTube video, 2:19, posted by "UnErase Poetry," March 10, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=75Eh5OnNeoY

stepping out of the house, getting a good education, wearing clothes of one's own choice, choosing one's partner on their own, or speaking out their opinions and taking part in discussions that are otherwise dominated by privileged men. While the way in which women exercise their own agency cannot be put down into words in an exhaustive list, what becomes clear is the desperate attempts made by those in power to thwart women's attempts to be agential subjects in the society. It would not be an exaggeration to say that not a single day goes by where the newspaper reports do not carry columns on the ways in which women are oppressed and discriminated in some way or the other. Depriving women of their own agency does not take a lot of time to work through the routes of violence. Cases of honour killing, rape, street harassment, domestic violence, dowry-deaths and so on have found a place in the Indian society since time immemorial. While these constitute a violation of a woman's body in its physical form, it does not end at that. Violence is a large spectrum where physical violence is only one element. Violence can be verbal, emotional, mental and lots more. Trolling on social media can be conceptualised as one such form of violence that may not have to do with tangible bodies and bloodbath, yet, involve a complete shunning of women's agency through sending of rape threats, death threats, sexually charged abuses and so on.

(1)

The online spaces are becoming more and more relevant in any sort of field in this Internet Age. The internet and more specifically, social media, are being utilised in ways more than one can imagine. There are people who use it to connect with friends and family, some like to interact with strangers and discuss all sorts of topics, ranging from food, travel, relationships to politics. Well-established brands as well as their upcoming counterparts tap into the potential of social media on a daily basis to reach out to a larger customer base and expand their market. In fact, the market itself has arrived on the internet with e-commerce platforms like Amazon and Flipkart and small-scale entrepreneurs' usage of social media

platforms such as Facebook and Instagram to sell their product. Politicians, actors, comedians and performers have also been using social media to expand their reach to their target audience and establish better inter-personal relationships. Not just that, the usage of social media by the politicians for electoral gains has been noted across the world. Former President of the United States of America, Barrack Obama, current President Donald Trump, current Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi are some of the political leaders across the globe who have used social media heavily for their political campaigns.[2] Social media and its immersion in politics can be seen in the case of people belonging to the marginalised sections of the society as well. Other forms of media such as newspapers and televisions tend to be occupied with the dominant narratives of the powerful. It is social media which provides an alternative space for the discourses of the marginalised communities to be brought out into the public domain for debates and discussions. #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo are two hashtag campaigns which make use of social media to highlight the discrimination and violence faced by Blacks and women, respectively. The #MeToo movement has become of global importance where women all over have been sharing their own experiences with sexual violence. In the Indian context, Dalit Camera, Dalit Diva, The Spoilt Modern Woman, Sanitary Panels are a few pages on YouTube, Facebook and Twitter that put out conversations that otherwise get stomped over by the mainstream media discourse of upper-class, upper-caste, masculine domain.

Social media or Web 2.0 is relatively more accessible as compared to the mainstream media, in terms of content creation and dissemination. Web 2.0 is a term made most popular by Tim O' Reilly in 2005 wherein the suffix 2.0 is meant to be on the lines of the language

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[2] For detailed analysis, see Audrey A. Haynes and Brian Pitts, "Making an Impression: New Media in the 2008 Presidential Nomination Campaigns," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 42, no. 1 (2009): 53-58; Ralph Schroeder, "Digital Media and the Rise of Right-wing Populism," In *Social Theory after the Internet: Media, Technology, and Globalization*, (London: UCL Press, 2018), 60-81.; Bruce A. Bimber, "Digital Media in the Obama Campaigns of 2008 and 2012: Adaptation to the Personalized Political Communication Environment," *Journal of Information Technology & Politics* 11, no. 2 (2014): 130-150

used to denote an updated version of any software in the technological industry.[3] The term

Web 2.0 implies a more interactive form of the internet where the user is involved in the

creation of content and is not just a passive consumer like before.

> "It is perhaps not surprising that Web 2.0 – which has been defined as the shift toward user-generated content and the move from desktop storage to webtop access (Beer and Burrows, 2007) – has become associated in popular depictions with empowerment and liberation as 'the people' apparently reclaim the internet and exercise their 'collective intelligence'."[4]

However, one needs to look at this alleged "power (attained) through the algorithm" with a

critical lens. While there may have been an increasing involvement of the users in the way in

which content is created and what sort of issues find place in them, this exercise may not

necessarily have proven to be of a "democratic" or "liberating" nature. The social media

platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram are certainly being employed by people

cutting across caste, class, race, gender, and sexuality to carve out a niche for their own

narratives and voices. Yet, it is not immune to what one may largely term as online violence.

The cyberspace has its own modalities of violence to counter any simplistic claim of the

internet being a highly democratic safe-space.

(2)

Online violence is a reality of this Internet Age with its own nuances and

complexities. It is a broad umbrella term comprising of the different ways in which violence

occurs in the online spaces. Online violence includes cases of cyberstalking, revenge porn,

doxxing, trolling, morphing of pictures and so on. Cyberstalking refers to the sending of

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[3] Tim O' Reilly, "What Is Web 2.0: Design Patterns and Business Models for the Next Generation of Software," *International Journal of Digital Economics,* no. 65 (2007): 17-37. See also David Beer and R. Burrows, "Sociology and, of and in Web 2.0: Some Initial Considerations," *Sociological Research Online* 12, no. 5 (2007): 1-13.

[4] David Beer, "Power through the algorithm? Participatory web cultures and the technological unconscious," *New Media & Society* 11, no. 6 (2009): 985-1002.

unsolicited messages and nude photographs on social media or through the means of computer-mediated communications. Revenge porn is a term given to the act of leaking of nude pictures and videos of the target online without seeking their consent, in order to exact revenge from them. This is a form of violence that is usually meted out onto women by their partners after having terminated their relationship. Doxxing is another form of online violence where a person's private details like address and phone number are leaked onto the public platforms of social media so as to cause harassment to the victim. Given the consistent improvements in technology, people have been using softwares to morph others' photographs and tinker with their messages to suit their own motivations. Lastly, trolling is another way in which one sees the usage of online spaces being done to harass and intimidate others. Trolling is a term that is usually used to refer to an act of sending of rape threats, death threats, abuses, sexually charged messages and slurs to a person online. It is most commonly seen to take place in the places where there are some form of political discussions or debates going on. However, the term trolling is also used in a light-hearted manner to refer to jokes, mockery and insults. The complications that such a fickle use of the term give rise to will be discussed in detail in the following chapters. This research focuses on the former definition of trolling where the trolls (perpetrators of trolling) engage in threatening people with rape and death along with sexually charged abuses and more.

People belonging to different strata of the society get trolled online for their ideas and opinions. Men, women, and persons belonging to all genders face the wrath of the online trolls in multiple ways daily. However, the way in which women get trolled is something that men simply do not have to face.[5] There is clearly a gendering of trolling that one comes across on social media. Women are the ones who receive rape threats and sexually charged

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[5] Tishani Doshi, "Trolling Is A Mind Game," *The Hindu*, 23 September 2016.
https://www.thehindu.com/books/books-authors/%E2%80%98Trolling-is-a-mind-game%E2%80%99/article14030410.ece

messages for having posted their opinions online and sometimes, even for having merely existed on the online platforms. Karla Mantilla mentions in her essay, 'Gendertrolling: Misogyny Adapts to New Media', women's gendered identities are brought into the online battle as a weapon. She argues that the motivation behind trolling women is to silence their voices and restrict their access to the public space of the internet.[6] The patriarchy of the real world gets adapted into the virtual world, where attempts are made by those in power, to maintain the internet and social media spaces as spaces of male-dominance. When women express their opinions online, the troubling features have a dual characteristic to them. First, their movement into the public space of the social media in itself is seen as a transgression. Second, their involvement in debates and discussions on what is already considered to be masculine space involving topics that again fall in the masculine domain, such as politics, irks the bearers of misogyny online, leading them to unleash gruesome violence onto women. Gaye Tuchman, while analysing the media culture of 1970's argues that a "symbolic annihilation of women" could be observed in the media where women were virtually absent from the conversations in all forms.[7] In the case of trolling, similar attempts are made to symbolically annihilate women from participating in cultural production at the level of social media.

(3)

Using gender as an analytical category, this research focuses on the trolling of five Indian women on Facebook and Twitter, namely Barkha Dutt, Swara Bhasker, Swati Chaturvedi, Shehla Rashid and Gurmehar Kaur. Barkha Dutt and Swati Chaturvedi are noted journalists, Swara Bhasker is a Bollywood actor, and Shehla Rashid and Gurmehar Kaur are student activists. Despite having varied professional backgrounds, there are a number of ways

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[6] Karla Mantilla, "Gendertrolling: Misogyny Adapts to New Media," *Feminist Studies* 39, no. 2 (2013): 563-570.
[7] Gaye Tuchman, "The Symbolic Annihilation of Women by the Mass Media," in *The Gender and Media Reader*, ed. Mary Celeste Kearney (New York: Routledge, 2011)

in which the journeys of these women in the online world of Facebook and Twitter intersect each other's. These five women are regularly involved in active engagement on Facebook and/or Twitter regarding myriads of issues related to the socio-political and economic conditions of the country and beyond. Their Facebook pages and Twitter timelines can be seen loaded with links to articles and videos talking about the issues of the day. The women selected raise questions to the establishment and the current government regime. Further, they have had their own stances against the Hindutva forces which they publish routinely on their social media timelines.

These five women do not belong to the category of a 'common peoples'. Instead, they have a public personality attached to them. All of them are public figures, in one way or the other. While Bhasker owes her public persona to the Hindi film industry, Dutt and Chaturvedi are senior journalists in the country, and Shehla Rashid and Gurmehar Kaur came to the spotlight after their respective engagements with student politics in last 2-3 years. Rashid became a household name overnight after the 9 February 2016 incident in Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) where allegedly 'anti-national' slogans were raised in the university campus. Rashid was the then Vice President of the Jawaharlal Nehru University Students' Union (JNUSU) and was subjected to massive trolling, following the incident. Gurmehar Kaur came to be known in public when she initiated a campaign on Facebook and Twitter against violence that ensued after cancellation of an event at Ramjas College, University of Delhi. She also made a plea to stop wars between India and Pakistan by mentioning that it was war that killed her father, who was an army official, and not Pakistan. This was followed by an incessant trolling with rape and death threats being given to her, which eventually forced her to leave the city for some time.

Moreover, these women are women who are well-educated, they speak in fluent English, a marker of upper-class/educated person and have a cultural capital with them. This

demarcates them from the common people in terms of privilege. The women, despite being privileged in more than one way, are victims of massive trolling on social media daily. Their celebrity status too does not protect them from the online violence. Rather, it seems to add to it. The similarity in their ideological formulations against the establishment binds their narratives together, creating an interesting sample for the study of gender and trolling under the larger rubric of violence in the Internet Age. The selection of these women only is not to be understood as a claim to exclusivity with regards to being trolled online. These are certainly not the only women who get trolled online. Moreover, men also get trolled online. NDTV's Ravish Kumar is one such male journalist who gets trolled heavily for his opinions and TV show. However, the way in which he gets trolled is quite different from the ways in which the women mentioned above get trolled. His personal life, marital status, relationship status, bodily appearance, dressing sense, sexual activity do not find a reference at all while he is being trolled. One tried to move beyond the binary understanding of gender to look for a suitable sample that identifies as non-binary, however, the effort was not met with success.

The research topic was developed through classroom discussions and interactions with the supervisor on violence. It was observed that the working of social media does not find much critical engagement, especially in the Indian context. In 2016, while the Ministry of Women and Child Development, headed by Maneka Gandhi mentioned in one of her interviews that online trolling would be considered to be on par with violence and that special mechanisms shall be designed to tackle the menace, social media has not seen a decrease of any sort in online violence.[8] Rather, when Gandhi came up with the #EndTrolling campaign on Twitter, irony died a sad death as she was herself trolled badly for that as it was alleged that she was trying to curb the freedom of speech of the users. The Ministry of Women and

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[8] Sunetra Choudhury, "Online Attacks on Women to be Treated as Violence: Maneka Gandhi to NDTV," *NDTV,* 18 May 2016. https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/online-trolling-against-women-will-be-considered-violence-maneka-gandhi-1407271

Child Development has come up with an e-mail address that is specifically dedicated to deal with online abuse against women. It has been reported that the complaints which are sent over that e-mail (complaint-mwcd@gov.in) are forwarded to the Cyber Crime Cell or even the concerned social media platform to take adequate action. However, in the period spanning between July 2016 and January 2018, not even a 100 complaints were received by the ministry regarding violence on Facebook and Twitter.[9]

Regardless, trolling has been recognised as an issue that demands prompt attention of policy makers, creators of social media platforms and common citizens alike. In this respect, this research promises to have relevance in the contemporary Internet Age. The kind of work that exists regarding trolling as violence in the Indian context is largely restricted to journalistic pieces. There have hardly been much nuanced academic debates surrounding trolling as violence. This work aims at defining newer contours in the study of violence itself by fleshing out how violence works through the virtual world in the form of trolling. As Kumkum Sangari argues, "violence is a foundational and systemic feature of all contemporary patriarchies".[10] This research studies how the internet has become a new everyday space where the power structures of the physical world get reimagined in the virtual world. It focuses on how gender cannot be restricted to being a "natural consequence of sex-difference or even merely as a social variable assigned to individual people in different ways from culture to culture".[11] Instead, it takes an approach where gender becomes a mechanism that "structures material and symbolic worlds and our experiences of them".[12]

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[9] Mariya Salim, "Online Trolling of Indian Women is only an Extension of the Everyday Harassment they face," *The Wire,* 8 July 2018. https://thewire.in/women/online-trolling-of-indian-women-is-only-an-extension-of-the-everyday-harassment-they-face

[10] Kumkum Sangari, "Gendered Violence, National Boundaries and Culture," in *Constellations of Violence: Feminist Interventions in South Asia,* ed. Radhika Coomaraswamy & Nimanthi Perera-Rajasingham (New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2008), 3.

[11] Sandra Harding, *The Science Question in Feminism*, (New York: Cornell University Press, 1986), 17-18

[12] Ibid. 19

Owing to the limited time span of the project, this work does not clearly hold true for being a digital ethnographic project. It has analysed the trolling of the five women namely, Barkha Dutt, Swati Chaturvedi, Swara Bhasker, Gurmehar Kaur and Shehla Rashid chosen through purposive sampling method by examining their Twitter and Facebook timelines. A textual analysis of the trolling messages is undertaken in order to understand the socio-political dynamics of it. This research builds up on existing arguments around the internet, social media, trolling and violence with the help of secondary sources.

The research questions comprise an exploration of trolling and violence keeping gender as an analytical category. What is trolling and how has it been defined until now? How can trolling be conceptualised as a form of violence? Where do the gender dynamics find a place in this structure of trolling? The research questions aim to problematise the simplistic arguments around trolling and violence and thus, provide a fresh perspective for an analysis of social media and the internet.

The dissertation is divided into three chapters: (i) Social Media as a site for doing Politics: Emergence and Access; (ii) Reading Violence into Trolling; and (iii) 'Screen'ing Everyday, Anonymity and Language on Social Media. The first chapter traces the historical shifts in media and the emergence of social media, or Web 2.0. It establishes the premise of social media being an active site for doing politics in the contemporary Internet Age. The chapter raises questions on the issue of accessibility to the internet and social media with the help of statistical data, laying groundwork for the second chapter to deal with trolling and violence. The second chapter takes up the task of conceptualising trolling and violence. It makes use of newspaper reports to elaborate on the term trolling and problematise it. The chapter analyses the trolling of Barkha Dutt, Swati Chaturvedi, Swara Bhasker, Shehla Rashid and Gurmehar Kaur through examining their Twitter and Facebook timelines. It also takes on the identity of the trolls in the context of the body and gender. The third and final

chapter explores and examines the ways in which the internet and social media are becoming the new everyday spaces. It goes on to establish a relationship between online and offline violence, while unearthing the peculiar characteristic of anonymity that the social media platforms provide to any user. Analysing the existing legal frameworks regarding online violence in short, the chapter concludes with highlighting the importance of language in conceptualisation of violence. It argues that the very fact that the same term trolling is used to refer to jokes and rape threats alike is problematic and creates obstacles in imagining trolling as a serious act of violence and not just as yet another frivolous act on the internet. The dissertation thus hopes to contribute to the knowledge production surrounding trolling and violence, a useful step in evaluating the social media and internet, at large.

Chapter One

Social Media As A Site For Doing Politics: Emergence and Access

Media has been witness to an evolution over the ages. From radios to television and now social media, technological advancements in media have maintained a steady pace. This chapter would begin with tracing the historical shifts in media and the emergence of social media. An examination of social media and its structure would be done in the second section of this chapter, while looking at the issue of access with a critical lens. In the third and final section, the chapter would go into the details of how social media has been an active site for doing politics in today's Internet Age. This chapter would make use of statistical data and secondary literature available to help establish a groundwork for understanding trolling and violence, a thematic that shall be explored in the following chapters, extensively.

(1)

While doing any research, it is imperative to historically locate the research subject in order to delve deeper into the nuances of the proposed research questions. This research takes on social media to explore the modalities of violence in the form of trolling on Facebook and Twitter in India. It would be interesting to thus historically situate social media and its predecessors. Amiya Kumar Bagchi delineates the evolution of media and communication, starting right from the usage of hieroglyphs and invention of alphabets to convey one's message and information. This was further improved upon by usage of terracotta tablets, *bhurjapatras* (birch-barks), and invention of paper by the Chinese to communicate with

people. Gradually, humanity witnessed the invention of telegraph and telephone, followed by print media, radio, television and now, the internet and social media.[13]

There are approximately a total of 832 television channels in India, out of which 403 are news channels and 429 are non-news.[14] There has been a booming rise in the newspaper readership in rural and urban India as well. As per the Indian Readership Survey (IRS) 2017, the rural readership of newspapers rose from 143 million in 2014 to 214 million in 2017. The readership rose from 152 million in 2014 to 193 million in 2017 in urban India. One must also take a note of the expansion of the total universe for the IRS 2017 from 962 million in IRS 2014 to 1.05 billion. 39% of Indians having an age of 12 years and above read newspapers and 20% of all the newspaper readers in towns having a population more than five million read newspapers online. The reach of different media included 75% for television, 39% for newspapers, radio and internet each at 19%, magazines at 5% and cinema at 3%.[15]

The Indian media universe has been a witness to a big bang of sorts in the last three decade. As Maitrayee Chaudhuri argues in her book *Refashioning India: Gender, Media, and a Transformed Public Discourse*, television media seems to have witnessed most spectacular changes, with the burgeoning coverage of chat shows, reality shows, sting operations, celebrity weddings, stand-up comedy, music shows, political crises, religious fervour laden debates and much more. She mentions that India's new economic policy of early 1990s ventured towards a greater integration into global capitalism. The period marked an advent of new political visions and cultural imaginings. The 90's were marked by "colourful

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[13] Amiya Kumar Bagchi, foreword to *Market, Media and Democracy*, compiled by Buroshiva Dasgupta (Kolkata: Progressive Publishers, 2001), 5-6.

[14] Ria Lakshman, "Six New Channel Licenses Issued, Total Number of Channels in India has Reached 832," https://telecomtalk.info/total-number-tv-channels-india/139844/

[15] Urvi Malvania, "Launch of New Publciations Lifts Indian Readership Figures: Survey," *The Wire,* 19 January 2018. https://thewire.in/media/launch-of-new-publications-lifts-indian-readership-figures-irs-2017

commercial add-ons" in print media advertisements attracting the consumers. The 2000's stood out with "communicative abundance of television" which was marked by a hoard of daily soaps and burgeoning of more aggressive newsrooms. Whereas, in the mid-late 2000's, we see a rise of new media and social media politics. [16]

Having a look at the data around the internet would be a good exercise here to understand the expansive reach of the internet in a better way. As per the 'Internet in India 2017' report published jointly by the Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI) and Kantar IMRB, by December 2017, there were around 481 million internet users in India. This number is expected to have reached 500 million by June 2018. The overall internet penetration rate stands at 35% of the total population. The internet penetration stands at 64.84% for urban India and 20.26% for rural India. The rate at which internet is becoming more and more common in day-to-day lives of people in India is evident by the number of daily internet users at an estimated 281 million.[17]

The two major social media platforms, Facebook and Twitter, both were launched in 2006. Around July 2017, India surpassed the United States of America in Facebook penetration with an estimated 241 million active Facebook users as compared to 240 million in the United States. However, only 24% of the Indian Facebook profiles have been declared female and the remaining 76% as male.[18] As for Twitter, India lies among its top 10 markets and is the fastest growing when it comes to observing through an audience standpoint.[19]

Media has not seen shifts only in the form of numbers and statistics. The internet that emerged as the World Wide Web has been transforming in myriads of ways. The flurry of

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[16] Maitrayee Chaudhuri, "The Indian Media and its Transformed Public," in *Refashioning India: Gender, Media, and a Transformed Public Discourse,* (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2017), 197-198.

[17] For more detailed statistics, see http://www.iamai.in/media/details/4990, last modified 20 February, 2018.

[18] Simon Kemp, "India overtakes the USA to become Facebook's #1 country," *The Next Web*, https://thenextweb.com/contributors/2017/07/13/india-overtakes-usa-become-facebooks-top-country/

[19] Sohini Mitter, "How Twitter Changed its Mind on India," *Forbes India,* 19 January 2015. http://www.forbesindia.com/article/big-bet/how-twitter-changed-its-mind-on-india/39391/1

changes have user involvement and engagement as their central defining characteristic. Numerous terms such as "Web 2.0", "social network sites", "user-generated content", "me media", and many others are being devised to come up with a lexicon specific of these social media spaces.[20] Web 2.0 is a term coined by Tim O' Reilly in 2005 to refer to social media.[21] The suffix '2.0' works along the lines of software updates and the way in which they are termed. Web 2.0 is thus a departure from Web 1.0, as it were, which was comprised of the world wide web, sans social networking sites. Web 2.0 marks a "shift from desktop storage to webtop access".[22] Web 2.0 comes with connotations of liberation and empowerment attached with it, a space that is being reclaimed by the users. Web 2.0 has been welcomed with open arms by people across the globe with a desire of "taking over the internet".[23] However, how much of this participatory and collaborative version of the web holds true for the proposed democratised spaces online is a question that demands critical investigation.

To put the shifts in the media viz-a-viz user engagement into perspective in the Indian context, one could begin by unpacking the role of the user cutting across different kinds of media. The user is no more a passive recipient of information and content being shared to them. Rather, they have an interactive and hyper-local presence in the regular laying out of the content, be it on television, newspapers, or even the internet. In the case of television, it is the audience which decides to create a winner for a reality show like *Indian Idol* where the winner is chosen on the basis of audience votes. In the vitriolic prime time debates and discussions on news channels, the viewers are asked to share their opinions through polls and tweets. Similarly, the newspapers are not new to carrying out columns dedicated to the

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[20] See Beer and Burrows (2007), O'Reilly (2007), danah m. boyd and Nicole B. Ellison (2008), Garfield (2006) for more.

[21] Tim O' Reilly, "What Is Web 2.0: Design Patterns and Business Models for the Next Generation of Software," *International Journal of Digital Economics,* no. 65 (2007): 17-37.

[22] David Beer, "Power through the algorithm? Participatory web cultures and the technological unconscious," New Media & Society 11, no. 6 (2009): 985-1002.

[23] S. Garfield, "How to Make 80 Million Friends and Influence People," *The Observer Review*, 18 June 2006, 6–8.

readers' responses to the stories followed by the newspapers.[24] Moreover, when it comes to the internet, it is a medium that is constantly evolving and formulated on the very idea of producing and reproducing content and not just passively consuming it. For instance, one can share a tweet or a Facebook post with their own comments on it and initiate a dialogue and be privy to the very production of content. At once, the consumer is the creator, and the creator, the consumer. Such an involvement of the user pushes us to think over the idea of access, which shall be discussed in the next segment of the chapter.

(2)

The IAMAI report on the internet usage in India in 2017 provides important statistical data that could help us in analysing the question of access to the internet well. As mentioned in the previous section, India currently has around 481 million internet users. Despite the projected hullaballoo around the government's 'Digital India' initiative, the rural-urban divide in the internet penetration is quite abysmal. The internet penetration in urban India stands at a decent 64.84%, while for rural India, it is a meagre 20.26%. An estimated 182.9 million users from urban India access the internet daily. In the same category, the estimated number of rural users is almost half of that of the urban users at 98 million. The survey covered over 170 cities, out of which Delhi, Mumbai and Kolkata are the top most cities with highest internet penetration. Fatehpur, Jagdalpur and Imphal lie at the lowest rungs of the list of the cities for internet penetration. Other smaller metros and non-metros have internet penetration less than the national average for rural India. If one looks at the way gender gets

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[24] Maitrayee Chaudhuri, Refashioning India, 198-199.

located in the internet access in India, the report mentions an estimated 143 million women users, which roughly makes up only 30% of the total user base.[25]

The report, however, fails to contribute to an understanding of caste composition of the internet users in India. Smita Patil in her article, 'Debrahmanizing Online Spaces On Caste, Gender And Patriarchy' argues that the "social composition of those with access to Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) are dominant Indian castes. She mentions that since only a small section of the Indian population are connected to the internet, a large number of people remain disconnected from the online realities of the Indian society. She proposes a critical reading of the celebratory note with which the development of ICTs is visualised in India as something that shall lead to an eradication of rural poverty. Instead, low accessibility to the ICTs, low education status and complex social structure have ended up expanding the digital divide.[26] Maitrayee Chaudhuri presents a somewhat similar argument with regards to the instant access to happenings across the world that the internet provides to its users. She argues that such an instant access must not be taken to be an equivalent of informed or equal access to content.[27]

However, it would be myopic to understand access only in terms of figures. In order to gauge the depths and crevices of the internet and social media, specifically, one must analyse the very architecture of social media as well. The internet can be conceptualised as a space without borders. It is a space which does not require passports of visas to visit another country, albeit virtually. As a result, social media provides access to different countries, people and cultures. One can take a digital tour of the Louvre at the press of a button with the

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[25] "Internet in India: 2017," *IAMAI and Kantar IMRB report.* http://cdn.mxmindia.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Internet-in-india_10-1-18.compressed.pdf

[26] Smita M. Patil, "Debrahmanizing Online Spaces On Caste, Gender And Patriarchy," *Feminism In India*, September 22, 2017. https://feminisminindia.com/2017/09/22/debrahmanizing-online-spaces-caste-gender/

[27] Maitrayee Chaudhuri, "National and Global Media Discourse After 'Nirbhaya': Instant Access and Unequal Knowledge," in *Refashioning India: Gender, Media, and a Transformed Public Discourse* (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2017), 236-237.

help of the internet. It goes unsaid that the experience of the real and the virtual vary in multiple ways, but that is not something which one would want to engage with, in the course of this research. The central argument is that the social media platforms along with the thousands of websites on the internet provide an access into a world that could be completely new and unknown for some people. For instance, a person sitting right here in New Delhi can talk to a person sitting far off in Pakistan, without having to cross the national borders. This fluidity of spatial interaction comes off as a positive aspect of the internet and social media. However, it is these very notions of accessibility that also contribute towards a usage of social media as site for doing politics. The next segment of the chapter shall deal with the same.

(3)

"Media serves as mechanism of social control. It translates the dominant ideology into common sense."[28]

(Liesbet van Zoonen)

Social media has been used as a tool for political purposes in myriad ways. Be it electoral campaigns, social movements, feminist activism, Dalit activism amongst others, social media is increasingly becoming a site for doing politics. This is aided by the defining characteristic of social media, i.e. accessibility. The fact that the internet penetration is increasing on a daily basis suggests that a large number of population does have access to the internet in some form or the other. As has been discussed in the first section of the chapter, the ways in which social media lets the user produce their own content and reclaim the platform make social media an enticing site for doing politics.

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[28] Liesbet van Zoonen, "Feminist Perspectives on the Media" in *Mass Media and Society,* (London: Edward Arnold, 1996), 31-52.

If one analyses the electoral politics in India, the usage of social media by the political parties and leaders can shed interesting light. The current Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi joined Twitter in 2009 and set up his personal website way back in February 2005. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was quick to realise the importance of social media and the internet amongst all the other political parties in India. The party had its website established by as early as 1995. If one places this in contrast with the Indian National Congress (INC), they had set up their official website ten years later in 2005. The national face of the Congress, Rahul Gandhi was quite late to join the internet party. He opened his account on Twitter only recently in 2015. Another political party which has a strong social media presence is the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP). The party itself was formulated in November 2012, whose website was registered somewhere around September the same year.[29]

The BJP IT Cell is one of the most active branches of any political party, dedicated specially to the social media activities related to the BJP. PM Narendra Modi is one political leader who has a consistent Twitter presence. The prime minister has also held a meet-and-greet called Digital Sampark on July 1, 2015 at his official residence. He had invited 150 people behind the handles that he follows.[30] Another political leader who has an active presence on Twitter is the Minister of External Affairs Sushma Swaraj. Known for her quick wit and quirky response, she is known to help Indian nationals who tweet to her quite frequently. Recently, she had helped an inter-faith couple who had been denied their passport due to their inter-faith marriage in getting their passports issued immediately. Swaraj, however, was trolled massively on Twitter because of the same.[31]

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[29] Swati Chaturvedi, "'Blessed to be Followed by PM Modi'," in *I Am A Troll: Inside the Secret World of the BJP's Digital Army* (New Delhi: Juggernaut, 2016). 15-16

[30] Ibid. p. 17

[31] PTI, ""Criticise but Not in Foul Language": Sushma Swaraj Hits Back at Trolls," *The Wire,* 2 July 2018. https://thewire.in/politics/sushma-swaraj-twitter-trolling

Not just political leaders, social movements too have relied heavily on media to propagate their agendas. Although the percentage of people belonging to the margins with an access to the internet and social media is quite low, the internet has come about to be a platform that provides a space for the subalterns to exercise their opinion and use social media as an alternative media platform. The hegemonic discourse of print media and television journalism at large caters to the privileged sections of the society and more often than not, turns a blind eye to the issues faced by the socially marginalised communities. The assertion of their right to speech and engagement in a political debate over social media platforms is an exercise that is done with the intent to counter the dominant discourse and carve out a niche for the subaltern voices, a space where they can *do* their own politics, without much of a hassle.

During the 9th February incident in 2016, when allegedly 'anti-national' slogans were raised in the Jawaharal Nehru University (JNU) campus in New Delhi, the students' union and the student body at large of JNU used social media as a tool to write their own counter narrative in response to the dominant narrative propagated through mainstream television channels. They shared memes, posts, and initiated a #StandWithJNU movement online over Facebook and Twitter to garner support from students and academic community all over the world.

Similarly, social media is a mode through which Dalit activists and feminist activists also have been writing their own script of politics, which otherwise does not find space in the mainstream media. Adivasi-Dalit-Bahujan students are utilising the possibilities of blogosphere, Smita Patil mentions in her essay, 'Debrahmanizing Online Sphere: On Larger Questions of Caste, Gender and Patriarchy'. Case in point could be Facebook and YouTube pages such as 'Dalit Camera', 'Dalit Diva', 'Round Table India', 'The Spoilt Modern Indian Woman', 'Feminism In India' and many more. She argues, "Dalit-Adivasi-Bahujan

social/political assertions attain new dimension through the creation of counter online sphere to the conservative-caste blind "isms" in India."[32] On a global level, #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo are two Twitter hashtag campaigns that have been using social media extensively to create awareness and dialogue around the killings of Black people in the United States of America and the rampant sexual harassment of women all across the world, respectively. However, as Wajcman argues, these new technologies prove to be enabling as well as disabling when it comes to utilisation of social media and the internet for the purpose of political resistances. These spaces provide accessibility and anonymity, which become tools in the hands of the oppressed and the oppressor, at the same time.[33]

The very nature of social media with its anonymity and accessibility features allows for multiple voices to exist on the social media platforms. However, these multiple voices do not contain themselves within a civilised discourse around political critique. Instead, it does not take much time for people to turn to violence on the internet to register their own protest against any opinion or comment. The atmosphere of political debates gets heated up way too easily over the internet and that can be seen more so in a case where women and people belonging to marginalised sections are involved. A woman exercising her agency and voicing out her opinion and political beliefs becomes an 'anomaly' in the Indian cyberspace which is dominated by the masculine, Hindu upper-caste, middle-class discourse.[34]

One of the ways in which violence takes place on the internet is through trolling. What is trolling? There has been a humungous hue and cry over trolling in media all over the world for almost a decade now, so much so that people have started using the term "trolling"

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[32] Smita M. Patil, "Debrahmanizing Online Sphere: On Larger Questions of Caste, gender and Patriarchy," *GenderIT.org,* 8 September 2017. https://www.genderit.org/articles/special-edition-debrahmanizing-online-sphere-larger-questions-caste-gender-and-patriarchy

[33] Judy Wajcman, "Technology as a site of feminist politics," in *Recoding Knowledge: State and Perspectives of Research on Gender in the Natural Sciences and Technology*, eds. Petra Lucht and Tanja Paulitz, (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 2008), 87-101.

[34] An in-depth analysis of this shall be done in the following chapters.

in common parlance and even in newsrooms. The term has made its place in the colloquial and the official realm. A question then arises, are these two different variants of trolling, as it were, different from each other in any way? Do the colloquial usage of the term trolling and the journalistic, newsroom debate usage of the same term refer to the similar acts?

In order to understand these questions, one must first try and look at the term trolling and its historical and etymological journey. One must lay out the ontological understanding of trolling in order to proceed further with an epistemological examination. That is to say, the "what"-ness of trolling must be understood before exploring the "how"-ness of trolling.

The word 'troll' has various histories and genealogies attached to it. One such meaning dates back to the Scandinavian folklore tradition. The term has Old Norse roots, dating back to early seventeenth century, with the meaning giant or demon. Trolls are creatures who are slow-witted, notorious and enjoy provoking others and picking fights with them.[35] Trolling also refers to a fishing technique used by fishermen to catch fish where they attach bait to a long string from a boat and move it to attract the fish. These definitions provide a context in which trolling in its current usage can be imagined. The trolls use the power vested in them behind the screens to do that which is not as easily do-able on the streets. This is in no way an attempt at hierarchisation of violence where that which happens on the streets is graver than that which happens on the screens. Certainly, there runs a dialogue between these two broader categories of violence. Trolling is done with the purpose of exacting pleasure from the misery and apathy of others. It often takes place in posts that talk about a certain perspective or ideology. If a particular sentiment or position maintained by an individual is not acceptable to a troll, then they might go on a barrage of personal attacks, vicious remarks, hate speech, rape and death threats and riling comments. Whitney

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[35] Georgia Dunham Kelchner, "Symbolic Images in Dreams: Fetches, Guardian Spirits, Trolls, Gods," in *Dreams in Old Norse Literature and their Affinities in Folklore* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2013), 45-46.

Phillips, an American digital studies researcher defines trolls as users whose goal is to "upset as many people as possible, using whatever linguistic or behavioural tools are available (to them)". Trolls have also been defined as users who provoke to disrupt or derail discussions, forming a subculture that enjoys doing so for the laughs, or in the internet lingo, the 'lulz'.[36] However, there are numerous times when trolling is not restricted to derailing a dialogue on the internet, in simplistic terms, and can instead be formulated as a mode of violence.

Social media's emergence has, thus, provided access, although constrained, to a world where one can do their own politics, an act which might not be easily doable with the mainstream media. Social media platforms have been put to use by politicians, activists and common people alike. Yet, the access that the internet provides has its own complexities and shortcomings. While social media is a site for doing politics, it is also a site for countering that politics, sometimes with formulated critique, and mostly, with violence in the form of trolling. It is this relationship between trolling and violence that shall be examined and explored in detail in the next chapter.

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[36] Whitney Philips, *This is why we can't have nice things: Mapping the relationship between online trolling and mainstream culture*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2015).

Chapter Two

Reading Violence into Trolling

Social media is a platform which is being heavily employed to further multifarious motivations and purposes with every passing day. While the political leaders of the world have been using it as a medium to expand their soft power across the globe, (as is discussed in the previous chapter) and influencing the electorate, they are not the only ones tapping on to the gigantic potential of the social media. We see actors, journalists, writers, activists, artists, et al making diligent use of the social media platforms to reach out to a larger audience, express their opinions, further any cause they are dedicated towards and much more. The social media platforms thus seem to have become virtual microphones that are up for grabs by any and every one. The power of social media, consequently, lies in this very aspect; it provides a space for multiple voices and opinions to exist and flourish. However, this polyphony is more often than not turned into a cacophony by users who not only refuse to accept each other's points of view but also, spew vile remarks in an attempt to silence any dissenting voice, as they perceive it to be. This form of silencing is not isolated from the social conditions and power structures of the society we live in. In the first section, this chapter establishes the existing usage of the term 'trolling' on social media and in newspaper reports to critically engage with its inconsistent connotations. Having problematised the very term 'trolling', the second section of the chapter undertakes a textual analysis of the trolling of Barkha Dutt, Swati Chaturvedi, Shehla Rashid and Swara Bhasker. The third and final section engages with the conceptualisation of violence done by existing scholarship and makes an attempt to add to it by analysing trolling as violence.

(1)

The world of the internet or "virtual imagined communities"[37] may have its own set of rules and regulations, but the larger zeitgeist of the "real"[38] world does get rubbed along this virtual field. The structural inequalities that exist in the real world get replayed in the power dynamics that function in the online space. As mentioned in the previous chapter, at the onset, the factor of accessibility becomes extremely important to keep in mind while studying the internet and social media. The caste, class and gender composition of the internet users reflects a skewed reality countering the idea of the internet being this supposed 'Promised Land'. Not just the numerical statistics, everyday occurrences on the internet also speak volumes about the power relations in cyberspace. This can be seen in the form of mansplaining[39] and sexist memes[40], sending of unsolicited pictures of the penis[41] by random and sometimes even known men to women, online stalking, shunning down the opinions voiced by persons belonging to the marginalised sections through trolling, slut-shaming women in the comments section of their display pictures for dressing a certain way, sending of rape and death threats and much more. The range and intensity creates a large spectrum of

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[37] Radhika Gajjala, *Cyber Selves: Feminist Ethnographies of South Asian Women,* (California: AltaMira Press, 2004), 13. (Gajjala talks about how the internet could be imagined as a "communion", a "community" wherein when one posts something on an online platform, they themselves are *imagining* the community and the readership. Gajjala goes on to use the term 'imagining' for virtual communities within a specific South Asian postcolonial context. She refers to the usage of the internet by the postcolonial subjects in order to create a common space online, shared by persons having similar geographical alliances. I am, here, borrowing from the former understanding in order to situate the internet as a microcosmic function of the real, physical world.)

[38] It seems pivotal to take a short detour and bring in a linguistic clarification for the purpose of this research here. The contrasting terminology of "real vs virtual", "actual vs imaginary", "tangible vs intangible" and so on has been taken as a necessary heuristic tool for an ease of understanding of the context. The intent is not to deem that which occurs online as something "not real" or "non-existent" or that which is at a lower level in the hierarchy of online and offline.

[39] 'Mansplaining' is short for 'man explaining' and is used to describe acts and situations where men overlook the knowledge and expertise of a woman and explain to them a certain concept with utmost condescension and patronising attitude.

[40] Example: the trope of a 'friendzoned' guy, wherein a girl is said to be 'friendzoning' her male friend by refusing to indulge in a romantic or sexual relationship with him, subtly reinforcing an entitlement of the male friend over the female friend's life choices.

[41] In the internet lingo, these are termed 'Dick pics'.

what all is problematic with the usage of the internet and social media today. While some might seem delved deep into the casual everyday sexism, others could possibly be downright violent. One must also note that the ways in which the power dynamics function at the interface of the social and the technological, they do tend to be overlapping categories, not neatly contained in water-tight compartments. Cases of stalking find openings into trolling which further finds openings into hacking of accounts and so on. A large question that such porous categories raises is how does one at all come to define a certain kind of online violence. Do we naively assume that there is just one large umbrella term of online violence without having any further branches? If not, how do we distinguish one from another and more importantly, how do we find these forms of harassment scripted as everyday realities?

When one delivers a cursory glance on the term "trolling", the term would seem a rather familiar one; one that is anyway being used excessively by people in their day-to-day lives as well as by journalists in news rooms, alike. However, the term, just like any other term which is a part of the 'internet lingo', has been no exception to continuous evolution. The term trolling has its roots in Scandinavian folklore tradition and fishing techniques, as discussed in the previous chapter. Yet, when one looks at the term's usage in the internet sphere, one would be baffled at the multifarious connotations that come attached with the term. If you type out the word "troll" on any of the social media platforms, including Facebook and Instagram, you would find a huge number of pages after pages with names such as "Text from my trolls", "Troll", "Troll Punjabi", "Troll Dekho", "Troll Fuckers", "Indian Politics Troll" and thousands more. What is interesting here is the range of the suffix and prefix used along with the word "troll"! While there are pages that deal with memes and other such humorous content, there are also pages that are politically motivated and archive the posts depicting the trend of abusive behaviour women receive online. Despite mammoth

difference in the content of these two larger categories of pages, it, thus, becomes really interesting to note the common denominator of the term "troll".

Herein, the researcher would try to inculcate a textual analysis of what (all) is considered as "trolling". Karla Mantilla in her essay, 'Gendertrolling: Misogyny Adapts to New Media', defines gendertrolling as a "specific kind of trolling and different from generic forms of online trolling," where it is a person's gendered identity that is brought into the online battle as a weapon.[42] She draws a parallel between gendertrolling and harassment offline as both being mechanisms to keep women away and using threats and violence to reach that desired end. She argues that the motive is to maintain the online milieu as a male-dominated space and in broader terms, not letting women access public spaces safely. Women are given rape threats, bombarded with comments aimed at character assassination, and men's masculinity is threatened.

Words as well as their meanings do not exist in vacuum. They have their own genealogies and trajectories that need to be taken into context while we proceed towards our findings. As can be observed through a basic search on social media mentioned above, trolling is a term that is being used more loosely than before, with every passing day. It has become an umbrella term which incorporates harmless pranks, jokes, memes, insults and abuses, hate speech and death threats, all at once. It then becomes difficult to understand the severity of the term in any particular context. Having said that, if one were to squeeze out the essence of trolling, as it were, it would come to fore that the term is certainly not a homogenous one. There are various acts which are deemed trolling but the spectrum of severity and the doer's intentions can make a huge difference in any two cases of "trolling". While when one person makes fun of the other, that is called trolling, sending of rape threats

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[42] Karla Mantilla, "Gendertrolling: Misogyny Adapts to New Media," Feminist Studies 39, no. 2 (2013): 563-570.

and abuses is also being called trolling. Therefore, one must take stock of the situation and the context in which trolling is said to occur.[43] The involved parties and their locations in the techno-social interactions on social media platforms need to be studied in order to derive answers to the proposed research questions regarding trolling as violence and its relation to gender and identity.

This research, thus, acknowledges that there is no one single definition of trolling and as a result, there can be no homogenous experience of trolling as well. It does get difficult to research something that is established on such slippery terrains of time, space and human interactions. However, an attempt has been made here to try and manoeuvre through the course of the research by enabling a working definition of trolling (and problematizing it further in the following chapter). This research project focuses on the kind of trolling where gender becomes the defining category to establish the ways in which violence is meted out onto the targets. The researcher would be looking at the ways in which people are abused, threatened with rape and death, criticised brutally and bullied, in the name of trolling.

Let us have a look at a few newspaper reports that talk about trolling, to get a better sense of the argument.

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[43] Pnina Fichman and Madelyn Rose Sanfilippo, "The Bad Boys and Girls of Cyberspace: How Gender and Context Impact Perception of and Reaction to Trolling," *Social Science Computer Review* 33, no. 2 (2014): 163-180.

Twinkle Khanna: Social media trolls are like cockroaches

IANS | Updated: Apr 10, 2018, 04:11 IST ✉ 🖨 A- A+

(Screenshot 1)

ENTERTAINMENT, BOLLYWOOD

SRK's Zero: Twitteratis troll title, compare him to GOT's Tyrone Lannister

DECCAN CHRONICLE.
Published   Jan 3, 2018, 4:42 pm IST   Updated   Jan 3, 2018, 5:02 pm IST

💬 1   ❤ 0   **0** SHARES   f 🐦 in 🔴 G+ ✉

Shah Rukh Khan starrer dwarf film by Aanand L. Rai's first glimpse has created a lot of hullabaloo for various reasons.

(Screenshot 2)

ENTERTAINMENT, HOLLYWOOD

Stars distressed by trolls!

DECCAN CHRONICLE. | SHWETA WATSON
Published   Apr 14, 2018, 3:29 am IST   Updated   Apr 14, 2018, 3:29 am IST

💬 0   ❤ 0   **0** SHARES   f 🐦 in 🔴 G+ ✉

Trolling celebs has become the new online fad. Many stars suffer from poor mental health due to bullying and hateful words.

(Screenshot 3)

29

In one of her interviews, writer-actor Twinkle Khanna compared trolls to cockroaches. She said, "They come along and they do that to everybody and people who take trolls seriously, I'd rather say they are foolish. Trolls are like cockroaches, once in a while, you spray hit on them and get them out of the way and you go on." In another news article on Deccan Chronicle, published on January 3, 2018, that talks about Hindi film industry actor Shahrukh Khan's upcoming movie *Zero*'s poster and the reactions it garnered from people on Twitter, the headline reads as 'SRK's Zero: Twitteratis troll title, compare him to GOT's Tyrone Lannister'. It should be noted that the categories under which the article is written are "Entertainment" and "Bollywood". The same newspaper carried an article, 'Stars Distressed by Trolls!' on April 14, 2018, under the categories of "Entertainment" and "Hollywood" but it provided a perspective where trolling had affected the mental health of the celebrities. An instance of American singer and television show judge Katy Perry is given where she had been trolled massively for having come out with her mental health issues on social media.

In the three articles discussed above, it is interesting to note the ways in which trolling is being scripted in the daily narratives. The usage of the term trolling is seen to have been done in three distinct ways. In the article that talks about Shahrukh Khan's movie poster, trolling is referred to as mocking something or making fun of, in a light-hearted and harmless manner. In the article where Twinkle Khanna mentions her views about trolling, it seems as if trolls are unimportant creatures or as she likes to call them, "cockroaches" that have nothing worthwhile to do and at the same time, are inconsequential. Hence, the writer-actor suggests to not pay attention to the trolls. This can be pitted against the nature in which Katy Perry and her encounter with trolling is reported. The severity of trolling is highlighted by the fact that it had led to a deterioration of the performer's health. It is also interesting to note the words that the writer has used in place of trolling or rather, to describe the very act of trolling in the beginning paragraph of the article itself.

"While the phenomenon of *celebrity trolling* is *terribly common* on social media these days, we often forget (conveniently so) that no matter how confident they may appear on the outside, *bullying and hateful words* targeted at them can affect them mentally." (Watson 2018) (Emphasis added)

The three major takeaways from this paragraph, for the purpose of this research, are: (i) the description of the act of trolling, "bullying and hateful words"; (ii) the depiction and problematisation of the recurrent frequency and normalcy with which trolling occurs these days; and (iii) creation of the category of a 'celebrity', escalated to a pedestal so much so that they are just assumed to be a blank slate, bereft of human fabric. Furthermore, through the examples mentioned above, it becomes clear that there is a lack of consensus within the media as well regarding what exactly is trolling. It certainly becomes evident, thus, that there are problems with the non-nuanced usage of the term.[44]

(2)

In this research, I have examined the trolling of five female public figures in India, namely Barkha Dutt, Swati Chaturvedi, Swara Bhasker, Shehla Rashid and Gurmehar Kaur. Barkha Dutt and Swati Chaturvedi are journalists; Swara Bhasker is a Bollywood actor; Shehla Rashid is a student-activist and has been the Vice President of the Jawaharlal Nehru University Students' Union; and Gurmehar Kaur has also had her own share of student-activism. The five women have quite a few common threads running across their profiles that seem to contribute to their facing the wrath of massive trolling on social media such as Facebook and Twitter. All of them have been known for speaking against the establishment and the current government regime in public quite a few times. These are the women who choose to voice out their opinion through the apt usage of social media. Being journalists,

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[44] More on this later.

Barkha Dutt and Swati Chaturvedi have time and again talked about the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)'s shortcomings as a successful government. Furthermore, the journalists have also spoken against the deteriorating social conditions of the country at national and international platforms as well. Swara Bhasker is one of the few Hindi-film industry actors who speak out against the establishment in public or in general, have a political opinion to share on their social media timelines. When it comes to Shehla Rashid, her political affiliation with the Left and her status of being a JNU student, along with being a Kashmiri Muslim become the fodder for the trolls' vitriol. Gurmehar Kaur has also been involved with student politics.

On 22 February, 2017, a march was organised to register protest against the cancellation of an event that was supposed to be held at Ramjas College, Delhi University where JNU student-activist Umar Khalid was invited to be a speaker. At that march, the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) members launched violence against the faculty and students who were a part of the march. A social media campaign, #StudentsAgainstABVP, was, thus, organised to mark the students' discontentment with the happenings of the event.[45] Gurmehar Kaur took part in that campaign and changed her Facebook profile picture where she can be seen holding a placard that reads, "I am a student from Delhi University. I am not afraid of ABVP. I am not alone. Every student of India is with me. #StudentsAgainstABVP." Her well-articulated critique of the ABVP members' hooliganism and the country's rising intolerance was seen by some as an output of being "brainwashed" by others. In addition, she was trolled heavily and given rape and death

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[45] Ajay, "Surrounded by Violence but not brought down by it: a firsthand account of Ramjas portests," *The Wire,* 23 February 2017. https://thewire.in/politics/surrounded-by-violence-but-not-brought-down-by-it-a-firsthand-account-of-the-ramjas-protests

threats, so much so that she eventually withdrew from the protest.[46] Her status of being an army officer's daughter was also turned against her, where it was being said that she was an ungrateful daughter and such. Gurmehar had made a plea against the war between India and Pakistan and advocated for peace between the two nations in a video that she posted on her timeline in 2016. In the video, she held placards, one of which read, "Pakistan did not kill my dad. War killed him." In response to this, she was met with a barrage of tweets from common folk and celebrities alike. Indian cricketer Virendra Sehwag, Hindi film industry actor Randeep Hooda, Union Minister Kiren Rijiju were few of the public figures that added to the massive hatred and threat Kaur received in the matter of a few hours.

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[46] _____, "As Students Protest Against ABVP, Gurmehar Kaur Withdraws From Campaign After Threats," *The Wire,* 28 February 2017. https://thewire.in/culture/as-students-protest-against-abvp-gurmehar-kaur-withdraws-from-campaign-after-threats

Virender Sehwag ✔
@virendersehwag

Bat me hai Dum !
#BharatJaisiJagahNahi

(Screenshot 4)

Kiren Rijiju ✔
@KirenRijiju

Who's polluting this young girl's mind? A strong Arm Force prevents a war. India never attacked anyone but a weak India was always invaded.

Randeep Hooda ✔ @RandeepHooda
👏👏👏👏👏 @virendersehwag 😂😂😂😂
twitter.com/adityachaudher…

8:58 AM - Feb 27, 2017

♡ 3,615 ♡ 3,757 people are talking about this

(Screenshot 5)

(Screenshot 6)

In addition to that, a video was circulated on social media that showed a girl dancing in the backseat of a car, seemingly drunk with a bottle of alcohol in her hand. The girl in the video was also wearing short clothes. It was rumoured that the video was Gurmehar's and was made viral through Facebook and Twitter, and largely through the insidious channels of 'family WhatsApp groups'. However, Kaur confirmed that the girl in the video was not her. Yet, the conversation should not end here by calling the incident just another act of spreading fake news. The intent and thought process behind the spreading of the video needs to be unpacked to understand the nuances of trolling and its gendered aspect. The girl in the video was meant to portray everything that is opposite to the image of an ideal Indian woman or 'bharatiya nari'. Wearing skimpy clothes, drinking alcohol, partying are all 'symbols' of

being a 'characterless girl', from the perspective of the largely middle-class, conservative, misogynistic trolls.

For Barkha Dutt and Swati Chaturvedi, the choicest of words like "presstitute", a portmanteau of 'press' and 'prostitute' are used by trolls. The term is kept exclusively for the journalists who speak against the current establishment and the Hindutva agenda. Barkha Dutt, in addition to the above, has been called "Burkha Dutt" for her alleged affiliations with the Muslim minority. Shehla Rashid has been called "urban naxal" along with the (in)famous "anti-national" tag. Her Muslim identity is also invoked repeatedly to come up with slurs that are not just sexist but also have a communal nature to them. In the case of Gurmehar Kaur, things went a bit differently. Kaur was, at that time, a student of Lady Shri Ram College, Delhi University, which is deemed to be one of the most reputed and elite colleges of India. Since the college did not come attached with any connotations of disruptive politics so much in the popular parlance, her identity as a female was exploited through and through. She was called a "pawn", "prop", "poor girl" by Randeep Hooda, Virendra Sehwag, Kiren Rijiju (to name the major public figures involved in the trolling incident), which was further carried onwards by the common twitter users. She was ripped off of her agency and was seen to be a completely passive recipient of an external influence, who was bereft of any capabilities of thinking for herself. It was automatically assumed that whatever she had been saying regarding the ABVP attack as well as the Indo-Pak war, was fed into her system and that she had no agency and mental faculties to think independently. Despite the different ways in which these women have been trolled, it is to be noted that there runs a common thread throughout their trolling. Their identity of being a woman is brought out by using sexist slurs

that reek of misogyny. Their personal lives are invoked and talked about in a way which their male counterparts never have to face.[47]

Dutt's twitter feed is laden with tweets about her alleged relationship with Hafiz Sayeed. It has also been alleged that she has been married twice and also, divorced twice! Dutt had gone public with her experience with child sexual abuse through her book, *This Unquiet Land: Stories From India's Fault Lines* as well as interviews and tweets. The journalist faced flak for maligning the country's image by talking about her own experience with sexual abuse as it was alleged that talking about such an issue on an international platform (Women in the World Summit held in New York, 2016) would paint the entire country with the same brush. The attacks did not stop at such preposterous, misguided nationalism and she received tweets that read as "Barkha Dutt 'tujhe to meri gali ka kutta bhi na dekhe, mardon ki to baat hi chhod de' (Even the dog in the alley behind my house wouldn't look at you, forget about men)."[48] The way Dutt chooses to dress up and maintain her physical appearance, specially her haircut, a short pixie that is usually called "boy-cut", has also been used against her. There are numerous tweets that mention that she does not "even look like a woman." Her diversion from the coded norms of femininity and what an Indian woman or a 'bharatiya nari' must look like is used by the trolls to harass her. The trolls come to attack in packs which almost seems to take the shape of what could be termed as an online mob. She is also called a "Congress' slut", "whore", "bitch", "randi", "chut" and much more. Her mobile number has also been shared publicly on multiple online platforms leading to a host of rape and death threats.

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[47] Barkha Dutt, "Let's talk about trolls: online abuse as a weapon to silence women," *Hindustan Times. 12 May 2017.* https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/let-s-talk-about-trolls-trolling-is-a-weapon-to-silence-women-barkha-dutt/story-A9X3fAuRwZiwVrhYQnKbYL.html

[48] Ibid.

Swati Chaturvedi too has been trolled for her opinions and reportage. She too has faced harassment that is seeped deeply into the caustic misogyny online. It has been alleged that she has had relations with Congress members. She too has been called the choicest slurs mentioned above. She is also the first Indian journalist to have filed an FIR against an unknown person using a particular twitter handle @lutyensinsider for online harassment. The harasser, however, till date has not been arrested, despite the tracing of the IP address already being complete, Chaturvedi mentions in her book *I Am a Troll: Inside the Secret World of the BJP's Digital Army*.

Shehla Rashid has had her own share of online misogyny and violence since the 9th February, 2016 incident in JNU where allegedly 'anti-national' slogans were raised at an event held inside the campus. Rashid was the Vice President of the Students' Union at that time. The incident brought intense backlash to the entire JNU community, as such. The people most affected by this were certainly those who came to public notice more and more by the virtue of being political figures in the university. Rashid was trolled, along with Umar Khalid and Kanhaiya Kumar, who were also student-activists during that time in JNU. However, the kind of trolling Rashid faced was quite different from that faced by the other two. She was not only targeted for being a Kashmiri Muslim, her gender identity was also put at stakes to burn. Her personal life was intruded into, as there were allegations against her for being sexually involved with Kanhaiya Kumar and Leftist leaders at national level politics. The toxic cocktail of communalist slurs and misogynistic abuses was served and is constantly poured for Rashid till now.

Trolling is also not limited as an act kept solely for the torment of public figures, however, the massive, almost organised, form of trolling that these figures face makes it stand out from the rest. The factor of the public figures being easily available to the public through an instant click on social media adds to the ease and sheer readiness with which the

trolls troll. The overwhelming accessibility that the social media provides in today's ethos is something that was not quite known few decades ago. Gone are the days when the public figures would be written fan mails in the form of physical, tangible letters. This is the era when you go online, click on your favourite public figure's profile and send them your words of praise and fandom in written or visual format as a "tweet" or "comment". You no longer have to stand in the queues at the Post Office. You can interact with your favourite public figures right from within the comfort of your own home, or rather, the comfort of your own body, whose extension can nowadays be seen in the form of the smartphone. However, this out-and-out accessibility has a flipside to it as well. It ensures that along with fan mails, there can be equally engulfing number of hate mails as well. Furthermore, there is an underlying free pass of usurping the existing power dynamics between the (gendered) public figure and the common public that social media provides through instant access.

The very idea of a certain someone, and more so, a woman, having immense power in the social structure adds to the intentions of the trolls. In an attempt to turn the power arrangement upside down, they take recourse to what is called trolling. The trolls, working under the rubric of larger patriarchal structure, assume an entitlement over the female body that is out there in the (public) online space. It is assumed that the public figures are products in themselves, waiting to be consumed by the audience or the trolls, in this case, through any and every action that they perform.

Here, it would be interesting to look at the trolling of Swara Bhasker when she posted a picture in support of the Kathua rape victim holding a placard. She was reprimanded for wearing makeup in the picture that she had posted. She made an attempt to clarify, however, that she was in the middle of a shoot for which she had a certain look. Instantly, a screenshot was taken by a certain user on Twitter and then photo shopped where the message given by Bhasker had been changed completely, which Bhasker was quick to call out as well.

Her original tweet read as,

"The need for makeup was because I was right in the middle of a shoot Chandni.. you know that thing called WORK.. But why is that important? People who wear makeup cannot take up for a cause? Don't have the right to express their opinion? What's bothering you?"

After having gone under the digital knife, it then read as

"The need for makeup was because I was right in the middle of a shoot Chandni.. you know that thing called WORK.. And suddenly got a mail form a media company for the promotional tweet. And also discussed with other celebrities so that all have "Hindustan" instead of India."
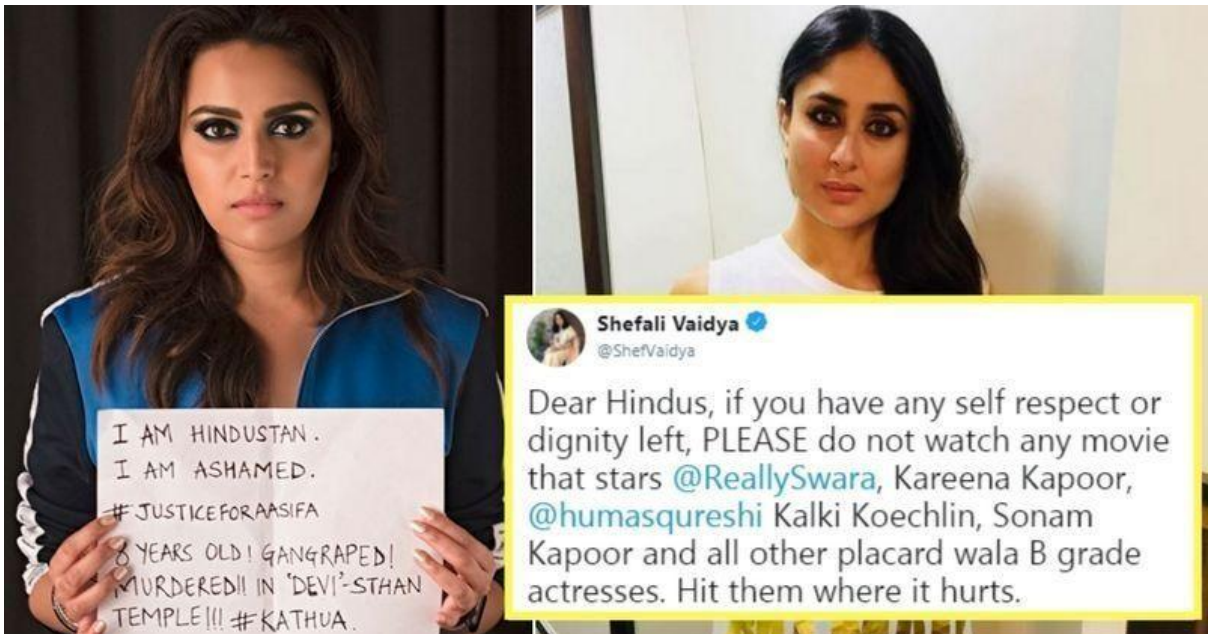

(Screenshot 7)

(Original and fake tweet of Swara Bhasker)

(Screenshot 8)

(Screenshot 9)

This example becomes interesting as the initial attack on Bhasker, on the grounds of makeup, is left as is in the photo shopped tweet and the focus is immediately shifted to as to why the term "Hindustan" was used in the placard instead of "India" through a false explanation. The placard also mentioned that the 8-year old girl was raped inside a temple. All of this was not taken quite well by the supporters of the Hindutva regime, largely. It was assumed that the placard and campaign was aimed at maligning the Hindus and soon, a campaign in response was launched where people were using the hashtag #JusticeForAll instead of #JusticeForAsifa. It is through these mediums that social media is used to manufacture lies, fake news, and facts that otherwise do not exist at all. Further, it becomes easier to do so on the internet because the architecture and structure of the internet is such that people can post anything and get away with it. Moreover, rarely does anybody cross-check the facts that are being fed to them, either by media platforms or even random individuals.[49]

While Swara Bhasker was trolled for using makeup and then her tweet photo shopped to imply that her tweet was a part of the promotions for her upcoming movie *Veere Di Wedding*, another actor Kareena Kapoor Khan, who supported the same campaign holding the same placard, was trolled in a completely different manner. Since the actor herself is not on Twitter or any other social media handle, the pictures were posted by other fellow actors and fan-based accounts. Her support was dismissed by people attacking her for her inter-faith marriage. One of the many such comments mentioned that the actor should be ashamed for having married a Muslim, Hindi-film industry actor Saif Ali Khan, despite being a Hindu herself. The tweet also shamed her for having had a child with him and naming the baby after a "brutal Islamic barbarian".

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[49] The cases of fake news propaganda and its consequences in the form of lynching and mob violence, alongside a regular, everyday communalisation of the country through rapidly spreading WhatsApp messages and Facebook and Twitter posts are not unknown to us. This has resulted in burgeoning of platforms such as Boom Fact Check, Alt Media and many more, which are working towards exposing the fake news propaganda.

(Screenshot 10)

Both of these examples suggest that it is the "public"-ness of the actors and/or their personal lives that are used as ground points for abuse and harassment online. While for Bhasker, it is her life as an actor— where people assume that they do things only for money or that they are too glamourised to be involved in a serious social campaign— that gets targeted; for Kareena Kapoor Khan, it is her personal life, her marital relationship with a Muslim man and the name of their child which become the bone of contention for the trolls. Yet, the larger rubric under which both of these fall is speaking against the alleged "Hindustan". The fact that the girl was raped inside a Hindu temple was criticised by the actors, which was taken as an offensive statement by the right-wing Hindutva forces. They believed that it was not right for them to say that Hindus are responsible (which they actually didn't) and they also questioned as to why did these celebrities raise their voice only in support of a Muslim victim. It was in this light that a counter-campaign was run with #JusticeForAll where they argued that there were many Hindu children who were being raped by Muslims in Madarsas as well. What was a campaign against the rising number of rapes in

the country, was soon shifted to a disgraceful fight as to whose girls have been raped more and whose not.

Throughout these cases, what we see is a constant gendering of the trolling. The identity of a female, her body, her personal relations, and her work are all integrated into one whole problematic mass for the trolls who have a set definition of what a woman is supposed to be like, more so, an Indian woman. The very fact that these women are fiercely vocal about their political opinions and leanings and have a sharp critique against the establishment and the Hindutva regime creates a category for the trolls to target. Further, it must also be noted that the women chosen are not the only ones who get trolled online for their opinions and views. These are women who belong to a certain class structure in the society. The cultural capital that they come along with is also to be noted. Student-activists, actor or journalists, these women are or have eventually become public figures with a common gendered identity along with belonging to a certain stature in the social structure.

Male journalists like Ravish Kumar of NDTV are also trolled heavily online and given death threats. However, nowhere does a troll attack Kumar's personal life and his relationships. Instead, he is trolled solely for his work. The trolling does not spill over to his private life in the way it does for females. The researcher had attempted to look beyond the binary understanding of gender while selecting the sample. However, the effort was not met with success, as a result of which, the sample is limited to women only. This does not mean, however, that a gendered nature of trolling affects only women users. It affects persons identifying across the gender spectrum in similar ways. In fact, even with men, the gendered aspect of trolling can be seen to be in function when they are abused for not being 'man enough'. In addition to that, they are also sent abuses that are themselves gendered terminologies and their wives and daughters are threatened with rape. The argument then boils down to a fact that political differences aside, the common thread that runs across

trolling is gender. The fact that men and women experience the internet differently, owing to the existing power imbalances thus produces a gendered trolling.[50]

Exploring the boundaries of the cyberspace in terms of the classic dichotomy of the public and private and then jettisoning it, can be an interesting exercise to understand how gender is configured in the cyberspace. The commonplace understanding of the private as the space of the feminine and the public as that of the masculine can be juxtaposed to the understanding of the cyberspace as well. The cyberspace, being a public space, is considered as the domain of men, which must not be transgressed by women and persons belonging to other marginalised gender identities. The public sphere of the internet is marked by debates, discussions and conversations amongst people across time and space. The topics of discussion might range from politics to popular entertainment to social issues of the current day and age.

It is this sphere of public debate and discussion that is rendered out of bounds for women, so much so that a woman journalist like Barkha Dutt is trolled for having a strong political position against right-wing fundamentalism and is labelled as "Burkha Dutt", implying her allegiance to the Muslim minority. She mentioned in one of her interviews, "There is no doubt that women are targeted in a way that men just are not. That misogyny is true everywhere but especially amplified online, where so-called critiques of our work fast descend into comments on how we look, what we wear, and oh-not-to-forget, our fictional husbands and lovers!"[51] Here, the one would like to bring the reader's attention to the Diana Coole's sociological analysis of transgression of the public space of the internet by women and its relation to the power dynamics in the cyberspace. She writes, "in this geography of

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[50] Alison Adam, "Cyberstalking: Gender & Computer Ethics," in *Virtual Gender: Technology, Consumption and Identity,* eds. Eileen Green and Alison Adam, (London: Routledge, 2001), 209-224.
[51] Tishani Doshi, "Trolling Is A Mind Game," *The Hindu* 23 September 2016. https://www.thehindu.com/books/books-authors/%E2%80%98Trolling-is-a-mind-game%E2%80%99/article14030410.ece

prescribed and proscribed spaces, transgressions of enforced boundaries- which significantly affect women- involve contestations of power, because the boundaries are not about geography but about power."[52] One sees this working in the cases of trolling of Barkha Dutt, Swati Chaturvedi, Shehla Rashid, Gurmehar Kaur and Swara Bhasker explicitly wherein the choicest of words that are used to abuse them are gendered slurs.

One, thus, gauges the specificities of the attacks that are made on women on the internet. They are highly gendered and employ a shaming of their agency to speak their mind on a public platform. The overarching motivation behind trolling seems to be a silencing of women, along with silencing of dissent. When a woman is trolled, the usual response reads along the lines of the age old narrative of victim blaming when it comes to gender and sexual violence in the form of statements such as "do not feed the trolls". Women, themselves too, at times, go off the internet and pull down their own profiles from the social media platform. A few more responses involve 'blocking' the trolls, ignoring them and even giving back to the troll and defending oneself. Be it the act of trolling or the responses to it, there is an overarching attempt to silence women. When it comes to the presence of women online, more specifically, thinking women discussing and debating issues occurring around the world, they are seen as being doubly deviant. One, they are out in the public domain which is inherently assumed to be a masculine space, supposed to be out of bounds for women. And two, because they dare to indulge in a debate with men over issues that are considered to be again, masculine-only domains. "Trolling must be viewed within this wider context, as a means of silencing women's voices online and their participation in 'virtual public space', resulting in the heteronormative masculinization of virtual space.

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[52] Sharmila Joshi, "Untangling the Web: The Internet and Violence against Women," in *Nine Degrees of Justice: New Perspectives on Violence against Women in India*, eds. Bishakha Datta, (New Delhi: Zubaan Books, 2013)

We see this in relation to women and technology throughout history, for instance female cyclists and then in women's adoption of the motor car (the stereotype of the incompetent 'woman driver' still exists), and like the online abuse faced by women, this misogyny and sexism can be viewed in the vein of attempts to curtail female participation and presence in the public democratic sphere, and women's mobility – whether physical travel in the case of the bicycle or car, or virtual travel vis-à-vis online communication and messages."[53] Often, men tend to establish a monopoly over the online communication even when the topics being discussed fall in the realm of women's experiences and/or interests.[54]

J Devika elaborates on the idea of private space in the digitised and feminised age of the internet,

> "Mobile phones are now regarded as 'own space' or private space by women, through which they use the Internet for self-construction. This autobiographical use of the Internet has opened up the 'private' that lies beyond the domestic. But there has also been a push back by misogynistic forces because of the automatic association of the 'private' with the 'sexual'. Mere visibility in online spaces is sufficient to invite condemnation for being a 'femi-nichi' (Malayalee slur that means femi-nazi). The visbilization of gender has made anyone and everyone a 'feminist', and hence open to attack."[55]

Such an understanding succinctly presents the private/public conundrum of the internet and social media. As Devika argues, whilst the mobile phones and internet have provided tools to women, belonging to different strata of the society, to express themselves and have a private world of their own that goes beyond the realm of the domestic, there has been a simultaneous attempt by misogynistic powers to equate the private with the sexual (something which we have seen happening in the cases of trolling of women mentioned earlier.)

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[53] Karen Lumbsden and Heather M. Morgan, 'Cyber trolling as symbolic violence: Deconstructing Gendered Abuse Online,' in *The Routledge Handbook of Gender and Violence,* eds. Nancy Lombard, (London: Routledge, 2017)

[54] Anne Scott, Lesley Semmens, Lynette Willoughby, "Women and the Internet: The Natural History of a Research Project" in *Virtual Gender: Technology, Consumption, and Identity,* eds. Eileen Green and Alison Adam (London: Routledge, 2001), 11

[55] Amrita Vasudevan, "Report of the National Dialogue on Gender-based Cyber Violence," 2017.

It is in these virtual spaces that rape and death become political weapons and women are treated like spoils of war. As Nivedita Menon mentions in her book, *Seeing Like A Feminist,* "For the women's movement in India, the recognition of rape as a political weapon is a significant part of its politics." Studies on the partition of India have dealt heavily with the usage of rape as a political weapon, in order to beat the enemy. Literature dealing with national conflict situations have also shed light on the rampant usage of women as spoils of war by warring nations and/or communities.[56] While during partition, women were seen to be sacrificing their lives and being mouthpieces for their community, on social media, women tend to depart from that and exercise their own agency to talk about the issues and concerns related to them on an individual level. They no longer serves as proxies for certain sects and communities. It would be interesting here to go back to Hannah Arendt's iconic piece 'On Violence' where she argues that "We know, or should know, that every decrease of power is an open invitation to violence - if only because those who hold power and feel it slipping from their hands have always found it difficult to resist the temptation of substituting violence for it."[57] When the Hindutva forces see a threat to their hegemonic power in the Indian society, all sorts of violent attempts are thus made to grab that power from slipping from their own hands. The cases of mob lynching in India under the current government's tenure are not unknown. The trolls seem to have a similar nature to them where they come in packs and the same tweets and messages are shared on a massive scale. Hashtags are trended at a given, stipulated time, in order to harass and create a mainstream narrative, thereby, suppressing the dissenting voices of the marginalised or the minorities. One could, thus, imagine trolls as online mobs.

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[56] See Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence* (1998) and Taslima Nasreen's *Lajja* (1997) for more.
[57] Hannah Arendt, "On Violence", 184.

Trolling, however, is not the only act where the erstwhile democratic space of the internet turns the whole promise of equality over its head. There are numerous ways in which harassment takes place in the online world. Violence in cyberspace can range from verbal abuse, rape threats to unwarranted lewd messages and photos. There have been numerous instances where the private and confidential material belonging to one, in forms of personal photographs or videos, are put on the internet without the consent of the person involved. The cases of 'revenge porn' have been on a rise all over the world as well. Revenge porn involves sharing of nude photographs and videos of a person without their consent on an online platform. Often, this is a case involving people who had been in a relationship in the past. In order to extract revenge from one's previous partner, their moments of privacy that had been captured with their consent are leaked out for the consumption of the voyeuristic masses over the internet. Stalking is another form of violence that is quite prevalent on the internet and often spills over the fissured binary between the real and the virtual, with stalkers claiming their right over the mostly female bodies not just online, but offline as well. It is interesting to note here that the forms of violence online are not peculiar cases that are restricted in spatial terms only to the cyberspace. The nuances in which violence is carried out and received in the real and the virtual world might differ, but both of them stem from the similar cultural pot of a society. As Shohini Ghosh points out, "The harassment of the streets has come on to the internet. Every instance of internet-related violence is also there in our everyday lives."[58]

At this point, it would be fitting to work towards unearthing the contours and conceptualisation of 'violence' itself. The very category of violence has been conceptualised over the years by scholars across disciplines in multifarious ways. Violence is certainly in no

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[58] Sharmila Joshi, "Untangling the Web: The Internet and Violence against Women," in *Nine Degrees of Justice: New Perspectives on Violence against Women in India,* eds. Bishakha Dutta, (New Delhi: Zubaan), 2012.

way restricted to its physical forms involving bullets and bloodbath, beating and battering. It goes beyond the gamut of what one may largely term as modes of physical violence. Violence, in the recent times, is being conceptualised in terms of intimate partner violence, emotional violence and so on. Addressing violence only in terms of its corporeality and tangibility is a fallacy that one could and should avoid, in order to make much more sense of the nuances in which abuse functions in the contemporary world. Herein, one also needs to understand that violence in cyberspace is not a homogenous category and involves various modes and methods through which it is carried out, as becomes clearer with the listing of types of online violence done earlier in this chapter.

As Kumkum Sangari theorises, "Violence is a foundational and systemic feature of all contemporary patriarchies."[59] In the cases of trolling of the selected sample and additional examples mentioned earlier, the aspect of expressing one's opinions regarding the socio-political goings-on of the world is seen to be suppressed by the trolls. The gendered aspect of trolling, both in terms of as to who gets trolled as well as in which way, has been discussed at length by now. The existing social structures find a reciprocation in the cyberspace with the acts of trolling of women. The transgressive connotations that come attached with the usage of the internet and social media by women has created a space for a peculiar kind of violence to emerge in the techno-social structures. Violence becomes the go-to resort for maintaining the power structures of the virtual in the real space as well. In case of trolling, verbal abuses, rape threats, death threats, sexually abusive language, all are employed to maintain the status quo of the society. Herein, the violence thus seems to be functioning "as a connective tissue between patriarchal systems and other social structures."[60] There is a constant process of creating and reinforcing a dominant narrative of what an ideal Indian woman is supposed to

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[59] Kumkum Sangari, "Gendered Violence, National Boundaries and Culture," in Constellations of Violence: Feminist Interventions in South Asia (Women Unlimited: New Delhi, 2008), eds. Radhika Coomaraswamy & Nimanthi Perera-Rajasingham, 3.

[60] Ibid, p.4.

be like and whoever tries to deviate from it, is met with the wrath of the online trolls. The violence meted out, thus, could be said to assume a "pedagogic and symbolic"[61] nature. This violence is out there to not only silence the existing voices, but also, to prevent any further voices of dissent and criticism by women from emerging in future. Trolling, in a way, then is a mode of violence that deals with setting examples so as to keep the status quo rigid.

One of the defining characteristics of trolling as well as violence is the concept of consent or rather, a lack of it. Whenever a person is trolled, the idea of consent is nowhere to be seen in function. When a tweet is made, a comment left, the consent of both the parties (sender and receiver) is not taken. One does understand and acknowledge the fact that there are policy principles and terms and conditions of the social media platforms that make one sign a contract before creating an account which mentions that there would be interaction and dialogue on the social media platform. However, in order to conduct an analysis of trolling as violence, one needs to delve into the deep crevices of the very architecture of the social media interactions. "Believing in a utopian tale of the internet, implies giving the epistemological logic of networking a precedence over the more material logics and economics and industrial power."[62] There are also privacy settings on both Facebook and Twitter where one can monitor their own profiles and limit their audience.[63] Yet, in these highly digitised techno-social interactions, one cannot not find a way to encroach those

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[61] Ibid, p. 11.

[62] Anne Scott, Lesley Semmens and Lynette Willoughby, "Women and the Internet: the Natural History of a Research Project," in *Virtual Gender: Technology, Consumption and Identity,* eds. Eileen Green and Alison Adam, (London: Routledge, 2001), 10.

[63] While it is true that one can limit the audience for their posts, one may not necessarily always want to block the trolls. It is also to be noted that the very idea of social media platforms is to engage with a larger audience from the comforts of one's home. The interaction is ideally aimed to cross boundaries of states and countries, where people belonging to different parts of the globe share facts, opinions and even their day-to-day activities with each other. It is through social media, one could argue, that every person today is writing their own autobiographical narratives. From posting photos of their pets, memes on the politician they dislike to long observational comments on the current condition of the country or even the world at large, people provide an access to their private lives to the public out there. We know that we are under the surveillance of not just the government, but also, of our friends, families, colleagues and even strangers. Yet, this does not imply that the harassment that happens online is in any way an invitation. This simply establishes how the internet is becoming the new 'everyday'. (More on this later)

virtual boundaries and in this virtual world, the trespassers are not even liable to adequate and effective prosecution. The boundaries set are porous and their fissures can anytime be broken into. Furthermore, the very structure of the social media and the rampant trolling occurring these days, specifically in the cases of women, can be seen to be developing ideas of self-censorship throughout social media. In no way should these acts be thought of as a solution to the menace of trolling online. Rather, these need to be looked at with a keen and sceptical eye for the coating of patriarchal conditioning and quick-fixes over problems that need a deep-rooted analysis and observation.

Along with self-censorship, many a times, women are warned by friends and relatives to not post their images online and use a pseudonym for social media profiles in order to prevent harassment of any kind, creating an acceptable narrative of silencing the victim and not nabbing the perpetrator. It is no wonder then that the mere usage of smart phones by women disturbs the public morality in numerous parts of India even today.[64] Women are expected to stay in the private domain of the household and not venture out into the public space, albeit virtual, to express their opinion. To quote Shilpa Phadke, "Public spaces are seen as spaces of potential sexual danger for women while the private spaces of the home are presented as havens of safety."[65] Such an exercise can prove to be dangerous as it contributes to the rhetoric where the focus is on taming the victim and not the perpetrator. This runs parallel to the victim blaming culture of the real world as well, where women are told to not wear short dress or go out late at night. The larger idea still remains that it is somehow the women only who are responsible for the violence meted out to them, that any form of violence is pure "incitement" and has nothing to do with the power structures of the society.

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[64] Anuradha Shukla, "Jeans, Mobile Phones Banned for Girls in this Haryana Village," *News18,* 17 April 2018. https://www.news18.com/news/india/jeans-mobile-phones-banned-for-girls-in-this-haryana-village-1721421.html

[65] Shilpa Phadke, "Sexuality & Space: Thinking Through Some Issues," In *Plainspeak, Journal of The South & South East Asia Resource Centre on Sexuality*, January 2006.

The larger question still remains that how is this form of online violence so rampant? The answers lies in the modalities of this violence. The exclusive feature of anonymity that the act of trolling awards makes it easier for people to troll public figures and common folk alike. At the interface of the social and the technological, this peculiarity of anonymity, which brings along impunity, adds to the complexities of understanding violence, in general. The trolls are often nameless, faceless entities that exist on the internet. Rarely is their identity known. Moreover, it is not uncommon for the trolls to have fake identities manufactured solely for the purpose of trolling. In addition to that, the (lack of) legal provisions available to counter trolling and other such forms of online harassment make it further easy for the miscreants to rampantly spread their venom in the online spaces and reinforce their dominance under the purview of the existing patriarchal structure. While a lot of trolls seem to be having male names, there is no denying the fact that women too have been and continue to troll other women on social media. The gender of the doer of violence is not necessarily defined as neatly as one would imagine it to be, at the very onset of the problem.[66] Further, given the architecture of the social media, it becomes extremely difficult and next to impossible, to be absolutely certain of a user's gender. There might be a male using a female username or vice-versa. Many a times, people use random words as well so as to surpass the gender scrutiny online. While Facebook does have a provision for asking the ID proof if it deems necessary, it is hardly taken into use. Data has also been released by the social media platforms as well as think-tanks which report a significant number of followers of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and US President Donald Trump, along with Barack Obama, to be fake bots. Imagine having a conversation with someone who is not even human! This brings us to an interesting question: does the gender of the troll even matter?

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[66] One knows the contribution of women during the Naxalbari movement of West Bengal where they too picked up arms and were responsible for carrying out gory acts of violence. The presence of women wings of right-wing militant organisations also testifies to the fact that women can also be the doers of violence.

It is the larger patriarchal techno-social structure that is at play here. It is the 'nobody-ness' of the troll that makes it difficult to pin down the act of violence to one existing, tangible human being. Otherwise, it all seems to be comprised of a world filled with internet ghosts and chimeras. The 'nobody-ness' of the troll can also be, by extension, read as the everybody-ness of the troll. This slippery attribute makes it difficult to attach responsibility and accountability to one particular person for the vicious acts of everyday violence being carried out online. The internet thus provides disembodied selves, in a way. However, this disembodiment is deeply problematic and has its advantages as well as disadvantages. While with the onset of social media, the emphasis on user-generated content and social networking has caused a sense of embodiment with inclusion of video material and visual experience, it may not necessarily be anything more than just multimedia content which can be duplicated and fabricated without much hassle. This corporeality and its (in)visibility raises a lot of interesting questions for the study of the social media; a thematic that demands an in-depth research project of its own.

Defining the crossroads of technological structures and human interaction on which the internet stands, one such way in which these crevices are explored and exploited is through the usage of screenshots. It is an extremely common practice to take screenshots of any tweet or post made by a public figure and circulating it along with a commentary or message, usually vile in nature, at a large scale, making their ways into the middle class drawing rooms through the pervasive medium of WhatsApp. In an article by Divya Arya written as a part of #ShameOnline campaign run by the BBC, she reports about a girl from a village in Uttar Pradesh who had committed suicide after the videos of her gang-rape had been circulated on WhatsApp by the perpetrators. The rape video was seen by people in the village and the nearby areas as well that brought severe trauma and shame to the girl who eventually committed suicide after being told by the village elders and officials that the rape

was her fault.[67] The medium of screenshot adds a peculiar nature to this act of violence of trolling. While posts and tweets can be deleted any time by the user(s), the screenshots become a private property of one who has taken them. It is then circulated at a massive scale which leads to the content becoming "viral". The screenshots add a certain kind of permanence to the violence itself. On one hand, it becomes a mode of maligning the public figures even for a tweet or post made by them, say 10 years ago; while on the other hand, it becomes extremely difficult to get over the trauma caused by the vicious trolling. The rape and death threats may have been made just once in writing but they do not cease to exist. They find a permanent place in the ever expanding cloud of the internet, making it difficult for the survivors to fully get rid of the violence. In addition to that, there are times when the screenshots are taken and then morphed to send a completely different message.

Having said that, one needs to establish the difference between online violence and offline violence, if one may largely term the violence in the virtual and real world as such, respectively. Violence, especially sexual violence, finds an odd yet known link with "shame". Violence in any sphere ensues trauma. Given the online nature of violence, it is accessible to a large number of people all over the world, "it" being the "act" of violence that is meted out to an individual, be it in the form of tweets, messages, leaked photographs and so on. Internet is a large repository of data and an act of violence in the forms mentioned above also formulate as data that is stored and archived, in most cases, forever. The speed with which data is shared and spread across the internet global is massive, which makes it extremely difficult to completely wipe out the very act of violence online. One may have gotten into an altercation with a troll online once and might have blocked them from their profiles, but the content that is shared stays in the cyberspace like a haunting phantom, making it difficult for

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[67] Divya Arya, "The WhatsApp Suicide," *BBC News,* 29 October 2016. https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-37735370

the victim to metamorphose into a survivor. The constant reminder of violence that had once occurred in the past is itself a violence that is impinged onto the individuals in the cyberspace. Furthermore, cyberspace is largely seen as a public platform where one communicates with friends, family, acquaintances and strangers. The act of trolling thus becomes an act of public shaming and violence that is carried out in the public domain, adding to the trauma experienced by the victim. The violence is out there in the open for people to consume, sometimes in the form of a series of tweets, sometimes in the form of audio-visual material such as photographs and videos.

Coming back to the very act of trolling, it is through the words that the violence is meted out, their ever-existing presence implies an ever-existing violence. Shehla Rashid observed in the National Dialogue on Gender Based Online Violence held at TISS Mumbai how speech acts were dealt with in a different manner than physical acts.[68] The distinction between action and consequence was further problematized by her while she borrowed from British philosopher J.L Austin's work. Austin studies the acts where the "very utterance performs the action it describes", which he has termed as "illocutionary acts". Rashid brought out an excellent example of the Scheduled Castes and Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act to situate Austin's work in the Indian context. In her argument, she puts forward that the Act is one of the few legislations in India where hate speech is recognised as being violative action. She mentions, while the Act in itself requires criticism for the way in which it defines social hierarchies and its implementation, it does provide an opening for recognition of hate speech. In the context of the virtual world, India does have its cyber laws and cyber-crime cells. However, the provisions and lack of implementation makes it difficult to acknowledge trolling as violence. The legalities of the cyber laws with respect to online violence shall be discussed in the following chapter.

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[68] Amrita Vasudevan, "Report of the National Dialogue on Gender-based Cyber Violence," 2017.

In order to understanding trolling as violence, it could be useful to go back to what Angela McRobbie had to say about the process of violence. McRobbie argues, we can "re-cast symbolic violence as a process of social reproduction".[69] The power relations are imposed on online bodies, in the case of social media and the social inequalities and hierarchies are thus maintained without fail, in the online world. Herein, it is required that trolling not be seen as something that has no linkages to the "real world". The virtual world and the real world do not exist in isolation. They are a part of the spectrum of the everyday and formulate everyday realities of people across the world. The power structures of the real get reciprocated and sometimes, even strengthened in the virtual world. These themes and more shall be discussed in the following chapter.

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[69] Angela McRobbie, "Notes on 'what not to wear' and post-feminist symbolic violence," *Sociological Review* 52, no. 2 (2004): 97-109.

Chapter Three

'Screen'ing Everyday, Anonymity and Language on Social Media

The role of social media in today's Internet Age is immensely dense. Social media does not only exist in the contemporary society as an external media platform. It is consistently engaging with the cultural negotiations in the society on an everyday basis. The very architecture and design of social media that comes along with anonymity and a language of its own have become enmeshed with the everyday reality of this Internet Age. This chapter would begin with a screening of how the internet is becoming an everyday space while people are glued behind the screens of their mobile phone and laptops. The second section of the chapter would analyse the feature of anonymity that comes along with the internet and social media, where people can hide behind their screens. This section would provide cases where this feature of anonymity has not only led to violence, but rather, has created a space for people to exercise their agency and shape their own desires. A brief description of the existing legal framework with respect to cyber violence shall also be carried out in this section. The chapter concludes by examining the usage of language on the internet and social media and how it urgently requires to be taken up by the scholars so as to bring a nuance to the knowledge produced around the internet and social media.

(1)

The internet is a part of the everyday life of a huge number of people in some way or the other. In his book, *Internet Culture*, David Porter notes how there has been an evolution of the internet from being merely a "peripheral phenomenon" to a "site for cultural production and transformation". The internet cannot be thought of as a passive site, as a mere add-on in people's day-to-day lives. Rather, it is a site buzzing with socio-cultural

interactions and production of content with every passing minute. While there are millennials (people born between mid-80's and late 90's) who make use of the internet for their academics as well as entertainment, we also have job opportunities emerging that are completely internet-based. For instance, social media marketing is one such foray wherein one can see major companies as well as small-scale brands entering into with equal enthusiasm in order to meet their desired customer goals. Social media marketing refers to the kind of marketing (of a brand/company) that takes place solely through the usage of different social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and so on. This is a profession that did not exist few decades ago. What one understands through this short example is how the internet has evolved not just in itself but also, in people's lives. While it is true that social media marketing is something which did not exist a decade or two back, it also cannot be neglected that social media marketing is, after all, a digitised take on the age-old profession of 'marketing'. It so appears that the internet has thus added a flavour and zest to an erstwhile vanilla business strategy. Although, social media marketing and other such internet inventions do have a certain sense of peculiarity of their own, which distinguishes them from their real world ancestors, as it were. This tells us a lot about the interactions between the online and the offline world. One fathoms that the relationship is far from being linearly defined; instead, it comprises of a complex set of nodes where social existence meets in its entirety (real and virtual).

While there is an overwhelming amount of research that argues for an analysis of the impact of the internet on the society, sociologist Manuel Castells warns us against this convoluted approach. Castells mentions that "rather than analyzing the impact of the Internet on society, the key issue is to understand the effect of society on the Internet."[70] One of the most interesting work in this regard has been done by Janet Abbate in *Recoding Gender.*

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[70] Manuel Castells, preface to *The Internet in Everyday Life,* eds. Barry Wellman and Caroling Haythornthwaite, series eds. Manuel Castells (New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell, 2002) xxix.

Abbate makes use of intensive interviews and archives in order to unpack the shift observed in the technological industry from being a field that was largely considered to be the domain of "women's work" to its contemporary version of being a hyper-masculine field.[71] Abbate proposes a move beyond what Charlotte Bunch had called "add women and stir", so as to attain a gender balance in the industry.[72] She establishes the evolution of coding as a professional activity wherein the work environment and other requirements were such that they excluded anybody who did not identify as white and male. Such a progression of events in the history of computer programming becomes interesting to observe, in order to delve deeper into the nuances of the now assumed everyday-ness of the social media and the internet, at large viz-a-viz existing power dynamics.

In 'Glitch Racism: Networks as Actors within Vernacular Internet Theory', Lisa Nakamura argues in a similar vein. She maps the existing discourse around online sexism and racism that treats them as "accidental effect of the network".[73] She argues that trolling and online hate speech are not restricted to being a result of the fallout of the imagined utopian vision of online communication. Rather, there is politics of privilege working behind all sorts of online violence including trolling, which is replicated post-after-post. This kind of privilege, Nakamura notes, is essentially a product of the same historical events that contributed to creating a hyper-masculine tech culture. With great privilege comes great power and certainly, it gets channelized into a vicious form of violence in the online spaces. Trolling, being one such form of online violence, ensures that there is a silencing of the voices of people belonging to the margins of the social structure. There is a gate-keeping of

[71] Janet Abbate, *Recoding Gender: Women's Changing Participation in Computing,* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012)

[72] Charlotte Bunch, "Women's Rights as Human Rights: Toward a Re-Vision of Human Rights," *Human Rights Quarterly* 12, no. 4 (1990): 486-498.

[73] Lisa Nakamura, "Glitch Racism: Networks as Actors within Vernacular Internet Theory," *Culture Digitally* (blog), 10 December 2013. http://culturedigitally.org/2013/12/glitch-racism-networks-as-actors-within-vernacular-Internet-theory/

online discussions and cultural production. When noted feminist blogger and media critic Anita Sarkeesian initiated a project to document the misogyny and sexism in the video games through problematic representations of women in the games, she was targeted with a massive online hate campaign. Overnight, games came up that involved players beating up Sarkeesian black and blue, images of video game characters raping her were posted all over the blogs, even her Wikipedia page was not left untouched. Sarkeesian received rape and death threats throughout the incident and much of it, continues even now, as I write this dissertation.[74]

One can thus see how there is a continuum of gendered victimisation through the new everyday space of the internet. The power structures of the real world get reciprocated and multiplied in the virtual world, owing to its unique feature of providing anonymity. However, one should refrain from assuming that when one argues that the problems of the internet are not necessarily novel in nature and are in fact, somewhat variations of older problems, one is having a deterministic approach. Instead, such an ideation "foregrounds technological innovations" and provides the benefit of "connecting ICTs to their history".[75] What one thus understands is that misogyny, racism, homophobia, Islamophobia and so on are not inventions of the internet. Instead, they are merely "enabled by technology and the cultural norms of Internet communication in which this behaviour is supported, defended, and even valued."[76]

Having said that, what stands straight is the fact that the internet has become an integral part of people's daily lives and practices. It is "less a separate sphere than an extension of everyday life."[77] One can find people doing all sorts of things in the online space

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[74] Adrienne Shaw, "The Internet Is Full of Jerks, Because the World Is Full of Jerks: What Feminist Theory Teaches Us About the Internet," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 11, no. 3 (2014): 273-277.

[75] Alison Adam, "Cyberstalking: Gender and Computer Ethics" in *Virtual Gender: Technology, Consumption & Identity,* eds. Eileen Green and Alison Adam, (London: Routledge, 2001), 209-224.

[76] Adrienne Shaw, "The Internet Is Full of Jerks, Because the World Is Full of Jerks"

[77] Niels van Doorn, Sally Wyatt and Liesbet van Zoonen, "A Body of Text: Revisiting Textual Performances of Gender and Sexuality on the Internet," *Feminist Media Studies* 8, no. 4 (2008): 357-374.

today, ranging from posting pictures of their babies and pets to arguing well-thought out political positions. The internet, especially the social media is quickly becoming a space where the world *exists*. The public platform is soon being adapted by the old and young into a private space of sorts. In Victorian England, the world of literature provided women "an escape from socio-political exclusion, domestic confinement and stifling mental decay; the electronic networks beckon the turn-of-the-millennium women around the world with a similarly inviting glow."[78] As per the 2015 report published by Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI), housewives outnumbered college students in the usage of internet. A good 26% of the users were housewives, as compared to 20% college students.[79] One thinks that perhaps we are standing at that juncture in history where women might not necessarily have a room of their own, but they do have a computer/smart phone, and that seems like the same thing. As J. Devika argues, women now regard their mobile phones as 'own space' or 'private space'. She mentions how women have been using the internet for the purpose of "self-construction" and attributes to the internet a quality of opening up the private which lies beyond the domestic.[80] However, there are women who choose to construct not just themselves, but also their political motivations. Not just women, persons belonging to all genders and sections of society can be seen utilising the internet and social media to further their own politics. An example could be feminists and feminist organisations that choose to work through social media and use it as a new frontier for gender politics and debates.

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There are two defining characteristics of cyberspace that mark it different from others, namely access and anonymity. One might call them virtues, one might call them vice. The

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[78] Anne Scott, Lesley Semmens and Lynette Willoughby, "Women and the Internet: The Natural History of a Research Project," 11.

[79] _____, "Housewives outclass college students, working women in using Internet," 22 May, 2015. https://www.indiatvnews.com/business/india/housewives-use-maximum-internet-iamai-report-18792.html

[80] Amrita Vasudevan, "Report of the National Dialogue on Gender-based Cyber Violence," 2008.

internet provides anonymity behind the screens of laptops and smart phones. The screen is thus not just a physical, tangible object separating the real from the virtual. Rather, it also becomes a metaphor of a screen, a demarcating object that lies between the perpetrator and his field of conquest, as it were. It is this screen that acts as a shield by providing anonymity to the perpetrator, which translates into impunity. As a result, the risk factor that is involved in violence against women in Indian cyberspaces is extremely low. People can easily forge identities online and use rhetoric and abuse to silence dissenting voices, of every nature. It is this nobody-ness of the troll that propels him to do that which perhaps he might not do in the "real" world. As N.S. Nappinai, a Bombay High Court advocate who works on information and communication technology related issues says, "The man may not hold a gun to a cashier's head but because he thinks the risk of harassing someone on the internet is a lot less, he will go ahead and do it."[81]

However, the features of anonymity and accessibility do hold in them a promise of liberation from biases as well, ironically. Sharon Cumberland has aptly termed this dual nature of the cyberspace as the "paradox of cyberspace".[82] When one talks about anonymity, it would be unfair to not mention the ways in which it has proven to provide self-expression without any form of retaliation in some cases as well. Take the case of female (fan fiction) erotica writers, for instance. Anonymity provides female writers the opportunity to keep their identities hidden so as to not be "outed" in the society and face backlash. It is the very principle of anonymity which furthers trolling that helps women in exercising their own sexuality and desires through erotica and other such forms of writing online. Yet, one cannot verify the claims of those writers being female because of the pseudonyms. One can only

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[81] Sharmila Joshi, "Untangling the Web: The Internet and Violence against Women"
[82] Sharon Cumberland, "Private Uses of Cyberspace: Women, Desire, and Fan Culture," in *The Gender and Media Reader*, eds. Mary Celeste Kearney, (New York: Routledge, 2012) 669.

then have an unscholarly faith in the goodwill of the internet users for the purpose of the study, albeit keeping a keen eye for scepticism wide awake.[83]

Not just writers, even activists have had a long history of using the internet to meet their political ends as well. For the 4th World Conference on Women in Beijing, activists heavily used the internet in the form of e-mail to get ahead with political networking.[84] If one talks about the contemporary feminist activism in India, one would note that a large number of middle-class women have been reimagining the political praxis while pushing further the women's question on social media.[85] In the cyberspace, where data gets produced and reproduced at an all-time basis, it becomes difficult to mark the exact moment in history when feminist activism started being realised and practised online. Yet, the 2009 Pink Chaddi campaign, launched by Nisha Susan proves to be an interesting moment in the history of feminist activism in India. Susan, along with a group of women, created a Facebook group called the "Consortium of Pub-going, Loose, and Forward Women", so as to protest against the right-wing Hindu group Sri Ram Sene's attack on women in a pub in Mangalore. The group saw a membership on around 30,000 people within a week. The group then sent around 3000 pink panties to head of the Sri Ram Sene.[86] This event becomes important in the history of Indian feminist activism not just because of its unique way of protesting but also, the rapid speed with which it caught the attention on not just national, but also international level.

'Hyderabad for Feminism' is another example where students from University of Hyderabad realised the potential in social media and formed a Facebook group to discuss

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[83] Ibid. p. 670.
[84] See Gittler (1999) and Huyer (1999) for more.
[85] Trishima Mitra-Kahn, "Offline issues, online lives? The emerging cyberlife of feminist politics in urban India," in *New South Asian feminisms: Paradoxes and possibilities*, eds. Srila Roy, (New York: Zed Books, 2012), 126.
[86] Sujatha Subramanian, "From the Streets to the Web Looking at Feminist Activism on Social Media," *Economic & Political Weekly* 50, no. 17 (2015): 71-78.

issues around gender (and other) inequalities.[87] The group was created to take forward the existing struggle on the streets against gender violence, such as Hyderabad's first Queer Pride and One Billion Rising marches. The founders of the group attribute the low cost, high efficiency feature of the social media for a successful functioning of the group and events organised by it.

Moreover, the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011 also relied heavily on the usage of social media, so much so that they were termed as a "social media revolution".[88] While it is true that social media helps provide a larger and much varied perspective for any kind of protest and its mobilisation, owing to the dialogic character of social media, there is a limit to which the kind of topics that find more resonance in such a space which is largely dominated by women belonging to the privileged sections of the society, with respect to caste and class. Further, there is always an overwhelming existence of the trolls out there in the cyberspace to undercut any and every form of resistance and dissent.

It would not be an exaggeration to state that online violence, today, exists in such a way that it has become a part and parcel of the everyday lives of women and people belonging to the marginalised sections of the society. The very idea that it is so common nowadays to see a newspaper report or a primetime debate on a TV news channel talking about online violence and specifically, trolling is something to be looked at with a sharp, critical eye. No matter how intimidating the digital space is, one does find it extremely difficult to completely refrain from a space that is such an integral part of daily lives in this Internet Age. Despite the fact that there is a particular demographic of middle-class, urban, educated young women who access social media with the purpose of activism or 'doing

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[87] Tejaswini Madabhushi, Maranatha Grace T Wahlang and Gitanjali Joshua, "Locating 'Hyderabad for Feminism' in the Present Struggle against Violence," *Economic & Political Weekly* 50, no. 44 (2015): 38-39.
[88] Nahed Eltantawy and Julie B. Wiest, "The Arab Spring Social Media in the Egyptian Revolution: Reconsidering Resource Mobilization Theory," *International Journal of Communication* 5 (2011): 1209.

politics', it should not be reason enough to essentialise the online forms of violence as elitist problems. This seems to be a convenient reductionism by the authority figures so as to find an escape route from responsibility for making available proper and effective redressal mechanisms to deal with gender-based cyber violence.

While there does exist the Indian Information Technology (IT) Act of 2000 for people's benefits, there is only so much one can do with it. The IT Act initially contained penalties only for crimes committed online in the field of e-commerce and other such economic activity. The Act did not cater to cybercrimes against individuals.[89] It was only after the 2008 Amendments that more detailed illegal activities online were incorporated under the Act, including distribution of child pornography. One of the most interesting and debated sections of the IT Act has been Section 66(a) which penalised anybody sending information or any form of data that is considered to be "grossly offensive" or being "menacing" in nature through the usage of computers and other such communication devices with an imprisonment of up to three years.[90] The Section was, however, later scrapped off in 2012 when two women in Maharashtra were arrested for a Facebook post. Shaheen Dhada had posted her views regarding the city-bandh following the death of a major right-wing political leader on her Facebook profile. Another woman, Renu Srinivasan had 'liked' the post and was arrested along with Dhada for "hurting religious sentiments". The charges were later dropped but the arrest marked a turning point in how social media is scripted not just in the studios of TV news channels, but also, in the legal framework.[91] When it comes to cyberstalking, it was not recognised as a form of stalking that could be penalised under the Indian law until recently. It was only after the Delhi gang-rape incident of 2012 that the

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[89] Debarati Halder and K. Jaishankar, "Cyber Crimes against women in India: Problem, Perspectives and Solutions," *TMC Academy Journal* 3, no. 1 (2008): 48-62.

[90] IndianKanoon.org, "Section 66A in The Information Technology Act, 2000". https://indiankanoon.org/doc/170483278/

[91] Nikhil Pahwa, "A list of Section 66A arrests in India through the years," *Medianama*, 24 March, 2015. https://www.medianama.com/2015/03/223-section-66a-arrests-in-india/

definition of stalking was extended to include online activity as well under the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 2013.[92] Yet, there are myriads of loopholes and lacunae that exist in the current legal framework to deal with online violence. Going into the nuances of the legality of online violence demands a project of its own, something that one would like to develop further in future course of research. The attempt here is thus limited to fleshing out the existing arguments regarding the treatment of online violence by the Indian law.

It has been repeatedly argued that the law is still "stuck in the 'physical'".[93] The legal understanding of violence largely precipitates on identifiable markers of physical injury, barring a few exceptions. The dichotomous relationship between physical and mental harm is something that gets reflected in the legal understanding of online violence. It is seen as something that is not as "serious" as a "real world" crime. The disembodied nature of the internet and thereby, as an extension, the form of violence that occurs on it needs to be kept in mind while scripting laws around it. One gauges the necessity of an understanding of the logic of the cyberspace by the legislature so as to conceptualise apt legal frameworks. Retired Justice Prabha Sridevan of Madras High Court suggests a focus on "prevention" and not "punishment or protection" when it comes to the state's recognition of rights. She formulates that the law could benefit by using language that acknowledges the "inviolability of the right to dignity" and harm as an "affront to dignity".[94]

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Thereby, language becomes an integral part of not just redressal mechanisms for purported violence, but also for the very conceptualisation of violence. One needs to

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[92] Japleen Pasricha, "'Violence' Online in India: Cybercrimes Against Women & Minorities on Social Media", *Feminism In India,* 18 May 2016.
https://feminisminindia.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/FII_cyberbullying_report_website.pdf
[93] Amrita Vasudevan, "Report of the National Dialogue on Gender-based Cyber Violence," 2008.
[94] Ibid.

understand that in the world of the Internet Age, there are multiple languages at play in every moment. One can post something on Facebook or Twitter in their mother tongues. People are not necessarily forced to type everything in English. The social media platforms provide a space for persons belonging to different regions to use their own language to express themselves. While this is certainly a welcoming move in today's era where regional languages have been dying a slow and passive death, it gives rise to a new set of problems. For instance, when one is trolled in a language other than English, it becomes difficult to approach the platform for taking action against the harasser. While it is true that the existing mechanisms provided by both Facebook and Twitter have not proven to be of much help when it comes to keeping a check on the rampant online abuse and harassment even in English language, one can only gauge the apathetic lack of responsibility by the platforms when it comes to abuses being hurled in a regional language such as Hindi, Telugu, Tamil, Bangla and so on. It reeks of utter convenience on the part of the social media platforms to not engage with such a massive issue of importance regarding safety of women online and blaming it on the lack of resources available to check in on the abuses in regional languages when the platforms themselves provide an option to access the platform in one such language. One needs to critically engage with the regional and linguistic specificities of gender-based cyber violence, in order to come to some form of resolution or solution.

In addition to that, language becomes all the more important in the way violence is scripted in the daily narratives and popular parlance, along with the jargon laden debates within newsrooms and academic conference halls. Feminist scholarship and movement have devoted copious amounts of time to ensure that harassment is scripted in a language that does not delegitimise or deflate the intensity of the issue at hand. Case in point could be the usage of the term 'eve-teasing' for street harassment and its eventual problematisation by the feminist movement. Feminists have been critically engaging with the politics of language and

the role it plays in (de)stabilising power structures for a long time. The usage of euphemism such as 'eve teasing' for street harassment has worked against the recognition of street harassment as a serious crime, amounting to sexual harassment. It is seen as something that is frivolous or rather, something which does not demand much serious attention, both from a legal perspective as well as that of the victim. It is normalised as a day-to-day occurrence. When one takes a look at the cases of trolling today, this analogy would prove to be quite useful.

Trolling has become one such form of harassment that is so common in day-to-day activities that it is hardly seen as being problematic or worthy of serious academic or legal intervention. Yes, there are debates and discussions surrounding trolling lately, however, not many of them seem to be grasping the root cause of trolling and its manifestations successfully. It is becoming a common praxis by persons belonging to different strata of the society to not engage with the trolls. This stems from an understanding that the troll derives vicarious pleasure out of an (abusive) engagement with its targets. In order to curtail this attainment of pleasure of the troll, people deem it fit to simply ignore the trolls. The popular phrase "do not feed the trolls" comes in through this exact perspective.

However, one needs to problematise such a simplistic understanding of trolling and the proposed solution to it. In not feeding the trolls, lies an inherent defeatist and complacent attitude on the part of the target. Moreover, the rhetoric of 'do not feed the trolls' adds to the victim-blaming narrative prevalent with all forms of gendered and sexual violence. It lies akin to the 'do not go out at night' and 'just ignore them' rhetoric proposed as a solution for street harassment. As Gandhi and Shah mention in the essay 'Violence becomes a political issue' in the context of street harassment,

> "harassment is meant to tell women to be "in their own place". We were told that this is our street and as outsiders, you should know better than to pick a fight with us or travel unescorted. So, in order to be out on the

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streets, women have to take precautions, be wary and constantly on guard."
(Gandhi and Shah, 1992: 50)

While one does not, in any way, mean to burden the victims with a moralistic standpoint for the necessity of taking an action, the measures and approaches taken to deal with trolling need to be studied with a critical lens. How much of this silence can be read as agency is something that one would like to keep open for further research.

In addition to that, the usage of the very term 'trolling' demands a thorough debate and discussion. The fact that the term trolling is used unanimously for things said in a jocular vein, pranks, insults, rape threats and death threats, all alike, is extremely problematic. One opines that perhaps, this could be a reason as to why there is no common consensus of the public with regards to the intensity and gravity of 'trolling' as violence. The reluctance of the media, the victims and the feminist movements to problematise and consequentially, define 'trolling' as harassment and violence does not seem to be working in the favour of anybody, except the 'trolls' themselves. One could obtain a lot by discarding the euphemistic usage of the term 'trolling' for something as grave as gendered and sexual violence. Yet, one can also not overlook the fact that the internet has a language of its own. The terms and phrases that one uses on the internet are evolved in a certain context and historical moment. As a result, it might not be easy to work towards conceptualising a script, a language, a terminology that considers trolling as online violence, as it might have an underlying threat of de-contextualising the violence.

Conclusion

Violence, as we have seen, is not restricted to the corporeal. Rather, it gets reimagined in the disembodied space of the internet and social media as well. The online space sees various kinds of violence occurring everyday on a scale that can only seem overwhelming, to say the least. Be it the cases of cyberstalking, sending of unsolicited 'dick pics', releasing someone's nude pictures and personal details without their consent, rape threats, death threats or verbal abuses, this Internet Age is fraught with violence in more ways than one would possibly imagine. Trolling is one such form of online violence wherein sexually coloured remarks, verbal abuses, rape and death threats and so on are hurled at people every single day on social media. While it would be untrue to argue that it is only women who get trolled in the cyberspace and that men or people belonging to other genders have an insulated environment on social media, it is the way in which trolling occurs that marks women and people identifying as queer different from cis-heterosexual men. The patriarchal social structure works its way through the porous boundaries of the cyberspace and ensures that the gender identity of an individual is always kept as a reason for their oppression. As we have noted through the examples of the trolling of the women discussed in the research, trolling of women functions on a dual level. One is the overtly evident motivation of trolling, i.e. silencing of dissenting and oppositional voices. The other and exclusive feature of trolling of women is the very discomfort of the contemporary patriarchy with outspoken and independent women, who step out of the domestic, to enter into the public spaces of debates and discussions. The movement of the female, howsoever virtual it might be, is reason enough for the existing power structures of the real world to establish their rigid place in the virtual world as well.

The cases of Barkha Dutt, Swati Chaturvedi, Gurmehar Kaur, Shehla Rashid and Swara Bhasker depict how an upper-(middle) class, well-educated, English speaking woman

with more than decent amount of cultural capital to her benefit is not saved from online violence by the intersectional privileges that she enjoys. The women in context are not just women who have a certain level of privilege and cultural capital allotted to them, they are women who are independent, unapologetically outspoken and politically opinionated. The fact that such a set of women choose to put out their opinions and initiate (and not just take part in) conversations around socio-political conditions of the society and world, at large, does not fit in the patriarchal narrative of gender-power relations. Repeated attempts at silencing these women's voices which also raises questions against the establishment are made with the usage of social media on an everyday basis. They are given rape and death threats, sent pornographic images, their personal details are leaked and sexually charged slurs and abuses are hurled at them at an overwhelming rate. We have seen how this violence on social media is becoming more and more prevalent, so much so that it has become a form of an everyday violence. This everyday violence faces a normalisation in both the real and the virtual world combined. The normalisation of trolling seems to fall in the similar terrain of the accepted narrative around what is euphemistically called, "eve-teasing".

We have established the ways in which the rhetoric of "eve-teasing" ends up working against the victims and in the favour of the perpetrators. Right from the beginning of the nomenclature of street sexual harassment as "eve-teasing", one can observe the ways in which language is employed to dilute and in effect, delegitimise the tenacity of the act of harassment and violence. The euphemistic usage takes away the grit and everyday horrors from street harassment and creates a normative logic where street harassment is seen as the order of the day. It is not only the way in which this form of violence is scripted in daily narratives that aids in its normalisation and trivialisation. The popular logic surrounding street harassment maintains an authority over the victim which involves blaming the victim for the violence doled unto them. The most common responses to any incident of street

harassment raise fingers on the victim regarding their clothing, the time of the day they were out and even their reactions to being harassed on the streets. The rhetoric is never about what the perpetrator was wearing or doing or his intention, instead, it takes the form of victim-blaming, giving rise to problematic "advices" by sometimes well-meaning folks to the women that ultimately culminates in staying at home and being extremely cautious. They are suggested, almost warned, to not retort back to the perpetrator, lest it ignite his vitriolic behaviour a notch further. Women are told to stay shut and simply ignore the street harassment and eventually, accept it as an everyday reality.

Similarly, in the case of trolling, one has emphasised the importance of critically engaging with the term "trolling" itself. We have panned out the usage of the term trolling with the help of newspaper reports and scholarly articles that help us to come to a conclusion that trolling is not a homogenous category. It formulates a spectrum of sorts in the internet lingo, with mockery and rape threat as its two extremes. The euphemistic usage of the term "trolling" instead of online violence thus seems to add to the already recalcitrant attitude in the cyberspace with regards to trolling. Since the term itself is so fickle and is used at different places and different contexts, it becomes difficult to initiate a dialogue to gauge the intensity of the problem. However, one also does need to look into the dynamics of the way in which language itself functions in the cyberspace and its own peculiarities, a project which goes beyond the scope of this dissertation. The commonplace response and suggestions to those being trolled fall under the larger understanding of the phrase "do not feed the trolls" and "just block them". Both of the ideations put the onus on the victim and not the perpetrator to nab the violence. This shows how despite trolling being a form of online violence, it is not necessarily recognised as one and that the existing gender dynamics and power structures of the physical world find resemblance and a superimposition in the virtual world. The work,

thus, contributes to the existing scholarship around gender and violence by defining newer contours around anonymity, consent, body and the everyday.

We have also seen that the internet can be conceptualised as an everyday space and studied accordingly, in order to critically engage with the thematic of gender and violence. The relationship between online and offline violence and the way they feed off each other provides an interesting insight into the workings of the existing gender relations and social hierarchies. While the internet provides an everyday space to mete out violence, it also gives way for practising politics, feminist, Dalit, queer and otherwise, as is evident by the increasing usage of the social media by feminist, Dalit, queer individuals and organisations alike. The internet provides a space for the marginalised sections of the society to create their counter narratives as opposed to the dominant discourse of the privileged which finds massive coverage by all forms of media. Social media, thus, becomes a space that is enabling as well as disabling. The aspects of anonymity and access can be and have been used to further the queer, feminist, Dalit cause and at the same time, to counter it and silence the emerging voices from the margins of the society. This "paradox of cyberspace" adds to the layers in which violence can be studied for further knowledge production.

Yet, there are themes that have remained out of the ambit of this work. The ways in which the political economy of the internet and social media works could shed interesting light on the ways in which we see the internet as a public space that is increasingly getting privatised. Such an examination could help in the knowledge production around the contingent realities of not just India, but the world, at large. There could be a more focused work on conceptualising the internet as the new everyday while keeping the legal framework of online violence as a contextual standpoint. This work does not claim to provide any expertise or detailed understanding of how the domain of the law finds its space in the everyday cyberspace. This research could serve as a foundation for further study on feminist

understanding of consent while looking at how the women who get trolled respond to the harassment they face online. Along with these, this research leaves the question of linguistic specificities of online violence and how does one engage with it critically in order to fathom a region-specific articulation of online violence open for further scholarship on gender and violence.

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