From the Streets to the Web
Looking at Feminist Activism on Social Media

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Does social media enable forming networks of solidarity between different marginalised groups? Is there a space for non-normative discourses such as the discourse on pleasure? Does digital technology aid in the construction of feminist counter-publics? These are some of the questions explored in this paper. Power relations that operate through social media, including forms of gendered and sexualised violence, are also discussed.

A casual conversation with my Gender Studies professor a few years ago revealed her deep sense of apprehension about the future of feminism. "Apathetic" and "apolitical" is how she described whom she called the "younger generation of feminists." To me, who had always held my peers in high regard for their feminist politics, this came as a surprise. While I would not admit this out loud, I had learnt more about feminist theory through interactions with my friends than I had inside the classroom. Where was this disjunction in opinion coming from? I realised then that while I sought feminist interaction and politically charged conversations with fellow feminists on Facebook, my professor saw the empty streets as evidence of our lack of interest in feminist politics. In the span of a generation, the political actors had not changed, but the space of politics had been transformed.

While it is difficult to pinpoint the exact period when online spaces began to be used for feminist activism in India, Nisha Susan's use of Facebook for the Pink Chaddi campaign can be seen as a turning point. It recognised the importance of social media as a tool for activism. The Pink Chaddi campaign was launched in 2009 as a protest against Hindu right-wing group Sri Ram Sene's attack on women in a pub in Mangalore. A group of women who called themselves "Consortium of Pub-going, Loose, and Forward Women" launched a Facebook group, which saw close to 30,000 members in a week. The members of the group then campaigned to send 3,000 pink panties to the head of Sri Ram Sene. The campaign became popular not only for its innovative mode of protest that challenged traditional notions of activism, but also for the way it effectively used social media to garner widespread attention to its cause. Since then, digital technology has been explored and appropriated by Indian feminists in various ways to draw attention to a number of feminist issues.

While leftist political methods, including protest marches, rallies, and dharnas, continue to dominate the popular imagination of activism, it is interesting to explore whether digital technology has contributed to transforming the very definition of activism. While the role of digital technology as a tool for political change has been widely studied, my interest lies in its particular contribution to feminist politics and activism. Does feminist activism have the potential to alter the nature of digital technology and its associations with masculinity (Wajcman 1991)? Do issues of access allow social media to become a democratic public sphere? It is with these cursory questions that I set out to study how, in the Indian

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context, feminist activism is transformed by using digital technology.

My research on feminist activism in online spaces has been motivated by my own engagement with social media and my own feminist politics. In the period in which this paper was written, I had been brainstorming with a colleague about creating a Facebook page to initiate discussions on online violence against women. Thus, as an ethnographer, I kept harking back to my own experiences of using social media for feminist activism while working on this paper. A number of questions raised in this study have been a result of conversations I have had in various feminist spaces on social media. I have also used my Facebook page for raising critical questions about social media use and participation, and for connecting with feminists across the world.

Methodology

To understand how feminist activists engage with social media as a space of activism, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 13 respondents. The interviews took place both face-to-face and over the phone, and were recorded with the consent of the respondents. The interview schedule consisted of questions on the demographic position of the respondents; how their feminist politics was affected by their social location; how they characterised their engagement with social media; how they saw feminist activism online in relation to other modes of activism; and narratives of gendered violence and backlash, if any. Questions regarding access to digital technology and its effect on feminist activism were also dealt with.

I have engaged in textual analysis in my understanding of certain online spaces, an understanding that colours most of this study. However, a feminist study of online spaces brings up its own ethical dilemmas. A number of Facebook pages and groups of which I am a member are "closed" groups and have a "safe space" policy,[1] which stresses preserving the confidentiality of the discussions that take place on the group. Reproducing discussions from these pages, discussions that often focus on the personal lives of its members, with the intent of textual analysis, thus amounts to an act of intrusion and surveillance. Keeping in mind these ethical questions, my emphasis has been to look at the experiences of feminist activists online as an integral part of their lived reality, and how they envisage digital technology in relation to their activism.

Defining an 'Activist': Locating the Respondents

One of the major difficulties I faced while selecting a sample of interviewees was how I would define a feminist activist for the purpose of this study. Just as there is no singular feminist movement, there is no singular definition of feminist activism either. When the study is located in cyberspace, questions such as intensity of engagement, perceptions of effectiveness of actions taken online, and their relation to offline spaces make the process of coming up with a singular definition of activism even more difficult. Therefore, I decided to rely on my respondents for their definitions of activism. Since I followed the snowball sampling method to locate my respondents, reaching

a particular respondent depended on how my previous respondent defined activism and whether they considered someone as fitting the criteria of the research project. What emerged was a diverse sample that not only defined and engaged with feminism in multiple ways, but also used online spaces and social media in different capacities, with differing levels of engagement. While some were wary of labelling themselves as activists, through the course of the interviews, most of the respondents stressed their commitment to creating an egalitarian society through their actions, including through their engagement with digital technology.

Almost all the respondents were from middle class or upper-middle class backgrounds and English educated. They were in the age-group of 17–35, with nine of the 13 in their 20s. The respondents lived in urban settings, with seven in Mumbai and the others in Kolkata, Delhi, Chennai, Bengaluru, and Guwahati. With the exception of one respondent, who is currently a university student, all the others were college graduates. Ten of the 13 respondents had upper-caste Hindu backgrounds. All of them identified themselves as able bodied. The names of the respondents have been changed to protect their privacy.

Digital Technology and Forms of Organising

In the last decade, digital technology has emerged as a key tool in organising protests and expressing dissent. The role of Facebook in organising and sustaining protests during the Arab Spring uprisings in 2011 saw the revolution being termed a social media revolution (Eltantawy and Wiest 2011; Skinner 2011). In India, in December 2013, following a Supreme Court ruling that upheld Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, a ruling that criminalises consensual homosexual acts, queer and feminist activists proposed observing 15 December as a Global Day of Rage. Coordinated through a Facebook page, the event, "Global Day of Rage—Worldwide," was held in 31 cities across the world and attended by more than 3,000 people.

In my conversations with feminist activists, almost all of them said that information about protests or rallies was conveyed to them through social media. Most of them also stated having used Facebook and Twitter to mobilise people for events and gatherings around specific issues. Some respondents saw social media as allowing a more nuanced form of activism. Deepti, a journalist, explains how often in a rally there will be no opportunity to engage with the opinions of all those present. However, an interface like Facebook allows for conversations between different groups of people even before gathering on streets. This helps everyone have a better idea of the agenda of a protest.

Respondents also point out the possibility of linking social media activism to offline initiatives, including existing social movements and policymaking processes. Anu underlines this potential of social media when she explains how her presence on Twitter enriches the work she does as part of an organisation working on disability rights. She describes how when legislations relating to disability are being drafted and when there is a call for comments from the parliamentary standing committee, she not only contacts organisations working with

disability but also puts out the subject for discussion on Twitter. She believes that reaching out to the 11,000 people who follow her on Twitter, which includes persons with disabilities, organisations working on disability, or people who are engaged in the care of disabled people, affords her a perspective that would be impossible to gain in offline spaces.

While most respondents are unequivocal in their opinion of digital technology aiding the process of organising a large group of people for a particular cause, envisaging online feminist activism independent of offline modes of action draws polarising responses. Some respondents are confident that digital technology has the potential to be the future of feminist activism. Archana, a student and administrator of a feminist Facebook page, states, "Protests can only take you so far in terms of visibility. With digital technology, you have networks from around the world participating." However, some respondents were of the opinion that activism carried out solely on social media cannot be viable and needs to be supplemented by offline action as well. Sheela, who works with a Delhi-based non-governmental organisation (NGO), states,

> You have to constantly be aware of what is happening on the ground, you can't afford to distance yourself. Because that is when you fall into the trap of slacktivism. There is an application on Facebook called 'Causes.' People click on it and feel like they have contributed while the charity there is only towards yourself.

Slacktivism, a derogatory way of describing online activism, sees it as having no social or political effect but to make participants feel good about themselves (Morozov 2009). Sushma, who works with a Mumbai-based NGO and is the administrator of a feminist Facebook page, finds the term "slacktivism" reductive and offensive. She states,

> This accusation comes from people who think that social media has made political zombies out of an entire generation. People are not passive receptors of populist opinion. Social media has given them the opportunity to view a variety of issues, to find issues they connect with, to meet people who believe in the same things they do and to create spaces, both virtual and physical, to bring these issues to light.

Her response brings to light the changing definitions of activism facilitated by digital technology. Angelina (2010) states,

> Existing researches tend to define activism as concrete actions, such as protests and campaigns, and the values represented by such actions. It neglects other elements that constitute activism together with the actions and values, such as the issue taken up by the action, the ideologies underlying the formulation of action, and the actors behind the activism (Sherrod 2006; Kassimir 2006).

Thus, online activism needs to be redefined and rethought rather than being seen merely as complementary to activism that take place in the offline, physical world.

From the Streets to the Net: Birth of Counter-publics in Online Spaces

When looking at the potential of communication practices in facilitating participation in political and social issues, the idea of a public sphere is critical. The public sphere, as defined by Habermas (1991), is a "society engaged in critical public debate." According to Habermas, in the bourgeois public sphere of the 19th century, institutions such as newspapers, debating societies, salons and coffee houses brought together private individuals who discussed the power of the state in a rational manner. Fraser (1990) critiques the Habermasian public sphere and states that instead of the ideal of open access, seen as a feature of the public sphere by Habermas, gender and class exclusion have always been built into the notion. Fraser (1990) points out that there is a coexisting public sphere known as the counter-publics, a response to the exclusionary nature of the dominant public sphere. She argues that the existence of multiple public spheres is critical to enhancing participation by allowing one "to speak in one's own voice, and thereby simultaneously to construct and express one's cultural identity through idiom and style" (1990: 126).

Historically, feminist activists have used various communication technologies to facilitate the creation of alternative discursive spaces where they could challenge patriarchal norms imposed on them through various institutions. Chatterjee (1993) narrates the story of Rassundari Devi, who taught herself to read and began a secret reading circle with her widowed sister-in-laws. The women's suffrage movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries used posters, pamphlets, and other printed media to counter the anti-feminist imagery in mainstream newspapers and magazines. In the current context, Jallov describes how community radio has allowed women in rural areas of Mozambique to organise themselves, discuss education, leadership, and self-confidence, and "to ensure the inclusion of women's experiences and viewpoints" (2007).

In the following sections, I look at how digital technology has been used by feminist activists to create counter-publics that need to be studied independently of offline action. I shall look at how feminist activism in online spaces has contributed to the creation of spaces where women have been able to create new subjectivities and relationships, and contest right-wing patriarchal control over their expressions.

Online Networks of Solidarity and Consciousness Raising

Critiquing the Habermasian assumption that private topics do not belong in the public sphere, Fraser (1990) states that the distinction between private and public works to the "disadvantage of the subordinates." Feminist activists have similarly stressed the importance of bridging the gap between the private and the public spheres to understand the individual struggles of women as belonging to a larger patriarchal structure. An integral part of bridging the gap has been through consciousness raising, which involves women sharing their personal narratives, including the oppression they face in their private domains. The politicising of such personal narratives has led to women's experience being seen as a significant source of knowledge production. Sowards and Renegar (2006) state that sharing stories is a form of feminist activism because "it creates a network of experiences between women and acts as a storytelling process that others can learn from if they so choose." Consciousness raising, thus, provides an alternative to the dominant public sphere.

Digital technology has enabled the continuation of such consciousness raising spaces into online spaces. Most of the respondents explain that sharing narratives of personal experience is an important feminist practice in online spaces, especially on social media. Archana talks about how the inbox of their page "Being Feminist" often receives messages from users around the world who request the administrators to share their stories on the page. She states,

> Whenever we share the personal narratives of our users, the response is usually overwhelming. Other members respond with a lot of compassion and empathy. This acts as an important support system and provides a sense of solidarity to those who share their stories.

She explains that such narratives also prompt important discussions on gendered violence and acts of resistance. Meera talks about how online spaces, especially blogs or Twitter, afford people the option of anonymity. This allows them to talk about issues that might be considered sensitive, or even dangerous, in face-to-face conversation and facilitates the sharing of personal narratives without censure or judgment. The ability to control information about one's self, by revealing certain aspects while withholding others, also allows for radical acts of identity construction. Sushma elucidates this when she states,

> As far as topics like my sexuality is concerned, social media gives me space to talk about it in a way I can't in front of my family or at work. For instance, putting up a display picture of two queer people kissing, or with a pansexual logo affirms my identity to everyone on my list (including my family) but also allows me to not explicitly 'come out' to people who would make my life inconvenient if they knew, like my parents.

Access to digital technology is believed to have brought to the fore many marginalised voices and created democratic spaces (Graham 1999; Castells 2001), thus creating more inclusive spaces of consciousness raising. In her interview, Raji, a Dalit feminist activist and poet, alludes to the importance of access to digital technology when she states,

> In Kerala, the voices of subaltern groups are very prominent on social media, especially sexual minorities and Dalit groups. On social media, all of us are publishers. Only some communities get the space to get published in mainstream media. Social media allows marginalised voices the possibility of being heard in the public discourse.

Anu talks about how sites like Facebook and Twitter, especially when they are accessed through smartphones, are disabled-friendly. This allows the voices of disabled people and their concerns to be heard. She states,

> Social media is very important to the work I do as a disability activist. As part of our work, we have created a social media platform for persons with disability, particularly people who are blind or visually impaired. This was possibly the first space where I was sensitised to the needs of the disabled and this has affected the work I do in my capacity as a lawyer.

Sushma believes that one is also able to access different bodies of knowledge through social media because of the diversity on the internet. She states,

> Tumblr has various blogs dedicated purely towards disseminating information and answering questions to a certain issue. There are not just several websites deconstructing the label 'queer,' but there are

several websites dedicated to deconstructing every single and each label that comes under it—pansexual, asexual, polysexual, genderfluid, agender, two-soul—the list is endless. Similarly, when talking about 'People of Colour,' even through first world lenses, it is usually 'African American' history that gets most 'attention.' But on Tumblr, there are several blogs each dedicated to Chinese-Americans, Vietnamese-Americans, Indian-Americans, Native-Americans, etc.

Social Media and Politics of Pleasure

While questions of violence inform most of the conversations that happen in online feminist spaces, the politics of pleasure is also an integral part. Discussions of sexual pleasure and the creation of safe erotic spaces are facilitated by certain aspects of digital technology, most significantly, the possibility of anonymity. "What social media has achieved is giving women the space to discuss things that concern them, especially in the sphere of sexuality," says Anu.

> Through the use of anonymity, women have been able to voice very private discussions which haven't formed part of the mainstream. An example would be the phenomenon known as 'female ejaculation,' written off in medical science and even by mainstream feminists, but which has found a voice in online forums as something real and not relegated to pornographic 'squirting.'

Initiating conversations around sexual pleasure, especially those that broaden the very definitions of erotic acts and bodies, is a subversive political act in a context where sex gets associated with risk and violence, and women's bodies are policed and regulated.

As Aristarkhova (1999) points out, the arena of pleasure is not just restricted to issues of sex and sexual acts. She states,

> Probably, cyberfeminists were the first openly political communities in cyberspace to play out their differences into new forms of cyber-organisations without programmes and restrictions, which invite other people for collective pleasure ... In doing it, we move beyond our cultures of sexualisation, we 'desexualise' pleasure, being fully aware that it is necessarily (though not exclusively) a political gesture.

A number of feminist campaigns have focused on a politics of pleasure that challenge the limited subject positions afforded to them. The #whyloiter campaign, conceptualised in reaction to instances of moral policing and increasing restrictions on women's mobility, emphasises the idea of "fun" and argues for the right of women to "hang out in the city, to make use of its public spaces, to loiter aimlessly." Spearheaded by Sameera Khan, Shilpa Phadke, and Shilpa Ranade, authors of the book *Why Loiter*, the online campaign uses the hashtag #whyloiter on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Foursquare to highlight women's efforts to reclaim public spaces. The online campaign has seen women sharing pictures, poems, and anecdotes that foreground their forging a relationship of pleasure with their cities, rather than one of fear and restriction.

The conversations on a number of Facebook pages and blogs also extend to topics such as body image or romantic relationships. An example of a feminist site dedicated to body positivity is the Facebook group titled "Women Against Non-essential Grooming," a closed group whose description reads, "WANG is not just for those who have relinquished the razor, lost the lipstick, and ditched the deodorant but for anyone who believes

that conventional beauty techniques are not the only route to attractive and socially worthwhile people." An important feature of the group is the photographs women share of themselves, often accompanied by discussions that celebrate appearances that do not conform to conventional standards of beauty, affirming a space free of shame or stigma. The existence of such an online group is not premised on the promise of disembodiment; instead the body becomes a site for the formulations of multiple female subjectivities, and a space for forging relationships with other women.

Aesthetic choices around self-representation have been another way in which feminists have expressed themselves in online spaces and reclaimed their embodiment from the male gaze. An example of this has been the act of taking selfies, or self-portraits, which can be read as women assuming control over technology to mark a subjective performance of the self. The act of taking a selfie challenges the authority of the male gaze by collapsing the boundaries of actor and spectator. The use of editing software and tools such as Photoshop also allow the possibility of multiple, constructed selves as opposed to an unmediated, natural body. While selfies have been labelled as an indication of narcissism in mainstream media spaces, a number of feminists have used the text of the selfie to point to the constructed nature of femininity. The Ladies Finger, an Indian feminist e-zine, is another attempt at politicising online spaces by foregrounding relationships of pleasure.[2] The blog describes itself as, "A new women's zine. Pop Culture. Health. Sex. Fun. Music. Books. Cinema. We do vaanthi. We like kranti. We write what we want to read." Rather than solely focusing on issues of violence afflicting women, the site contains discussions on a number of diverse issues, right from Malala Yousafzai's clothes to the songs of Begum Akhtar. The e-zine thus becomes a space for the celebration of diverse subjectivities and experiences of women. The creation of multiple female subjectivities and expression of pleasure have, however, been a source of anxiety to patriarchal and right-wing forces. The next section demonstrates how such feminist activists occupying online spaces have negotiated controls over their expression and contested the notion of Indian culture articulated by these forces.

Feminist Engagement with 'Indian Culture'

An allegation that is routinely levelled against Indian feminist activists, including queer activists, is that they are "westernised" in thought and action. Within such a discourse, feminists get constructed as not just being alienated from the reality of Indian culture, but also as disrupting superior "Indian culture" with ideas from the "degenerate west." It is important to note that the idea of culture, as articulated in the nationalist discourse, is a gendered one.[3] This conception of "Indianness" has been appropriated by those advocating the ideology of Hindutva, which sees India as a Hindu nation threatened by the Muslim and Christian other (Jaffrelot 1993). Part of the wider Hindu right-wing discourse, Hindutva ideology conflates women's right over their sexuality with notions of purity and virtue (Tharu and Niranjana 1999: 505). Banerjee points out

that under Hindutva the female body becomes a site of cultural conflicts and women's entry to the public sphere is seen as a threat (2005: 141).

Such an understanding of nationalism and Indian culture has been questioned by Indian feminists through various modes of protest carried out in online spaces. A recent example has been the Kiss of Love campaign, which was conceptualised as a non-violent protest against increasing instances of moral policing in Kerala. The Facebook page of the campaign was instrumental in mobilising youth from different parts of Kerala for the event held in Kochi on 2 November 2014.[4] More significantly, the page, which had 1,54,249 likes as of January 2015, has become a site for celebrating public expression of love, and challenging Hindutva's heterosexual and patriarchal control over women's sexuality. By sharing narratives of young people from across the country, as well as by highlighting expressions of solidarity from prominent public figures, the page has argued for a politicisation and redefinition of the concepts of love, sex, and morality. Other feminist pages, such as Feminist India, constantly engage with questions of nationalism, seen in updates such as "Happy Republic Day to the upper caste, heterosexual men of this country" and "Radical Hindu logic: Valentine's day is against Indian culture. However, marital rape, child marriage, dowry, etc, are our traditions and thus must not be questioned." A critique of the popular understanding of Indian culture can also be seen in Facebook pages that have come up as part of the protest against Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, which criminalises consensual homosexual acts. Since one of the bases for the judgment has been that homosexuality is against Indian values, queer and feminist activists have sought to challenge the Hindutva notion of Indian culture and its conception of homosexuality as a threat (Narrain 2004).

These debates on Indian culture, expressions of sexuality, and feminist contestations of them have important implications on how we understand online spaces as counterpublics. Papacharissi (2002) states, "The virtual sphere allows the expression and development of such movements that further democratic expressions, by not necessarily focusing on traditional political issues, but by shifting the cultural ground." Extending Fraser's arguments, the counter-publics created by feminist activists in online spaces have served to strengthen democracy by critiquing the oppressive and exclusionary ideas of Indian culture. As seen, feminist activists occupying online spaces have critiqued mainstream media discourses and provided an alternative discourse to political events. The discursive communities created in the process give rise to political debates that highlight the systemic injustice that has been perpetrated by both state and non-state actors.

Access to Digital Technology and Unequal Power Relations

However, despite the optimism over the presence of diverse feminist voices in online spaces, it is necessary to question whether online spaces facilitate equal participation among different groups, allowing all to express opinions as well as

contribute to online public discourse in equal measure. Most of the respondents agreed that unequal access makes digital technology exclusive and elitist. Meera, who works with an internet rights organisation, says that most of the internet users in India are from the middle class and above, come from urban areas, and have a minimum level of education. According to a report titled "Internet in Rural India" by the Internet and Mobile Association of India, internet penetration in rural India remains a low 6.7%. Sheela asserts that with such a low rate of internet penetration, social media is far from becoming the future of feminist activism in India. Sushma points how this disparity also affects feminist activism in online spaces when she says, "It is undeniable that there is a class bias involved in the kind of issues that get the limelight in online spaces. For instance, the recent verdict on 377 sparked a lot more outrage than the demolishing of a slum in Mumbai."

When looking at questions of access, the issue of language becomes a pertinent one. Raji states that she prefers to write in Malayalam on her Facebook page since that is the language easily understood by most people in her friends list. She also states that being a Malayali poet, she expresses her sentiments better in her native language than in English. However, she says that her choice of language does limit the number of people who follow her work outside Kerala. The use of a particular vernacular language is heavily reliant on technological support. When asked whether Dalit issues find as much space on social media as other issues, Anu says,

> I know there is a lot of brilliant work being produced on caste in vernacular languages. But the problem I and many others face is that our phones or other devices often don't have the technology to support different scripts. I often can't access the work of a lot of Dalit feminists who write in Tamil on Twitter.

Access and technological infrastructure alone are not responsible for the power relations that operate in online spaces. Deepti states that despite the increasing presence of varied voices on social media, certain kinds of issues are seen as "cooler" than others. She narrates how her efforts to write on issues of disability on her blog made her realise that the subject is openly disregarded and interest in it is very limited. Significantly, even within transnational feminist networks of solidarity, there is often a reproduction of traditional power structures. Indian feminists who share space with western feminists on online platforms state that the voices and expressions of women from third world countries are often silenced. Third world women thus end up being constructed within neocolonial discourses, associated with tradition and ignorance, and in need of saving by first world countries. Sushma, whose feminist Facebook page invited women from other countries to share the administrator duties, states that their opinions are often undervalued when they attempt to articulate the realities of Indian women. She states, "We get a lot of 'Oh those poor women in developing countries' or 'You have no right to say something about women in developing countries because you don't know what it's like' from American/ European members when we post articles about women from other parts of the world." Archana, who is also an

administrator on the page, states, "In a manner of speaking, my experience is white feminists are very reluctant to acknowledge their white privilege. I mean, theoretically, sure, they know they have privilege, but in practice, they (the ones I've had experience with) seem to take any sort of criticism as a personal insult."

Gajjala (2000) questions the rhetoric of Internet technologies being "great equalisers" when she states that cyberfeminism continues to carry assumptions of first-world technology liberating the "third world from its 'pre-developed' misery." She states,

> Internet constructs of 'third-world' ignorance and identity occur within a framing of 'civility' and netiquette that are defined in very westernised and urban bourgeois terms. At the same time, the speaking and silencing of women from various races, classes, castes, and geographical locations continues to be governed by a 'benevolence' that is nonetheless hierarchical in that it 'allows' or disallows Others' speech.

Thus, while digital technology has led to a greater and more diverse participation in political and social discourse, it does not necessarily create more democratic spaces. Unequal access to digital technology restricts the possibility of marginalised groups participating in online spaces. Even after barriers to access are overcome, there are inequalities in whose voice gets heard and which issues get highlighted in online spaces. In addition to questions of access, women's participation in online spaces is limited by the sexist and misogynist violence women face online.

Gendered and Sexualised Violence in Online Spaces

One of the ways in which digital technology has been theorised has been to see it as freeing women from the constraints of their bodies and sexuality. However, as this section demonstrates, women have not actually been able to achieve this freedom, with digital technology reproducing the sexist and misogynist environment that they have to contend with in their offline lives. The Internet Democracy Project's report titled "Keeping Women Safe? Gender, Online Harassment and Indian Law" found that women who articulate strong opinions about national politics, feminism, and sexuality are most susceptible to being targeted with gendered and sexualised violence in online spaces.[5] The violence itself can be understood using Liz Kelly's framework of a "continuum of violence" against women.[6] This broadens the definition of violence to include threats to safety, limits on space for action and agency, and dishonour, shame, and disgrace.

In online spaces, gendered violence has often taken the form of silencing feminist activists. Some of the respondents spoke about how their Facebook "friends" would mock them for the feminist content they shared and participate in calling them names such as "militant feminist" or "feminazi." There have also been instances where activists have been threatened with violence, rape, and death. The respondents spoke about how the violence could often be "triggering" and very distressing,[7] so much so that they are often forced to withdraw from online environments and refrain from engaging in any online

feminist debates or political commentary. A respondent narrates an incident where she decided to share her personal experience of being assaulted and tweet about it to initiate a conversation on the different courses of action a rape survivor could take. She says that while this did manage to bring about meaningful conversations on rape in certain spaces, she was also harshly criticised and told by many that she "deserved to be raped."

Instances of gendered violence and backlash to feminist activism have prompted feminists and feminist organisations to work towards creating safe environments for women participating in online spaces. In 2013, as part of the "16 Days Campaign Against Gender Violence," Prajnya organised a colloquium that brought together concerns of gender violence. It brought together organisations such as Empowering Women in IT (EWIT), Feminist Approach to Technology, and the Centre for Cyber Victim Counselling, among others, to discuss issues of gender violence, such as cyberbullying and cyberstalking and various strategies to combat them, including legal options and online solidarity networks. Similarly, the global campaign "Take Back the Tech," initiated in 2006, has been highlighting the violence against women that is perpetrated in online spaces, and defines itself as a campaign that calls for "taking control of technology in both online and offline platforms to end violence against women."

Some respondents stated that seeking legal recourse is necessary when the violence spills over to physical environments. However, based on her personal experience of filing a first information report (FIR) against online violence, Malini explains that law enforcement agencies are often hostile to such complaints by young women and actively discourage them. The "Keeping Women Safe? Gender, Online Harassment and Indian Law" report says that the strategies women develop to deal with online abuse "very rarely include the law ... resulting in a silence around questions of legal effectiveness and recourse for online verbal abuse." The limited definition of criminal behaviour under the Information Technology Act 2000 makes it difficult to identify the wide range of gendered violence that takes place in online spaces and is, therefore, ineffective in addressing it.

Online violence and harassment serve to limit women's participation in online spaces and drive women offline. Thus, effective legal and juridical provisions need to be in place to address instances of online violence and ensure the participation of women without risk of violence. Till this is achieved, women's participation in online spaces will continue to be limited.

Looking Ahead: Concluding Notes

The primary objective of this study has been to explore how the Indian feminist movement has engaged with social media and other online communities, and their efforts to politicise the space. Digital technology is seen as of key importance to mobilise people for offline initiatives. However, conceptualising feminist activism online independently of offline movements has been my key concern. Online spaces have given rise to multiple counterpublics formed through various feminist efforts, including the creation of spaces where women can share personal narratives, form networks of solidarity, and be part of consciousness-raising groups. A focus on the politics of pleasure that seeks to create multiple subjectivities for women has also been a part of feminist activities in online spaces. However, patriarchal and Hindutva forces have sought to control such expressions and subjectivities by positing them as a threat to Indian culture. As a response, feminist activists have used online spaces to debate and reformulate Hindutva's notions of Indian culture and gender identity. Thus, feminist activists have reclaimed online spaces for the creation of counterpublics, which function, as Fraser (1990) states, to "invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs."

However, as the paper demonstrates, while digital technology is populated by a diversity of voices, issues such as unequal access and gendered violence have restricted the expression of marginalised communities, including women, in online spaces.

I must stress that the definition of feminist politics and online activism put forward by this paper remains limited to social media. Definitions of feminist activism must be broadened to include interventions that seek to interrogate and redefine the relationship between gender and technology, especially in a context where technology continues to be associated with masculinity. Initiatives that address the exclusion of women from technology need to be studied. An example of this would be trying to understand how a feminist engagement, including the participation of more female editors, could address the gender gap on Wikipedia. While this paper focuses on personal narratives of activists, studies that focus on the political economy of digital technology, including questions of ownership and distribution of resources, are needed to understand the democratising potential of such technology.

NOTES

1   Geek Feminism Wiki (http://geekfeminism.wikia.com/wiki/Safe_space) defines a safe space as a term for "an area or forum where either a marginalised group are not supposed to face standard mainstream stereotypes and marginalisation, or in which a shared political or social viewpoint is required to participate in the space." In *Feminist Cyberscapes: Mapping Gendered Academic Spaces*, Kristine Blair and Pamela Takayoshi argue that "websites written by and for women ... offer women spaces for active participation in the construction of more productive, supportive, and encouraging subject positions for women and girls" (1999: 6).

2   See http://theladiesfinger.com/about/

3   Chatterjee explains that in the nationalist movement while Indian men were expected to retain control over the material aspects of western civilisation, including science and technology; women were seen as the protectors of the "spiritual quality of the national culture" (Chatterjee 1989). Contingent to identifying women with the spiritually superior Indian culture was equating ideal femininity with "chastity, self-sacrifice, submission, devotion, kindness, patience and the labours of love" (Chatterjee 1989).

4   See https://www.facebook.com/kissoflovekochi.

5   See http://internetdemocracy.in/reports/keeping-women-safe-gender-online-harassment-and-indian-law/

6   The concept of a continuum of violence against women was proposed by Kelly (1988). The framework suggests that rather than looking at violence and abuse as discrete categories and as deviant and episodic, different forms of violence need to be studied for their commonalities and for the way in which they reinforce

patriarchal power. This is useful in understanding the limitations of existing definitions of sexual violence and allows us to identify the "different forms of sexual violence, their different impacts, and different community and legal responses to women, positioned differently, within and between cultures and through history" (Radford et al 2000).

7 Chemaly defines a trigger as "complex, unpredictable and highly individual reactions to material that evokes pain and fear." She explains how triggers have been understood in feminist spaces as "emotional and physical responses," including flashbacks and post-traumatic stress disorder, to violent and misogynistic content, such as "graphic descriptions of incest, rape, sexual assault, domestic violence, self-harm and suicide" (2014).

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