From the Streets to the Web: Feminist Activism on Social Media

Report submitted by Sujatha Subramanian

M. Phil Scholar, Advanced Centre for Women's Studies

Tata Institute of Social Sciences

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Introduction

A casual conversation with my Gender Studies professor a few years ago revealed a deep sense of apprehension on her part regarding the future of feminism. “Apathetic” and “apolitical” is how she described what she termed as the “younger generation of feminists”. To me, this came as a surprise, having always held my peers in high regard for their commitment to the feminist cause. While I wouldn’t admit this out loud, I had learnt more about feminist theory through interactions with my friends than I ever had inside the classroom. Where was this disjunction in opinion coming from then? I realised then that while I sought feminist interaction and politically-charged conversations with fellow-feminists on my Facebook wall feed, 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 hadn’t changed, but the space of politics had most definitely been transformed.

While it is difficult to pinpoint the exact time period when online spaces began to be used for feminist activism in India, Nisha Susan’s use of Facebook as part of her Pink Chaddi campaign can be seen as a turning point in recognising the importance of social media as a critical tool for activism. The Pink Chaddi campaign was launched in 2009, as a protest against the right-wing Hindu group Sri Ram Sene’s attack on women in a pub in Mangalore. The campaign was launched by a group of women who called themselves “Consortium of Pub-going, Loose, and Forward Women.” A Facebook group was launched, which saw close to 30,000 members within a week. The members of the group then coordinated to send around 3000 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 in various ways by Indian feminists to not just bring attention to a number of issues but also to transform digital technology itself into a feminist space.

While Leftist political methods, including protest marches, rallies and *dharnas* continue to dominate the popular imagining 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 of feminist politics and activism. Despite the initial promise of disembodiment, digital technology continues to be gendered, with its associations of masculinity. How then can this space be transformed towards a radical feminist politics? Does feminist activism have the potential to alter the nature of digital technology? In turn, can feminist activism itself get redefined by digital technology? My interest also lies in exploring whether forms and methods of feminist activism contain the ability to innovate and transform themselves, depending on different political actors, audiences and spaces. Given these questions, is labelling digital technology the space for fourth wave feminism an impending reality? Do issues of access allow for such a realisation? It is with these cursory questions that I have set out to study how feminist activism gets transformed using digital technology, in the Indian context.

Methodology

My research on feminist activism in online spaces has been motivated by my own engagement with social media and my own feminist politics. I have engaged in textual analysis in my own 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 stress on a “safe space” policy. Reproducing discussions from these pages, discussions that often focus on the personal lives of its members, with the intent of a textual analysis, thus amounts to an act of intrusion and surveillance. Observing discussions on social media without making my position as a researcher explicit would also amount to an act of “lurking”, which would undermine the transparency of my research process. Keeping in mind these ethical questions, my emphasis has been to look at experiences of feminist activists online as an integral part of their lived reality and how they envisage digital technology in relation to their activism. To understand how feminist activists engage with social media as a space of activism, I relied on in-depth, semi structured interviews with my respondents.

The interviews took place both face-to-face and telephonically, and were recorded with the consent of the respondents. The interview schedule consisted of questions on the demographic position of the respondents and how their feminist politics was affected by their social location, how they saw feminist activism online in relation to other modes of activism, how they characterised their engagement with social media and narratives of gendered violence and backlash, if any. Questions regarding access to digital technology and its impact on feminist activism were also dealt with.

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 also no singular definition of feminist activism. 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, etc, make the process of coming up with a rigid definition of activism even more difficult. Unable to come up with a well-defined, singular definition, 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 also 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 respondents did stress on their commitment towards creating an egalitarian society through their actions, including through their engagement with digital technology. Shobha S.V., who works at a Delhi-based NGO, reflects on whether she sees herself as an activist and says, “My interaction with social media came primarily out of a need to express myself, like an online diary. But while all issues were personal, I also wanted the space to reflect mostly my political views. I suppose that does make me an activist. The hesitation is not because I don’t see myself as an activist but I am trying to figure out what activism is.”

While the definitions tended to vary, most respondents agreed that their activism addressed the structural inequality and oppression arising from gender and sexual identities. Most of the respondents also agreed on an intersectional definition of feminism, with some actively focussing on issues of disability, LGBTIQ rights and Dalit feminist issues.

Broadly, the engagement of respondents with online spaces for feminist activism could be categorised in two ways. The first group comprises those who use online spaces in their professional capacity, as employees of feminist organisations. 6 out of the 13 respondents work with feminist organisations, predominantly NGOs but also media houses and their own entrepreneurial projects. The other respondents mostly use blogs and social media, including Twitter and Facebook in their personal capacity. However, such a strict compartmentalisation between personal and professional can be misleading. A number of respondents who work with feminist organisations also use their own social media accounts to share personal experiences while some respondents, especially students, stated that they see their duties as administrators of feminist pages on Facebook, while being non-remunerative, as something they do professionally. The level of engagement also varied- while most of the respondents stated that they use social media on more or less a daily basis towards an individualised, everyday form of activism, some stated that they use it mostly as part of a collective and to organise people and raise awareness regarding specific campaigns and protest movements.

Almost all the respondents located themselves as belonging to a middle class or upper-middle class background and English-educated. The respondents are in the age-group of 17-35, with nine of the respondents in their twenties. The respondents were mostly located in urban settings, with 7 of the respondents based in Mumbai and the others from Kolkata, Delhi, Chennai, Bangalore and Guwahati. With the exception of one respondent, who is currently studying at the under-graduate level, all the respondents are college graduates. With the exception of four respondents, all of them identified as heterosexual. 10 of the 13 respondents also identified as belonging to an upper-caste Hindu background. All the respondents identified as able-bodied.

While the small sample size prevents the formulation of any generalisations and is in no way representative of feminist activists using social media, the predominance of an English-educated, city-based population, belonging to an upper-middle class, upper caste Hindu background necessitates a reflection on questions of access to digital technology and how my own location influenced my access to the respondents.

Findings/Observations

From the Streets to the Net: 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 Uprising in 2011 saw the revolution being termed as an "online revolution". In India, in December 2013, following the Supreme Court ruling that upheld Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, a ruling that criminalises consensual homosexual acts, The Global Day of Rage was proposed by queer and feminist activists as a form of protest to be observed on December 15th, just four days after the ruling. Coordinated through a Facebook page, the event was held in over 31 cities across the world and saw more than 3000 people in attendance. In their essay titled "Revolution 2.0? The

Role of Digital Media in Political Mobilisation and Protest", Jan Hanrath and Claus Leggewie state "Unlike the traditional mass communications, with newspapers and TV as lead media, the use of the Internet via computers and mobile phones facilitates individualised mass communication, allowing user-generated content to be shared with a virtual community. In this way, users can bypass governments and the mainstream media, in their established roles as conceptual, commercial and organisational gate-keepers and agenda-setters, and use the World Wide Web to transcend the local and, indeed, the national public spheres" (Hanrath and Leggewie, 2013).

In my conversations with feminist activists, almost all of them agreed that any information regarding protests or rallies was conveyed to them through social media. Most of them also stated having used Facebook and Twitter to mobilise people regarding events and gatherings around specific issues. Some respondents saw social media as allowing a more nuanced form of activism. Deepanjana Pal, a journalist, explains how often in a rally, there wouldn't be an 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 actually gathering on the streets. This helps everyone have a better idea of the agenda of the protests. Many respondents also see social media complementing traditional forms of activism because of its ability to form transnational networks. Moupriya Das, a Kolkata-based activist, says, "Street Activism is important but it is also limited because of its localised nature. You cannot raise your voice against an issue happening in Syria or America and expect to get heard if you are in India. Social media allows you that."

Respondents also point out the possibility of linking social media activism to offline initiatives, including existing social movements and policy making processes. Amba Salelkar underlines this potential of social media when she explains how her presence on Twitter enriches the work she does as part of the organisation Inclusive Planet Centre for Disability Law and Policy. She describes how when legislations relating to disability are being drafted and when there is a call for comments from the Parliamentary Standing Committee, as part of her job, 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 care of disabled people, affords her a perspective that would be impossible to gain in offline spaces.

Beyond Slacktivism? **: Reconceptualising Digital Media Activism**

While most respondents were 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 drew polarising responses. Some respondents are confident that digital technology has the potential to be the future of feminist activism. Archismita Choudhury, a student and the 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. Shobha 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 the "Causes" application. People click on it and feel like they have contributed while the charity there is only towards yourself."

Shreya Sen, 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. They think that issues get noticed when the social media wants it to be, people take to the streets in protest when the social media tells them to and that people want to change a government because the social media says they should. People are not passive receptors of populist opinion. They create and understand the populist opinion and negotiate with it. 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.”

Sen’s response brings to light the changing definitions of activism, facilitated by digital technology. In her article titled ‘Beyond the Digital: Understanding Digital Natives with a Cause’, Maesy 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, 2005; Kassimir, 2005).” Thus, activism needs to redefined and rethought beyond its complementary role to movements and other forms of activism that taken place in the offline, physical world. As the subsequent sections demonstrate, the significance of digital technology to feminist activism lies predominantly in its ability to create an alternative public sphere. It is this alternative public sphere that I wish to study in the paper, by focussing on the processes through which they are created and examining the inclusions and exclusions that take place.

***Reimagining the Public Sphere*: Digital Technology and Alternative Public Spheres**

A growing body of literature has envisaged digital technology as enhancing political democracy by facilitating the participation of people in social and political movements. In a paper titled "A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace" published on February 8, 1996, from Davos, Switzerland, John Perry Barlow, founder of the Electronic Frontier Foundation stated “Ours is a world that is both everywhere and nowhere, but it is not where bodies live. We are creating a world that all may enter without privilege or prejudice accorded by race, economic power, military force, or station of birth. We are creating a world where anyone, anywhere may express his or her beliefs, no matter how singular, without fear of being coerced into silence or conformity” (Barlow, 1996). Seen as a key tool for social inclusion, it can be said that digital technology has brought to the fore many marginalised voices. This allows for the existence of multiple public spheres, as opposed to the Habermasian idea of a single public sphere (Habermas, 1989). In her article titled “Rethinking the Black Sphere: An Alternative Vocabulary for Multiple Public Spheres”, Catherine R Squires refers to theorists such as Calhoun (1992) and Robbins (1993) to propose the existence of “multiple, coexisiting counterpublics” composed of “marginalised groups”. She states,

> “These writers agree that people of colour, women, homosexuals, religious minorities, and immigrant groups have created coexisting counterpublics in reaction to the exclusionary politics of the dominant public sphere and the state. The move away from the ideal of a single public sphere is important in that it allows recognition of the public struggles and political innovations

> of marginalized groups outside traditional or state-sanctioned public spaces and mainstream discourses dominated by white, bourgeois males” (Squires, 2002).

Rekha Raj, a Dalit feminist activist and poet, alludes to the democratising potential of social media 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 sphere.” Salelkar 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. The website, inclusiveplanet.com, which is a social media platform, is meant particularly 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.” In their statements, they echo the view of Mark Poster, who states in his essay, “Cyberdemocracy: Internet and the Public Sphere”, “The "magic" of the Internet is that it is a technology that puts cultural acts, symbolizations in all forms, in the hands of all participants; it radically decentralizes the positions of speech, publishing, filmmaking, radio and television broadcasting, in short the apparatuses of cultural production” (Poster, 1997).

The diversity of voices that populate social media make it a fertile space for intersectional feminism. Intersectionality as a concept is used to explain how oppressive institutions, such as casteism, sexism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, racism, etc, are interconnected. An intersectional form of feminist activism thus addresses the need to identify how forms of oppression work in collusion with each other and the need to fight them in an everyday struggle for emancipation. Salelkar recounts one such instance of how social media helped her discover the intersection between disability and queer issues. She says, “There was a time when a hashtag “#fuckcispeople” became viral on Twitter and a lot of queer activists, mostly trans activists, began voicing their opinion on a lot of issues. I started following them and soon, there was an exchange of ideas and I discovered that there are a lot of cross-cutting issues between disability and trans issues. This led me to understand and theorise disability in new ways.” Sen believes that because of the diversity on the internet, one is also able to access different bodies of knowledge through social media. 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 Color", 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. The amount of information that the social media has made accessible at the click of a button is something most feminist studies courses would not be able to cover in two years (or more)!”

However, despite the optimism regarding intersectional voices on social media, most activists agree that the issue of unequal access prevents the promise of digital democracy actually being realised. 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, the internet penetration in rural India remains at a low 6.7 per cent. Shobha asserts that with such a low rate of internet penetration, social media is far from becoming the future of feminist activism in India. Sen points how this disparity also affects feminist activism when she says, “It is undeniable that there is a class bias involved in the kinds of issues that get the limelight. For instance, the recent verdict on 377 sparked a lot more outrage than the demolishing of a slum in Mumbai.” Pal states that despite the increasing presence of varied voices on social media, certain kinds of issues become more “cooler” than others. She narrates how she her efforts towards writing on issues of disability on her blog made her realise that the subject is openly disregarded and the interest towards the subject is severely limited. She explains that mainstream media also affects which issues get more prominence over the others. However, even those respondents who are cautious about the exclusionary nature of social media see it as an important tool for creating social change. Shobha says, “From my engagement with social media, I know it can be extremely exclusionary. But I realise that people who inhabit the social media space are powerful in the social setup that we live in. To influence them, to sensitise them to issues of the marginalised, that might not reach them otherwise, is very important. If they make a noise, then there will be repercussions.” Shobha’s argument thus draws attention to how social media can also affect mainstream media narratives. According to her, social media, populated by those who have “cultural capital” and “social capital” should be used effectively to create pressure groups to represent issues of the marginalised.

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[*] Name changed

When looking at questions of access or of intersectionality, the issue of language becomes a pertinent one. Raj states that she prefers to write in Malayalam on her Facebook page since that is the language easily understood by most people on her friend list. She also states that being a Malayali poet, she best expresses her sentiments in her native language, rather than 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 also heavily reliant on technological support. When asked whether Dalit issues find as much space for discussion on social media as compared to other issues, Salelkar 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 instruments 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.” Thus, the need for more advanced forms of technology becomes imperative to the creation of democratic spaces.

***The Personal is Political:* Online Networks of Solidarity and Consciousness Raising**

While the previous section looked at the potential of digital technology in bringing to the fore voices of marginalised communities, in this section, I look at how social media has allowed the formation of networks of solidarity between these groups through the process of consciousness raising. Feminist activists has stressed on the importance of sharing personal narratives and naming the oppression they face in their private domain as an important form of consciousness raising, a sentiment typified by the slogan “The personal is political”. 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 contemporary feminist politics may include or stray from "…traditional rhetorical options of protest, confrontation, militancy, conflict, counterpublics, and social movements.” They go on to state that sharing stories is a form of feminist activism because “…it creates a network of experiences between women and acts as a story-telling process that others can learn from if they so choose.”

Consciousness raising has been an integral part of bridging the gap between the private and the public spheres, by understanding the individual struggles of women as belonging to a larger patriarchal structure. It thus provides an alternative to the dominant public sphere.

Digital technology has enabled the continuation of such consciousness raising spaces into online spaces. The ability to connect with feminist networks across the world allows women a sense of community. As seen in the previous section, digital technology provides a space to those whose stories do not find a place in mainstream media narratives. Most of the feminist activists I spoke to explained that sharing narratives of personal experience is an important feminist practice in online spaces, especially social media. Choudhury 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, especially to experiences of violence. I think this acts as an important support system and a source of healing to those who share their stories. As administrators of the page, we try and keep the trolls away, so that the members can have a safe space.” She explains that such narratives also prompt important discussions on gendered violence and acts of resistance on their page. Meera* talks about how online spaces, especially blogs or Twitter, allow people the option of anonymity and freedom from the restrictions that offline structures impose on them. This facilitates the sharing of personal narratives without censure or judgement. The ability to control information about one’s self, by revealing certain aspects while withholding others, also allow for radical acts of identity construction. A respondent 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 or 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.”

While questions of violence inform most of these conversations, politics of pleasure is also an integral part of these feminist spaces. 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. Salelkar states, “What social media has achieved is giving women the space to discuss things that concern them, especially in the sphere of sexuality. 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 on line forums as something real and not relegated to pornographic "squirting".” The conversations on a number of Facebook pages and blogs also extend to topics such as body image issues or romantic relationships, broadening the definition of “political” itself. 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 the women share of themselves, often accompanied by discussions that celebrate appearances that do not conform to conventional standards of beauty and affirm a space free of shame or stigma. 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. In the Indian context, conversations around female sexuality, especially those that get articulated in terms of female sexual pleasure, run the risk of being labelled as “western” and as being against “Indian” culture. In the following section, I look at how feminist activists in India have used social media to contest and negotiate the idea of “Indian” culture.

Indian Women, Western Feminism?: **Feminist engagement with Indian culture in online spaces**

An allegation that is routinely levelled against Indian feminist activists, including queer activists, is that they are "westernised" in their thoughts and actions. Within such a discourse, feminists get constructed as not just being alienated from the reality of Indian culture but also as disrupting the superior "Indian culture" with ideas from the "degenerate west". It is important to note that the idea of culture, as articulated within the nationalist discourse, is a gendered one. Partha 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; the 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). The women's movement in postcolonial India has engaged in a critique of the nation and the nationalist construction of femininity in diverse sites, including media representations, the legal setting etc[1].

Such a critique of nationalism and Indian culture has been carried forward by Indian feminists in online spaces as well. The Pink Chaddi campaign, which was launched on Facebook, mobilised support from around the world in its protest against the Hindu right-wing group, Sri Ram Sene's attack on women. The campaign prompted a number of conversations on the Hindutva idea of femininity, tradition and "westernised" politics.[2] Feminist pages, such as Feminist India constantly engage with the 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 engage with the meanings of Indian culture, with many questioning the dominantly Hindutva version of Indian history and culture. Disproportionately identifying women with Indian culture has also led to women being targeted for what is perceived as being "westernised" behaviour, including western modes of protest. Das, one of the key organisers of the Slutwalk[3], Kolkata, narrates an incident where she was harassed for putting up pictures of herself participating in the Slutwalk. She states, " A number of commenters, in addition to saying that I ought to be raped for the kind of clothes I was wearing, also said that I was mindlessly engaging in Westernised ideas, and words like "vagina" or "slut" had no place in Indian culture." She explains how a large volume of the threats come from men who identify as Men Rights Activists, who use the logic of Indian culture to condemn feminist activists and threaten them with violence. Das's narrative points out to the inequalities and forms of oppression that exist within online spaces, despite its democratic potential. This necessitates a discussion of the gendered violence that feminists are subjected to in online spaces. I explore this in the next section.

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[1] For a detailed analysis of the women's movement engagement with the nationalist question, refer to Sangari and Vaid's (1989) *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History.*

[2] Refer to Tejaswini Niranjana's (2010). "Why culture matters: rethinking the language of feminist politics." for a discussion of the same.

[3] The Slutwalk movement has been a transnational movement, protesting against rape culture, particularly against justifying rape on the basis of the victim or survivor's clothes.

Silencing the "Feminazi" : Gendered Violence and Backlash

One of the ways in which digital technology has been theorised is in its ability to free women from the constraints placed on them by their bodies and sexuality (Haraway, 1985) thus enabling them to participate in the public sphere without violence or prejudice. However, as this section demonstrates, women have not actually been able to achieve this freedom, with digital technology reproducing the sexist and misogynist environment women have to contend with in their offline lives as well. The violence itself can be understood using Liz Kelly's framework of the "continuum of violence"[4] against women. This broadens the definition of violence to include threats to safety, limits on space for action and agency, and dishonour, shame and disgrace. Feminist activists especially have been at the centre of severe backlash, in the form of gendered and sexualised violence. The Internet Democracy Project's report titled "Keeping Women Safe? Gender, Online Harassment and Indian Law"[5] found that women who articulate strong opinions about national politics, feminism and sexuality are most susceptible to being targeted.

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". Aditi Gupta, co-founder of Menstrupedia, an organisation that seeks to spread awareness about menstruation, tells me that the content she shares on menstruation has often been considered taboo by some of her friends on Facebook. In many instances, they have asked her to remove the content and in some cases, "unfriended" her. There have also been instances where the activists have been threatened with violence, rape and death. The respondents spoke about how the violence could often be very triggering and distressing, so much so, that they often contemplated shutting down their blogs, Twitter handles and Facebook profiles. Many were forced to withdraw from online environments and refrain from engaging in any online feminist debates or political commentary. Choudhury spoke about how as the administrator of a feminist page, she had to deal with online misogyny and violence on a daily basis. She explains that the experience has been so harrowing that recently, she has decided to disengage herself from her duties and avoid the page for some time. 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, including the decision to not file a case. 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 "deserves to be raped." She says, "When I read that it was a huge trigger for me. I backed down and I said that I didn't want to engage in any more discussions on this particular subject any more. That's how shaken I was by the level of violence." She explains that a lot of the feminist activists she is friends with have faced much worse forms of violence and accept it as par for the course. However, as the next section demonstrates, there have been widespread calls to end the sexualised and gendered forms of violence that are part of online spaces.

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[4] The concept of a continuum of violence against women was proposed by Liz Kelly in her work *Surviving Sexual Violence* (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 and Friedberg, 2000).

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

Occupy Online Spaces: **Creation of Feminist Online Spaces**

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. The response to gendered violence faced by feminists is varied and often depends on the intensity of the threats. Most feminist activists responded that they have accepted the violent comments and threats directed at them in online spaces as an inevitable reaction to their feminist articulations. Pal says that so far, none of the violence has spilled on to her offline environment and she has been able to ignore it. She states, "They say that when you have a lot of haters, you know you are doing something right. When I see people getting threatened by the feminist sentiments I express on the internet, and respond with violence, it urges me to carry on even further." However, very often, the violence does spill on to the physical environments of the activists. Das states that a man who had been threatening her on Facebook managed to find out her location from the information she had shared and began stalking her regularly. When she realised that she could not handle the situation herself, she decided to file a report. She explains that the entire process of filing a report was so difficult and inconvenient that she ultimately decided to not go ahead with it. She states, "When I went to a police station near my house, I was told that it was not under their jurisdiction and I should report at the police station which would cover the location of the perpetrator. When I managed to discover the location of my stalker and go to the police station, they too turned me away. By the end of it, I was so exhausted that I had to let it go." She explains that the law enforcement agencies in the country are often hostile to such complaints by young women and actively discourage them from filing an FIR.

A report titled "Keeping women safe? Gender, online harassment and Indian law"[6] states that among 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 IT Act of 2000 makes it difficult to identify the wide range of gendered violence that takes place in online spaces. A 2010 report by Prajnya, titled 'Gender Violence in India'[7] states, "Cybercrimes are peculiar for another reason: very often, the perpetrators are not based in the same country as their victims, and this raises the tricky issue of jurisdiction. There is as yet no globally recognised legislation governing cybercrimes and prosecution is therefore often impossible. The same physical boundaries that are rendered invisible in virtual and cyber relationships become obstacles to achieving justice in the offline world." Meera* says that greater awareness regarding The Criminal Law Amendment Bill, introduced in 2013, which criminalises cyberstalking (defined as "to monitor the use by a woman of the internet, email or any other form of electronic communication.)", might empower women to effectively deal with such acts of violence. Section 507 of the IPC - criminal intimidation by anonymous communication-, and Section 66A of the IT Act also provides wide legal recourse to instances of online abuse.

Das says that in addition to legal provisions, change also has to come from large-scale, organisational efforts. She says, "We need to have more women regulating these online spaces. Very often, Facebook does not take action against sexist and misogynist comments targeted at women saying that it does not violate their community guidelines. I'd like to see what happens when it is a feminist who drafts these guidelines." Das's suggestion is indeed being seen as many feminist groups as a necessary course of action for creating safe, feminist spaces in the online medium. In May 2013, a campaign was initiated by a coalition of groups such as Everyday Sexism, Women, Action and the Media and activist Soraya Chemaly, which demanded that Facebook "take concrete, effective action to end gender-based hate speech on its site.[8]" The campaign was supported by about 50,000 tweets and 6000 emails to advertisers whose ads appear on Facebook, urging them to withdraw from advertising on Facebook till Facebook agreed to take action regarding gender-based hate speech on their site. Facebook responded with a formal statement, agreeing to take a number of steps, including the establishment of "more formal and direct lines of communications with representatives of groups working in this area, including women's groups, to assure expedited treatment of content they believe violate our standards.[9]" Similarly, the global campaign "Take Back the Tech", initiated in 2006, has been highlighting the issue of violence against women that is perpetrated in online spaces. The campaign calls for taking control of technology in both online and offline platforms to end violence against women. In 2013, as part of the "16 Days Campaign Against Gender Violence", Prajnya organised a colloquium that brought together concerns of gender violence. The colloquium brought together organisations such as Empowering Women in IT (eWIT), Feminist Approach to Technology, Centre for Cyber Victim Counselling, among others, to discuss issues of gender violence, such as cyber bullying and cyber stalking and various strategies to combat them, including legal options and online solidarity networks.

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[6] http://internetdemocracy.in/reports/keeping-women-safe-gender-online-harassment-and-indian-law/

[7] http://www.prajnya.in/gvr10.pdf

Thus, the response to gendered and sexualised violence that all women, and particularly feminist activists, face is varied and dependent on the nature of violence. While the individual response of women can make a strong statement about individual resilience, this often leads to the larger issue of violence being ignored or downplayed. Social media platforms need to be made accountable for the gendered violence that women face by initiating effective ways of reporting perpetrators of violence and taking legal action against them. Similarly, effective legal and juridical provisions need to be in place to address instances of online violence.

***Looking Ahead*: Some Concluding Notes**

The primary objective of this study has been to explore how feminists engage with social media and other online communities and their efforts to politicise the space. The attempt of this study has also been to understand the potential of these spaces for the Indian feminist movement. As the paper demonstrates, digital technology has redefined what it means to be a feminist activist by opening up spaces that encourage intersectional dialogues, by dint of their uniquely democratising potential. Digital technology thus allows for the construction of feminist public spheres, where voices of the marginalised communities, including those of Dalit, queer and disabled persons, can be heard. Digital technology has also enabled women to form networks of solidarity and be part of consciousness raising groups by affording them the option of anonymity. My attempt has been to chart both the liberatory potential of online spaces as well as the gendered and sexualised violence that forms an inescapable reality of such spaces. As seen in the previous section, such violence has had the effect of silencing women and discouraging them from actively participating in the public sphere. The narratives also demonstrate that the intensity of violence is such that it blurs the lines between 'real' and 'virtual', with the effects of violence spilling into women's offline lives as well. The existing laws have proven inadequate to cover the wide range of gendered and sexualised violence against women. Thus, for online spaces to truly become a constructive space for feminist activism, such acts of violence and their implications, need to understood and addressed.

I must stress that the definition of feminist politics and activism put forward by this paper remains limited. 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, can address the gender gap on Wikipedia. Thus, 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. As discussed previously in the paper, the question of access to digital technology remains central in envisaging it as a democratic space. Focussing on issues of access and ownership are also essential in addressing questions of gendered violence. Thus, while this paper demonstrates that digital technology contains the potential to give rise to feminist public spheres, the realisation of equal access and digital democracy remain a primary concern.

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[8] http://www.womenactionmedia.org/fbagreement/

[9] Ibid

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