Debate, Dissent Zindabad!(?): An Autoethnographic Account of Facing Onlne Harassment as a Feminist Activist on Social Media

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Abstract:
Internet has become a huge part of our everyday life. It is no more just used as a source of information but with the advent of services like e-commerce and e-banking it has become a service provider and with social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, it plays a big role in the sphere of human interactions also. Along with other forms of interaction, activism has also taken to internet and there are certain outcomes of taking one's activism and ideology on cyberspace and not all of them are pleasant. In this paper, I attempt to look at the experience of facing online harassment on social media sites as a feminist activist through focusing mostly on Facebook and Twitter through an autoethnographic account. This paper focuses on three aspects largely; the need and pertinence of a discourse around the phenomenon of gender based cyber violence on social media sites, the central theoretical debates and discussions regarding this issue, and finally my experience of facing abuse on social media as a feminist activist and my ways to negotiate with it.

Keywords: Cybercrime, Online Harassment, Sexism, Misogyny, Activism, Cyberfeminism, Trolls,

Internet can be called one of the world's greatest inventions. With the advent of internet in the field of communication technology, the barriers of geographical distance has almost been blurred. It has given people ample scope to take forward their personal and professional relationships across geographical boundaries.The socio-economic and cultural facets of life have been tremendously affected owing to the rise of globalization. The cyberspace has been a blessing to human civilization. Internet has connected people around the globe (Saha and Srivastava, 2014). But the innovation of internet has not only brought about good things with it. It has brought about it a totally new genre of crime that can be propagated through the medium of internet. It operates in different spheres of the cyberspace. The internet is used not just to access information about various things but also to connect with people over social networking websites(SNWs). Other than that it's used for online shopping, online banking, e-ticketing, e-tax paying, online search of partners on matrimonial and dating websites etc. And women are active participants in the cyberspace along with men. So the crimes against women in cyberspace have also been rising with their increasing frequency in real world. Women have been drastically victimized in the cyber space, and so have been people from sexual minorities. While there are many instances where women in western countries are victimized, there is a raise of such victimization of women in the eastern regions such as India and these women are relatively with less legal protection and they are unique than their western counterparts (Halder and Jaishankar, 2008, 2009, 2011b). There is ample instances of people from sexual and gender minorities also being victimized for the same reason. Among other factors behind these crimes, having a strong opinion and presence in cyberspace, or the attempts to raise voice against the oppression faced by various religious, political, racial, gender and sexual minorities happens to be one influencing the cyber crimes. Some perpetrators try to defame women by sending obscene emails, stalking women by using chat rooms, websites etc, developing pornographic videos where women are depicted in compromising positions mostly created without their consent, spoofing emails, morphing of images for pornographic content etc (Halder and Jaishankar, 2008, 2009, 2011b). Women active on social media often fall prey to these offenders, and recently these cyber crimes have started happening on high scale against the women and gender nonconforming activists all over the world. The rise of right wing politics across the globe, the rise of religious fanaticism and the rise of men's rights activism as attempted organized counter to feminist movement can be blamed for the increase in occurrences of online harassments against women and gender nonconforming people active and vocal on social media against the oppression they face.

In Indian context, the change in the political scenario and the influence of global politics need to be observed with great detail regarding the rise of online harassment against women and gender nonconforming people vocal on social media about various types of oppressions faced by various

minorities. In Indian society, caste and gender are the most vital markers of social stratification followed by religion and it is depicted in the virtual world of social media also. In the present scenario of aggressive right wing religious and cultural nationalism in India, one's political affiliation also contributes greatly towards the reaction one receives online. Autonomous gender rights activists from varying political and social locations also fall prey to frequent attacks by online harassers.

Academic inquiry into the various aspects of the violence against women includes the study of online harassment faced by women in the cyberspace too. The UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women states that 'Any act of gender based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life' falls under the category of Violence Against Women (VAW), or wider gender-based violence. Manifestations of this violence include street sexual harassment, domestic violence, financial abandonment, sexual assault, physical beatings, and rape (Kovacs, Padte and SV, 2013).

Online harassment does qualify as violence against women, especially given the emphasis on the declaration's 'psychological harm", forms of violence changes with the variety of the medium being used. And internet has been being used as a means of perpetration of violence for a long time. One of the reasons for this can be stated as 'ICTs allow perpetrators to commit violence anonymously and at a distance from the women they are targeting, making it harder to identify perpetrators and charge and prosecute them.' as mentioned in a 2011 summary report by Association for Progressive Communication. There are countless instances when women and gender nonconforming people across the world and in India have been threatened of rape, or other sexual crimes, their photos morphed, and misused, intimate captures leaked on internet without their consent and other forms of violence that are indicative of how the gender based discrimination of the real world seeps through in the virtual world also.

There have been a large amount of research work focusing on the amount of abuse, and several campaigns, both online and offline are being conducted to counter online harassment of women. 'Take back the tech' is a global campaign urging women to take control of the technology to counter such attacks and prevent them from happening. 'Be my safe space' is a campaign presently being run by Breakthrough India to prevent harassment of women both in online and offline public spaces.

These studies though have largely focused on the role of the image that is used in the harassment by the perpetrator (Kovacs, Kaul Padte and SV, 2013). There is a trend of looking at the trend of mobility of an image across borders through internet as 'virtual trafficking' (Maltzahn, 2006). In regard to this, there are laws across the globe that penalize usage of such images and the basis of these laws are the idea of modesty and morality which becomes problematic as it does not

consider the right of the women or gender nonconforming people to share their own photos that violate the guidelines of morality and modesty, deeply embedded in such laws.

Other ways of perpetrating violence against women and people online are increasing in numbers day by day. Verbal abuse specifically designed to attack women on the basis of their gender is a growing problem of global proportions. Women who are active on social media (especially Twitter and Facebook) receive threats or comments that directly attack their gender, their safety, and by extension, their very right to have an opinion in a male dominated space (Kaul Padte and Kovacs, 2013).

The activists in India have taken to e activism for a long time now, and the main word that comes in the mind is internet trolls.

However, the troll as 'nuisance-creator' or 'provoker of all-and-sundry' is an image often created by the trolling community themselves. Portraying themselves as friend to none and mischief-makers, 'trolling' has become synonymous with anything bad that happens on the Internet, particularly in relation to what is said. But does this definition in fact negate the wider context and specific effects of trolling? Are trolls simply annoying individuals 'provoking' a response that may or may not be required? Simply those who intentionally go off-topic? Or does the wider context of violence against minorities (in this case women) and the effects of violent speech–individually and collectively – perhaps mean that the term 'troll' is too gentle a descriptor within a sinister climate of hate fuelled vitriol (Kaul Padte and Kovacs, 2013)

The case of Anita Sarkeesian can give us a better look into the how trolling functions. It was a famous case, and in an interview given by Sarkeesian to Jessica Valenti she, on being harassed by 'Gamergate' and the gaming community for pointing out the sexism that plays in the videogames, said, " The word troll feels too childish, this is abuse." (The Guardian, 2015).

The interviewer of this interview and feminist writer Jessica Valenti herself dropped off social media for some time in the mid 2016, for her five years old daughter was getting rape threats by online harassers.

American journalist Megan Tyler says, 'It creates a hostile culture in which sexism and woman-hating can be freely expressed, if not praised, and this ultimately works to exclude and silence women. And make no mistake, there are serious issues of hostile, misogynist cultures in many places online' (Tyler, 2012). And in Indian context it is important to look into the highly politicised nature of the internet trolling on Facebook and Twitter not only through direct commenting but also through messaging, posting and sharing and morphing of images without consent.

Journalist Sagarika Ghose who has been harassed by trolls on Facebook and Twitter, especially by Hindutva fundamentalists wrote, "Self-professed supporters of Narendra Modi and Subramanian Swamy specialise in abusing what they call "paid media". For them, "whore",

"bitch", "Congress pimp", "Muslim-loving whore", "Congress-funded media" are all in a day's work… the daily invective and defamation by hundreds of Twitter handles speaks of an organised campaign" (Ghose, 2012). She also coined the term 'Internet Hindus'.

The experience of other women who have faced violence show a trend of a troll army. Analyst B. Raman has opined about this trend, "'are not just lumpen elements…they are motivated and well-organised cadres."(Kaul Padte, 2013)

The perpetration of harassment by trolls on social media platforms itself tells a lot about how the global cyberspace mimics the misogyny in real life. We can look at the absurd policies to maintain community standards on platforms like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram where photos of women being violated are allowed and not taken down as the caption or the photograph do not violate the community standard but protest pictures of women against shaming of breastfeeding or menstrual taboo gets removed as they violate the community standards of these social media platforms. The rape and other threats, or the fake profiles do not get taken down easily.

There is again the debate of whether hate speech can be considered as violence comes into play in this matter of policies that are ruled out by the social media websites. In regard to this the fake profiles, despite not being authentic and causing serious harassments by posting comments, messaging and impersonating people, are not taken down easily. In a study named 'The More Social Cues, The Less Trolling? An Empirical Study of Online Commenting Behavior', Daegon Cho and Alessandro Acquisti look at how the possibility of being identified regulates online commenting behavior of people and concludes that the more a person is likely to be identified, the less is the probability of indulging in abusive commenting or messaging behaviour online.

In this part of the paper I elaborate on my experience of navigating social media space as a feminist activist. First there will be a brief about the four major episodes when I faced trolling on social media and then the next part will consist of elaborating on the common patterns seen in these episodes of trolling. Since 2014, I have been trolled in four major occasions. The first incident happened in November, 2014 when a photograph of me kissing my female friend on lips went viral. The photo was taken at the Kiss of Love protest that was organized at Jhandewalan metro station, at a stone's throw distance from the RSS Headquarters in Delhi. The KoL chain of protests began in Kochi, as a response to the vandalization of a cafe by a group of hindu extremist youth over a couple allegedly engaging in public display of affection. It had been organized in both Mumbai and Kolkata before being organized in Delhi. My photo was picked up by many media outlets on their social media pages and everywhere there were comments made by men and women from right winger groups that both of us should be raped and killed and mutilated. There were graphic, sexually violent posts elaborating on what treatment they wanted us to be subjected to. Some people were threatening to throw acid on us and some other were threatening to abduct us and teach us some lessons. We both were interning at an

organization back at that time. Some people found the name of the organization from our facebook. There was a poster being circulated on Facebook with our photographs and that organization's name and address with a call to vandalize its office. We filed an FIR. But there was no response from the police after the follow up actions. We could not continue regularly following up after a few times of being sent back with the assurance that the matter is being looked into and we will be notified if something happens. Nothing happened. But a lot of the people who were abusing me and threatening me of rape, abduction and acid attack were people living in and around North Campus, where I was residing at that point of time. A lot of them knew and could find out where I stayed, what was my usual route between college and my PG, and my timings. That was extremely panic inducing because I used to stay 2.5 kms away from my college in a private paying guest facility, I used to walk to and from my college, and since DU has an open campus, it was possible for people to materialize the threats that they were subjecting me to online. I was scared to access public places, I was scared in the crowded areas, I was scared when the roads were empty, I was constantly alert. I could not tell this to my family either. This condition took a severe toll on my mental health condition and I had to start taking therapy shortly after.

The second instance happened in April, 2016 when I merely narrated on my facebook timeline an incident of a Haryanvi woman, aged in late 50s giving a befitting reply to two men who were vocally sharing their discontent over women having seats reserved in the general compartments of Delhi metro despite having a coach reserved entirely for them. The post had close to 11000 likes and 2700 shares. The abuses started to pour in from the next day. My inbox and the 'Others' section were filled with abuses. This time it was not specifically from right wing rolls but in generally from men and few women. The common line of point in most of those messages was that feminists are men haters, women like me are supposed to be raped, women are supposed to stay at home and men are supposed to go out, and rape happens because feminist women urge other women to go out and disturb the natural order of things. There were a lot of name calling, I was called 'slut', 'whore', other variants of the same term, my family was abused and called names too. There were some rape threats too but this time it did not affect me as much because no one knew where I was staying in Delhi, secondly the shock of being unfamiliar with cyber abuse wasn't present in this case after going through the first time. But it did manage to unsettle me for sometime. The abusive messages continued for almost a month. A lesson I had learnt from my first experience proved to be very effective even this time. I do not keep my family members in my list, nor do I upload photos of them very frequently as a protective measure. It does not expose them to the brunt of abuses that I have to receive for voicing my opinions online. I filed a complaint this time also. Despite repeated emails, there were no response. Later when I inquired to other senior contacts. I left Delhi in June and came back to TISS to continue my course. After five months of my complaint, in October, I got a call from the Delhi cyber cell that the case is going to the court the next day and I was supposed to be present at the court the next morning at 11. I was in Mumbai, could not afford to catch a flight to land in Delhi the next morning. They asked me to give in written that I want the case to be closed if I won't be able to travel all the way to Delhi in a 24 hours notice. I had to write a mail telling them to close the case.

The first two incidents happened on Facebook. The third incident took place on Twitter right in the beginning of 2017, when after the mass molestation during NYE celebration in B'lore, #NotAllMen had started trending on Facebook and Twitter and feminists asked women to share their experiences of facing harassment in public space with another counter hashtag #YesAllWomen to emphasize that almost all women have faced sexual harassment and that is an important issue. I wrote a tweet about one of the experiences where upon getting down from a bus in Delhi, I had found the back of my kameez smeared with semen. Someone had masturbated on my kameez in the crowded bus. I realized it after I got down from the bus and the bus rushed past the bus stop. I wrote about the incident in a tweet with the aforementioned hashtag and it started doing the rounds like many others on Twitter. Men jumped on from every direction to deem me a liar giving evidences how men don't do such things, how I was lying to defame men, how I was ugly and no one would want to masturbate against me, how I was deservingly not getting any sexual attention and should have been happy with what I got and not complaint, and in total contradiction with this, that I am slut and I faced what I deserve and that I deserve even worse. This did not last as long as the previous two incidents and as I am not much active on Twitter, it did not really bother me, but what happened is because reaching out people on Twitter and commenting on tweets is less restricted on twitter compared to Facebook, along with trolls from all over the world commenting on my post, there were feminist women from different corners of the world with different backgrounds supporting what I had said. Actually most of the fight there was fought by them on my behalf, women who had no personal connection with me in any way were supporting me because they themselves related to it. The way social media builds transboundary solidarity among people was something that I experienced personally through that particular incident,

The fourth and the most recent incident happened in July, 2017. I was writing a commentary on the recent political events under a hashtag #SextInTheTimeOfNDA on my Facebook timeline. I was writing fictional dialogue exchange between sexual partners with reference to recent political events. GST had been passed a day before, the sanitary napkins were considered a luxury item, there was a massive 86% seat cut in JNU for MPhil and Ph.D intakes, my department, the Advanced Center for Women's Studies at TISS was on the verge of closing down as we had heard due to the unavailability of funding, there are fund cut for research grants, there are systematic targeting of particular disciplines. Those posts were not written specifically keeping any political goal in mind, they began mostly as rants by a 23 years old female student for whom things were not going very nice and smooth. Later I added up some other recent political events like the trimming of the fig trees on the route of Kanwar Yatra as the Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath considered them inauspicious, the tendency of PM Modi tendency to give unwanted hugs to world leaders much to their awkwardness etc. They were widely received and from the next day onwards my inbox started to fill up with abusive messages again. This time the intensity was unprecedented. Hindu right wing trolls targeted me en masse. Apart from sending messages, there were posts written against me with elaborate description of what sexual ordeal they wanted me to be subjected to. There were even more horrifying comments under the posts. People were sending me requests so that they could troll

me in my comment box when I accept as my privacy setting did not allow them to comment on my post otherwise. But once they send you requests, they are automatically following one, and one can mention the people they are following in the comment boxes. So unable to comment on my posts and tag me in theirs, they started mentioning me in the comment boxes under those posts asking other people to find and rape me, mutilate me, kill me, file mass FIRs against me for insulting the Prime Minister of the country. And all of them had huge following, the posts asking people to rape and mutilate me were had likes and shares in thousands. There was one man on whose profile it was written that he works in the Home Ministry. I had posted a screenshot of the messages that he sent mentioning that his profile says where he works and some of my friends took that to twitter tagging different ministers saying trying to draw their attentions to the fact that he was abusing me. There were no replies, moreover, he noticed it and started tagging the Mumbai Police, the Maharashtra CM asking to find my whereabouts and arrest me for insulting the government.

This went on for two weeks. I was waking up everyday to 200-300 notifications where 90% of them would be from people either sending me messages or mentioning me in comments under the posts that called for my rape. After a month it died down a little, but in those four weeks it had affected me really badly. I was always alert, my mental health suffered greatly. I could not step out of my house for a long time out of fear because my photos were apparently being circulated in WhatsApp groups. I left my apartment and stayed at my partner's for a few days out of fear. My profile was attempted to be hacked numerous times after this.

During this period Facebook blocked my profile for 10 days, first for three days and then for seven days, removed posts where I had put screenshots of the abusive messages that I received and at the same time, none of the men abusing me were penalized. None of their profiles were blocked, none of the posts were taken down. Reporting repeatedly did not help either. After my experience with the 'Due process' of dealing with cyber abuse once, I did not file an FIR again. Since that did not work fine, I had stuck to my ways of tackling online abusers by naming and attempting at shaming them and reporting by posting screenshots, profile links and reporting their accounts which does not prove to be very effective either because Facebook and Twitter's strange community standards don't get violated by rape threats but tend to get thrown off the hook when there is a political commentary written by women just because it has reference of sex.

As a response to an article on Elephant Journal, "Does Facebook Hate All Women—or Just Feminists.", Facebook released a response defending their policy, saying,

"*We prohibit content we deem to be genuinely harmful, but allow content that is offensive controversial. Harmful content is generally defined as that which leads to or organizes real world violence, theft or property destruction, that which intentionally and directly inflicts emotional distress on a specific private individual, and that which is broadly illegal… we understand your concern about the pages you referenced… Having said that, as long as these*

types of pages do not violate our policies as explained above, we err on the side of allowing people to express themselves."

According to the Facebook administration, rape does not fall under the category of 'genuinely harmful' or leading to 'real world violence'. If violence against women is not harmful, but pictures of women who have suffered from breast cancer are considered to be sexually explicit, the question of in whose favour such policies are designed remains pertinent (Kaul Padte, Kovacs and SV, 2013).

Another problem with Facebook is their mechanism does not recognize Hindi abusive slurs written in roman or Devnagri script as abusive. That becomes a huge problem while tackling online abuse because when you report it the standard reaction from Facebook says that it does not violate their community standards. If a social media platform allows usage of a vernacular language, there should be adequate mechanism present to deal with issues like this which Facebook clearly lacks. In this scenario, the most effective way of dealing with the abuse and the psychological effect it has on me has been through writing about it and posting screenshots of the abusive messages on my timeline.

There is not enough seriousness about how enormous cyber abuse can get, how rampant it is and how cyber abuse blurs the line between the real and the virtual world. The threats that one receives on social media can very well be executed in real life, the threats and abuses are given by real people, not inanimate profiles, and the targets of these threats and abuses are as well people. The threats and abuses are often based on their socio-political locations. Just as atrocities based on one's position on the ladder according to various parameters of social stratification take place in the real world, on social media, the same standards are followed for inflicting violence. All the attempts of online abuse against women which revolves very much around their sex and sexuality, do not represent the abusers' intention of indulging in a healthy sexual encounter. The sexual encounter they portray in the abuses is a violent one, it is not for enjoyment of the parties involved. The sexual encounter they perceive in punitive in nature, it's a form of brutal punishment, and by default the concept of consent is absent. Punishment to who if we ask, we see women who have spoken about their rights, their desires, their politics, who tried to claim the space that men were habituated of feeling entitled to, only because of the apparent absence of women, be it in real or in virtual world. Women talking about politics, working in male dominated sectors and rising up the ladder, talking about their rights at home, and workplace, claiming the space that has been considered 'male' till now threaten patriarchy to the core, and the privileges that men have been enjoying are at stake.

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