

Gender Justice and Social Media Networking in India: New frontiers in connectedness

Kaberi Chakrabart

University of Calcutta, India

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Abstract

Social media emerges as the new tool/avtar for the multicultural networking in India, stimulating a new form of dialogic discourse in the space of democratic governance. It is unfolding as a space of liberation, a platform of cogitation or a site of celebration of provoking assertions and identity formation. Digitized networking, despite its economic and technological implications, is fast growing as an instrument of interrogating and/or reconfiguring traditional social-political, economic-cultural practices, identities, behaviors, norms and structures in India. The robust forms of social media networking, especially engaging the younger generation, in last few years have witnessed a new mode of citizen engagement in India, marked by a hitherto unseen celebration of power of connectedness engaging individual-citizens and groups. At the same time, it exhibits certain layers of discrimination and alienation within the deliberative-communicative space, thereby often defeating the essence of a true 'democratic' interconnectedness.

Arguing on the above-mentioned assumptions, this paper contends that social media has played an instrumental role in provoking critical debates on gender justice, especially in the context of recent cases of physical violence against women in India. The power of social media networking as the new feedback system has been exploited by the organizations, individuals, activists, towards creating new strands of collective action in interrogating and resisting violence and redefining justice. In negotiating with the governance and the locale of power as well occasionally subverting the 'myth' of gender justice, social media emerges as the new platform of active citizenry and 'insurgent politics' with transformative potential for women's rights movement in India.

Gender justice refers to an emancipatory enterprise that propagates structural and functional equality, based on political-ideological predispositions favouring women's rights, autonomy and entitlement as against subordination. The idea, despite contested in terms of its multiple dimensions, brings in the issue of women's agency in challenging discrimination, thereby aspiring to the fulfilment of equal and substantive citizenship. It addresses the unique context of *justice* in terms of gender that cuts across other identities like class, race, religion, etc. and scrutinizes the embedded relations of power in the society.

The Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing initiated a debate on the achievements in the fields of gender equality and gender mainstreaming towards social transformation in different parts of the globe. The idea of gender justice or equality in general prompted the deliberations on the role of the state, family, civil society, and private agencies in affirmative actions towards ensuring non-discriminatory environment - women's equal access to resources, democratic rights and secured living. Women's movements or feminist politics repeatedly focus on public debate on gender injustices/inequalities, expanding network in promoting equality and autonomy, persuading public policy or demanding a pro-active state.

The context of debate in India

In 1974, Indian government set up a Committee on Status of Women in India, which published its historic report 'Towards Equality: Report of The Committee on Status of Women in India'. The Report revisited the discourse of gender in its economic, political, social and cultural dimensions in the very context of the post colonial society in India and provided the ground for emergence of a new women's movement with agendas like political-economic empowerment, sexual violence, gender disparities in education, health, employment, etc. and the question of women's autonomy. The 1970s and 1980s witnessed the culmination of women's movement and feminist dialogues around the issue of *violence against women*. The struggle against dowry deaths, bride-burning, rape, sex selective abortion led to a powerful nation-wide campaign for gender justice, consolidating fraternal networking, demanding radical legislation and raising awareness about gender discrimination. The agenda of gender equality battled for a space in the public sphere, mediated by the women's groups, civil society activists and organizations and especially the media. Despite skewed coverage and manifest gender biases, the mainstream media, especially the press, provided an important platform to raise the issue of gender discrimination. In the 1980s, the above-mentioned issues rocked the country and violence against women became a national agenda.

The outrage started with the Mathura rape case, where a low caste teenage girl was raped inside a police station in Maharashtra in 1972.¹ Women's organizations spearheaded a nation-wide campaign against the custodial rape and the 'insensitivity' of the judiciary to the helplessness of a poor girl and demanded a stringent legislation against such sexual violence. The campaign also initiated public deliberations on different other forms of violence against women, especially domestic violence – defining violence, identifying its root causes, talking about the social attitudes to the victims, etc. The anti-rape and anti-violence campaign hit the front pages of the newspapers and many of the journalists actively supported the movement

by the edits/features/reportage. Women's movement in India embarked on a sustained campaign against violence since 1980s utilizing the reach and influence of mass media.

However, the dominant coverage evidently lacked a gender perspective or women's perspective by marginalizing serious debates on patriarchy and women's equality and security, and was mostly limited to the chronicles of violence and agenda of legal reforms. Gender inequalities in everyday living were greatly marginalized in the media coverage. In the post-liberalization period, women's movement in India has been greatly affected by massive commercialization of mainstream media that often trivialized gender-just issues like empowerment, entitlement or autonomy as well portrayed stereotyped images of women and feminism in India.²

Social Media and Gender Issues

In the context of a robust expansion of new media as the new platform of cogitation, the transformative potentials of social media networking in terms of reach, usability or pluralities has been explored at different levels of democratic governance. Social media, as the advocates argue, is emerging as the new *feedback system* for the democracy by making information readily available, by challenging the traditional boundaries of politics/power and energizing new kind of civic activism. It is claimed that in the post-Facebook world, the nature of social and political engagement has undergone qualitative changes to accommodate *immediacy of real politics*, a round-the-clock active opinionated space and the new, versatile and unfiltered *sources* of information. The social media networking not only opens up a prolific space of communication but also helps in subverting the embedded hierarchies in conversation.³ In the world of such a massive decentralised communication, *participation* also acquires a new meaning with the expanding scope of *inclusion*, transcending the borders of local/regional/national confines, appreciating multicultural dialogues and allowing networking among dispersed citizens. Social media – the new *magic multiplier*,⁴ having much more potential of amplifying the information and messages than the traditional media can lead to a new kind of social web of relations. For the last five years, the global society has witnessed the strength of social media in throwing counterweight to big powers, entrenched political-social orders and reclaiming the leverage of a new kind of *insurgent politics*.⁵

The *liberated* space of social media presents a massive scope for the contemporary women's movement in India in bringing the gender issues in the public space. UN Women acknowledges the use of media, especially social media, as a 'powerful tool to advocate for elimination of violence against women and promote gender equality'.⁶ In 'The Platform For Action' set by the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing towards empowering women, two strategic objectives stated were "increasing the participation and access of women to expression and decision-making in and through the media and new technologies of communication and the promotion of a balanced and non-stereotyped portrayal of women in the media"⁷. The transformative, participatory, inclusive space of social media has drawn the Indian women activists, organizations into this site of deliberation to make their voices heard and raise an alarm bell against rising trends of gender violence. The social media sites - the Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, blogs, Youtube and numerous virtual communities, open up the

possibility of a vibrant conversation around gender discrimination, especially the vulnerability of women in terms of equality and security and thereby nurturing identity formations at different levels.

Concerned over the increasing threats to women's security, the United Nations gives a special priority to the issue of violence and has launched a global campaign - 'UNiTE to End Violence against Women'. The Secretary-General, Ban Ki Moon observed : "From battlefield to home, on the streets, at school, in the workplace or in their community, up to 70 per cent of women experience physical or sexual violence at some point in their lifetime...we must fundamentally challenge the culture of discrimination that allows violence to continue."⁸ The Millennium Declaration of September 2000 resolved to implement the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, acknowledged the multiple sources and forms of violence against women and recognized gender equality as a 'key' in achieving other proclaimed goals.⁹

According to the National Crime Records Bureau statistics 2010, there has been a 4.8% increase in crime against women in India as compared to 2009. 8.9% of the total victims of Rape were girls under 14 years of age, while 16.1% were teenage girls (14-18 years) and 57.4% were in the age group of 18-30 years.¹⁰ According to the UNDP Human Development Report, 2011, India ranked 129 out of 187 countries in the Gender Inequality Index. The NCRB Report 2012 shows that the singular crime of rape is the fastest growing crime in India and has increased by 902% over 1971 to 2012.¹¹ In spite of the constitutional guarantees of gender equality and a host of legislations to combat crime against women, gender based violence is emerging as a great concern for the contemporary women's right movements in India. The increasing cases of physical and domestic violence in the forms of rape, dowry death, bride burning, sex selective abortion, honour killings, etc. - a large section of which remain unreported, demean the historical achievements of the Indian women's movements. In the light of the unabated violence against women, the new genre of communication in social media networking gives birth to a hitherto unseen *power of connectedness*, significant for an emerging movement of justice, appreciated by the women's organizations and activists as well as the younger generation in India. The new form of civic activism finds a robust expression after the heinous gang-rape of a 23-year old girl in Delhi on 16 December, 2012. The incident sparked off an unprecedented public outrage and marked the beginning of a month-long protest in the streets of Delhi and other Indian cities, a great part of which was mediated by social media. The camaraderie of the protestors – both in the virtual space and in streets, broke the spatial and cultural boundaries and exposed the myths of gender equality in Indian democracy. Since December 2012, Indian media gave extensive coverage of multiple cases of gang rapes – in Kolkata (5 February, 2013), Mumbai (19 August, 2013) and other parts of the country. The anti-rape movement has fed the nationwide debates on crime against women and gives the public sphere an immense opportunity to revisit the gender issues in a serious manner. The public anger against such crimes surged in the social media space with the launching of a number of online campaigns, numerous individual/group postings in social media networking sites or formation of virtual communities. This study limits its scope to the

forms of networking in social media framed by the women's organizations, NGOs and civil society groups or individuals in the context of recent cases of sexual violence in India.

Networking modes

The dominant usage of social media in civic engagement against gender-based violence, especially rape gives rise to some visible roles of this communicative space in the recent history of women's movement in India that can broadly be summarized as follows:

- Social media emerges as a space of unfettered horizontal conversation for citizens as individuals or groups, focussing on 'Let's Talk'.
- Social media provides the platform for awareness generation – acts as a new tool for campaign and collective action.
- Social media reconstructs the debates around gender justice.
- Social media calls for action and demands a pro-active citizenship, feeding the interface of online and offline campaigns by expanding the scope of the campaign beyond virtual space to the field.

Social media recovering strength of conversation

MUST BOL is a Delhi-based youth-led platform taking up the campaign against violence. It urges the youth to speak out against violence in their own lives arising out of gender identity – 'to recognize it, to talk about it and to address it'. The group combines offline campaign using short films, posters with online discussions through Facebook or online contests. The 'Lets Talk' campaign of *MUST BOL* in Facebook encourages conversations on gender-based violence and calls for opinion on 'the issues surrounding gender and security you want the contesting political parties to address'. One recent post says: "we keep asking for change, this is our chance to contribute to it."¹² *Youth Ki Awaz*, an online collaborative platform for the youth conducts an opinion poll in the Facebook on the same issue – "what should be the First Priority for the government to ensure women's security in your city?"¹³ The proclaimed goal of these campaigns is to restore the space of dialogue for the youth, especially girls, in governance and to utilize social media for social change. *Jagori*, an advocacy group working on women's rights circulated a 30 seconds film, 'Don't Suffer in Silence' in Youtube as part of their campaign against violence. The crucial issue of underreporting of crime against women and silencing the voices against violence surfaces in a number of online campaigns in social media space. *Maitri India* post in Facebook shares: "victims often feel pressure to keep quiet and hide the truth...call helpline."¹⁴ It talks of building 'trust' in a visual poster – "A victim may only reach out for help once. If a friend says they are being abused, believe them."¹⁵ The youth community nurtures the social media as a concept of '5th Space' beyond family, education, friends and leisure, celebrating provoking democratic assertions and power of *connectedness*. *Feminists India* provides an online platform for those who are committed to gender equality and justice and works on the assumption – 'Sharing is living'.

Social media in awareness generation

The vibrancy of social media in generating awareness on gender injustices has been well acknowledged in recent burst of online campaigning by the women's organizations, human right groups or civil society associations. Community blogs, organizational reach to Facebook or Twitter have opened up a hitherto unseen virtual space of campaign against violence, pervasive in nature, that breaks the glass ceiling in the public deliberations on gender equality. *Oxfam India*, shared the popular 'We Can' campaign towards reduction of violence against women and political empowerment. It launched 'The Close the Gap Campaign' in social networking sites, the tag line of which was 'Indians Demand Equality for Women'. It thought of reaching out the citizens, including the rural India through interactive response system to engage them in public conversation on gender equality. One crucial dimension of conscientization is challenging the myths and stereotypes that perpetuate gender inequality and make women vulnerable to violence. The women's organizations locate the primary root of gender inequality in the space of family and voice protest against unequal treatment of boys and girls in their upbringing. The recent cases of gang rapes in India have thrown a lot of uproar on the issue of 'mindset' in treating girls and explaining sexual violence. Social media space is flooded with campaigns against such stereotypes. Kalki Koechlin, the Bollywood actress, has been part of a satirical video on rape – 'It's Your Fault', that was posted on Youtube on September 2013, which received great response from social networking sites. The video was filmed as a response to statements made by some top politicians after the Delhi gang rape case suggesting that 'rape is inevitable if women wear short clothes'. In response to such 'insensitive' statements *Metro and You*, a youth blog comments: "... Dear Society, instead of putting restrictions on girls and blaming them for whatever happened with them, can you please teach your boys how to treat a girl?"¹⁶ *UN Women* also launched global online campaign – 'Teach Your Son to Respect Women'. *Oxfam India's* campaign, 'No More Violence Against Women' in Facebook substantiates the debate on 'mindset' with the poster – 'Let's Raise Our Boys To Become Responsible Men.' *Youth Ki Awaz* shares a link on 25 September, 2013 for discussion that challenges the stereotyping in gender roles – 'Why Can't Your Son Learn to Cook and Your Daughter Train for the Olympics?' However, such well-articulated campaigns also bring in apprehensions whether "these fancy looking posters in English would change the attitude of a guy who has probably not even completed his high school and who lives in a slum?"¹⁷ Responding to the verdict in the Delhi case in favour of a capital punishment, *Oxfam India* reiterates that deep attitudinal and behavioural shifts are required to provide women a violence-free life. Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh also urges for a change in mindset to fight against gender injustice. *Communitiny: The Youth Collective* presents its motto in its virtual site as 'the first mutiny is within' implicating a change in the self. As a vibrant site of recent anti-rape movement, the social media mobilized public opinion against the myths around and social taboos on rape and its victims. The myth is attacked in a *Maitri India* poster in Facebook :

"Myth: Men rape when they can't control their sexual urges. They can't help themselves.

Fact: Rape is not an impulsive sexual act by a man who couldn't stop himself. It is an act of aggression, power and humiliation by a man who chooses to violate a woman."¹⁸

The youth and women activists reacted sharply in the ‘insensitiveness’ of the state apparatus, especially police and judiciary in dealing with crime against women. *Youth Ki Awaz* posted in Facebook that even lawyers and Judges needed lessons in gender sensitization. There was a strong reaction against the defence lawyer A P Singh’s sexist statement in the Delhi case. His argument was that if his daughter was having pre-marital sex and moving around at night with her boyfriend, he would have burnt her alive. The interview clipping in Youtube comes with sharp reactions that such ‘clinically insane’ human being should be eliminated from the society. *Maitri India*, *UN Women* share a cartoon poster in their Facebook sites that reflects the reluctance of the police to register and investigate the cases of violence, especially in the cases of poor marginalized women. *Centre for Social Research* raised objections to trivialization of crime against women by police. In its Facebook and Twitter pages (23 and 24 September, 2013) it campaigned against recording the Delhi case as a ‘murder’ and not rape and asked whether India was underestimating rape. *CSR* and *Oxfam India* participated in a collaborative campaign using the social media tool with a specially dedicated Facebook and Twitter page on Protection of Women Against Domestic Violence Act. They say that social media has helped them ‘to reach out to hundreds of NGOs, individuals and feminists fighting against domestic violence abuses’¹⁹. The campaign against violence, especially domestic violence finds an important space in the online networking of women’s organizations. *Maitri India* launched an online signature campaign – ‘Count On Me: My pledge to End Violence’²⁰ and later online campaign volunteers carried forward the effort to the community, educational institutions and workplaces. Different ‘pages’ created by groups for a ‘cause’ mobilize support or ‘followers’ through ‘Likes’ or ‘Share’, creating a fluid, yet overspread community talking about gender justice. Thus, the women and youth activists, human right organizations build up an extended space of public deliberations on gender discrimination and gender justice by addressing geographically dispersed citizens.

Social media reconstructing the gender debates

As has been noted, mobilization against violence supports the movement for attitudinal changes and poses for a reversal in the socialization process. The coverage of crime against women in social media rediscovered some of the crucial dimensions of the issue of gender-based violence. One such much-debated dimension is the legal reforms to ensure gender justice against violence. After the series of gang rape cases in different parts of the country, women’s organizations, civil activists and citizens in general raised a cry to enact stricter laws to punish the perpetrators of such crimes. In social networking sites people debated over the newly passed rape law providing for death sentence to repeat offenders and harsher punishment for crimes like acid attack, sexual harassment. It, however, manifested a divided community over legal reforms in the social media space. In Twitter, *Feminists India* expressed the strong disapprobation of the new law by many women’s groups. It argues that ‘Indian activists demand gender just, gender sensitive and NOT gender neutral rape laws.’²¹ *Swayam*, a Kolkata-based women’s organization, shared the stand against capital punishment in Facebook – ‘Rapes are Continuing, and Death Sentence cannot Solve the Issue: Here’s Why?’²² extending the debate to the viability of death sentence in general. Justice Verma Committee, formed after the Delhi gang rape case to probe into the sexual violence and

suggest measures, also favoured electoral reforms to end injustice. In social media, common Indian citizens debated over marital rape that was hitherto unseen in the history of women's movement in India.

The contextualization of violence gets an important dimension in the contemporary debate. The vulnerability of women to violence becomes an issue of public concern and deliberations in social networking sites that was earlier confined mostly to feminist dialogues, women's groups or academic pursuits. The North East India, Kashmir represents conflict-ridden areas where such vulnerability multiplies due to incessant armed conflicts and lack of peace. In Manipur, women have formed *Gun Survivors Network* in December 2004 to help the victim families. The group works in social media space to raise demand for a mass sensitization programme for the police and general public, stricter laws against such crimes and more importantly, gender-sensitive rehabilitation programmes for women. The poor visibility of North East women in the mainstream discourse of Indian women's movement is partially restored in such ways of virtual sharing through video blogs, content communities. The reports of sexual abuses against Indian army or insurgent groups and the fast-unto-death of Manipuri activist, Sharmila Iram Chanu demanding repeal of AFSPA (Armed Forces Special Powers Act), get exposed in the blogs run by the North East students. Online campaigning also includes issues of poverty and vulnerability of poor women to violence, though very marginally. The ordinary citizen gets an opportunity to express their opinion in this kind of public dialogue which is otherwise largely unavailable to them in traditional media.

Call for Action

Social media is not only emerging as a space of democratic conversation but also the new mode of collective action. It is forging virtual networks of fraternity and solidarity and often coordinating 'real' movements. Delhi gang rape case is a fascinating example of such an effort that mobilized, through Facebook, WhatsApp or Twitter, thousands of protestors, mainly youth and students into the streets of Delhi who clashed with police, participated in 24 Hour sit-in, blocaded the Parliament Street. The social networking sites were poured with angry posts against such a crime and people pledged to fight the case with the victim's family. Mourners demonstrated in candle marches throughout India assembled by the 'call' in social networking sites. A large number of Facebook users changed their profile picture to a black dot, symbolic of shame in a country where women are not safe even in the capital. Just after the incident, Facebook groups were created like 'Gangraped in Delhi' on December 20, 2012 and 'Delhi for Women's Safety' on December 18, 2012. *Change.org*, organized an online petition - "President, CJI: Stop Rape Now!", that received more than 65,000 signatures for an appeal seeking the intervention of the President of India and Chief Justice of India. The famous Bollywood actor, Farhan Akhtar tweeted after the Mumbai gang rape incident – "There has to be harsher punishment for rape & a fixed time limit within which cases must reach a verdict in court. Wake up system!!"²³

Care India, Jagori shared the online campaign, 'Awaz Uthao' (Raise Voice) to stop violence against women which received lakhs of signatures in their sites. It demanded effective implementation of police laws, prompt and proactive judicial actions, accountability of

government and access to redressal systems for all.²⁴ Innovative kind of protests against sexual violence and harassment can be seen in the social media space. In March 2008, *Blank Noise* proposed the campaign – *Send One Garment You Wore when you Were ‘Eve Teased’* challenging the traditional ‘mindset’ by throwing questions – ‘Do you really think it is your fault when you are violated? ... Do you really think it is only certain kind of clothes that result in women experiencing street sexual harassment?’ They proposed to “install those clothes” on the streets of the cities and “collectively challenge the notion that women ask to be sexually violated.”²⁵ *The Life and Times of an Indian Homemaker*, a popular blog, shares ‘some tips’ for prevention of sexual assaults with its followers and satirically posts – ‘Sexual Assault Prevention Tips Guaranteed to Work!’²⁶ *Maitri India* posts also provoke actions against domestic violence by suggesting ‘what each of us can do to prevent domestic violence’. It called for a pro-active role of each citizen by calling police, speaking out publicly and reaching out the victim. The *Bell Bajao* (Ring the Bell) campaign against domestic violence or *Pink Chaddy* (Pink undergarments) campaign against sexual harassment received a wide attention in the social media space in India. The reach of social media breaks the cultural and physical limits of procedural democracy and often subverts the *lakshmanrekha* or the marked boundaries of routinized deliberation. This liberating zone of new media facilitates in the breaking of *culture of silence*, essential for substantive democracy and more important for women’s movement.

A Postscript to the debate

From the beginning, the feminists challenged the ‘masculine political birth’ of the civil society and demanded an equal space in public sphere. The women’s movement in India has been successful in drawing gender issues in the orbit of public debate since 1980s. A prolific campaign for a gender sensitive social and political order by the women’s organizations or human right groups has forced the state and civil society to revisit and reframe the public policies around gender issues. The political power of social media emerges as important for the women’s movement in this negotiation with the governance and the locale of power. Despite the liberating potential of the social media space, some uncomfortable assumptions, however, permeate the discourse of digital activism. Here people log in as ‘strangers’ connecting to another stranger and thus, the brand of ‘anonymity’ hinges upon the forging of a permanent bond in terms of ‘real’ friendship. Many observers argue that social media habits create an estrangement of the young generation from the ‘real life conversation’. People can hide behind the wall and easily disconnect from the conversation at their own will. These kind of ‘weak ties’, evident in social media networking, can very easily defeat the possibility of a long term movement against social inequality. People may be satisfied with the illusion of their meaningful engagement by just ‘Liking’, ‘Sharing a post/link’ or ‘Tweeting’. At the same time, in spite of the assumptions of deep penetration or plurality, social media space exhibits layers of discrimination or hierarchy among the users. That is why the socially marginalized communities are widely invisible in the space. The rape of a poor dalit girl does not hit the site in mobilizing public anger or action as was in the case of Delhi or Mumbai. The everyday vulnerability of the women in conflict-ridden areas like Kashmir or North East mostly remains unattended in the debates. The social media hardly debates over the

vulnerability of the women in agricultural or unorganized sector in terms of economic security and justice. The digital divide in a developing country like India is also crucial for the democratic character of the space. The total monthly active user of Facebook and Twitter is about 10 crores in India which is only 6 per cent of the total population in the country. Sceptics raise questions about the potential of social media in sustaining a movement with the goal of a long term transformation due to its inherent loosely structured or 'leader-less' character. One may take note of Malcom Gladwell's well-read assumptions on 'Small Change: Why Revolution Will Not Be Tweeted', in addressing the debate. Women's movement in India can exploit the strong potentials of the social media networking keeping in note the inherent limitations of this space.

Notes and References:

1. In the Mathura Rape case, the court gave the verdict in favour of the two accused constable. After a prolonged legal struggle, the women's organizations could win justice for Mathura.
2. Gaye Tuchman calls it a 'symbolic annihilation of women' by the mass media.
3. "Rather than mere "one to one" conversation, or "one to many" (as with email or text-messaging), social networking sites such as Twitter and Facebook enable "many to many" communication.(Ref. Zakharia, F, "Fareed's take: the role of social media in revolutions", *CNN*, 27 March 2011)
4. Communication scholar Wilbur Scramm considered mass communication as the *magic multiplier*.
5. Manuell Castells argues that the new form of mass self-communication with its horizontal mode has intervened in the space of insurgent politics and social movements. (Ref. Castells, M, 2011, *Communication Power*, Oxford, OUP, Ch.5)
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