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FEMINIST ENCOUNTERS: A JOURNAL OF CRITICAL STUDIES IN CULTURE AND POLITICS

Founded in 2017, Feminist Encounters is a journal committed to argument and debate, in the tradition of historical feminist movements.

In the wake of the growing rise of the Right across the world, openly neo-fascist national sentiments, and rising conservative populism, we feminists all over the world are needing to remobilise our energies to protect and advance gender rights.

Feminist Encounters provides a forum for feminist theorists, scholars, and activists to communicate with each other, to better educate ourselves on international issues and thus promote more global understanding, and to enhance our critical tools for fighting for human rights.

Feminism is an intellectual apparatus, a political agenda, and a programme for social change. Critical analysis of how gender discourses produce cultural identities and social practices within diverse lived realities is key to this change. We need to think more sharply in order to strategise well: as the discourses of conservatism renew and invigorate themselves, so we as feminist scholars need to be refining our amazonic swords in order not just to respond effectively but also to innovate our own ideas for equality and social justice.

We are, of course, committed to intersectionality, a vital lens through which to see the contours of race/ethnicity, class, sexuality, age/ability, and explore how gendered scripts get lived, and filtered through these specificities of cultural organisation. Lived experience is never codified in terms of gender alone, and so our research will always be sensitive to the nexus of lived oppressions.

The journal has a large editorial board and journal team, consisting of over forty scholars in twenty countries. This is deliberately inclusive in order that we can promote diversity and engage with different concerns from across the world. Our aim is not to simply talk to ourselves, reconfirming our localised assumptions, but to generate feminist encounters across regions, even if this is sometimes uncomfortable. Globalisation has been a triumph of neoliberalism, but digital technologies have also flattened and reduced the distance between us in dramatic ways, so that now we can talk to each other with unanticipated ease.
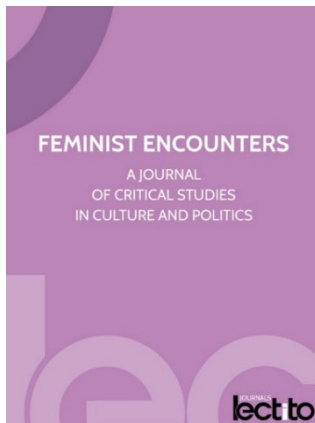
This new access to each others' voices has also brought challenges to the way we think and do things, so that being a feminist today might be quite a different prospect to a person living in China, Iran, Norway, South Africa or the UK. Second Wave Feminism used the idea of 'sisterhood' to invoke solidarity between women. I've always rather liked Andrea Dworkin's claim, though, that: "Feminism is a political practice of fighting male supremacy in behalf of women as a class, including all the women you don't like, including all the women you don't want to be around, including all the women who used to be your best friends whom you don't want anything to do with anymore." The notion of sisterhood was challenged by Black feminists in the 1980s as being too conceptually white, thus bell hooks' trenchant critique that: "the idea of 'common oppression' was a false and corrupt platform disguising and mystifying the true nature of women's varied and complex social reality". In the 1990s and 2000s it has been fair to say that feminist theory and Feminist Studies since have engaged more intentionally and deliberately with intersectionality - though Jennifer Baumgardner did caution us that: "Sisterhood was never about everybody agreeing ....".

For our journal, sisterhood must expand and embrace our transgender allies and our men friends, reminding us that sibling relationships are rarely straightforward or inevitably blessed by golden moments of total affinity. Thus, **Feminist Encounters** welcomes the opportunity for new kinds of international discussions in the spirit of collaboration and critical intellectual enquiry. We hope for productive agreement and disagreement, and the shared struggle of fighting gender oppression, with our minds, hearts, and bodies, as the times demand.

Sally R Munt, University of Sussex
Founding Editor

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SPECIAL ISSUE: GENDER ACTIVISM IN INDIA

Guest Editor

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Special Issue: Gender Activism in India

Rose Richards [1*]

Published: March 1, 2023

INTRODUCTION

Gender activism in India has a rich and complex history as befits the second largest country in the world, by population. There have been hundreds, perhaps thousands, of notable feminist activists in India who have fought for gender equality and rights, and campaigned against gender-based violence. One such early activist was Savitribai Phule (1831-1897), who was a Dalit woman who campaigned successfully for access to education for girls, setting up many schools open to children of what was then the lowest social caste in India (traditionally denigrated as 'Untouchable'), campaigning more widely against gender-based violence, female infanticide, and the killing and burning of widows, and victims who were raped and pregnant. Together with her activist Muslim partner Fatima Sheikh, they provided vital education to marginalised women, recognising the necessity of what in the west would today be called intersectional feminism – the link between gender and poverty, whether rendered through social class or caste. Their friend and associate Tarabai Shinde published the booklet '*Stri Purush Tulana*' in 1882, a critique of patriarchy and the caste system in 19th century India, which can be considered as the first modern feminist publication in India.

What we see from the very beginning of feminist activism in India is this cogent link between gender and caste oppression, and religious culture. This methodology of a type of intersectional analysis was evident in early feminist activism and writing, and continues today, not least in the recent research we present to you in this special issue. However, we need to be careful not to impose an analytical method based epistemologically in USA black feminist research – intersectionality – upon a non-western country such as India, which has its own concrete types of difference and intellectual approaches for thinking about them. Context and history are important, and to read Indian feminism through contemporary western theories of postcoloniality, poststructuralism, or postmodernism is rather to impose frameworks that although dialogic, do not quite fit onto India's separate development as a nation, nor its own intellectual histories. For readers curious to read further about these debates, Maitrayee Chaudhuri has written an erudite and incisive introductory commentary to thinking about such issues called 'Feminism in India: The Tale and the Telling' (2012),[1] which tries to avoid framing Indian feminism within western academic frameworks.

Thinking about the scope of women's/gender studies in India, as of the last count in 2017, there were 163 Women's Studies and Gender Studies centres across the nation,[2] geographically spread across all major regions. Women's Studies has flourished in Indian universities, the watershed moment in social awareness coming after the 1974 report 'Towards Equality', published by the Committee on the Status of Women in India, which was appointed by the Indian government in 1972 to produce a survey report. Feminist activism in India was rising in the early 1970s, and it was the Towards Equality report that highlighted the distressing themes of gender inequality across all aspects of public and private life, and the despairingly universal provenance of gender-based violence. Women's Studies became a recognised discipline in 1977, following on the heels of the people's activism. The National Conference in Women's Studies in 1981 led to the creation of the Indian Association of Women's Studies

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[1] Chaudhuri's commentary is available on the website *Cairn Info* (https://www.cairn.info/revue-tiers-monde-2012-1-page-19.htm).

[2] See, for example, Geentanjali Ganjoli, Women Studies Departments in Indian Universities face threat of closure (https://policystudies.blogs.bristol.ac.uk/2017/07/24/women-studies-departments-in-indian-universities-face-threat-of-closure/).

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which meant that feminist researchers could network for the first time, share more knowledge effectively, and receive professional recognition. For histories of feminist education see further Anu Aneja's 'Women's and Gender Studies in India' (2019), and for specific understandings of the Indian context for feminism we would recommend for example (of many possible examples) Sunaina Arya and Aakash Singh's (2020) 'Dalit Feminist Theory: A Reader' – both published by Routledge/Taylor and Francis. Those readers wanting to know more about contemporary feminism in India would do well to check out digital platforms on social media such as the Facebook page 'Feminism in India' which has 90,000 followers, or online magazines such as *Feminism in India*[3] which is also a great resource for students and for discussion. The topic of gender activism in India, is like its referent – huge, diverse, fascinating, and powerfully moving – we offer a snapshot of current gender activism in this issue of *Feminist Encounters* which we hope you will find interesting.

There are 9 articles in the special issue which forms the first part of this publication, and then 3 further articles in the general section, which are rounded off with the three book reviews.

In their article 'Forging Fraught Solidarities: Friendship and Feminist Activism in South Asia', Nithila Kanagasabai and Shilpa Phadke discuss the importance of friendship in Indian feminism. They argue that friendship is 'deeply political' and is therefore 'a way of doing activism'. Friendship forms a bridge over caste, cultural and political differences and has been overlooked in research about gender activism, but is it enough? Their article explores the nuances of and changes in feminist friendships through discussions with Indian feminists.

Anandita Pan's article, 'Gender, Caste and Subjectivity: Revisiting the #MeToo Movement in India', considers the #MeToo movement in India through the positionality of the speaker. Her examination of the role of intersectional identities of caste, class, and gender in determining subjecthood, and solidarity, shows how ironically the #MeToo movement in India reproduces casteist, classist and sexist hierarchies and replicates the erasure of Dalit women in society.

In '"Please Don't Go Yet": The Voice and Texture of Indian Women's Campaign Rhetoric', Subhasree Chakravarty deconstructs the gendered nature of three female political candidates' speeches. Her study reveals 'an exhilarating battle of campaign rhetorics fraught with language restrictions and gender dynamics'. Chakravarty links the political speeches to the contexts in which they arose and from this broadens her study to the state and future of female rhetoricians in India.

In 'Sex-workers Defying Patriarchy and Challenging State Reform and Rehabilitation Projects in India: Voices from the Margins', Shriya Patnaik explores the resistance of sex-workers to state reform through local channels of grassroots organisation, performative culture, and collective action. Her participants leverage various modalities of resistance to the state's current ways of dealing with them because existing state reform projects often violate subjects' bodily autonomy and act as moral discipliners, exposing them to systemic and institutionalised violence.

Next, Antoinette E. DeNapoli considers gender activism from the angle of female religious leaders in 'Can a Woman be a True Guru? Female Hindu Gurus' Grassroots Religious Activism and the Performativity of Saintliness at the *Kumbh Mela*'. She engages with two such leaders who take different approaches to the role of women – one preaches that women should enjoy the same rights as men, while the other maintains that women are different and therefore require different rights. DeNapoli argues that, through performance of the 'rhetoric of saintliness,' the gurus 'heighten or reverse sex-role stereotypes embedded in mainstream representations of "good" gurus in order to mobilise gender reform in patriarchal *akhāṛā* culture'.

Aastha Tyagi's article, '"You call us goons! Have you seen how their women act?": Gendering as a protest strategy among Hindu nationalist students in New Delhi', looks at gender in *Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad* (ABVP), the largest political student organisation in the world. ABVP is 'one of the strongest arms of the largest and most influential coalition of Hindu nationalist organisations … in promoting Hindu nationalist ideology to an extremely influential demographic: the young, university-educated, and urban populace'. Tyagi asks, 'As a member of the largest Hindu nationalist organisation in the world, what does it mean to protest in the present political moment - with the knowledge that there is state and institutional support on your side?' And to answer this, she follows the stories of three young party members and how they respond to violence.

Moving away from nationalist student protests, the three final articles in the special issue concern the women-led Shaheen Bagh protest of 2019 to 2020 in Delhi. This protest was made as a response to the Citizenship Amendment Act, and the police action that followed. Most of the protestors were Muslim women, and their methods were non-violent.

The first article, 'Transnationalising *Dadis* as Political/Activist Subjects', is written by Radhika Gajjala, Emily Edwards, Debipreeta Rahut, Ololade Margaret Faniyi, Bedadyuti Jha, Jhalak Jain, Aiman Khan, and Saadia Farooq. This article shows how the '*dadis* (grandmothers) of Shaheen Bagh' emerged as political subjects in the Twittersphere. The authors use a multi-methods approach that includes qualitative interviews with local and

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[3] See https://feminisminindia.com/.

transnational activists and related actors as well as a situated feminist data analytics and critical digital humanities approach to examining big social data online.

Next, in 'Shaheen Bagh: Gender, Affects, and the Graphic Narrative of Protest', Pujarinee Mitra considers the protest through the graphic novel, *Shaheen Bagh A Graphic Recollection* by Ita Mehrotra (2021). The protesters mobilised affects primarily through sharing food, singing songs and the display of artwork. Mehrotra perpetuates this form of resistance with her own artwork. Mitra examines this work through the intersecting discourses of South Asian Feminisms, Contemporary South Asian literature, and Affect Theory.

The third and last article on the topic of the Shaheen Bagh protest is by Yash Sharma and Shatakshi Singh and is titled 'Shaheen Bagh and the Politics of Protest in the Anti-CAA Movement in India'. It explores 'the pathways and politics of resistance' within the anti-CAA/NRC (Citizenship Amendment Act/National Register of Citizenship) protests in India. The authors describe the protest as 'a powerful symbol of resistance against, and reimagination of, hegemonic notions of nationalism, secularism, citizenship, and belonging in contemporary India'.

In addition to the above, in the General Articles section of this issue we have included two further research articles and an interview. The interview, 'Dance, Gender, and Activism in Pakistan: Interview with Performer-Activist Sheema Kermani' is by Priyanka Basu. In it she interviews Sheema Kirmani, a performer and activist based in Karachi, Pakistan. Kirmani has raised awareness of violence against women and women's empowerment and has fought for social justice through her organisation, *Tehrik-e-Niswan*. Additionally, Kirmani traces her educational journey and influences from her childhood dance lessons to her student days in the UK.

In 'Mothering and Radical Selfcare: An Autoethnography of participating in a Facebook parenting group' Smitha Sasidharan Nair and Rajesh Kalrivayil's autoethnography explores the development of their own parenting style through their engagement with a Facebook parenting group. Their theoretical approach draws from Audre Lorde's idea of radical self-care to analyse the interactions on the online group on empowered mothering and self-care.

The final article we are pleased to present is Katrín Ólafsdóttir and Jeff Hearn's '"How did this happen?": Making retrospective, present and prospective sense of intimate relationships where men have been violent'. The authors consider the narratives of three men who identify as perpetrators of violence and three women who identify as victims/survivors of IPV. Their analyses focus on how the participants present their relationships, employing the notion of affective–discursive practices. In the article the authors show how men make sense of their own behaviour under these circumstances and how shame functions as a regulatory emotion.

We end this issue with three book reviews: Arianne M. Gaetano reviews *Dreams of Flight: The Lives of Chinese Women Students in the West* by Fran Martin; Siyang Cao reviews *Contemporary Chinese Queer Performance* by Bao Hongwei; and Brian Curtin reviews *Race and Masculinity in Gay Men's Pornography: Deconstructing the Big Black Beast* by Desmond Francis Goss.

We hope you will enjoy delving into the rich and informative contributions in this issue!

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Forging Fraught Solidarities: Friendship and Feminist Activism in South Asia

Nithila Kanagasabai [1]*, Shilpa Phadke [1]

ABSTRACT

Friendship has been central to the forging of feminist solidarities. Cross-border friendships and feminist activism in South Asia have disrupted narratives of violence and hostility between countries. Friendship then is deeply political for multiple reasons, often facilitating a powerful critique and unsettling hegemonic, heteropatriarchal narratives of affective relationships. Drawing on the narratives of feminist activists in South Asia, we explore the nuances of 'doing activism' with friends as well as how friendship itself inflects activism and the interrogations that these might bring to the fore. We reflect on the ways in which feminist activism has engaged with fun arguing that joy is intrinsic to feminist organising. We also examine feminist fractures and how these might impact our activism, our friendships, and what they reveal about structural inequalities. As we reflect on the transformative potential of feminist activism within the South Asian region over the last four decades and the friendships it has nurtured, we ask if friendship has fulfilled the promise of challenging existing structural hierarchies and reimagining our relationships, concluding that the answer must be yes and no.

Keywords: South Asia, feminist activism, friendship, feminism, fun

INTRODUCTION

In 2019, the two of us were interviewing feminist activists in India and Pakistan who had been involved in movements claiming public space. During these interviews, the subject of friendship came up several times. In the course of their activism, the activists forged deep and meaningful friendships and also invited their friends to join them in their activism. That article (Phadke and Kanagasabai, 2021) on online collectivising did not have the space for us to discuss these friendships, but it was something that we found deeply relevant to a politics of both feminism and activism. Friendship has been central to the forging of feminist solidarities as feminist activists describe their engagements with the political. While there has been scholarship that focuses on friendship in South Asia (Ali, 2019; Kamal, 2019; Banerjea *et al.*, 2018), this article seeks to locate friendships as relevant to the doing of feminist activism.

Feminist scholarship in South Asia has focused significantly on kinship, locating women within the institutions of marriage, family and community drawing our attention to the ways in which patriarchal discourses are played out on the bodies of women. This article is situated in the context of friendships forged in feminist activism that offer possibilities of decentring kinship embedded in the institutions of marriage and family. Anthropologists and sociologists studying South Asia have for long focussed on the 'intimate association' (Dube, 2001) kinship structures have with women's lives (Karve, 1953; Uberoi, 1993). South Asian feminist scholarship has also focussed on the ways in which cross-border friendships and feminist activism have disrupted narratives of violence and hostility between countries (Chhachhi and Abeysekera, 2015; Phadke, 2020; Phadke and Kanagasabai, 2021; Wijesiriwardena, forthcoming). Friendship then is deeply political for multiple reasons, often facilitating a powerful critique and unsettling hegemonic heteropatriarchal narratives of affective relationships. Despite this, even as the heteronormative universe seems to dominate conversations on both love and violence, there is writing and reflection on friendship in and as activism (Banerjea *et al.*, 2018), friendship, feminism, and academic collaboration (Kaplan and Rose, 1993; Maina and Missero, 2021), and feminism and friendship (Roseneil, 2006; Winch, 2013; Chowdhury and Philipose, 2016).

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In this article, we examine the ways in which feminist activists find both feminism and friendship, and explore the nuances of 'doing activism' with friends. We also think through how friendship itself inflects activism and the kinds of dialogues and interrogations that these might bring to the fore. We reflect on the ways in which feminist activism has engaged with fun, arguing that joy is intrinsic to feminist organising. We also examine feminist fractures, the frictions, the silences, and the choices of whether and how to disagree and how these might impact both our activism and our friendships. Reflecting on the transformative potential of feminist activism within the South Asian region over the last four decades and the friendships it has nurtured, we ask if friendship has fulfilled the promise of challenging existing structural hierarchies and reimagining our relationships.

In the introduction to their anthology *Friendship as Social Justice Activism: Critical Solidarities in a Global Perspective*, Niharika Banerjea *et al.* argue that 'friendship as social activism is about the renewal of our imagination about who we are and who we wish to become' (2018: 2). Though the anthology encompasses diverse kinds of writing, the editors point out that they all attempt to 'find ways of being together that is *within and outside* the heteropatriarchal ordering of things' (3). This generative anthology makes a strong case for friendship not simply within activism, but *as* social justice activism. Focusing on the minutiae of everyday interpersonal relationships, the essays in this volume stitch together a narrative of solidarity, love, and a collective quest for change. Elora Halim Chowdhury and Liz Philipose (2016) also reiterate the centrality of friendship in solidarity efforts. They draw on Leela Gandhi's (2006: 10) formulation of dissident friendships as 'all those invisible affective gestures that refuse alignment' to suggest that 'friendship is significant to collective life' (2016: 2-3). They focus on emotions and lived experience which they argue are fundamental to community building. For them, friendship allows for surprising connections and the possibility of contesting power hierarchies.

Gender activism has organically grown many friendships, and in fact, in some cases, friendships facilitated the beginnings of feminist organisations. These collectives have fostered a sense of community both on the streets and online, allowing for a multivocality of feminist imaginations even within a single organisation. For this article, we draw on the eight interviews we had done for our earlier article, titled 'Doing Feminist Community Media: Collectivising in Online Spaces' (Phadke and Kanagasabai, 2021), in which we examined the online presence and creation of feminist communities engendered by four organisations: *Blank Noise*, *Girls at Dhabas*, *Parcham Collective* and *Pinjra Tod*. Both *Parcham* and *Blank Noise* are registered non-profit trusts in India. *Pinjra Tod* started as a largely Delhi-centric collective to make hostel regulations less restrictive for women students but is now known nationally and has gone beyond this mandate to respond to emerging crises. *Girls at Dhabas* began in Karachi and spread to other cities. They also had a large reach online with conversations that were often South Asia centric. In our interviews for this article, the subject of friendship came up again and again convincing us that it deserved an engagement of its own. Specifically, we cite here our interviews with Sadia Khatri, co-founder of *Girls at Dhabas*, and Salma Ansari, co-founder of *Parcham*. Additionally, in 2021, we edited an anthology of essays, poems, and artwork on friendship by South Asian women and genderqueer people, and this process also informs our engagement with this article.

Taking off from these, we circulated a short questionnaire on an online Indian feminist listserv where we asked for stories of peoples' friendships, the joys, the frictions, and the solidarities. We invited feminist activists, broadly defined to include feminist academics, journalists, social workers, health professionals, lawyers, and people in allied fields, to respond to this questionnaire. We felt that additional narratives, even if brief, would allow us to layer our observations on friendship in relation to feminist activism. Nineteen feminist activists filled the short questionnaire, and we followed this up with semi-structured interviews with four of them – scholar activist Vibhuti Patel, theatre director and writer A. Mangai, theatre writer and activist Neha Singh, and queer feminist activist Pramada Menon. These interviews enabled a more focused engagement with friendship that allowed us to arrive at generational understanding of how friendships have historically shaped feminist activism in the subcontinent.

All of the participants in the study are educated and nearly all of them have post-graduate degrees including some doctorates. They are largely middle and upper class and many are well known in feminist circles in South Asia which implies access to both networks and cultural capital. Participants come from different religious backgrounds Hindu, Muslim, Christian and Buddhist though some are non-practising. All but one identify as cis-gender women. This description is true of us, the authors, as well. This homogeneity of location then is a limitation of the study.

We use our interlocutors' names with their permission. On the survey too we explicitly asked those who filled it whether they would like us to use their names and if not whether there was a specific pseudonym that they would prefer us to use. We even had an option for them to have their names against some responses and not against others. We wanted to both recognise the contribution of individual narratives as well as allow for anonymity where preferred. Every single person chose to have their names mentioned and only one chose to anonymise the friend she spoke about. The choice to use their names then is one that explicitly acknowledges that the process of knowledge creation is a collaborative one, especially in the context of the subject we have chosen here, where the feminists we interview are as much experts as they might be interlocuters.

Our effort has been to illuminate some of the nuances of the connections between friendship and activism. We sought to understand how friendships are implicated in and impact the collective stance of an organisation or movement, how friendship and activism interact to produce messy, but often generative, ideas of gender activism even as there is an ever-increasing fear that any arguments within the group might undermine feminist politics within populist regimes.

FINDING FRIENDS, FINDING FEMINISM

Despite a growing body of scholarship within what could be called Friendship Studies (Coates, 1996; Devere, 2013; Ali and Flatt, 2017) friendship is notoriously difficult to define. A large and diverse set of relationships that are often characterised by mutual care, reciprocity, and trust get referred to as friendships. Some friendships last, others are fleeting; some are based on having a shared past, while others are all about becoming together with; some start out as colleagues and find friendship along the way, others who are friends find opportunities to work together; some friendships are built on a sense of shared politics - a common purpose, some others are founded on the ability to disagree without malice, and these are not mutually exclusive. Feminism, too, is difficult to define and is really feminisms in the plural rather than any one thing. While broadly, feminism seeks the social, political and economic equality for all persons regardless of sex or gender, and is necessarily intersectional, or at least aspires to be, feminist theory and ideologies encompass many different positions and often competing perspectives - with a number of them having branched out of and in response to other theories, including feminist theories.

Feminist activism has often begun in people's homes, as everyday pushbacks, minor disobediences, as tactics to navigate heteropatriarchal family structures; sometimes literally the first meetings of feminist organisations are held in people's homes over cups of tea and often involve the provision of hospitality to those who have come from elsewhere. Vibhuti Patel, who has been part of the women's movement in India since the 1970s and has played a pivotal role in documenting it, in our interview with her, gestures to the lack of resources within the movement which meant that their own resources had to be mobilised. She talks of the reciprocity implicit in early activist meetings and the ways in which activism then translated into friendships.

> If you come to Mumbai, you stay in my house. If I go to Chennai, I stay in her house. … We also felt like we were being disowned by our families – one, for becoming feminist, two for not getting married or marrying a person not of their choice. So the only thing we could fall back on were our friends.

She talked about the ways in which activist connections provided both a home in strange cities as well as mitigated the possibilities of loneliness. Her narrative suggests that arriving in a new city already connected to feminist networks cushioned one from possible alienation. She speaks of finding friendship with Sonal Shukla, who founded the Vacha Charitable Trust and was a founding member of the Forum Against Oppression of Women, when she relocated from Baroda to Bombay (now Mumbai), 'I never felt lonely because we had our own feminist socialist women's group. We also started a feminist network and newsletter in English'. Flavia Agnes (2021) in an obituary for a few feminists who had passed writes that in 1981 when there was an initiative to start a drop-in centre for women survivors of domestic violence, Sonal Shuka offered a room in her home and the centre functioned from her home for two years. Agnes acknowledges her own debt to Sonal Shukla who she writes, 'hand-held me while I transitioned from a middle class Christian battered housewife to a feminist lawyer. She was the driving force for me to resume my education and complete my graduation'.

Salma Ansari, the co-founder of *Parcham,* who began her activist journey in the 21st century, 40 years after Vibhuti Patel began hers, told us that the first meeting of the organisation happened at her home in 2012, she reflects on how her sisters' friendship with Sabah (Khan) and Aquila (Khan), both feminist activists and co-founders of *Parcham*, led her to become a part of the group and eventually to the formation of the football team in Mumbra. Many of our interlocutors marked finding feminisms and finding friends as concurrent processes. While some of them formed deep friendships with those they initially met as colleagues, fellow activists, or professional collaborators; for some others, it was the friendships that drew them into activism and allowed them space to continually re-evaluate their politics and their praxis. Reminiscing about her initial forays into the world of feminism through her association with an independent left-oriented women's organisation, A. Mangai, founding member of theatre groups, Voicing Silence and Marappachi, both committed to increasing the participation of women in theatre and director of over 30 plays, says,

> When I was in my 20s there was a lot happening politically, but it was also a personally challenging time for me. I was grappling with my own family's opinions on caste, and my own inner questions about the choice of a partner, I also had my kids quite early. Therefore, it was very reassuring to find this women's

organisation. I was taken under the wings of Mythili Sivaraman who was extremely active at that point… I would literally run to the organisation's office two streets away from my residence at that time.

Speaking about the joys of ever-evolving friendships and how integral fun has been to them, co-founder of CREA, a feminist human rights organisation, Pramada Menon notes,

> I think that one of the things that really has started striking me, especially now that I'm in my late 50s, is that some of my close friendships have been formed through work. Often we say that friendships at work don't happen because there's competition. So if I look at one set of us who have been friends from the time that I started working, when I was 22… Knowing that you've spent a lot of your youth together, and you have had formative conversations, and all of us have arrived in whatever form or shape. We're not competing with each other. We can still go out and then dance in public because that's how we remember each other at that point in our lives. And it's not as though we don't have professional disagreements, which we do; but there is a huge level of commitment to being there for each other.

However, friendships are not merely built within supportive workplaces and activist organisations; they are forged in moments of crises and amid frustrations. Vibhuti Patel marks a moment in the socio-political history of the South Asian subcontinent as fermenting feminist collaborations,

> In the post-emergency period in India, there was tremendous anger against the gross violation of human rights. All of us who were active in various movements came together – whether it was a youth movement or student movement or the Sampoorna Kranti movement in Bihar or tribal movement, or the then newly emerging Dalit movement – to raise our voices against this. However, there was a sense of suffocation among the women who were seen as subsidiary or just playing a supportive role – you only cook for your comrades, you do the fundraising, you translate pamphlets. There was this famous joke in those times that encapsulated how the women felt – The man is an article, the woman is a footnote.

Neha Singh, who went on to initiate the *Why Loiter* movement which exhorts women to reclaim public space marks herself as one of the thousands of young feminists galvanised in the aftermath of the horrific 2012 gang rape and murder of a 22-year-old physiotherapy intern in New Delhi. She says,

> My first feminist collaboration was with Rasika Agashe, an actor-director who wanted to make a protest play in response to the Jyoti Singh rape and murder in 2013. I wrote and acted in her play. We still have a wonderful relationship and support, co-create and cheer each other's work.

For the activists we spoke to, engaging with other feminists, working with them, and consciously building a relationship with them then allowed for their feminisms to evolve. Feminist researcher and activist Vimala Ramachandran recounts in response to our survey questions:

> Being a part of a women's empowerment programme in the late 1980s, I met young rural and urban women who were involved in building women's collectives. They questioned me all the time, forced me to think – at the same time they showered so much love and care. They reached out when I went through any personal or professional crisis, bouts of burnout and depression. It is over 30 years now – and these bonds continue to be strong, loving and as always argumentative.

Many of our interlocutors marked the collaborations and friendships engendered by feminist activism. These collaborations produced academic work, policy documents, plays, books, songs, organisations, publications houses, legal services, support groups which have contributed to transforming gendered ideologies, legal frameworks, and state policies. Academic and activist Usha Raman, in her engagement with our survey questions, notes,

> What I gain most from my feminist friends-the permission to mix spheres, to easily move from the professional to the personal to the emotional to the political, without explanation and without signposting. The group of women in the Network of Women in Media, India, for instance, is a wonderful, fierce collective that I constantly draw inspiration from through the daily act of texting and reading others' texts on a WhatsApp group. One is seen and acknowledged.

The Network of Women in Media, India (NWMI) that Usha Raman refers to is a voluntary, informal collective that serves as a forum for women in media professions. In the twenty years since its founding in the early 2000s, the network has consistently taken public positions on issues of journalists' rights and media ethics addressing among other things workplace harassment, press freedom and portrayal of women in media.

Finding friends and finding feminisms are processes that are ongoing and dynamic. Our interviews and survey responses suggest that feminist activism has created spaces for friendships to grow. Friendships are forged in spaces of belonging but also in moments of crises and from the frustrations of not belonging in other spaces. As many of the narratives suggest, these friendships offer solace, support, and the structures that might facilitate the possibilities of taking risks.

What our narratives suggest is that these friendships were joyous, exciting and deeply transformative. They facilitated choices for women, offered ways in which women might resist their natal and marital families. Friendships then provide alternate ways of belonging and of building solidarity against the patriarchy. But beyond creating both security and the possibility of resistance, these friendships are deeply relevant for themselves, as relationships that are central to peoples' lives, outside of kinship, offering new ways to think about and imagine human connections.

FUN *IN* AND *AS* FEMINIST ACTIVISM

Writer and activist, Shals Mahajan in an email tribute to Sonal Shukla and Kamla Bhasin, founder of Sangat (South Asian Network of Gender Activists and Trainers), after their passing, recounts a moment from the Indian Association of Women's Studies Conference in 1995 in Jaipur,

> We had practised a song that Sonal had written and wanted to sing to Kamla. I had begun to know Sonal that year and had heard of Kamla and was totally intrigued by this older and absolutely riveting and charming feminist, not only writing a new song for the conference but preparing us to sing it to Kamla by way of greeting as soon as we met. Who meets like this, right? Apparently feminists do! …

> And then there was this woman, wearing her gorgeous hair cut short, bristling with energy and with laughter and joy in every line of her face, marching towards us. And as soon as she met Sonal, she burst into song – *Amma dekh, Amma dekh tera movement bigda jaaye! Amma dekh, O behna dekh!* (Mom watch/look, mom watch your movement is getting corrupted! Mom watch, O my sister watch!) When she was done, she said, *Sonal, yeh maine tere liye likha hai*, (I wrote this for you) and Sonal said, *maine bhi tere liye likha hai* (I've also written something for you)! And she sang her song.

> It was magic. In my mind the image of these two fun loving powerful and absolutely *zindadil* (exuberant) feminists walking up to not only hug each other but writing and singing for each other, and with each other, this has been the image I have carried with me since. If I was not in love with feminists and feminisms till then, I would've been so then.[1]

Drawing on the work of Gould (2009) and Howe (2013), Kareem Khubchandani (2019) writes 'activism develops and is sustained by erotics and intimacy. The intensities of being in collective space with others – laughter, flirtations, and silent sadness evidence how politics land on/impact the body, and how bodies shape and make themselves in relation to political structures' (2). Mangai in speaking about her friendship with feminist activist, writer and historian V. Geetha draws attention to the embodied nature of friendship,

> Most of my friendships are formed in spaces where we loosen up our body and voice. The key friendship I can recall is my friendship with V. Geetha. Even though Geetha and I knew each other, we waited 10 years to become friends. We were in Sri Lanka together and on one van ride from Trincomalee to Colombo around 1998-99 I invited her to come see one of my rehearsals. She gifted me a book. I think that's the first gift I have received when somebody came to see a play. I treasure that copy of the book. From 2007, we worked on plays together - burning the midnight oil, editing, reading… They nicknamed us Hyper One and Hyper Two because of our energies! Geetha wrote close to five plays and I directed them. We have both written about the take-backs from these collaborations. I mean, we had our own shared vision, but we had different platforms, we still have different platforms…

In the same vein, academic and filmmaker Anjali Monteiro in her response to our survey speaks fondly of her friendship with N, whom she does not name,

> I worked with N in the late 1970s, on a series of media materials on women's reproductive health. She was over 13 years older than me but we developed a very strong bond. I spent hours and hours with her, scriptwriting. She was also a singer and musician and the work we did was full of poetry and music.

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[1] Shals Mahajan, Extract from email post titled, 'Sonal Shukla and Kamla Bhasin - A Memory' to listserv feministsindia on 25 September 2021. Translations in this narrative are ours.

> Working with her opened me up to a new world and new cultural influences. I learnt to sing from her and 44 years later I still hum those tunes and sing to myself. Her mother was a very strong and supportive person, with whom she lived and I began to realise that being a feminist meant seeing feminism in unlikely locations and that it is important to recognise our debt to the generations before us.

Speaking about the possibilities of intergenerational friendship made possible because of the movement, Neha Singh of the Why Loiter movement muses,

> I think the oldest loiterer who has ever joined us is Pradnya Bhatawadekar who is around 70 years old. She was also in the play that Sachit (Puranik) directed called *Loitering*. I am also friends with my co-actors who are much older or much younger than me. The people that I'm friends with, even if they belong to a different generation and have different life experiences, constantly question the norms. That is what attracts me to people.

If movements and activist workplaces were places where feminists nurtured deep and lasting friendships, friendships, in turn, became places to springboard into the world of activism. *Girls at Dhabas* is an initiative by young Pakistani women that began in Karachi in 2015. Sadia Khatri, one of the founders, posted a photograph of herself at a *dhaba,* a roadside food stall, a space that is often considered masculine, and soon her friends joined her. *Girls at Dhabas* went on to organise street cricket, cycling rallies, and hangout sessions at *dhabas*. If fun is an essential part of these women's claim to public space, so is friendship. Sadia articulates not just the pleasures of doing activism with friends, but also why disagreeing with fellow activists might be easier if one shared a friendship:

> In any sort of political movement or organising that I have been a part of, the foundations of one's politics are so much stronger when there is actual friendship and love and care between the individuals. This does not mean you have to reach a political consensus or agree on everything. It just means genuine interest in knowing how the other person arrives at their politics. Within *Girls at Dhabas* it was a symbiotic relationship – talking about public space, sharing the pleasure and leisure in our lives – that enabled us to trust each other.

These bonds did not preclude stepping out of the comfort of established friendships and creating space to build relationships of mutual trust, support and love with a wider group of people.

Friendships were fostered across organisations and even across national borders. Feminist activists who had never met in person became friends. Neha Singh speaks about her friendship with the authors of the book *Why Loiter* (2011) that launched the movement,

> My second and most life-changing relationship has been with Shilpa (Phadke), Sameera, and Shilpa (Ranade). First, because I read their book *Why Loiter* in 2014, and six months later by actually meeting them, sharing the photos and stories from all our loitering sessions, and then with them taking part in our loitering sessions. The relationship solidified over the years with our constant support for each other in professional and personal ways, and I cherish the amazing bond we have.

Manahil, an undergrad student from Pakistan, underscores how even chance encounters in online spaces with fellow feminists that sometimes allow for both a fleeting sense of connection as well as a more lasting sense of having found a space in which one belongs. In her answer to our survey, she writes,

> In Pakistan, we have this all-female Facebook group called 'Soul Bitches,' and it's basically just an online community where women have the freedom to just… be. It's a place where women share their problems, their fears, their aspirations, and just their life in general with hundreds of other women that they have. It's so fascinating how – because of our collective lived experiences and even trauma – women are able to come together and offer support and friendship to people they have never even met.

The *Parcham Collective* is a local organisation based out of Mumbra, a predominantly Muslim locality in Thane district in Maharashtra, India. The suburb of Mumbra was where a large number of Muslims from the city of Mumbai were pushed to after the horrific communal violence in the aftermath of the Babri Masjid demolition in 1992[2]. In the decade since its inception in 2012, *Parcham* has engaged with women and youth in Mumbra through a variety of initiatives from football training for girls to a mobile suitcase library. And even as they strive to organically address issues within the neighbourhood, they are equally focussed on reaching out to those outside in order to transform the stereotypical understanding of Mumbra as a Muslim ghetto. In fact, Salma Ansari views

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[2] On December 6, 1992, Hindu fundamentalists demolished the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya, India. In the aftermath of this event, there was communal violence in many parts of the country, including Mumbai.

friendship as being central to the kind of activism that the organisation engages in: 'Parcham is an organisation that attempts to build friendships. It tries to overcome narrow-mindedness and build a society of equity' (quoted from Phadke and Kanagasabai 2021).

If friendship is central to Parcham's activism, so is fun. The organisation began with a girls' football initiative to encourage girls to lay claims to public space for leisure. Similarly the Why Loiter movement and the Girls at Dhabas also advocate for women's access to both pleasure and leisure, by loitering in public spaces and hanging out at dhabas traditionally the preserve of men. Public space in the South Asian context is carefully surveilled and so such claims to public space for fun are inherently political claims. Fun as something that is relevant to feminist politics in ways that transcend class is an argument that is increasingly being heard in relation to feminist activism in South Asia (Kirmani, 2020; Phadke, 2020). The claiming of public space for fun has been read as collective acts of citizenship rather than as individualised actions of middle- and upper-class women that might be seen within the frames of neoliberal consumption (Phadke, 2020). For instance, Kirmani's (2020) research engages with claims to fun in Lyari, a working-class neighbourhood in Karachi. While feminism and feminist politics have, at times, acquired the 'reputation' of being austere or joyless, the experience of anyone who has been part of feminist activism knows that fun is intrinsic to it and always has been. In the narratives, in our interviews, we hear just how much feminist activists enjoyed the spaces they enabled, the camaraderie, the singing and dancing, and the sheer joy of being part of a transformative politics. It reminds us of the slogan used by the suffragette movement that claimed 'bread for all, and roses too' making it clear that the desire for beauty, for joy, for poetry, music, song, and dance have always been part of feminist activism.

FEMINISM, FRICTIONS, AND FRACTURES

Because feminist spaces are spaces of joy, fun, and even euphoria, one tends to elide the reality that they are also spaces of frictions, disagreements, judgment, and sometimes fractures, both those that might be mended and those that might irretrievable. This is true of both individual friendships, relationships within organisations, and between organisations. As feminist spaces grow and expand new challenges come up. Sadia speaks about how when Girls at Dhabas grew in scale and began including members who were not friends or acquaintances, the group had to find new ways of building trust and confidence in one another and the collective. She spoke of a three-day workshop that they organised to discuss their ideas about the collective as also 'to speak about who each of us was, where we were from and what mattered to us as individuals'.

Individual relationships with and within organisations are attended by not just solidarity but also frictions. We argue that there are frictions generated by differences in location as well as those along the axes of class, caste, religion that produce power differentials and circumscribe friendship and feminist activism. Along with this are the anxieties that attend being seen as good or bad feminists and being judged for acting or not acting in particular situations, for speaking up or not speaking up in particular situations.

In recent years, the divisive conversations around #MeToo have challenged friendships amongst feminist activists. Mangai reflects on one such case, that took place in an institute where she was teaching and the brief period of uneasiness in her friendship with V. Geetha.

> The person accused was our common friend. Geetha took the lead and drafted an open column and signed a letter for action against him. I did not sign that letter. As a response, many friends got together and published a statement defending him. I remember getting a call asking me 'Why are you not signing it?' I said, because I don't feel it's right. I couldn't sign that either. There were a few months of silence between Geetha and me and a few other Comrades. Later, I met Geetha at a memorial meeting. We couldn't talk, but we could hug. That embarrassed, hesitant moment was quite intense for me - and I am sure for Geetha too. And then I think after almost six months, Geetha and I made a date and we sat down and shared. We knew that we didn't want to lose each other. We have witnessed many such instances. I think it is one of the most beautiful moments that we shared.

Mangai reflects on the capacity to talk across very charged and also very public differences in a friendship and what they have meant. She does not suggest that there was a resolution, but rather that the friendship survived their different positions.

Mangai acknowledges that it is difficult to rebuild broken bridges, but one could find pathways that allow people to co-exist without having to work together again. She says, 'It's okay to wash dirty linen in public, but can we do it with a pinch of compassion?'. Mangai suggests that rather than friendship, 'I keep going back to Richa Nagar's formulation of radical vulnerability. I find it effective in building solidarity'. Richa Nagar et al. (2016) place the notion of 'radical vulnerability' at the heart of feminist friendships and collaborations. Collective commitment to

continually acknowledge one's complicity in the very structures that one seeks to dismantle, Nagar *et al.* argue, allows for a politics that is alert to inequities, and consequently is ever-willing to evolve. She writes,

> In common usage, the idea of accountability often implies responsibility toward those people or issues that we feel some kind of ethical commitment to. Radical vulnerability builds upon that sense of responsibility by requiring deep relationality—that is, sustained entanglements defined by trust and friendships that make sharing of authority both necessary and organic (512).

Responses to frictions might be seen in silences and erasures, in pushing things under the proverbial carpet and not discussing them. But also in confrontations, in discussions that move forward, even if differences are not resolved.

While feminists have tended to centre friendship, social movement scholars have often expressed reservations about friendship. Jo Freeman (1972-73) has, in the context of the American women's movement, pointed out that in the absence of formal structures informal cliques govern organisations and most often in an inequitable fashion. She insists that it is the structurelessness of a group allows for informal hierarchies to thrive without being recognised as such. She goes on to argue that while informal networks are neither new nor specific to the women's movement in the 1960s, it might augur well to remember that it was these informal structures – like the locker room – that disallowed women and some men from accessing power and social reward. In fact, the women's movement has fought to have structures formalised in order to confront the exclusion of women.

A statement written by women from marginalised castes and communities to explain why they were leaving the *Pinjra Tod* movement, an informal collective in Delhi, India that challenges curfews in women's hostels, questioned the assumption of sisterhood in the group and said that the movement had failed them (Lama and Maharaj, 2019). The argument that networks create elites even within feminist spaces finds resonance in Rupali Bansode's (2013) article, where she writes,

> The academic discipline of Women's Studies where sisterhood is celebrated has faced many accusations from Dalit women activists and writers, for serving only the 'upper-caste/class feminists' needs and 'not doing justice to Dalit women's perspectives'. The silence from non-Dalit practitioners on the rape cases in Haryana and Bihar outraged many Dalit women's groups.

Yogesh Maitreya (2014) speaks directly to the divides that preclude friendship across caste, arguing that casual interactions between Savarna students and Dalit students within university setting rarely evolve into deeper friendships where one feels comfortable enough to share what he calls a 'personal epistemology of caste'. Christina Dhanaraj (2016) adds to this critique,

> To view us as fascinating subjects for learning and use our extension of friendship as an opportunity to gain access into our narratives and worldviews, only to *other* us later; to promise unfaltering allyship but buckle at the slightest calling-out; … to rub shoulders with us at rallies and protests, but celebrate festivals that are inherently oppressive to our communities; to not question your family's privileged position and continue to reap the benefits it gives you – none of these is solidarity. And more importantly, to not stand up for us when we really need you to and fail us when push comes to shove – that is ally-theatre at its best.

Asha Achuthan (forthcoming) also writes about the connections between friendship and allyship and what happens when the links break.

> 'Women looking out for each other' was the latest description thrown at me in some anger by a friend of 17 years, as a reproach aimed at how I had moved away from her. I had moved cities, but was not expected to have moved away. I had enacted my version of 'coming out', but it had been received grammatically, albeit enthusiastically, and sisterhood was re-asserted as binding glue, also grammatically, emphatically. And because I did not really have a spouse or children—those stable assets/ burdens—to show, my share of sisterhood burdens was of course larger. The anger at my inability to fulfil them was proportionately more. And so I ask my easily feminist friend (not so easy for me), in reciprocal anger— does sisterhood stand in for allyship? Do your milestones, and your precarities, look like mine? Are mine visible to you? … Can we, really, be friends?

Achuthan's words invoke the tropes of sisterhood and what they might mean in relation to differences, of sexualities, of families, of households. Such expressions of feminist anger compel us to examine our claims to allyship in turn creating a space to interrogate existing hierarchies and reflect on possibilities for an inclusive feminist politics.

Not just caste and sexuality, but religion too has been the basis of hierarchies and discrimination as well. Vibhuti Patel speaks of a heart-breaking fracture premised on communalism,

> My boyfriend and fellow political activist, whom I married in course of 5 years of working together, was a Muslim. I went to London for a postdoctoral fellowship in 1992. My colleagues were jubilant and said it brought great prestige. This was in 1992-93 when the Babri Masjid was destroyed. When I came back in 1993, I got distant looks from everyone, the atmosphere was very difficult and I felt very lonely. It was communalism. Perhaps they did not know before that I had an inter-religious marriage. They knew me as a fearless feminist who participated in demonstrations and rallies, went to jail, or actively intervened for support to women in distress. And the first time I myself was facing trauma, I did not have agency and I resigned from my job.

The foregoing narratives focus on questions of hurt, of betrayal within what were seen to be feminist spaces, but also point to embedded structural hierarchies. Acknowledging these fractures allows space for us to name the 'inequalities within our feminisms' (Phadke, 2022: 190). Feminism might then be seen as providing 'the space for a productive exploration of conflict' (Winch, 2013: 198). In fact, Winch (2013), cites Perrier (2012) who sees antagonism as critically productive, not as something to be 'overcome in order to enable kinder feelings, but rather as a permanent condition' (198). Winch reads Perrier as suggesting that for feminism, the goal is not friendship between women but rather the struggle for justice and liberation and that antagonism is central to 'sustaining political movements' (198). Sara Ahmed (2014) reflecting on feminist hurt and the ways in which feminism hurts, and notes that

> We might need to attend to bad feelings not in order to overcome them, but to learn by how we are affected by what comes near, which means achieving a different relationship to all our wanted and unwanted feelings as a political as well as life resource… Bad feelings are creative responses to histories that are unfinished. They are not the only responses. And we are not finished.

Friendship among feminist activists is not immune to disagreement, distance and disenchantment but holds within it the possibility of reparation. Even where fractures are unable to be healed the articulation of dissent, of contestation, is important to a dynamic feminist politics.

Feminist relationships, including friendships, are situated within socio-political hierarchies. Even as we recognise the strides that have been made possible by feminist activism not just along axes of gender but in other structures as well, and the individual transformations and sheer joy that have been engendered by friendships in these spaces; we must acknowledge that friendships by themselves have often been circumscribed by same kinds of caste, class and community hierarchies that attend other institutions. While friendship has the potential to challenge the hierarchies embedded in kinship, it has not always been successful in doing so. And so feminist spaces need to consciously challenge the ways in which friendships might replicate kinship structures premised on inclusion and exclusion. This is something that we need to strive to work on as a movement that aims at justice. The constant questioning and challenges are generative for not just feminist activism but also for friendship.

FEMINIST SOLIDARITIES IN SOUTH ASIA

South Asian feminisms have had to grapple with the use of the term South Asia itself with all its geopolitical implications. The space of South Asia has been deeply contested and fraught politically, and this is something that feminists of the region have had to contend with. One of us, Shilpa, was at the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID) conference in Bangkok in 2005, where she also participated in the South Asia Caucus where there were about 300 participants of which over 200 were Indians. It was a stark visual reminder of that the shadow of a dominant 'big brother' India played out in feminist spaces as well. Even while recognising these imbalances, feminists in the region have forged deep bonds with each other in ways that allow them to grapple with the politics of their own countries and the region.

Chhachhi and Abeysekera (2015) quote Kamla Bhasin and Nighat Said Khan's lyrical description of a workshop held in a village in Bangladesh in 1986, which they mark as one of the first spaces where South Asian feminists spent time with other women from the region creating the possibilities for a 'new Southasian feminist consciousness' to emerge (557). Chhachhi and Abeysekera also point out that it was the first time that Bangladesh and Pakistani feminists were meeting after the Bangladeshi war of independence in 1971. They recount the discovery of cultural similarities as well as those in their own life histories creating a sense of recognition and personal connections. Chhachhi and Abeysekera write that women from countries with active hostility (India and Pakistan, and Pakistan and Bangladesh) 'tied *rakhis* on each other's wrists, sealing a pact of sisterhood' (557). They

lovingly recount subsequent workshops with South Asian feminists that built and cemented lifelong friendships creating 'chosen affective kin relationships' (559).

The South Asian vision of sisterhood seen in Chhachhi and Abeysekera's narrative of tying *rakhis*, a North Indian Hindu ritual that invokes the 'protection' of brothers for sisters, must be read against their articulated desire to create chosen kin relationships. On the one hand, the enactment of such a ritual when performed between women from warring countries can be read as an act of solidarity that subverts the intentions of the patriarchal ritual by suggesting that women can be each other's security. However, viewed from the perspective of 2022 and the events that have transpired in the foregoing decades when right wing fundamentalisms in the region have further imposed the upholding of familial ties, the marking friendship as being *like family,* as opposed to challenging the primacy of familial affiliations might be seen as short sighted and eventually perhaps even counter-productive. There have been feminist and queer efforts at reflecting on the idea of kinship as not 'always already heterosexual' (Butler, 2002) challenging heteropatriarchal narratives and notions of belonging.[3] What we might suggest, of course with the benefit of hindsight, is to assert more radically, friendship as a vector of affective relations.

Subha Wijesiriwardena's narrative furthers imaginations of South Asian feminist relationships. She writes:

> There is a photograph, from 1984. It is a group of smiling, beautiful, young South Asian women. If you look closely, you may recognize some icons, as they were in their 20s and 30s: Kamla Bhasin, Amrita Chhachhi, Khushi Kabir, Nighat Said Khan, Sunila Abeysekera. In this photograph, I used to see our feminist leaders, the feminists who shaped our South Asian feminist identities—or some versions of it— for many of us, in many ways. Now, I also see some young women, like myself, alive with the idea of friendship. Friendship, which gives courage to the idea of possibility. … When friendship between nations and peoples seemed impossible, these women forged unimaginably everlasting bonds and commitments to each others' work—through wars, peace processes and regime changes. They forged transnational feminisms and networks of solidarity underpinned by material, real-life commitments; they cared for each others' children, they took each other into their homes, they were there whenever personal tragedy, or indeed political tragedy, struck in the lives of one another. (forthcoming)

Chhachhi and Abeysekera also talked about interventions in knowledge production which not only brought in regional analysis but also challenged academic hegemony by producing output in multiple forms including songs. Mangai also discusses cultural work that creates connections,

> The most enduring, creative friendship for me is the one we evolved over almost 30 years in Sri Lanka. Suriya Women's Group in Batticaloa, Sri Lanka and Sitralekha Maunaguru in particular has been special to me. Over these years of consistent cultural work with the group, we have created many works. In the course of such work, newer friendships and bondings with younger women, artists and scholars have evolved. Vasuki Jeyasankar, Sarala Emmanuel, Vijayalakshmi Sekar, Amara, Kumari and other members of the cultural troupe have become my close-knit circle of friends.

More recently movements that claim public space have also built cross border connections and collaborations via digital spaces. Sadia Khatri says,

> Loitering on the internet, one ends up talking to people whom you would never have talked to in real life… Someone from India messages or someone from Nepal. Even though I don't know what that person looks like, there is a moment of being seen, of mutual recognition. Jasmeen is someone I met online. Knowing that *Blank Noise* has been around for so much longer one could ask questions like how do you sustain a collective?

The Jasmeen she refers to is Jasmeen Patheja who started the *Blank Noise* initiative, against street sexual harassment in Bangalore, India. One of us, Shilpa, has also collaborated with the *Girls at Dhabas* on loitering initiatives. In 2015 and 2016, we ran online and street campaigns asking women across the world to loiter and share photographs of themselves having fun in public space. This collaboration enabled a conversation across our fraught borders. Neha Singh also speaks warmly about her friendship with Sadia Khatri from *Girls at Dhabas*, also a group that has taken a lot of inspiration from the book, *Why Loiter* (Phadke *et al.*, 2011)

> Sadia and I have been friends online only. But we've also become friends through all those singing videos and all that I put up – she's like, Oh my God, I love this song, because she also loves Bollywood songs. We've had a lot of discussions about how we negotiate and navigate with our parents, relatives and

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[3] A deeper engagement with work around the idea of chosen family (Weston, 1991) is beyond the scope of this article.

neighbours when we go out loitering. Asking is this gonna really change anything? But then constantly doing it and then engaging with more and more people.

bell hooks (1986) talks about the difference between support and solidarity arguing that support could well be occasional but solidarity requires a sustained ongoing commitment. Chhachhi and Abeysekera's (2015) essay traces the radical shifts that South Asian feminists made to challenging geo-political truisms in the region. They recount the ways in which feminists from the region made statements and overtures that contradicted those of their governments. In 1996, a Pakistani women's organisation, the *Women's Action Forum* (WAF) came out with a statement of public apology for war crimes of the Pakistani army in Bangladesh in 1971. The regional feminists came out with a South Asian Feminist Declaration in 1989 at a meeting in Bangalore, India 'campaigning for a joint charter of women's rights, sharing visions and developing alternatives to existing development models at the South Asian level from a feminist perspective' (SACW, 1989). This was revised and updated at a meeting in Negombo, Sri Lanka, in 2006. In 2010, ahead of an official South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) meeting in Delhi, South Asian feminists came out with a booklet A Feminist Vision of a People's Union of South Asia (FVPUSA) that endorsed the idea of a peaceful South Asian region. More recently, and as indicated in our interviews, we have seen collaborations and the articulations of friendship across borders around feminist activists claims to public space. Digital spaces have also contributed to making possible some of these connections and the building of a robust dialogue even as governments of South Asian countries turn increasingly hostile to one another. The collaborations and connections we have engaged with above, some of them built over decades, reflect the earnest desire, the willingness to take risks to build solidarities across different kinds of borders and boundaries.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

When women find feminist spaces, whether in the 1970s when funds were hard to come by and food came from your kitchen and one slept on mattresses on the floor, or in the 2010s and 2020s where strategising, conversations and connections are made via digital devices and social media, there is a recognition, a liberation even and the joy of having one's voice be heard. Our interviews suggest that for individuals these spaces were transformative, affording new chosen connections through friendship and creating structures of support separate from those tied to families. Friendship as the basis of social connections offered an opportunity to reimagine and restructure our relationships with each other and the world.

The pressing question that arises then is: have we in fact made inroads into challenging existing structural hierarchies and reimagining our relationships? The answer must be yes and no. Because families have been central to the ways in which we think about closeness, the language that feminist activists have used to note the value and importance of their friends in their lives, was sisterhood - the creation of chosen bonds the relevance of which was emphasised by describing them in the language of kin relations. For individuals these chosen bonds were deeply transformative providing as they did spaces to belong and the possibilities of becoming. However, even as friendship, given the element of choice, offered the possibility of radical transformation, access to these spaces and structures continued to be circumscribed by class, caste and community. Even as some found a form of freedom and liberation in these spaces, structurally little changed. As the decades have rolled by, there is greater recognition of these limitations. The language of sisterhood has been challenged in various spaces and has been replaced in some ways by the newer term allyship. Allyship continues to be fraught, but it is a term that offers distance from the language of kinship. There is recognition that friendships within feminism are not just embedded in the same structures of power that they challenge but that they may contribute to their continued existence. However, the frictions and fractures that are very much part of the terrain of feminist activism and friendships enable the challenging of these structures of power.

It is important to recognise both the value of striving to dialogue across difference but also that sometimes antagonisms are productive in the challenges they issue, demanding that we look anew at our ways of imagining a more just world. The experience of forging South Asian solidarities since the 1980s onwards yield heart-warming stories of friendship and narratives of the ways in which feminists in the region sought to counter the hostile geopolitical formations engendered by their states. Their collaborations allowed them to take risks in challenging their states openly and publicly. The 2000s have brought new collaborations not despite, but because, feminist activists are learning to be attentive to an ever more shifting terrain and confrontational politics, even as they recognise the need to unite against the authoritarianism that looms large over the South Asian region.

Feminist scholarship has tended to interrogate the neoliberal aspects of individuation that underlies an uncritical celebration of friendship. While it is important to recognise the pitfalls of romanticising friendships, it is equally important to recognise that deep, enduring friendships underlie feminist activism and these have made possible social change. To acknowledge the potential of friendship to build communities and enact a transnational analytic

of care is to be conscious of the ways in which friendships have been deeply transformative, not just at an individual level, but for feminist activism within countries, in the region, and even globally.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Gender, Caste and Subjectivity: Revisiting the #MeToo Movement in India

Anandita Pan [1]*

ABSTRACT

The #MeToo movement has claimed to mark a 'new era in Indian feminism' by introducing feminist articulations into the quotidian through the powerful use of social media. The 'sharing' of survivor stories has served as a means to challenge the taboo of victimhood while also creating the possibility for solidarity. The #MeToo movement in India claims inheritance of previous movements such as the 2009 Pink *Chaddi*[1] movement against moral policing, the 2011 Slut Walk movement against victim blaming, the 2015 *Pinjra Tod* movement against sexist curfew in hostels, and the 2017 *Bekhauf Azadi*.[2] All these movements from which #MeToo claims heredity from, are movements proclaiming women's right to access public space.

The article will delve into the positionality of the speaker; the role of intersectional identities of caste, class, and gender in determining subjecthood, and solidarity. In its focus on gender inequality and sexual violence, the #MeToo movement, ironically, reproduces casteist, classist and sexist hierarchies. What seems to drive the #MeToo movement in India is the anxiety regarding women's confinement in the domestic sphere and the resultant inability to 'speak'. This understanding categorically erases Dalit women, whose lives as well as oppression, encompass both private and public spaces. This article highlights the latent Brahmanism of the #MeToo movement by examining the erasure of Dalit women.

Keywords: #MeToo, gender, Dalit feminism, caste, Brahmanical patriarchy

INTRODUCTION

In 2015, students across Delhi came out on to the streets to protest against the restrictive rules imposed on female students residing in hostels in Jamia Milia Islamia university. The protest was named *Pinjra Tod* (Break the Cage). What started off as dissent against the curfew in girls' hostels, excessive surveillance, and so on, evolved to incorporate larger issues impacting women in academic settings across universities all across India (Barua, 2020). A major point of debate was the differential treatment of boys and girls at the hostel and the narrative of 'protection' propounded by the authorities for imposing surveillance. What is more interesting is how *Pinjra Tod* actually broke out of its conceptual framework and expanded to other spheres as well. Some of the notable instances where *Pinjra Tod* raised its voice are the Justice for Jisha and Delta Meghwal's rape and murder.[3] Two important aspects emerged as a reflection—the expanse of reach through social media, and the debates surrounding plurality versus homogeneity. The campaigns saw massive support in social media, signalling solidarity by technological means. Additionally, Jisha and Delta's Dalit identities were also an important aspect, this

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[1] *Chaddi* is a Hindi word meaning 'underwear'.

[2] *Bekhauf Azadi* means 'fearless freedom'.

[3] Jisha was a Dalit law student from Kerala who was found brutally murdered in 2016. The popular newspapers, online journals and blogs, argued how there was a lot of mainstream media attention given to the Nirbhaya case which is clearly lacking when it comes to Jisha, whereas, and this is repeatedly emphasised in these articles, the level of brutality in Jisha rape case is much more intense than that of Nirbhaya. The point of argument remained that Nirbhaya's identity as an upper caste girl located in the heart of India's capital city Delhi earns her the media attention, while Jisha is ignored because she belongs to a lower caste community in Kerala. In this gendered, region-based analogy, Jisha's identity as a Dalit and her spatial location of the 'marginalised South' becomes important. The rape and murder of the 17-year-old Delta Meghwal sparked similar questions of systemic oppression on Dalits. *Pinjra Tod* raised questions about Delta's caste-based sexual violence and the lack of justice. For further details, (see Daniyal, 2016) and *Pinjra Tod*'s Facebook page.

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recognition immediately aligned their politics to indicate inclusivity. It is, however, also important to note that several members of the group later left it accusing '*Pinjra Tod* of appropriating voices of the marginalised to put up a facade of inclusivity' (*LiveWire*, 18 February 2019). Criticism was directed primarily towards the lack of space given to Dalit Bahujan and Muslim women in leading roles to adequately express their opinions. It was alleged that the role of the members from the marginalised groups was restricted solely in terms of seeking suggestions and became effectively a token inclusion (*LiveWire*, 18 February 2019). *Pinjra Tod*, on the other hand defended their position, emphasising their 'solidarities, unities' and recognition of difference (*Pinjra Tod*, 20 March 2019). *Pinjra Tod* and the debates surrounding it are significant. It shows how feminist movements in India have taken shape in keeping with the changing influences of technology. Simultaneously it highlights the necessity of debating the aspects of seeking adequate representation of marginalised groups and fairly reflecting the issue of cultural difference. *Pinjra Tod* is considered a predecessor of the #MeToo movement in India.

The #MeToo movement, originating in the USA in 2017 to highlight the prevalence of sexual harassment within the film industry, took the world by storm. It was a first-of-its-kind movement that emerged in the social media. The Naming and Shaming List 'allowed women to tell their stories in their own (disembodied) voices, while claiming agency over the borders — which are systemically violated in the real world — around their bodies as selves' (V. Chandra, 2021: 172). The world wide web became the ideal platform to connect women across the globe. G. Chandra and Erlingsdóttir identify the #MeToo movement as a 'collective and connective collaboration' (2021: 1). The proclamation 'Metoo' contains within itself a sense of solidarity, affinity, and assertion. According to MacKinnon,

> Sexual harassment is the unwanted imposition of sexual attention on someone who is not in a position to refuse it. Now ask: In what circumstances do women tend to be in a position to refuse men's sexual attentions? In the workplace? Not usually. Women are systemically the structural subordinates of men in the workplace; therefore, men can require pretty much anything, and hold women's jobs as hostage. Educational institutions? Some women are teachers, some women are in positions of power, but on the whole, it is men who are at the upper reaches of that hierarchy too. Women students are not usually in a position to refuse men teachers' sexual attentions. (2017: 17)

The #MeToo movement has claimed to mark a 'new era in Indian feminism' by introducing feminist articulations into the quotidian through the powerful use of social media. The #MeToo movement in India claims inheritance from previous activist movements such as the 2009 Pink *Chaddi* movement[4] against moral policing, the 2011 Slut Walk movement[5] against victim blaming, the 2015 *Pinjra Tod* movement[6] against sexist curfew in hostels, and the 2017 *Bekhauf Azadi*.[7] All these movements from which #MeToo claims heredity, are movements that proclaim women's rights to access public spaces. The movement has been propelled by the power of personal narratives. As such it has become a great exemplar of modern-day praxis of 'personal is political'. Pointing out the difficulties in speaking out about sexual harassment, V. Chandra notes that the popularity of social media owes to the removal of the corporeality from the context. She writes,

> The digital media offers an aesthetico-politics of hashtag stories without the physicality of women's bodies or voices. It allows women to narrate their traumatic experiences to the neutral computer screen. (V. Chandra, 2021: 175)

In India, the movement emerged and took shaped predominantly as a protest due to sexual harassment in the workplace.[8] It started famously with Raya Sarkar's LoSHA list of names of sexual harassers including several prominent academics (Bhandaram, 2017; G. Chandra, 2021; Kaur, 2017).[9] The list opened a floodgate of responses which followed two streams—veracity expressed through opinions shared in social media, versus the opportunity provided by an online movement to avoid the strenuous and often unavailable process of legal redress for sexual

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[4] The Pink *Chaddi* movement (2009) was in reaction to ultra-conservative and right-wing vigilantes who attacked a group of women in Mangalore and proclaimed marriage of couples if they were visible in public on Valentine's Day. Nisha Susan, an employee of *Tehelka* political magazine, organised a peaceful protest against this, whereby pink *chaddis* (undergarments) were sent to the right-wing political party leader's office.

[5] The Slut Walk movement (2011) is a transnational movement that began in Toronto calling to end slut shaming of sexual harassment victims.

[6] The *Pinjra Tod* movement (2015) began in reaction to sudden imposition of curfew in girls' hostels, among other related matters, in universities in Delhi.

[7] The *Bekhauf Azadi* march (2017) was an attempt by women to reclaim their right to move around freely in city at night. This march was in response to an incident of stalking in Chandigarh.

[8] The term 'workplace' is used here in a broader sense incorporating public institutions where women work and study.

[9] LoSHA, or List of Sexual Harassers in Academia, was a crowd-sourced list of sexual harassers in academia. It is important to mention that Sarkar's list was originally not meant for public consumption.

harassment. Feminist online platforms such as *Kafila* expressed their concerns regarding the 'due process', arguing that it would undo the years of effort put in by feminists to ensure legal acknowledgment of sexual harassment (Menon, 2017). 'It worries us that anybody can be named anonymously, with lack of answerability,' the letter read. They pointed out that this approach of naming could potentially 'delegitimize the long struggle against sexual harassment,' and make the struggle more difficult (Menon, 2017). At the same time, the list garnered much support as well. Pointing at the legal and institutional lacunae in properly addressing the cases of sexual harassment, the use of 'informal networks', such as on social media, to unveil the names of harassers was seen as an act of tremendous courage (Kaur, 2017). The list has been lauded for 'naming' the harassers. As Geetha mentions, the problem of sexual harassment lies in 'allowing harassers the benefit of anonymity' (2017). Women reporting harassment continues to be a rare occurrence due to the immense social stigma attached to it. In addition to normative gender hierarchies that perpetuate such stigma, the locations of institutional power such as in academia or the film industry contribute to instilling fear of ostracism. Moreover, as Geetha notes, 'The flipside of this . . . is that the price of not speaking out is even worse: years of trauma, and forced dissembling' (2017).[10] The movement progressed outside the realm of the academia to incorporate the Bollywood film industry, political leaders, as well as noted journalists.

The 'sharing' of survivor stories has served as a means to challenge the taboo of victimhood[11] while also creating the possibility for solidarity. G. Chandra and Erlingsdóttir term it as a 'contagion effect'. Contagion, here, refers to the possibility of solidarity where 'a single outcry of rage becoming a concerted effort towards lasting change' (2021: 2). This is where, G. Chandra and Erlingsdóttir opine, the potential of the #MeToo movement lies—where each new voice has a political potential to be heard and included to achieve a global transformation. It is interesting to note how they recognise the contribution of the 'local' in the 'global'. They write

> The hashtag echoes a larger whole beyond the individual. It is an 'I with countless others' — a 'we' of solidarity and shared experience, allowing women and people of all genders across social, ethnic, political, or sexual divides to understand that they are not alone and that the nature of sexual harassment and abuse transcends these boundaries. (2021: 2)

The #MeToo movement is seen as initiating a new wave of feminist consciousness across India. The #MeToo movement also initiated important conversations about its constituency: women, and encompassed the fields of academia and media, specifically cinema and journalism. The #MeToo movement has also come under scrutiny for its classism and casteism (Rowena, 2017; Tella, 2018; Vijayalakshmi, 2018). The constituency of this movement have been contested by Dalit feminists who have argued that the concept of sexual harassment in the workplace— on which the #MeToo movement is built—comes at the cost of erasing caste and promoting a *savarna* perspective.[12] Questions about #MeToo persist: Whose story-telling is more visible? Does identity in terms caste, class and gender play a role in determining subjecthood in the #MeToo movement? How do we confront the issues of who speaks for whom? Is solidarity achieved by acknowledging difference or by erasing it? This article highlights the latent Brahmanism of the #MeToo movement by examining its erasure of Dalit women. The article is divided into two sections—I begin with addressing the subject of the #MeToo movement by outlining the heterogeneity of the categories 'woman' and 'Dalit' and the erasure of 'Dalit woman'. From there I go on to discuss whether and how the issues that became prominent in the #MeToo movement, are sufficient to address the concerns of Dalit women.

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[10] Geetha (2017) mentions that, 'When women do speak out, and there are many who do, the due process is tedious. This is true not only of what transpires in internal complaints committees but in the justice system as a whole, where suffering and hurt have to be validated through established protocols that involve evidence gathering, halting testimonies and clever arguments. Court judgments might salvage the experience of anger and hurt by foregrounding ethical arguments that validate what victims have undergone, but procedures are what they are, tiresome and tiring. We keep with them, but that does not take away their tedium. Then, there is the question of relief to do with sexual harassment: apologies? Dismissal of persons? Guarantees that such things would never be allowed to happen again?' https://www.firstpost.com/india/raya-sarkars-list-of-sexual-predators-not-a-problem-but-allowing-harassers-to-recede-into-the-background-is-4183795.html%20 (Accessed 20 January 2022).

[11] It is important to note that victimhood, as Munt (2006) argues, also becomes a reason behind formulating social movements.

[12] The *Savarna* perspective refers to a homogenised, upper-caste/Brahmanical perspective. In Indian feminism, the *savarna* aspect becomes visible when feminist thought and practice tend to promote the concerns of only upper caste women while categorically erasing the factor of caste. *Savarna* feminism has been criticised for white-washing Dalit women's concerns, and its inability to identify intersecting structures of caste and gender.

#METOO IN INDIA: DIALOGUES AND DEBATES

Two types of responses to the #MeToo movement reveal the deep disagreements amongst feminist voices, and the 'contested nature of Indian feminism' (Roy, 2018). The ideas of difference and sameness, however, have laid grounds for feminist histories and theorisations for decades. Countering the dominant construction of 'woman' as a unitary subject seemingly affected by issues that cut across race, class, nation, and so on, feminist theories arising from non-White non-Western locations, question the homogenisation of the category. Such epistemological postulations highlight a unitary form of patriarchal oppression, a universalised experience of womanhood, and arguably the erasure of differences among women in an attempt to homogenise feminist politics (Pan, 2020: 99-101). Non-White feminists have also challenged the deployment of difference as the 'Other' (non-white non-western woman), which gets represented in essentialist terms in contrast to the 'self' (the white western woman).[13]

The most important contribution of the recognition of difference has been two-fold—that 'woman' is not a unitary category, and that there is a need to recognise intersectional structures as creating different sets of oppressions for women of different groups. It is important to note that allyship in feminist formulations, continues to be a matter of concern. According to Marai Larasi,

> For in a world where all women's lives have less value than the lives of powerful white men, which lives are least valuable? Which girls are simply embodied or disembodied collateral damage not only for violent men, and for the mainstream media, but even for some of our feminist 'sisters'? Which women's bodies are inscribed as disposable? We know which bodies. They are Black, brown, disabled, working- class, 'lower' caste, queer, lesbian and trans. They are bodies seeking refuge in the very countries that helped to orchestrate the destruction of their homelands. They are us. They are me. Woman is not homogenous. Body is not neutral. (2021: 234)

Criticisms towards #MeToo have pointed at its ultra-heteronormativity (Halberstam in G. Chandra and Erlingsdóttir), the relegation of women with disabilities as outsiders (Halberstam, 2021; Haraldsdóttir, 2021). Haraldsdóttir utilises the strategic silence of her group of women with disabilities to voice their discomfort and dissent both towards mainstream construction of womanhood and the feminist praxis. Such postulations can provide the space for a 'possible suture, a stitching together of ideologies, practices, strategies, and emotional resonances' amongst different communities of feminists (G. Chandra and Erlingsdóttir, 2021: 5).

But what about situations where women do not even have the opportunity to claim any strategic silence? How to bring together the local and global? Should one replace the global denominators with local narratives? Do they both benefit each other? Does this anonymity really address all women? Who are these women who claim solidarity? More importantly, who all *can* claim solidarity by the use of the hashtag MeToo in social media? Herein the issue of 'access' with reference to the #MeToo movement becomes important. I argue that the concept of 'access' becomes crucial in two ways—economic accessibility and sexual accessibility. The #MeToo movement in India, emerges from these deliberations.

THE 'ME' IN #METOO: ARTICULATING DIFFERENCE

Citing dual levels of erasure—of the speaker and the audience—V. Chandra notes that mainstream literary traditions, historical travel narratives, and epistolary archives, have all given prevalence to hegemonic male narratives (V. Chandra, 2021). Women's lack of visibility and voice is further solidified by their relegation to the domestic sphere. As mentioned earlier, the #MeToo movement in India has taken shape to bring about women's voices in the public sphere. V. Chandra historically traces the silencing of women 'within domestic spaces, under protective clothes, in demarcating public spaces inaccessible to them, and in schooling their bodies to make them as inconspicuous as possible in the public gaze,' and points at the #MeToo movement's crucial attempt in breaking this silence (V. Chandra, 2021: 173). The movement has thus been delineated as one attempting to bring women to the public sphere.

The concerns pertaining to women in nineteenth century India concentrated primarily on women's lack of access to the public sphere. Karlekar recovers nineteenth century Bengali women writers to show how they problematise the nationalist reformist representation of women as key markers of nation's culture and identity by highlighting the patriarchal undertones that reconfigured the gendered binaries of public/private within the

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[13] With reference to the First and Third world feminisms, Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003) has pointed out that the colonial history creates a division between the First and the Third worlds and contributes to the construction of a Western feminism which develops itself through a process of object formation of the Third World women in order to acquire a subject position for itself. By claiming to have 'knowledge' about the Third World women Western Feminism asserts its superiority as theory generator, whereas the Third world women remain evidence-providers.

nationalist construction of the 'new woman' (1993: 6-10).[14] The public/private binary was brought forth in the post-independence feminist movement through issues such as women's rights over their bodies, sexual networks of power, women and labour and so on (Kumar, 1993). Major attempts were made to recover women in history while also simultaneously inserting them in existing, dominant domains of knowledge.[15]

Such instances of interiorisation are further strengthened through the stigma of victimhood. Shaming, or 'victim blaming', coupled with social ostracism, continues to be an inherent aspect of sexual oppression on women. Under such circumstances, victims of sexual harassment are forced to remain silent and anonymous. In 'The Language of Gender Violence,' Keren elaborates how 'language holds victims accountable, rather than their perpetrators' (2012). Keren argues that with the reporting of a sexual crime, a simultaneous shift in the use of terminology also takes place—from 'alleged victim' to 'accuser.' Keren identifies this as constituting a significant change in how we think about sexual violence. Abuse elicits a response of sympathy. But, as Keren (2012) points out,

> using the term 'accuser' reverses the process, because it turns the victim into an accuser. So we as a public are now positioned to identify sympathetically with him as the victim of her accusation, rather than with her as the victim of his alleged perpetration.

Voicing one's sexual oppression thus seems to fixate a person to a singular identity. As G. Chandra notes,

> The danger of claiming the suffering of an assault or other violence lies in being reduced to victimhood, where victimhood is seen as a state without agency, a passive condition in which the victim becomes object- like, less of a person, through the loss of the ability to act in her own defense, survival, or cause. (2021: 103).[16]

The victim/accuser is now defined solely through the identity of a 'victim of sexual harassment' and as one who complained against it. Consequently, the anonymous person falls into the category of what Natanson calls 'a kind of hiddenness' (1979: 533-546). Contrastingly, when innumerable women use the MeToo hashtag on social media, they are choosing to resist dominant discourses of passive, invisible femininity. In this way, using of the hashtag becomes an act of regaining personhood and agency. As Natanson claims, the opposite of anonymity is recognition, where recognition implies taking the whole person into account.

Herein lies the importance of anonymity - the #MeToo movement has brought forth critical discussions regarding anonymity - like Fearless and Chamkiigirl in *Unlimited Girls,*[17] the #MeToo movement 'has allowed spaces of support and solidarity to emerge, creating a means of dealing with the stories, memories, and experiences of sexual harassment and violence suffered by people of all genders' (G. Chandra, 2021: 104). Anonymity, therefore, is redefined from loss of personhood to regaining of new affinities. As G. Chandra mentions,

> Anonymity allows those who have had violence done to them to have a means of breaking the silence in a safe space; to be part of a community of fellow sufferers; to find a language that legitimises emotion instead of having it delegitimised by a demand for rationality that trauma cannot always deliver; to have access to a form of catharsis through sharing and listening; to have a means of authenticating one's experience; to be able to name the experience, to understand it for what it was; to regain a sense of empowerment; to create solidarities of empathy; and to keep the focus on the stories and the system that produced them, rather than on individuals. (2021: 104)

The #MeToo movement's proclamation of women's agency and solidarity, I would argue, comes at the cost of imposing homogeneity on 'Indian women' and so erasing the issue of caste from its discursive framework. Jenny

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[14] Both in literary imaginations as well as political movements, breaking the shackles of domesticity has been a major issue in mainstream Indian feminism. As early as 1867, Rassundari Devi likened her married life to that of a prison.

[15] The pedagogical reformation is noteworthy to mention here. Mary E. John credits the publication of the report, *Towards Equality* (1974-75,) for feminism's entry into Indian academia. The report revealed an unprecedented deterioration in the condition of the vast majority of women since the 1950s. As a result, Women's Studies centres were born within universities. John mentions that through these centres and research units, a 'fundamental shift was thus inaugurated - from women as subjects to be educated to "women" as new subjects of investigation and study' (2008: 4).

[16] See also Soran Reader (2007) on loss of personhood in the way the complexity of agency is explored through instances of non-agency, negotiation, and so on.

[17] Paromita Vohra's *Unlimited Girls* (2002) opens with 'Fearless' - the narrator's online persona - searching for love. As she logs in to a site named 'All you need is love.com: Women who get it', the viewers are greeted with a surprise. The site, unlike the heteronormative image that it portrays, serves as a platform for women to don their alternate personae and converse with each other about love, life, politics, and feminism. The anonymity and wider reach provided by the internet in *Unlimited Girls* marks a new direction in feminist praxis by bringing together women of different regions, different ideas, and different aims.

Rowena argues that 'we need to look into the nature of the "sexual harassment" discourse itself to bring out the ways in which it has always tilted towards the interests of elite, upper caste women' (2017). In its focus on gender inequality and sexual violence, the #MeToo movement, ironically, reproduces casteist, classist and sexist hierarchies. What seems to drive the #MeToo movement in India is the anxiety regarding women's confinement in the domestic sphere and their resultant inability to 'speak'. Consequently, what underlies the movement are the desire to be visible in the public sphere and make their voices heard. This understanding categorically erases the issue of caste, and especially for Dalit women, whose life as well as oppression encompasses both private and public spaces. One also, cannot deny the obvious classist implications in terms of unfettered access to technology and social media platforms. Dalit feminists have pointed to the lack of awareness in understanding the intersectional nature of multiple vulnerabilities faced by Indian women.

The identification of differences, or the lack of thereof, has been raised by Dalit feminists (Rege, 1998; Rowena, 2017). Dalit feminism articulates differences from mainstream Indian feminism and Dalit politics through its invocation of intersectionality between caste and gender. Dalit feminism claims that the interventionist approaches typified by mainstream Indian feminism fails to address issues concerning Dalit women because mainstream Indian feminisms tend to see caste and gender as two separate and mutually exclusive categories. Dalit feminism, on the other hand, sees caste and gender as two interrelated structures that actively and simultaneously contribute to the structural oppression of Dalit women, and it argues that mainstream Indian feminism often suppresses socio-cultural differences such as in caste identity, in order to magnify particular issues and impose universality as 'women'.

This is where the relevance of the 'local' comes in. Rana Ayyub (2018) notes that despite the home-grown activist movements, such as #Pinjratod: Break the locks, #Nirbhaya, #StopThisShame, and #WhyLoiter in India with its Pakistani companion movement #GirlsAtDhabas, have had a catalysing effect. The term local here can be used in the sense of recognising the particular, the specific, such recognition helps battle imposed homogeneity and universality. The 'local' revises our notions of the global and provides ways to transform it.[18] The contribution of the local in shaping the 'global' was made visible through Dalit feminism's approach towards mainstream Indian feminism and Dalit politics when Gopal Guru (1995) famously points to the cultural subordination by Dalit leaders who silence the independent political expression of Dalit women. As such, Dalit women's discrimination by Dalit men leads to the understanding that:

> (1) It is not only caste and class identity but also one's gender positioning that decides the validity of an event; (2) Dalit men are reproducing the same mechanisms against their women which their high caste adversaries had used to dominate them (*sic*); (3) the experience of Dalit women shows that local resistance within the Dalits is important. The whole situation compels us to defend the claim of Dalit women talk differently.' (1995: 2549).[19]

In its VIII National Convention on 26th June 2009 held in New Delhi, the declaration of the National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW) stated:

> We are concerned that Dalit women in India suffer from three oppressions: gender, as a result of patriarchy; class, being from the poorest and most marginalized communities; and caste, coming from the lowest caste, the 'untouchables'.[20]

This declaration points at three intersecting factors of gender, class, and caste, and shows that inequality and difference exist not only among those in the binaries of rich/poor, upper caste/lower caste, but also leads to differences among women, and men and women within the Dalit community too. Dalit feminism has rightly pointed at the necessity to identify difference within and amongst 'women' and 'Dalits'. The constituency, 'Dalit woman', is in fact an intersectional category that is simultaneously impacted by caste and gender. Dalit feminism has elucidated this point by redefining patriarchy as Brahmanical patriarchy.[21]

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[18] At the outset, I would like to mention that I use the term 'global' in a very flexible manner to refer to the mainstream and the popular. As such, global here is not restricted to the geographical alone.

[19] I discuss the idea of difference in Dalit feminism in detail in my book *Mapping Dalit Feminism* (2020).

[20] http://idsn.org/wp-content/uploads/user_folder/pdf/New_files/Key_Issues/Dalit_Women/NFDWdeclaration_2009 .pdf. More details provided in the references.

[21] Uma Chakravarti (2003) defines Brahmanical patriarchy as: 'A set of rules and institutions in which caste and gender are linked, each shaping the other and where women are crucial in maintaining the boundaries between castes. Patriarchal codes in this structure ensure that the caste system can be reproduced without violating the hierarchical order of closed endogamous circles, each distinct from and higher and lower than others. Further, Brahmanical codes for women differ according to the status of the caste group in the hierarchy of castes with the most stringent control over sexuality reserved as a privilege for the highest castes. Finally, it incorporates both an ideology of chaste wives and *pativrata* women who are valorised, and a

The construction of a homogeneous Brahmanical patriarchal identity of the 'Indian woman' can be seen for example through the discourses surrounding the *sati*[22] abolition and widow remarriage. In a detailed textual analysis of the construction of the '*sati*', Mandakranta Bose notes that, the Vedic readings of *sati* was often a misreading. Moreover, '*sati* was not simply a Brahmic conspiracy, for it was also assimilated in the Buddhist tradition' (2000: 25). Bose also mentions that the practice of widow immolations was not common, and that the 'largest number of *satis* from the eighteenth century onward occurred in Bengal and Maharashtra' (2000: 27).[23] While the abolition of *sati* was presented as ending a barbaric treatment of women, thereby highlighting the progressive mindset of the new patriarchy, widow remarriage functioned as a corollary to this reformist agenda in order to endorse women's agency. The 'women' being cited here, however, was not a universal category. Women belonging to the lower rungs of the society suffered due to the legalisation of such processes. Sen and Dhawan argue that,

> Following the Widow Remarriage Act, widows, who had previously had unconditional rights of remarriage, were now deprived of their property if they remarried.... Most importantly, the debates over social reform led to the imposition of marriage system which eroded the customary rights of poor, labouring and lower caste women. They found entry and exit into marriage more difficult. Thus, social reform and the shifts in marriage regimes had the opposite effect on two groups of women; the middle classes were able to defer marriage, access education and the public world of employment and politics, while poor women found themselves less able to access remunerated work, more trapped in marriages and in intensive regimes of labour within marital households. (2012: 7)

While the difference between 'men' and 'women' pervaded a homogenised notion of gender throughout the social reformation period, the difference of castes was addressed only by anti-caste movements. Dalit politics attempted to counter the Brahmanism in the nationalist reform movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Challenging the identification of 'India as Hindu and Hinduism as nationalism', these anti-caste struggles were premised on a strategic fracturing of the mainstream homogeneous category 'India' (Omvedt, 1990: 724). Despite the invocation of gender,[24] the concerns of Dalit politics predominantly continued to be that of the eradication of caste. Gender, then, was seen as an additive category, subsidiary to the greater issue of caste.[25] Kumud Pawade mentions the perpetual discrimination toward Dalit women within Dalit communities:

> While thinking about equality across caste and class, men forget about gender equality, this happens during talks of Dalit struggles or political agendas. Women are merely tokens in the [political] movement, and in literary conferences. Even their sessions are scheduled towards the end of the program when the audience has lost interest. (Qtd. in Paik, 2009)

Thus, the question remains as to whether women were seen as part of Dalit politics, or whether there was a nuanced, gendered understanding of caste.

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structure of rules and institutions by which caste hierarchy and gender inequality are maintained through both the production of consent and the application of coercion' (2003: 34).

[22] '*Sati*', referring to a faithful wife, was a tradition practiced in certain parts of India whereby a widow was burnt alive on the husband's funeral pyre. This practice was abolished in 1829.

[23] Herein she links moralistic argument of *sati* to materialist consequences of ownership, and the potential loss of sexual control over the widow. A widow inheriting the property after the death of the husband meant 'disinheritance for other family members or the fragmentation of property as well as power for women,' as well as the 'risk of unwanted sexual entanglements' (Bose, 2000: 27). Thus, *sati* was a convenient means to remove the 'inconvenient female out of the way' (Bose, 2000: 27).

[24] In this context, it is important to mention Ambedkar's idea of endogamy and Periyar's Self Respect Marriage. Ambedkar writes in *Annihilation of Caste*, 'I am convinced that the real remedy [to caste] is intermarriage. Fusion of blood can alone create the feeling of being kith and kin, and unless this feeling of kinship, of being kindred, becomes paramount, the separatist feeling – the feeling of being aliens – created by caste will not vanish. Among the Hindus, intermarriage must necessarily be a factor of greater force in social life than it need be in the life of the non-Hindus. Where society is already well knit by other ties, marriage is an ordinary incident in life. But where society is cut asunder, marriage as a binding force becomes a matter of urgent necessity. The real remedy of breaking caste is intermarriage. Nothing less will serve as the solvent of caste' (2015: 285). Periyar's demand for inter-caste and interreligious marriage, women's choice in birth-control, aligned the sexual domination of Dalit women to Brahmanism (Geetha and Rajadurai, 2011).

[25] An example of this is the 2016 Una March where Dalit women were not included in the decision-making bodies. Moreover, Dalit women leaders recounted that they were not allowed to speak on stage because their issues were not considered important enough (Pan, 2020: 1-2).

THE PROBLEMATICS OF SEXUAL AVAILABILITY AND DIGITAL ACCESS

Dalit feminists have sited the strategic erasure of the caste question in gender in the #MeToo movement by invoking the Bhanwari Devi case (Rowena, 2017). Bhanwari Devi was a '*saathin*'[26] in Rajasthan who actively participated in preventing the marriage of a one-year-old girl. As retaliation, she was raped by five upper caste men in front of her husband. Women's groups in Rajasthan and an NGO called *Vishaka*, which was associated with them, predominantly represented this violent act as a case of gender violence. The Bhanwari Devi case led to the famous *Vishaka* judgment (1997) on women's sexual harassment in the workplace (Mody, 2013: 91-97; Patel, 2005; Sarpotdar, 2012: 19-22). In 2013, the Indian parliament replaced this with the Sexual Harassment of Women (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act. Bhanwari Devi, however, has yet to get justice.

The *Vishaka Guidelines* has been celebrated as a victory for Indian feminism and for all Indian women. However, as Rowena notes, 'feminist mobilizations around Bhanwari Devi's brutal gang rape, worked only to formulate a caste-blind gender discourse based on the *Savarna* women's need for protection in elite workplaces' (2017). Herein lies the strategic erasure of the caste question in mainstream feminism: mainstream feminist interpretation of the issue presumed the category 'woman' to be a homogenised whole, wherein sexual harassment is assumed to be operative similarly for 'all women', with same intensity. Mainstream feminism, therefore, views 'woman' solely through the single axis of gender and erases the specificity of caste. An intersectional angle will highlight that Bhanwari Devi's rape is rooted in Brahmanical patriarchal idea of Dalit women's sexual availability, due to their (disapproved) presence in the public sphere.

Sharmila Rege links Dalit women's sexual abuse with the labour they engage in and the spaces they occupy. She writes,

> In the Brahmanical social order, caste-based division of labour and sexual divisions of labour are intermeshed such that elevation in caste status is preceded by the withdrawal of women of that caste from productive processes outside the private sphere. Such a linkage derives from presumptions about the accessibility of sexuality of lower caste women because of their participation in social labour. Brahminism in turn locates this as the failure of lower caste men to control the sexuality of their women and underlines this as a justification of their impurity. Thus gender ideology legitimises not only structures of patriarchy but also the very organisation of caste. (1998: 44)

In a casteist society such as India, ruled by norms of Brahmanism, Bhanwari Devi's prevention of child marriage was seen as a daring act. Her public rape, therefore, served as a means to assert the caste supremacy of the upper-caste rapists and also the emasculation of her husband, who despite being present at the scene, could not protect his wife. The Bhanwari Devi case, therefore, becomes the classic example of mainstream feminist appropriation of 'sexual atrocity' at the cost of ignoring caste (Rowena, 2017; Geetha, 2017).

The assumed uniform standards of perspective adopted by mainstream feminism fails to see that different situations demand different priorities. Dalit women's rape cannot be understood in all its complexity if it remains as an added dimension to caste problem or a gender issue. Instead, we need to recognise that Dalit women are differently situated in social worlds, and the violence inflicted upon their bodies specifically arises from the intersecting structures of caste and gender. The concept of sexual harassment in the workplace—on which the #MeToo movement is built—thus comes at the cost of erasing caste and promoting a *savarna* perspective. Moreover, for Dalit women, whose work necessitates their presence in the public sphere, confinement to the domestic is not an issue. In the process of challenging the restricted mobility of women, mainstream feminism fails to identify and challenge the very edifice of Brahmanical patriarchy. This shows that, unlike with upper caste women, Dalit women's sexuality is not confined to the domestic/private realm. It is public in its specifically casteist formulation where upper caste men are seen to have access to lower caste women who are seen to be impure because of their presence in the public sphere of work.

Additionally, it is also important to highlight the inaccessibility of digital platforms for Dalit women. Explorations regarding the impact of the social media in expanding the scope of marginalised, emancipatory politics has been explored predominantly in case of Dalit politics (De Kruijf, 2015; Kumar and Subramani, 2014). For Dalit women, the problem is two-pronged and concerns accessibility and epistemic authority. Smita Patil (2017) notes that,

> low education status, complex social structure and low accessibility to Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have expanded the digital divide. Those connected to the internet are 35% of the

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[26] *Saathin*, literally meaning friend, was the Rajasthan state government's Women's Development Programme (WDP), where Bhanwari Devi worked since 1985.

population – the social composition of those with access to ICTs is dominant Indian castes, and they stand disconnected from the reality for majority of the Indian society.

As a result, we see an acceleration in the gap related to access and social mobility (D. N., 2001).

The complexity of digital access is addressed in the recent documentary, *Writing with Fire* (Ghosh and Thomas, 2021). In the documentary, we see Dalit women journalists of Khabar Lahariya making a transformation in news reporting through the introduction of digital platforms, but this transformation comes with new challenges. We hear journalist Shyamkali's voice echoing through as she expresses her fear of touching and potentially destroying the smart phone. Her fear reflects the masculinisation of technology and digital modes of communication. Added to the patriarchal perception of women as inherently incapable of having intelligence (cyber or otherwise), the digital divide is broadened further through the inaccessibility of English language.[27] While on the one hand, the documentary shows the tremendous scope of the digital platform in reaching a global audience and making journalism a true praxis 'of the people, by the people and for the people', it also creates unique obstacles for Dalit women journalists. Suneeta mentions the numerous prank calls she has received since appearing on the *Khabar Lahariya* YouTube channel; the comments section on YouTube reveals blatant casteist-sexist attacks on the Dalit women journalists. The detrimental impact of social media is also visible in the way the youth of the nation consumes information. In fact, *Writing with Fire* shows how dominant politics, armed with religious sentiments, utilises social media to promote and strengthen Hindutva ideologies.

In such a scenario, Dalit women can be seen to occupy an extremely marginalised position in the public sphere. Shyamkali's lack of knowledge of English reveals how *savarna* women are the beneficiaries of 'the Brahminical knowledge/power structure of the Indian academic space, as they have established parallel spaces for feminist research and development' (Rowena, 2017). Dalit women, on the other hand, find themselves outside the framework of these feminist discourses. It is for this reason that the sole focus on the 'sexual' harassment of the #MeToo movement, fails to address the reality of intersectional oppression on Dalit women. Such condition highlights the stark difference for women in documentaries such as *Unlimited Girls*. According to Radhika Gajjala, we often associate 'voice' as an empowering moment that is tangible – 'as direct (unmediated by power hierarchies) speech coming from a corporeal body on the other end of the gadget/computer' (2019: 2). Such correlations, however, are often too simplistic, as we see in cases of the Dalit women journalists in *Khabar Lahariya,* the physical manifestation of voice does not ensure agency. It needs to be recognised in a more nuanced manner in the form of a negotiation. Gajjala mentions that in order to assess voice in its multiple formats, we need to ask new questions: 'Do the affordances of the gadget and/or platform for engaging the digital provide access, misinformation, or surveillance, for example? Under what conditions is access liberating and empowering?' (2019: 2). Such questions highlight both the construction of such 'voice' and the politics behind it.

Political organisations such as the Ektara Collective, have tried to bridge this gap between the local and the global, and the transformative potentials of recognising cultural difference, through creative and aesthetic reimaginations. Their film, *Turup* (2017), is set in Bhopal, and it explores the lives of women at the intersecting boundaries of religion, caste, class, and gender. The story primarily follows the relationship between a Dalit girl and a Muslim man, and the right-wing political party's opposition to it. The film shows how the final legal victory of the couple is made possible only when women of different castes and classes come together and fight against the injustices meted out to them. The ultimate realisation of this transformation happens through the symbolic alliance and affiliation between Monica, the Dalit housemaid, and Neelima, the upper caste journalist turned housewife. *Turup* creates an imaginative space where the 'local' enables transformation at the 'global' level. The inter-caste, inter-religious marriage of the Dalit girl and the Muslim boy in the small town of Bhopal, highlights the possibilities that can emerge when differences and intersectionalities are recognised, and solidarities are built.

CONCLUSION

The complexity of allyship in Dalit feminism is further enhanced by a historical erasure of the caste question in the analysis of gender. In the Indian context, 'women as middle class and upper caste has a long genealogy that, historically and conceptually, goes back into nationalism as well as social reform' (Tharu and Niranjana, 1999: 502; Sangari and Vaid, 1989: 7, 8 and 18; Tharu and Lalita, 1993: xix). The erasure of caste differences in feminism and gender in Dalit politics has given rise to the phenomenon that 'all the women are upper caste (and by implication, middle class Hindu) and all the lower castes are men' (Paik, 2009: 41). In this context, women's role in the anti-Mandal agitation is also significant. The agitation was caused by the government's decision to implement the suggestions of the Mandal commission wherein a quota would be implemented for the OBCs (Other Backward Classes) and would be used in recruitment to the Public and Central services. Uma Chakravarti mentions that, as

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[27] Patil mentions that internet is accessible predominantly to articulate and educated Dalit women and Adivasi girls (2017).

a response to this policy, women college students in Delhi demonstrated on the street with placards reading 'We don't want unemployed husbands!' (2003, 1). Chakravarti argues that the implication of the placard was rooted in Brahmanical patriarchal ideologies:

> What the placards were saying was that these girls would be deprived of upper caste IAS husbands. But what they were also saying was that the OBCs and Dalits who would now occupy these positions in the IAS could *never* be their potential husbands. (2003: 1)

Tharu and Niranjana show how in the late 20th century, an anti-Mandal woman aligns herself above all as a citizen of India rather than as a gendered being, thus avoiding a 'battle of sexes' with middle class men. However, the claiming of citizenship rather than or perhaps over sisterhood with Dalit women, now not only sets them against Dalit men, but also against lower-caste/class women (Tharu and Niranjana, 1999).

A reorienting of caste/gender questions through an intersectional lens reveals that women's bodies are marked by Brahmanical tropes of sexual control which were established through the Vedic dominance. Women, then, emerge not only as a heterogenous category marked by caste, class, religion, and so on, it also becomes imperative to recognise the specificity of their concerns as impacted by different cultural, social and political systems. In this context, the approach taken by *Pinjra Tod* can be serve as an example. In terms of the issues, they chose to speak on and the approach, *Pinjra Tod* can be seen as being open to exploring gender through its intersections with other structures of oppression. As they mention in their response to the allegations of being *savarna*, they 'invested in a host of issues faced by women on campus such as the need for basic infrastructure, against discrimination based on caste, religion, race and region in university and private accommodation, implementation of reservations and redressal of sexual harassment' (*Pinjra Tod*, 20 March 2019). Interestingly, they argue that their point of contention was never premised on intersectionality per se. Their attention to plural forms of discrimination seems to have emerged in the process of the various campus-related issues they focused upon. Such a proclamation almost dismisses the necessity of keeping intersectionality at the centre of our thinking and activism. A Dalit feminist approach to the #MeToo movement addresses this necessity. It shows that the understanding of sexual harassment as solely a result of gender oppression, will only reproduce the caste-blind discourse and further work to invisibilise Dalit women and their experiences. The #MeToo movement, in claiming solidarity and agency, not only ignores the factor of accessibility to digital platforms, it also represents gender in a singularly homogeneous term. The crucial message of the #MeToo movement should be that solidarity need not imply homogeneity.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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'Please Don't Go Yet': The Voice and Texture of Indian Women's Campaign Rhetoric

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ABSTRACT

724 women candidates from India campaigned for their parties in the lead up to the parliamentary elections of 2019, and yet none of them were appraised for their oratorical skills. The absence of attention on how and what women say during their political campaigns is in keeping with a widespread apathy towards women's rhetoric in public discourses in India. Could that be the reason why electoral participation of women in India is alarmingly low and uninspiring? This article explores the gendered life of political speeches in India and the specific conditions within which the speeches of women candidates are assessed and promoted. To that end, the speeches of three political candidates are analysed, revealing an exhilarating battle of campaign rhetorics fraught with language restrictions and gender dynamics. Each of these speakers showcase a personal, idiosyncratic yet nifty tradition of political speeches through their use of domestic idioms, imagery, satire, and other feisty rhetorical claims. Most significantly, their speeches were covered by many media, catapulting to the forefront the so far neglected genre of women's political speeches. Although refreshing, it is still an uphill battle for the candidates, as they establish themselves as rhetors on their own terms.

Keywords: feminism, elections, women politicians, speeches, India

INTRODUCTION

'I urge you to put the house in order,' pleaded first-time parliamentarian Mahua Moitra to the speaker of the house in 2019. 'Sir, there is no room for professional hecklers inside this great hall.' The great hall that Moitra so eloquently highlights belongs the Lower House of the Indian Parliament (the *Lok Sabha*), fashioned to aid debates and foster dissent. Its purpose is fully realised only when equal status and opportunity are granted to all who speak within it. It could be that Moitra's hecklers were voicing their protest against the content of her speech, her gender, her party affiliation, or some combination of all three. Whatever it is that compelled them to showcase such behaviour, they were no friends of dissent and quite content to be enemies of a democratic political ethos. If a woman speaker can be heckled and interrupted in the Parliament and must continuously request for time to be able to finish her inaugural speech, then this is a potent moment to evaluate if women political leaders in India receive the recognition, respect, and audience they deserve when speaking in public. Are we, either as individuals or as a collective, less tolerant of women who hold public office? Has it always been like this?

At the time of its transition from colonial rule to independence after 1947, the founding leaders of the Indian constitution envisioned a Parliament that would create new frontiers of democratic nationhood. With this objective in mind, they funnelled their energies into building a new republic in which broadscale electoral democracy acted as a central lifeline. The realisation of this dream however was not easy to attain and equally or more difficult to retain. Caught in the heat of independence struggles and the partition of territories during this extremely critical moment of nationalist politics following 1947, the Constituent Assembly of India, which preceded the first fully elected Parliament, ensured that the first electoral roll of the independent nation was consolidated based on universal adult franchise and nothing less. In fact, Indians became voters before they were citizens, says Ornit Shani in her book *How India Became Democratic*, where she describes how this process encouraged a massive cooperative effort in building shared democratic spaces that ordinary Indians became attached to and started to own. The desire to work around certain notorious hierarchies and inequalities that divide Indian society, to put in place a 'procedural equality' that could enable the authorisation of a truly representative government, changed the

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meaning and texture of Indian democracy for years to come (Shani, 2017: 5). So deep was their commitment to this project that not just the politicians but also bureaucrats, and especially the latter made it their job to educate and include the common people into an administrative structure that could support and sustain a thoroughly democratic nation building process. For this, they speculated, consulted, and debated among themselves to ensure that the people's participation was more than just a voting right, that it was as close as it could be to a fully democratic deliberative process. This came to forge a sense of national unity, as various stakeholders of the project found themselves entrusted with duties that could make tangible differences in the effectiveness and credibility of the Parliament. As Shani says,

> Turning all adult Indians into voters (…) against many odds, and before they became citizens with the commencement of the constitution, required an immense power of imagination. Doing so was India's stark act of decolonisation. This was no legacy of colonial rule: Indians imagined the universal franchise for themselves, acted on this imaginary, and made it their political reality. (2017:1)

Much has changed since 1947. Coming afar from those early days of heady nation building, the Indian Parliament has undoubtedly mellowed down its zeal to invigorate argumentative exchanges. In recent years, the executive wing of the government has repeatedly tried to suppress opposition challenges through many measures. Boycotts, suspensions, threats, and disrespect have increasingly gained momentum on the floors, elbowing out robust debates.[1] Mahua Moitra's 2019 appeal to the members of the Parliament to allow her to speak without being constantly interrupted, is evident of the intolerance that the Parliament has now come to represent. Still, she openly resisted the verbal onslaught and continues to do so in her participations in parliamentary debates whenever she is allowed the opportunity. For most other women parliamentarians in India however, participation in parliamentary debates is as rare as their membership in this powerful democratic institution. (Rai and Spary, 2019: 3). This makes the Indian parliament a particularly productive site of contradictions. As women tend to be overshadowed by their male colleagues in both representation and participation in everyday parliamentary affairs, the same Parliament takes bold steps in appointing women in major institutional roles. Indians have repeatedly cast their votes in favour of women leaders in the parliament and consequently the country had its first female prime minister in 1966, its first president in 2007, nominated a female Speaker of the *Lok Sabha* in 2009 and conferred important cabinet portfolios like Defence and Finance to women politicians in the last few decades. Moreover, as this article is being written in 2022, the parliament elected its second female President who identifies herself as belonging to the Adivasi or aboriginal communities, marking an unprecedented historical moment. While none of these are insignificant achievements and display an impressive roster when compared to other countries of the South Asian region, the day-to-day workings of the parliament present a wholly contradictory picture beginning with women's representation in the Parliament.

By all accounts, women's representation in the Indian parliament has been relatively low. A little over 11 per cent of the members in the *Lok Sabha* are women. Compared to this, the world average is 23.6 per cent and Asian regional average is 19.7 per cent (Rai and Spary, 2019: 9). According to the July 2022 data and global rankings on women's representations in parliaments by the Inter-Parliamentary Union, India's position is 144 out of the 193 countries enlisted. It is clear that the rise in women's representation in the parliament has been painfully slow. If we look at it, say Rai and Spary, '[A]ll the 333 individual women MPs ever elected to the *Lok Sabha*, from the 1st to the 16th, would not fill a single *Lok Sabha*, not even two-thirds, which further underscores the historical dominance of male MPs' (2019: 9). On the other hand, in the *Rajya Sabha* or the upper house, it is even more difficult to chart a steady increase since the number of women parliamentarians have varied between 5 and 12 percent since 1952 to present day, showing a slightly higher representation in the 1980s than in 1990s (Rai and Spary, 2019: 9). Successive national governments since the 1990s have failed to produce a legislative consensus to pass the long-debated Women's Reservation Bill, a constitutional amendment seeking to legislate for gender quotas to reserve a third of seats in the national parliament and state assemblies which would effectively fast-track increases in women's descriptive representation (Rai and Spary, 2019: 74-5).

It wasn't just the parliament where Moitra had to suspend her speech and openly address her audience. Once, during a campaign rally in Betai village in the state of West Bengal, a group of women from the audience were preparing to leave the meeting before Moitra's speech was over. It was late in the evening and the women appeared worried and in a rush. Moitra had only half-finished her sentence when she noticed movement in the audience. She wasted no time in directly addressing the women to make a personal plea: 'Please don't leave yet. I know you are getting late for work at home. There is much you have to do at home, and you must have left household work

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unfinished to attend political meetings,' Moitra said (2019b). While the rest of the audience kept silent and implicitly became a part of this private gendered conversation within a public meeting, Moitra asked the women to just wait a bit longer as she would soon be done, she promised. The women were eventually persuaded to stay and Moitra made a great rhetorical leap by appealing to women and their domesticity in her speech.

Campaign rhetorics are precursors to Parliamentary deliberations and require equal degrees of rigour and flexibility to persuade millions of citizens. And yet, in India it has received scant attention, even more so when it comes to analysis of speeches delivered by women politicians. A sustained indifference among scholars and political commentators alike on the corporeality of political speech acts, motivates me to read campaign speeches delivered by women politicians. Women's representation and participation in the parliament is but one part of the political game, it is also possibly just the tip of a prodigious iceberg. In their journey to the parliament, women politicians are subjected to various registers of assessment at every stage of the election process. How women speak, argue, raise issues, resolve conflicts are all matters of political interest since gender performances are at once circumscribed and emancipated by electoral audience expectations.

In this article, I wish to draw attention to the ways in which women political leaders use persuasion in other political arenas, outside the Indian parliament. More particularly, I am interested in exploring how women make a case for their parliamentary candidacy in national election campaign speeches. As forerunners to parliamentary positions, these campaign speeches are recruitment battlegrounds that every candidate must win. As they navigate through this very complex and stressful course, it is rarely so that men and women have the same experience. One of the primary reasons for this is that as in the Parliament, here too women candidates are vastly outnumbered by men. For every 100 candidates fielded by all parties for the general elections of 2019, only 9 were women (Spary, 2020: 225). How does this inequality in numbers shape and affect campaign speeches? I read the campaign speeches of a small group of women and examine their different facets and modes of working. Looking upon the speeches as at once persuasive and deliberative performances, I analyse how each candidate deploys individual narratives about politics, traversing opportunities and perils that can have lengthy impacts on their professional reputation.

Reading and analysing the role and influence of language and rhetoric in campaign speeches, delivered by select candidates in the lead up to the 17ᵗʰ Parliamentary Elections in India, will yield a couple of results. By drawing women political communicators within a rhetorical frame, this article hopes to both increase the visibility of the work of women in politics as well as put forward a strategy for future studies and theorising in Indian feminist rhetoric. Analysing these speeches will also shed light on the construction of women's identities and public voices in contemporary Indian politics. Keeping in mind this relatively large scope of the project, the article will focus on two fundamental aims. The first of these is to track what kind of persuasive strategies are included in political campaigns of women candidates. The second is to observe how these three women mediate their gender identities as they build their rhetorical credibility. The objective is to ascertain if indeed women political speakers communicate specific rhetorical messages as they reposition themselves as rhetors on their own terms.

THE FIGURE OF THE CREDIBLE LAWMAKER

Bryan Garsten in his book *Saving Persuasion: A Defense of Rhetoric and Judgment* explicitly defines rhetorical affect as something that the orator performs without any coercion. All they need to do is merely put 'words into the air.' Those words 'in the brief moments of conscious or unconscious reflection that occur while we listen to a sales pitch or a campaign speech' will become a slice of 'an active process of evaluation and assimilation (…) in our minds' (2009: 7). This part-spontaneous and part-skilled process of ambling through information to gather an exacting array of evidence, is what tenderly guides an audience to persuasion and conviction. Garsten says,

> [B]eing persuaded is not the same as learning, but it is related. When someone sits back and decides, "All right, you have persuaded me," he is not merely describing something that has happened to him. In spite of the grammar, he is describing something he has done. (2009: 7)

To allow oneself to be persuaded is then as challenging as to persuade. Garsten asserts that

> political decision-making is often the result of great speech and persuasion, more than that any other kind of ideology can enforce. As any democratic politician can testify, it is speech and speech alone that turns up as the most formative 'means of influence and technique of rule. (2009: 1)

Elsewhere, Sonja Foss and Cindy Griffin reject persuasion as a manifestation of the patriarchal bias that is characteristic of much of rhetorical theorising (1995: 2). In their view, all attempts at persuasion inevitably culminate in a struggle over power since its efforts are chiefly directed towards changing, controlling, or dominating its audience. In other words, influencing audiences, which has long been associated as an archetype of rhetorical effect, is glorified only because it grants the rhetor a feeling of self-worth. This value of the self for rhetors come

from being able to control people and situations. It also comes from 'the rhetor's ability to demonstrate superior knowledge, skills, and qualifications (…) in order to dominate the perspectives and knowledge of those in their audiences' (1995: 3). To counter this, Foss and Griffin propose rhetors try invitational rhetoric as an option for rhetorical analysis of public discourse. Invitational rhetoric does not impose the rhetor's viewpoint upon the audience, but is an invitation extended to the audience to think through new ideas along with the rhetor in a collaborative model. Based on the feminist principles of 'equality, imminent value, and self-determination', rhetors who apply the invitational style are not striving to convert the audience by undermining their ability to think for themselves (1995: 4). Instead, offering a mutually acceptable space to deliberate on the ideas introduced by the rhetor makes both the audience and the speaker recognise the inherent value of dynamic argumentation, where no one is made to feel inadequately represented. Foss and Griffin see their contribution as a boost to feminist rhetoric scholars to 'develop models for cooperative, nonadversarial, and ethical communication' (1995: 15).

Thinking outside Western rhetorics, Keith Lloyd examines the patterns of argumentation in and around India and the ways in which they differ from Aristotle's propositions on rhetoric. At the time Aristotle was defending the virtues of rhetoric to the Greek senators in Athens, the celebrated Indian political philosopher Kautilya in his text *Arthashastra*, identified '*ganas*' and '*sanghas*' – two popular non-monarchical governmental systems – as having a hand in developing deliberative practices which classified forms of public reasoning (Lloyd, 2018: 224). In the West, Aristotle's model of logical reasoning became the dominant approach, underlying 'the Western impulse to divide issues into two clear choices – only one of which can be true and only one of which can "win"' (Lloyd, 2021: 374). Compared to this, the mode of reasoning in the Indian subcontinent known as '*Nyaya*', codified and popularised by Hindu scholars of logic, emphasised 'communal reasoning based in attaining common good'. Using 'bridging rhetoric', a term borrowed from John Dryzek (2002), standing for associating with people with different social characteristics, Lloyd shows that in the *Nyaya* school of logic from ancient India, it is the community that decided how arguments were concluded and not just the rhetors. Practitioners of *Nyaya*-based reasoning believed that truth could not be made visible or attainable simply through modes of logic, irrespective of whether it is formal or informal. However, a consensus on truth could be reached through a process of negotiation among vested members of shared communities. Given that this *Nyaya* method was put into practice in a 'multi-religious, multiethnic, and multilingual' country like India, 'it simply had to be an effective bridging rhetoric' (Lloyd, 2021: 375). Besides, the successful application of this bridging method of persuasion was not only adopted and adapted by other existing religions in India at that time like Buddhists, Jains and Muslims, it also provided a means of establishing peaceful ways of maintaining dialogues and deliberations among people of different languages, situations, and beliefs (Lloyd, 2021: 374). Even with full knowledge that rhetoric and persuasion can be manipulated, no robust political system could deny either the influence or rigour of rhetoric.

To be able to influence well, persuasion must be pliable. Since there can never be a one size fits all template for political speeches, to be flexible and open to reorienting itself based on audience expectations becomes an irreplaceable value. The delivering of political speeches is then not only a matter of skill it is also a means of engagement, a chance to attend to disagreements and controversy in politics. If played well, it provides a fantastic opportunity to articulate arguments on either side of a disagreement or controversy, to link those arguments to the opinions of citizens and gently prodding them to deliberate. Politics and persuasion share an intimacy that is difficult to avoid. Persuasion is not just an ability but also a willingness, a generosity of nature, a voluntary commitment to listen to others, more so when they differ from the opinions of the speaker. Historically, men – more than women – were allowed to speak in the public sphere. To offset this imbalance, women designed their own persuasive strategies so that their voices were heard. In time, this came to represent a particular resistance movement often referred to as the feminine style in public speaking. Bonnie J. Dow reinforces that the feminine style may not always be biologically exclusive because many oppressed groups can employ feminine style as a rhetorical device for empowerment (1995: 109). Essentially, introducing the feminine style reconfigures the identities of rhetors and audiences. It aids in transforming audiences from passive receivers of information to active participants in the process of persuasion.

There is a serious threat in politics of creating echo chambers. Too often political speeches turn into flagrant boastings or attacks, signifying the candidate's accomplishments and power by way of belittling its opponents. These acts, though described as political rhetoric, can neither employ nor attain persuasion. To persuade successfully, the speakers must pay attention to details, listen as much as they speak, invite utterances as much as they inform. I find Garsten's (2009) rendition of persuasion in political discourse, Foss and Griffin's (1995) invitational style and Lloyd's (2021) theory of bridging rhetoric as similar. In turn, what Garsten (2009) and Foss and Griffin (1995) describe as persuasion without coercion or manipulation have much in common with Lloyd's (2021) bridging rhetoric involving communities. Each of these performances work more for the audience than individuals, all three emphasise malleability in methodology and implementation, and expect to arrive at decisions through consensus instead of seeking for Truth. Putting these theories together, it becomes clear that the most enduring speeches in politics are those that persuade a heterogenous audience through meticulous deliberations.

But I also wonder if all political speakers have the same authority or liberty to persuade through deliberations? What happens to speakers who are also representatives of various minority groups or other intersectional groups? Can deliberative practices be accessible to all citizens equally? There is always an element of risk, of chance and hence controversy in political speeches. Undoubtedly, all political speakers try to influence their audience, but for some this involves a greater degree of risk taking than others. In the case of women politicians in India, this frequently amounts to a double whammy. Firstly, since so few women get to stand as political candidates and represent a constituency of their choice, expertise, or background, those that do may continually have to keep their political masters happier than their electorate. Secondly, apart from being mired in all types of social pressures these women candidates may not be seen by their audience as empowered enough to bring any real change in the constituencies they represent. How then might women candidates create a model of deliberative persuasion that also allows the audience to perceive them as credible lawmakers? In the Indian political environment, this predicament can be resolved to some extent through the induction of a cultural vernacular or multiple flexible gender and identity affiliations formed through discursive interactions, that can bridge the gap between the audience and their elected representatives. In the case of women politicians especially, the initiation of this cultural vernacular becomes imperative since other than creating a space of familiarity and comfort with the audience, it secures a platform from which the speakers can voice their resistances to other oppressive regimes.

For women in India, choosing a political career is neither easy nor popular. Casting their votes for women candidates after being persuaded by their campaign speeches do not come affably to a habitually recalcitrant audience, who are more interested in appraising those candidates on conservative gendered issues[2] than their competence in politics. Such events remind us that for women in politics, as in most public life, gender is intricately linked with political performance and patriarchal ideology which play a crucial and decisive role in shaping electoral choices. In most historical instances, women leaders in the Indian context have been kept away from gaining access to public speaking, and even when they did, they had to fight an uphill battle to establish their integrity and commitment to political life. Even now, despite the crusades for equal opportunity and educational reform, women political candidates in India still struggle for acceptance beyond tokenism in all governmental settings. Although rhetorical readings of political speeches of women candidates have received considerable attention within language and gender research literature in Western academia, there has been very little research available on political speeches by women in India. The rhetorical interplay between language, identity and representation in this truly diverse multilingual landscape turns complex in small constituencies whose political leaders may come from wholly different geographical locations and culture. In remote and rural constituencies, the local culture is intricately woven into the fabric of language,[3] so much so that the only way to persuade the audience is to establish an interpersonal communication with them, which prevents the candidate from being seen as just another political wanderer. To achieve this for any politician is not an easy task but even harder for a woman candidate and is worthwhile to examine if we were to find functional and sustainable rhetorical models for women politicians.

Persuasive political speeches are awash with features to impress, to appeal to the causes, sentiments, and habits of the audience. Yet, there is by no means an effortless way to accomplish this. It is this tactical disposition of political rhetoric that prevents it from being steered by either logic or emotions alone, although a neat amalgam between those two is perhaps too much to ask anyway. How then must we characterise the ilk of political speeches, specifically in economies as that of India, where the trimmings of reasoning and emotions still leave it wanting? For me it is in reading campaign speeches as an invitation to dissent, as a form of public reasoning as well as deliberation, that make them not about politics but rather a performance of politics. In my understanding, this is exactly what Moitra does in the two situations described earlier. In each event, she displays dissent and deliberation, negotiating her role as a woman politician. While in one she demands respectful attention from her mostly male colleagues, in the other she recognises that her women audience may not have as much freedom with their time as their male counterparts when attending political rallies. In each of these instances she situates herself beyond quotidian political duties and approaches her audience with an insight about their gender hierarchies and limitations and is subsequently applauded for her courage and compassion. To avoid becoming inimical, political rhetoric here reasons itself to be a site through which the orator mediates fears, hopes, prejudices and expectations of her audience. But for deliberations like these, most political speeches would be reduced to mere facts and entertainment.

THREE LANGUAGES OF DISSENT

Once in every five years, India welcomes the festival of national and state-wide elections. The usual suspects are the state legislative assemblies and the *Lok Sabha* or parliamentary elections, but a number of more local

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[2] Such as their marital status, domestic fidelity, and standards for cultural values, among others.
[3] More than the same in urban areas where the cultural and linguistic diversity is readily apparent.

varieties like *panchayats*[4], municipalities and even frequent by-polls maintain a continuity in election season almost every year. Treated as a carnival, elections generate a euphoria mostly visible in their planning and organisation, particularly around the rallies and speeches of key politicians. An escalation of activities as the days arrive are a sure giveaway that something of great consequence is waiting to unfold. In Bengal specifically, the preparation for an election rally measures up to popular community events like soccer matches or music concerts. On the day of the speech recital a colourful stage is set early in the day; streets are blocked to vehicles; and microphones checked intermittently to make sure that audiences living more than a mile away also get to hear the speech. The anticipation of elections, like annual religious festivals, brim with zeal and an abundant commitment to flaunt all that the political parties hold worthy.

Working within this milieu, women political candidates are deeply entangled in the established cultural relationships between active politics, gender, and public use of language. They occupy a peculiar intermediate space, where they are occasionally evaluated favourably for being successful proponents of women and gender issues, while equally frequently lauded for not being one. Deblina Hembram, Mahua Moitra, and Mafuja Khatun are the three politicians from the state of West Bengal in India whose speeches are closely read here and examined for their rhetorical strategies. These speeches must be understood in the context of the entire campaign, the larger politics of the state, and the evolving position of women candidates in Indian elections. The state of West Bengal attained significance in the public eye during the 2019 elections, although one cannot deny that it has always had a strategic impact, feasibly for being the state with the third-largest number of seats in the *Lok Sabha*. However, this time, Bengal[5] garnered attention for certain other exclusive reasons. Bengal's politics in the last decade has witnessed a massive change of power. From the demise of the communist government[6] after running the state for over thirty years to the rise of the All-India Trinamool Congress (AITMC) party headed by possibly the fiercest woman politician in the country today who promised a complete makeover and facelift of state policies. The third and most recent entrant in this scenario has been the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP). It is the party in power in the parliament currently, a Hindu nationalist party which sought and found ripe opportunities for sewing their ideology among a section of the population who were getting increasingly dissatisfied over minority claims and positions in the state. Several factors that also featured as major election issues, including the current chief-minister's erratic policies towards minority communities, the rampant corruption and arrogance of its ministers, and general economic instability hastened the rise of the common people against the current government. But most importantly, the AITMC of West Bengal was one of the only two political parties[7] who decided to implement voluntary gender quotas in 2019. Although this initiative did not influence other parties' nomination of women candidates, 'it was successful in enabling several women from these two parties to enter parliament' (Spary, 2020: 223).

These three major political parties, with three distinctive ideologies, fought tooth and nail to collect the maximum number of seats possible. The three candidates whose speeches I examine, each belong to one of these three parties. These speeches were also selected because they were strategically composed, delivered and promoted by their respective parties who showcased the candidates' ability to aggressively combat each other in these crucial election campaigns. These speeches also received ample media attention and coverage. The presence of these three women, in a sea of belligerent male politicians who usually have central statuses and dominate the electoral landscape, was a revelation of sorts specifically from the standpoint of providing platforms for a refreshing cast of female politicians in the parliament.[8]

Apart from being strategically composed, the speeches also brought to the political table unique rhetorical skills based on the candidates' local inheritances, social backgrounds and historical conditions. For instance, Deblina Hembram, represented the Adivasis or tribal communities who have been marginalised for centuries and are consequently embroiled in protests against almost all political parties in India for lack of education, infrastructural development, and employment opportunities in the region. Hembram was a candidate for the Jhargram constituency of the CPI(M) party and has been a member of the state legislative assembly for three consecutive terms from Ranibandh. Although a long-time party worker, Hembram shot to fame this time exclusively for her speeches, delivered both in the city of Kolkata and its suburbs during her campaign tours. Mahua Moitra, on the other hand, is a former investment banker who left her job with JP Morgan in London to join a career in politics

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[4] Village councils.
[5] West Bengal is often referred to as Bengal. The other half or the eastern part of the state was partitioned at the end of British colonialism and India's independence in 1947. It has subsequently emerged as the nation of Bangladesh.
[6] Run by Communist Party of India (Marxist).
[7] The other one being BJD from Odisha.
[8] Among a total of 54 women candidates fielded by all parties, 17 were from AITMC, 5 from BJP and 6 from CPM (Trivedi Centre for Political Data). Each of the three candidates I read here belong to one of these three political parties, among which only AITMC and BJP were able to send 9 and 2 women from a grand total of 22 and 18 members respectively to the Parliament.

in India. She is currently a Member of the Parliament, having contested and won the election from Krishnanagar constituency and has earned a lot of interest and respect for her ability to deliver bold and fiery speeches. Finally, there is Mafuja Khatun, the first Muslim woman candidate fielded by the BJP in West Bengal, partly to counter the aggregation of Muslim votes around the Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee and her party AITMC. Khatun did justice to her position and political ambition by unleashing a series of speeches targeting the Muslim population of the state. Khatun's seat in Jangipur was a fiercely contested one, considering her principal opponent was a three-time winner of that seat. In spite of their involvement in active politics for almost a decade or more, these candidates were barely known earlier for their political accomplishments and seldom featured in the media for their speeches. If campaigning is one of the most contentious and provocative spaces in the public sphere, then these speeches were nothing short of intense dissent in which each candidate tackled opposing ideologies with confidence and rigour. In diction, style, reasonability, and persuasiveness they each stood apart and soared to political eminence and visibility by far due to their rhetorical adeptness.

'IN THE NAME OF DEVELOPMENT': DEBLINA HEMBRAM AND THE ABORIGINAL VOICE

Hembram's (2019a) speech at Kolkata was marked by a compelling and effective phrase in the Adivasi dialect, '*Amra oder charbok nai,*' translating as, 'We will not let them get away.' This was a bold rhetorical move and also a highly tactical one. Rarely have the audience from within and outside the tribal community been exposed to political speeches delivered in a tribal language, that too for a major political rally in the state capital. No doubt, this became a catchphrase to identify the passion and trauma of sustained negligence and violence (in a range of issues from deforestation, illegal mining to lack of basic resources) that the people of her community have endured for more than seventy years since Independence. But Hembram's (2019a) audience in Kolkata that day was not made of just members from her tribal community, but thousands of supporters of the CPI(M) party from other parts of the state. She spoke for roughly seven minutes, and her argument was built upon a list of development work that the current government promised to bring to various tribal lands but did not fulfil. She focused on questioning the level of unemployment in the state and how despite being educated, young men are not getting jobs. She screamed at her audience, 'You have to say what these men will now do. Will they go around the forest to rake leaves or kill rats in the fields?' (2019a). In a podium otherwise full of male speakers, Hembram shows no sign of being outnumbered. But she did bring up many times in her speech, her gratitude and appreciation for the party and the institution that has given her the opportunity to speak in this public platform, especially because she represents a non-urban constituency. Hembram's speech caught her own party members unaware since they did not expect her to be able to address a large audience so deftly. Hembram's campaign speeches up until then mostly attended by audiences from remote rural areas of the state, with whom she could communicate and construct spontaneous relationships by talking about common grievances. In this exclusive speech in Kolkata, Hembram outshone all other speakers in her ability to refreshingly articulate her passion for public service and political commitment for a community that rarely makes to national news, to a more diverse group of people. Hembram made sure to be equipped with not just facts and figures but also stories. Speaking mostly impromptu, she was halting at times but with a fervour that made her audience – no matter what their backgrounds – feel one with her. Her use of a basic but sensational linguistic style in which she switched between urban Bengali[9] and the tribal dialect in the most agile manner, gave her an edge over the others. She spoke about rising unemployment, lack of development in the indigenous people's reservation areas, lack of incentives for farmers, almost non-existent educational infrastructure, and a general apathy in the current government to bring about real social change in the area.

Some of these issues palpably fall under a common registry of accusations hurled by all candidates at each other. But what made Hembram's speech rhetorically impactful was how she adapted a locally accepted semantics – heightened by persuasive delivery – to focus on the manipulation of Adivasi communities for political purposes. She spoke fiercely against being them being used tokenistically as representations and subjected to frivolous appeasement policies. She was not speaking to only the Communist Party supporters but to the fourteen million people of the city, about classified atrocities suffered by generations of her people. Hembram could not have been unaware of her party's current political status in the state. She must have known as much as the people who had gathered there to hear her speak, coming from villages as far as 200 kilometres away, that the once ruling Communist Party can now barely amass enough numbers for building a respectable opposition. It was imperative therefore that Hembram build an image of herself as more than a Communist Party member. Although affiliated to that party, she spoke as a tribal woman addressing the large political divide between urban and rural constituencies. This awareness encouraged her to break out of the usual vain, self-obsessed speeches that are

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[9] The language spoken in the state of West Bengal.

usually delivered by most political leaders in the state. As a dyed-in-the-wool communist, her focus was the condition of work and workers, but occasionally she also included other grievances of tribal communities. This short excerpt illustrates how her accusations against inefficient government policies were always unfailingly followed with a more personal response:

> Such tall tales and a crock of lies! It looks as if they have nothing but love and compassion for us, Adivasis. In the name of 'development' they are offering us drums and other musical instruments, to preserve our music and culture. We, Santhals[10] and Adivasis, do not need their instruments to sing our songs. We can sing songs, make melodies even without their political blessings. (2019a)

She is sarcastic as she talked about the promotion of a disproportionate number of religious festivals supported by certain political parties: 'They say it is useful to do *puja*s[11] – so many kinds of *puja*s – Durga[12], Kali[13], dolls, any item for *puja*s, but no one available to help the distressed people of the country.' Hembram's persistent evocation of her humble background and assertion that political power fails to dazzle her, makes her one of the strongest allies of the common people. Her words are carefully chosen to depict a stark contrast between other politicians from privileged classes and her own Adivasi upbringing. Her message to her voters on the necessity to uphold this distinction was clearly communicated.

'IN POLITICS AS A FOOT-SOLDIER': THE CLARITY OF MAHUA MOITRA

A graduate in Finance from Mount Holyoke College, USA and a former employee of JP Morgan in London, Mahua Moitra's entry into politics is as thrilling as her speeches. Relatively new to the political scene, she has been a member of the West Bengal legislative assembly from 2016 and elected a member of parliament in 2019 for the AITMC party. Also, she is possibly one of the most promising and aggressive political speakers in the country at present. Moitra's style of speaking includes meticulously chosen content and sharp and efficient delivery which has so far captivated her audience and played a big role in bringing persuasive speeches to the forefront of the political game in India once again. In one of her earliest speeches, she introduced herself to the audience of her constituency Krishnanagar: 'I am a politician and I have come here to do political work. I fully carry the responsibilities for the promises I make in my speeches and need no other party workers' assistance' (2019a). She then moves on to outline for her rural and possibly uneducated audience the many democratic responsibilities that politicians share with civil society members; carefully drawing out the differences in electoral decision-making between parliamentary and state elections.

Rather than interpreting these lessons in politics negatively, her audience immediately ally themselves with her on the promise of a transparency that has eluded them for many years due to opaque political methods. In their eyes, she resurrects politics from its generally assumed pit of corruption and the newfound respectability is embraced with genuine enthusiasm. Unlike Hembram, Moitra does not share the social background of most of her audience in her constituency. That is perhaps the reason why one cannot help but notice a pedagogic style in the way she constructs her arguments without letting them become condescending or pedantic. For example, knowing Bengal's love for soccer, she uses the game as a metaphor to define her position – 'I play as a centre-forward in the Indian political team. I am like Baichung Bhutia[14] whose offensive moves must be dexterously defended by the BJP government' (2019a). Moitra's soccer claim gets her Bengali audience every time, as does her scorn for the BJP government's failure to prevent the terrorist attacks in Pulwama, Kashmir earlier in the year. Her references to how the Indian state implicitly supported Hindu mobs who shamefully go into lynching spree against Muslim men and yet fail to preserve national security, is met with rounds of applause from her dedicated supporters.

Moitra's speeches are designed keeping in mind the expectations of her rural audience. She comes to her public speaking assignments well prepared; begins each speech with a customised introduction in which she talks about the love she has for her constituency; the familiarity she feels in the area that she has grown to be fond of; all in the manner of exposing a sense of responsibility of one who knows how to take care of her people. In her somewhat pastoral relationship and communication with her audience she teaches them organisational efficiency and urges them to get better at their political performances. In an informal and slightly endearing style of speaking, she explains difficult concepts like demonetisation, national security, economic development and communal

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[10] Ethnic groups residing in Eastern India.
[11] Religious festivals.
[12] Hindu Deity.
[13] Hindu Deity.
[14] A popular soccer player from Bengal.

harmony with an ease that makes even her male party colleagues sharing the stage with her look impressed. She tries her best to not alienate her audience and is always eager to create an atmosphere of trust and mutual exchange. Just as she constantly associates herself with her audience to maintain a unified democratic front, so she never makes the mistake of positioning herself as different from the electorate. She insists that her audience perceive her as more than a political leader, preferably also as a social leader. She instructs them, 'Fasten your seat belts, let us get on to the fields, yours and mine self-esteems are at stake, come, let us design this election for ourselves' (2019c).

Moitra's speeches draw examples from around the world, specifically about the Second World War and Nazi Poland and Germany to explain xenophobia and growing hatred for a particular race, religion, or community. She makes sure that she addresses the religious tensions in India today through moral and mythical stories about how Hinduism does not support killing Muslims. She makes her distance from this vision of Hinduism clear to her audience: 'I like to serve politics as a foot soldier and not a self-absorbed leader, greedy for power' (2019b). Finally, she distinguishes between a foolish and an intelligent politician, expounding how development is an evolving concept and that as a political leader she makes the best effort to attend to all the requirements of her constituency. Moitra is a strategist, an organiser, and a coach for her people. Her professional experience in global financial corporations affect the way she handles her rallies, shares information with her people and how she always persuades her audience invoking their democratic rights. Moitra sells electoral politics as an intellectual affair and assists the people of Krishnanagar to find reasons for the choices they make.

CALLING OUT THE 'FAKE MUSLIM': THE SATIRE OF MAFUJA KHATUN

Among the three women candidates whose speeches are analysed here, Mafuja Khatun is the most prolific entertainer, collecting numerous spontaneous rounds of applause in almost all her speeches. An important candidate, unambiguously fielded by the BJP to gain currency among the Muslim community members in West Bengal, Khatun displayed an astute and remarkable perception of the job cut out for her in this election. She diligently focused on ways to initiate offensive attacks on the present Chief Minister and her government in West Bengal, possibly as an antidote to the growing discomfort in the state about Khatun's party's attitude to Muslims. Khatun made no mistakes in her speeches to uncover the workings and methods of distinguishing a true Muslim (herself) versus the 'fake Muslims', namely non-Islamic people who claim to support Muslims. In every speech, she publicly announces against the Chief Minister, 'Beware of fake Musalmans.' By articulating such a strong opinion, she establishes herself as an insider of the Islamic community and sets all other freestanding interlocutors as fictitious and misleading. Khatun targets her Muslim audiences through assurances of solidarity, a gatekeeping mechanism which prevents all but a handful of people to be named as authentic friends of Muslims. Her calling the Chief Minister a deceitful person for attempting to attend Muslim cultural events presupposes the audience's agreement and uses it as a cue to embark upon a personal attack on the aforesaid minister. The banality of the performance eventually does entertain her audience. Her story ends with an impertinent rhetorical question: 'How can the one who has not kept a fast and broken it at an auspicious hour, hasn't read the namaz, can wear a hijab and pray to Allah and join in the Iftar gatherings?' (2018b). True to that claim, Khatun always keeps her head covered when she comes to deliver her speeches. Moreover, all her arguments are against only the chief minister of West Bengal and no other political candidates. With explicit references as a *bona fide* practitioner of Islam, she presents an authentic leader in herself before her audience and a religious insider who can guide them to the 'real' political party that truly supports minority religious groups.

Khatun's speech style is reminiscent of a form fairly common in the late 70s and 80s among the Communist Party of India's members. Khatun's political career started with them when she was elected on the Communist Party of India's (Marxist) ticket in 2001 and 2006. But in the following two state elections (2011 and 2016) she lost to AITMC candidates. She eventually joined the BJP in May 2017. It is therefore not surprising that Khatun's training in political oratory was shaped by the Communist Party in the early phase of her career. This influence is still evident in the way she uses patriotic songs or poems in her speeches which creates a distinctive public voice that has little in common with her contenders. She speaks in a noticeable local dialect and accent, using a variety of puns and alliterative words to add a certain cadence to her speech. She also makes a habit of ending her speeches with either nationalistic poems or songs composed many years ago, possibly around the peak of India's freedom movement. Delivering long sentences almost breathlessly before breaking to draw a long breath, she makes sure that each sentence begins with an onslaught on the opposition candidate. For instance, she scorns Mamata Banerjee's (the Chid Minister of the state) ability to invest effectively in trade and industries by ascribing funny names to her projects, such as '*tolabaji shilpo*', 'syndicating *shilpo*', and '*boma shilpo*'[15] (2018a) to call her out on the low utility index of such commercial enterprises. At another time, she joked about the numerous festivals organised

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[15] The art and craft of extortion and bomb manufacturing.

by the state government promoting artisans: '*ghoti mela*', '*bati mela*', '*mati mela*', '*choti mela*'[16] (2018a). Khatun's ability to weave an anecdotal story for every issue she raises against her contenders, adds a tenor to her speeches that is missing in the other candidates. Most of the stories she narrates about the opposition are laced with localised humour and are meant to ridicule rather than give any details of political work. One of her favourite topics is to commence an imaginary debate on who is a more ethical politician (the Prime Minister or the Chief Minister) without caring to produce any political analysis or statistical data as evidence. Unlike Mahua Moitra, who explains politics through civic terms and democratic rights to enforce a political consciousness among her audience, Mafuja Khatun is happy to persuade through spoof, satire, and absurd narratives.

IDIOM, AMBIGUITY, AND CHARISMA

In an absolute and rather limiting sense, persuasive rhetoric is an indulgence in skill and eloquence. Political speeches therefore are part invention and intuition, and part emotions and evidence, all rhetorical elements swathed in idioms of identity. Still in politics, disagreements more than indulgence become the cornerstone of efficacious rhetoric. The three speakers here exercise the former over the latter in resisting to only speak for and as women in their campaigns. Merging personal tone with personal disclosure can be seen as 'interrelated characteristics of feminine style', claim Dow and Tonn (1993: 292). That is because, the telling of a personal experience 'presupposes a personal attitude to the subject and a willingness for audience identification' (Dow and Tonn, 1993: 292). However, this conspicuous lack of explicitly addressing the concerns of women voters; of trying to build any solidarity with a section of the population that clearly needs more representation; to refrain from making promises about issues that would influence women's choices in the future, should not seem like an abandonment of feminine style. Quite contrarily, it compels me to read them as a style reminiscent of methodical resistance against being trapped into circumscribed gender roles. Even though women politicians are aware of gender discrimination and the lack of adequate representations, to succeed they must also live up to models of gender-neutral national leaders, making way for easier governance at the campaign level.

Writing in 1963, W. H. Morris-Jones rationalised that to understand the 'inside story' of the workings of the Indian government, one needs to be aware of how influential political idioms are in keeping the government-electoral machinery well lubricated. Indian political language, he states, enjoys an exceptionally wide latitude ranging from style, fashion, background to education, manner, behaviour making utterances in this language liberally equivocal. Even though a certain amount of ambiguity is acceptable in political idioms of all countries, in most cases the regional variations of these idioms eventually merge with the dominant national language of politics. In India however, there is no single simple political language to begin with and faced with this lack of standardisation, all available political idioms can be implemented only with a characteristic authority (Morris-Jones, 1963: 133-53). The political leader or speaker is entrusted with this authority to adopt an idiom that most fittingly authenticates their identity. For Morris-Jones there are only three kinds of available idioms to adopt – 'modern', 'traditional', and 'saintly' – and most leaders of independent India, if not all, must ultimately decide to embrace one of these to defend their political logic (1963: 135).

More recently, Ramchandra Guha refers to this classification when he institutes 'charisma' as a trope for persuasive political leadership encompassing identity, rhetoric, and community loyalty. Charismatic leaders, Guha says are as much skilled with 'dramatic presentation of issues' and 'political oratory' as 'mastery of political psychology' (2011: 289). Borrowing from Morris-Jones's analysis of India's three political idioms, Guha marks the territories of each of these idioms by their styles of rhetoric. He identifies the modern idiom with the rhetoric of hope, the traditional with that of fear, and the saintly or 'national-populist' with the rhetoric of sacrifice. Since the modern idiom expresses itself frequently through the English language and is generally the idiom of the urban elite, its own rhetoric of hope offers a 'better and fuller life whether expressed in material terms or otherwise' (Guha, 2011: 295). The traditional idiom and its rhetoric of fear rests upon an anxiety of being outnumbered by others. Promoted as a warning to its members to remain loyal to their caste, religion, region, or language against all odds, this kind of political idiom and its rhetorical affect makes sure that no group or community goes unnoticed or underrepresented. Finally, the saintly idiom is laced with a rhetoric of sacrifice for it first campaigns for renunciation of all that is valuable to individuals and then against all tyrannical and therefore immoral regimes (Guha, 2011: 295).

This would not be the first time that personal identity has been associated with great oratory, adding a veneer of ethics over the kind of politics that continue to toe a thin line between the fair and unjust. As such, what Guha calls 'charisma' here is moderately akin to what ancient Roman rhetorician Quintilian (c. 35 CE - c. 100 CE) required all orators to possess, precisely wisdom, ethics and freedom from vice, to be of any service to the state. Only such a 'good man' could 'speak well' and foster a conscientious ethos. Are political leaders automatically

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[16] Utensils Fair; Earth Fair; Shoes Fair.

catapulted to being good men or do they have to work hard to achieve that title? Do women have to work harder, given that their working conditions in politics are engulfed in layers of complexity? Although Morris-Jones's (1963) examples of candidates enacting his three idioms did not include any women, it is reasonable to assume that women and men may not share the exact same forms of political idioms. Women's preoccupation with politics habitually goes beyond the party into the realm of the non-political. Wendy Singer's analysis of women's role in election campaigning in India suggests that on campaign tours, women politicians need to address local concerns that sooner or later get incorporated into election issues (Singer, 2007: 160-61). Difficulties in security, sanitation, dowry, or domestic abuse are political in only as much as they are openly discussed during election season; at all other times they drift along the tides of social activism. (Singer, 2007: 162). Campaign rhetorics of women candidates are conceivably melting pots where 'social service, vocal agitation and electoral participation' are all blended, howsoever coarsely, in the name of 'women's politics' (Singer, 2007: 180).

Delivering a political speech is more than simply instructing the audience on how to act, that would be counterproductive to reasoning. It is more equitable to read them as debates in the most capacious manner possible, where multiple interlocutors are equipped to make rhetorical interventions by promoting opportunities for further argumentations and discussions wherever required. The primary role of these interlocutors even when vested with political interests is to admit dissenting voices in public discourse. Rhetoric is what makes all such democratic articulations possible since it perfectly aligns itself to notions of dissent and disagreement.

THE INTIMACY OF BELONGING

Like all things political, campaign speeches are almost always more than what meets the eye. Contradictions are in fact so integral to political speeches that a brilliant political speech, it is generally acclaimed, is one that does not fail to inspire even its detractors. To be something of that calibre necessitates careful crafting of not only *what* to say, but also *how* to speak the unspeakable. No part of a political speech can afford to be superfluous since there is hardly ever an audience more scrutinising, exacting or demanding than an electoral one. In nine out of ten speeches persuasion is accomplished by deploying multiple strategies designed to create a memorable impression of both the candidate and the speech. Content here is as much important as attire; enunciation and attitude as much as originality and sense of humour. At its core, these ambiguities of political speeches are also their very conditions of possibility. For it is in such a reading, I would like to think, that we observe the properties of those paradigms within which women speak, interact, influence and persuade during election campaigns.

Likewise, each of these three candidates whose persuasive strategies I explore, pitched their claims and posited their stakes to their voters not exclusively as women but as reliable and assiduous party workers. Hembram in Kolkata, Moitra in Krishnanagar, or Khatun in Murshidabad, were all campaigning in areas that they did not live in, which also means they shared no special intimacy with the largely unknown audience and required to firmly establish their credibility before they could solicit votes. Khatun tried to achieve this by bluntly aligning herself to Islamic voters, copiously referring to Muslim mothers and sisters; Moitra called herself the daughter of Nadia district; and Hembram used the Adivasi dialect to strike a familiarity. As the three women campaigners reminded the audience of these specific and intimate associations at every rally, they simultaneously constructed an informal space to foreground their identities. The leaders were fully aware that they had a lot to lose in the risk of being seen as too alienated for being woman politicians from other geographical regions and therefore seemingly beyond reach to usher any real change. However, apart from the initial exposition, there was nothing in the speeches to support explicit gender preferences or even its mobilisation as a rhetorical trope. Although women's issues did come up in the campaign speeches – more for Hembram and Moitra than Khatun – they were always projected as supplementary to other national issues. This was intriguing and exceptional since all three of them referred to the current plight of women across the nation, the continuity of atrocities inflicted on them and the result of corrupt male political leaders, who turn a blind eye to such events. Nevertheless, beyond these allegations, they made no other direct attempt to address women's issues, no endorsements of specific projects that these candidates might undertake if they were elected to office or made any empathetic reference to gender empowerment. It would not be wrong to suppose that these candidates shied away from being primary campaigners for women voters. On the same note, they never referred to each other's speeches and only cited either the chief or the prime minister whenever required, whether for criticism or inspiration.

This overt disengagement with women's issues by these three political leaders underscores the question as to how might the local and political metastasise into personal choices during campaigning? Each politician must be allowed to make their particular rhetorical choices as they nurture particular goals or directions in mind. Hembram, Moitra, and Khatun too appear to have made their choices on the rhetorical strategies and tools that get them to present their voice to their voters. Each of them establishes competence as they determine ways, some more successful than others, to share agency with their audience. Whether it is through humour (Khatun) or a constant use of metaphors (Moitra) or connecting with the audience on tropes of Adivasi language (Hembram), the women

are constantly in pursuit of a cultural vernacular. In every instance of successful persuasion, the audience and the women attain a moment of epiphany, documenting extraordinary strategies that increase the visibility and credibility of women as rhetorical communicators chronicling their contributions to the history of public discourse.

India is presently beyond the debate on whether more women should be encouraged to take up public office responsibilities; the answer is abundantly clear, and its implementation is an ongoing process. The stakes are equally high in presuming that both male and female politicians have the same opportunities for constructing and delivering campaign speeches and resulting in similar rhetorical impact. Such an assumption would then expunge any contention that even in politics, men and women have different lived experiences and that here gender narratives are shaped by a rather imprecise discernment of women's leadership roles. In other words, while women politicians are accepted as different leaders and seriously appraised for their characteristic communicative styles, occasionally those same identities are re-negotiated through rigid strains of gendered discourses. Framed by local customs and conditions these models of what a woman should express or say in public even when they are political leaders must be deftly managed by all female politicians in their campaign speeches. A woman political leader has an obligation to sound suitably progressive to her electoral audience without seemingly abandoning any gendered norms or convictions of the constituency she is representing. Her utterances are most persuasive when besides party principles, they effortlessly toe the line between practicing autonomy of speech and living up to regional paradigms about women's identities and role in public assignments.

The British feminist linguistic theorist Deborah Cameron (2006) in her article 'Theorising the Female Voice in Public Contexts' discusses several fundamental critical frameworks that evaluate the ways in which gender is associated with uses of language in the public sphere. She begins by drawing attention to how the 'third wave' of 'language and gender scholarship' shifted its focus from generalising tendencies of earlier feminist scholars' interests in universal 'grand narratives', to a more fruitful consideration of 'the "local" conditions affecting women's public utterance in different times, places and social groups' (2006: 3). Cameron, however, is reluctant to entirely discount all generalising notions, considering a certain uniformity exists in the role and function of female voices in public contexts across the globe. Citing examples from Joel Sherzer (1987) and George Kennedy's (1998) extensive anthropological and rhetorical scholarship on cross-cultural traditions, Cameron agrees that while at different historical periods exceptional women orators have been recognised and felicitated, majority of public speaking in almost all cultures continues to be dominated by men. Then again, even if over time democratisation of such spaces has become a concern for all, and efforts are made to include more female voices, there continues to be 'both prejudice and internalized anxiety about the female voice in public contexts' (2006: 4). While Cameron observes how concepts of public and private may differ over cultures and can be more inflexible and overlapping than generally understood, certain domains of oral communication, like law, politics or commerce continue to be flourished by male voices even when there is substantial awareness of gender discriminations. In India too, instances of strong female political speakers have been sporadic at best, with hardly any time-honoured traditions available for centuries.

CONCLUSION: THE PERVASIVE ERASURE OF WOMEN IN INDIAN POLITICS

For all its egalitarian championing of voices, rhetoric's foray into democracy has been marked by a glaring imperfection – that of the marginalisation of women's voices both as practitioners and theorists of rhetoric. By now it is a commonplace claim that women's voices are minimally audible in traditions of political debate, arguments and discussion when compared to men's, no matter what the cultural or geographic context might be. This erasure is so pervasive, that for centuries not even one recovered text is available containing an entire speech by a female orator from ancient India. Apart from some sporadic and insufficient references to Gargi as a renowned orator in the Brihadaranyak Upanishad (8th century BCE) or Yajgyavalkya's brilliant wife Maitreyi (Sen, 2005: 7-8), most other women speakers or rhetoricians are glaring in their absence, fashioning a misconception that it was customary for women to stay away from matters of either public or political significance. In a tradition which otherwise labels its presumed deity of 'spoken words', a woman named Vac,[17] and makes her an accomplice of Brahma[18], the irony of the lack of women speakers in classical history can be hardly understated. Then again, political events in India in the last two hundred years or so have produced a number of challenges to such assumptions, with increasing documentation and analysis of women's participation in politics, ranging from Laxmibai, the Queen of Jhansi in the 19th century through a spate of leaders during India's independence movement to even more contemporary coverage of political lives of leaders like Mamata Banerjee, Smriti Irani, or Sushma Swaraj.[19] Intriguingly though, none of these leaders' speeches have made it to either popular lists on

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[17] The Hindu goddess of spoken word.
[18] God of creation and part of the Hindu trinity.
[19] Popular women politicians in India in the last few decades.

influential oratorical performances or scholarly critical works. Even now, a casual search on Google for influential political orators in India comes up with less than a handful of women's names. A list published by *The Better India* in 2014 promoting '14 Inspiring Speeches by Indians You Can't Afford to Miss', singularly mentions only one woman's – Kiran Bedi's[20] – speech on visionary leadership during a TEDWoman event, among thirteen other male stalwarts from the country like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Rabindranath Tagore, Narayan Murthy, and Sachin Tendulkar (Pareek, 2014). Two other such lists, an especially scathing one published by *The Outlook Magazine* on India's best orators, compares mostly male politicians with a cursory mention of Indira Gandhi – the only woman in the analysis – that too for her ineloquent ways (Bobb, 2022); while the *Bangalore Mirror* puts only two women politicians, Mamata Banerjee and Smriti Irani, in a list with seventeen other male competitors (2018). Comparably, a quest for critical works on speeches delivered by female politicians from India in my university library database yielded only six results. The path to recovering more voices is indeed long and arduous. At this rate, even if some progress is made in advocating women's speeches in political analysis, creating a corresponding corollary to the masculinist tradition remains a pipedream.

Political speeches are an invitation to its audience to think. It is in this temptation to think for themselves that the electoral audience finds unhindered access to reason and a taste of equality. Together with their leaders, they exchange ideas which empower them to evaluate and respond by voting the most suitable candidate as a lawmaker. This rhetorical analysis of campaign speeches delivered by Moitra, Hembram, and Khatun, is an attempt to draw attention to the representation of gender in such performances of political culture. Their speeches are memorable and worth analysing, not just for their content but also their rhetorical significance, the problems, and promises they pose for female public speakers.

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Sex-workers Defying Patriarchy and Challenging State Reform and Rehabilitation Projects in India: Voices from the Margins

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ABSTRACT

Despite the prostitution industry being accorded a semi-legal status in India, the status of sex-workers remains abysmal with scarce provisions towards healthcare, education/literacy and/or labour rights. Consequently, the current approach to the rights of sex-workers is ridden with several structural barriers, as existing state reform projects often violate subjects' bodily autonomy and act as moral discipliners, leaving them vulnerable to forms of systemic and institutionalised violence. Notwithstanding such exclusions, there have been strong feminist undercurrents advocating for the inclusion of such marginalised actors. One such example is the *DURBAR* NGO in Kolkata comprising of many sex-workers, calling for the legalisation of the prostitution industry as its underground nature enhances networks of crime, and simultaneous workers' stigmatisation. *DURBAR* workers actively champion for their rights as equal citizens, and instead critique state regulation projects that seek to morally discipline them rather than providing concrete emancipation strategies or skill development. This article analyses such modalities of resistance through local channels of grassroots organisation, performative culture, and collective action. Reliant on such accounts from the margins, it elucidates how such bottom-up accounts of mobilisation, epitomise significant catalysts of agency and social change, which otherwise go missing from the dominant annals of policy and developmental discourses.

Keywords: South Asia, human rights, gender & sexuality, sex-worker rights, civil society movements

INTRODUCTION

> Despite irrefutable evidence emerging from government, non-government research and voices of numerous affected sex-workers, the Indian State has failed in its obligations to respect, protect and promote the rights of sex-workers who are arbitrarily arrested and evicted. State inaction to assess and amend punitive laws that impact sex-workers and their families has led to Indian sex-workers living in a criminal and stigmatised environment. By giving unviable and unworkable rehabilitation schemes as the only option to sex-workers, the State has failed in its duty to protect their freedoms.
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> *United Nations Human Rights Council*, 2014 Report on India[1].

The policing of prostitution globally has been a hotbed of contestation, with a diverse range of positions ranging across moralistic condemnation, abolition, criminalisation, decriminalisation, legalisation, and community-level mobilisation. This article debunks certain myths surrounding the state-sponsored regulation of the sex industry in India, as well as drawing attention to a bottom-up approach that consider actors' socio-economic agency, bodily autonomy, vocational choices, and freedoms in the making of legislations. It further discourages over-sensationalised narratives that often accompany media stories about prostitution, as they detract from a comprehensive understanding of the issues and instead rest on ideologically charged interventions. The article engages with feminist, postcolonial and subaltern scholarship towards problematising the passage of prostitution and trafficking laws in postcolonial India alongside a bourgeoise, respectable sensibility. It consequently incorporates oral testimonies from sex-worker rights' NGOs in India, namely *Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee*

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[1] A/HRC/26/Addl.: *Human Rights Enquiry Commission Reports*, 2010-2020 (UN Archives: Geneva).

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(DURBAR), Sampada Grameen Mahila Sanstha (SANGRAM) and *Veshya Anyay Mukti Parishad (VAMP)*, along with insights from the author's encounters with sex-workers and trafficked persons from Odisha and Kolkata. In its final section, in arguing for equitable and non-discriminatory emancipatory parameters, the article underscores a notable case-study of resistance and grassroots-level organisation through the *DURBAR* NGO. Such an inclusion of the occluded life-stories of marginalised subjects in India can inform a profound change of discourse that integrates the lived experiences of India's sex-workers. Finally, via unpacking women's experiential narratives, this article encapsulates the intersectional concerns of gendered activisms from the Global South, informed by feminist epistemologies that incorporate such silenced histories.

A conceptual clarification needs making at the outset. Although the terms 'prostitute' and 'prostitution' have been historically invoked to refer to the sex industry and its affiliated actors, I am aware of their stigmatising connotations. The article instead uses the terms 'sex-worker' or 'sexual commerce' to avoid the epistemological violence inflicted by derogatory nomenclatures. However, for the purposes of historical consistency, these nomenclatures need to be used in certain places to refer to the evolution of the industry and the subsequent regulation policies in the domains of law and policy-making. Analogously, since male prostitution is unrecognised/disallowed in India, this article primarily deals with female perspectives.

METHODOLOGY

The article's methodological approach is a combination of ethnographic insights based on NGO Annual Reports, collated testimonies from the *Davis Projects for Peace*[2] fieldwork the author conducted in Odisha (2016-2018), interactions with *DURBAR* workers in Kolkata during fieldtrips (2018-2019), along with archival research tracing India's ratification of protocols on trafficking and prostitution post-independence. Interviews were conducted in Hindi and Oriya and then translated into English. Focus group discussions and fieldwork revealed pivotal points from certain groups of interlocutors such as sex-workers, trafficked persons, and social workers, these were critically analysed to understand the approach of law enforcement agencies towards the stakeholders involved in sexual commerce. Additionally, this article relies extensively on case-studies from three consequential sex-worker rights organisations in India, namely *DURBAR*, *VAMP*, and its parent-body NGO *SANGRAM*. Finally, it collates data from the baseline surveys and records of the *National Network of Sex Workers* (NNSW) and *National Human Rights Commission of India*, which reveal important insights on the many predicaments afflicting sex-workers.

This leads me to my own positionality as a researcher, as an outsider to the sex industry as well as an activist and academic researching on this topic. While I had initially intended to prioritise an integrated, participatory approach, my *outsider* status soon became evident. As I am a privileged non-sex-worker, my research process involved carefully negotiating access and respecting and wholly incorporating the diverse range of subjectivities surrounding and including participants. In a departure from age-old regimes of non-participatory decision-making, understanding their circumstantial conditions in conjunction with taking into account their voices in the making of initiatives was integral to establishing trust in this research context.

From my previous experiences in working with NGOs, it also was crucial to recognise the role of sex-workers as legitimate stakeholders in the development of research projects. It became clear that interviewees from across Odisha and West Bengal did not perceive themselves as disempowered mute observers or passive beneficiaries of assistance, exercising little agency. They actively reminded the researcher of their resentments with previous interventions, whereby their viewpoints and grievances had not been sufficiently considered. Participants refuted the idea that sex-workers were just objects of charitable intervention; rather they were agents whose desires and perspectives constituted an active role in policies. The research process promoted dialogical participation and mutuality along with encouraging and enabling participants to mobilise as agents of social change. Such roles of sex-workers as equal stakeholders, whereby they are uniquely positioned to articulate and provide solutions to problems afflicting them, remains a central objective of this study. It also shapes the motivations behind responding to the Indian Supreme Court's recent judgement on the rights of sex-workers, which the article turns to in its penultimate section.

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[2] The *Davis Projects for Peace* is a global initiative for students to design their own grassroots-project addressing conflict-resolution, human rights, peace-building, minority development, and holistic growth. As its recipient in 2016, I worked on building a shelter-home for trafficked and homeless persons from the railway stations of Odisha, and some former-sex-workers. Collated interviews have shaped this article's many articulated concerns. Project findings can be found at: https://www.middlebury.edu/office/projects-for-peace/projects/2016/resurrect-restore-and-revive-dignity-railway-station-children; 'The Invisible Voices of India's Informal Sector Sex-Workers,' *LSE South Asia Centre* (2021): https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2021/03/22/the-invisible-voices-of-indias-informal-sector-sex-workers/.

PROBLEMATISING INDIAN PROSTITUTION LAWS

The legal statute governing the rights of sex-workers and trafficked persons in India is *The Suppression of Immoral Traffic in Women and Girls Act* (1956), amended in 1986 as *The Immoral Traffic Prevention Act* (ITPA). While this Act allows sex-workers to conduct their trade in private sites, they cannot legally seek customers in public spaces or engage in organised services. Although prostitution in India *per se* is permissible, a range of activities surrounding it like the operation of brothels, pimping, pandering, and street solicitation, are illegal. Despite the existence of red-light districts, the question of sex-workers' human rights remain ambiguous. They are not safeguarded by labour laws or trade unions but can seek rescue and rehabilitation in state-sanctioned shelters. Additionally, under the ITPA, as prostitution is predominantly categorised through the lens of trafficking/exploitation, it precludes an understanding of sex-work as a valid form of labour. There are several problems in this conflation of *trafficking* with *adult consensual prostitution*, thereby downsizing or negating the possibility of other forms of trafficking characterising the global regime like sweatshops or agricultural labour, debt bondage, and mechanisms of smuggling such as that of arms or drugs.

India's historical approach to prostitution has been shaped by international obligations, especially its fulfilment of the 1949 United Nations *Convention of the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and of the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others* and being a signatory to the Palermo Protocol.[3] Although the Indian Supreme Court in May 2022 emphasised a radically different approach that promotes subjects' legal and healthcare rights, it nonetheless becomes consequential to analyse the skewed manner in which India's prostitution laws have historically perpetuated oppression against sex-workers.

From a human rights perspective, the implementation of the ITPA by law enforcement agencies has created a multitude of complexities. While its clauses allow the police to arrest prostitutes or pimps who work in brothels at close proximity to public places, the ITPA has enabled a criminalisation approach that impedes the application of rights-based parameters. Moreover, over-sensationalised representations have acted to dichotomise sex-workers in terms of victimised/deviant subjects, positioning the police as heroes, bolstering patriarchal power structures whilst aligning with the moralistic disciplining of the state. In my interviews with *DURBAR* workers, women described how brothel raids actioned under the guise of public protection and rooting out crime, constituted stigmatisation as their sex-work was now exposed to family, acquaintances, and wider society. Arbitrarily implemented measures like raids, forceful rehabilitation amidst other forms of societal othering, can lead even well-intentioned officials to continue with the objectification, essentialisation, reification, and traumatisation discourses of 'rescued' persons, culminating in questionable recovery practices achieved through close regulation and surveillance in governmental shelters. Additionally, the ITPA penalises family-members who live off of sex-workers' earnings, not taking into consideration any causal factors that propel a turn towards sexual labour. Aggravated by the clandestine nature of sex-work, an added conundrum arises with a lack of reliable data, valid numbers, or insider accounts. Sex-workers constitute a hidden population who are denied access to education, public health services, social security benefits, and/or labour rights, and all too often, a legitimate voice.

Therefore, according to the ITPA's clauses as well as Sections 370-374 of the Indian Penal Code, despite the conduct of sexual commerce not wholly decreed as illegal, the outlawing of related, subsidiary activities like soliciting/seducing in public places, persons living off the earnings of prostitution, or the maintenance of brothels that house a majority of sex-workers in India, has rendered onto the profession conditions of systemic violence. A reductionist albeit myopic understanding of the industry based simply on the 'sex-trafficking' discourse alone, closes down opportunities for agency. During our case-studies and interactions with trafficked persons in Odisha (2016), individuals opened up about their various circumstances that preceded sex-trafficking, like the smuggling of minors for coerced labour in factories, sweatshop labour, *begar* or bonded labour, indentured or agricultural work, and being led away from their hometowns/villages in deceit under pretences of work. In either case, subjects recalled the oppressive life alternatives that they had escaped from, be it domestic violence, patriarchal family structures, or lack of education and opportunity in impoverished homes. The over-representation of prostitution as being the sole, constitutive factor in trafficking discourses under the ITPA, does little to address such on the ground realities. Therefore, the complex origins of the profession have left India's population of sex-workers in a highly vulnerable stratum of society, who while participating in the trade due to a plethora of situational factors or limited volition, are relegated as outcastes in civil society and oppressed by the very agents of law enforcement, which are supposed to protect historically disenfranchised groups.

The state's criminalisation approach to sex-work has been buttressed by the public shame and humiliation associated with it historically. It is compounded by the public spectacle brought about by the infamous Rescue & Raid Operations in cities, under the guise of law-and-order management in order to protect 'respectable' residential

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[3] F.No.83/18/47-Public 'India's Ratification of U.N. Draft Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and of the exploitation of the Prostitution of others' (National Archives of India: New Delhi, 1949).

neighbourhoods in urban centers. While not negating the existence of human trafficking in South Asia, it is nonetheless critical to problematise official depictions that erroneously synonymise all forms of *trafficking* with *sexual commerce*, thereby negating aspects of individual choice or nuanced situational factors. Brothel raids have become so commonplace in order to combat this ostensible 'social menace' that they negate inclusive modes of integration, ergo failing to adequately address the problem (Weitzer, 2014: 7-8). This lack of recognition of sex-work as a legitimate form of labour is directly contradicted by demands for occupational freedom and representative standards of reform within the profession, as espoused by sex-work rights NGOs.

Svati Shah's work (2014) on the Kamathipura region of Mumbai, helps us understand some of the circumstantial factors sustaining Indian sex markets. Shah foregrounds the nuanced subjectivities characterising sex-workers amidst their systemic conditions of unemployment, oppression, and inequality. In tracing the urban 'pull-factor' of cities that play a definitive role in attracting poor, rural populations, she underscores the spatial and geo-political factors shaping sexual commerce. She unpacks the violent politics of sexual regulation as the local police sporadically harasses sex-workers towards protecting elite localities, in tandem with real-estate agents who are sanctioned to arbitrarily check the residential quarters of suspects on behalf of the state. These structural barriers and institutional constraints explain how in controlling sex-workers' bodily autonomy under the provisions of ITPA, governmental organisations seek to discipline gendered minorities and sex-workers in enforcing pedagogical norms for respectable citizenship.

Such arbitrary models of policing seek to penalise sex-workers rather than secure their freedoms, culminating in situations where they lack control over their lives, in a negation of agency. Such acts of systemic violence are mentioned in the OHCHR's 2014 Report of the *Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women*, which alludes to the problematic workings of the ITPA in enabling a penalising legislative framework:

> Sex-workers in India are exposed to a range of abuse including physical attacks and harassment by clients, family members, the community and state authorities; they are forcibly detained and rehabilitated and consistently lack legal protection; and they face challenges in gaining access to essential health services, including for treatment of HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases. [...] The Special Rapporteur recommends that the Government review the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956 that de facto criminalizes sex-work and ensure that measures to address trafficking in persons do not overshadow the need for effective measures to protect the human rights of sex-workers.[4]

In light of such incarceration modalities that facilitate a punitive criminalisation framework instead of guaranteeing civil rights, the Report notes that rehabilitation programs for sex-workers should not be made contingent on their forcible detention in corrective homes 'which they consider a virtual prison'. Despite these recommendations, coerced rehabilitation continues to remain the preferred official recourse for prostitution.

A few women's rights organisations in India have gone a step further in advocating for a prohibition/abolition model towards prostitution. However, such societal attitudes further enable discrimination against sex-workers and their children, in negating their agency and culminating in a vicious cycle of deprivation, alongside erasure from public access (Sagade and Forster, 2018: 30). Ideologically motivated, abolitionist interventions have little grounding in empirical evidence or adherence to humanitarian rights. Their 'Moral Crusades' against prostitution are reflected in governmental websites/publications, and are strategically tailored to hyperbolically present a few, cherrypicked testimonials alongside stereotypes of sexual slavery, minor exploitation, human suffering, amidst heroic narratives of governmental rescue. While select imageries can elicit potent tools in dramatising suffering and evoking public support, they also negate a complex and more realistic understanding of India's sex markets (Weitzer, 2007). State-sanctioned rescue and rehabilitation measures are largely non-participatory in nature, thereby reinforcing pluralistic forms of discrimination under the garb of public welfare. Ironically, what remains moot in arbitrary, top-down interventions of this kind as enacted in state operations are the voices from within the community or any addressal of their first-hand perspectives (Doezema, 1999).

EXPERIENTIAL INSIGHTS ON THE PREDICAMENTS AFFLICTING SEX-WORKERS IN INDIA

The article now turns to certain accounts by sex-workers and social workers from the research, which delineate many limits to the workings of the ITPA, alongside the denial of basic living conditions towards sex-workers. Names have been anonymised/altered to maintain persons' confidentiality.

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[4] OHCHR's Special Rapporteur's Report (2014). Available at: https://uprdoc.ohchr.org/uprweb/downloadfile.aspx?filename=3721&file=EnglishTranslation (Accessed 15 October 2020).

Testimonies of pervasive police brutalities from sex-workers themselves

1) Rekha (Sangli, 22 June 2016) says: 'In the police station, the police tried to frighten us with a big lathi [baton]. We thought that they would beat us. We were asked to stand in a line touching the wall.'

2) Seenath (Kozhikode, 20 January 2016) says: 'Police make the women to clean the police station and sometimes they also sexually harass women.'

3) Nirmala (Sangli, 13 January 2016) says: 'They used to round us up and take us to the police station. We were kept overnight and then the next day we were all told that we would be presented in court. They would register our names in the police books. It was a humiliating experience to be taken to court. The police would be on either side and we would be made to walk in between all the way to the court. When we were presented in the court they would tell us we are not to open our mouths and when the judge asked us, we must accept our guilt by nodding our heads.'

4) Seenath (Kozhikode, 20 January 2016) says: 'Police also create false witnesses to build up their case while they arrest women. I was a victim of a false case filed by the police.'

5) Anupama (Warangal, 9 February 2016) says: 'The police raided our house at 7 o'clock in the morning. They took us in a van to medical college and did many tests. The people at the hospital were talking badly about us. They joked and insulted us. It was like a hell to us, very painful and humiliating. We were then taken to a "home" in Hyderabad and put there for 23 days.'

6) Shakeela (Kozhikode, 20 January 2016) says: 'The police arrested me and forcibly took me to a mental hospital. I was ignorant and I had not made any mistake. There were many women like me and there was a separate place for mentally ill women. I was there for few days. The food was not good, the place was not proper, there was no proper place to sleep and the toilets were bad. They were providing skill development trainings. I was not interested and finally I managed to escape from there.'[5]

Such quotes from sex-workers elucidate the multitudinous oppressions that sex-workers face in their quotidian life circumstances. Under the rhetoric of law-and-order, while police forces continuously harass subjects, they also extract rewards for allowing them to conduct their trade. This culminates in situations where women are left with no safeguards to turn to, they become infantilised or shunned or made destitute by the very upholders of law, trapped amidst conditions of institutional violence and precariousness. Such comments also illustrate the coercive nature of raids where the visibility of red-light districts across cities like GB Road in New Delhi, Kamathipura in Mumbai, or Sonagachi in Kolkata are targeted especially as hubs for criminal activity, thereby resulting in the spatialisation of sexual commerce as well as a perpetuating cycle of impoverishment.

Testimony on exclusions in access to social security or public services

7) Sex-worker Madhulika says: 'I have been trying unsuccessfully for years to get access to a Ration Card or some form of identification like Voter ID. Without this, neither can my daughter get admission into a school, nor can I get access to food items provided cheaply for groups below the poverty line under the Public Distribution System. My daughter, known as a sex-worker's child, is frequently teased and discriminated against by as "*dhanda karne waali ladki*" (girl who engages in sexual commerce) by her acquaintances, despite the fact that she is an innocent young girl and has ambitions to grow up and study. I have tried to reach out to my parents and relatives, but they have cut off all relations with me. In our village, I am ostracised as the "other" woman and frequently mentioned as an example of the one who has caused the family grave shame.'[6]

Testimony on lack of inclusion/consultation in stakeholder processes

8) *SANGRAM* Activist Meena Seshu says: 'Time and again sex-worker collectives, organisations working with sex-workers have shown that they are natural allies and partners to root out exploitative practices and provide alerts on trafficking for sexual exploitation. Despite this, the proposed committee precludes their participation. It is proposed that any committee at the district level that seeks to fight human trafficking must have participation of and consultations with sex-worker groups and collectives. Additional members should include members of the Human Rights Commission at the district level. The social workers must have a proven track record of working on women's issues/empowerment and not limited to anti trafficking work in order to ensure a more holistic perspective. Lawyers with a track record of working with sex-workers, women in distress, violence against women should be included in the Committee.'[7]

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[5] *National Network of Sex Workers Report* (2016). Available at: http://nnswindia.org/upload/News/Press-Release/UPR-Submission-Sex-Work-Final-Submission-22-Sep2016.pdf (Accessed 6 January 2022).

[6] Interview with *DURBAR* worker, conducted by Shriya Patnaik (Kolkata: 7 January 2019).

[7] Interview with *SANGRAM* activist, conducted by Madhu Bhushan, a social worker (2016).

Such life-stories are not isolated accounts; they enumerate excesses of violence against sex-workers in India. They also delineate critical lessons. Firstly, the denial of a safe environment to life or dignity of labour. Upon 'rescue', women are denied recourse to legal counsel or rights to appeal, are at oftentimes left amidst deprived living conditions in detention centres. They also allude to the stigma confronting their children, who face acute discrimination in schools. Shunned by society at large, terms used to refer to the sex-workers like 'public nuisance', 'public immorality', 'loitering for shameful activities', or 'unchaste/undutiful women' are not uncommon.[8] Sex-workers' inclusion as equal stakeholders in social inclusion initiatives can help encapsulate a comprehensive, insider view of the problem at-hand, and also lead to the implementation of appropriate measures that can adequately address the many issues confronting those women working in the sex industry.

In the *Davis Projects*, interviews with anonymised sex-workers reverberated with certain concerns. Firstly, some participants remarked how their rehabilitation process was accompanied by moral policing paradigms that sought to correct their 'deviant' behaviours instead of examining the various socio-economic exigencies or situational factors impelling them into sex-work. Secondly, post-rescue, despite receiving some healthcare treatments, many objected to intrusive bodily examinations, or treatments for STIs/VDs that they were subjected to, oftentimes without consent. They further critiqued the protectionist parameters of state approaches which presented the women as helpless victims or vulnerable subjects devoid of any agency. They discussed paternalistic and moralistic encounters with the police, who constantly compelled them to return to their former families from whom they continued to face ignominy. Women also opened up to us about specific issues like menstrual hygiene, pregnancies, safe contraception, consensual intercourse, and the need for psychological counselling in cases of abuse or trauma. Finally, they posited their need for economic self-sufficiency, vocational training, and skill development programmes, leading towards integration into the market economy, instead of the compulsory institutional rehabilitation programs that merely relied on moralistic disciplining approaches. Additionally, the conversations with Sonagachi sex-workers underscored their predicaments in their popular depictions, as they recounted how oft-sensationalised representations as victims duped by traffickers, devoid of consent, while powerful metaphors towards spurring humanitarian support, ironically enables coercive law enforcement policies, which curtailed their freedom of movement or bodily autonomy.

Testimonies on absences to legal justice frameworks

Some of the most flagrant abuses against sex-workers in India have historically stemmed from law enforcement agencies. Sex-worker rights NGOs like *DURBAR, SANGRAM* and *VAMP* frequently express how police operations are responsible for perpetrating numerous forms of violence toward sex-workers. Their viewpoints illuminate how in the event of raids, law enforcement bodies caused miscellaneous forms of infringement upon their rights, like a forceful evacuation from their homes and workplaces, societal shaming, physical or verbal abuse, or forceful detention in shelters/remand-homes, instead of offering rehabilitation such as in concrete skill developments tailored to job markets. Such acts of regulation extend to judicial bodies too.

Take another example from a *VAMP* social worker, who observes:

> A sex-worker with speech and hearing impairment was detained in an observation home after a brothel raid and produced in court after four months. We were present at the court when she told the judge that she wished to return home and did not want to be kept in the observation home. To our shock the judge declared in an open court, '*She has come from the gutter and wants to return to the gutter. She will not listen.*' What justice can we expect from courts which treat us in such a demeaning manner?[9]

This quotation elucidates the intricate web of discrimination that ensures sex-workers find it hard to seek redressal via legal mechanisms, file their cases in courts, or have access to due process. A lack of access to legal services stems from bias against prostitution caricaturing sex-work as sexual deviance, moral depravity, or victimisation, which does little to gain a concrete understanding of conditions on the ground. It is indicative of a myopic understanding into the complex factors driving them away from the domestic constraints of the household and instead to seek socio-economic autonomy. Such gaps in availing themselves of justice are expressed by a *SANGRAM* worker who says:

> Sex-workers approached the District Legal Services Authority to provide free legal aid during raided and 'rescue' operations. Legal aid officials told them that 'sex-work is illegal'. When sex-workers asked for assistance in setting up a legal aid cell to provide aid and advice for sex-workers, officials refused, saying that permission was needed from the national and state legal services authority. They refused to help

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[8] Interview with former sex-worker, conducted by Shriya Patnaik (Bhubaneswar: 16 July 2016).
[9] OHCHR Case-studies (2009-2016). Available at: https://uprdoc.ohchr.org/uprweb/downloadfile.aspx?filename=3721&file=Annexe1 (Accessed 9 February 2022).

sex-workers to put in a proposal to the national and state Legal Aid services. Disappointed, the women gave up contacting the legal aid services authority.[10]

The apathy of governmental bodies is further illustrated by a spatialisation of red-light districts as sites of crime. Elements of participatory reform are further negated when authorities determine unilateral and perhaps heteronormative solutions, like her release back to a family-member or custodial guardian. Such measures not only infantilise persons and disavow their volition, but open up grounds for patriarchal acts of surveillance by said guardians, under the semblance of benevolent protection.

Another point of pressing concern in the traumatisation of sex-workers lies in the conduct of brothel evacuations. The following testimony is from an adult sex-worker in Andhra Pradesh and fittingly contextualises this:

> On December 24, 2011, I was in my room with my clients. In the evening around 6 pm, the Circle Inspector (CI) along with eight women constables pushed open my door and beat us severely without giving any reason. They searched my belongings in the room and found condoms and money. The CI said, 'You are doing sex-work.' They took my money and took me to the police station and beat me. They used my money to have their dinner, but they did not give me any food during the night. They booked a case against me under sections 377 and 3 & 4 of ITPA Act. On the next day, they took me to the hospital and asked me to sign on a blank piece of paper. When I asked why, they threatened me and told me to remain quiet and do as they say. Later they took me to the Judge. They informed me not to tell the Judge that they had beaten me. When the Judge asked, I said what the police told me to say under their threat. I was taken away and kept in jail. It has been two years, but I am still attending court to settle my case.[11]

These recollections of institutionalised prejudices and disregard for bodily autonomy, are not uncommon in the Indian context. The failure to receive legal redressal also epitomises a denial of the right to a free and fair trial, in what is often a blatant miscarriage of justice. Social workers enumerate such excesses in interventions, as law enforcement agents routinely humiliate and harass sex-workers. Derogatory terms like 'public nuisance', 'obscene conduct', and 'morally deviant' among others, are recurrently used to refer to them in official proceedings. Systemic biases like arbitrary confinement, public shaming, forceful medical testing, and intrusive genital check-ups, are commonplace. Moreover, in cases of women involuntarily sent to correction facilities, their life-choices are unacknowledged, and they are released onto the custodial guardianship of family members, are met out only upon a guarantee of relinquishing sex-work. Due processes like the right to life, dignity of labour, equal protection from violence, or legal assistance, are rarely delivered under the repressive apparatus that primarily views them as criminals over citizen-subjects with fundamental rights. Such excesses render the already stigmatised sex-worker population prone to a lack of legal recognition or inclusion into civil society, perpetuating a continuum of human rights violations and non-consensual modes of rehabilitation. Finally, demands for social security services like education or healthcare, remains conditional upon relinquishing sex-work, a clause resented by many.

LITERATURE DEBUNKING PROSTITUTION PARADIGMS IN INDIA

This article now turns to relevant scholarship towards demystifying certain exclusionary modes of governance deployed towards disciplining sex-workers in India. The first of these is the 'Rescue-Myth', whereby the welfare paradigm is used to present the nation-state as the guardian of women's rights, in which the abduction of women becomes synonymous with a direct assault on state power. John Frederick (2015) evaluates such narratives intrinsically shaping legal, policy and developmental interventions across South Asia. Alluding to the large nexus of trafficking occurring across the Nepal-India border, here the victim is presented as a naive, vulnerable girl who is drugged, duped sold and raped against her will, subsequently rescued by governmental organisations who chart the course of her rehabilitation and reform. This assumes a highly gendered vision of sexuality in showcasing a passive female victim and masculinised male perpetrator, such a representation being accompanied by certain issues. It presupposes the discourse of the patriarchal state assuming the welfare function of rescuing the poor, hapless victim (inevitably a female) who is sold or trafficked against her will, which negates instances of willed cross-border migration out of socio-economic circumstances, alongside speciously equating all forms of cross-border trafficking with sex-trafficking alone. Such portrayals invoke notions of coercion and victimhood of women and children (synonymously equated as vulnerable groups devoid of agency) towards mobilising humanitarian

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[10]*National Alliance of Women's Organisation* Report (2014). Available at: https://www.sangram.org/upload/resources/status-of-women-in-sex-work-in-india-submission-to-CEDAW-committee.pdf (Accessed 5 March 2022).
[11] OHCHR Case-studies (2009-2016).

support, alongside enabling law enforcement agencies who further restrict subjects' freedom of movement and bodily autonomy. This can also lead well-intentioned activists to continue this objectification, reification, and re-traumatisation of rescued persons, culminating in a dangerous precedent that it is only through close regulation and surveillance in state-sanctioned shelters that recovery can be achieved.

Furthermore, the role of media depictions in sensationalising the discourse of trafficking through the lens of 'Melodrama', becomes another challenge. The scholarship of Carole Vance (2012) and Dina Francesca Haynes (2014) critique such representations, even award-winning documentaries like *The Selling of Innocents* (Directed by William Cobban and Ruchira Gupta, 1996), which mobilise emotional support through their sensationalised, linear accounts. This genre of 'Melomentary' does have certain uses. Its urgency and emotive appeal can galvanise public support and fundraising endeavours. Nonetheless, it is misleading for a plethora of factors: an over-emphasis on sex-trafficking can exclude its multifaceted nature: *vis-à-vis* the complexities in coalescing *Trafficking* with *Prostitution*, women's volition in light of life-alternatives, and a simplistic 'good vs. evil' narrative strategy in polarising aspects of perpetrator-abuse vs. victim-suffering (Vance, 2012: 205). Besides, it disregards bottom-up modes of adaptation like Self-Help Groups, peer networks, and community-led collective action. Finally, it departs from a rights-enhancing approach and yields to protectionist interventions, whereby the contextual analysis of sex-work becomes restricted to individual villains and state saviours, rather than an assessment of the co-implicated structural conditions sustaining it. Moreover, narratives of suffering are exaggerated as means of stoking sympathy along lines of victimisation and female sexual innocence, which have little grounding in situational contexts, therein unleashing forms of propaganda and public misinformation. Their skewed causal evaluation of the issue alongside proffering rudimentary solutions to trafficking, which while leading to urgency of action, can distort a wholistic understanding of the problem, along with precluding the passage of effective legislations (Haynes, 2014).

At this stage, it is fitting to underscore how notions of 'respectable' society play a key role in the gentrification and spatialisation of sexual commerce, relegated to the red-light districts of urban centres. Spaces like Sonagachi, Kamathipura, and GB Road, among others, serve as examples of how the visibility of prostitution reinforces the politics of otherness and buttresses sex-workers' discrimination, who find it nearly impossible to integrate into other residential localities or escape from their identities, in a spatial distancing from the middle and upper-class society. While such red-light districts are frequently visited by their bourgeoise elite clientele, sex-workers have to pay regular commissions to the police for their mere existence, their inclusion as legitimate workers remain a distant reality. In the interviews with women from the railway stations of Cuttack and Bhubaneswar, women who had at some stage of their lives been engaged in sexual commerce, articulated such concerns. Although they had been responsible for supporting their families back in villages through remittances or even single-handedly bringing up children without any support, the stigma of prostitution as a threat to societal honour, continued to scar their identities. Their complex subjectivities in being the economic familial breadwinners, underscores the layered stratifications surrounding sex-work in India. As established by Svati Shah (2006), notions of honour, chastity, stigma, and respectable femininity enable a set of discursive practices where even though the sexual labour of the sex-worker is readily available for consumption, its covertness and distancing from bourgeoise society precludes her to ever escape from her former identity and integrate into the public sphere as a regular citizen.

Such discourses hyperbolically present the brothel as a pervasive site of crime instead of a workplace, which can present all sex-work as evil and prolong a cycle of subjugation by taking a criminal-based approach to rescue and rehabilitation. This could also prove to be counter-productive to the efforts of the NGO's, trade unions, and HIV support groups. Besides, it robs the woman of her agency or the desire to construct a happy future for herself, devoid of the patronising dependence on the state. Post rescue, the sex-worker has limited options. She has to fit into the typified account of the psychologically damaged figure whose identity is solely marked by her former occupational role. The patronising rhetoric of saving the victim becomes an oversimplification as it takes a homogenous approach to analysing the multiple operating forces at play. The articulation of the rescued survivor is therein inherently linked with the reappropriation of women's sexualities, which in turn ontologically determine the frontiers of respectable identities and legitimate subjecthood.

Partha Chatterjee (1989) sheds light on how the 'Devi' archetype of the India woman *vis-à-vis* the geo-politicisation of the female body relies solely in terms of a goddess-figure of Mother India, desexualising the Indian woman in the making of the independent nation. Such dialectical albeit hegemonic ideologies characterising postcolonial identity-building across the 20th century, were steeped in heteronormative sensibilities of a passive feminine sexuality and wifely duty as quintessential roles for women. Sumathi Ramaswamy (2010) concomitantly demonstrates how the cleansing of India's body-politic via a goddess-like figurehead became pivotal to the process of nation-building, *vis-à-vis* instituting a transcendental marker for feminine virtue in a symbolic appropriation of women's bodies. The expression of national identity in the years following independence, was thereby intrinsically linked with control over women's sexualities, which then constituted the epistemological and ontological principle against which gendered norms were constructed. This legitimisation and institutionalisation of pedagogical citizenship in the postcolonial nation-state, was complicit in the exclusion of non-conforming groups who were

situated outside the bounds of the patriarchal family structure like sex-workers, *devadasis* (temple-dancers) and *tawaifs* (courtesans).

The OHCHR's 2014 Report notes the presence of a penalising model across South Asia that treats sex-workers akin to criminals, in tandem with disciplinary paradigms that have consequently affected their rehabilitation. The Report offered recommendations to strengthen sex-workers' rights to justice. These include: firstly, the formation of community-based organisations and labour collectives aimed at awareness-building; secondly, encouraging the participation of sex-workers themselves in the formulation of policies pertaining to their lives, primarily in the public health domain of HIV/STI programmes; thirdly, the necessity of free legal aid services; fourthly, sensitisation toward their situational factors and offering adequate protection under National Human Rights Instruments. Subsequently, Anne Gallagher, as the UN Anti-Trafficking Program Director (2001), compellingly establishes how without a lack of assessment and acknowledgement of structural conditions, criminalisation parameters that have accompanied prostitution policies across nations, do more harm than good. Such benchmarks are useful to draw from in the Indian context.

SUCCESS STORIES FROM THE INDIAN CONTEXT: SEX-WORKER RIGHTS NGOS EPITOMISING RESISTANCE AND CIVIL SOCIETY INTEGRATION

Owing to the underground nature of the prostitution industry in India, structural barriers like poverty, illiteracy, and societal marginalisation, have exacerbated the sex-worker community's state of impoverishment, in a cyclical inter-generational process. As a result, many face conditions of precariousness like scarce literacy levels, healthcare coverage and/or labour rights. Their children continue to face discrimination in schools and society at large. However, notwithstanding such systematic oppressive measures, there have been strong feminist undercurrents in the recent decades advocating for the dignity of such marginalised actors. NGOs like *DURBAR*, *SANGRAM* and *VAMP* have undertaken compelling measures towards reintegrating sex-workers into mainstream society through numerous modes of assistance. These comprise of: firstly, providing micro-credit systems and opportunities for skill development; secondly, forming Self-Help Groups towards community-building and a social support-system; thirdly, building awareness drives to prevent the rise of HIV and STIs in an unregulated, clandestine industry. Through using protest slogans, social media channels, crowdfunding, and awareness-building campaigns, social workers and feminist lobbyists have provided a vital platform to broadcast disenfranchised voices, through which subaltern women can participate in a transnational culture of feminist consciousness.

One such organisation working for sex-workers' solidarity and dignity is *DURBAR*, a West Bengal NGO. Based out of Sonagachi (one of the largest red-light districts in Asia), its social workers consist of several ex and working sex-workers as they believe that insider participation is crucial towards gaining a first-hand perspective into the diverse nature of problems afflicting the community. Belonging to a network of more than 60,000 activists, it follows a model of sex-workers being uniquely positioned to participate in peer outreach and advocacy networks, as well as including sex-worker stakeholders in developmental projects. It has emerged as an efficacious example of subaltern solidarity and intersectional grassroots-level mobilisation from South Asia, to which the article now turns.

One of *DURBAR*'s pressing demands is the legalisation of the prostitution industry in India as it believes that its informal nature has buttressed networks of crime, the entry of minors alongside trafficked persons into the trade, and simultaneous workers' stigmatisation. Along this vein, to prevent the entry of non-consensual participants and minors, it has established Self-Regulatory Boards (SRBs) as a means of eliminating oppressive labour conditions as well as trafficking. *DURBAR*'s SRBs include a diverse composition, sex-workers, non sex-worker members such as doctors, lawyers, counsellors, *Panchayat* and Municipal Corporation employees, representatives from state Social Welfare Department, the Labour Commission, Women's Commission and Human Rights Commission, and social activists. One task they perform is the screening of new entrants, with a view to identifying minors, or coerced persons. With sex-workers' localised networks of information dispersed across Kolkata, they are distinctively placed to intervene in the inclusion of unwilling or forced adults or minors. The triumph of their working model is reflected in numbers, from 1998-2007, *DURBAR* has rescued a total of 560 unwilling women and underage girls across Sonagachi. In its sites of operation, the proportion of underage girls below 18 years has dropped 25.3% in 1992 to 3.1% in 2001 (Bandyopadhyay, 2006). Its goals also lie in the assimilation of rescued girls into schools, providing access to modes of vocational training, and skill development programs tailored to job markets. It therefore seeks to foster a participatory culture rooted in sex-workers' choices. Where adults we interviewed choose to stay in the trade in search of better livelihoods, they are assisted by peer networks towards negotiating better terms with clients/patrons. In ascertaining a two-pronged mechanism for ground-level organisation through the presence of support networks, as well as the women confidently asserting their rights in public spaces, Sonagachi's sex-workers self-identified themselves as dynamic, resilient women with strong capacities for collective action, thereby debunking typical stereotypes of victimisation or crime.

The merits of *DURBAR*'s approach also lie in a working model of training sex-workers into leadership positions. This, they believe, instils an organisational culture of equitable participation along with drawing expert-level officials into the leadership structure, a model reliant on diversity of opinions. Instead of victims in need of protection/saving, this also inculcates among sex-workers a sense of purpose through an incorporation of their expertise in everyday adaptation strategies. An avowed emphasis on this egalitarian organisational culture is substantiated by a lack of hierarchy, with sex-workers placed on an equal footing with other social workers in terms of decision-making processes. Accordingly, the institutionalisation of equality is done on the basis of skillsets, in tandem with reciprocity, dialogue and exchange of ideas between the two sub-groups. This structure was historically conceived along principles of sex-workers possessing expertise in dealing with the particular nature of issues confronting the community, and taking on roles as peer educators. Conversely, non-sex-worker staff's expertise in manoeuvring areas of administrative bureaucracy, local-level governance, and developmental networks, is valued. The merits of such an integrative approach have been hypothesised by Gooptu and Bandyopadhyay thus:

> Importantly, this process of dialogue and mutuality ensured that the two spheres were not assumed to be static and exclusive of each other. This also ruled out the construction of a sense of enduring difference or otherness, and also avoided the possibility of essentializing or exoticizing sex-workers as the repository of some peculiar intrinsic and immutable traits and characteristics.' (Gooptu and Bandyopadhyay, 2007: 259)

DURBAR's organisational practices have in this manner, fostered principles of uniformity, leadership, and self-esteem in a renewed sense of self, both in symbolic and material terms. Cognisant of sex-workers' agency and abilities for capacity-building, such strategies potentially alleviate aspects of othering from civil society and enable them to navigate through legislative barriers as rights-bearing citizens.

The Sonagachi Project's endeavours have also developed educational and healthcare drives for inclusion. Towards the former, peer educators have promoted a robust pedagogical program towards enhancing workers' sense of self-confidence and critical thinking, as well as navigating through everyday situations. However, this curriculum doesn't merely involve literacy classes alone, but also includes a practical component in terms of applied learning, catering to real world needs. This entails facilitating information technology training alongside technical skillsets that aid them to navigate through life's functional aspects, as well as broadening their worldview on wider historical, political, and socio-cultural issues. This dialogic form of education through an inclusion of topics like consent, agency, and gender equality has been instrumental in the way sex-workers envisage their newly empowered subjectivities, along with providing them with vocational tools to promote socio-economic change.

A major arena of *DURBAR*'s accomplishments has thereby been in its HIV prevention program, an area of significant concern in the prostitution industry. Although the Sonagachi district houses some of the largest population of sex-workers in Asia, its HIV incidence rates have been comparatively lower when compared to other red-light centres in India like Kamathipura Mumbai and/or GB Road, attributed to the work done by *DURBAR*. The Sonagachi AIDS Project initiative was conceptualised by Dr Smarajit Jana upon collaboration with the *All India Institute of Hygiene and Public Health*. It was fundamentally premised on the idea that sex-workers could notably assist as agents for change in the HIV epidemic. *DURBAR*'s healthcare program provides specialised services like routine check-ups with in-clinic doctors, paediatric care, medications/antibiotics for STIs/VDs, free condom distribution, group trainings, midwives' support, counselling, and psychological services. It has opened open clinics for women in locations across Kolkata where outreach workers adhere to non-judgemental, confidential avenues for treatment. Another transformation was enabled through the popularisation of condom usage and distribution to those in need, along with normalising a community culture of rejecting clients who did not adhere to safe sex practices. It is today acknowledged by the WHO as a benchmark for comprehensive, bottom-up, community-led change (Jana, *et al.*, 2004). This emancipatory model towards collective action has heralded a perceptible reversal in societal attitudes of sex-workers as change-makers in development projects, therein challenging the pervasive othering they have historically encountered.

DURBAR workers believe that participation is incomplete without the socio-economic empowerment of sex-workers themselves. *Binodini Srameek Union* (a registered trade union) is responsible for securing sex-workers' labour rights and has organised protest movements across India to lobby for awareness-building and decriminalisation frameworks. The economic wing, *Usha Multipurpose Cooperative Society* runs a microcredit program of assistance alongside enables workers to obtain interest-free loans from banks, towards securing their financial autonomy.[12] Such grassroots movements of resistance exemplify key catalysts for community-driven change. The project's interactions with sex-workers helped me realise how in rehabilitation projects, efforts should be made to ensure

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[12] *Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women* E-Bulletin. Available at: https://gaatw.org/members/asia/127-membership/asia/553-durbar-mahila-samanwaua-committee-dmsc (Accessed 25 March 2022).

the freedom of movement, bodily autonomy, physical and mental health, confidentiality, and human rights benchmarks for sex-workers, against whom various forms of institutionalised violence are often perpetuated under the facade of law-and-order. Consequently, the focus of national law enforcement agencies should be to prevent the re-traumatisation of rescued persons, which also requires the collaboration of NGOs and social activists working together. Such measures can symbolise substantial transformations in sex-workers' self-identification, thereby affecting their newfound social imbrications as agents of change and in consequence demands for dignity. They have helped bring about a sense of a self as an entity with inalienable human rights; a self that can recast their positionality in resisting exploitation, together with altering India's sex industry towards becoming more participatory in accounting for the lived voices and experiences of subjects.

2022 SUPREME COURT JUDGEMENT

In 2022 a landmark decision by the Supreme Court of India recognised sex-worker rights. On 19 May 2022, the Supreme Court took this historic step in advocating for a rights-based approach along with issuing a set of directives that offered safeguards against age-old forms of oppression that workers had been subjected to. Firstly, sex-workers are entitled to equal protection under the law. The police must act in accordance with human rights principles and provide them with adequate legal courses for redressal, and more importantly, not be complicit in violating their fundamental rights, as done historically. Secondly, the issue of consent of women entering the profession is paramount, and consensual sexual commerce should not be conflated with trafficking. Accordingly, since adult, voluntary sex-work is not deemed as illegal, sex-workers cannot be harassed, arrested or penalised, as was previously routinely done in cases of raids. Thirdly, the Central Government and the State Governments must involve sex-worker representatives as participatory actors in decision-making processes, including planning or formulating interventions. This clause has been one of the most significant mechanisms of change in the recent legal regime in its cognisance of workers as stakeholders exercising knowledge and expertise on their vocation, and will hopefully inculcate inclusive paradigms for the future. Fourthly, adult sex-workers cannot be incarcerated against their will in correction facilities/detention homes, on grounds of rehabilitation. The possession of condoms, as has been previously penalised along moralistic measures, cannot be construed as evidence of soliciting or brothel-keeping, and is acknowledged to be along consensual, safe-sex parameters. Fifthly, national legal services should run sensitisation workshops to eradicate extreme forms of discrimination afflicting sex-workers, and enable awareness-building towards preventing punitive approaches against them. Finally, no child of a sex-worker can be separated from her mother on the ideological grounds of her trade, or presumed to be trafficked on grounds of living in a brothel.[13]

This decision marks a discernible shift from previous laws and policies in the perception of sex-workers as equal participants and stakeholders in society The success of the Sonagachi Project has denoted the merits of such a dialogical and participatory approach to grassroots initiatives, in sex-workers emerging as effective peer-advocates, social workers, HIV/AIDS counsellors, and sectorial leaders. Their bottom-up modes of organisation can provide a case-in-point for feminist mobilisation, as well as enable marginalised actors to exercise effective bargaining capacities with the state. As stated by the *NNSW* President on the implications of this decision,

> It is very important for us to know that we can access help if there are instances of sexual assault, and that medical services are available to us. We believe this will go very far for the protection of people in sex-work. Specially, the directive that women won't be forced into rescue homes makes us very happy and we are thankful.[14]

However, despite this revolutionary legal stance, one must be cautious of certain future challenges. For one, the Central Government's reservations in according equal rights to a section previously perceived as socially deviant, as well as backlashes from conservative groups that view all forms of sex-work as exploitative, cannot be underestimated. Bureaucratic hurdles, red tapism, alongside impediments towards the implementation of the law uniformly across states, should also be considered. In spite of its recommendations that have finally accorded some civil liberties to sex-workers, this decision has not completely legalised the trajectory of sex-work in India, as demanded by several feminist groups, However, in lieu of the shortcomings of decades of institutional and societal prejudices, this indicates a noteworthy shift.

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[13] *Live-Law* India (2022). Available at: https://www.livelaw.in/top-stories/criminal-action-against-voluntary-sex-work-adults-supreme-court-200084 (Accessed 25 May 2022).

[14] *Times of India* (2022). Why this is a big moment in Sex-worker Rights (editorial), *Times of India*, 30 May.

CONCLUSION

This article has argued for a bottom-up model of community-driven change. It has advocated for a more participatory approach to the sex industry in India; one that is foregrounded in the rights of workers, public health efforts in acknowledging them as equal and legitimate participants in healthcare drives, and finally the prevention of a punitive framework of regulation. It has emphasised acceptance of the profession along a non-criminalising vein, the dignity of sex-work labour, and argued for adequate protection against police harassment, alongside equitable opportunities in the social order. Historically, the state-regulation of women's bodily agency, reproductive rights, or the right to sexual labour, has been a crucial tool of global governance, through which hegemonic forms of disciplining have been instituted. Despite this, if a group of marginalised actors located at the fringes of civil society, can stand shoulder-to-shoulder together to challenge the carceral forces of the state apparatus, and resist patriarchal structures in advocating steadfastly for their rights, it epitomises the formidable force of mobilisation sex-workers' coalitions can achieve, nationally and transnationally. This holds lessons for the policy arena, in that the participation of community-members in developmental initiatives can go a long way into making them effective. Above all, such moments necessitate a paradigm shift in the conceptualisation of sex-workers not as *objects* of sympathetic protection, but rather as *agents* determining their collective destinies.

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Can a Woman be a True Guru? Female Hindu Gurus' Grassroots Religious Gender Activism in India, and the Performativity of Saintliness at the *Kumbh Mela*

Antoinette E. DeNapoli [1*]

ABSTRACT

This article represents a departure from existing scholarship on women's political activism in Indian Hinduism. Women's gender activism in Hindu nationalism encompasses a range of approaches, from hard-line to emancipatory, and is motivated by different concerns, from religious xenophobia to religious power. Thus, female religious leaders (gurus) advocating Hindutva Hinduism exercise more than one style of leadership in the public sphere. Based on ethnographic research conducted at the *Kumbh Mela*, the article illuminates another style of activism, which is termed 'grassroots religious feminist-leaning activism.' Analysing the teachings and practices of two female gurus, it argues that one guru believes in a separate but equal approach (men and women have different skills and rights), and the other follows the approach that both genders should have the same rights and abilities to make choices because of their common humanity. Both gurus are unlocking opportunities for women's greater freedom within the male-dominated religious hierarchies of the Hindu ascetic orders *akhāṛās*) at the *Kumbh Mela*. This article argues that, through performance of the 'rhetoric of saintliness,' the gurus heighten or reverse sex-role stereotypes embedded in mainstream representations of 'good' gurus in order to mobilise gender reform in patriarchal *akhāṛā* culture.

Keywords: South Asia, Kumbh Mela, feminism, female gurus, gender activism

INTRODUCTION: PERFORMING 'SAINTLINESS' AND THE POLITICS OF GURU SPEECH

Existing scholarship examining the roles of gender and religion on identity formation and political activism among women religious leaders in India's public sphere, calls attention to female gurus in Hindu nationalism who are agitating against the fundamental rights of religious and ethnic minorities, such as Christians and Muslims. Generally classified under the umbrella term 'Hindutva,' right-wing Hindu nationalist movements espouse a political ideology that pushes for Hindu supremacy and aims to 'transform India, constitutionally a secular state, into an ethno-religious nation known as the Hindu Rashtra (Hindu nation) (*Hindutva Profiles*).' Gurus such as Uma Bharati and Sadhvi Rithambara, two of the most famous women in the Hindu right in the 1980s and 1990s, have embraced Hindutva agendas, with Uma Bharati being an influential leader in the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and Sadhvi Rithambara being vital to the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP). Both gurus have been at the centre of the Ram Janmabhoomi movement, inciting the Hindu masses to demolish a sixteenth-century mosque called the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya based on populist claims that it originally was a temple to the Hindu god Ram (van der Veer, 1994).

Since the inception of the Ram Janmabhoomi movement, other female gurus promoting the cause of the Hindu right have risen to prominence. For example, Yati Chetnanand Saraswati (also known as Chetna Devi) runs an *ashram* in Ghaziabad (near Delhi) and is a lawyer by profession. She not only leads the Akhand Hindustan Morcha ('Great India Front') in Meerut, but also heads a powerful goddess temple in Dasna. Furthermore, she is the disciple and successor of Yati Narsinghanand Saraswati, an outspoken male Hindutva leader who has been arrested for using hate speech against Muslims (Khare, 2022). Aside from making the phrase 'love jihad' famous, Chetnanand Saraswati has organised campaigns to 'rescue' (her words) Hindu girls in relationships with Muslim men and convert them back to Hinduism (Srivastava and Irani, 2020: 21). Her hatred of Muslims comes through in her speeches, as does her view of Hindu women and girls as 'vulnerable' and 'gullible' and easily preyed on by Muslim

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men. She castigates Muslim men, calling them 'sensuous,' and reasons that the fault for her perception of Muslim men's being 'better at satisfying a woman's desire' lies with Islam.

Female gurus at the forefront of the Hindu right in India such as these leaders engage in political gender activism that the cultural historian of South Asia Amrita Basu (1995) has referred to as 'feminism inverted.' Uma Bharati has spoken 'vehemently against the exploitation of women's bodies in the media and advertising' (Basu, 1995: 166), while Chetnanand Saraswati has lobbied the Indian government to provide 'compulsory military training for every woman' and a weapons license to 'families with daughters and sisters' (Amar Ujala, 2019, Web Document). Both Hindutva leaders advocate for women and girls to protect themselves against sexual assault and gender-motivated violence.

In a similar vein, Sadhvi Rithambara has led the *Durga Vahini* organisation ('Durga Vehicle') since the 1990s. An independent and voluntary women's-only branch of the VHP (the *Bajrang Dal* is the parallel men's organisation), with twelve centers across India, *Durga Vahini* sponsors annual, month-long religious education camps for women between the ages of fifteen years and thirty-five years. Many of the organisation's participants come from some of India's poorest villages and socially marginalised castes. *Durga Vahinis* attending these camps learn life skills and receive training in martial arts and weapons use. While the gurus of the Hindu right support women's and girls' empowerment, education, and leadership roles within the movement, they nonetheless affirm gender social norms, emphasising the role of motherhood and women's selfless sacrifice as heroic 'soldiers' fighting on the battlefield of the Hindu Rashtra.

This article represents a departure from the scholarship on women's political activism in the Hindu right of India. Based on ethnographic research, it demonstrates that female gurus enact different styles of leadership in the public sphere. Indian women's political activism, as the scholars Tanika Sarkar and Urvashi Butalia have discussed (1995), encompasses a range of approaches, from hard-line to emancipatory, and is motivated by different concerns, from religious xenophobia to religious power. The gurus advocating Hindutva Hinduism tend to exercise but one style of leadership.

Apart from claiming Hindu supremacy, right-wing movements espouse patriarchal, bordering-on-misogynistic visions of gender norms and roles (Basu, 1995). And yet, the Hindu right has provided a niche for women's leadership and authority (Bedi, 2016; Menon, 2010). Its popularity among women across diverse identities is increasing in India (Bradley, 2017; Tomalin, 2015). Women are not only drawn to Hindutva, but also constitute some of its staunchest supporters and spokespeople (Sarkar and Butalia, 1995). Scholars studying the movement have asked why women would support a movement that reinforces their subordination to men (Bacchetta and Power, 2002; Bacchetta, 2002a; Bacchetta, 2002b; Sarkar and Butalia, 1995)?

While political ambition may be a factor, there are other reasons for women's participation. Hindutva's combining devotional and ascetic ideals such as 'sacrifice, martyrdom, and selflessness' through select use of Hindu religious symbolism, narratives, and texts, appeals to conventional cultural representations of respectable womanhood (Basu, 1995: 161). But unlike the convention that tends to equate feminine virtue with passivity, the movement encourages women to see themselves as 'powerful agents rather than passive victims' (Basu, 1995: 159). Hence, Hindutva actively supports women's activism and leadership. Women who embody the movement's ideals through diverse roles are highly respected and viewed as powerful. They may further be seen as spiritual mothers and, by implication, respected as gurus, saints, *yoginīs*, *siddhās* (spiritual masters) based on religiously sanctioned ascriptions of motherhood with virtuous femininity. Importantly, female gurus in India and abroad are considered exemplars of feminine morality and revered *because* of their perceived symbolic motherhood. As I will show, pervasive cultural tropes embedded in discourses around 'good' women intersect with mainstream perceptions of female saintliness. Hindutva elevates these associations to its advantage and draws women into its orbit. Women participating in the Hindu right may increase their status and gain respect by heightening perceptions of their feminine virtue to convey their credibility as gurus.

Religious devotion and asceticism may lie at the heart of women's attraction to the Hindu right. But its castigation of gender violence has also been a rallying point for women's involvement. As Basu has said, 'The BJP has made the raped Hindu woman symbolic of the victimisation of the entire Hindu community. What makes this symbol so effective is that it recalls the violence that women routinely suffer' (1995: 165). That the movement has strategically (dis)placed the blame for violence against women on male religious and ethnic minorities indicates that religious bigotry may be as strong a motivation as devotion for women. While women join the Hindu right for various reasons, these examples illustrate that it offers women, especially those from the lower strata of the society, access to power and status.

This article illuminates another style of the gender activism in India, which I term 'grassroots religious feminist-leaning activism.' Analysing the teachings and practices of two gurus, I argue that one guru believes in a separate but equal approach (men and women have different skills and rights), and the other follows the approach that both genders should have the same rights and abilities to make choices because of their common humanity. These

female gurus are pushing for women's greater freedom within the male-dominated religious hierarchy of the publicly exposed Hindu ascetic orders (*akhārās*) at the *Kumbh Mela*.

For example, in July 2015, images of a female guru embroiled in a tussle with male religious leaders at the *Kumbh Mela* (literally, the festival of the 'water pot') flooded the national Hindi and English language news and print media. Celebrated every three years in one of four states on a rotating basis on the banks of a sacred river, this year's *melā* (*Trimbakeshwar Simhastha Kumbh*) was held on the Godavari River in Nasik city, Maharashtra.[1] The *melā* represents the largest fair in India, showcasing a context in which Hinduism, the country's majoritarian religion, manifests in the public sphere in politically polarising and politically gendered ways. As stations covered news of the millions of pilgrims arriving for the event, another *melā*-related incident captured the regional headline news on channels such as Aaj Tak and Zee News. It involved the guru named Trikal Bhavanta Saraswati (hereafter, *Mataji*, or 'Respected Mother') and the president of the All India Akhara Council (subsequently, 'Akhara Council'), Mahant Gyandas.

For context, the Akhara Council represents the governing body over thirteen established ascetic orders (*akhārās*) from across Hindu and Sikh sects, which, in the Council's view, form the legitimate saint society of India. Consisting of two representatives from each *akhārā*, the Council has twenty-seven leaders, including the president, who serves a four-year term and is elected through a democratic voting system. Only men hold leadership roles in the organisation. The Council also mediates between the *akhārās* and *Kumbh Mela* administration, handling decisions ranging from scheduling the dates and times of the ritual bathing ceremonies to assigning the bathing order of the *akhārās* to allotting them land, facilities and other resources.

Two days into the *melā*, Zee 24 Taas, a Marathi language news station in Maharashtra, broadcasted a video of Mataji on a stage holding a microphone as a group of men, one of whom was the chief minister of Maharashtra, surrounded her and tried to take it away. As the scene unfolds, Mahant Gyandas, the Akhara Council leader, faces Mataji, tapping her on the left shoulder and then pointing a finger at her. His behaviour suggests that he and Mataji have a heated confrontation. The rest of the news bulletin describes Mataji's going to the Mela administration office to file a police report (FIR) against the Mahant and others for physically 'abusing' her.

Mataji's interviews on national television depict her visibly distraught by the event. But she seems more upset by the media's questioning the credibility of her account of the experience, as well as her bombshell claim of the Akhara Council's mistreatment of female saints (*sādhus*). For instance, after Mataji presented her side of the story to a news station, the female anchor invited Mahant Gyandas and another Council spokesperson to respond to her 'allegations' of abuse and sex discrimination (Sarkar 2015). Both gurus denied the claims. Gyandas reframed the issue by emphasising that Mataji had abused him. He argued that he was the real victim, not her. He said that he had noticed that the microphone was turned off and wanted to switch it back on. Then he added that he told Mataji to give him the mic and he'd speak for her. However, he said that she had misread his actions and shouted 'all men are the same.' According to Gyandas, he showed Mataji respect, despite her disrespecting him. At the end of the interview, he clarified that Mataji had 'planned' the stunt for 'publicity,' thereby casting doubt over her being a 'real' guru at all.

While the broadcast aimed to delineate the boundaries between 'good' and 'bad' gurus, for this author, it illuminated a set of issues and problems concerning representations of 'saintliness,' by which I mean the attributes of authenticity and respectability ascribed to holy people, and especially to gurus as a class of religious teachers/leaders within Hindu society. More specifically, the station's privileging the patriarchal views of male gurus within the mainstream over those of a female guru challenging the religious establishment magnified the roles of gender and structural power on shaping the discursive parameters of saintliness in the public sphere.

'Women's speech,' as the feminist gender and cultural studies scholar, Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan has said, 'is often confined to the space of the home; their denial of and exclusion from public spaces—platforms, pulpits, courts of law, educational institutions, parliaments—limits the reach and scope of their words' (1993: 88). What is more, as Sunder Rajan argues,

> … when women are allowed access to public forums, the very exceptionality of this entry may produce various kinds of linguistic excess. Though such 'speaking' does signify 'truth,' as lies, fantasies, desires and distortion do by other means than referentiality, they stand discredited when judged by the strict standards of veracity—and as a consequence the speakers often invite retribution by being subjected to containment, punishment, and backlash.

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[1] In this article, proper names for people, places, and festivals do not appear with diacritical marks. In translating Indic language data into standard British English, the author provides the original Hindi language terms for selected concepts. Since the author conducted research in modern standard Hindi, only Hindi, not Sanskritic, transliterations of terms appear in the text.

This discussion connects Sunder Rajan's insights concerning negative representations of women's speech to discourses around saintliness in the public sphere. To spotlight the diversity and gendered politics of these discourses, I analyse the ways that the feminist-leaning female gurus featured in the paper resist attempts at being silenced by the dominant discourse while creating alternative spaces for the inclusion of women's roles in patriarchal *akhāṛā* culture.

Despite the mainstream leadership's claims to the contrary, sex matters for *who* gets to control public understandings of 'real' and 'fake' gurus, *how* those constructions unlock and restrict opportunities for women's leadership, and *where* those representations are deployed, such as on national television (mainstream channels including commercials). Because the power of controlling representation for public consumption is deeply political, revealing what's at stake for people's lives and identities, it warrants exploring the connections of sex and politics to what I term the 'rhetoric of saintliness.'

To that end, I will examine the roles of gender, religion, and politics on the rhetoric of saintliness at the *Kumbh Mela*. As the opening vignette suggests, multiple institutions collude and compete in shaping public knowledge about 'good' and 'bad' gurus (i.e., saintliness). In addition to the male power elite through the Akhara Council and the national media, the Indian government through the state-controlled *melā* administration is also decisively instrumental in producing the rhetoric of saintliness. The type of power that the Akhara Council wields over the media and the Indian state suggests its role as the 'vestigial' Hindu state in the public sphere. Developed by feminist legal scholar Naomi Goldenberg (2014: 254), the 'vestigial state' describes religious institutions acting as 'political formations' to plan and control the agenda of public policy and the public interests of the state.

This article offers empirical observations based on two months of ethnographic research with Hindu gurus at the 2019 *Kumbh Mela* held in Prayagraj (formerly Allahabad) in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh. Additionally, I provide analyses based on five years of fieldwork conducted between 2014 and 2019 with Mataji and her community in Prayagraj. Although I spent most of my time at the *melā* with Mataji and her devotees at her camp, I worked with seventeen other gurus, men and women, from all over India. I conducted participant observation with the gurus, interviewing them multiple times at their camps, depending on their schedules, and participating in their camps' festivities. Aside from this, my methods also included semi-structured individual and focus group interviews, video and audio recordings of the gurus' practices, and transcribing and translating the Hindi language data into English. To interpret the materials, I pair a performance studies-centred analysis of the gurus' narratives with a discourse-centred analysis of media representations of them for comparison.

For the following discussion, I have chosen to analyse ethnographic materials drawn from my research with two female gurus, namely Guru Ma Anandmai Puri (henceforth, Anandmai) and Mataji. They have taken initiation as renouncers (*sannyāsīs*) into the Dashanami tradition, leaving behind the norms of marriage and family while adopting a life of simplicity by dedicating themselves to worshiping the divine and humanitarian service. Their teachings represent different perspectives on the spectrum of the rhetoric of saintliness, and revolve around three themes, namely, exemplary character (*sadācār*), mother power (*mātṛ śakti*), and selfless service (*sevā*). In this analysis I am interested in the ways that the gurus interpret and apply these themes to their activism to forward an alternative rhetoric of saintliness to that of the Hindu mainstream.

While the dominant rhetoric foregrounds transcending gender, the gurus' teachings unravel the fallacy of this idea in two key respects. First, they emphasise the real-world impact of female embodiment on saint's lives in connection with longstanding institutional inequities and ingrained attitudes that obstruct women's realising their full potential. Second, they relate gurus' credibility to gendered ideologies of respectability. However, I will show that the gurus retool feminine ideals to include traits such as self-determination and heroism. Although the gurus speak about transcendence, they view it differently than the mainstream. They want to transcend patriarchal structures of gender discrimination, not gender identity.

I argue that the rhetoric of saintliness is 'performative.' It constructs saintliness based on not only, as one might generally assume, rigorous moral standards, but also, as is less known in scholarly and popular understandings, sex-role stereotypes. I will focus on the latter aspect. I suggest that saintliness 'performs' a contingent and dynamic status ascribed to gurus whose moods and motivations conform to patriarchal norms and who uphold the religious *status quo*. Violation of norms often leads to the mainstream labelling gurus 'fake' and 'hypocrites.' As significantly, through their rhetoric, the female gurus heighten or reverse sex stereotypes to actively push for substantive gender reform in patriarchal *akhāṛā* culture.

Determining the saintliness of men and women based on their behaviours fitting religious expectations is not new or unique to Hinduism. We find similar practices in the history of Catholicism (Bynum, 1992). This article illuminates how gender works in the rhetoric of saintliness. It shows that female gurus and male gurus lead with different conceptions of saintliness from each other, and delineates the alternative criteria of the female gurus concerning 'mother power,' which they say is unique to the female sex, to sanction that status for women.

'REAL SAINTS RESPECT WOMEN': GENDERING 'VIRTUOUS CONDUCT' IN ANANDMAI'S RHETORIC OF SAINTLINESS

Thousands of saints, many with esteemed titles (for example, Acārya Mahāmandeleśwar, Mandeleśwar, etc.), populate the 2019 *Kumbh Mela*. In this temporary city comprising over 3,200 hectares of land (approximately 7,900 acres), and divided into twenty-one sectors, the incredible number, diversity, and variety of holy people is striking.

Female gurus are not anomalies, however. Their camps, from the Sannyasini Akhara of the Juna Akhara to the Sadhvi Shakti Parishad, dot the *melā* landscape. One camp in sector 16 catches my eye. Its entrance bears the name 'Women Power Camp' with an image of Anandmai on both sides. Observing my interest, a guard motions for me to come inside. A table packed with Hindi language books written by the guru is placed in front of him. In the main tent of the camp is Anandmai speaking with another female guru who is seated in the lotus posture on the ground. When they emerge from the tent, Anandmai calls me over and informs me that she has just initiated the other guru as a *mahant* (director) of the Niranjani Akhara. The newly-made *mahant* travelled to the *melā* from Aligarh city in central Uttar Pradesh. Anandmai then tells me that she herself is a *mahāmandeleśwar* (literally, 'great lord of the region') in the same *akhāṛā*. Her title cues that she has been invested by the *akhāṛā*'s institutional hierarchy with the authority to teach and transmit a sacred tradition of knowledge to others. Her official title as written on her camp's banner reads, '*Ānant Śrī Vibhūśit Śrī Śrī 1008 Mahāmandeleśwar*.' This garland of titles means that Anandmai is credentialed as a guru.

'I rule in this *akhāṛā*,' Anandmai says. Her statement comes in response to my fieldwork assistant Raj Kumar, a doctoral-level research scholar from Delhi University's Anthropology Department, explaining that I have journeyed to the *melā* from the USA to research female gurus. Anandmai mentions that she has left a university position as a lecturer in Sanskrit to serve women through her *akhāṛā*. Realising that Anandmai will soon lead the ritual coronation of the *mahant* (director or leader of an *akhāṛā*) at the camp, I steer the conversation in another direction. I explain that, based on the media reports I had read months before the fair began, the *Akhara* Council has been coordinating with the *melā* administration, the state's chief minister, Yogi Adityanath, and the media to block the entry of 'fake' gurus at the *melā*. So, I ask her, 'What makes a guru "real" or "fake"?'

Figure 1. Entry to Anandmai's Camp at the *Kumbh Mela*. Author's Collection

Figure 2. The entrance to the camp of the *Sannyasini Akhara* of the *Juna Akhara* in sector 16 of the *melā*. The poster board's image of the *akhāṛā*'s leader, Śrī Mahant Aradhna Giri Maharaj, greets visitors. Author's Collection.

Figure 3. Female *Sādhus* camping in the *Juna Sannyasini Akhara* Camp at the *Kumbh Mela*, Prayag. Author's Collection.

Anandmai responds candidly, emphasising that 'India is a patriarchal society. Men are born from women's bodies, but they want to dominate women. That's why I made this camp, so women saints get respect.' Her answer hardly surprises me. Six years earlier in 2013, Anandmai established her Women Power camp for the first time at the (*Maha*) *Kumbh Mela* in Prayagraj. But she wasn't the only guru creating alternative spaces for women saints to flourish. In 2013, at the same *melā*, the *Juna Akhara*, the largest of the *akhāṛās*, not only established a separate women's *akhāṛā* for the *sādhus* of its order, but also a separate camp for them (the Juna *akhāṛā* heads called it the '*Mai Baḍā*' or 'Mother Camp.' It is also known as the '*Sannyasinis*' Camp'). Both developments made the headlines, with images of the Juna female *sādhus* celebrating the decision. By contrast, the media posited controversy occurring between Anandmai and the Niranjani *akhāṛā*'s leadership. I wondered if her forming a separate camp for women and initiating them with big titles, such as the *mahant* described earlier, were at issue.

Answering my question with more precision, Anandmai speaks at length about the character (*sadācār*) of 'real' gurus. She teases out aspects of *sadācār* related to guru behaviour, dispositions, and motivations. To her, *sadācār* is a fluid term, encompassing meanings such as 'righteous conduct and courteous demeanour,' along with respect for women (McGregor, 1993, 978). Her pressing on the term's latter sense is not extraordinary. Recall that Mahant Gyandas raised this point in his media interview cited earlier. Discourse featuring the motif of 'respecting women' arises often in religious patriarchy's rhetoric of saintliness.

But as Anandmai elucidates her perspective on *sadācār* as respecting women, the gendered implications of the rhetoric of saintliness become apparent. She says,

> We believe that more and more women should read scriptures and do meditation. Women should focus on empowering themselves. We have made this camp because we believe that women are the mother-power (*mātṛ śakti*), and they should come forward in the society. We want more and more women to join the saint tradition. They will get more respect. India is a patriarchal society. See, the real work (*vāstik kāryā*) of saints is to do more and more for others. Through our trust, we take care of everything for women. Women shouldn't have any problem, whether it involves ritual bathing at the rivers, doing rituals (*kalpavās*), walking around the grounds, and taking shelter at the *melā*.

In Anandmai's narrative, the role of gender on the rhetoric of saintliness is salient. It is neither an empty signifier, nor an outer sheath for women to slough off in order to obtain guru credibility. Her narrative hints at what other gurus such as Mataji make explicit: the problem of women's sexual exploitation, harassment, violence, and oppression in patriarchal *akhāṛā* culture. To Anandmai, these problems are real, serious, and urgent, and become heightened at the *melā*. In her view, "real" saints work toward making women's lives better by providing them shelter, food, and cash (101 INR) to return home, and a female space away from the male gaze where women can give time to themselves and each other. Her 'work' aims to bring tangible benefits to women's lives, and it illustrates the definitional parameters for what *sadācār* means to her.

More specifically, *sadācār* as 'respecting women' involves accepting their embodiment as real, not denying it as illusory or tangential to the human experience. To dismiss the materiality of (any) gender, as I understand Anandmai, undermines the idea of the female *sādhu* as normative. Likewise, it suggests a profound lack of awareness regarding the institutional power hierarchies that structurally disadvantage women's relationships to the *akhāṛā* system.

Furthermore, Anandmai suggests that the Akhara Council's official statements that 'real' gurus do not see gender, and more to the point, the female sex, conceals its refusal to accept women as 'saints.' Its denial of the relevance of gender appears to be rooted in the understanding that female bodies are intrinsically deficient and inferior to the (high-caste) male body as superior and universal. In the view of the mainstream leaders, then, women have gender, but men do not. Embodying saintliness requires women to renounce being female without renouncing femininity, and men to affirm Herculean masculinity as an element of spiritual transcendence. Accordingly, judging by its statements to the media, insofar as women's behaviour upholds the patriarchal gender order, the Akhara Council accords them respect as mothers, daughters, and devotees. But not as saints. How ironic it is that the Council claims to 'respect' female saints, according them sanctity as mothers, but then chastises them for acting like women. It is a 'catch-22' that no *sādhu* across the traditions can surmount simply because of her sex.

'WOMEN ARE MOTHER POWER': CONSTRUCTING SELFLESS SERVICE AS FEMALE SAINTS' PREROGATIVE

Another aspect of *sadācār* drawn out by Anandmai concerns having the 'right knowledge' about the quality of 'mother power' that she accords women. But what is mother power? Anandmai mentions this idea in her narrative. For her – and for Mataji – mother power is unique to women because of their sex. Simply put: women have it and men do not. In this context, 'mother power' and 'power' are not synonymous concepts (Humes, 2000: 141; Erndl

2000).[2] This means that while both men and women have *śakti* as the power that is 'life force,' women possess the physiological power to birth life. This power makes women different from men.

Therefore, in the gurus' rhetoric and the dominant Hindu religious discourse, 'mother power' cues the procreant capacity associated with the female sex. Women's material bodies through menstruation, childbirth, and lactation connect them to the generative female body of the goddess Shakti, whom many Hindus worship as the divine absolute mother of the world.

In Anandmai's use of the term, mother power specifically refers to the innate socio-biological *potential* of women for motherhood. She explains her idea of the concept like this:

> Women have a lot of power (*śakti*). They are mother power (*mātṛ śakti*), but they don't know it. Women should know their mother power and work for change. Men are the form of knowledge, and women are the form of devotion. The meaning of the Hindu religion (*sanātan dharm*) is to work for everyone (*sevā*); to serve people selflessly and with love. There's no use of being a guru without love. We have made this camp to increase women power. As I've already said, women can do anything, but they have to know themselves.

While, at one point, Anandmai tells me that she encourages women to marry and 'build their houses,' she leaves open the possibility that some women would rather serve the society than the patriarchal family. These latter classes of women are precisely whom Anandmai seeks to draw into her organisation and initiate as *sādhus*. Either way, she indicates that mother power equips women for both motherhood and saintliness. Likewise, stressing that 'women must come forward' relates her view of their innate capacity for self-assertion and self-determination (i.e., autonomy) as aspects of mother power. Mother power represents the perceived and ascribed source of 'women's power' and the basis for their guru authority, and feminine virtue.

Anandmai's rhetoric constructs women as 'real' saints, amplifying that mother power endows them with the 'right' stuff to be 'good' gurus. Her idea of mother power pushes beyond patriarchal views that hinge on obedience, subservience, and deference to elders, especially husbands and in-laws. Anandmai disconnects the concept from its predominant association and attaches it to a cluster of other traits that have been eclipsed in public discourses concerning feminine virtue. Releasing the ideology of ideal womanhood from the grip of sex-specific roles, she forwards the respectability of women becoming saints to serve the society.

In the late 19th century, Hindu saints such as Swami Vivekananda, the disciple of the renowned mystic Paramahamsa Ramakrishna, repurposed the boundaries of sainthood by elevating the idea of *sevā*—selfless service to humanity—to redefine Hinduism in colonial India through a socially engaged lens. Cultural and political pressures and ideological shifts wrought by the encounter of 'multiple modernities' inspired and challenged Indian gurus to redefine saintliness (Eisenstadt, 2000). Since then, guru-centred movements in India and the Diaspora have plugged into some form of Vivekananda's and other gurus' models of socially engaged sainthood to forward public-facing Hindu (or 'Hindu-inspired') worldviews, practices, and organisations addressing diverse issues ranging from women's empowerment, gender equality, caste discrimination, poverty alleviation, ecological stewardship, and rural development. To that extent, guru movements have morphed over time into engaged spiritualities for social change. Concurring on this point, the historian of religion Karen Pechilis (2018) has said that modern and contemporary female guru-centred traditions demonstrate a 'pragmatically engaged spirituality' that strives for 'real-world impact' on the lives of the people and communities whom they lead.

Pechilis's analytical model of the 'pragmatically engaged spirituality' of female gurus provides a useful framework for understanding Anandmai's and Mataji's relationship to the idea of *sevā* and their encoding it with gendered meanings to increase female saints' status. Anandmai's rhetoric lauds the tangible impact of her organisation on Indian society. She says,

> We have changed the lives of one *lakh* people (approximately 1500) who were alcoholics and drug and nicotine addicts. I gave them a prayer and told them to swear on the goddess Ganga that they would not consume these substances anymore. We have paid for the marriages of women from poor village families (referencing dowry). We are changing this society through women power. That's why we want more and more women to join our organisation and adopt the *sādhu*'s way of life.

Anandmai's narrative makes explicit the connection of *sevā* to women power. *Sevā*, according to Anandmai, *is* what women excel at. They were born to serve others, and, to her, they have the gendered constitution to do it. Working for others' benefit externalises women's (mother) power and makes it possible for them to be devotional and loving, focused and steadfast, indefatigable and self-determined. From this angle, Anandmai's rhetoric

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[2] The scholar of religion, Cynthia Humes (2000), has argued that in Hindu religious traditions the concept of 'woman power' (*strī kī śakti*), in particular, implies the idea of the characteristics and capacities culturally ascribed to women as a *strī* class, from which their feminine power (*śakti*), including the socio-biological potential for motherhood, is thought to derive.

constructs the idea of the female *sādhu* as normative by emphasising that *sevā* constitutes the 'natural' extension of women's bio-moral proclivities to the public sphere. Her selective gendering of *sevā* as righteous femininity encourages women across communities and life stages to step out of socially expected gender roles and, as she says, 'adopt the *sādhu*'s way of life.'

By the same token, Anandmai teaches that female *sādhus* belong in the public sphere, challenging highly politicised representations that position them as volatile outliers. They are not exceptions to the upper-caste male norm of *sādhus*, occupying the margins of *akhāṛā* culture. In contrast, Anandmai situates female *sādhus* at the grassroots of society, engaging in beneficent relationships with underserved identities and transforming lives. To her, *sevā* accomplishes more than only women's uplift, which has been the operative focus of colonial and postcolonial applications of the concept in many guru-centred movements. It also aims to empower women by reforming the patriarchal structures that exploit them. In this way, she alters how people talk about female saints, changing the terms of the discourse, by clarifying that women's becoming *sādhus* and claiming public space to change women's worlds are the rights vested by Hinduism.

Returning to Anandmai's idea of the connection of *sadācār* to mother power, she says that a big problem within the saint society, from the *akhāṛās* to the monasteries, has to do with gurus' 'wrong' knowledge (or lack thereof) about mother power. It forms the basis for their mistreatment of female saints by denying them the rights ('*adhikār*') that she says Hinduism entitles them because they embody mother power. Anandmai attributes the majority of the problem to the combination of stupidity and misogyny and partially to the rapid spread of misinformation through communication technologies (e.g., television, mobile phone, computer) that denigrates women. Accordingly, then, 'real' gurus not only have the 'right' knowledge about mother power (and women power), but also teach it to others to increase women's rights in Hindu cultures. A large component of Anandmai's *sevā* involves dispelling falsehoods and ignorance about the rights that, as she instructs, Hinduism recognises women as eligible for, beyond the prescribed norms of marriage and householding. To that end, she underscores the rights that empower women for leadership roles in the *akhāṛās*. Anandmai says,

> According to the Hindu tradition, when women become *sādhus* they have the right to sing *bhajans* (devotional songs), give *kathās* (recitation of narrative traditions) and *pravachans* (religious teaching), lead rituals for others, and they can train other *sādhus* and make them *mahants* (leaders of their *akhāṛās*). Women have more rights than men in the saint society. But female *sādhus* don't know their rights, and they shouldn't compete with male *sādhus* for their rights, as it might hurt men's egos. They should complement each other. Women are waking up to their true power because of camps like this.

In promoting the dharmic rights of female *sādhus*, Anandmai's rhetoric is anchored to an ideology of gender complementarity. While some scholars have argued that religious models of complementarity camouflage embedded sexist values and do not substantively empower women (Humes, 2000: 139), Anandmai uses the concept to acknowledge sexual difference and augment the primacy of female embodiment for saintliness. Without restricting female agency to the domicile, she invokes the ideology to increase *sādhus*' autonomy within the *akhāṛās*, and she sanctions their engaging roles that harness their devotional and leadership capacities.

It is noteworthy that Anandmai steers clear from using the language of 'gender equality' in her rhetoric. She never mentioned the term until I addressed it with her. Her understanding that men and women are 'different but complementary' may have made raising that point unnecessary. Importantly, I have found that many of the gurus with whom I worked rejected the notion that men and women are 'equal,' because, to many of them, it articulates the standpoint that men and women are 'essentially' the same. It seems that for the majority of the gurus, 'equality' connotes the Western post-Enlightenment idea of 'natural equality.' An 18th century political concept derived from the western legal tradition, natural equality posits the view that men and women share the same basic human nature and are essentially 'equal.' This idea would likely strike Anandmai as incredible. To her, 'women power' identifies 'who' and 'what' women 'naturally' are, and distinguishes them from men, ontologically, socially, and so religiously.

Nevertheless, when I ask Anandmai whether she sees political rights such as gender equality enshrined in India's Constitution as a resource for increasing women's dharmic rights in Hindu society, she draws a sharp line between 'religion' and 'politics.' She makes clear that the saint society has its own 'Constitution' that 'gives women all the rights.' Her use of term 'woman power' makes it possible to distance herself from political issues related to women's rights and sexual equality. To that extent, she renders feminism moot for Hindu women.

'Woman power,' as a concept, invites enough ambiguity in its range of signification to allow for the dichotomies of 'religion' and the 'state' to become submerged in the rhetoric of saintliness. Additionally, it deflects potentially pejorative associations with feminism that the gurus I worked with have found it a potent motif around which to organise their religious gender activism, whether or not they align themselves with feminism. However, the mainstream rhetoric around 'woman power' positions it at odds with feminism. As Sunder Rajan has argued, media advertising has deployed 'woman power' to override feminism's impact and nullify the term's usage from public discourse (1993: 138).

Anandmai's rhetoric of saintliness constructs an adversarial connection between 'women power' and feminism, with the former occupying a superior position over the latter, fortifying the dichotomy between religion and politics. In attributing to female *sādhus* some of the recent movements for gender equality and reform in India, such as women's protests against the bans preventing their (and menstruant women's) entry into the temple sanctums of Sabarimala in Kerala and Shani Shingnapur in Maharashtra, Anandmai overreaches herself. Her rhetoric articulates the mainstream view that concern for the legal and constitutional rights of women and other minoritised identities is 'political,' and therefore, anathema to being a 'real' guru. Anandmai's approach demonstrates one leadership style at the *Kumbh Mela*. Let us turn to another approach illustrated by Mataji's leadership to get a clearer sense of the different styles.

'BUILD CHARACTER FIRST, THEN READ *VED-PURĀN-ŚĀSTRA*': MATAJI'S PERFORMING EXEMPLARY CONDUCT AS ANTI-DISCRIMINATION

Mataji's leadership bridges the spheres of religion and politics. Her grassroots religious gender activism combines religion and rights norms to advance the political rights of women in Hindu society. Through her teachings and practices, Mataji positions her leadership as continuous with feminist objectives. She focuses her advocacy around empowering female *sādhus* by advancing their fundamental rights to equality of opportunity in matters concerning their leadership as monastic heads (i.e., as *Śaṅkarācāryās*: lineage gurus identified with the teaching tradition of the 9th century leader Ādi Śaṅkarācārya), institutional autonomy, and economic sustenance. Advocating their right to equality of opportunity in these three overlapping respects, Mataji accomplishes her larger goal of institutionalising equality of status between female *sādhus* and male *sādhus*. By taking her gender activism to the legal courts, the media, and the Indian state, Mataji constructs the idea of the female *sādhu* as normative (Hindustan, 2017).

In Mataji's formulation, 'normative' refers to the belief that the female sex is intrinsically important and is born with the same ontological value and significance as that ascribed to the male sex in Indic society. According to Mataji, the female, as one type of normative human, deserves to have the same rights and privileges (personal autonomy) and opportunities (education) as the male. This understanding of the 'female as normative' that underlies Mataji's religious feminist activism parallels that of western feminist scholars and thinkers such as Adrienne Rich (1986) and Winnifred Tomm (1991). As Rich has elucidated in her classic work, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, the view of the female as normative embodies the 'awareness of her intrinsic importance, her depth of meaning, her existence at the very center of what is necessary and sacred' (1986: 93). Mataji's feminist leadership reinforces the gender studies scholar Kamla Bhasin's point that while 'feminism' may be a foreign term, the concept has diverse cultural expressions and trajectories (2019).

At the 2019 *Kumbh Mela*, Prayag Mataji's camp appears in sector 19 over by the banks of the Jamuna River, roughly eight kilometres from Anandmai's Women Power Camp on the other side of the fair near the Ganges River. There are two main ways to reach Mataji's camp, from the Jamuna side in Naini city through heavily policed entry points, or by crossing the pontoon (floating) bridge accessed from inside the *melā* proper that connects the Ganga and Jamuna sides of the fairgrounds. While the Ganga-facing side is by far the more crowded and trafficked of the two areas, the Jamuna-facing side also draws heavy crowds and is densely populated.

Signs with the logo of Mataji's NGO (Śrī Gayatrī Mātā Jñān Mahāyagñā Sāmiti), along with glossy posters hanging from the camp's border wall with an image of Mataji holding a trident, mark the spot of her camp. The banner around the gate reads: '*Ānant Śrī Vibhūśit Gayatrī Triveṅī Prayāg Pīṭhādīśwār Jagadgurū Ādyā Svayambhū Śaṅkarācārya Trikāl Bhavantā Saraswatī Jī Mahārāj*' ('The Eternal and Respected Lord of the Sacred Place Gayatrī Triveṅī Prayāg World Teacher the First Self-Made Śaṅkarācārya Trikāl Bhavantā Saraswatī Great King/Lord') This garland of titles signifies Mataji's status as a *self-made* (*svayambhū*) *Śaṅkarācāryā*, and hence, her alternative authority as India's 'first' female *Śaṅkarācāryā*.

Inspired by what she has termed a 'divine vision,' in which she claims that the god Śiva and the goddess Śakti called her to the leadership, Mataji announced her status to the media and the *melā* authorities in 2008. She publicised the news following the 2007 Maha *Kumbh Mela* in Prayagraj. After receiving the revelation, Mataji put up a signboard at the gate of her camp for the Prayagraj *Magh Mela*, which is like the *Kumbh Mela* but on a much smaller scale. Six years later, at the Ardh *Kumbh Mela*, also in Prayagraj, Mataji announced the creation of India's 'first' Hindu women's *akhāṛā*. She established the order through her charismatic authority as the female *Śaṅkarācāryā*, naming it *Akhara Pari*,[3] which I have translated as the 'Society of the Free Birds Escaping the Prison of Tradition.' Mataji's self-declared status and her founding a women's *akhāṛā*, which she currently leads, have sent the Akhara Council in an uproar.

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[3] The full name is *Sarveshwar Mahadev Vaikunth Dham Mukti Dwar Akhara Pari*. I refer to the *akhāṛā* simply as '*Akhara Pari*.'

Figure 4. A Poster depicting Mataji as the female *Śaṅkarācāryā* at her camp's gate. Author's Collection.

In 2017, the leaders of the Akhara Council decided to form an internal peer-review system for India's saints (Hindustan, 2017). Narendra Giri, its (former) president and (former) the secretary of the Niranjani Akhara (the *akhāṛā* to which Anandmai belongs),[4] who was elected in 2014, and again in 2019, publicly announced through the press that the Akhara Council would operate as the arbiter of saint society (*Wion Web* Team, 2017; *Scroll* Staff, 2017; Sharma, 2021). Claiming that role allowed the Akhara Council to fashion its identity as the vestigial Hindu state and leverage its power over the *Kumbh Mela* publics through the Indian state. Moreover, by investing itself with the political authority of the vestigial state, it could control perceptions of 'good' and 'bad' saints through its rhetoric of saintliness (Press Trust of India, 2017).

Between 2017 and 2018, the Council published four separate lists with the names of the so-called 'bad' gurus of India. Each iteration revealed more and more 'fake' gurus (Hindustan Times, 2018). The Council had no shortage of words for annihilating their credibility or respectability. Since then, the Council has made a concerted effort to provide its finalised list to the *melā* administration before the start of every *Kumbh Mela* (though it monitors gurus' behaviour and updates its list accordingly). By publicising the list, the Council sought the intervention and approval of the Indian state to block the entry of the 'fake' saints at the *melā*. It also demanded that the state prohibit the pronounced fakes from putting up boards with their 'fake' titles at the *melā* and elsewhere. According to media reports, Yogi Adityanath accepted the Council's request, and for the 2019 *Kumbh Mela*, ordered the *melā* administration to have all the signs and logos of 'self-styled' gurus, including *Śaṅkarācāryās*, removed from the fairgrounds (Jaiswal, 2017; Sikhaula, 2014; Shukla, 2018).

Through its strategic alliance with the state, the Akhara Council in its role as the vestigial state has attempted an all-out government takedown of the saints whom it accused of 'corrupting' Hindu society. In his media interviews and on Twitter, Narendra Giri said that the fake saints, many of whom were blacklisted because of their

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[4] On September 21, 2021, the media published news of the alleged suicide of Mahant Narendra Giri (Pandey, 2021). Based on the reports, the Mahant was found dead at his residence in Prayagraj. The police have launched an investigation into the incident.

Figure 5. Sector 16 of the *Kumbh Mela*, Prayag located nearest to the Ganges River. Author's Collection.

'self-styled' status, were not 'authentic' by the Akhara Council's criteria. Giri framed the Council's motives in redemptive terms, emphasising the need for 'saving the saints from disgrace' (Verma, 2017).

Mataji's name appeared on the Akhara Council's second list in December 2017, alongside those of alleged and convicted rapists, murderers, drug and sex traffickers, and a female guru named Radhe Ma scandalised for wearing make-up and mini-skirts. Self-proclaiming the *Śaṅkarācāryā* status and forming a women's *akhāṛā* (in 2014) led to Mataji being blacklisted. Her ascribed 'fake' guru status impacted her visibility and treatment at the 2019 fair, for the *melā* authorities placed her camp as far from *melā*'s centre as possible.

Wherever Mataji's activism lands, her leadership becomes the most public platform for overtly challenging male leadership and reclaiming the reigns of the rhetoric of saintliness from mainstream control. One of the ways that Mataji shifts the discourse is through her teachings on *sadācār*. She presses on some of the same meanings as Anandmai, such as moral conduct and respecting women *because of* their embodiment, rather than despite it. But she takes her rhetoric to another level by connecting *sadācār* to women's equal opportunity to lead as monastic heads.

Mataji understands that the historical exclusion of women from the *Śaṅkarācāryā* leadership is based on two deeply rooted and intersecting patriarchal streams of thought. The first concerns attributing an ontologically inferior status to the female; the second involves ascribing the female body a ritually impure status due to menstruation. Mataji reasons that uprooting these anti-woman worldviews requires reversing the normative gender/power hierarchies to raise women's status. Her interpretation of *sadācār* undercuts the ritually-based significance that the mainstream accords to ideas of gender/caste purity by heightening the alternate value of moral purity, achieved through dietary and religious practices, for the leadership. Here, I call attention to Mataji's relating *sadācār* with forms of moral conduct.

In the public lectures that I have attended, Mataji emphasises that moral purity, rather than the ritual purity associated with being born a Brahmin man, distinguishes the 'real' guru. 'Moral purity' denotes not only 'righteous conduct,' but more precisely, eliminating customary practices that discriminate against others based on their sex and caste. According to Mataji, moral purity is tantamount to embodying anti-discrimination attitudes and behaviours. *Sadācār* defined in this sense identifies the minimum criteria for being a 'real' guru to Mataji. She says,

> *Sadācār* means to follow the path of truth in one's behaviour and mentality. The people who call themselves religious leaders do not have any of these qualities. They have not brought their knowledge of *Ved-Purān-Śāstra* [she means *Vedas*, *Purānas*, and *Śāstras*, authoritative texts in Hindu orthodox views] into their way of life. They are corrupting the religion by making distinctions between people based on their caste and sex. For them, the truth is knowing *Ved-Purān-Śāstra*. It has nothing to do with behaviour.

Mataji modernises *sadācār* in order to speak to contemporary social justice-based issues. By emphasising *sadācār* as anti-discrimination, she alters perceptions of saintliness to include concern for women's and other minorities' political-legal rights. She crafts her rhetoric of saintliness around the perception of women being morally superior to men and counters views of their second-class status. Moreover, by correlating the culturally ascribed feminine traits of self-control and self-discipline with celibacy (*brahmacārya*), a practice conceived as masculine in (some) Brahmanical texts (Khandelwal, 2001; Gross, 2001), she refutes the implied orthodox perspective that women are incapable of ritual purity during menstruation. Mataji amplifies the idea of female *sādhus* as inherently pure, powerful, and auspicious. Neither female embodiment nor an oppressed caste status accounts for the problem of impurity to Mataji. Rather, the problem lies with bad attitudes and behaviours. Hence, *sadācār* defined by Mataji's standards outweighs knowledge of ancient texts. Her reworking the dominant criteria for saintliness advantages groups whom the mainstream tradition has denied the right to study the Vedas based on their ascribed impure status. Thus, Mataji's emphasis on women's moral/socio-biological superiority to men reverses the status of women and men to claim women's right to equality of leadership.

'I AM BUILDING MY ARMY OF WOMEN!': PERFORMING FEMALE HEROISM AS WOMEN'S RIGHT TO EQUALITY OF STATUS

In nearly every media interview, public lecture or program, and personal meeting that she gives, Mataji accentuates some variation of the pronouncement that 'women are mother power [*mātṛ śakti*]. The mother is the best creation of God in this whole world.' She holds up the quality of mother power as the gold standard for attributing saintliness to other gurus. But Mataji is not unusual. I have yet to meet a female guru who did not draw on the concept in some way to authorise her role. As we saw earlier, Anandmai also uses it to raise women's status in the saint society. Mataji and Anandmai share similar essentialist views about mother power that idealise women's perceived maternal nature without restricting women to sex-role stereotypes. Both gurus conceive mother power as the potent female source of energy for women's ascribed traits of devotion, love, patience, self-control, selflessness, and endurance to withstand hardship. These traits are said to endow women with maternal instincts and produce female virtue. Additionally, the theologies of the gurus relate the inherent sacrality and purity of female embodiment and bodily processes to the divine materiality of the goddess as the creatrix of the manifest world.

There are important differences in their perspectives, however. Anandmai constructs her theology of mother power to teach the ideology of gender complementarity (the view that men and women are essentially different and inhabit roles that complement each other's differences), and Mataji crafts her theology to intensify the reversal of gender/power hierarchies. Through that status reversal, she constructs female *sādhus*' equality with that of male *sādhus* to push for their equal right to the leadership. Her rhetoric suggests that women's exclusion from the topmost tiers of institutional power is related to perceptions of them being inferior to male *sādhus*.

In her practices, Mataji associates 'mother power' with an attribute that is muted in Anandmai's rhetoric: female heroism. In Mataji's usage, the concept refers to the gendered feminine power of courage and strength, self-determination and self-discipline, and defiance against male domination over women. Mataji's theology constructs female heroism as women's insubordination against the male sex right.[5] Likewise, her theology condones that female insubordination against the patriarchal right to women *is* virtuous. This is a crucial difference in perspective between the two gurus. Mataji's identifying mother power with/as the righteousness of women's resisting male control over the female sex widens the parameters of respectable womanhood to include traits that are often seen as dangerous to the patriarchal order.

Thus, Mataji's narrative attacks mainstream misogynistic thinking at its root, replacing such discourse with an emancipatory vision of the female as heroic. Her rhetoric of saintliness weakens religious patriarchy's structural monopoly over the leadership by reconfiguring the notion of heroism (that is to say, to women's resistance to forms of male control) as the female birth right. In claiming women's superiority over men based on the perception

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[5] In referencing the idea of female insubordination against the male sex right, I'm drawing on the feminist religion scholar, Winnifred Tomm's explanation of the concept (1991: 85-93).

of their naturally heroic nature, Mataji reverses gender hierarchies to push for the normativity and equality of female *sādhus*.

Although women's ascribed second-class status is linked to perceptions of their bodily impurity, Mataji's rhetoric suggests that there's more involved than solely concerns with purity. Their perceived inferiority may also stem from widespread understandings, articulated discursively and symbolically in the *melā* sphere, that promote *akhāṛā* culture as an exclusively gendered context for heroic masculinity. Historically, *akhāṛās* were formed as paramilitary societies to protect the monastic heads, Hindu traditions, and Indians against British colonial forces (Gross, 2001). In practice, the *akhāṛās* place a premium on the male sex for entry into the saint society, in which martial imagery is prominent. Only five of the thirteen established *akhāṛās* accept women (Hausner, 2007). Even the meaning of '*akhāṛā*,' which may be translated as 'wrestling ring,' 'sports,' and, as I learned, 'army' of saints, privileges male virility.

The implication is that mainstream discourse forwards the view that 'real' saints are 'essentially' men because of imputed heroic qualities thought to make male *sādhus* capable of enduring the difficulties of *sādhu* life and protecting religion and country against perceived enemies. That the Brahmanical texts elevate ideals such as control over the body, sensory suppression, and vanquishing desires to construct asceticism, suggest the idea of male virility as normative to saintliness. Patriarchal *akhāṛā* culture positions female *sādhus* not only as 'anomalies' *in* the saint society (Khandelwal, 2004), but also as outliers *to* it. This is based on perceptions of their incapacity for virility, and by implication, their inferiority to male *sādhus*.

Enlarging the idea of mother power to include and justify heroic femininity, Mataji advances women's monastic leadership. Like the term '*akhāṛā*,' the title '*Śaṅkarācāryā*' connotes the ascetic ideal of heroic masculinity. Based on fieldwork responses of the gurus, the *Śaṅkarācāryā* epitomises male virility. Many of them described the *Śaṅkarācāryās* as the 'leader of the army' comprising all the *akhāṛās*. Gender was not a factor in their responses. As many female gurus as male gurus made the comment. However, gender became a factor in their responses when discussing the issue of eligibility for the role. With Mataji and another guru (not Anandmai) being the exception, the gurus said that women are ineligible to become *Śaṅkarācāryās*, citing the criterion of birth as a Brahmin male. But women's ineligibility is also a function of the perception of male virility as the essentially gendered basis for eligibility, which renders women categorically ineligible and ontologically incapable of leadership.

'*WOMEN NEED THEIR OWN AKHĀṚĀ!*': CONSTRUCTING *SELFLESS SERVICE* AS WOMEN'S RIGHT TO INSTITUTIONAL AUTONOMY

Empowering women to see themselves as heroic through her teachings, Mataji unravels deeply ingrained attitudes and practices that condition them to be dependent on others, especially male kin, for their well-being. Some of the religiously-sanctioned gender ideologies featured in orthodox Brahmanical texts prescribe women's and girl's dependence on fathers, husbands, and sons as the condition of ideal womanhood (Shastri, 1990). But such prescriptions, apart from socialising women to be dependent on and obedient to men, send the message that they cannot protect themselves because of the ascribed weakness of the female sex. It instructs them to believe that their protection and happiness come from being dependent on others. However, Mataji disrupts this idea, emphasising women's innate capacity for self-protection. In a women's programme that she organised in 2019, she said,

> No one ever tells a girl or a woman this knowledge, but she knows when a man is looking at her badly [with sexual intent]. A woman always knows. When they know that the person may harm them, they must protect themselves. Women must take action against sexual terrorism.[6]

Mataji backs her words up with activism. She offers women (and men) in the local community martial arts training sessions free-of-charge at her *ashram*. At the sessions, female and male instructors from around Prayagraj, whom Mataji has contacted, come and teach the women, including the women who live at her *ashram*, the art of self-defence. Importantly, as she makes clear, female heroism involves protecting oneself against what Mataji labels 'sexual terrorism,' which includes all forms of gender-based violence. A man ogling a woman qualifies as 'sexual terrorism' by Mataji's definition.

Thus, Mataji inculcates among diverse female audiences that independent female power is not only virtuous. It is also heroic, exemplifying Mataji's vision of respectable femininity. Recall Mataji's retrieving the microphone from Gyandas discussed earlier. It enacts her right to resist the patriarchal right to dominate women and speak for them. She teaches that women and girls deserve to live without 'sexual terrorism.' It is their human birth right. By the term 'independent,' I understand Mataji to mean the idea of women and girls empowered through knowledge

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[6] Mataji Trikal Bhavanta Saraswati, 27 July 2019, Prayagraj.

of their self-worth to take control of their lives and actively change their worlds. Her view is based on deeply valuing the female as normative and equal to the male.

While Mataji travels around the country altering perceptions of the boundaries of respectable womanhood to include the heroic elements of feminine identity as laid out above, she focuses her efforts on spreading the message of the virtue of independent female power to the female *sādhus* whom she meets at the *melās*. She speaks to *sādhus* who belong to an *akhāṛā* and to those who do not belong to any *akhāṛā*. In either case, through the rhetoric of saintliness, Mataji asserts their constitutional right to organise and lead *akhāṛās* of their own as they see fit.

Her activism combines Hindu teachings on selfless service (*sevā*) with rights-based discourses related to gender equality to advance women's equal right for institutional autonomy in Hindu society. To sanction that right, Mataji applies the concept of *sevā* retooled as working toward the universal *female* good through leadership, advocacy, and support for or collaboration with other organisations committed to changing lives. She says,

> My *sevā* is to work for the women of this country and in the saint society. *Sevā* means doing good work for women. That's why I formed my *akhāṛā*. It's a women's *akhāṛā* because it gives priority to women. In my *akhāṛā*, every woman is equal (*barābar*) to every man. Through this *akhāṛā*, I can teach women about their rights. When I told some religious leaders that I wanted to make an *akhāṛā* for women, they all said, 'Why don't you start an NGO? Why do you need to start an *akhāṛā*? Don't make a separate *akhāṛā* for women.' So, I said, Wow! The women can work but only a man can sit on the throne? This is why I started my *akhāṛā*. So that women, too, can sit on the throne. This is my *sevā*. To make women sit on the throne and serve the society.[7]

Significantly, Mataji's and Anandmai's views of *sevā* illuminate the ideological fault lines in the rhetoric of saintliness. Although Anandmai pushes the boundaries of feminine virtue and alludes to heroic feminine traits such as self-determination and courage in her application of *sevā*, she discourages women's taking the initiative to form their own separate *akhāṛās*. Acting independently of male authority seems to go against her idea of heroic femininity. In her words, it might 'hurt men's egos.' Fighting for women's institutional autonomy amounts to 'competing with men' and is neither feminine nor virtuous. Thus, Anandmai does not openly challenge male-dominated power structures, but rather encourages women to work within the hierarchy.

By contrast, Mataji accentuates the beneficence of women's independent leadership as a form of selfless service. Female *sādhus* can lead as the 'heads' of an *akhāṛā*. Or, they can work as its 'hands' in service to objectives conducive to women. Her rhetoric resists attributing saintliness based on sex-specific roles. In this way, Mataji creates an alternative way of conceiving *sevā* by emphasising women's institutional autonomy as an aspect of it. From her standpoint, female religious institutional autonomy is good for the society and models the *full* range of women's potential. Her rhetoric joins theology and gender advocacy to reverse the structural hierarchies that bring women under male control in *akhāṛā* culture. By reworking *sevā*, Mataji interrupts the gendered tropes woven into the rhetoric of saintliness that perpetuate essentialist perceptions of sex roles and protect high-caste male privilege.

Mataji is unyielding in her emphasis on the right to institutional autonomy for female *sādhus*. Although over the last nine years other *akhāṛās*, such as Juna and Niranjani, have organised separate women's organisations or camps, Mataji remains largely unsatisfied with these efforts. Based on what she has told me, such *akhāṛās* represent semi-autonomous institutions. That is, the women's *akhāṛās* may be separate from the male *akhāṛās*, but they are not independent from them. This means that female leaders of the women's *akhāṛās* are subject to the institutional authority of the parent *akhāṛā*, and by implication, subordinate to the male leaders of those *akhāṛās*. Similarly, the women's *akhāṛās*' decision-making powers are limited by the predominant interests of the male-run *akhāṛās*, which wield the power to decide on the agenda of public policy (such as making lists of 'fake' gurus) that impact others in the saint society. Structurally, then, the practice of forming women's *akhāṛās* within the established (male-run) *akhāṛā* system, which some of the Akhara Council leaders seem to condone, confirms Mataji's suspicion that, despite Anandmai's statement ('I rule in this *akhāṛā*'), women do not substantively 'rule' in organisations that have been folded into the larger male power structure.

Creating an *akhāṛā* purposefully for the female saints, Mataji imparts the idea of the female *sādhu* as normative by emphasising women's right to institutional autonomy. Through Akhara Pari, she is transforming previously blocked access points for women's leadership and dismantling inequities that keep them from moving up the power structure. Her leadership is creating substantive change for underserved identities. By Mataji's definition, *sevā* endeavours to make women's and girl's lives better by protecting their interests and their constitutional rights in a society in which they are slowly eroding under a government powered by Hindu nationalist politics. The retooled ideas of *sevā*, *sadācār* and mother power illuminate the alternative standards by which Mataji constructs her rhetoric of saintliness in the public sphere.

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[7] Mataji Trikal Bhavanta Saraswati, June 9, 2018, Prayagraj.

CONCLUSION: REAL GURUS, FAKE GURUS, AND THE GENDERED RELIGIOUS POLITICS OF SAINTLINESS IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

This article has advanced the concept of the 'performativity of saintliness' to demonstrate how the grassroots religious gender activism of female gurus in the public sphere, constructs an alternative narrative to the dominant discourse to create outcomes that empower female saints in Hindu society. To this end, the article has illuminated the roles of sex and politics on the rhetoric of saintliness for controlling entry into and exit from the saint society, as well as the *Kumbh Mela*, the (temporary) world of saints *par excellence*. As we have learned, while religious patriarchy as the vestigial state, with the media's cooperation, corners the market on the rhetoric of saintliness, the Indian state surveils the boundaries of *akhāṛā* culture by allowing or refusing entry to saints whom the Council labels 'fake' gurus.

However, religious patriarchy's tightening the reigns of the rhetoric has provoked the proliferation of parallel discourses also attempting to reconfigure the boundaries of saintliness. At the *Kumbh Mela*, saints variously stake their claims to authenticity/virtue to support, ignore, or defy the dominant discourse. Based on media reports, the Akhara Council itself is not immune from being subject to the internal peer review system that it has implemented. It, too, has undergone disruptions concerning the leadership of the presidency, with different *akhāṛā* heads claiming their authority over others for the title. At the 2015 *Kumbh Mela*, during which Mataji went to the media and alleged women's mistreatment in the *akhāṛās*, the Council became entangled in a bitter battle of words and wills between two prominent male gurus over the leadership. Debates over saintliness, over 'real' gurus versus 'fake' gurus and so forth, are not unusual in the saint society. Rather, as I have argued, they are performative.

But even as the mainstream rhetoric upholds transcending gender identity as the basis for attributing saintliness, the alternative rhetoric of the gurus described in the discussion suggests otherwise. They express the view that religious patriarchy conceals systemic sexism and misogyny from public scrutiny by emphasising transcendent saintliness. Likewise, they expose the hypocrisy of the mainstream leadership that, on the one hand, claims to 'respect women' and, on the other hand, attacks the credibility of gurus who 'see' themselves as female. As the gurus indicate, 'transcendent spirituality' articulates the discursive trope for universalising the male sex as normative. Hence, the gendered 'catch-22' on which the male rhetoric pivots bespeaks attitudes denigrating female saints based on perceptions that they are essentially incapable of virility, the *sine qua non* of saintliness, and by implication, lesser than male saints.

Despite religious patriarchy, the gurus are committed to improving the status of female *sādhus* within *akhāṛā* culture and changing lives. They use the same concepts as the religious mainstream, namely *sadācār*, *mātṛ śakti*, and *sevā*, but repurpose them to alter perceptions that subordinate women to male authority. Their rhetoric actively positions women at the helm of *sādhu* life, thereby constructing the female *sādhu* as normative to the male *sādhu*.

Nevertheless, the different perspectives of the gurus shape their relationship to the ideas of gender equality, women's rights, and feminism, and to patriarchal *akhāṛā* culture. As I have argued, whereas Anandmai reworks *sadācār* to affirm female embodiment, Mataji forwards that premise to promote anti-discrimination and pro-woman worldviews that challenge dominant caste and gender hegemonies. Similarly, for Anandmai, mother power, as she interprets it, invests women with ritual and devotional authority, which includes initiating them into leadership roles, and 'naturally' qualifies them to engage with the male-dominated public sphere through selfless service. By contrast, in Mataji's conception, mother power generates women's capacity for heroism and makes it possible to protect themselves and others and govern institutions independently of male control. As a result, Anandmai's rhetoric situates her squarely within the male-powered institution, though not without issue, while Mataji's destabilises traditional hierarchies, thus, locating her outside the mainstream.

In sum, the gurus' rhetoric of saintliness brings to the surface the largely neglected issues and problems affecting female saints in the public sphere and beyond it. To that extent, the gurus state that empowering women requires that religious patriarchy go beyond bestowing on them the religious bona fides of saintliness or highlighting their visibility in the saint society through media coverage. For these gurus, the increased visibility of female saints at the *melā*, in the news, and so on is not, as the mainstream asserts, synonymous with their holding a high status, or their receiving respect in the *akhāṛās*. Though it may be a convenient substitute for the religious establishment's idea of gender equality, increasing women's visibility cannot replace the hard work of reorganising *akhāṛā* culture to make it gender and caste inclusive. Initiatives to create *akhāṛās* for women suggest that female gurus are frustrated with the sexism that saturates *akhāṛā* culture and deprives women of realising their full human potential. At every turn, the gurus instruct that women deserve more. They deserve better. It is their birth right.

Just as significantly, though, while the gurus weave their rhetoric around the common language of 'women power,' Mataji performatively pushes the limits of that discourse by aligning her theology with advocacy for women's equal rights in Hindu society. Through the intersection of her rhetoric and religious gender activism, she teaches that 'until women get their rights, they will never get their respect.' For Mataji, enforcing women's constitutional rights, especially in religious spheres where those rights are flouted and dismissed as 'foreign,' must

accompany empowering women in India. Mataji is not alone. More and more gurus, both men and women, are echoing her sentiment. Whether Mataji's protecting the fundamental rights of India's most underserved identities by organising alternative traditions for them to flourish is enough to transform the internal power structures of institutions that have historically excluded them from the monastic leadership remains to be seen. However, both Mataji and Anandmai demonstrate through their feminist-leaning religious gender activism that real, gender-based change is not only possible. It is also imperative to creating hopeful futures for women.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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'You Call Us Goons! Have You Seen How *Their* Women Act?': Gendering as a Protest Strategy among Hindu Nationalist Students in New Delhi

Aastha Tyagi [1*]

ABSTRACT

Founded in 1949, Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) is the largest political student organisation in the world. ABVP fights university elections, helps students navigate university bureaucracy, and conducts extra-curricular activities for students. It is one of the strongest arms of the largest and most influential coalition of Hindu nationalist organisations called the Sangh Family (*Sangh Parivar*) in promoting Hindu nationalist ideology to an extremely influential demographic: the young, university-educated, and urban populace. As a member of the largest Hindu nationalist organisation in the world, what does it mean to protest in the present political moment – with the knowledge that there is state and institutional support on your side? Ethnographic data and interviews show that gender plays a key role in how protests are organised and performed. In this article, the sites of the ABVP protest are deconstructed to illustrate two objectives: first, to lay out the preparations that go into 'doing' protest. Second, the strategies, micro-politics and navigations that show how protests are gendered. Gendering emerges as a strategy of assertion against women of the left and progressive groups.

Keywords: India, gender, Hindu nationalism, student politics, ABVP

INTRODUCTION

India has had a rich history of student protests and student-led interventions on issues of national importance that began in university spaces (Altbach, 1989; Pathania, 2018; Shah, 2004). Ideologically-aligned groups engaging on university campuses contribute to the vibrant student politics in India (Martelli and Parkar, 2018). Different groups lay claim to the campus space (through protest sites, walls, graffiti art, seminars, etc.) and on the student body through these initiatives. Protests become one of the ways in student parties *do* politics. In many cases, protests and counter-protests are held to declare ideological positions on issues in different forms: demonstrations, clashes, attacks through social media, and sometimes, physical violence.

Since 2016, there have been recurring events in India that have brought intense scrutiny over university campuses, inviting national and international attention (Nayar, 2020). [1] Polarising campuses sharply, the interventions from outside the university campuses have called upon members of the student community to explicitly declare their ideological affiliations; these events have compelled academics and scholars to widely discuss the idea and purpose of the university (Apoorvanand, 2018; Pathak, 2016). Is a university only for receiving education or is it a place for cogitating on radical new visions of the society? Some of the biggest questions that the university and its members have been grappling with are: What is nationalism? Who has the nation's interests at heart? What can be spoken about and who can speak about it? And is university the place for intense debates on tradition versus new ideas? [2]

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[1] Here, I refer particularly to the death of Rohith Vemula, a PhD scholar at the Hyderabad Central University in January 2016; the Film and Television Institute of India protests in 2014-2015; the 'February 9' incident at Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi in 2016; the 'Ramjas clashes' in Delhi University in the following year, the Banaras Hindu University's female students protesting the hostel regulations in October 2017; attacks on students in Aligarh Muslim University and Jamia Milia Islamia, and JNU attacks 2020, among many more.

[2] Pathania (2018: 18) also sees the present events in universities as assertions from students of marginalised communities '…producing a counter culture to the existing dominant culture'.

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There have been many student groups of different ideological positions engaging with these debates, taking to the streets to fight and protest. Among them are students from the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (All India Students Committee; ABVP), one of the most prominent student organisations in India. The ABVP was founded in 1949 as an affiliate of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (National Volunteers Corp.; RSS). The RSS has been the most influential organisation leading the Hindu nationalist movement in India. The RSS also sits at the helm of the network of different Hindu nationalist organisations called the *Sangh Parivar* (Sangh family) – a network of affiliate organisations catering to different demographics and groups – each contributing to the Hindu nationalist vision of the nation in their own way (one of which is the current ruling party of India, the Bharatiya Janata Party (Indian People's Party, BJP)). ABVP is a crucial member of the *Sangh Parivar* and it is uniquely positioned to cater to the movement in the way no other affiliate can: it caters to university students, brings discussions and vision of the Hindu nationalist thought to the campus, articulating them in the language that can appeal to young, educated students. ABVP, unlike other affiliates, allows both men and women to work together for the movement. The diversity of the student body in university campuses (gender, caste, region) also allows it to have a reach in demographics that are not as easily available to other affiliates. Further, ABVP alumni make up a large percentage of those who currently hold power in the government through their membership in the BJP. Thus, ABVP members have direct access to the corridors of power.

Women of the Hindu nationalist movement have increasingly acquired a crucial role in mobilising for the ideology (Basu, *et al.*, 1993; Katju, 2022; Sarkar, 1991; Sen, 2007). Their unique ways of contribution (such as using the domestic sphere for mobilisation, religiosity as a space to recruit new members etc) has been noted in the scholarship on women and Hindu nationalism. One crucial piece of the puzzle seems to be missing: how do young, urban, educated women, an extremely significant demographic to the *Sangh Parivar*, contribute to the movement? When it comes to active involvement in mobilisation and violence, the figure associated with the ABVP is typically of a Hindu male. Unlike other Sangh sisters (Tyagi, 2020), ABVP women do not keep religiosity at the forefront of their motivations for being a part of the movement. By understanding how ABVP women mobilise for the movement, we can achieve an insight into how young, educated, urban conservative women are furthering the cause of their ideology in the present historical moment.

In this article, I show how ABVP women are intimately involved in asserting the cause of Hindu nationalism in the space of the university. Through the personal biographies of the students in the movement, I will show how protests are a crucial site for socialisation into the Hindu nationalist movement. Through socialisation, student activists understand their required role during the protest and at the protest site. What emerge are different motivations, both personal and ideological, for being involved in protest and violence for the movement. Being involved in a protest and specifically being violent has the potential of future rewards from within the movement. The involvement of ABVP women has allowed the Hindu nationalist movement to perform two functions: first, they are able identify a new antagonist, non-male enemies of the movement (women from progressive, feminist, left and anti-caste groups). Secondly and importantly, their active engagement in the protest site mediates the presence of Hindu nationalist men who increasingly need the presence of female bodies to assert themselves ideologically in the university space. This process that I refer to as 'gendering' is a strategy that is operationalised through the presence of ABVP women, where bodies at the protest site are identified and gendered, and this process determines the different ways in which opposing sections are engaged.

This article is based on ethnographic fieldwork among ABVP students in two universities in Delhi. The fieldwork was conducted in 2019 and 2021-2022. In the article, I first briefly describe my fieldwork methodology. I then delineate how Hindu nationalist women have mobilised for the ideology and violence. To make my case for the importance of ABVP women, I discuss three 'events' and their key actors (two women, one man) to illustrate the biographies, motivations for being involved in the movement, and then describe their involvement in the protest 'event' and violence. Using the patterns of involvement, I show how gendering as a strategy is operationalised at the protest site.

In this ethnography, I relied on previous research contacts from another Hindu nationalist affiliate (the Rashtra Sevika Samiti (National Women Volunteers, the oldest RSS affiliate established in 1936) and social media to establish a connection with ABVP student activists or *karyakartas* (activist workers). Out of 30 main interlocutors, 18 self-identified as female and 12 as male. There were 20 Brahmin students, seven Other Backward Castes (Jats, Yadavs, and Gujjars), and three Rajputs.[3] Among the 30 students, 15 came from a Hindu nationalist habitus (having kinship relations in the organisation) and were introduced to the ideology before joining the students' group. Educational level of the group was as follows: 10 doctoral students, 12 Master's students, and eight Bachelor's students. Barring two who were studying natural sciences, all of the students were studying Humanities and Social Sciences.

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[3] In my study, I did not encounter any Dalit students. I will not claim that there are no Dalit students in the ABVP, but predominantly, the organisation's caste profile in Delhi is dominated by upper-caste and OBC, middle-class students.

The study used ethnographic methods including participant observation and interviews. I conducted my data collection in two universities in Delhi: KOV and NU (names changed).[4] I relied on snowball sampling to meet interlocutors and establish connections. I first conducted participant observation in public meetings, protests, demonstrations, in the common hang-out spots of Hindu nationalist students. After four or five meetings, I conducted a continuous series of in-depth interviews and got access to more intimate spaces and internal groups within the organisation. After data collection, I relied on thematic coding to organise my data. The data of this article comes from narratives of the 'events' and personal interviews with key participants from the ABVP, news reports, and social media of the interlocutors.[5]

Regarding my own identity, I introduced myself to my interlocutors as a north Indian woman who came from a middle-class urban family. I share caste, language, regional and gender markers with many of my interlocutors. My interlocutors seemed to be aware of how to place me in the caste hierarchy as my surname indicates a dominant caste status. I presented my institutional credentials as an international student in Germany and many times students approached me about further studies in Europe. I identify as a cis female. My identity, especially my caste position, allowed me access to spaces that would not be possible had it not been for my caste name's association with the movement. Further, my female identity allowed me into spaces and conversations with female students and many times, solo conversations with male members about the aspirations, masculinity and pressures they feel.

GENDER, VIOLENCE, AND IDEOLOGICAL MOBILISATION

The presence of women in ideological movements has produced scholarship that has consistently asked us to re-evaluate assumptions on how women participate in social movements, the roles they undertake, the impact on the larger feminist cause and differential definitions of agency and self-identity – be it religious movements, ethnic movements, electoral politics, and other forms of identity. In the subcontinent itself, there is a massive diversity in how women have participated in public life, and engaged with religious, ideological or political mobilisations (Sarkar and Butalia, 1995; Ciotti, 2006; de Alwis, 2002; Jeffery and Basu, 1999; Metcalf, 1999; Omvedt, 1990; Pawar and Moon, 2014; Roychowdhury, 2020; Sen, 2007). Ciotti (2006) argues that similarities in the way women across ideological spectrum participate points to the gendered sociological ways that they can participate in political life. *Seva* or service is an act of community service through volunteering. It aims to be an act of kindness and compassion towards those who are considered less privileged than oneself. '*Seva*' encompasses within itself an idea of self-erasure and is an action for the benefit of someone else. An important aspect across the political spectrum has been the idea of '*Seva*' as central to how women become political (Ciotti, 2006: 439).

Hindu Nationalist Women and Violence

Ideological assertions have inevitably produced different forms of violent mobilisations. Hindutva's engagement with various forms of violence has been written about extensively (Basu, *et al.*, 1993; Engineer, 1985, 1994, 2002). Hindutva's women, like women in other ideological projects, have regularly articulated their ideological demands through the language of violence, what Sarkar and Butalia (1995: 6) have referred to as the 'feminisation of violence'. Durga Vahini (Chariots of Hindu goddess Durga; an affiliate of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (Global Association of Hindus, VHP)) women have been actively propagating their ideology through street vigilantism and involvement in riots (Katju, 2002; Saluja, 2022). Sen (2019: 745) calls such assertions 'urbanoid enactments'[6]. Shiv Sena women have been documented to be involved in the post-Babri Mosque (1992) demolition riots in Bombay (Bedi, 2006; Sen, 2007). Sen (2006) has shown how Shiv Sena women (and here I also take into account other Hindutva women) carry out the ideological agenda and bring their own 'feminised' forms of violence to the fore: they are active in public spaces; in the same fight as men, they perform the role of 'myth-making', 'rumour-mongering' and 'image building' (Sen, 2006: 28).

But what makes the ABVP case interesting and relevant to the subject of gender and activism today? Gendered forms of participation are mediating the way ABVP engaged with oppositional groups on campus. ABVP women are creating newer avenues for women's expression of Hindutva in university and urban spaces, an aspect that had

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[4] The university names have been changed to protect the identity of my interlocutors.

[5] This article is part of a chapter in my doctoral thesis on the role of protests and violence to the personal and ideological project of the ABVP members. In the chapter, I classify three different kinds of protest engagements that the ABVP does on campus. These protest forms are differently structured and are in service of achieving different goals. The first type of protest is what I call 'registering dissent' against university administration and other educational institutions. These protests help establish ABVP's role as an organisation that works for students' benefit. The second type of protest (described here) is called 'Clashes'. These are protests that happen when two student groups violently engage with each other on the university campus. This protest clearly demarcates the ideological positions of the different groups. The third type of protest is in the service of the ideology and invites unprecedented ideological mobilisation from within and outside the university campuses.

[6] Please refer to footnote 20 for Sen's conceptualisation of 'urbanoid enactments' (Sen, 2019).

until now been assumed to be under the domain of their male counterparts. As I will show in the article, ABVP women are now crucial to the project of Hindutva on-campus.[7] They are the ones mediating the presence of their fellow male activists against ideological opponents, even protecting them from perceived threats from the 'other women' (elaborated later in the article).

Anamika, Manoj, and Barkha: Urban, young, educated Hindu nationalists[8]

I have chosen three *karyakartas* and related events to illustrate the changing ways in which young people engage in violence on university campuses and their engagement with the Hindu nationalist movement. Anamika, Manoj, and Barkha, are enrolled in a prestigious university in Delhi. All three have had a well-to-do upbringing in upper-caste and middle-class households and their identity markers are representative of many of the interlocutors in the study. Through these case studies, I will demonstrate how students enter the movement, negotiate their position and find their roles within the protest landscape. The events I will discuss are protest clashes. I define clashes as a violent interaction between opposing student groups on the campus on an issue of ideological importance and to assert political dominance. During clashes, the site of the protest is largely on campus, many a times with police presence. Through such clashes, I show the importance of ideological assertion to the project of Hindu nationalism on campus and for the individual activists of the ABVP. In the cases I discuss, the participants were progressive groups (left aligned, feminist) versus Hindu nationalist ABVP. Here, I will discuss individual participation in three events: the 'T-tree' event (name changed, 2019), Ramjas violence (2017), and KOV university attacks (2020; university name changed). In all the cases above, the fight was ideological (against the 'left') and in favour of specific values: against those who question 'traditions', uphold caste rituals, and those who question the idea of the nation. What emerges from the data are the ways in which members recognise their role, invest time and energy to perform it, and use this participation as symbolic leverage for their future in the movement. In this article, the focus would be to demonstrate that members are socialised into the organisation through protest and a marker of this socialisation is understanding gendered ways of participation in the protest site.

Anamika, 'the stone thrower'

While waiting around the 'help desk' (a space where new university aspirants can find help and information about the university from students' volunteers), two friends of an ABVP member spoke amongst themselves.[9] A young woman, Anamika, had just passed them, walking in step with an excited student and nervous parents. As she passed, one of the students turned to the other, lowering his voice and said, 'She is the one who threw the stone!'. The girl widened her eyes. 'Her?', she inquired. 'Yes, she's the one who threw stones,' her friend confirmed. He turned to their friend in the ABVP, who was the young woman's batch mate in the college but evidently lower in the hierarchy of the ABVP college unit. He affirmed, adding 'There was blood'.

Anamika is a 20-year-old Brahmin woman who comes from a BJP and Sangh family. She is a student at a college in a university in Delhi. The incident when Anamika allegedly threw stones was the incident of the 'T-tree *Pooja*' (prayer), a 'tradition' that has continued from 1953 at her elite NU college. Every year on 14 February, the boys hostel conducts a ritual where a newly crowned 'Mr. Fresher' (first year resident of the college hostel) leads a prayer. The hope for the prayer is that those involved find a partner and 'lose their virginity' in the next six months. Two famous personalities are chosen by a vote in the boys' hostel and their posters are whom the prayers are addressed to. The female personality is called *Damdami Mata* (*Damdami* mother) and the *arati* (prayer song) is sung to her. College students recount that there was an addition of using condoms as balloons to promote 'sex education'. Over time, the condom balloons have found a place in the ritual as well. After the formal prayer, the members of the boys' hostel burst these balloons that are previously filled with water and whoever receives the meagre water shower is considered 'blessed'.

A few days before the T-tree celebration in 2018, a group of women from within the college objected to the ritual. Referring to themselves as the 'Progressive' Front, they opposed the misogynist and sexist practices of the

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tradition: the voting of the female body that would represent *Damdami Mata*, the use of the phrase '36-24-36' in the prayer song (as an expression of desire for a perfect female body). As matters were discussed in the college 'Parliament' (the electorally-chosen, student run parliament of the college), two opposite sides stood firm on their point. There were students who wanted the tradition to go on and those who wanted it gone. Deliberations brought into discussion the objected lyrics but to no avail. There were students who believed that a 'Brahmanical tradition' that upheld sexism needed to be gone. On the other side were students who asked the former to learn to take a joke and respect the tradition of the college.

Anamika was part of the college students who were proud of this tradition and wanted to it continue because of its value as a college ritual. As the students of the 'Progressive' front grew in number and gained support from outside the college, the college students who were batting for the tradition became insistent on holding the celebration as well. A day before the event, a fight broke out between the two groups at the site of the tree. There was violence between the students, men and women. While the Progressive students found numerical support from *Pinjra Tod* (break the cage; a progressive Feminist group in Delhi) and the Students Federation of India (SFI; student affiliate to the Communist Party of India-Marxist), Anamika involved her connections in the ABVP from outside her college. Her seniors from the organisation rushed to her aid and found her physically fighting women who did not agree with her. 'I was bleeding and crying', she recalled. Manoj, the senior who rounded up the ABVP members to go fight, remembered reaching the college and immediately 'getting to work'. During the 'T-tree protests', Anamika is remembered as the only girl defending the tradition. In the three days of this fight, she says she received threats from as far as her home state of West Bengal and intimidation in her student residence. 'My hair tie fell down when the leftists pulled my hair!', she says, and immediately also claims that she saw a young student almost die in the protests. Claims of sexual harassment flew from both sides, but no formal complaints were made.

Anamika is an ABVP member from her high school years. Although she comes from a Brahmin Sangh family, where her uncle and father are both associated with the BJP, she secretly sought out the local ABVP leaders on her own to become a member. Her parents wanted her to solely focus on her studies but her attraction to the ideology compelled her to seek more. When she was 16 years old, she reached out to the National Secretary of ABVP. He responded to her and assured her of making her a part of the 'movement'. She was connected to a local Bharatiya Janata Yuva Morcha (BJYM; BJP's youth wing) leader. He in turn directly connected her to two ABVP members who lived close to her home.[10] They met outside her home, careful to keep in mind that her parents were not fully aboard with the idea of her joining. Anamika fondly recalled that the two ABVP seniors took her out for ice cream. She became a member that day – by submitting her yearly membership fee of 2 rupees (less than 2 cents) and as a mark of initiation, she was given a booklet about the ABVP. She has now been a member of the organisation for four years.

Anamika's family originally comes from Sylhet, Bangladesh. It was her grandfather's father who moved to Silchar, Assam, 'much before' the Partition in the subcontinent.[11] [12] She believes in the fight for those who came before 1971, the ones who do not have the documents, the Hindus. 'But where will the Hindus go?', she asks. And the consistent stand of the Sangh: that India is the home for Hindus perhaps gives her a reason to believe that she has a place here. She grew attached to the 'values' from home: values such as 'patriotism' (as a desired, natural value) and sacrifice, respect for soldiers, respect for the Mother Nation, being a good citizen and to work for the 'disadvantaged'. These could be acquired common values from nationalised schooling but coming from a Sangh home meant that she had another structure to identify these values with. She has an 'emotional attachment' to the ideology. Her association with ABVP is not restricted to her loyalty for the organisation – it is for the ideology, an ideology of 'Golwalkar, Savarkar, and Swami Vivekanand'.[13]

Anamika is now the co-convener of the ABVP in her college unit. I first met her during 'help-desk' season (during university admissions in June-July). She did her duties on the move, shouting instructions to her ABVP

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[10] This also demonstrates the relatively smooth networks between different Sangh affiliates across the country and the role that personal connections play in retaining interested members in the organisation.

[11] The focus on the temporal indication of 'much before' India's partition in 1947 is to stress on her connection to India, as opposed to the stigma carried by migrants who have crossed borders after the Partition, especially in the eastern states of India.

[12] She spent her early years in Assam, fully aware of her identity as a Bengali there. She has over time understood the aggression towards immigrants in Assam, come to dislike the rhetoric of 'all Bengalis in Assam are Bangladeshis', the conflicts that took place in 1965 and 1971. She remembers hearing about United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), a radical organisation working towards an independent Assam. She understands that they (ULFA) want 'everyone out' – Hindu or Muslim.

[13] Here, she is referring to key idealogues of the Hindu nationalist movement in India: Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar (1906-1973), the second head of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh; Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1883-1966), the author of 'Hindutva: Who is a Hindu' (1923) and a key member of the Hindu Mahasabha; and, Narendranath Dutt (1863-1902), also known as Swami Vivekanand, was a monk who followed the Ramakrishna Mission, a Hindu reform movement from Bengal, India.

juniors as she walked on with the parents inside the college. She was never stationary. First, she would make contact with a parent and their ward at the college gate. Then she would walk with them rapidly to the assigned classroom where admissions were taking place. On the way, the parents would almost pick up their steps to match hers. She would exclusively address the parents, asking them where they were from, what their ward's percentage is, and their 'category' (referring to caste category, relevant for admission formalities).[14] In the meantime, the parents would ask her opinion on the college, hostels, and student accommodations. She would take them to the entrance of the class, and wait outside (the 'help-desk' volunteers were not allowed inside admission rooms). Once she saw that they are settled inside the room, she marched her way to the college gate to start the process again. Sure enough, once the parents were done with admissions, they would seek her out and thank her, many times asking their ward to take '*Didi*'s number' (*Didi*, older sister) and asking *Didi* to keep an eye out for their child – a tried and tested strategy that has helped retain Sangh memberships for decades.

What was her motivation for getting involved in violence of the T-tree clashes? Was it mere retaliation as she claims, or is there something more to the act of defending a tradition? In this particular case, she opposed the women because they were from 'the left' – disparate groups that came together against the defenders of tradition. This clash inevitably became a 'right' versus 'left' debate, 'tradition' versus 'progressive' ideologies. She faced repercussions: intimidation and a threat of suspension from the college. And there were rewards: she was a valued *karyakarta,* her seniors in the organisation knew her well, and she now held sway in the internal politics of her college as well. The violence of T-tree is the incident that Anamika is known for: she threw stones and physically fought, and it resulted in her contribution to ABVP getting recognition in the college where it did not even have a fully-working college unit. But her aim is not the ABVP, it is national politics, to work for the ideology: 'I will stay for the ideology, not for the organisation'.

Anamika's presence at the protest site allowed for two forms of assertions: first, Anamika played an instrumental role in articulating a traditionalist and ABVP's position on the issue. Further, it mattered more that she repeatedly asserted that as a woman this event did not offend her. As students who were not partisan now remember it, it was a fight between 'leftist women' and 'ABVP men', led by Anamika. In the T-tree incident, Anamika articulated her role as a female conservative voice on campus, positing herself as a single-voice against the women with the oppositional view. Anamika represents how women in the ABVP are claiming their ideologies and carving out distinct spaces as Hindu nationalist voices on campus. Secondly, in the actual clash that took place between students, ABVP men would have had to seriously re-consider participation in engaging with opposing women due to the bogey of sexual harassment. The presence of their own female members made the space more accessible to them as the sexual harassment bogey could be then used from both sides.

Manoj, 'the (Hindu) nationalist'

> Earlier, ghee (clarified butter) was sold with the label as is. When people started mixing something in the ghee, it had to be differentiated with 'desi ghee' (indicative of purity). Ideally, everyone should be a nationalist if you are living in this country. But if there is a difference between nationalists and if it helps 'you' to differentiate us like that, then go ahead. I don't like the idea of being a 'Hindu nationalist'. We are just activists. But if you compare us to other organisation, for examples the slogans raised at JNU, then we are definitely nationalists. Hence if you need to differentiate the ghee from 'desi ghee', then one definitely needs these labels.[15] (Manoj, 25-year-old, Brahmin male *karyakarta*, DU)[16]

Manoj comes from a middle-class family of Indian National Congress members. But his immediate family is a Sangh family: Brahmin, who generally are convinced that the Congress 'plays minority politics', and that there is an inherent bias amongst intellectuals against the Hindus in India. When he was growing up, he asked his father about the Gujarat riots in 2002. He must have been 8 or 9 years old. His father asked him a question in return: whose report had he heard? 'Entire families got burnt in Godhra and people did not find the space to speak about their sorrow. No media house went to the families of the train victims', he states. 'That moved me. I saw that even those channels that are now pro-BJP did not raise these issues'. Now he is on a path of course correction, making

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[14] As part of affirmative action, government and government-funded institutions in India have spaces reserved for historically oppressed communities. Caste is one such category. Depending upon the state and national list, different castes are categorised into groups: General (dominant castes), Other Backward Castes (OBCs), Scheduled Castes (SCs), and Scheduled Tribes (STs). To claim the seats in educational institutions for reserved categories, students have to produce the relevant caste certificate.

[15] JNU is Jawaharlal Nehru University, a research university in Delhi. The slogans he is referring to are alleged 'anti-national' slogans that were raised at an event to mark violence in Kashmir on 9 February, 2016.

[16] Manoj's analogy explains his discomfort of being called a 'Hindu nationalist'. He believes that they are nationalist and that the word 'Hindu' is given by outsiders. In this way, he can present his ideology as free from religion and present it as a universalist project. Further, I wonder if we can use the dichotomy of pure and diluted clarified butter to also extend the prevalent practices of caste.

sure that the 'unheard' side is heard in every way possible. Manoj wears his ideology on his sleeve, as he likes to call it. It emerges in his speeches, examples he chooses to give, the plays he chose to participate in, and the poetry he chooses to read (most often aloud). He was the lone vocal and openly Hindu nationalist student in his elite college in NU. He gradually found students who agreed with his views, but never publicly. He recounted an incident with a teacher who admired his poetry. On learning about his political views, the teacher asked him why he as a 'good' boy associated with a 'dirty' ideology. 'I told him that you have described me as a "good" boy in a "dirty" ideology. Both are your words. I laughed and walked away', he recalled. During his undergraduate studies, Manoj became more convinced of the ideology of his father and became active about his beliefs. During the time, he did not need to be a part of the ABVP to show the side he was on – he liked the feeling of being 'unique' for his ideology is his college. It was only after he joined a postgraduate course at the Faculty of Law that he officially became an ABVP member.

Manoj does not like the word 'goon' associated with the ABVP. The association of ABVP men (and now, women) with the word is prevalent and does not seem to be going away anytime soon. It is this image that makes men in ABVP careful when clashing with people in protests: that they would be unfairly judged. 'You call us goons. Have you seen how *their* women act?', he asserted. Men like Manoj say that they have to work extra hard to keep the image at bay. In 2019, Manoj appeared in a video, where is he is seen kicking and abusing a student who was standing by, watching an anti-Citizenship Amendment Act protest in NU. A member of the ABVP runs up from behind Manoj, trying to hold him back while he shouts abuse and kicks. Then, there is commotion – the person taking the video starts screaming as we see students running in all directions. 'These ABVP goons are attacking students', the voice pants as she warns students to run in the opposite direction. Manoj was the first 'senior' to respond to Anamika's call for support at her college a year earlier. And a year before that, when the violence at Ramjas College broke out, Manoj went to the scene to make sure his side was heard. He says that the violence they faced did not surface as much as it did for the other side. 'We were beaten too!', he says exasperated. And there is 'proof': videos and photos of the blood that was shed from the side of the ABVP. This 'proof' collected and retrieved at a moment's notice, put in a folder called 'Ramjas' in his phone. Two days before the Delhi riots in 2020, Manoj circulated a video of himself on WhatsApp, speaking to a news channel, threatening anti-CAA protestors. 'You have been talking to me for so many days, have I been a goon to you?', he asked me. It was not a question where he needed a response. My response was assumed no.

What draws Manoj to violence? What does he gain from his physical presence in a fight between 'left' and 'right'? What gives him the confidence to make the first move? Apart from the assurance offered by masculinity, clearly there is a knowledge that exists before making the move that physical intimidation and physical and verbal violent tools are available to him. A way to explain Manoj's insistence on using violence comes from a need to give his ideology the upper-hand. It is not an ideology that he just came into – it defines his life entirely, from the friends he has, to how he becomes political and the career choice he has made. It encompasses his family and what his father stands for, what he has stood for his entire life. A defence of the ideology is the defence for his way of life.

In this case, gender plays a role in how men like Manoj participate in the protest site. First, Manoj's discomfort with the stigma of being considered a 'goon' has been cemented from ABVP's and his own involvement in campus violence. But now, there are more antagonistic women on protest sites directly fighting to make their claim. While seeking out men among those antagonists is a strategy, it cannot begin until there are women alongside already engaging other women. Secondly, for men, there is also an idea of honour and masculinity in not physically fighting women. Therefore, men like Manoj can be completely free to participate when there are people who they perceive as men on the other side. But when there are women, the strategy needs to be reconfigured.

Barkha, 'the follower'

Anyone who knows her would know it was her: in the checked shirt with a long scarf covering her face, holding a steel rod and surrounded by *Bhaiyas* (kinship term to denote older brothers; a way to address older male members in the organisation) who she knew would protect her. When the initial videos and images from the attacks in a prestigious university in Delhi emerged (2020), Barkha was the only person whose involvement everyone was sure of. Her name became emblematic of the incident: the girl who was violent, the girl who threatened to beat other women (and possibly did), the girl who caused infrastructural damage to one of India's most prestigious universities right in the heart of the capital. She was the girl who was willing to be violent for the Hindu nationalist ideology.

The night her name did the rounds in the media, she uploaded a 'status' on WhatsApp, the messenger service, the only place where she was active after the incident. It was a video message from a female Commonwealth Games medal recipient and sports personality who supported the 'retaliation' by 'nationalist' students against '*vampanthi*' (communist) 'anti-national' students. The next day, there was another message supporting the 'reaction', a tweet by an ABVP national executive member. She then went off-the radar on social media. Two days before the Delhi riots in 2020, ABVP held its state conference (*prant adhiveshan*) in Delhi. In the conference, all high-ranking members of the ABVP in all of Delhi campuses and members of the National Executive came together

for the routine meeting. The *Adhiveshan* is a celebratory affair: there is decoration, photo opportunities, new post holders chosen, and an address by the National chief. All the ABVP members uploaded photos and videos showing how they participated in the event. The seniors uploaded parts of their speeches. Campus level post holders uploaded pictures with the chief guest and 'candid' shots that showed them in event proceedings. And ABVP members like Barkha uploaded pictures of her with different *Bhaiyas* and *Didis* (older brothers and sisters, a way to address older members) who had 'supported' her. There were pictures of her beaming other ABVP members. Then there was picture of her with Manoj, calling him her 'backbone' and keeping her safe 'during the most difficult time' in her life (referring perhaps to the backlash against her after her name became prominently known after these attacks).

Barkha was 19. She was in her second year of undergraduate studies. She comes from a Brahmin family that supports the BJP. She did not know about the Sangh or what it stands for. She knows the BJP and believes in its 'positive impact' on the country. She knows that *Bhaiyas* in ABVP are nice and protective. She trusts her seniors in the organisation. And she is deeply interested in how power plays out during university elections, even though she cannot vote in it (her college does not participate in university elections). In programmes organised by the ABVP, she is usually with a senior, following them around and doing as she was told. Since she has moved away from family to go to college in Delhi, she has relied heavily on the network of her ABVP seniors to find her feet in the big city. She visits them at home, is beloved by their parents, and attends their family weddings. For her, ABVP is her family in Delhi. Her life is in the ABVP. She attends protests, all ABVP events, and has her own circle of influence now in her college and in the ABVP, and perhaps even the larger Sangh family.

When she volunteered to go across the city to threaten those who were bothering the project of her *Bhaiyas* and *Didis* organisation, she knew she was doing it because no harm would come to her. When the Delhi Police could not locate the attackers, Barkha was protected by the highest powers in the organisation, safely kept in Manoj's home until the storm blew over. When Barkha decided that violence was a method, she was not doing it for the ideology but for the thrill of pleasing her seniors. Validation drew her to authority figures in the organisation and her efforts have paid off: she has become more vocal in the ABVP. She is different from Anamika and Manoj, for whom the ideology needs actions to be defended. She is not naïve that she follows an authority figure and does what they say. She knew who to ally with and now, even after there is proof that she was involved in the violence, she is visible, not hiding, and there is no police case registered against her.[17]

Barkha as a single female figure surrounded by men wielding sticks and rods represents how crucial she is to the violence. Her presence allowed for entry into women's quarters in the university campus. In videos of the incident, she is the one verbally engaging with women who were registering their anger against this violent act. I think that her uploading videos of the female supporter of the ideology after the incident also helps make the women more visible in the movement. During fieldwork, ABVP members voiced concerns about women traditionally being more 'attracted' to the 'left' or feminist groups. By making women like Barkha and Anamika visible, they are creating space for more women to join them. Further their presence shows (standing alongside their male counterparts) that there are active women Hindu nationalists who are not afraid of physical violence.

MOTIVATIONS FOR PROTEST AND VIOLENCE

> I wanted to be a part of something, that people listen to me- to speak about my ideology and the ideology I adhere to. (Anamika, 20-year-old, female ABVP member)

In these three biographies, there are multiple reasons that emerge for being involved in the movement. What also emerge are the different ways in which young Hindu nationalists navigate their involvement in the protests and the larger movement. Both Manoj and Anamika are driven by a need to speak about their ideology. Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar (1906-1973) was the second Sanghsanchalak (head of the organisation) of the RSS and one of the revered icons of Sangh thought. In his book, *Bunch of Thoughts* (Golwalkar, 1966), he writes that there are three 'internal threats' to the Hindu nationalist movement and its patriots: Christians, Muslims and Communists. Anamika believes in this classification and upholding the Hindu nationalist fight for tradition takes precedence when she decides how she will fight the progressive group. As mentioned earlier, the fight is situated in the context of the historical Hindu nationalist movement as the enemy shared an alliance with the communist ideology (among many others who fought the ABVP during the clash). For Manoj, a Hindu nationalist, it is most natural, an obligation, to love your country. The position that the organisation and its networks have on contemporary politics has allowed him confidence to make the first move when fighting during protests. His desire emerges from giving

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[17] While Barkha has not had to deal with police or judicial action, India has consistently recorded low rankings in terms of press and academic freedoms. Civil society members, academics, activists and artists, have been jailed, threatened and even, died in custody (see also: Pheroze, 2022).

his ideology an upper hand during these clashes and protests. For Barkha, she is fighting for the ideology of her *Bhaiyas* and *Didis*, thereby showing how the movement retains connections and mobilises them for action.

There were not only rewards gained for the movement and the ABVP when these young *karyakartas* protest and fight other student groups on campus. There are material and symbolic rewards that come to the *karyakartas* for being involved in protests like these. The role that they played in a successful protest can used to leverage later for lobbying for positions in the organisation. For example, for Anamika, she was able to establish ABVP, hitherto a marginal force in her college, as a strong student party after the T-Tree incident. She was able to take absolute control of the unit and use this to gain influence at the campus-level politics of the ABVP. For Manoj, the ideology comes to represent him, his choices, his entire milieu. A defence of the ideology is a defence of his way of life. His constant availability to the organisation's initiatives also allows him access to the networks of power within the organisation and always a position at the campus-level to make crucial decisions. Similarly, Barkha, after her involvement in the aforementioned attacks has managed to accrue her own circle of influence in the organisation now. I suggest that after seeing the symbolic and material gains accrued by those who are violent for the ideology, Barkha makes an active decision for potential future benefits by choosing to be violent.

GENDERING VIOLENCE AS A STRATEGY

> I have seen with my own eyes, how 'their' (meaning 'left') girls attack 'our' boys during protests. After that they threaten them with a sexual harassment case. (Aditi, KOV university ABVP unit (30-year-old, Brahmin female activist))

Aspirations and motivations to fight for the ideology are gendered. Further, how young people adapt to fight for it, the tools they choose to use, definitely are. One of the strategies that has emerged in ABVP's protest landscape is the conscious gendering of protest structure and site to achieve protest aims, primarily against progressive and feminist groups. It was after Ramjas that the idea of 'goons' as being assumed a male *karyakarta* changed for the ABVP. Nazar (21-year-old female ABVP member, Brahmin) pointed out the need for female *karyakartas'* body occupying the protest landscape thus:

> During Ramjas, it was the girls who gave the fight to the communists. They occupied the front stage. Vindhya *Didi* (a senior female activist in the organisation) showed that commie girl (a girl from a communist-leaning student party) that ABVP girls are not less.

Vindhya achieved a meteoric rise in the organisation after she directly engaged with a prominent female student politician from the left during the Ramjas clashes. During the T-tree protests, Anamika is remembered as the only girl defending the tradition. She threw stones and physically fought women from the opposing side. There was hair pulling, slapping, kicking, hitting, and verbal abuse from both sides.

In the T-tree protest, Manoj appeared alongside other ABVP members to defend the stand taken by Anamika and other students. Manoj was there to intimidate and rely on physical strength to 'win' the protest. But it was a conundrum since most of his opponents were women. ABVP members spoke of how 'women from the left' specifically sought ABVP men in protests to first engage them in physical violence and then press charges of sexual harassment. Thus, one of the strategies of ABVP men in recent years has been to hold their hands up so that there is proof. There are also video recordings and photos to illustrate how 'left women' use the bogey of 'sexual harassment' to malign 'good men from the ABVP'. Now, Manoj's presence at the protest site with a heterogeneous composition (especially women from antagonist groups) relies on the female ABVP *karyakartas* to mediate his presence and action there.

During my data collection, a trend that emerged was the specific roles performed according to the gender identities of ABVP members. What do I mean by gendering of a protest? Here, I define 'gendering' as assuming, identifying and then taking action accordingly, based on presumed gendered characteristics of femininity and masculinity and how that affects bodies in a protest space. This is a strategy that has emerged in the way that ABVP mobilises for protests. First, it is the conscious deployment of female ABVP *karyakartas* to assert control of the protest to engage women in other student groups. This is done as a 'tit for tat' measure since traditionally ABVP has a more traditionally male-oriented, masculine image. Secondly, as is evident from Aditi's quote above, it is also a strategy to recognise women in other student groups as using tools to disparage or undermine the male *karyakartas* of the ABVP. In this analysis, what emerges is the singling out and creating of 'the other women' as a threat to the protest of the ABVP and the reputation of ABVP men. The threat of 'sexual harassment' as a legal recourse hangs in the air like a bogeyman – used by 'other women' against ABVP men. I find that when it comes to clashes, gendering is one of the most essential tools to claim the space, assert dominance and take control of the narrative of the protest. The recognition of and assuming an opposite gender is crucial to manoeuvring the protest. It is through this calculation that further steps can be deliberated: sexual violence and harassment at the site of the

protest, a proven strategy to malign opposite groups. The participation of women is used to consolidate the position of male protesters. Female ABVP *karyakartas* come to the rescue of their male counterparts between female antagonists – mainly to prevent them from being 'falsely' implicated in charges of sexual harassment. Women's bodies in this scenario become the site of contested honour – right-wing women protecting the honour of men through a surveillance of the bodies of the 'other' women. The body of the female *karyakartas* becomes the site through which ABVP men can protest and protect themselves.

The participation of Hindutva women in violence is not new, nor is their presence in the urban, public space (Katju, 2022; Pahuja, 2012; Saluja 2022; Sarkar, 1991; Sen, 2019). The imagination of perceived violence in different affiliates may vary but being physically adept at defending the ideology has been one of the core aims of the women's affiliates in the *Sangh Parivar*.[18] What makes the ABVP case interesting and unique is that firstly, unlike other Sangh affiliate organisations like the Rashtra Sevika Samiti, Durga Vahini, etc., these women receive no training in engaging in threats of physical violence.[19] Secondly, unlike the other affiliates, the young women have to engage in physical confrontation in the public space, mainly on the university campus but other spaces in the urban landscape as well (for example, clashes with the police or other organisations). Thirdly, these women are fighting their antagonists alongside the male *karyakartas* of the organisation, unlike any other affiliate in the Sangh family. Lastly, these women are the primary mediators of violence in the university space between non-Hindutva women and ABVP members. Without their presence, the ABVP men would not have such a fluid access to this confrontation. Female *karyakartas* like Anamika, Barkha, and Vindhya, are now essential to the protest landscape of university politics that is propagated by the ABVP.

CONCLUSION

The physical act of coming together for members in ideological groups (such as protest sites) act as a glue for more concrete socialisation in the organisation and the ideology (Virchow, 2007). There are three reasons that primarily emerge for members' partaking in such violence: for the defence of the ideology; for knowledge of having state/support of the authority; for material and status benefits, alongside the creation of closeness with powerful members in the organisation. The link between the motivation to be part of the organisation, the ideology, and violence is not evident with the membership of every member. Not every member chooses to become violent. What emerges paramount here is that members who can be violent in the ABVP are primarily those that have previously existing connections that will enable safety from repercussions – the informal networks in the local hierarchy as mentioned earlier (for example, because of having the support of powerful seniors in the organisation or having support from the State). All of the members here received a light admonishing from authorities, but their networks enjoy good relationships with the local police. There is also a connection between one's own aspiration within the organisation and material or status benefits that will be achieved through the violence. There is the higher status of members who are seen being visibly violent among their peer group. Therefore, visual proof of one's involvement and injuries, a repetition of the specific ways in which they were hurt is repeated to build a 'legend' that is mythologised when the situation demands.

In this article, I have attempted to show how members are socialised into the organisation through protest. A signifier of socialisation within the organisation is to understand one's role in the protest. As shown, male and female members perform specific roles in the set-up of the protest. They gender a space and identify their opponents. Gendering of the protest site and identifying of female and male bodies also emerges as a crucial strategy during protest clashes. Further, in the recent past, the image of the 'goon' as indicative of a male activist has also begun to change. Female *karyakartas* are essential to the feminine gendering in producing successful protests during clashes. This recognition comes at the backdrop of ABVP members asserting a masculine image and accompanying tendencies of violence, vandalism and vigilante behaviour. The 'goon' image was typically associated with male members, but is now being appropriated by women also – women who do not hesitate to use physical violence and vandalism to assert themselves. They typically engage with opponent women in a protest site, while male members are assumed to be engaging with competing men. The script goes haywire when the opponents do not follow the same strategy of gendering the protest site.

Foster (2003) focuses on the role of the body and its potentials in her work on strategies from different progressive movements. She articulates different forms of action that the body takes, depending upon the role and

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[18] For example, for women in the Rashtra Sevika Samiti, the perceived violence is against the Hindu women's honour. On the contrary, the perceived violence among Durga Vahini women is against those who threaten Hindus and Hindu ideals.

[19] ABVP runs an initiative called 'Mission *Sahasi*' (Mission Bravery). In this, young women are given self-defence training. This initiative, modelled on other Sangh women's affiliate trainings, is directed against physical and sexual harm from men in the public space. I found no mentions among ABVP women between the cursory training from initiative and the ABVP women's actions at protest sites.

nature of the protest. She moves away from classical theories that suggest that the body in a state of protest is almost unthinking, instead showing how the body has been used strategically in the service of the political protest. There are two findings from her work that I find helpful in locating these strategies in the larger protest infrastructure. First, the body is carefully thought about. The Hindu nationalist body, especially presence of antagonistic female bodies, finds itself reconsidering tactics and redefines the structure of the protest. Second, protests are not spontaneous eruptions (Foster, 2003: 395) but strategically planned. Thus, what these strategies also point to is the anticipation, possible visualisation, and preparation for the protest. By making sure that there are female ABVP members, holding the hands up to avoid contact with the antagonistic female body, and using documentary evidence, are all in preparation to sustain the protest and thereby, feed the movement.

A related aspect that can be discussed here is: does the presence of female Hindu nationalist bodies enable more mobility for other marginalised bodies in the public protest sphere? Phadke, *et al.* (2011) have argued about the positive impact on women's mobility through the presence of different bodies in the public space. The act of being present, as we have seen progressive women's movements across South Asia take up this idea, have allowed for increased mobility in the public sphere (Kirmani, 2020; Phadke, 2020; Saeed, 2018). But does the presence of ABVP women align with this finding? Here, I would like to bring in another finding from Basu (1999: 10):

> The relationships between agency, activism, and empowerment are complicated and often contradictory. Women's agency may strengthen systems of gender segregation, and women's activism may heighten identification with their roles as mothers. Women's activism may also empower women from particular communities but at the cost of deepening religious and ethnic divisions amongst them.

Many times, when women participate in violence, we are left to understand whether the actions are agential, and perhaps, feminist. Borrowing from Basu's explanation, I propose that presence of more female bodies does not automatically increase access for other marginalised bodies in the public space. ABVP women are quite clear that they are fighting for the furthering the presence of Hindutva. Further, female *karyakartas*' presence is allowing for a male assertion that would not have been as possible had it not been for former's presence.[20] Anamika fighting for the T-tree ritual is an act of defending tradition and honour, in line with her Hindu nationalist beliefs. Similarly, Barkha's presence is allowing for a more emboldened presence of her male counterparts in the protest space. In this case, the activists were very clear that their fight was for tradition and against a 'feminist' interpretation of the event. In this way, this clash is significant because it illustrates to us how conservative women do politics in university or historically-assumed progressive spaces. What emerges is that ABVP women mediate the presence and actions of ABVP men in protest sites. Therefore, women who are protesting the Hindu nationalist ideology become the most formidable enemy of all the protesting ABVP members. These protests could take place just with women (with the absence of men). But without women, these protests would not be possible. For the larger Hindu nationalist cause, these women should be seen as making an equal claim on the ideology and the organisation. They are the new agents of Hindutva.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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[20] Sen (2019) in her study of Shiv Sena women calls the public assertion 'urbanoid enactments'. She uses the case of vigilantism of the women on the street to argue that this is one of the ways the poor women access urban space and fight men on the streets to increase access and mobility. Although it is done in the language of 'populist politics of the city' (Sen, 2019: 745), it is a 'convoluted' way that allows women to access the urban space. She writes, 'Right-wing politics' and its legacy of violent self-defense becomes a temporary crutch for women to articulate their desire for security…'. While this is furthering the cause of mobility (albeit, complicated and convoluted), ABVP women's intervention in the streets is increasing the visibility of Hindutva women and conservative students, completely in the service of the organisation and personal goals.

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Transnationalising *Dadis* as Feminist Political/Activist Subjects[1]

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Twitter publics to map how the '*dadis* of Shaheen Bagh' (grandmothers of Shaheen Bagh) emerged as political subjects through transnational media space even though they themselves did not directly access social media. A team of feminist media researchers examine how social media networks were mobilised strategically to gain international visibility and traction. Through a feminist close reading of Twitter data and a select few in-depth and unstructured interviews with various associated actors, this mediated visibility of seemingly subaltern women is mapped. This article draws on transnational/postcolonial feminist frameworks to examine digital public presences. This study uses a multi-methods approach that includes qualitative interviews with activists (local and transnational) and related actors as well as a situated feminist data analytics and critical digital humanities approach to examining big social data online. In examining the mediated production of this visibility, however, the study does not wish to imply that the women whose presence is amplified in international media are not actual protestors or to deny, discount or appropriate their agency or labour as activists.

Keywords: India, digital activism, Muslim feminism, subaltern women

> Networks speak to the link between the local and global - linking an event in a small village in Tunisia to the evening news in London. Yet they bind peoples and ideas not only across distance, but also in proximity. (Srinivasan, 2013: 49)
>
> Like ethnographies, makings up of big data…are more than 'scrapes' of reality—they are part and parcel of that reality, immanent to the human condition. (Boellstorff, 2013)
>
> With prayer beads in one hand and the national flag in the other, Bilkis became the voice of the marginalized in India, an 82-year-old who would sit at a protest site from 8 a.m. to midnight. (Ayyub, 2020)

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INTRODUCTION

The three quotes above frame our investigation. In this article, we examine Twitter publics in an attempt to map how the Muslim 'dadis of Shaheen Bagh' (grandmothers of Shaheen Bagh), such as Bilkis Dadi[2], emerged as political subjects through transnational media space even though they themselves did not directly access social media. Our interest here as feminist media researchers is to shed light on and raise questions about how women of the community are highlighted as active protestors through the formation of social media-based affective networks (Papacharissi, 2015). In examining this phenomenon, we look at how the visibility of women as protestors expands the utility and scope of social movements in varied ways. We note how the presence of women at protest sites has directly or indirectly been repurposed via Twitter while making 'identity-based cultural and political demands' (Jackson, Bailey and Foucault-Welles 2020, p. xxv), with hashtags becoming the *lingua franca* of this phenomenon.

As Srinivasan (2013) who researched the 'Arab Spring' as an ethnographer on-site observes, responses to social media used in protest movements tend towards either 'distortion' or 'deification' (p. 52) in characterising the use of new communication technologies in protest spaces. Zeynep Tufekci, another researcher of the Arab Spring, has argued that we need to study the *how* of networks to move past an inappropriate debate of binaries that ignores the power of social context around technology use and its appropriation (Tufekci, 2011). In this piece, we attempt to move beyond this binary, studying both the mediatisation of the Shaheen Bagh protests and the symbiosis between online and offline feminist protestors through analysing hashtags. Social media use in activism was comparatively new in 2011 when Tufekci wrote, but now in 2022, we have seen the impact of the Black Lives Matter movement and can hardly discount the importance of social media use in activism. However, if we think of social media as similar to political pamphlets, newsletters, and other forms of media used by activists, we begin to see that these are just tools but with their own unique yet limited affordances to help build networks with great speed.

We are a team of researchers some of whom are part of a research team at Bowling Green State University where we have been working to examine the use of computational tools and data analytics software through a critical humanities lens. The team was started for graduate students working with Radhika in 2019. Co-authors Emily Edwards, Debipreeta Rahut and Ololade Faniyi are members of this team. Other co-authors of this article joined us in this investigation as we started to do interviews for the current paper. Dyuti Jha, Aiman Khan and Jhalak Jain were in Delhi at the time of the Shaheen Bagh protests and were able to provide us with onsite information and contacts for us to interview. Saadia Farooq joined us while we were finishing up some drafts of writing for the overall project looking at the data from Shaheen Bagh because of her interest in Muslim feminism in South Asia. While Jhalak Jain, Aiman Khan and Dyuti Jha provided us with onsite contextual information, Dyuti Jha and Saadia Farooq advised us on the different histories of Muslim feminisms in India and Pakistan, thus allowing our team to work on this project without making broad generalized assumptions about Muslim feminism. The information we got from those we interviewed on site, as the rest of us did a close examination of the data from Twitter and Instagram, allowed us to understand the geographical specificity of Muslim feminism in India vs other regions in the world. We have listed co-authors to reflect their contribution to the writing of this article. The first four co-authors (Radhika, Emily, Debipreeta and Ololade) are responsible for majority of the writing in this article.

Overall as a team, we have been watching how Twitter hashtags have promoted the role of women protestors on-site in the anti-CAA/NRC protests. The anti-CAA/NRC protests refer to the national and transnational series of protests in response to the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) enacted by the Government of India in December 2019. Along with the CAA, the National Register of Citizens (NRC), an official record of legal citizens in India, was also proposed. The list would include undocumented migrants of Hindu, Sikh, Jain, Parsi, Buddhist, and Christian religious backgrounds from Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh who entered India before 2014. However, Muslim undocumented migrants were conspicuously missing from the NRC list. Protests soon followed, decrying blatant religious discrimination. A ban, as well as the scrapping of the NRC, was demanded (Vishwanath and M. Sheriff, 2019).

In this article, we retrospectively examined the social media terrain of the protests by looking closely at smaller sections of larger datasets through the use of data analytics tools. In the process, we see how geographically and politically dispersed offline users are linked under particular hashtags and how the network is shaped through algorithmic logics that users have no absolute control over. Although many social media users and digital activists attempt to 'make' a hashtag trend, the mechanics of the algorithm are opaque and often uncontrollable (Edwards, *et al* 2021). In looking at the data we had collected around the events in December 2019 and then in January 2020, we found tweets that cross-referenced the #shaheenbaghprotests #dadisofshaheenbagh #womenofshaheenbagh

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[2] Bilkis Dadi was featured on *Time Magazine*'s list for 100 most influential people in 2020 (Ayyub, 2020).

and #shaheenbaghdadis. All hashtags referred to protests led by Muslim grandmothers of Shaheen Bagh, a community in South Delhi, who were portrayed as keepers and protectors of the home that was under threat with the passing of the CAA/NRC protests which gained momentum during the period between December 2019 and April 2020. These hashtags were reflective of the strong offline visible presence of women from the community who were on the streets protesting. Overall, the *dadis* (paternal grandmothers) of Shaheen Bagh seemed to draw more significant attention internationally than anti-CAA/NRC protests featuring Muslim men or female Muslim students (Kadiwal, 2021).

In the current article, therefore, we map how this mediated visibility of subaltern women protestors on-site is produced through digital publics. We do this through close feminist readings of Twitter data and a select few in-depth, semi-structured interviews with various actors. Our multi-methods approach presents a situated feminist data analytics and a critical digital humanities methodological lens to examining big social data online (D'Ignazio 2020; Jackson, Bailey and Foucault-Welles 2020; Klein 2014; Rettberg 2020; Risam 2018). In terms of theory, we draw on transnational/postcolonial feminist frameworks to examine these digital public presences. We chose Twitter as our overall focus for collecting data because it is commonly used in India and is also mentioned by interviewees. Scholars have observed how Twitter has the potential to serve as a counter-public sphere (Rambukanna, 2015; Cheema, 2020).

This article also demonstrates how critical feminist and qualitative/interpretive researchers might be able to re-tool computational data analysis software. For instance, we show how social network analysing and visualising tools such as Gephi and Netlytic can be used against the grain of quantitative epistemologies that might flatten the analysis and create broad generalisations that erase the specificities of particular intersections of social media use. Thus, we take a 'different approach to studying voluminous digital corpora that combines the scale of computational research with the depth of [critical, feminist] qualitative analysis' (Shahin, 2016: 29). We must also note that our collaborative authorship is consistent with our methodological approach to the parsing out of the data through critical feminist close reading. We attempted to include multiple voices in the collection and analysis of the evidence. Co-authors include not only academics from the Global North but also researchers and participants on-site and who were engaged in reporting on events locally.

In Part I of this article, we will lay out the context of the anti-CAA/NRC protests and follow this by detailing our methods and methodological approach. We explain how we handled the two kinds of data we collected; qualitative, in-depth, semi-structured interviews and through data scraped from Twitter via an iterative process that allowed us to view the data as situated (Rettberg, 2020). In Part II, we discuss two main features of the movement's strategy to amplify the women of Shaheen Bagh that became evident through an examination of Twitter datasets collected from January to mid-March 2020. Thus, while the creation of visibility for the subaltern and older women protestors (the *dadis*) of the community contributed significantly to the overarching strategy to visualise an ethos of non-violence and the local performance of an ethic of care in the Shaheen Bagh protest space (Bhatia and Gajjala, 2020), the strategies and tactics for amplification of the protests internationally also relied on inviting transnational activist coalitions, international non-profit groups, Human Rights organisations as well as on the spontaneous efforts and participation of local and global celebrities. In this way, we see the criticality of both online and offline networks in producing the Shaheen Bagh protests as both a local manifestation of a new iteration of Indian Muslim female-led activism and a global, digital feminist protest.

PART I

The anti-CAA/NRC protests happened in several places in India between December 2019 and March 2020. The reasons for the protests and the demographics of who was protesting were sometimes different, particularly in the case of Assam. Thus, for instance, while in the case of Delhi, the anti-CAA protests were concerned with the marginalisation of Muslim citizens, at the same time, in Assam, there was intense tension between indigenous Assamese, undocumented Bangladeshi migrants and Bengali Muslims. Therefore, while our paper focuses on the Delhi protests, we must acknowledge that the anti-CAA/NRC protests have complex regional nuances. With this in mind, there has already been an excessive focus on academic writing and news reporting internationally on the Shaheen Bagh site. Why one more? We argue that this very global hypervisibility provides the rationale for our article. As with the 'Arab Spring,' the questions regarding social media-based hypervisibility centre around examining the strategic deployment of various types of media by local activists and digital tool-wielding witness allies. However, we do not argue that the protest itself was possible because of Twitter or that somehow the digital activists were more important than the local physically on-site and at-risk activists and community participants (Aday, *et al.*, 2012; Srinivasan, 2013).

Past work on social media protests dates back to work on Occupy Wall Street's use of social media in the Global North (Juris, 2012) and Egyptian and Tunisian protest movements' use of social media in the Global South (MacKinnon, 2012; Papacharissi, 2015; Tufekci and Wilson, 2012; Srinivasan, 2013). More recently, in the past five

years or so, we have seen research on the Black Lives Matter movement (Florini, 2019; Jackson, Bailey, and Foucault-Welles, 2020), on #metoo as it happened in India (Guha, 2021), the Delhi 2012 Rape protests (Dey, 2018), and so much more. All these scholarly writings have a nuanced popular perception of social media use by activists and sympathisers as either slacktivism or a democratising tool that somehow facilitates revolutions (Rotman, *et al.*, 2011). While most past research on such social media publics amplifying offline movements is either based on offline ethnographic work or close textual readings and interviews, research by scholars such as Shahin, Nakahara and Sanchez (2021), Jackson, Bailey and Foucault-Welles (2020), Papacharissi (2015), Bruns and Burgess (2015), as well as various other contributors to the edited collection on 'Hashtag Publics' edited by Rambukkana (2015) engage more fully with the digital landscape. We also attempt to use computational tools to engage big data publics to understand not only the use of social media in activism but also the discursive terrain that such activist use produces. Activist groups are organised, facilitated, and assisted by offline community experts, and skilled technology workers are often voluntarily part of such teams. The mass of users who jump into the action spontaneously - the slacktivists and performative activists - who can consider themselves contributing to the movement may amplify the cause. This article contributes to and extends theoretical and methodological discussions initiated in the previous works through a specifically feminist epistemological framing of methodology (Alcoff and Potter, 1993), engaging with feminist and postcolonial interventions in the use of computational tools for critical research (D'Ignazio and Klein, 2020; Jackson, Bailey and Foucault-Welles, 2020; Rettberg, 2020; Risam, 2018).

There has been previous research on social media use, particularly Twitter, as with Papacharissi (2015) and Jackson *et al.*'s respective works (2020), and considerable work has been published on the topic of the Shaheen Bagh protests. Scholars have pointed to the visibility of subaltern women at the protest site and care as a protest strategy (Bhatia and Gajjala, 2020; Kadiwal, 2021; Mustafa, 2020; Salam and Ausaf, 2020). Some research has also begun to look at data scraped from Twitter publics while arguing for a situated data analytics approach to studying such protest publics (Edwards, *et al.*, 2021). We apply this latter framework to our data to provide further evidence for how Twitter publics worked in sync with the offline protests. Thus, our focus here as media researchers is to examine how social media networks were mobilised strategically by offline local groups of protestors and how they were used to gain international visibility and traction on behalf of the protest movement, with the seemingly unlikely *dadis*, the subjects, at the forefront of the movement. Our analysis connects with Suddhabrata Deb Roy's (2021) observation that the anti-CAA movement is perhaps the only movement in modern Indian history that has witnessed such large-scale mobilisation of people from all walks of life. This raises some very pertinent questions regarding class, caste, and gender as it relates to this immense mobilisation which will surely be the subjects of many studies to come. Spaces like Shaheen Bagh are 'resistances in themselves' when we note the subaltern working-class character of the women who led the protest and thus merited additional study to illuminate how this protest, in particular, not only featured the leadership of previously marginalised female political subjects, the *dadis*, but also incorporated a variety of feminist actors online and offline, in India and beyond (Roy, 2021).

Context

What has now become known as the 'Shaheen Bagh movement' began as a response to the passing of the Citizenship Amendment Act, National Register of Citizens and National Population Register, or CAA/NRC/NPR which happened on 11 Dec 2019. As Aiman Khan and Madhur Bharatiya (2020) point out, the CAA is exclusionary, particularly when paired with the National Population Register (NPR) and the National Register of Citizens (NRC). It targets the Muslim population as it 'grants Indian citizenship to people of all religions (except Muslims), who have allegedly faced religious persecution in their home countries, namely Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan' (Khan and Bharatiya, 2020). The Shaheen Bagh protests (15 December 2019 to 24 March 2020) featured a significant number of Muslim women. Some of the women interviewed on-site by a member of our larger research team emphasised that the women of the community led the organising. One of them stated, '[i]f we do not speak, who will speak for us because the majority of people are already against us and this is the time when we need to do something on our own.' The presence of a high number of middle-aged and older women was also noted. Their presence apparently created an aura of safety for younger women from the neighbourhood and women visitors from nearby colleges and universities to express their solidarity and support. The protest became further popularised through social media. Photos and videos were shared from the physical location of protests to social media with hashtags such as #womenofshaheenbagh, #ShaheenbaghProtests, #NotoCAANRCNPR and more. Sites of protests included Shaheen Bagh in Delhi, Park Circus in Kolkata, and Mumbai Bagh in Mumbai, along with several other small protest gatherings in locations such as Lucknow, Allahabad, Bangalore, as well as some locations in the state of Assam. While not all these protests shared the same concerns about Muslim marginalisation, several of the sit-in protests that happened simultaneously in other parts of Delhi, such as Gandhi Park in Hauz Rani and Maujpur, shared similar concerns. Notably, the Shaheen Bagh protests took place in the same neighbourhood as Jamia Millia Islamia (JMI) University, which witnessed police brutality on 15 December,

2019, as retaliation for JMI students having joined the anti-CAA/NRC protest in huge numbers. As per an eyewitness interviewed, Delhi police brutalised students without provocation and stormed into the library and hostels. They used tear gas, stun guns, canes, and bullets on students resulting in several serious injuries.

The women of Shaheen Bagh became the face of the protest movement. In light of how Muslim women are viewed globally as being allegedly oppressed by their men (Ahmed, 1992; Stabile and Kumar, 2005), the mediated visibility of the women of Shaheen Bagh as protestors created an international impact. Western media outlets and researchers began to make claims that made it seem that this expression of agency by the subaltern women of the community worked to change the story and to create an ethic of care (Edwards, *et al.*, 2021; Bhatia and Gajjala, 2020,). The progressive framing of the *dadis'* protests as an 'affective strategy' thus emphasised non-violence and tableaus of domestic activities such as making tea for protestors at the site, thereby pushing back at narratives of the protests as driven by forms of anti-state violence. While these observations are not incorrect since #changethestory was intentional and the creation of a non-violent caring aura at the site was strategic, such claims need to be understood in relation to regional histories of Muslim women exerting their agency socially and politically in India.

Muslim Women's Movement in India

The political exclusion of Muslim women must be viewed through a wider context of exclusion faced by Muslims in India; despite this, Muslim women across various regions in India have been involved in protest movements visibly for a long while. Here, we only briefly map their organising in the interest of touching on the relevant points in these histories starting with the Shah Bano case. In the 1980s, a 62-year-old Muslim woman Shah Bano filed a petition demanding maintenance from her divorced husband. This case became a moment of challenge in the history of Muslim women's struggle for equality. This case resulted in the Muslim Women Bill being adopted in 1986. The bill prioritised Muslim Personal Law over criminal law on the issue of Muslim women's right to maintenance. Thus, the secular state ironically reinforced patriarchal religious control over women.

Since the 1990s, however, Muslim women's networks in India became visibly diversified. Key players in movements include the Muslim Women's Rights Network (MWRN) and the Bharatiya Muslim Mahila Andolan (BMMA). These networks created shifts in how Muslim women's issues were taken up. For instance, although the BMMA advocacy deals with the issue of matrimonial rights and the reform of Muslim Personal Laws, it also tackles issues such as the socio-economic and political marginalisation of the community (Kirmani, 2011). Both MWRN and BMMA move beyond common issues such as veiling, polygamy and triple *talaq*[3] (divorce). Women's rights are also highlighted by drawing attention to problems related to violence against the community and how these impact the women in the community.

While MWRN is committed to a women's rights approach, the BMMA experiments with Islamic feminist approaches by asserting that it is not Islam alone that has oppressed Muslim women, but that centuries of patriarchal interpretation of Islamic texts are to blame. Thus, the BMMA argues that standing up for women's rights does not require abandoning one's religious identity. Women are encouraged to engage with Islamic texts while claiming rights related to inheritance, marriage, and political empowerment (Kirmani, 2011). In the Indian context, 'Islamic feminism' thus poses a dilemma at the theoretical-conceptual level. On the one hand, some women dislike being associated with Islamic feminism. On the other hand, in actual practice, Muslim feminist organising has been heavily influenced by both Islamic texts as well as texts of modern feminist thought.

However, despite these shifts in Indian Muslim feminist thought over the past few decades, Indian national and international media still focus on reporting only the feminist engagements that question Islamic religious authorities. The Shaheen Bagh protests thus signalled a watershed moment in traditions of Muslim feminist activism in India in terms of both the national scale of the protests and the hypervisibility of working-class Muslim women rather than the leadership of formalised secular feminist non-profits and Islamic feminist organisations.

Methods

Our methods are interdisciplinary, following scholars such as Jackson, *et al.* (2020: xxxv), who found it helpful to transfer 'online counter-publics into networked data' to understand how activists mobilise digital publics. Close feminist readings of the data collected emphasise data visualisations and networks as providing partial pictures of more complex phenomena. We focus on particular hashtag datasets from January to March 2020 accessed through the Twitter Application Programming Interface (API). These datasets, around #Shaheenbaghprotests #womenofshaheenbagh and #sheinspiresus, were chosen because of their visibility in anti-CAA/NRC protest tweets. They were scraped via Netlytic and the open-source software Gephi. These two software tools afforded us social network analyser and visualiser tools to capture and transform data collected on the #Shaheenbaghprotests into concise networks showing the 'nodes' (the people involved) and the 'edges' (how they connect). On Netlytic,

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[3] In Islamic Law, *talaq* is a means of divorce initiated by the husband saying *talaq* (I divorce you) three times to his wife. A wife can also ask *talaq* of her husband.

we set the system to collect #Shaheenbaghprotests starting from 15 January 2020 for 62 days, and then we set it up to collect #sheinspiresus and #womenofshaheenbagh in March 2020 for 62 days. With Gephi – one of us ran it on her Mac for approximately two hours every day for the first three months of 2020. Team members interviewed on-site activists, witnesses, and diasporic South Asian activists. During our interviews with local and transnational/diasporic activists and with witnesses on site, we verified some patterns we saw emerge through mapping Twitter publics. The interviews and surrounding news reports and commentary essays collected during the protests and subsequently until summer 2022 also helped us make sense of the data collected.

In order to get a full-scale reading of what was happening, we needed to look not only at who was saying something and to whom but what they were saying and how they were connecting with the larger conversation. Netlytic and Gephi allowed us to search and filter specific hashtags and phrases to find what we were looking for. We were able to do two kinds of analyses of the tweets - content and network analysis. Our network analysis with these tools showed us who was talking to whom and how communication and ideas spread across the Internet and worldwide. Tracing the nodes (the users in the dataset) and edges (how they are connected) also allowed us to attach actual people to the data and connect the digital space with the groundwork of activists. We argue that groundwork does not have to be limited to on-the-ground activists and protesters, as our work revealed that the digital space is a socio-cultural environment with its own nuances and power dynamics. Several transnational groups we found did not have a physical grounding with the Shaheen Bagh protestors but did have a digital connection that brought attention to the women on the ground. Therefore, we maintain that studying just one or the other does not tell the full story. Comparatively, while in a 'big data' approach to information, the identification of these clusters and patterns would be the end of the analysis (Kitchin, 2014: 8), in applying a critical, feminist framework to this data collection and analysis, visualisation became a starting point to engage in further data collection and to dig deep into the meaning of the nodes and clusters.

In addition, we also did over 25 unstructured interviews with various people through snowball sampling. Respondents included transnational activists, local activists, social media influencers from India, and transnational influencers. Ten were Muslim women, including three from the community of Shaheen Bagh. Two Muslim women were college students, and one was a high school student about to enter college. Two other Muslim women were diasporic South Asians, and two were professionals with postgraduate degrees. Another ten interviewees were diasporic South Asian non-Muslims, some of whom formed transnational activist coalitions working to support the cause, and three of this pool of interviewees self-disclosed their Dalit-Bahujan location. The remaining interviewees were male. As such, these interviewees composed a diverse pool in terms of regional location and conditions of class, caste, religion, and gender, including both on-site protestors and digital activists. What follows are snapshots from the digitally mediated environment of the protests as we explore intersections and relations of various groups and actors. Three of our co-authors were present in Delhi at the time of the protests and started as interviewees. Consistent with our research team's feminist approach to collaboration, we invited interviewees who wished to join us as co-authors. However, we are also conscious of the need to protect the privacy and identities of interviewees. Anyone who chose to co-author did so voluntarily.

PART II

Snapshots from the Twitter publics

The vignettes described in this section provide us with snapshots of what is brought into existence through a mix of strategic and spontaneous use of social media around the protest site at Shaheen Bagh. These 'snapshots' are of digital actors/nodes/space/clusters visualised through arrangements of scraped networked tweets. These snapshots allow a glimpse into a process by which the grandmothers of Shaheen Bagh emerged as political actors in the Twitter sphere, even though none of these older women was actually using social media. As an interviewee pointed out, these older women do not have the technological access or social media literacy to be present as Twitter or Instagram users. However, the on-site strategies of activists, including welcoming younger generations of visitors who possessed this social media literacy, did contribute to the production of online visibility. The *dadis* of Shaheen Bagh thus emerged as political subjects in transnational space through social media, even without being Twitter users.

The '*Dadis* of Shaheen Bagh' as Political Subjects

Our analysis of the Twitter data was circular and iterative. We ran several visualisations and textual cloud features, retrieved reports and graphs from the Netlytic site and collected and imported data to Gephi. Then we looked closely at the interview transcripts to identify connections between what the interviewees told us and what we could see in the scraped Twitter data. We also kept an eye on current news around protests against the Indian authorities and Prime Minister Modi both on social media and in traditional news outlets. Therefore, for instance,
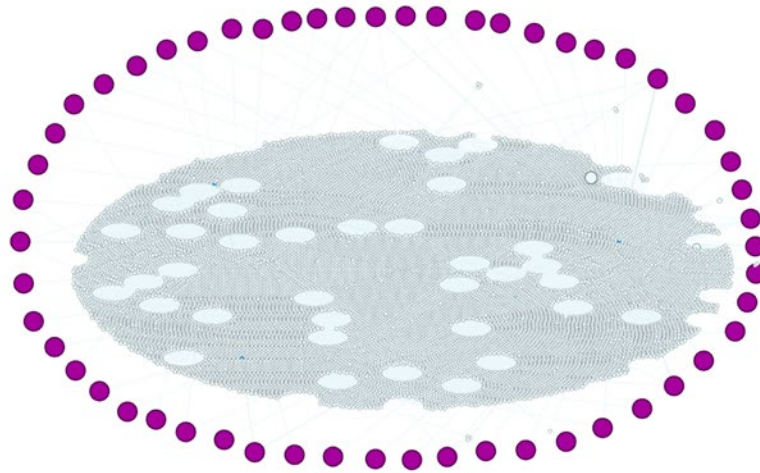
Figure 1. Nodes of tweets mentioning '*dadis*' in the #shaheenbaghprotests dataset (© Gajjala, 2022)[4]

@indiatvnews reporter asking about protest . Dadi waha jamiya me goli chal gai aawaj nahi aa rahi. Dadi rocks. She is 80 years old.   #ShaheenBaghProtests #CAA_NRC_NPR
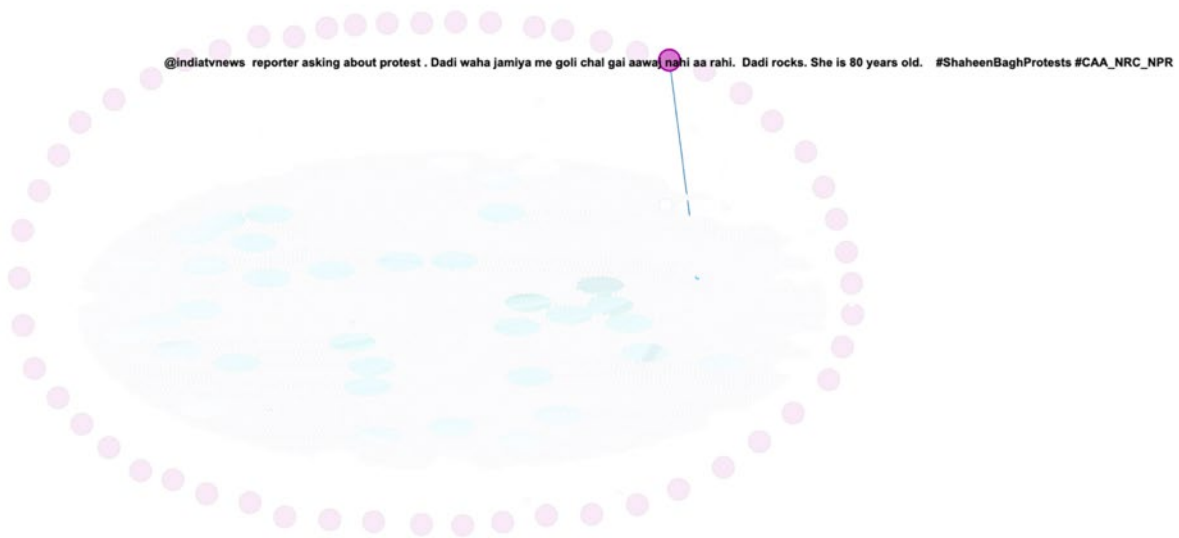
Figure 2. An example of a tweet highlighting the *dadis* as political subjects and protestors (© Gajjala, 2022)

when we saw that Bilkis was listed on the TIME 2020 list of 100 most influential people, we returned to the datasets and searched '*dadi*' (paternal grandmother). The search revealed a focus on '*dadis* of Shaheen Bagh' in the datasets scraped using hashtags 'Shaheenbaghprotest,' 'womenofshaheenbagh' and 'sheinspiresus.' However, in the dataset for #sheinspiresus, we saw that there were many '*dadis*' being named and celebrated by even the majority BJP pro-Modi (Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party loyalists) Twitter accounts—in what might be read as a concerted attempt no doubt to sabotage the visibility of the activist *dadis* of Shaheen Bagh (see **Figure 8**). Yet, what this revealed to us was that the term *dadi* as a political subject had gained brand value in the social media space.

Snapshots (in **Figures 1 and 2**) we share below are careful arrangements of nodes in the larger datasets that name the presence of the *dadis*. We can see that the presence of '*dadi*' in Twitter space comes about because of the actual physical presence of the *dadis* on-site in Delhi. The brand value then is derived from the actual protest site where the physical activist presence of the older subaltern woman is a fact. We identified this by filtering the term *dadi* and enlarging the particular nodes to make them visible. We then dragged them to encircle the larger hairball mesh containing the larger mass of tweets to highlight and represent the presence of the *dadis* as political subjects in Twitter publics.

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[4] The reports and visualisations were developed by Radhika Gajjala using software such as Gephi and Netlytic.

Figure 3. Nodes representing a cluster of Bollywood celebrities – tagged by a pro-CAA Twitter user in an attempt to shame these celebrities for supporting the protesting women of Shaheen Bagh (© Gajjala 2022)

Celebrities

One of the interviewees informed us that the sit-in protest of Shaheen Bagh was initially started by fifty women who knew each other. Then the movement picked up. The interviewee further noted that the strategy of digital connectivity started in specific locations, for example, Jamia Milia Islamia. This interviewee also noted that the local print or broadcast news in India did not cover the protest until it became visible via social media. The protests became prominent internationally when celebrities tweeted about them. We see then that this sort of visibility created an 'opportunity space' for independent actors to become active and also to form international coalitions. It further opened up opportunities for transnational activists to respond and connect. Through this transnational visibility, the scale of the movement shifted and led to connections with 'common networks among actors from different countries with similar claims' (Tarrow, 2012: 32).

Some protestors gained more visibility internationally than others because of their access to social media, while others—celebrities like Swara Bhaskar—came to the physical protest site to express solidarity and attracted large crowds. Periodically, through what Tarrow (2012) calls 'non-relational diffusion' and 'mediated diffusion,' these celebrities became more of the focus of the media attention than the protest cause itself. Yet these moments of 'non-relational diffusion' also disseminated information far and wide. Celebrities, then, acted as 'brokers' who may not necessarily participate but served as connectors for otherwise unconnected sites. Some people partaking in the protest, like the celebrity Swara, were visible because of their presence on the site and their 'accessibility' to social media. Interestingly though, as an interviewee confirmed, offline protest sites in Shaheen Bagh were highly fractured spaces - not as cohesive as the online visibility of a few groups might imply.

In **Figure 3**, we see that celebrities such as Bollywood actors and high-profile activists are tagged by a pro-Modi account in a negative Tweet. The tweet says, 'shame on you,' but it uses the #womenofshaheenbagh and tags celebrity accounts with a large following. This account was later suspended, so it is hard to say if it was just a bot or a real person handling the account. However, since the algorithm does not really care about the meaning of the words, this sort of post would also significantly amplify the #womenofshaheenbagh and contribute to its 'trending' on the Twitterverse. Swara Bhaskar gained much visibility via social media because of her public anti-CAA statements in mainstream press spaces. Even though she herself was not active on social media in the time period of the dataset we examined (although it is possible that in later archives of Twitter, she became active), what is known as the 'in-degree' centrality for her Twitter user ID (node) was high. In-degree centrality is a simple measure to map network connections and refers to the number of edges directed towards a central node (user in this case) being examined. Thus, in this case, the number of inbound ties directed to Swara established her Twitter handle as significant in that dataset at that particular time. In such a case, her virtual presence is signalled through the fact that her Twitter handle is tagged and addressed regardless of whether she herself was actively sending out tweets or not.

Yet, in this particular scenario, the algorithmic measure of her importance is also directly connected to real-world events. Swara Bhaskar explicitly expressed her support during the anti-CAA/NRC protests and shared her views with the media. After an incident in January 2020 at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in which masked people attacked and injured students and teachers (Yasir and Perrigo, 2020), Swara, a former student of JNU, tweeted her anger and urged people to come and show solidarity.

Figure 4. Visualisation showing clustering around the node '@reallyswara' in the dataset centring #shaheenbaghprotest in January 2020 (© Gajjala 2022)
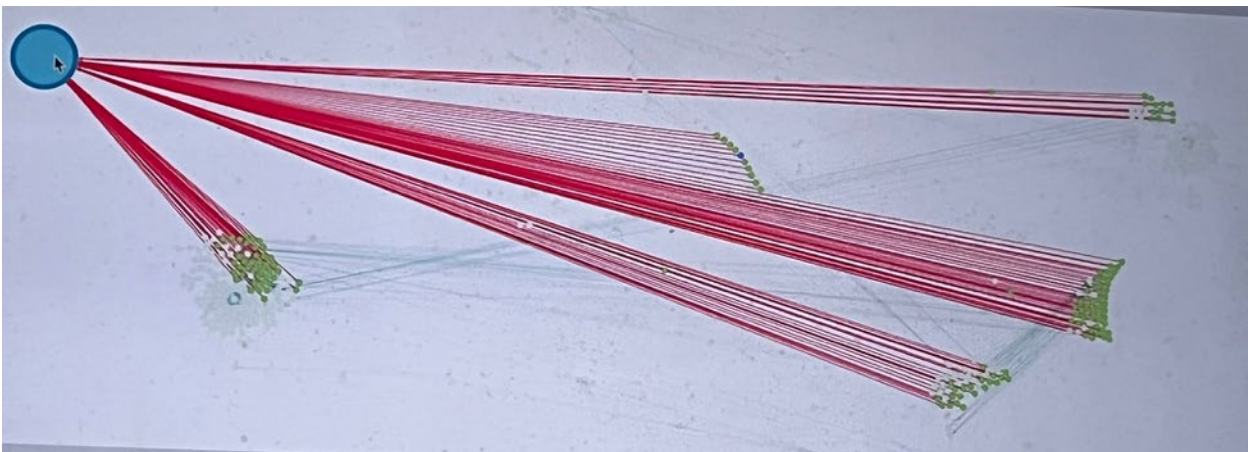
Figure 5. The large node represents @reallyswara and the lines represent the edges. The smaller notes are the users who were tagging @reallyswara. This pushed her visibility to a higher point in the network so that she featured as one of the top ten (© Gajjala 2022)

As shown in **Figure 4**, @reallyswara is centred and highlighted as the second-highest ranking cluster in the data around #shaheenbaghprotests in January 2020. Netlytic reports also revealed that @reallyswara had a high in-degree centrality (**Figure 6**), with visualisations in **Figures 5 and 6** showing the significance of this node. We highlight this cluster not just because of the statistical significance of the node in the larger dataset containing 99,950 messages and 52,577 unique posters, as evident from the report from Netlytic (**Figure 6**), but also because of our contextual knowledge that this Twitter handle belonged to Swara Bhaskar.

The visualisation above depicts all the tweets tagging @reallyswara from 6 January 2020 to 20 January 2020. A smaller cluster was extracted from the larger dataset to show how accounts that tagged @reallyswara pulled her into visibility. It is also interesting to note that some of the accounts that tagged @reallyswara became non-existent after sending tweets to popular figures like Swara Bhaskar. It is key to highlight here that while these tweets tag Swara Bhaskar, there is no tweet in this set that comes from her Twitter account. This activity around Swara Bhaskar happened because she took a public stance against PM Modi in support of the women of Shaheen Bagh.

Figure 6. Top 10 Users (based on In-degree centrality) for #Shaheenbaghprotests data collected in January-February 2020 (© Gajjala 2022)

Most of the tweets tagging her are negative tweets. Nevertheless, this gave her visibility as one of the top ten 'in-degree' Twitter accounts, as we saw in the report on the dataset around #Shaheenbaghprotests collected starting 17 January 2020, via Netlytic (see **Figure 6**).

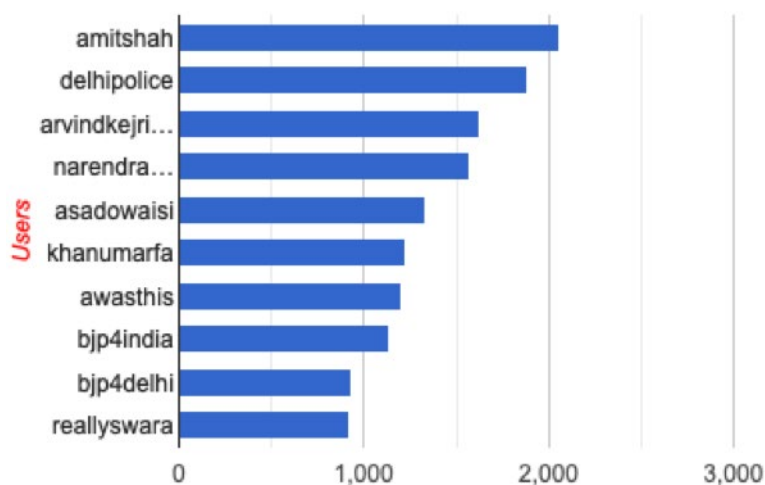In data space, even negative publicity produces visibility and creates a presence of particular Twitter users as they are tagged while contributing to the trending of hashtags. Thus, we see that celebrity presence in the discourse around the protests, whether or not Swara was physically at the site or tweeted about the protests, amplifies both the hashtag and the celebrity herself. As Jackson, Bailey, and Foucault-Welles (2020) point out, celebrity participants help spread the message but not necessarily always in the direct ways we imagine. Further, it is also possible that celebrity participation might inadvertently create problems. While there were examples of other celebrities tweeting, we chose to describe Swara Bhaskar's cluster from the larger data visualised through Gephi because this illustrates how online networks behave as particular hashtags get amplified.

Feminist Encounters of the *Dadis* and Younger Muslim Women Activists

While there was also much internationally visible activity on Twitter around other hashtags such as #delhiprogrom, #delhiburning, and #antiCAA, some of which fed the global stereotype of violent Muslim protests, the tweets amplifying the presence of the *dadis* (grandmothers) of Shaheen Bagh took centre stage eventually. Thus, the strategy of amplifying the offline presence of the older women protestors through social media shifted the focus of the reporting about the protests, highlighting their demands and their agency. The story that eventually remains in the international memory is the story of non-violent protest led by subaltern Muslim women of the community like Bilkis, who practiced an ethic of care and respect. Twitter visibility emphasised non-violence and the ethic of care on-site. As Ziya Us Salam and Uzma Ausaf (2020: 14) have noted, 'the women refused to move as if their life depended on it; and it probably did. They protested peacefully, persistently and persuasively, asking the government to repeal the CAA'.

India has had a complex relationship with feminism with its culturally diverse population and complicated colonial history. It has thus resulted in both vilification and veneration, often simultaneously, of feminist movements and activists. Feminist movements are further nuanced by issues of class, religion, caste, age, sexuality and more, as shown in the Islamic feminist struggles discussed earlier in this article. It cannot be said that India lacks any form of feminist struggle, especially as the Shaheen Bagh protests exemplify a new feminist wave within the Indian subcontinent. However, we must point out here that this feminist wave did not necessarily enact the models of Islamic feminism discussed earlier in this article, despite the Muslim religious identity of the women on-site.

Contemporary Indian feminist protests are frequently defined by the interrelation of digital and physical activism (Khan, 2020). Adrija Dey (2016) has argued that Indian feminist activism today is more broadly and increasingly defined by its global, digital dimension, despite the persistence of a digital divide, drawing particular attention to how student movements in India, the United States, and in the United Kingdom have mobilised to protest and show solidarity. Past research has identified among Indian digital feminist movements where "subaltern images" are deployed to spread a sense of affect and authenticity (Gajjala, 2017). The strategy of mobilising the women of Shaheen Bagh by the digirati on Twitter became clear to us when we visualised the position of various network actors. Our analysis revealed a concentrated effort among anti-CAA/NRC Twitter users to emphasise a narrative of political protest defined by strategic representations of made-to-feel-at-home-ness and an ethic of care.

The sit-in location thus became a significant site for *dadis* and younger activists as they bonded not on the basis of victimisation but with their energies directed to a political commitment. As the successful strategy to make the protest visible through the hypervisibilising of the 'feisty' and 'gutsy' *dadis* of Shaheen Bagh via Twitter became apparent to even the pro-Prime Minister Modi and pro-CAA/NRC actors, these groups tried to draw attention away from the *dadis* on International Women's Day by highlighting other Indian female public figures with #sheinspiresus (Edwards, *et al.*, 2021). While this was not an explicit blacklisting of the *dadis*, it emphasises concerted attempts to make the women's protests and their cause invisible and banal through seemingly harmless yet purposeful tactics.

In a larger dynamic visualisation on Gephi, we saw that the visibility of the hashtags #womenofshaheenbagh and #sheinspiresus spiked as they competed with each other with significant spikes on 4, 8 and 9 March 2020. Through interviews with transnational activists, we learned that this might have been the result of a concerted effort to take over and sabotage the hashtag introduced by Prime Minister Modi's account. The #sheinspiresus garnered over 20,000 tweets between 8 and 9 March 2020, while #womenofshaheenbagh had a spike of 10,000 tweets on 4 March of the same year (see **Figure 8**).

In our investigation, we see not only the struggle for minoritised identities asking for inclusion of their identity as part of the Nation, but also see women's struggles with layered patriarchies in local, national, and international contexts. Through a committed resistance to these layered patriarchies, supposedly 'subaltern' women and unlikely activists form counterpublics and become part of big social data archives. Here we see a shift from earlier hashtag movements such as those around the Delhi 2012 Rape and those around the #metoo since 2012, in which the primarily visible protest agents were metropolitan college-educated women (Bansode 2020; Dey, 2018; Guha 2021; Gajjala 2019).

How then might we read this 'big data' visibility of subaltern groups of global south women as agents of change? For instance, in the case of Shaheen Bagh, the community members of Shaheen Bagh led the charge on the ground and through their own Twitter account, @shaheenbaghoff1. However, the affective deployment of content - figures, videos, text - and the strategic populating of particular hashtags by a larger network of digital participants and activist coalitions, local and diasporic, generated affective intensities, which in turn produced publics. These digital publics focused and reoriented the transnational gaze on the seemingly benign bodies of older women rather than on the rage of the younger feminists and the men of the community. Thus, a concerted strategy was involved in making the *dadis* visible globally through digital publics.

When we asked an interviewee about this international media visibility of *dadis* and *Time Magazine*'s influential feature of Bilkis, she noted that this was strategically done to highlight Indian culture, specifically that of care, love, and respect, instead of rage. She said one could counter rage, but it is harder to counter a peaceful protest. This was clearly a strategy invoking a Gandhian non-violent resistance to reassert the community's identity as Indian. Groups like 'United Against Hate' also came forth to push for 'compassion' and the 'peaceful' nature of the protest, and Bilkis, an elderly woman, became the face of the movement. However, we argue that rage manifests in varied ways and that the *dadis* sitting in for three months in determined protests against the CAA and NRC exemplifies the driving force of rage and resistance despite the attempts at the reductive framings. The *dadis* made clear their identity-based political demands with non-verbal disruptive tactics that were just as eloquent as the tactics of younger women and men activists protesting the CAA. Their quietness was not weakness; the *dadis* refused to move from the roadways as if their lives depended on it, their driving force a deeply affective rage as their home was under threat with the passing of the CAA and NRC in India.

Internationalisation and Transnational/Diasporic Coalitions

Transnational digital activists also played a role in amplifying the narratives emerging from the local activist sites in India. As Giuliana Sorce and Delia Dumitrica have observed in their study examining the Fridays for Future's (FFF) digital protest communication on Facebook, there is an awareness on the part of current youth activists "of the necessity to act in a 'vertical' manner that goes beyond national, geopolitical milieus and towards a transnational activist sensibility" (Sorce and Dumitrica, 2021: 2). Activists and observers of the anti-CAA/NRC protests in India that we interviewed also clearly articulated their awareness of this fact and talked to us about the conscious, strategic manner in which student activists and community organisers mobilised social media while also connecting with each other through back-channels via WhatsApp, Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram with activists internationally.

In looking at the data, we examined the participation of international organisations, diasporic populations, and transnational activist groups in the data. Various actors shape this internationalisation, including NGOs, labour movements, and transnational coalitions. International actors include 'double-edged institutions' like the World Bank. Thus, the conditions of possibility for progressive transnational social movements are based on contradictory and ambivalent politics. Tarrow's (2012) mapping of internationalisation as a precondition of transnational and global activism is relevant here. In this context, it is worth noting that the activity we recorded
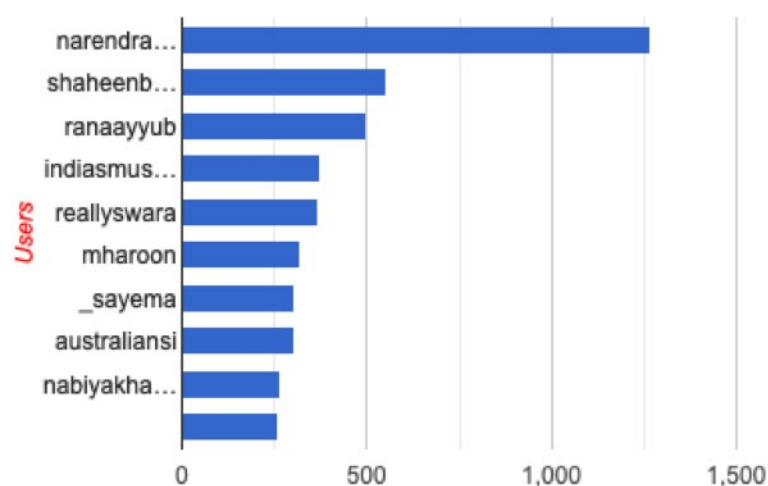
Figure 7. Top ten users Mentioned/Replied to on #womenofshaheenbagh dataset

through the databases was scraped on and a few days after International Women's Day, 2020. The two databases, #womenofshaheenbagh and #sheinspiresus, also included #internationalwomensday. Most of the activity around these two hashtags happened from 4 March to 10 March 2020. Twitter users implicitly adopted the strategy of internationalisation on both sides of the debate. On the one hand, the pro-Modi groups concentrated on making the #sheinspiresus trend more significantly on the Twitter global stage than the Shaheen Bagh protests. On the other hand, the anti-CAA activists made a concerted effort not only to keep #womenofshaheenbagh visible but also to hijack PM Modi's followers' #sheinspiresus, following the announcement by Modi on Twitter that he would hand over his Twitter handle to seven inspiring women on International Women's Day.

In terms of media engagement by diasporic populations in their home-nation politics, such as in the case of Tunisia, Marwan Kraidy (2017) notes a shift in the internationalisation of media that formed a precondition for what was characterised as the Arab Spring. Kraidy calls these digital spaces and the connections articulated 'crucial training grounds for the revolution' (Kraidy, 2017: 33). Activists changed not only their strategies but also their platforms, flocking to social media such as Facebook because of the open ethos of these platforms. We saw similar kinds of formations emerge in relation to the anti-CAA/NRC protests as well.

Continuing our circular and recursive process of examining the data, we looked for diasporic group handles that came up either in our interviews or in various news reports. We also looked to see if any such handles appeared in the 'top ten' graphs we visualised via Netlytic. See **Figure 7** for one such report from which we were able to identify Rana Ayyub (ranaayyub), the author of the article in *Time Magazine* about Bilkis and Swara Bhaskar (reallyswara), both of whom are located in India. However, R. J. Sayema (sayema), a 'Secularist Feminist Rockstar' of 'Radio Mirchi'[5] fame, was also one of the top ten. While Bollywood's popularity amongst South Asian diasporas is well known, 'Radio Mirchi' also has an international/diasporic following as evidenced by news reports documenting abuse targeting Bhasker, visible women personalities were trolled and harassed by pro-CAA users illustrating larger trends of trolling within the Indian digital political sphere on Twitter (Mishra, *et al.*, 2021). However, the attention they received – whether positive or negative – served to make even traditional media pay attention to the cause. In **Figure 7**, we see that the top ten Twitter handles in the #womenofshaheenbagh dataset include transnational diasporic activist groups, local groups, and high-profile women activists. It is no surprise that the top handle is @narendramodi since many anti-CAA/NRC protestors and pro-Modi protestors likely tagged his handle, implicating the Prime Minister in this dataset meant to amplify the activist *dadis*.

In yet another example of how we went about looking for the role of transnational digital activists, when we saw reports concerning the banner 'Resign Modi' that appeared on the London Westminster Bridge on India's Independence Day anniversary, 15 August 2021, we scrambled back to our datasets to search for the 'South Asia Solidarity' group that was allegedly responsible for the banner and the press release that followed. We found that this group had a significant presence (N= 124) in the #womenofsshaheenbagh dataset, even though this handle did not make it to the top ten. Compared with the N=320 of the @australiansi handle count in the dataset, the number of Tweets referencing them was far less, yet given our overall examination of evidence beyond Twitter, we recognise that this is a potentially influential group.

However, the involvement of diasporic communities was not restricted to joining the protests via Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. There was street activism as well in international sites. For instance, on 25 January 2020, South Asian activists in London convened outside the official residence of the British Prime Minister. The group
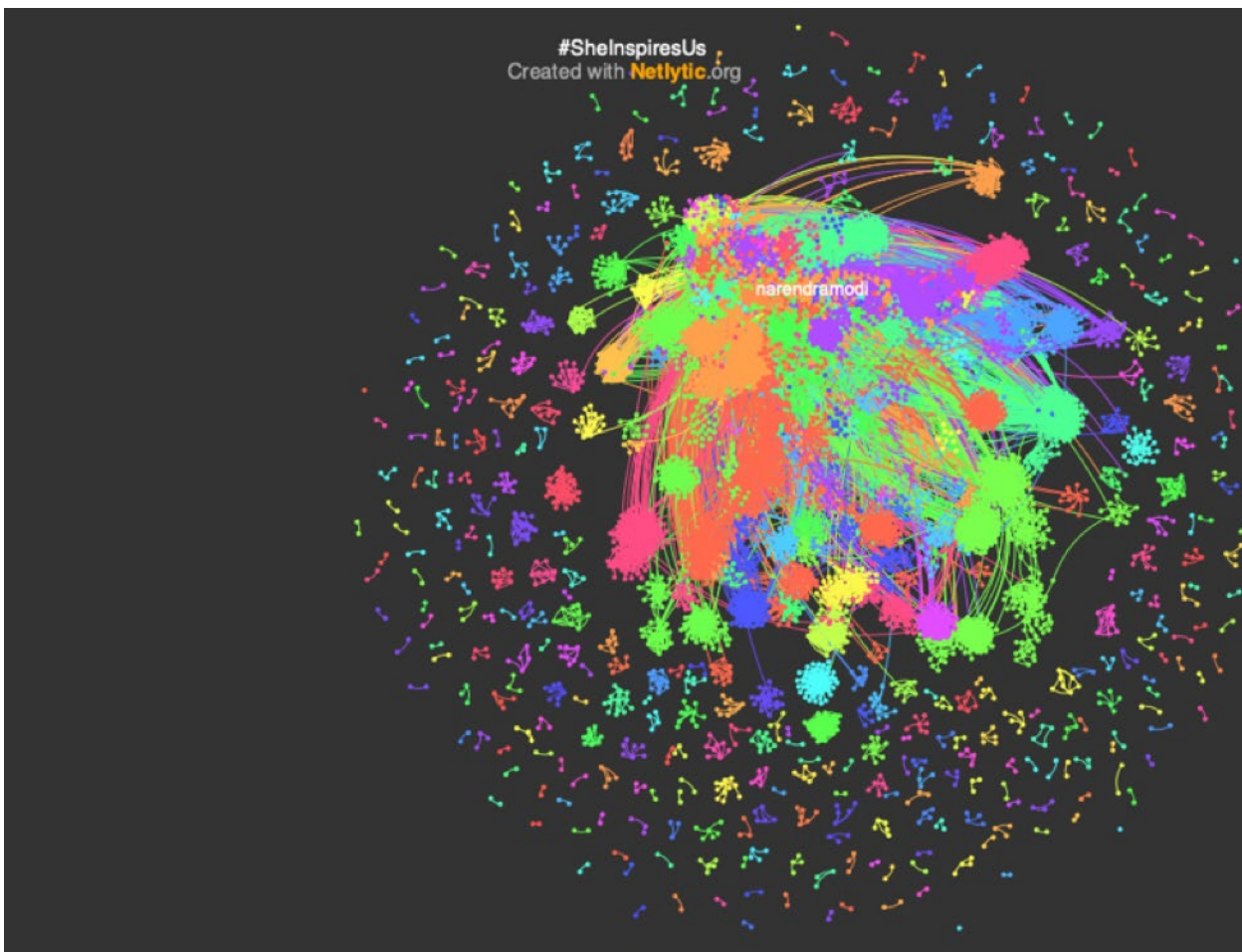
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[5] https://onlineradiofm.in/stations/mirchi

Figure 8. Overall Network visualisation of the #sheinspireus dataset (copyright Gajjala 2022)

represented various faiths and ethnicities. They proceeded to march to the Indian High Commission to protest against the CAA and NRC. This demonstration was organised by the human rights body South Asia Solidarity Groups (SASG) and was supported by the Co-ordinating Committee of Malayali Muslims, SOAS India Society, Tamil People in the UK, Indian Workers Association (GB), Indian Muslim Federation (UK), Federation of Redbridge Muslim Organizations (FORMO), Kashmir Solidarity Movement, South Asian Students Against Fascism, Newham Muslim Alliance, and Ghadar International.

Pro-CAA/NRC

Finally, the presence of pro-CAA/NRC content needs to be mentioned lest we give the impression that all media outlets and Bollywood actors and actresses were sympathetic to the protests. Pro-CAA and pro-Modi activity on Twitter was also heavy during this time and within these two datasets. The pro-Modi Twitter handles included high-profile actresses and other visible figures too. Although the anti-CAA/NRC protests were able to reach international audiences because of the transnational handles amplifying a significant majority of Indian diasporic populations, despite the visibility of progressive diasporic groups on Twitter, many remain in support of the right-wing Hindu politics currently prevalent in India.[6] Thus, when we examined the dataset #sheinspiresus as a whole for instance, the most prominent Twitter handles are @narendramodi @Kanganateam @bjpforaurangabad and so on.

CONCLUSION

In the current study, we looked at datasets from Twitter using Gephi and Netlytic software. We then proceeded to make sense of them through a close feminist reading of texts, visualisations, and reports acquired using data analytics tools for computational analysis. We also made connections with the interviews we had conducted with activists and witnesses on-site in Delhi and with transnational digital activists from the South Asian diaspora. We were able to see that the significant transnational visibility produced through social media activity for the subaltern

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[6] Witness for instance, the 2022 Hindu-Muslim flare-ups in August and September in the city of Leicester, UK.

older women of Shaheen Bagh were a result of the on-site activist strategy to use social media while also connecting with transnational activists and sympathetic media personnel. Therefore, the global visibility of Shaheen Bagh's women was produced through the combined strategies of local activism, social media outreach, transnational/diasporic digital activism, and finally, connecting with international organisations such as UN Human Rights groups and a variety of media organisations.

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Shaheen Bagh (2021): Gender, Affects, and Ita Mehrotra's Graphic Narrative of Protest

Pujarinee Mitra [1*]

ABSTRACT

Ita Mehrotra's journalistic memoir, *Shaheen Bagh: A Graphic Recollection* (2021), through the graphic narrative medium, facilitates a reading of the Shaheen Bagh protests in India, particularly those in Delhi, as pivoting on affective strategies. This article argues how the women of Shaheen Bagh in Delhi mobilised affects primarily through the following activities – sharing food, singing songs and the display of artwork. The article explores: What role does the graphic narrative genre of Mehrotra's book play in the representation of affective strategies used in the Shaheen Bagh protests? And since Shaheen Bagh was considered remarkable because the organisers were Muslim women (Verde and Kumar, 2020, n. p.), how does the study of gender and ethnicity in relation to affective strategies contribute to this proposed reading? This article is situated within the intersecting discourses of South Asian Feminisms, Contemporary South Asian literature, and Affect Theory.

Keywords: Indian feminism, Shaheen Bagh protest, affect and activism, graphic narrative

INTRODUCTION

The Government of India passed a law on the 11 December 2020 that recognised citizenship of India along ethnonationalist lines. This law, known as the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), defied Constitutional fundamental rights, specifically Article 14 'Equality before the Law' and Article 21 'Right to Life'. It claimed to grant citizenship to all Hindu minorities, who were displaced from India during Partition, and who are supposedly being persecuted in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh, but the law excluded Muslims from these countries who were also similarly displaced from India. Finally, it forced existing citizens to prove they are truly 'Indian' through appropriate documents (birth certificate, voting identification, etc.). In the final days of 2019 and early months of 2020, there had been numerous protests against this law nationwide, in which 25 people were killed and thousands detained under police custody. This article will focus on an iconic protest that started in Delhi but gradually spread to the rest of the country - the Shaheen Bagh women's protest. In Delhi's Shaheen Bagh area, Muslim women spear-headed this movement, sending out a protest message that the CAA-NRC laws were not only authoritarian, but nobody in India, and especially the Muslims, were obliged to comply with its stipulations. The activists staged a sit-in for 101 days from 14 December 2019 to 24 March 2020, redefining the very idea of dissident feminist protest in the country. They were leaderless and free of any form of involvement from NGOs, founding themselves completely on a shared sense of solidarity. Numerous women's protests across the country started to imitate them and their idea of 'care as resistance' (Verde and Kumar, 2020: n. p.). It has now been more than two years since the Shaheen Bagh protests were forced to end due to the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Kiran Bhatia and Radhika Gajjala (2020) have argued that care was used by the women of Shaheen Bagh as a strategy of protest to counter non-violently the 'legitimacy of violence enacted by the police, the government, and those supporting the CAA and the NRC in India' (Bhatia and Gajjala, 2020: 6299). They mention in passing that care was a part of the protest's 'affective framework' (2020: 6299), they do not engage with the concept of affect as a strategy of protest for long. I argue in this article that the protest's affective framework was a strategy which singles it out as a unique form of feminist resistance against growing Hindu nationalism, religious sectarianism and right-wing conservatism in India.

Ita Mehrotra's journalistic memoir, *Shaheen Bagh: A Graphic Recollection* (published in New Delhi by independent Yoda Press in 2021), through the graphic narrative medium, facilitates a reading of the Shaheen Bagh protest as

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pivoting on affective strategies. The black and white graphics narrate the incidents at the Shaheen Bagh protest site in Delhi through a conversation between the author and one of the real-life protestors, named Shahana. Shahana reminisces about her own family history and how they came to live in Shaheen Bagh. Gradually, the narrative also explains the political events that were set in motion as a reaction to these protests. I argue in this article how the women of Shaheen Bagh, as represented in this graphic recollection, mobilised affects primarily through social activities - sharing food, singing songs and the display of artwork. The article raises the questions: What role does the graphic narrative genre of Mehrotra's book play in the representation of affective strategies used in the Shaheen Bagh protests? And since Shaheen Bagh was considered remarkable because the organisers were Indian Muslim women (Verde and Kumar, 2020: n. p.), who are seen by Hindu majoritarianists as subjugated by male members of the community, how does the study of gender and ethnicity in relation to affective strategies contribute to this proposed reading?

In this close reading of the Mehrotra's graphic narrative, examining how text and image interact to portray the affective strategies that were used in the Shaheen Bagh movement of Delhi, I have used primary and secondary sources on the movement and on the wider socio-political issues the movement addressed, framed by affect theory and scholarship on anti-colonial and feminist protest strategies in South Asian history. I situate my article within the intersecting discourses of South Asian Feminism(s), Contemporary South Asian literature, and Affect Theory.

The Citizenship Amendment Act of 2019 was by no means an isolated political move but rooted in a history of India's citizenship laws, as Rahul Rao (2021) argues. The Citizenship Act, 1955, granted citizenship to all persons born within the Indian territory, irrespective of their religion and ethnicity. This law was amended in 1986 to include a clause which stated that at least one parent must be an Indian citizen. The law was amended further in 2003 and then it required that both parents must be Indian citizens or at least one of them should not have been an 'illegal migrant' (Rao, 2021: 590) during the birth of the child. However, in the 1980s, its most restrictive form occurred in the region of Assam, when ethnic majority groups there started to protest 'illegal' Bangladeshi immigrants entering the state (2021: 590). The Congress, who were in power in the centre at that time, passed the IMDT (Illegal Migrants Determination by Tribunal) Act, 1983, which made it difficult to frame immigrants as 'illegal' (2021: 590) because the responsibility to prove 'illegality' (2021: 590) lay entirely on the accuser. Since the Foreigners Act, 1946, which was in operation for the rest of the country made the 'illegal immigrants' (2021: 590) prove their 'right to remain' (2021: 590), Assamese citizens saw this as discrimination against them. The NDA (National Democratic Alliance), a group of parties headed by the BJP, filed an affidavit to fight this and the Supreme Court soon declared IMDT unconstitutional on grounds of being discriminatory. The Assamese Chief Justice, Ranjan Gogoi, whose ideological affiliation was proved to be majoritarian later, was mainly responsible for this 'zealously activist' (2021: 592) act. These sentiments of the Assamese ethnic majority were later manipulated for the introduction of the CAA-NRC in 2019.

The NRC or the National Register of Citizens was a precursor to the Citizenship Amendment Act or CAA and jointly aimed to disenfranchise Muslims in an elaborate political move. A draft of the NRC was first published in Assam in 2018. Rao explains that through the NRC, 'the 'illegal' (mostly Muslim) migrants might be detected, deleted (from electoral rolls), and deported (to Bangladesh)' (2021: 592), which was planned to be extended to the rest of the Indian states as well. Angana P. Chatterjee (2021) mentions that NRC required everybody to submit legal documentary proof of their citizenship, or they would be detained and deported (Chatterjee, 2021: n. p.). Ironically, the defaulters in this case turned out to be mostly Hindus, which BJP had not anticipated (Rao, 2021: 592). The NRC disenfranchised 1.9 million people out of the 33 million population of the state (2021: 592). So, it was revised and republished in 2019 by which only Muslims were to be disenfranchised (2021: 592). The CAA was introduced to grant Indian citizenship to refugees from all other ethnic groups except Muslims, who were fleeing ethnic persecution in the neighbouring Muslim-majority countries (2021: 592). The immigrant detention centers required in this operation had already started to be built in Assam (Chatterjee, 2021: n. p.). If there are no established legal protocols, detentions can last for an indefinite period unless the detainee is deported soon (2021: n. p.). At the time Chatterjee wrote her book (2021), there were 13 detention centers, and more were under construction (2021: n. p.). Some jails served as detention centers in Assam and one to accommodate close to 3000 people was being built in Goalpara (2021: n. p.). That was supposed to be India's largest detention centre for 'illegal' (Chatterjee, 2021: n. p.) immigrants. By November 2019, already a total of 1043 immigrants were imprisoned in six centers in Assam, out of which approximately 20-25% were women. There were young children too. By April 2020, close to 30 detainees had died due to mismanagement, unhygienic conditions, starvation, and some from mysterious reasons (Chatterjee, 2021: n. p.). Although the Supreme Court had ordered in May 2019 that 'those regarded 'non-citizens' and detained for more than 3 years, be conditionally released' (Chatterjee, 2021: n. p.), this was not heeded. The NRC's operations were postponed in 2019 due to the Covid pandemic, but there remains widespread fear that any Muslim can be detained any time if they failed to show citizenship documents.

In India, many children under the age of 5 and mostly the old-aged do not have birth certificates or other identity proof for many reasons including illiteracy, a lack of awareness, inaccessibility of registration centers, or

inaccessible procedures for registration and procurement of documents. After the CAA bill was signed into law, Muslims, who make up 14.2 percent of the Indian population suffered relentless anxiety that this law would rob them of their citizenship - even if they had documents (Changoiwala, 2020: n. p.). As data has shown, women were a major part of those facing disenfranchisement and being detained since they migrate more because of the culture of patrilocal residence within Indian marriages (Changoiwala, 2020: n. p.). The protests emerged as a challenge to the political structure that was triggering this anxiety and displacement among Muslim women and Muslims in general.

The history of South Asian women activists can be traced back to the anti-colonial movements in India. However, although most protest movements in South Asia and around the world demanded a certain experience in organisation or unionisation, the protest camps at Shaheen Bagh were extremely spontaneous and under no specific organisational or political banner. The women who started the protests were largely homemakers, aged grandmothers, and some ordinary professionals, who followed unorthodox protest method - sharing food, singing songs while helping their grandchildren with homework, putting up artwork by themselves and the children at their homes, and so on - which initially triggered concerns of safety among onlookers. It became uniquely representative of South Asian feminisms in the way it challenged the stereotypical conceptions of Muslim femininity and domesticity by spilling into the largely male-dominated public space of the streets. The practices of so-called women's responsibilities like cooking and nurturing, which were activities imagined to be strictly confined to the domestic sphere, were used to stage a resistance against the conservative and perceived anti-Muslim state laws. The common stereotype of the Muslim woman is that she is dominated and controlled by her husband and has no will of her own (Edwards, *et al.*, 2021: 4). Moreover, the popular belief in the country says that it is university students and renowned feminists who encourage protest, not the 'quiet resistance' (2021: 3) of a few poor and ordinary Muslim women. Therefore, these women were not expected to have the ability to be strategic, which partly indicates how radical the protests were perceived.

As Hillary Chute (2017) defines the term 'graphic novel,' as opposed to 'comics', as a 'book-length comics for a sophisticated adult audience' (2017: n. p.). The mode of communication of a 'graphic novel' is however neither like a 'graphic', that is, an image, nor a 'novel' (a word-text) but works through a relationship between the two— the movement of image and words on a page in a sequence. Making meaning out of this interaction of two distinct yet related elements is similar to how meaning is produced in poetry, as it involves a 'distillation and condensation' (2017: n. p.) of time on the page. In poetry, the different elements like rhyme, line break, and in short, the form interacts with the message to shape time as it flows through the body of the poem. A kind of 'aesthetic labor' (2017: n. p.) is required or expected to slowly break these condensed symbols down. This expected aesthetic labour has been used for affective purposes, as an awareness or call for action or just to present a historical testimony like iconic graphic novels such as Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1980) (Chute, 2017: n. p.). Mehrotra's *Shaheen Bagh* (2021) provides testimony of a historical South Asian feminist protest movement that used affective strategies as a resistance method by the interaction between words and images on the page to show how affective strategies were adopted. The focus of this article is on analysing how the movement has been represented in Mehrotra's graphic narrative, rather than commenting on the movement as it took place in real time.

South Asian graphic narratives are being increasingly studied by notable literary scholars such as Pramod K. Nayar (2018), Harleen Singh (2015), Pia Mukherjee (2015), Kavita Daiya (2021), Amit Rahul Baishya (2019), Ritu Gairola Khanduri (2016), and others. Writing specifically about the graphic narrative of protest, Charlotta Salmi (2021) states that these narratives function as 'intermedial texts': 'It is precisely when prose fails, or there are no words to be had, that the intermedial text bears witness to its failure and presents alternative avenues for confronting state force' (Salmi, 2021: 171). By 'intermedial texts', Salmi means that the graphic medium of these narratives mediates between the written and the spoken word to express what is ineffable in these forms of expression. Affects, which, according to Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg (2021), occur in 'in-between-ness: in the capacities to act and be acted upon' (Seigworth and Gregg, 2010: 1), are 'intensities' (2010: 1) that pass between human bodies and non-human bodies, sometimes sticking to these bodies. *Shaheen Bagh* (2021) appears journalistic in its retelling of the story of the protest, including interviews with activists, documentation of the activities at the protest site, what was being said by political leaders, and the ways in which the protestors responded. However, in utilising a graphic medium for memorialising such protest, the affects used for carrying out resistance through the protest could be portrayed more effectively through using this 'intermedial text' rather than through solely prose or the spoken word (Salmi, 2021: 171).[1]

Shaheen Bagh is a small locality in the predominantly Hindu, Indian city of Delhi's Jamia Nagar area, which houses a prominent Muslim-majority institution of high academic standing, the Jamia Milia Islamia University

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[1] I have used 'comics' and 'graphic narrative' interchangeably in my article because these terms have the same connotations, the latter only being used as a marketing strategy since 1964 to sell this kind of books to an adult bourgeois readership, who would not otherwise consider them to be of any literary merit (Chute, 2017: 33-37).

(JMI). The area itself is a marginalised part of Delhi because of its huge Muslim population, who consider it safer than the more gentrified parts of Delhi, as we know from the character of Shahana in Mehrotra's book:

> (....) I have realised how it's so SAFE, beyond anything else, for my family to live in Shaheen Bagh. This is why Muslim families live near each other. I feel like we NEED to live close together, whether it is in Shaheen Bagh, Jafrabad or Old Delhi…It is also why my parents never considered moving to 'better' parts of Delhi even when they can afford to! (Mehrotra, 2021: 22)

The immediate cause of the Shaheen Bagh protest was a police crackdown on Jamia's students in December, which disrupted the idea of safety that Shahana had. Ziya Us Salam and Uzma Ausaf (2020) recount that on 15 December 2019, the police attacked not only the students who were protesting the Citizenship Amendment Act, but also students studying in the library and praying at the mosque. Tear gas was released and there was considerable brutality and violence from state forces. Amidst this, two hijab-wearing Muslim women fought bravely to shield a male friend from the police's baton. This instance was the first blow at shattering the image of the 'coy, speechless, and powerless Muslim women' (Salam and Ausaf, 2020: 7). In a way, Shahana's idea of Muslim safety in Delhi lying within proximity with other Muslims is emphasised through these two women who fight to protect their friend.

At the protest site, safety would mean an absence of violence from protestors as well as from police or other state forces. However, it is very difficult to agree on what is violent and what is not. Judith Butler (2020: 1) argues that for some physical attacks only will qualify as violence and for some emotional harassment too would be included in the definition. In politics, what a state or any regulatory power considers violent is always what threatens their legitimacy:

> As much as it would make matters easier to be able to identify violence in a way that is clear and commands consensus, this proves impossible to do in a political situation where the power to attribute violence to the opposition itself becomes an instrument by which to enhance state power, to discredit the aims of the opposition, or even to justify their radical disenfranchisement, imprisonment, and murder. (Butler, 2020: 5)

Therefore, in case of any resistance against the state, it is also extremely difficult to precisely pinpoint what could be considered non-violent, since that 'power to attribute' (Butler, 2020: 12) violence (or non-violence) to an act is wrested by the hands of the state. In fact, the state could claim its response to protests via police brutality legitimate in order to have a 'monopoly' (2020: 12) on violence. Butler warns against giving up on this debate on what constitutes violence/non-violence by striving to 'establish a way of distinguishing between a tactical attribution of violence that falsifies and inverts its direction, and those forms of violence often structural and systematic, that too often elude direct naming and apprehension' (2020: 5). This means on the one hand, we should see the label of violence that the government pastes on the protestors of CAA-NRC to 'invert' (2020: 5) the actual 'direction' (2020: 5) of violence (that is, from the government towards the disenfranchised Muslims or police brutality on the Jamia Millia students). On the other hand, we should also discern the more subtle and 'systematic' (2020: 5) kind of violence enacted through judicial, social, and legal oppression (like the CAA-NRC).

To follow a resistance strategy based on non-violence, Butler suggests that the tendency towards individualism needs to be avoided and social relations need to be formed (Butler, 2020: 9). After all, violence is not only an attack on a person but also on 'bonds' (2020: 16), which in this case, is the bond between public and the state. In using the ethics of care and affective strategies centred on safety and security, social relations between people of all communities are established and strengthened by activists such as the Shaheen Bagh women as part of a non-violent protest. In the next section, I discuss anti-individualistic tactics such as hospitality, female bonding, confidentiality, defiance (of gender roles), empathy, and love and comradeship as affects in circulation in the camp and represented in Mehrotra's graphic recollection. These affects are collectively utilised to impart feelings of safety and security, which forms the overall affective strategy of the protest.

SHARING FOOD

The first instance of affects of safety mobilised through food sharing represented in the book takes place in the conversation between the narrator and Shahana. It starts with a page solely devoted to a single strip of two panels where a tea kettle is pouring tea into a tumbler and then a hand is lifting the tumbler (see **Figures 1a and 1b**). We see the steam from the tumbler waft to the next page to signal a continuity. On this second page, we realise that the hand belongs to Shahana, now holding this tumbler of tea, conversing with the implied narrator who stands outside the panel. The tea becomes a symbol of the start of a friendly conversation.
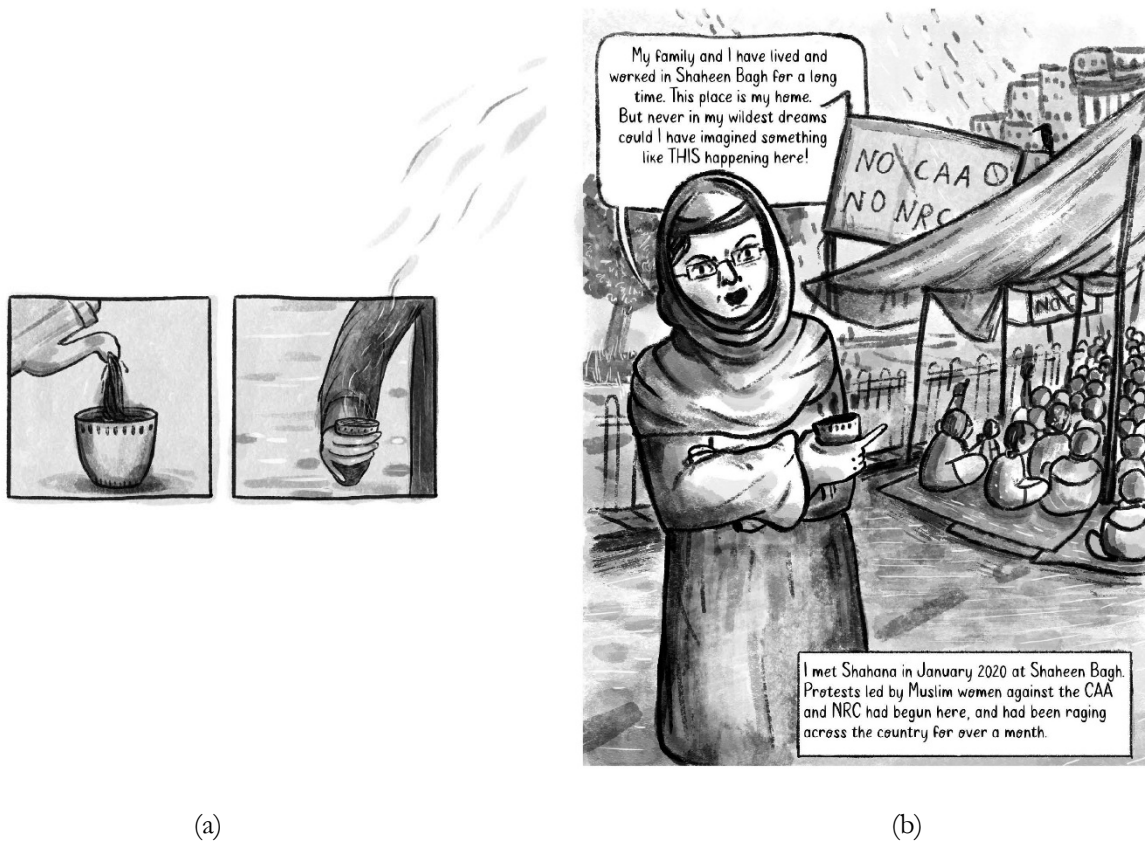
Figure 1. Shahana and the narrator conversing over tea. Excerpted with permission from *Shaheen Bagh: A Graphic Recollection* (pp. 14-15) by Ita Mehrotra (© Ita Mehrotra)

Philip Lutgendorf (2012) notes that tea (or *chai* in Hindi), which started as a colonial artifact, gradually became a pivotal Indian symbol of hospitality and particularly central to 'male friendship' (Lutgendorf, 2012: 25). That it was characterised as a 'male' cultural artifact, is because the public sphere where the tea-stalls serve tea to a primarily office-going urban clientele (Lutgendorf, 2012: 25), which are male-dominated spaces. Beginning the narrative with a kettle pouring tea into a typical glass tumbler of a Delhi tea-stall while a female friendship develops there, is therefore, notable and significant. This is how the graphic medium positions the text in a women's movement - by denoting the flow of time from picking up the tumbler to the start of a conversation and friendship between a Shaheen Bagh participant and a writer (both women) through tea fumes across the comic's gutter.[2] Chute writes in the introduction to her book that comics, in the words of Art Spiegelman, 'choreograph and shape time' (Chute, 2017: n. p.) and she explains that this happens by 'arranging it [time] in space on the page in panels, which are, essentially, boxes of time. (....) Panels are how the cartoonist gets to experiment with presenting time, with duration and motion' (2017: n. p.). The panels in the graphic illustration above use the drifting of fumes across the gutter between them and the next page to 'arrange' time 'in space' (2017: n. p.). This temporal path is the path to a female 'bond' (Butler, 2020: 16), that counters state violence through sharing stories.

The cup of tea here is a crucial element, which symbolises sharing secrets and confidentialities, as in the figurative 'spilling the tea'. 'Spilling the tea' actually derives from 'spilling the beans', a phrase etymologically rooted in Ancient Greek (Khalis and Rifhan, 2019: 220). When 'spill the tea' was first used, it did not refer to the drink but to the letter, 'T'. Lady Chablis, an American drag queen used it in 1994 to refer to 'truth' (2019: 221), that is, truth about their life as transgender persons. However, the meaning intended by Lady Chablis stuck to the word and the word 'tea', as in the drink, took its place to refer to 'spreading gossip or secrets' (2019: 221). The tumbler of tea in Shahana's hands, thus, metaphorically works to denote confidentiality.

Shahana opens up to the narrator about how their family had struggled since the times of Partition to survive on their land in Delhi, and as quoted before, how she had come to realise that Shaheen Bagh was one of the safest places in Delhi for Muslims (Mehrotra, 2021: 22). As she says those words, her face becomes the sole focus of the panels, perhaps to highlight the cautious flinching and sideward glances of her eyes. Reading the relationship between the pictorial representation of her expressions and her words in the comics (Chute, 2017: n. p.), the reader gleans that this is supposed to be a hushed comment. The bond developing between the two women also demands

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[2] 'Gutter' in the language of comics is the space between the panels.
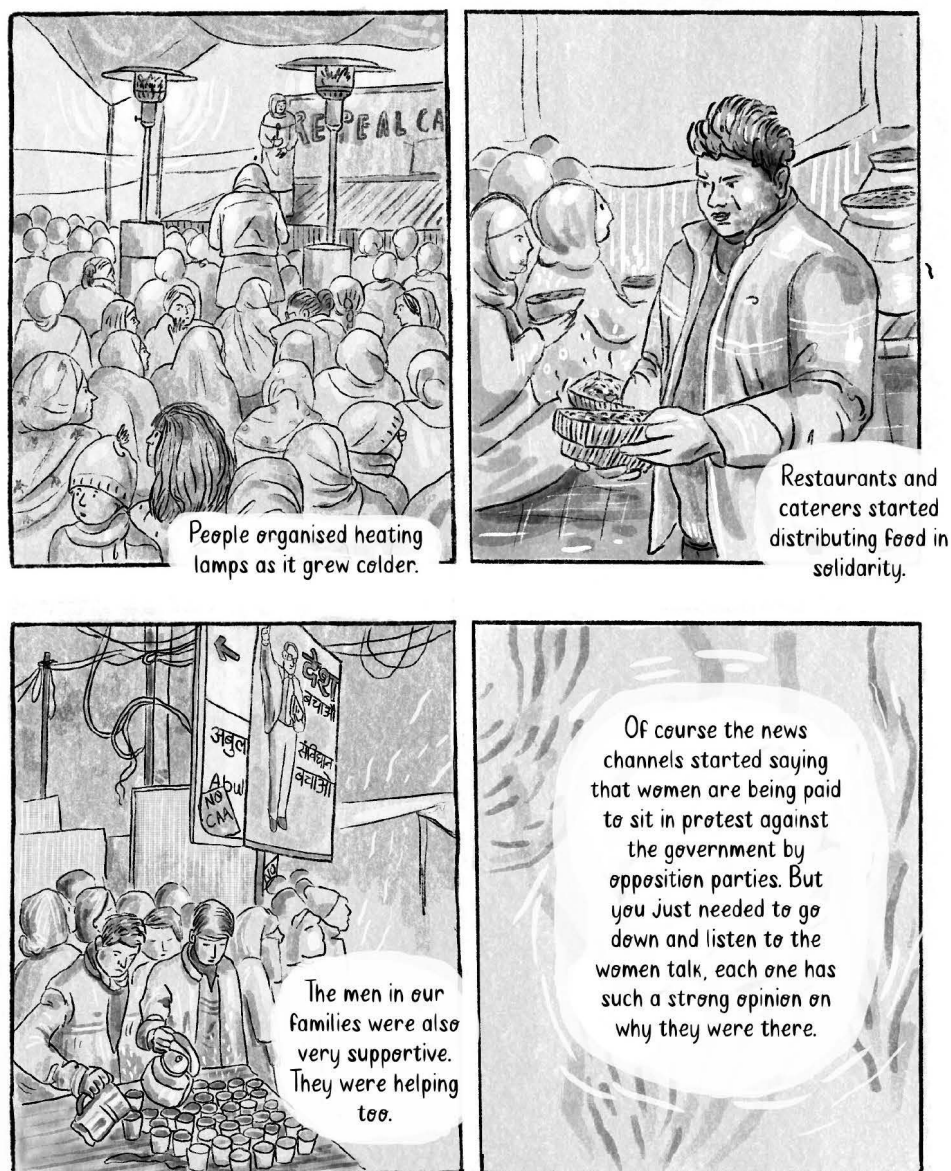
47

Figure 2. Men helping the women at the protest site. Excerpted with permission from *Shaheen Bagh: A Graphic Recollection* (p. 47) by Ita Mehrotra. © Ita Mehrotra.

an understanding of confidentiality as an affect, implied symbolically in the graphic gestures and in the sensitive content of their conversation, rather than being stated outright.

Reclaiming the tea stall as a site of female bonding produces defiance as an affect when it comes to socially prescribed gender roles. The sit-in protest at Shaheen Bagh for close to three winter months required essential needs like hunger and warmth to be met. Men from different religious ethnicities and occupations assisted the women in large numbers in fulfilling these necessities, although they were not allowed to enter the women's enclosure (Farooqi, 2020: n. p.). Sikh-Punjabi and Muslim men shared food, braved the cold along with the women, and donated money for snacks, blankets, and rugs (see **Figure 2**). Although such care responsibilities are generally expected to be fulfilled by women while men engage in discussions, defiance of those expectations functioned here as another affect used strategically.

Moreover, the fact that this act of rebellion took place on the male-dominated city streets makes it doubly defiant. Shilpa Phadke, *et al.* (2011) claim that although and even for the Hindu middle-class woman, the idea of 'loitering' or existing without the intention of doing a chore on the street is demonized by the society as 'mad', 'bad' or 'dangerous' (Phadke, *et al.*, 2011: 15); it is not very different for Muslim women except for an added

complexity: '... the fact that their entire community is looked down upon with hostility, and lives in fear of violence, means that they not only have decreased opportunities to venture out of community boundaries but also that their movements and behaviour are more closely policed by their families and community' (2011: 46-47). In the Shaheen Bagh protest, the opposite happens, and it is the men in Muslim families as well as from other communities who do chores like cooking and distributing food, while the women are engaged in political conversations, usually considered to be the men's forte. However, the caption bubble covering the last panel in **Figure 2** says that media channels were propagating that the women were 'paid' by the 'opposition' to sit there, which politicises the affects involved in food sharing in the government's favour.

In January 2020, Amit Malviya, the BJP IT Cell Head, claimed that the Muslim women at Shaheen Bagh were backed by Muslim men and were getting remunerated for their efforts with 500-1200 rupees and a plate of biryani (Salam and Ausaf, 2020: 16). Malviya tweeted a video, making these claims, which also added that 'the more hours each woman sits, the more money she makes' (*Times Now*, 2020: n. p.). Apart from filing a defamation suit against Malviya, the women responded to this allegation with an invitation: 'Come to my house, my daughter-in-law makes the best biryani. We will serve you' (Salam and Ausaf, 2020:156). In **Figure 2**, we see a different sort of invitation in the words in the speech bubble: 'But you just need to go down and listen to the women talk,' on a page filled with panels focused on men serving food. The gutters again become crucial to this interpretation here since in reading comics, that is where 'human imagination takes two separate images and transforms them into a single idea' (McCloud, 1994: 66)[3].

The invitation is used by the Muslim women of Shaheen Bagh as a non-violent affective strategy, inviting people for food and then cooking and serving it is an act of care with associated affects that are rooted in gender bias. Traditionally, cooking and serving food (as well as all other forms of care work) have been associated with women in a patriarchal social setting. Doing them well become acts of doing femininity correctly (Limeberry, 2014: 29; Thomas, 1993: 666). Interestingly, for the women in Shaheen Bagh, promising to cook and serve food to their opponents is 'a source of potential empowerment and social engagement' (Limeberry, 2014: 36) while simultaneously being 'a site of oppression and structural disadvantage' (2014: 36). As an act of non-violence, the women, by saying these words, appear to cohere to the oppressive structure of mandatory care work, while the real objective behind the invitation is to diffuse the hatred and suspicion circulated by the right-wing around the food cooked and served at the protest site. Myrte E. Hamburg, *et al.* (2014) write that offering food is not only a sign of caring for the other, thus building an empathetic relationship between the provider and the receiver but is also a form of emotion regulation in the receiver. This primarily takes place due to every individual's association of positive feelings with food and feeding. These feelings include the association of food with the satisfaction of a basic need as well as affects like 'empathy and supportive behaviour' (Hamburg, *et al.*, 2014: 5), which might aid the individuals involved to draw closer and to make 'allies' out of 'enemies' (2014: 5). Therefore, the prospect of feeding here is intended to regulate the feelings of suspicion around sharing of food at the protest site by converting suspicion into love and comradeship.

The protest strategy of mobilising affects through food sharing is rooted in the Sikh religious tradition of *langar*.[4] Cooking or serving food was not solely left to the men but was a unified act of service, however, the men doing it voluntarily, irrespective of caste or religion, were seen by the women as 'helping' (see **Figure 2**), which is significant because in most Indian households, men do not share the load of domestic work. In Mehrotra's book (2021), we see this gesture from men on page 47 and then on pages 60 and 61, with a sequence of showing women's hands rolling and patting the dough. These panels on the two pages create a temporal continuity by depicting a similar scene at the protest site, finally ending in a panel on page 61 itself, showing both men and women from all communities standing together with hands on each other's backs. The use of *langar* by Muslim and Sikh men and women to combat Muslim persecution under Hindu fanaticism recontextualises *langar* in a unique expression of secularism. At the same time, it challenges gender roles in both communities, underlining the importance of seeing Shaheen Bagh as a feminist radical social protest. *Langar* has also been used later by the farmers in Punjab to protest the Farm Bills in 2021 (Sandhu, 2022: n. p.), continuing the deployment of this protest strategy in South Asian resistance.

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[3] Scott McCloud (1994) says that we are able to construct this 'continuous, unified reality' (McCloud, 1994: 67) of a narrative despite the panels 'fracturing' time and creating a 'jagged, staccato rhythm of unconnected moments' (1994: 67) because we are using the gutters as 'closures' (1994: 67). Closures are this practice of seeing unconnected parts but stringing them together to form a whole connected narrative (1994: 63).

[4] Michel and Ellen Desjardins (2009: 4) write that the *langar* has been crucial to community building in Sikh religious and cultural history. It was inspired by the Sufi tradition and by Guru Nanak's (the first Sikh guru or prophet) concern for feeding the poor and destitute against the dictates of a caste conscious society.

SONGS

Mobilising affects of safety through singing songs is another protest strategy that was used in Shaheen Bagh. Affects like persuasiveness, affective information, excitement, inspiration, empathy and hope are central to communal singing, the affective quality of protest songs has played a crucial role for centuries in mobilising people for resistance. In India, although protest songs have been around since the anti-colonial and anti-caste movements in the 1930s, they were formally adopted in the 1940s by the Communist party's cultural wing, The Indian People's Theatre Association (Pande, 2013: n. p.). During the Shaheen Bagh protests, many songs and even hip-hop music became popular channels for dissent like Varun Grover's '*Kagaz Nahi Dikhaenge*' (We Refuse to Show Our Articles) (2019), Faiz Ahmad Faiz's '*Hum Dekhenge*' (We Will See) (composed originally in 1979), Arivarasu Kalainesan's '*Sanda Seivom*' (We will fight) (2020), and Divine and Dub Sharma's 'Azadi' (Freedom) (2016, inspired from the words of Jawaharlal Nehru University's student-activist, Kanhaiya Kumar's speech), among others. In fact, the hip-hop protest culture gained a new momentum in India due to the songs directly composed to resist CAA (Ramadurai, 2022: n. p.). To discuss the composition and circulation of these songs in detail here is beyond the scope of this article. I shall focus instead on how they have been represented in Mehrotra's book (2021) and how certain lines from the songs have functioned visually and affectively in those pages. However, a brief background on the songs is required to understand their impact as seen in Mehrotra's book.

Two songs whose performance has been illustrated in the book are Varun Grover's '*Kagaz Nahi Dikhaenge*' and Faiz Ahmad Faiz's '*Hum Dekhenge*.' '*Kagaz Nahi Dikhaenge*' is a poem that Grover wrote and then recited on Twitter in Dec 2019 to protest the CAA and NRC. It is inspired by Rahat Indori's poetry and a Bangla anti-CAA protest slogan, '*Amra kagoj dakhabo na* (We Will Not Show Our Papers)' against the CAA. Opposition leaders like Shashi Tharoor and Sitaram Yechury shared Grover's poem and it circulated widely, becoming the 'anthem' against CAA and NRC (*Outlook* Web Bureau, 2019: n. p.). '*Hum Dekhenge*', on the other hand, by leftist poet and revolutionary, Faiz Ahmad Faiz, was first published in 1980 in his collection, *Mere Dil Mere Musafir* (Dubrow, n. d.: n. p.). The poem's use during the anti-CAA protests started with a controversy: on Dec 17, 2019, IIT Kanpur's students started protesting police brutality on Jamia Millia Islamia's students. The poem was recited by a student to a crowd of fellow student protestors, and this was recorded and put on Twitter. A post-doctoral faculty member lodged a complaint against the use of this poem because its lines allegedly invoked 'communal sentiments' (Dubrow, n. d.: n. p.). It did not, however, stop the poem from being adopted as another protest anthem against the CAA and NRC. Not only was the poem used in India but also abroad in the many global demonstrations against the CAA. For instance, in one such protest held in Cape Town, South Africa, a woman named Kathyayini Dash sang this song into a microphone outside the Indian Consulate (Dubrow, n. d.: n. p.). It became a symbol of the anti-CAA protests worldwide and eventually the cover design of Ita Mehrotra's book (Mehrotra, 2021: cover design).

Protest songs offer forms of truth that challenge power structures, empower participants and other listeners to fight, spreading information that builds the mass of the movement, and overall, can facilitate social change (Cort, 2013: 5). These functions help understand how songs function affectively in Mehrotra's *Shaheen Bagh*, which depicts the auditory effects of the songs through a visual medium. There has been an adoption of Urdu/Hindi poetry into songs for some time in India, although '*Hum Dekhenge*' had already been sung as a protest song in a different context in Pakistan earlier. By depicting the effect of these songs in comic form enables the representation of these sentiments captured in the lyrics in a medium that can portray the emotions that remain ineffable through solely words or images (Salmi, 2021: 171)

Poems sung as songs during protests created the atmosphere for action and charged the participants emotionally. Tiina Rosenberg (2013) mentions that creating an 'atmosphere' is as important for staging a protest as the physical location, and music plays a part in the former by acting as a 'mediator and cohesive element' as well as evoking 'strong corporeal responses' (Rosenberg, 2013: 179-80) among protestors. These corporeal responses are embodied affects, as per her understanding (2013: 180). She conceives affects as purely bodily reactions to a stimulus (2013: 180), while the definition of affects I am working with in this article, straddles both physiological and emotional realms. In contrast, Dard Neuman (2008) shows how protest music affects listeners emotionally and conceptually. However, since he does not talk about the body, I will be using his ideas in conjunction with Rosenberg's in this discussion.

Neuman refers to sociologist R. Serge Denisoff's term 'magnetic song of persuasion' (Neuman, 2008: 2) to describe protest songs, which are as we see, purposefully affective. They are clear in their political significance, and this is the goal of creating and singing these songs in the first place - 'identifying problems and prescribing clear solutions' (2008: 3). This makes it easier for them to influence outsiders to join the movement by making them aware of the grievances fuelling the protest and its goals (2008: 2-3). In this way, it mediates between the protestors and onlookers and strives to create between them the bond that Butler (2020: 16) has mentioned in her book (Neuman, 2008; Rosenberg, 2013). Thus, persuasiveness operates through protest songs to attract the mind and the body towards forming affective solidarities with other members of the movement.

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Figure 3. Women waving their *dupattas* and singing. Excerpted with permission from *Shaheen Bagh: A Graphic Recollection* (p. 80) by Ita Mehrotra. © Ita Mehrotra.

In the depiction of the protest in Mehrotra's book (2021), the protest songs are 'lifting spirits' (see **Figure 3**). The scene in the drawing covering the full page shows the words of a song charging up the crowd as they fling their *dupattas* into the air in excitement, singing the lyrics. Other women take pictures, documenting this moment for inspiration for those who will see the video/photos, whether posted online or circulated via messengers (see **Figure 3**). The representation of bodies and minds present in this scene creates images of solidarity through performing protest songs together in order to garner support for their cause.

In the 'magnetic song of persuasion' (Neuman, 2008: 2), information becomes affective because the knowledge of the cause, the demands, and the goals presented through the songs excite empath and even a sense of responsibility for the people protesting. The women disseminate this affective information by singing these songs to draw more and more people in a short time. Persuasiveness lies in the information in the songs that influences the judgment of recipients to form attitudes or take actions, based on whether this affect is positive or negative (Albarracin and Kumkale, 2003: 453). This is evident in the way Grover and Faiz's poems/songs became viral and

drew in voices from all over the world in support of the Shaheen Bagh women, and other anti-CAA protests in the country.

Along with such affective information, outsiders are also drawn in through the generation of empathy, transforming 'the passive listener into an active participant' (Neuman, 2008: 3). The affects that are in play here are empathy and hope, 'lifting spirits' (see **Figure 3**) signifies a resurgence of hope. Juan Rene Carrillo (2014) highlights this affective strategy in the context of the US Civil Rights Movement. At that time, songs/music in African American churches were used to promote, as J. E. Williams said, a 'culture of hope,' which 'provided boycotters with a range of meanings to find solace and empowerment in giving hope to succeeding generations that it was possible to abolish oppression' (quoted in Carrillo, 2014: 6-7). Mehrotra's book (2021) similarly allows the reader to visually trace the operation of such musical affects in a graphic medium, for instance in the way the *dupattas* flutter like flags of freedom with the lyrics of the song, which translates in English as 'The answer will be found in the air; the answer will be found in the breeze' (see **Figure 3**). The hope for an answer to their call for freedom from oppression, is depicted in drawing the lyrics adrift, metaphorically embodying that affect. Subir Dey and Prasad Bokil (2021) call this representation of sound 'sound-symbolic words' (Dey and Bokil, 2021: 1080), which are 'located between the art and the text, an element that is meant to be read (like text) as well as viewed (like an image)' (2021: 1080). The reader can visually experience that strategic construction of a 'culture of hope' (J. E. Williams as quoted in Carrillo, 2014: 6) with for example how '*Hum Dekhenge,*' a song which became most popular during the protests has been represented metaphorically by paper boats on water (Mehrotra, 2021: 63-64, 111-117), denoting a kind of flow of a 'culture of hope' (J. E. Williams as quoted in Carrillo, 2014: 6). This image of paper boats is a representation of a similar creation seen on the streets of Shaheen Bagh during the protests, inspired by the emotion in '*Hum Dekhenge'*. Paper boats were arranged in the shape of a heart (Mehrotra, 2021: 64) and at the actual protest site, and the text of the poem, '*Hum Dekhenge,*' was placed below, accompanied by a toy tank, to denote 'the military's small power when compared to that of poetry' (Dubrow, n. d.: n. p.). The state's authoritarian regime is represented by the military, and poetry or song symbolises the struggle against it, cutting a benign figure of secularism and equality that the Constitution of India traditionally upholds.

This performance of songs underlines their non-violent identity, much like Judith Butler's (1999) concept of performativity, which states that the gender and sexuality of individual subjects are cemented through their repeated performances of these identities through acts, through language, and through the categorical relations of opposition with members of other gender identities. By singing songs in contrast to using military violence, the participants of Shaheen Bagh protests are building an image of their struggle as welcoming, whilst the rigid citizenship laws of the Indian government build walls against religious minorities. Moreover, the lyrics of the songs sung like these lines from Grover's 'Kagaz Nahi Dikhaenge' (2019) - '*Tum aansu gas uchaloge, Tum zeher ki chai ubaloge, Hum pyaar ki shakkar ghol ke usko, ghat-ghat-ghat pee chayenge*' (You will spray tear gas, You will brew the poisoned tea of hate, We will stir the sugar of love in it, and drink it up in one go) - further emphasise the strategic performance of songs to affectively establish a loving, peaceful identity against the government's violent championing of divisive sentiments.

'*Hum Dekhenge'* was composed by Faiz originally in 1979, to protest the oppressive regime of Zia-Ul-Haq. The refrain of this song also features on the cover of the book on a placard held by a woman in hijab standing in a puddle of water. There are circular lines around her that show winds blowing. The use of these different images of flow (of water and of air) visually depicts the strategic use of affects through protest songs. One of the ways in which Seigworth and Gregg (2010) theorise affect in political activism is

> [....] the hard and fast materialities, as well as the fleeting and *flowing* ephemera, of the daily and the workaday, of everyday and every-night life, and of 'experience' (understood in ways far more collective and 'external' rather than individual and interior), where persistent, repetitious practices of power can simultaneously provide a body (or, better, collectivized bodies) with predicaments and potentials for realizing a world that subsists within and exceeds the horizons and boundaries of the norm. (Seigworth and Gregg, 2010: 7) [emphasis mine]

Put simply, affects are 'intensities' (Seigworth and Gregg, 2010: 7) generated in the repetition of diurnal acts of political resistance which bind bodies into a collective. These intensities then help these collectives to realise and imagine an alternative reality, different from what exists in the present. The way that happens is when these intensities are channelled through 'repetitive practices of power' (2010: 7), for instance, in the repetitive singing of protest songs during a protest can produce intensities/affects like defiance and persuasiveness. These intensities are also 'fleeting and flowing' (2010: 7) and that's how they travel within the collective. Anti-CAA protest songs like '*Kaagaz Nahi Dikhaenge*' (2019) and '*Hum Dekhenge*' (1979) going viral to produce similar sentiments in people worldwide who were against these draconian laws is a good example of this phenomenon. The 'culture of hope' (J. E. Williams as quoted in Carrillo, 2014: 6), is built through the 'flowing' (Seigworth and Gregg, 2010: 7) of such intensities that are mediated through the performance of protest songs.

Music is used as an affective strategy to arouse empathy. Empathy can be understood to be of two kinds– one, passive bystander empathy, which is the ability to perceive others' emotions and understand their challenging situation, an ability that is innate to the human brain; and two, active empathy, in which one performs care acts for 'emotionally connecting with another person's need for support' (Berardi, *et al.,* 2020: 59). This can be effective in forming communities and solidarities, especially during times of crises (2020: 61). Drawing the lyrics of '*Hum Dekhenge'* across pages till the end of the graphic recollection in a kind of visual, symbolic flow evokes empathy as 'emotional capital' (Dunn, 2004: 235), which functions as a 'resource for mobilizing potential participants and for sustaining their involvement' (2004: 236). Through informing and persuading the bystander, affective empathy is evoked by the songs sung by protestors to facilitate and embed care acts like sitting at the site in solidarity, spending nights in the cold, and stretching oneself to the utmost for the cause by bringing children there, and the men helping with the provision of food and warmth through distribution of blankets. In Mehrotra's pages, we see more and more women and men join in as the lyrics flow out. However, music also has other functions in protests such as historicising truths and challenging power structures, and according to Rosenberg. '*Kagaz Nahi Dikhaenge'* (2019) by Varun Grover, another popular song of this movement, serves this purpose.

We see the refrain of Grover's song floating above a crowd of protestors (Mehrotra, 2021: 86) as the graphic narration informs how Shaheen Bagh's impact spread far and wide like in Bihar, tracing the reach of empathy. This song, while expressing defiance as one of its affects, is centred on an expression of self-suffering as an acceptable alternative to violence, in order to differentiate oneself from the government's character. The women are protecting lives and engaging in non-violence by not doing what the opponent are inflicting on them. While the Hindu right-wing seemingly does not value their lives, the protestors do not replicate such sectarianism. The strategy of self-suffering is not simply a passive immolation of the self -Roberto Baldoli (2019) cites Mahatma Gandhi to claim that self-suffering might also have 'the intent to harm' (Gandhi as quoted in Baldoli, 2019: 9), which can be exemplified through fasting 'deployed wrongly' (2019: 9) or by causing 'emotional and moral punishment of the other' (2019: 9). In refusing to show the papers, a 'moral punishment' (2019: 9) is inflicted on the authoritarian government by claiming rights to live on the country's land without obeying the government's draconian laws. For instance, one woman in the novel is seen demonstrating a deeper significance to the activists' refusal to show documents: 'The money that will be spent in the process of creating a countrywide NRC is ours. We will not let this happen' (Mehrotra, 2021: 44). The song also hearkens back to Hindu-Muslim unity under secularism, the protestors' assertion of power does not shy away from expressing 'rage, indignation, or aggression' (Butler, 2020: 21) but avoids physical attacks, pursuing non-violence aggressively (2020: 21). Thus, the social relationship between the protestor and government remains cordial.

ART

The constituent affects of safety mobilised through the display of artworks utilises Baldoli's concept of 'moral punishment' (Gandhi as quoted in Baldoli, 2019: 9). Shaheen Bagh's artwork, as represented in Mehrotra's book (2021), includes posters, installations, and objects used for symbolic purposes like the black balloons and the slippers left on empty cots from the movement. In the Shaheen Bagh protest, sarcasm is deployed to challenge the cynicism and popular perception of BJP's invincibility:

> Hegemonic parties sustain their power by convincing people of their invincibility. This invincibility is always a myth, but it becomes a self-perpetuating myth when it spreads outside the core of its supporters. When even opponents start to believe this myth of invincibility, they either collude with the ruling regime or are reduced to paralyzing cynicism. (Ali, 2020: n. p.)

Mocking and exposing the facade and the mythical nature of such invincibility can be a powerful tool of affective resistance. In the novel, there is an image in the book of a woman holding a poster that says '*Yahan pichle saal ki topi nahi mil rahi. Inko 1970 ke papers chahiye*?!' (translated below by Mehrotra as: 'Here we can't find last year's winter caps and they want us to find papers from 1970?!') (Mehrotra, 2021: 28). Maria Brock (2018) calls such sarcasm 'ironic protest' (Brock, 2018: 282), and says that this is as much a response to an authoritarian regime as it is to cynicism. Brock writes that sarcasm and cynicism are jointly a psychological product of the modern social condition (2018: 282). However, contrary to what she argues - that such use of sarcasm is futile and not serious activism - I posit that sarcasm can be useful as an affective strategy in such anti-government protests. Political comics are frequently based on this affect, through caricatures and other satirical depictions of influential figures, political comics use sarcasm to criticise and point out social and political foibles. They function as 'mechanisms for social control, reflecting conflict and maintaining dominant social structures' (Chen, *et al.,* 2017: 132-137). The poster does not use pictorial caricatures but the mockery of government mandates in the CAA/NRC laws by juxtaposing citizenship papers with last winter's caps, functions as a trenchant caricature.

Figure 4. Detention centers in Assam. Excerpted with permission from *Shaheen Bagh: A Graphic Recollection* (p. 44) by Ita Mehrotra. © Ita Mehrotra.

Figure 5. The mock detention centre at Shaheen Bagh. Excerpted with permission from *Shaheen Bagh: A Graphic Recollection* (p. 62) by Ita Mehrotra. © Ita Mehrotra.

The above panels are from two separate pages but read together operate effectively if one wants to understand the affective strategies of the detention centre installation at Shaheen Bagh. The panels in **Figure 4** are intended to provoke horror. The top panel shows a woman holding a drawing of the detention centre in Assam. She says that her husband has been taken to one of them and the subsequent panels provide a snapshot of what those centers look like as the woman narrates her story. The panels, particularly the one at the bottom of **Figure 5**, brings the horrific concept of the detention centre even closer to the everyday reality of the people outside Assam by depicting the model installed at the protest. The mock detention centre is shown to have a few children and people wandering peacefully, looking at the drawings hung inside (see **Figure 5**). One panel shows drawings hung everywhere on the street, starting with just a caption bubble saying, 'And how much art and poetry filled up the whole area'. The contrast created on these pages implies that the women at the site were creating art and bringing people together while the government was creating fear and dividing them. The detention centre becomes that symbolic node which is imbued strategically with these affects– one of solidarity and respect for the Constitution because the posters in the model included those of B. R. Ambedkar and J. L. Nehru among others, in contrast to the fear and hatred mobilised by the current government's detention centers in Assam. If one goes by Butler's definition of care as providing 'social and economic forms of support for life' (Butler, 2020: 39), the government might be seen as the primary caregiver. The Model Detention Center Manual, prepared and circulated by the government, outlines a wide range of facilities under basic human needs to be provided in the detention centers, but in reality, many have been found to have died while staying in the detention camps due to cruel and unsustainable conditions (*The Logical Indian*, 2019: n. p.; Maanvi, 2019: n. p.). The installation, and its portrayal in Mehrotra's book, underlines the denial of care to the Muslims in India from the government through its stark depiction of the horror. An element of satire is working here too: Salmi writes that 'satirical images capture the tension between the ludic and the rigid in the comics narrative system' (Salmi, 2021: 181). The model detention centre on page functions as a caricature of the caricature in Shaheen Bagh. The caption bubble in the top panel says: 'Protestors gathered in Khureji Khas in Delhi and released thousands of black balloons. Their slogans could be heard for miles around' (Mehrotra, 2021: 72). The image of women and a few men and children holding balloons which are seen floating up in the sky over the traffic includes shouts of '*Inquilab Zindabad* (Long Live the

Revolution)' (2021: 72), intended to symbolically shame the government, 'in shame how [one is] situated becomes visible, creating a paralysis that may lead to a resolution in an apology' (2020: 42).

The panel depicting flip-flops on empty charpoys (Mehrotra, 2021: 31) function as stand-ins for the women who had to go home because of the onset of the Covid 19 pandemic in India. A caption bubble inside the panel says: 'But it was only a matter of days before the site was forcefully closed off'' (2021: 31). This strategic placement of the flip-flops to suggest resilience and determination are 'symbols of protest' (2021: 31). There is another inset of a sheet of article with these words scribbled in hand:

> 25 March 2020 NEW DELHI: The nearly 100-day long protests came to an end on Tuesday, with Delhi police and paramilitary forces clearing the site on Tuesday. 'Many of us felt that if we don't give up the space now then we won't be able to reclaim -' (Mehrotra, 2021: 31)

The writing is abruptly cut off there. While there is the resigned acceptance of an end to the protest, whose strength is underlined in its longevity ('100 days'), there is a promise to 'reclaim' (Mehrotra, 2021: 31), with a return and resilience in the voices of those oppressed under Hindu supremacy. The flip-flops are, therefore, also reminiscent of the undefeatable nature of the protestors. Here again, a 'culture of hope' (J. E. Williams as quoted in Carrillo, 2014: 6) is constructed through the artistic deployment of such a symbol.

CONCLUSION

Ita Mehrotra's *Shaheen Bagh: A Graphic Recollection* (2021) is a journalistic memoir whose graphic medium functions as an intermediary text, presenting the strategies of Shaheen Bagh protest, Delhi, within an affective framework. This framework articulates political resistance on the part of ordinary Muslim women (homemakers, aged women, and a few lower-middle class professionals). Affects related to non-violence and safety were used strategically by these women to fight their disenfranchisement under the new CAA and NRC laws. Such affects were mobilised through social practices such as sharing food, singing songs, and displaying artwork at the protest site.

Shaheen Bagh challenged the binary of appropriately gendered use of space whilst also protesting Hindu nationalism and anti-Muslim attitudes in modern India, and raising important questions about the relationship between gender, non-violence, and political activism. It can be seen as manifesting Butler's ideas of non-violence as an effective tool of resistance, as Shaheen Bagh formed solidarities which are crucial to the survival of a secular democracy. The necessity of strengthening ethnic and gender solidarities not just within the nation but also abroad is through the generation of positive political affects. Sharing food, performing protest songs, and making art, helped generate these positive affects which enabled the movement to remain non-violent despite an aggressive government backlash. Mehrotra's graphic memoir participates in this feminist collective struggle as a postcolonial narrative that bears witness, testifying to and archiving a historical protest (Mehta and Mukherjee, 2015: 3). The novel traces the operation of affective protest strategies to oppose ethnocentric citizenship laws, the illegalisation of minority lives, and the unchecked rise of detention centers under the current right-wing nationalist, Hindu majoritarian government in India.

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Shaheen Bagh and the Politics of Protest in the Anti-CAA Movement in India

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Published: March 1, 2023

ABSTRACT

This article attempts to understand the pathways and politics of resistance within the anti-CAA/NRC (Citizenship Amendment Act/National Register of Citizenship) protests in India. Led and organised by Muslim women, the activists living in the locality of Shaheen Bagh emerged as a powerful symbol of resistance against, and reimagination of, hegemonic notions of nationalism, secularism, citizenship, and belonging in contemporary India. By exploring the resistance seen in Shaheen Bagh as a case study, our analysis tries to understand the ways in which the protest was a reflection of emergent solidarity, engendered in part by the communalisation of everyday life in India and the rise of Hindu majoritarianism. We contend that the actions in Shaheen Bagh should be seen as symbolising an organic resistance movement located at the intersection of gender and religion. This research aims to raise the following questions: How did the activists from Shaheen Bagh navigate its potential as a gender-based protest movement while framing a political opposition to CAA/NRC? How does the idea of Shaheen Bagh offer us new vocabularies of thinking about alternative democratic futures through the prism of prefigurative politics? This article suggests we need to resist a linear or coherent reading of the protest and instead attend to its fragmentary, contested, and contradictory forms.

Keywords: Hindu nationalism, Shaheen Bagh, anti-CAA protests, prefigurative politics

INTRODUCTION

In December 2019, Shaheen Bagh, one of the localities in the Jamia Nagar area of New Delhi became the epicentre of resistance against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in India. The occupation-style protest, held in a Muslim-majority neighbourhood and led by Muslim women, became a significant event in the contemporary Indian political landscape. The opposition to the Act stemmed from its exclusionary logic in the immediate sense, but also from the wider anti-Muslim sentiments that have intensified in India under the Bharatiya Janata Party's rule since 2014. CAA is an amendment to the Citizenship Act of 1955. Under the Act, fast-track Indian citizenship is extended to Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis, and Christians who had migrated to India before the end of December 2014 from the Muslim-majority nations of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. In excluding Muslims from this provision, the amendment introduced religion as a qualifier for citizenship for the first time in the history of modern India, a secular state.

For Irfan Ahmad (2020), the law reflected a form of 'legal populism' that effectively creates exclusionary categories of authentic people, denoted by Hindus and other non-Muslims, against an inimical 'Muslim Other' within the country. According to Ahmad, the law 'installs a Hindu home' in India and manifests the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) reimagination of India as a Hindu nation-state. The promulgation of the CAA was followed by the announcement of a nationwide National Register of Citizenship (NRC). The NRC is a government registry that would identify legal citizens of India based on documentary proof. Read in conjunction with each other, the dual policies of CAA-NRC are notable for their ostensible anti-Muslim intent. While the NRC calls into question the citizenship status of all Indians, the CAA extends a safety net to communities other than Muslims.

These laws need to be understood as complementary instruments that further the ethno-nationalist agenda of the BJP (Jaffrelot, 2021) in India, which has increasingly turned to legislative changes to promote its ideology. Since the re-election of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2019, the government has introduced legislation criminalising

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triple talaq,[1] dissolved the semi-autonomous status of the Muslim-majority state of Jammu and Kashmir, and expedited the construction of a Hindu temple over the ruins of the historic Babri *Masjid* (mosque). Resultantly, the ratification of CAA was recognised by many as an attempt to strip Muslims in India of their citizenship status. It set off a wave of protests across India in the first widespread expression of resistance to the BJP's ideology of *Hindutva* (ideology of Hindu nationalism). Several student groups and civil society organisations participated in demonstrations led by Muslims to oppose the amendment in many cities. The capital city of New Delhi emerged as the heart of anti-CAA protests in India.

In terms of the protest at Shaheen Bagh, its location in a Muslim-majority neighbourhood played a crucial role in fostering the Muslim women-led sit-in at the site. Shaheen Bagh is situated at the convergence of several Muslim residential localities. The area is home to Muslims of divergent socio-economic backgrounds, including labouring classes, wealthy businessmen, and white-collared professors teaching at the adjacent University of Jamia Millia Islamia (JMI). In her work on Muslim segregation, Ghazala Jamil (2014) has noted JMI to be an important consideration in motivating Muslim relocation to Jamia Nagar during the rise in communal tensions in the 1990s. As a result, JMI has always held aspirational status for the residents of Jamia Nagar due to its promise of socio-economic mobility. Considering the intricate ties between the occupants of Shaheen Bagh and JMI (Farooqi, 2020), it is easy to understand why the area erupted into protests when the Delhi police stormed the campus of JMI on 15 December 2019 and attacked the students demonstrating against the CAA. The protest at Shaheen Bagh started as an organic gathering of worried family members, neighbours, civil society individuals, and students and eventually evolved into a momentous sit-in that lasted for a hundred days.

The most notable aspect of the demonstration was the overwhelming presence and visibility of Muslim women at the protest site. Shaheen Bagh was 'organized, led and sustained by Muslim women' (Bhatia and Gajjala, 2020: 6287) from the area. Given the popular representations of Muslim women as 'victims of Islam and Muslim men' (Jamil, 2017: 121), this mobilisation drew intense media and popular attention. The protest represented a critical rupture in the unopposed growth of the BJP and its ideology of Hindu nationalism since 2014. Many media outlets expressed surprise over the formidable challenge offered by Muslim women to the BJP's ethno-nationalistic agenda. In recognition of its significant impact on contemporary Indian politics, our research emphasises the protest at Shaheen Bagh as being a critical event of gendered activism in South Asia. We read the Shaheen Bagh protest through the interconnected lenses of gender, religion, and spatiality to highlight its distinctive forms of resistance by drawing upon the framework of 'prefigurative politics'. The observations are drawn from documentary research of news reports and social media, anecdotal accounts, and ethnographic observations from our visits to the protest site at Shaheen Bagh and other smaller sit-ins in Delhi.

This article is organised as follows. In the first section, we look at the intersection of religion and gender to consider the ways in which the protest at Shaheen Bagh was informed by these identity markers and their impact on the nature of the protest. In doing so, we focus on historicising the participation of Muslim women as political agents against dominant narratives that dismiss them as passive subjects. In the second section, we focus on the geographical location of Shaheen Bagh to understand the significance and survival of the protest movement in the face of extensive state pressure on anti-CAA protestors. We argue that Shaheen Bagh's position within the peripheral Muslim-majority area of Delhi is essential to understanding its emergence as the face of anti-CAA resistance in India. In the third section, we study Shaheen Bag as a case of 'prefigurative politics' to assess its radical potential. In doing so, we move past instrumentalist perspectives and attend to the embodiment and realisation of alternative democratic ideals within the physical site of Shaheen Bagh. We examine the emergent subaltern solidarity and pedagogical values that were intrinsic to the protest. We conclude by reflecting on the transcendental nature of the protests and their enduring relevance for gendered activism in India.

SECTION 1

Religion and Gender at Shaheen Bagh

This section looks at how religion, gender, and nationalism were intertwined within the repertoires of protest at Shaheen Bagh. The tensions evoked by the heavy use of nationalist symbols reflected the divergent ways in which Muslims in India were confronting their relationship with the nation in light of increased polarisation and violence against Muslims. We also reframe Shaheen Bagh firmly within the long and hitherto overlooked history of Muslim women's activism in independent India. In doing so, we argue that restricting Shaheen Bagh as an instance of gendered activism ignores the role of religion in informing the protests.

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[1] Triple *talaq* is a means of instant divorce in Hanafi Islam. Muslim women's groups opposing the practice in India have been historically supported by the Hindu Right. This is because the Hindu Right sees triple *talaq* as reflective of stereotypes about Muslim men being oppressive and 'anti-women' (Agnes, 2019: 339). The bill introduced by the BJP unduly punishes Muslim men by criminalising the practice as opposed to merely banning it.

The protest at Shaheen Bagh was remarkable in its reclamation of nationalist symbols that have been used in the past to browbeat Muslims and question their patriotism towards India. The protest site was saturated with nationalist markers that asserted the Indian identity of the participants alongside religious signifiers that iterated their Muslimness. Among other things, Shaheen Bagh as a visual field was marked by the overwhelming presence of the national flag, sprawling posters of revered freedom fighters, and even a towering iron structure of the Indian map. The protesters highlighted the country's secular foundations as enshrined in the Constitution of India by participating in mass recitations of its preamble and singing the national anthem. This strategy of wielding emblems associated with Indian nationhood was used to communicate the affective ties and belonging of Muslims with the ideals of a secular India. For Ranabir Samaddar (2020), these practices were reflective of what he calls 'insurgent constitutionalism' and a politics of refusal. The key, for him, is the protesters interrogating 'how to disobey the law, yet swear by the virtue of constitution.' This formulation is complemented by Fahad Hashmi (2022) who argues that collective and individual public performances such as the protest infrastructure and installations, political graffiti, sloganeering, and more reflect the political engagement of the protesters and their 'insurgent citizen' identity.

The emphasis on nationalism by Muslims offered a challenge to their disenfranchisement through the CAA-NRC in two distinct but interrelated ways. First, it emphasised Shaheen Bagh as a people's protest that emerged to defend the secular idea of India and welcomed interfaith solidarity. The protest site evolved from a makeshift tent to a festive space hosting interfaith prayer, public speeches, exchange of books, concerts, and community kitchens run by men and women across different religious identities. In inviting people across all faiths to participate alongside the Muslim residents of Shaheen Bagh, the protesters successfully mobilised an emotional linkage between the country's religious diversity and national identity. Second, the protest at Shaheen Bagh resisted the traditional reading of citizenship as a membership status limited to the exchange between the state and its citizens. By repurposing the segregated protest site as an inclusive space amiable to students, artists, intellectuals, and ordinary civilians across all religious boundaries, Shaheen Bagh reconfigured the understanding of citizenship as a relationship *among* citizens. Shaheen Bagh's configuration as an all-embracing demonstration moored to relative Muslim neglect in the highly segregated landscape of India prompted people to view the protest as a reclamation of the diverse and secular foundations of the country.

Seeing the radical potential of Shaheen Bagh as a noticeably religious yet inclusive protest site, the BJP was actively involved in vilifying the protesters (Chatterji, 2020). Notably, Prime Minister Narendra Modi reaffirmed the necessity of the CAA at an election campaign rally in December 2019. He announced that the protesters responsible for any violence were easily identifiable 'by the clothes they wear' in an allusion to their Muslim identity (*The Economic Times*, 2019). This was an apparent effort to frame the protests as an exclusively Muslim issue and not one that was being opposed by various sections of the society. In an election rally, Home Minister Amit Shah referenced the protest at Shaheen Bagh as a rallying point for votes for his party. Shah called upon the voters to 'press the button (on the voting machine) … with such anger that its current (shockwave) is felt at Shaheen Bagh' (Mathew, 2020). In another rally, Shah said, 'voting for the BJP candidate will make Delhi and the country safe and prevent thousands of incidents like Shaheen Bagh' (Chatterji, 2020). The ubiquity and persistence of such inflammatory rhetoric against Muslims in general, and Shaheen Bagh in particular, showed that the use of nationalist symbolism was no guarantor of altering popular perceptions of the community and the protesters.

The predominantly Muslim nature of the protests also became a point of contention in liberal circles. Many protesters chanted distinctly Islamic slogans like '*Allahu Akbar* (God is Great)' and '*La ilaha illallah* (There is no God but Allah)' at protest sites. When videos of the religious sloganeering became viral on news and social media, they were used as a basis to discredit the secular foundations of the protest. Shashi Tharoor, a Member of Parliament and a liberal politician, expressed his opposition to the video by equating the slogans with Islamic extremism (*TimesNow News*, 2019). Tharoor, who avowed his support to Shaheen Bagh and JMI protesters, exemplifies the ambiguities of expressed solidarity between Muslims and liberals in India. It is apparent that the liberal support for the protesting Muslims impinged on their ability to sanitise the protests of any meaningful assertions of their Islamic identity.

This double bind also sparked debates within the Muslim community. Irene Akbar (2020) defended the practice of religious sloganeering by vindicating it as an enactment of Muslim defiance to an anti-Muslim law. In response, Hayaat Fatemah highlighted the need to create 'a space where a non-Muslim can raise the same slogans with the Muslims' (Fatemah, 2020). The unjustified equation of any Muslim religious assertion as 'communal' in wider public discourse informs this split. In some ways, this also manifested in the protesters decision to not allow any local clergy or Islamic leaders to either lead or control proceedings at the protest site. These debates also raise questions about whether Muslims can truly broker the terms of their belonging in India while claiming their religious identity.

As soon as Shaheen Bagh emerged as an important protest site within the wider anti-CAA-NRC movement in late 2019, there were organised efforts to discredit the protesters. A prominent allegation in this context was that

Figure 1. Aysha Renna, a student confronting police officers to defend a fellow student during Anti-CAA/NRC protests. 2019. © Arun Kumar and *New Indian Express*.

the women protesting were 'anti-India' and had been paid by opposition parties like the Indian National Congress. This claim was not just made by online trolls but was echoed by Amit Malviya, head of the BJP's IT Cell. Malviya released a video on Twitter with a man claiming that the women were being paid an hourly amount and made more money the longer they stayed. This unverified claim was then amplified by national media houses like Times Now and Republic TV. While a subsequent investigation by news outlets Newslaundry and AltNews exposed the role of local BJP leaders in creating the video to spread misinformation, the claims made stuck in popular understandings of the protest and protestors.

The attempt to discredit the protestors as paid actors stems from a wider disregard of Muslim women as political agents within Hindutva politics and beyond. Muslim women are often portrayed as oppressed or victims of a hegemonic, patriarchal Islamic culture within wider public discourse (Bacchetta, 1994; Jamil, 2017). The debates around issues of triple *talaq* and *purdah* (facial coverings) are often weaponised by the Hindu right to further this narrative of Muslim women as lacking any form of political agency, and these ideas can feed into the stereotypes about the social backwardness of Muslims (Agnes, 2019). Such narratives persist beyond the circles of the Hindu Right and are often endorsed by mainstream women's organisations in India. By stressing the incompatibility of women's rights and emancipation with any form of religious identification, these organisations, often overlook the implicit universalism of their own Hindu identity markers like caste names or clothing choices.

For Ghazala Jamil, the 'false universalism' of the women's movement in India reproduces the subaltern status of Muslim women given the dominance of upper-caste, upper-class Hindu women in these spaces (Jamil, 2017: 21). The ignorance of self-narratives from the Muslim community leads to scholarship that systematically treats Muslim women as silent or invisible bystanders to the everyday processes of political participation and social change that affect them significantly. In response, Muslim women's organisations embody the dual resistance at the heart of Muslim women's activism in India. Groups like the Muslim Women's Rights Network or the *Bharatiya Muslim Mahila Andolan* actively challenge the exclusionary nature of the mainstream women's movement in India as well as the religious orthodoxy within Islam that marginalises women.

Kirmani finds this vision of Muslim womanhood as existing within a 'third space' that aims to reconcile the opposition between women's rights and religious identity (Kirmani, 2009: 82). We believe situating the Shaheen Bagh protestors within this dynamic is relevant given their determined refusal to trade off their 'Muslimness' to legitimise their political claims. Instead, they located the strength of their dissent manifestly within their location as Muslim women in BJP's India. In doing so, they exposed themselves to police intimidation, hate speech by BJP leaders, and violence by Hindu vigilantes. Aysha Renna, a young student of History at JMI became the indelible image of this dual resistance when her photograph opposing the police went viral (*Yahoo News*, 2019). In the image, Aysha raises her fingers at a heavily armed policeman to protect another student who was being beaten heavily with batons. In her fearless confrontation of the state's brutality against Muslims, the otherwise defenceless Aysha became a symbol of strength, resistance, and hope.

SECTION 2

The Significance of Shaheen Bagh

Shaheen Bagh became an iconic symbol of Muslim women's resistance in India and sparked similar sit-ins that emphasised secular values and women's leadership across the country (Lahiri, 2021). Given the popularity and influence of Shaheen Bagh, there is a need to understand how it emerged as a bastion of anti-CAA opposition in India. In what ways did Shaheen Bagh offer a resonant template of resistance that drew people to the protest site and inspired others to model their own protests after Shaheen Bagh? How did the BJP and other right-wing forces respond to Shaheen Bagh's unifying potential?

Whilst the choice of Shaheen Bagh as a protest site was partly due to its closeness to JMI, it also carried the strategic advantage of being close to a significant thoroughfare. In response to the attack on JMI, the residents of Shaheen Bagh blocked the road in protest and disrupted the traffic between Delhi and the satellite city of Noida. The location of the protest site in a Muslim-dominated neighbourhood added to the protestors' sense of togetherness and safety from outside attacks and police harassment. Even though rumours of right-wing mobs planning attacks on the protest site circulated and disturbed the protestors, the protection offered by being in a Muslim locality contributed to the longevity of Shaheen Bagh. This is especially apparent in the violent police response and mob attacks on other protest sites. Occupations in other areas of Delhi proved vulnerable to police pressures and counter-mobilisations by right-wing groups due to their presence in areas with mixed religious populations. In contrast, Shaheen Bagh remained a relatively impenetrable protest site due to its location in a Muslim-majority area on the outskirts of Delhi.

Britta Ohm (2021) traces the 'legal awareness' of Shaheen Bagh residents to the Batla House encounter of 2008, where the Delhi police gunned down two Muslim men suspected to be terrorists in the Jamia Nagar area. Ohm notes that feelings of injustice and shock circulated among the residents in the aftermath of the encounter, and they were increasingly subjected to police excesses. As a result, the protestors held 'ample experience with family members being exposed to arbitrary police harassment and detention' (Ohm, 2021: 758).

Shaheen Bagh's significance was also driven by its ability to generate a potent and inclusive vision of Indian democracy that challenged the BJP's reimagination of India as an exclusionary *Hindu Rashtra* (Hindu nation). This alternative vision was implicit in the site's evolving physical and material infrastructure. Initially restricted to a marquee, the makeshift tent at Shaheen Bagh soon expanded into a large encampment. Stages emphasising open dialogue were constructed to give people space to speak, vent, and engage with each other. Shaheen Bagh housed a rich cultural ethos evidenced by the presence of political graffiti, performances of revolutionary songs and poems, intellectual and literary discussions, a visible revival of the legacy of Indian freedom fighters through homages, painted portraits, and literary texts at the site. Additionally, an informal community kitchen was set up to feed the protestors and visitors sustained by the food and supplies donated by visitors.

The physical architecture of Shaheen Bagh was charged with political meaning and attention to care that made it possible for Muslim women to participate in the protests actively. Given the disproportionate burden on women for child-rearing, housekeeping, and domestic duties, the presence of libraries, classrooms, beds, and kitchens on the protest site increasingly eschewed any logic of remaining at home for the protestors by drawing the activities of the private sphere into the protest site. These structures at the site arose out of recognising these delimiting factors for women and gave birth to a community-enabled sense of agency. The women could participate without any constraints of domestic life since the protest site mitigated their immediate concerns.

One of the volunteers running the classroom at the protest was JMI student Younus Nomani. He told journalist Ayushree Nandan that 'to encourage every woman in Shaheen Bagh to step out and resist, we created a space in the neighbourhood where their children can be looked after' (Nandan, 2020). This sentiment is echoed by Satya Prakash (2020), a volunteer at the Shaheen Bagh library. In an article, Prakash wrote that although the library was created to counter misrepresentations of the protestors as 'misguided' and 'brainwashed people' who did not understand the issues they were protesting against, the success of the initiative became apparent once the women started frequenting the library, reading books and engaging in political discussions. These statements exemplify how the evolving infrastructure of Shaheen Bagh engendered co-constitutive modes of political participation. In doing so, Shaheen Bagh promised a sense of security, political purpose, and an 'ethics of care' that precipitated its continued evolution and growing participation by women (Bhatia and Gajjala, 2020: 6291).

Beyond the emancipatory possibilities of Shaheen Bagh for Muslim women, the protests also generated inter-faith participation and solidarities among students, farmers, and civil society members. Shaheen Bagh encouraged different social groups to coexist with mutual respect through regularly-held interfaith prayers, the celebration of cultural festivals, and inter-dining at the protest site. These seemingly banal activities had revolutionary potential, considering that food, festivals, and public prayers have increasingly become sites of violence and exclusion for marginalised communities in India. As a result, the ideals of syncretism, tolerance, and diversity encouraged by Shaheen Bagh challenged the exclusionary values of Hindu nationalism. Shaheen Bagh successfully framed CAA

Figure 2. A road sign on the freeway occupied by protestors painted over to read, '*Inquilab Zindabad* (Long live the revolution)' alongside pictures of Mahatma Gandhi and B. R. Ambedkar. 2019. Picture by author.

as a political issue that threatened the secular fabric of India, even though it disproportionately affected Muslims. In mobilising 'a new vocabulary of secularism' (Laliwala, 2020), the protestors at Shaheen Bagh embodied ideals of equality, freedom, justice, and tolerance that are foundational to the Indian Constitution.

Shaheen Bagh in the Hindutva Imaginary

The BJP and the Hindu Right were acutely conscious and wary of the transformative potential of Shaheen Bagh. Since the first week of the protest, there was a concerted campaign by these groups to delegitimise the protestors and their cause. As the protest persisted and grew despite these counter-narratives and gained international attention, the response turned violent. When a four-month-old child died from exposure to cold as the mother was participating in the protests, the right-wing media painted the women and other protestors as callous, uncaring people who wilfully subjected their child to the cold weather. *OpIndia*, a media site associated with the BJP, published an article that said, 'Little by little, the life was dragged out of the child. Reports say his mother didn't even realize when the light finally ebbed away from him' (*OpIndia*, 2020). By suggesting that the mother could not realise her own child was dying (an unverified claim), the implication painted the mother and other protestors as callous and insensitive women.

Similarly, Safoora Zargar, a member of the anti-CAA Jamia Coordination Committee, was unduly arrested on the charges of organising communal violence in Delhi in February 2022. Zargar, who was pregnant at the time of her arrest, became a cause for heavy criticism of the central government since she was imprisoned during the pandemic despite her poor health. The right-wing ecosystem on social media immediately worked to discredit the sympathy and attention being drawn to this case by publishing morphed images of Zargar and claiming that she got pregnant at the protest site. In response to the criticism of the government for jailing a pregnant student during a pandemic, *OpIndia* ran an article reporting that one of the conspirators in the assassination of former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi was pregnant at the time of her arrest (*OpIndia*, 2020). By comparing Zargar, a student imprisoned without trial, to a convicted member of the terrorist group LTTE, there was a clear attempt to dehumanise Zargar and render all sympathy towards her as misplaced.

The right-wing campaign to malign the protestors was not limited to personal attacks on the women, there was an attempt to frame the protest site as 'anti-national' in itself. The wide-scale presence of Islamic symbols and Shaheen Bagh's location in a Muslim locality were used to claim that the protestors were Pakistani (that is to say foreign agitators) or anti-India. Kapil Mishra, a BJP leader who made numerous inflammatory speeches during this

period, tweeted saying 'Pakistan has entered Shaheen Bagh' and adding that 'Pakistani hooligans have captured the streets of Delhi' (*Express News Service*, 2020). Amit Shah, the Home Minister of India, laid the stakes clearly in an election rally. He asked the voters if they wanted to be on the side of 'Narendra Modi, who conducted airstrikes and surgical strikes on Pakistan's soil to kill terrorists' or with 'people who back Shaheen Bagh.' Through this false equivalence, the protest was presented as being organised and supported by people who were anti-Indian as defined by BJP.

The media actively contributed to this portrayal as well. Sudhir Chaudhary and Deepak Chaurasia, two television news anchors who had run multiple late-night shows questioning the legitimacy of the protests, were denied entry to the protest site. Sudhir Chaudhary later tweeted videos of the event and added that he thought that Indian law did not apply to Shaheen Bagh and whether he would need a new visa to enter the protest site (Azam, 2020). By reinforcing the language of access and borders, the implication was clearly to relegate the protest site as somehow 'beyond India' and hence a Pakistani space. It is evident how such narratives fed into the wider discourse of Islamophobia circulated by right-wing social media outlets that constantly label Muslims as anti-Indian.

Statements like those by Anurag Thakur, a minister in the BJP government, who called for 'traitors to be shot' while speaking about Shaheen Bagh only intensified these sentiments by openly encouraging violence (Press Trust of India, 2020). These statements inspired immediate violence when a 17-year-old boy openly fired at the protestors injuring a student, followed by another man shooting in the protest area. These instances became a precursor to the wide-scale violence that took place in February 2020 that killed 53 people, two-thirds of whom were Muslim. While the violence did not take place in the Shaheen Bagh neighbourhood, it was centred around areas like Seelampur and Jaffrabad where similar sit-ins by Muslim women had become the target for locals and BJP leaders like Kapil Mishra (Gettleman, Raj and Yasir, 2020). Many Muslims also suffered significant material loss as homes, mosques, shops, and automobiles were targeted and burnt. This was the natural culmination of the hate campaign that the BJP leaders and other right-wing groups actively channelled against the protest at Shaheen Bagh. It also reflects the deep-seated anxiety provoked by the wave of popular resistance triggered by the protests at Shaheen Bagh that represented the anti-thesis to the BJP's ideology of Hindu nationalism.

SECTION 3

Shaheen Bagh as Prefigurative Politics

On 24 March, a day after the complete lockdown announced by Prime Minister Modi came into effect, Delhi Police moved to clear the protest site at Shaheen Bagh. While the women had already suspended mass gatherings and maintained a small symbolic protest, the police were quick to dismantle the makeshift tents, speakers, and lighting equipment. The government also hired people to hurriedly paint over the graffiti and posters that had been put up in the area as the sanitisation of the space from all remnants of the protest became the state's priority. While the organisers encouraged continuing the protest symbolically through the social media hashtag #Inquilabliveson, there was an increased realisation that the state would actively resist any return of the protestors at Shaheen Bagh. As a result, this period marked increased conversation about the relative success and failure of Shaheen Bagh.

Sanjay Kumar, a professor at the Center for Study of Developing Societies, spoke about the supposed failure of Shaheen Bagh and said, 'It (the protest) did not achieve anything. The pandemic and social distancing norms cut short the protest. It ended in a dramatic manner' (Lama, 2020). On the other hand, Mohammad Ayoob, Emeritus Professor at Michigan State University, had called for the end of the protest in February. He believed that while the protestors had proven their resolve against the state, now 'they have increasingly become pawns in the electoral game being played in the national capital.' He believed the protest had achieved its objective in as much as 'they (the protestors) have squarely registered their dissent against the CAA and successfully linked the discussion of the CAA with the National Register of Citizens' (Ayoob, 2020). How do we make sense of these competing claims about the success or failure of Shaheen Bagh? How do we assess Shaheen Bagh as a form of political activism, an incipient social movement, and a protest site? In what ways did Shaheen Bagh engender alternative imaginations of political participation and democratic futures?

While Kumar believes that the inability to have the laws repealed meant the protest failed, Ayoob thinks marking an opposition to the laws was sufficient. We believe these instrumental readings of the protest at Shaheen Bagh fail to account for its generative potential. A focus on studying Shaheen Bagh through the narrow lens of means and ends overlooks the emancipatory and transformative aspects of the protest and their impact on the protestors. Thus, we suggest that studying Shaheen Bagh as a case of prefigurative politics allows us to account for its fragmented, contradictory, and contested forms. Carl Boggs defined prefigurative politics as 'The embodiment, within the ongoing political practice of a movement, of those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture and human experience that are the ultimate goal' (Boggs, 1977: 100). Thus, prefigurative politics entails 'activists

Figure 3. A sign board in Shaheen Bagh covered with posters of prominent leaders, including Mahatma Gandhi, freedom fighter Bhagat Singh, and Dalit leader Dr B. R. Ambedkar. 2019. Photo by author.

directing effort into performing now their vision of a "better world" to come' through 'organization, design, architecture, practices, bodies, or something as simple as a gesture or demeanor' (Jeffrey and Dyson, 2021: 643).

In the analysis below we study Shaheen Bagh as a case of prefigurative politics by focusing on the elements of radical experimentation and alliance building that defined the period of the occupation at Shaheen Bagh. This is relevant because as Luke Yates shows, what distinguishes prefigurative formations from other political logics like instrumental thinking, is that 'to prefigure is to anticipate or enact some feature of an "alternative world" in the present, as though it has already been achieved' (Yates, 2015: 4). In developing such alternatives, prefigurative politics allows protest movements to emerge as 'social laboratories for the production of alternative democratic values, discourse, and practices' that actively contest with and move beyond mainstream ideals (Juris, 2008: 3). We believe the subaltern alliances forged at Shaheen Bagh along with the pedagogical elements of the protest represent a clear and important instance of prefiguration. These aspects were integral to the emancipatory potential of the protest along with its ability to sustain an opposition to Hindu nationalism beyond the period of the occupation.

Subaltern Alliances at Shaheen Bagh

One of the defining images of the protest at Shaheen Bagh was the Republic Day celebrations on 26 January. The occasion is ordinarily marked by the hoisting of the national flag by the Indian Prime Minister at India Gate in Central Delhi and the accompanying parade. The protestors at Shaheen Bagh hosted their own flag hoisting ceremony, marked by a tremendous scale of public participation. The flag was hoisted jointly by Bilkis, one of the eldest protestors at the site, Radhika Vemula, the mother of Rohith Vemula, a Dalit student who died by suicide after allegations of casteism against the university administration, and Saira Bano, mother of Junaid Khan, a 16-year-old who was lynched to death in a communal incident. The event was concluded through a tableaux parade, along the lines of the official parade, which saw local artists and students decorate e-rickshaws and parade them in the nearby areas.

This 'alternative' celebration of the Republic Day was reflective of the prefigurative nature of Shaheen Bagh. The presence of Radhika Vermula and Jignesh Mevani, a Dalit MLA from Gujarat, was representative of the alliances and networks of solidarity that the protest had helped engender, particularly among the subaltern groups in India. To gauge the significance of this coalition, we need to contextualise the shifts in the Indian public sphere under the BJP and its associated right-wing organisations that are driven by the ideology of Hindutva, which understands India as the historical and religious homeland of Hindus. As argued above, this is used as a basis to paint Muslims as 'invaders,' 'foreigners' or 'anti-national' and systematically exclude them from the public sphere.

Since 2014, this has manifested in a wave of vigilante violence, legislative exclusion, and the consistent demonization of Muslims in public discourse. While the CAA and NRC legislations are one example of this process, there are other facets to this as well. There have been numerous instances of mob lynchings of Muslims over suspicions of transporting beef or cattle for slaughter (Frayer, 2019). In 2015, Muhammad Akhlaq was killed by a mob over purportedly storing cow meat in his fridge (Kumar, 2017). Multiple states in India have introduced laws that criminalise inter-faith marriage over purported fears of 'love jihad,' a conspiracy about Muslims marrying Hindu women to convert them to Islam. Muslims in Gurgaon, a city on the outskirts of Delhi, have been attacked and stopped from offering Friday prayers in public areas (*Al Jazeera*, 2021). These are just some examples that highlight the precarity of Muslim existence in contemporary India.

In such a context, the inter-faith solidarity and cross-cultural support for the protest at Shaheen Bagh were remarkable and reflected a key prefigurative element. A vital aspect of the 'alternative world' that defines prefigurative politics is its ability to reconfigure the sense of being for participants. Writing in the context of the Occupy Wall Street protests, Gitlin argued that the communal self that emerged as part of the identity of the protestors was 'prefigurative in that what it "stood for" was the virtue of encampment itself, assembly as a way of life, a form of being' (Gitlin, 2013: 9). This renewed sense of being and thinking is relevant in how it allows a reframing of the idea of community and solidarity for participants. In their work on the Gezi Park protests in Turkey, Acar and Uluğ argue that 'burgeoning solidarity between disadvantaged groups in a collective action setting' has been shown to lead to prejudice reduction, both during and after the protests (Acar and Uluğ, 2016: 167).

We see significant evidence of such transformative social relations at Shaheen Bagh, including the Republic Day celebration cited above. The community kitchen run by volunteers through the supplies donated by visitors was an undertaking of radical experimentation. There was an uninhibited inter-mixing of people of all gender, religious, caste, and class backgrounds in the preparation, distribution, and consumption of food at the protest. This is in stark contrast to the segregationist outlook that many Indians hold towards food. According to a Pew Research Center survey, 51% of Hindus say 'they would *never* eat food in the home of someone whose religion has different rules about food than theirs' (Pew Research Center, 2021). Thus, gastronomical choices have long served as a barrier within social relations in India and have been used to exclude groups like Muslims or Dalits that have low rates of vegetarianism.

While the targeting of Muslims on suspicions of eating beef was outlined above, Dalits in India have also been attacked by upper-caste groups through the practice of 'untouchability' that persists despite being outlawed by the Indian constitution. Under the logic of casteism, the mere presence or touch of a Dalit is seen as polluting by the upper castes. There have been numerous instances of Dalit cooks in public schools being sacked after upper-caste students refuse to eat food prepared by them. In stark contrast to this, Sikhs are renowned for the practice of *langar*, i.e., free community dining at *gurudwaras* (Sikh places of worship) for people from all backgrounds. The community kitchen at Shaheen Bagh, run by Sikh farmers and volunteers, embraced the principle of *langar* and offered food to all the protestors with an empathic disregard for caste and religious norms that regulate inter-dining. In making religion and caste identities redundant, the protestors came together in a clear repudiation of regressive practices that dominate social life in India.

In addition to the community kitchen and the 'alternative' Republic Day celebrations, there were other efforts at building and reforming social relations at the protest. The social media handles of Shaheen Bagh posted consistently about issues that went beyond the concerns of the protest site or the CAA-NRC legislations. On 7 January 2020, they posted in solidarity with the students at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) when right-wing mobs attacked the campus and injured multiple students (@ShaheenBaghOfficial, 2020). This solidarity was not transient or one-sided and was reciprocated by other groups. The JNU Students Union called upon students to mobilise in support of the protestors after a shooting incident in February 2020, which created a climate of insecurity at the protest site. Sikh farmers travelled in large numbers from the state of Punjab to join the protestors and volunteered at the community kitchen. Women's organisations such as the student led *Pinjra Tod* (Break the Cage) helped organise similar sit-ins in other areas of Delhi by offering organisational support and coordinating resources. It is relevant to note that the state was cognisant of this emergent solidarity and punished the participants heavily. Umar Khalid, Sharjeel Imam, Devangana Kalita and Natasha Narwal, all students from JNU were among the many arrested and jailed under the draconian UAPA over unsubstantiated claims of inciting violence and sedition. A number of these students and activists, primarily Muslims, continue to remain in jail without trial.

Protest as Pedagogy

One of the ways in which prefigurative political formations engage with local communities is through the notion of 'social centres' understood as 'practical movement projects organized by social and cultural movements' for the purpose of 'political, educational and leisure activities' (Yates, 2014: 5). According to Yates, these practices within social centers 'demonstrate how the testing, expression, and prefiguration of political meaning takes place in the

course of everyday life' (Yates, 2015: 238). This can involve 'the sharing of associated knowledge and competence among participants relating to the pursuit of social change' and enabling 'quotidian socializing that take place in and around social centers' to help manifest and solidify group networks (Yates, 2015: 238). These practices are defined as 'alternative' because they might not be directly linked to a protest's goal and are instead geared towards developing processes of future political conduct and being.

The Fatima Sheikh Savitri Bai Phule library that emerged at Shaheen Bagh was one such social centre at the protest. Mohammad Asif, an AMU student, started the library to create a constructive space for local people, particularly Muslim women, at the protest site to read literature, engage critically with political ideas, and raise questions. The library was based out of a bus stand and was named after two revolutionary women. Savitribai Phule and Fatima Sheikh were social reformers who advocated for women's education and pioneered the movement for girls' education in mid-19th century India. The library founders emphasised the vital contribution of these women to the field of education and characterized the library as 'a form of resistance' that drew on their legacy to represent 'the idea of free education, the idea of being rational, the idea to question the establishment' (Fatima Sheikh - Savitribai Phule Library, 2020). The celebration of the historically overlooked legacy of Fatima Sheikh was a gesture that communicated an effort to historicise acts of resistance by Muslim women. The politically conscious choice of naming the library was followed by the decision to inaugurate the library on 17 January 2020 to commemorate the fourth death anniversary of Dalit scholar Rohit Vemula. By invoking this subaltern heritage of resistance, the protest communicated its belief in reinforcing social ties among the most marginalised social groups in India.

The library housed several books and pamphlets on authoritarianism, the constitution, the Indian freedom struggle, democracy, feminism, religion, Dalit, and queer literature, among other things. The diverse range of topics is indicative of the kind of diverse political exposure and social justice awareness that the organisers were trying to raise among the people of Shaheen Bagh. This was reflected in the organisation of the library as a free and accessible space for all protestors and visitors to the protest site. They also asked for donations of specific titles in Hindi and Urdu to ensure that these political ideologies and historical accounts could be accessible to the non-English-speaking locals. The success of the adult library in Shaheen Bagh also led to the construction of a children's library and gallery named 'Read for Revolution' by some students from JMI.

In this sense, the library at Shaheen Bagh endorsed Ambedkar's dictum of 'Educate. Agitate. Organize' and highlighted the importance of developing critical faculties. Beyond the pluralistic and inclusive ideas of education, rights, and identity that the library sought to propagate, it also symbolised resistance and solidarity with the students of Jamia. The police attack on JMI involved a shocking incident where riot-geared police entered the university's library and brutally beat up students with batons. As a result, the university was shut down for an indefinite period, leaving students without any accessible spaces to study. Thus, the library also served as a tool for reclaiming lost spaces and recreating centers of learning that had been seized from the students.

The library at Shaheen Bagh subtly linked education to resistance by carving out a physical sphere of knowledge within the protest site. The appropriation of space to build a utopian world of uninhibited exchange of ideas, free expression, and revolutionary philosophy within the library space was an important endeavour that communicated an alternative and idealistic vision. It is important to note that Muslims have historically had the lowest literacy rate among any religious community in India, in large part due to their socio-economic marginalization (Sinha and Chowdhury, 2016). As a result, the library was a small effort to address this relative deprivation by emerging as a community space for learning and making education accessible. Along with giving people a space to read, the library regularly hosted movie screenings, recitals of protest poetry, political discussions, and lectures.

Various political leaders, university professors, filmmakers, journalists, and other intellectual figures were invited to the library. This was unprecedented considering that most intellectual activities and public discussions in Delhi occur in either the university spaces or premier cultural institutions located in the wealthy neighbourhoods of Central Delhi. While technically open to all, these institutions act as intellectual gatekeepers accessible only to those with socio-cultural capital. In this context, it is essential to underscore that the library disfigured these hegemonic spaces of knowledge and power by enabling people across gender, age, and differing social statuses to learn, interact and engage with each other. In doing so, the library served a unique pedagogical function within the protest and fulfilled its role as a 'social centre.'

CONCLUSION: SHAHEEN BAGH BEYOND SHAHEEN BAGH

While studying Shaheen Bagh as a prefigurative political formation with its stress on alternative world building allows us to move past 'means and end' dichotomies, and instrumentalist frameworks, it still requires us to ask: how is Shaheen Bagh memorialised and remembered by the protestors? What are the ways in which Shaheen Bagh and its emancipatory potential underpin the contemporary political landscape in India?

Figure 4. An outline of the Indian map with the words, 'We the people of India reject the CAA, NPR, and NRC'. Photo by author.

One way we can assess this is by looking at how Shaheen Bagh and its 'protest culture' became a catalyst for other protests. As detailed above, the protest at Shaheen Bagh inspired Muslim women all over India to come out and protest with sit-ins in all parts of the country. In November 2020, after months of protest against a string of new legislation, farmers primarily from Haryana and Punjab decided to march to New Delhi to pressure the central government. The farmers were stopped at the Delhi-Haryana border, where they then proceeded to camp in protest by occupying the highway in a demonstration that lasted for over a year. The farmers established camps on the occupied highway with tents to sleep in, daily *langar*, CCTV cameras, a medical centre, a temple, and a library. Speaking on the widespread presence of women in the farmer's protests, one protesting farmer said, 'the historical protests at Shaheen Bagh gave us the inspiration and courage to protest,' while another added that 'the women at Shaheen Bagh didn't end their protest until the government used the threat of coronavirus, we will also not go back until the laws are repealed' (*The Wire*, 2020). When the government repealed the laws after the protest, Nuzhat, a participant in the anti-CAA protests, said, 'I view it as our victory' and added, 'I am overjoyed, and my bravery has grown as a result of their resistance' (Raj and Singh, 2021).

These statements and incidents reflect the impact of Shaheen Bagh in marking the first instance of mass protest against the BJP government and its emergence as a seminal event in the history of women's political participation in India. Speaking on the second anniversary of the protests, Shubhasini Ali, president of the All India Democratic Women's Association, said the women protestors of Shaheen Bagh 'no longer cared to obey the men at their homes or outside, and came on the road in thousands to join the movement because it was a question of their children's fate and about the nation' (Basu, 2021).

The 'politicising' effect of participation in these protests on Muslim women was also significant. Speaking on the impact of the protest on her everyday life, Zeba, a participant at the sit-in inspired by Shaheen Bagh in Uttar Pradesh, said, 'We never imagined we'd be fighting a cop in the middle of the night. We now understand our strengths and weaknesses, and we know who we are.' She adds, 'I merely noticed the injustices that were occurring throughout the world, but now I don't just see them; I ask why they are occurring and why they should not' (Raj and Singh, 2021). Nuzhat, another participant, reflected on the movement's future when she said, 'If they implement NPR, NRC, and CAA, we will fight back. We may lose our lives, but we will not sit on the sidelines' (Raj and Singh, 2021).

These sentiments reflect the transcendental nature of the Shaheen Bagh protests and their enduring impact on the political imagination of the participants. In his analysis of the protest, Irfan Ahmad echoes this belief and calls the protest 'an interrupted future' and believes that the protests are not over and sees them as having laid the groundwork for 'something to come: that which is the horizon of the future' (Ahmad, 2021). This future and its divergent possibilities were starkly visible at Shaheen Bagh. On the one hand was a mock layout of a detention centre, the kind that the Indian government has started building to house those found without proper citizenship documents under the NRC. The replica was a reminder of the political future that Muslims in India have been forced to confront in the face of rising Hindu majoritarianism. On the other hand, was a model of the India Gate located in Central Delhi. This model was a memorial dedicated to all of those who had lost their lives during the anti-CAA protests. Those lives were lost in resistance to the dystopia of tomorrow for Muslims and other minorities in India. In commemorating those lives, Shaheen Bagh reinforced the call made symbolic by the protest anthem written by Aamir Aziz, '*Sab yaad rakha jaayega* (We shall remember everything).' Thus, Shaheen Bagh and its celebration of democracy and its fraternal ideals, reaffirmation of secular principles with their promise of coexistence, and emergent solidarities, held within it hope. It showed that popular resistance retains the power to oppose the erosion of India's democracy and institutional collapse in the face of Hindu majoritarianism.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Interview

Dance, Gender, and Activism in Pakistan: Interview with Performer-Activist Sheema Kermani

Priyanka Basu ¹*, Sheema Kermani ²

ABSTRACT

Sheema Kermani (1951-) is a performer and activist based in Karachi, Pakistan. Through her organisation, *Tehrik-e-Niswan* she has worked towards raising awareness of violence against women and women's empowerment. *Tehrik-e-Niswan* is a cultural organisation invested in social justice through the arts. As a dancer and theatre actor, Sheema Kermani uses her training, choreography, and pedagogy to foreground the activist potential of performing arts. Scholarship on dance and political activism within the larger global context (for example in South Africa and New Zealand) have focussed on dance's potential 'to further social justice and compassionate communities' (Shapiro, 2013: 15) and its power 'to envision, move and create change.' (Shapiro, 2016: 3) Within the contexts of the UK and USA, scholarship on dance and protest have encompassed historical enquiries (Mills, 2021), politics of representation, place, and identity (Prickett, 2013) and embodied choreographies of protest (Foster, 2003). In the South Asian context, dance as counter-hegemonic to communal politics have informed the works of artist-activist, Mallika Sarabhai in India (Grau, 2007). This interview with Sheema Kermani follows the existing strands of research on global dance and activism by focussing specifically on Pakistan. Sheema Kermani talks about her own dance pedagogy in dance and art history, her formative years in the UK and the influences of feminist and Marxist movements, and her continuing work for social justice in Pakistan in the wake of rising religious fundamentalism, gender atrocities, forced migrations and climate crisis.

Keywords: Pakistan, gender, activism, dance, Sheema Kermani

INTRODUCTION

Performer-activist, Sheema Kermani [1951-] is a prominent name not only in Pakistan but also in larger South Asia and internationally. She founded her organisation *Tehrik-e-Niswan*, a cultural action group in 1979 to work primarily with working class women. The organisation has strived to raise awareness about violence against women and the need for their empowerment. She is also one of the major proponents of the annual *Aurat* March (Women's March) movement in Pakistan that has been instrumental in bringing women into the mainstream politics of the country (Batool and Malik, 2021; Kamal, 2022). Sheema Kermani has deployed her dance (and theatre) practice as a mode of activism against religious fundamentalism and attack on basic human rights. Her views on the politics of dance in Pakistan have been published in an interview with Rekha Pande (2004). Her own essay – 'The Unchanging Reality of Male Dancers in Pakistan' (2022) – maps the history of male dancer-mentors in Pakistan and how there has been little shift in attitudes and cultural policies in Pakistan thus pushing dance to the edge of the margins in terms of social acceptability. In Pakistan, where dance is still seen as taboo and the cultural labour of the dancer is interrogated, Sheema Kermani has continued to perform, mentor and actively campaign for performing arts to be deemed respectable in an Islamic society. More recently, she was seen to appear in a cameo performance for the Coke Studio[1] Season 14 music video, '*Pasoori*' (Conflict), which has become a viral global

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[1] For detailed analysis of Coke Studio, media consumption and Pakistani modernity, see Williams and Mahmood (2019).

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phenomenon cutting across borders and linguistic boundaries; thereafter, Kermani has gained a new recognition as the '*Pasoori* dancer'.

In this interview[2], Sheema Kermani talks about her early training in dance in Pakistan under Mr. and Mrs. Ghanshyam and later in India under various mentors who trained her in Indian classical dance styles of *Odissi*, *Kathak* and *Bharatanatyam*. For her, the training in multiple dance styles allowed her the creative freedom in choreographing and not restricting herself to rigid boundaries that the arts are often confined to. She also reveals how her brief educational stint in the UK as an art history student exposed her to the second-wave feminist and Marxist movements in the 1960s, which she used [in pioneering feminist activism] in Pakistan upon her return in 1971. For her, the dictatorial regimes in Pakistan have remained a steady challenge as she decided to be a dancer-activist. As the Global South is gripped by different forms of religious nationalism, precarities of citizenship and statelessness and the larger threat of climate crisis, she tells us how the arts are a necessary medium to bring the countries of Global South together into action.

INTERVIEW

Priyanka Basu: Your early training in dance in Pakistan was under the tutelage of Mr. and Mrs. Ghanshyam (who were themselves trained under Uday Shankar in Almora) as well as various mentors in India. How do you see this training as still contributing to your dance practice, activism, and dance as an intellectual exercise?

Sheema Kermani: I started training with Mr. and Mrs. Ghanshyam when my family moved to Karachi. I was about 13-14 years old around that time. My mother was very keen that both I and my sister learn classical dance. She was herself from Hyderabad (Deccan) and after her marriage she used to go back to her *Ustaad* (music teacher) who would come to the house to teach her. So, she found this couple – Mr. and Mrs. Ghanshyam – in Karachi and we started learning from them. I think I have always appreciated the fact that I had a good grounding in a holistic approach. It was not just as *Kathak*, or *Manipuri* or *Kathakali*, but it was, as you know as per the Almora style, a bit of all these things. So, we did learn all these styles together. What was interesting is that Mr. Ghanshyam himself would choreograph a lot of dance dramas in the Almora style; in the sense that these were big dance dramas with many students taking part in them with all the above-mentioned styles incorporated in these choreographies. I think this was a very interesting way of teaching, learning and of creating work. There is so much scope in trying different moves through different styles and not feeling restricted that this is the only thing one can do. I have continuously felt that this training gave me the vocabulary and impetus to choreograph on different themes in different styles. I found the freedom to use different styles exciting, interesting, and useful for my work. Even today I feel the same way, that one doesn't need to feel restricted in any way.

Priyanka Basu: When you went to India for your dance training in various styles (such as *Bharatanatyam*, *Kathak* and *Odissi*) did you have the same kind of mentorship and feel the confluence of different styles?

Sheema Kermani: No, when I went to India, I felt a strong push from all my teachers that I must stick to only one style. There was this strict sense of purity that if you are learning and practicing *Bharatanatyam* (or *Odissi*), then stick to *Bharatanatyam*. Actually, I cheated in the sense that I did not inform them what styles I was learning. This was because it was so difficult to go to India from Pakistan. I only had my visa for a certain period. I knew that I won't be able to stay endlessly, and I just wanted to learn as much as possible. Here, in Karachi, my guru Mr. Ghanshyam had said, 'Just learn whatever you can, as many things you can. Just try and pick up whatever you can.' However, I did feel the pressure in India to conforming to one style and the question as to why I was running around to learn other styles. But somehow, I was able to manage. I divided my time between different gurus and classes (morning till afternoon) because I had gone just to learn dance. I felt that I had to make each day very fruitful and feasible for myself. In the evenings, I would run to watch performances whether they were dances or music concerts. At that time amazing performances used to take place and you won't believe it, they were all free! That was so much a part of my education while I was in India – to be able to see the best of the gurus perform (dance and music) and to see them at very close quarters. It is a very important part of education because in terms of performing arts, every time you get to watch it closely you learn a lot more. I knew that back in Pakistan one had such little opportunity because there weren't any performances to watch. It was a time when I had the opportunity to sit onstage with Vilayat Khan *sahab* or Bismillah Khan *sahab*, go to the SPICMACAY lectures and talk to them. I felt I learnt a lot from these experiences, just by sitting in their company – it made such a lot of difference.

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[2] The online interview was conducted on Zoom on September 16, 2022.

Priyanka Basu: Similarly, you had gone to the UK for your formal education in art. How do you feel that has contributed to your work in dance as activism?

Sheema Kermani: When I was finishing my A-levels in Karachi, though I was already learning dance I thought I wanted to become a visual artist – a painter. So, I applied to various art colleges, and I got into one of the art colleges in London. I went there in 1969 and came back just after 1971 to Pakistan. Those years in the UK were also a very exciting time for me. It was a time in the West when second-wave feminism was coming up – Germaine Greer and Kate Millet (in the USA) – the hippie style, the Flower Power time, anti-Vietnam War time. There was a lot of intellectual activities taking place and Left-wing political activism happening around me. Art colleges, as you know, are very exciting places. There were opportunities to see many films, theatre productions, and concerts. I felt it was one of the best of times to be in the West at that point. I was naturally very influenced by all these new ideas that were coming up in the West and the exposure I was getting to those ideas, especially to feminism and Marxism. These influenced me a lot. When I came back to Pakistan I came with these ideas and the spirit that I want to be part of the Left movement in Pakistan. There was no women's movement in Pakistan at that point of time, and therefore I wanted to set up something in that respect in the country.

Priyanka Basu: My aim in asking the previous question was to understand how these journeys to the UK and other countries in the West helped in shaping the artistic sensibilities of several artists (from early Pakistan), e.g., visual artists such as Zainul Abedin and Qamrul Hasan from East Pakistan. (See Hoek and Sunderason, 2019) What do you think about these earlier journeys and your time as well?

Sheema Kermani: The most important point here is that it was a time (in early Pakistan) when religious fundamentalism had not yet entered our lives and Pakistan was still in a way towards progress in this sense. It was a new nation and was still trying to find ways to new ideas and create new institutions. Whatever existed before in (West) Pakistan, i.e., the time before 1971 was much influenced by what was happening in East Pakistan. There were many Bengali musicians and dancers in that period. (See Basu, 2022) This was a very important aspect, which we slowly lost over time. And then, things started changing. Even when Bhutto brought in his concept of Islamic socialism, he stressed upon 'Islamic', introduced Friday as a holiday, banned bars and the consumption of alcohol. It is actually from that point onwards that things gradually started deteriorating. But whatever ideas I was exposed to and had gained during my time in the West in the 1960s, I wanted to use them in my work and activism when I came back to Pakistan. I felt that I wanted to work with the women in the country. I really wanted to explore the question as to why the status of women in Pakistan is so low. Who are the most oppressed in the society? And I found them to be the working-class women. This is how I started working.

Priyanka Basu: From when you took up dance as a form of protest after you came back from the UK in 1971, how has it evolved and grown? What are some of the similar and different challenges you face today?

Sheema Kermani: Soon after Bhutto Zia-ul-Haq came into power and it was he who actually banned women from dancing on-stage, especially classical dance. The society, however, became as hypocritical as it could because the irony was that the so-called *mujra*s (female dancing for male titillation) continued to be performed in people's homes including ministers' houses. Classical dance was banned, and one had to obtain special permissions to perform. The fact that one of the most crucial art forms were banned meant that many of those practicing that art form left the country. Most of the dancers left Pakistan because they felt they couldn't handle it anymore. However, I stayed on having decided that I will resist this move. I just had that revolutionary spirit in me to challenge that who has the right to tell me that I must not dance. I just felt that this is my fundamental human right, nobody can stop me, and I will continue doing it. Of course, one had to find ways to do it. We have read that in Latin American or South American countries even music was banned by their fascist and authoritarian governments. However, people found ways to sing – whether it was in their churches or in other spaces. In the same way I found ways to dance without advertising it, keeping it very low-key and just informing people through word-of-mouth initially. It was a time when there were no mobile phones. We would make a mailing-list of people who we would then inform about forthcoming performances. It was a challenging yet exciting process, which gave one the hope that this is the way to resist. I strongly feel that if arts can be used as resistance, they become very powerful. They give the artist a lot of hope and courage. That is what I found in my art – it was in my dance, music, and theatre. That is what gave me the courage to resist. Otherwise, you give up and feel that there is no life and future to live for. I have still not given up. I feel that from that time till today it is my art that gives me hope, courage and strength to continue and is a source of happiness.

Priyanka Basu: Have the challenges that you had faced initially now changed completely, or they continue to manifest in similar ways?

Sheema Kermani: I think the challenges continue in a sense, but they change in a lot of ways. At that time, it was the state and the government that were your enemy. I could not get permission from the state and the government to perform inside an auditorium. Very clearly then, you explored what you needed to do and how you needed to go about it. You thought about what the channels were to explore to be able to continue doing what you want to do. Over time, things have changed very drastically and for the worst actually, I would say. Worst how? Even so many years ago, people would always support my work, my dance, or any other work of this kind. This is because they felt that this was the form of resistance to authoritarianism and fascism. The people, therefore, had a reason to support. But slowly what one finds is that religious fundamentalism has seeped into the people, individuals, and the society, into groups of people, and into their thinking and psyche. Now, it is the people who can turn around and attack you. Previously, I have never felt that the public is going to attack me. But today, I would be scared about where I am performing because it can be anyone among the public who can turn around and say that this is their way to heaven so they should get rid of a sinful dancer like me. It is really sad that instead of things moving forward we have just gone backward. Wherever such fundamentalisms rise, similar kinds of reactions happen. One of the worst things about fundamentalism is religious fundamentalism because there so little way out of it. People do not think at the moment when they are reacting, and it is simply a mob mentality that is just ready to react.

Priyanka Basu: You are renowned as the foremost 'classical' dancer in Pakistan and continue to practice the dance forms of *Odissi, Bharatanatyam* and *Kathak*. How do you use the vocabulary, stories, and guidelines from these styles in new choreographies? How do they facilitate secularism despite their rootedness in religiosity?

Sheema Kermani: Well, yes. That is an interesting question because I myself started to question the whole aspect of religious mythologies that we dance to, whether it is a Radha-Krishna narrative from the *Geetgovind*. For myself, I have always found that they were never religious stories for me but more of mythological stories. They were partially romances, partially erotic, partly devotional, and partly historical. I have always found them very interesting as I have found with all other mythologies. Personally, I have had no great issues with them. I also feel that one needs to look at the larger aspects, e.g., the story of the *Geetgovind*.[3] The love affair, the jealousies, the desire to be together – all these come across as human feelings and emotions. This is what I have loved about these stories that you do not necessarily need to see them as emotions of gods and goddesses but rather as human emotions. However, very soon I felt that in Pakistan a lot of these stories did not make sense because people have not read these mythologies, histories, or legends. Of course, at one point when people were watching Indian television, they were familiar with the (Indian epics) *Mahabharat* and *Ramayan* and knew all the episodes. However, that stopped eventually so people do not know those stories anymore. Moreover, people do not also relate to these stories and episodes of Radha and Krishna. This is where I found the aspect of having learnt various dance styles very exciting.

What I had started doing from earlier on was to use Urdu poetry, and even English poetry. So, all my *abhinaya* (acting) would be about things that interested me and were around me. My *abhinaya* was not necessarily always from the *Geetgovind* or a *bhajan*. For me *abhinaya* would be maybe a poem from Iqbal or a poem from Faiz Ahmed Faiz or poetry by Fahmida Riaz, our local Urdu poets. I even did *abhinaya* on English songs. I allowed myself to be innovative about it and I think training from the Ghanshyams helped me a lot in this. I have done a lot of work on Urdu, English and Persian poetry, taken those verses and choreographed on them. It has been an interesting journey. I also think the distance from India helped because if I was in India, it wouldn't have been so easy to do this thing. Having said that I have also performed some of my work in India. I did a lot of *abhinaya* on Sarojini Naidu's poetry. Naidu wrote in English but used rich Eastern or Indian imageries visualising them in the Indian subcontinental settings. I have always found her poetry very interesting to work on.

Priyanka Basu: Two of your renowned choreographies, *Song of Mohenjo-Daro* and *Aao Raqs Karo* (Come, Let Us Dance), are exemplary in this sense. In *Song of Mohenjo-Daro*, you have gone back to explore dance from within the sculptures. Would you like to say something about how you did this?

Sheema Kermani: Sure, I can talk a little bit about that. When I did come back from India and people told me, 'What is this that you do? It is not Pakistani; it is all Indian and Hindu dance!'. That is when I started going into Mohenjo-Daro and doing my own research on it. Not only did I research on the statuettes, the figurines, and the

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[3] The story of the *Geetgovind* (a 12th century love poem by the Indian poet, Jayadeva) includes the love tryst between Krishna and Radha, and is divided into 12 chapters, delineating the 12 states of Krishna as a lover. Within its larger context, the narrative indicates human's relationship with God, or the God-human friendship.

Figure 1. Sheema Kermani in a classical Indian *Odissi* dance performance at Arts Council of Pakistan, Karachi (2012). © *Tehrik-e-Niswan.*

relief work but also on the origins of folk dance. What is the harvest dance, why do people dance in the rain and so on. All of these went into building the narrative and choreography of *Song of Mohenjo-Daro*, and I also linked it with contemporary times. My *Song of Mohenjo-Daro* starts in the present times where a young girl is learning dance with a guru and the girl's fiancé comes and starts getting angry with her. He says that he has told her to stop dancing, otherwise he won't marry her. At this point, a friend of his approaches and takes the man (fiancé) on a fictional journey back in history and they reach the times of Mohenjo-Daro. There he sees the same girl (his fiancée) with whom he had just had a fight. He also sees the figures of yogis, drummers, and others that you see commonly in the reliefs of Mohenjo-Daro. So, the man lives the life of the people of Mohenjo-Daro and discovers that dance and music were very important aspects of that life. Consequently, he comes back a transformed man with very different ideas. This is how I had choreographed *Song of Mohenjo-Daro*, which became very popular and was much talked about because people did not have any idea of these things. And of course, the dancing figurine—the *tribhangi* (three bends) posture of the dancing figurine—and its similarities with the *Odissi* dance form that we practice related to the narrative of *Mohenjo-Daro*. It was an exciting choreographic journey. The second choreography, *Aao Raqs Karo* was based on the poetry of Fahmida Riaz. Fahmida actually wrote parts of the long poem for me. It is in the form of a historical narrative on the changing position of women from the cave times till the present. I had so much wanted to do that kind of work through dance and to discuss how women's position have changed through different stages of life in history.

Priyanka Basu: Recently, we have seen an onslaught directed toward Muslim women in Bangladesh for wearing *bindi* (a Hindu symbol and thus un-Islamic), and on Muslim women in India for wearing the hijab. You have been wearing *saree* and *bindi* throughout your life as a form of protest. How do you see these onslaughts as primarily patriarchal?

Sheema Kermani: It is. It is patriarchal and fundamentalist basically. In Bangladesh women have used the *bindi* on their foreheads since forever and have worn the *saree*. This is true of Muslim women. Suddenly there is an onslaught, which signals the rising fundamentalism that is taking place globally. There is Christian fundamentalism, Hindu fundamentalism in India, Islamic fundamentalism in Muslim countries. I feel for me wearing a *saree* and a *bindi* has always been a part of my identity. It has aided my search for identity in Pakistan, which has always been a multicultural society. That multiculturalism, sadly, is being done away with. When I was growing up in Karachi, I had Christian, Parsi, Hindu and even Jewish students in my class. We have lost all of this diversity over a period of time. It has become so constricted over time, e.g., everybody must dress in the same way, or they must talk in the same way. I find that the whole beauty of this society – the diversity and pluralism – is really lost. Somehow, I have always managed to escape any such attack on my physical being but emotionally and verbally there have been many attacks. People question me if I am a non-Muslim. I reply saying that my parents have always taught me that it is very impolite to ask someone's religion. We grew up with those ideas about respecting people's privacy about their religious choice and identity. My parents were practicing Muslims, but it was a much more open religion that was practiced among that earlier generation of people. There was so much acceptance of every other religion. They were secular people, which meant that you could practice your religion, but you couldn't impose it on anybody else. There was a whole generation of people with such mindset, which we have unfortunately lost now.

Priyanka Basu: 2023 is the 45th anniversary of *Tehrik-e-Niswan*, a leading platform for social activism in Pakistan. Could you tell us about its inception and journey so far, especially with working class women? What are some of its ongoing and upcoming endeavours?

Sheema Kermani: Yes, next year *Tehrik-e-Niswan* completes 45 years, and we are organising a festival to celebrate the event with a retrospective of some of our work and showcasing some new work. When I started *Tehrik-e-Niswan*, the idea was to work with the oppressed of the oppressed, i.e., working class women. We started with conducting lots of adult literacy classes for women. We did vocational centres for women. We initiated health facilities for women. We also worked with working class women in factories by trying to organise them into trade unions. These were the initial initiatives of *Tehrik-e-Niswan*. We created a short play based on the stories of some of the women we were working with. The impact of this play, we felt, was much larger than all the seminars, conferences, talks and workshops that we had been doing over a period of time. Consequently, *Tehrik-e-Niswan* moved on to become a cultural organisation and we decided to use the medium of culture to talk about human rights issues. This first play that we had produced was *Dard Ke Faslay* (Separated by Pain) based on a story by the novelist-poet, Amrita Pritam. The story has two characters—Life (Jaan/Zindagi) and Wind (Hawa)—and it is a conversation between these two characters discussing the lives of women in an area – how these women have not felt that they have been alive or experienced the wind of liberation. It was a symbolic play but still had a huge impact because it had all the elements of music, dance, movements and singing. It was the effect of this play that made us realise that nothing has more impact than a cultural medium of storytelling. Since then, the work of *Tehrik-e-Niswan* as a cultural group has been primarily focussed on telling stories about women (female-oriented). Most of the themes are related to human rights issues. We have also gone beyond theatrical productions – video productions, television plays and mini-series. It is the diversity of this venture into various forms that has helped us sustain as it might be difficult to sustain with one mode of cultural production. It also helps that besides being a dancer, I also work in theatre, television plays or productions by other people – this helps us a lot in sustaining ourselves and *Tehrik-e-Niswan* moving forward.

Priyanka Basu: *Aurat* March has emerged as one of the most recognised mobilisation of women's dissenting voices in Pakistan. How do you see yourself within it as a dancer-activist? What are the threats you have faced and how have you countered them?

Sheema Kermani: It has now been more than 5 years since we started *Aurat* March. The initial idea was borrowed from all the marches that were taking place in other countries such as in the USA and Europe; we felt why shouldn't Pakistan have a women's march of its own? However, it was not an easy task. To get women out on the streets in Pakistan is very tough. Firstly, there is a huge resistance to this concept. Secondly, there is resistance to the fact that women are coming out into the domain of politics and not restricting themselves to smaller niche places such as conferences and seminars. The last women's march that we had was on a very prominent avenue where all the political marches (organised by political parties) take place – a big step for us. I think *Aurat* March has been a very big move for Pakistan. It has brought the dialogues and discourses on women's issues to the mainstream of life where everybody is talking about it. When I started *Tehrik-e-Niswan* on International Women's Day in 1979 people used to ask me why I was organising an event. However, nowadays there are numerous events organised on Women's Day all over Pakistan. The march has become a symbol of women in Pakistan becoming part of the

mainstream politics. While this has been a huge step forward, we have also faced many attacks. Last time we were charged with blasphemy when there weren't any other issues to slam against us. Our videos were manipulated and doctored (other words were put into our mouths) to hold us guilty of being blasphemous. It has been a struggle to continue with the march. We sometimes have staunch right-wing people standing right in front of us with stones in their hands to pelt at us. However, I must say that in Karachi *Aurat* March has been very lucky to have the support of the provincial government. The government has been very helpful, supportive, allowed us to take this march out and provided us with security. It is also because we have the PPP[4] government here, which is in a sense the most liberal of all the governments we have had. On the contrary, women's marches in places like Islamabad and Lahore face a lot of resistances. We have also had very strong women's leadership in PPP such as Benazir Bhutto and Sherry Rehman – educated, forward-looking women who have been part of the political mainstream. These women have always supported women's march. The point now, however, is that where does *Aurat* March go from here and what is its future. The idea for most of us was that at some point women would become part of the mainstream politics, administration and governance of the country. Sadly, we are still nowhere near any of these. In fact, gender-based violence has increased hugely in Pakistan in the last many years. It is not just in one city but all over Pakistan. Although we make such a noise about it, we protest, we come out on the streets, it is written about, there is no improvement. Actually, the state has to implement the laws and see to it that the perpetrators are punished. Unfortunately, that does not happen. Those who are the perpetrators of violence on women, they hardly ever get punished. They always seem to be able to get away with it. The last time the Prime Minister of Pakistan, Mr. Imran Khan, made some remarks about women; comments such as if women wear short dresses they will be raped. If the leadership is so misogynist, obviously then these ideas penetrate the society hugely and it becomes more and more difficult. I think we still have a very long way to go regarding women's rights issues and for equality for women. But at least, the discourse has started and every family, home, kitchen talks about *Aurat* March – why are these women marching, what do they want? Bringing this discourse at the forefront has been a huge step in itself.

Priyanka Basu: What are the challenges that your male and female students face as dancers? How are their performances restricted to safe spaces?

Sheema Kermani: I would say that in the last couple of years (due to the pandemic), dance student numbers have really gone down. The second time when the Taliban took over Afghanistan and its effect spread over Pakistan, it aggravated the religious fundamentalism in our country – this really affected the arts and artists hugely. It is hard to get audiences for our dance performances during times of political instability. Families would not send their children to learn dance and it is also difficult for them to access public transport to come to the dance schools. In the last three years COVID-19 has also impacted this situation, more so because I felt that I was not comfortable teaching online. The internet facilities are intermittent and not all students have access to them. How do you teach students who do not have laptops or live in areas where there is no electricity most of the times due to huge power cuts? I think the arts have suffered a lot in the last three years. There was only one *arangetram* performance (formal entry to stage performances) that took place in these three years. This performance also took place in Alliance Française as it is one of the safest spaces as a cultural centre. It is also one of those spaces where you can avoid those people who can potentially harm us. So, it has not been easy at all, and it is not going to be easy in the future also because in reality there is no support for the arts whatsoever, especially for the classical arts. Unless you get some kind of support from the state and the government, these arts are going to die. This is one of my fears in Pakistan that classical arts are actually dying. We really cannot say that there are many students who are taking it up seriously primarily because they feel that what are they going to do with it. One cannot make any money out of it! Secondly, you also don't get respect or a respectable position in society by taking up dance as a profession. So, why would anybody want to become a dancer in this country? There is of course, a lot of hard work that goes into becoming a dancer. Above all, there is a constant attack – what you are doing is not Pakistani and not Muslim. I really feel that classical dance is going to perish away in Pakistan as I don't see a future for it. There are also no venues to perform. I feel that I have really pushed the boundaries by performing in different venues, including conferences. I have really pushed to bring it to a popular level so that people can get opportunities to watch it because I feel that this is the only way in which you can popularise this art. People praise the beauty of the art form when they are able to watch it. However, when it is not accessible to them, how will they appreciate art? There are so many private television channels in Pakistan but not one of them has any classical dance programme. Not one of them has a classical music programme for that matter. Can you believe it? When PTV – the national channel of Pakistan – started, classical music programmes would be aired every day. There are no classical music programmes now. So, all of these are indicative of the fact that the classical arts are dying and there are very few people who

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[4] The Pakistan People's Party is a centre-left socialist-democratic party formed in 1967 under the chairmanship of Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto.

are managing to keep them going. If there are going to be no venues, no performances, no stage functions, no government and political support, then how are they going to survive? It is sustainable if we keep trying at our individual levels as we cannot take them very far. I do have a studio and space to mentor, but what is going to happen to that space and to my students when I am no more there? I think I have been trying very hard to find some support to set up a cultural centre, but nobody is interested in the initiative. Bangladesh is much better than Pakistan in nurturing dance. There is a sensibility there that these art forms are needed for the society. We don't have that sensibility that dance and music are important for the life of a society. It keeps society vibrant, but there seems to be the attitude here that there is no need for dance and music in our country. I feel disturbed by this attitude – it is a dead society without the arts.

Priyanka Basu: Do you think that dancers can then transition to television shows? Television is a huge medium in Pakistan. Is it possible for dancers to switch over to television? For example, with the global acclaim and viral status of '*Pasoori*' in Coke Studio Season 14[5], you have often been recognised as the '*Pasoori* dancer'. Does this recognition through television and digital media contribute to your dance activism? How do you use social media such as Facebook and Instagram in your social work and activism?

Sheema Kermani: When I was first offered to dance in '*Pasoori*', I was doubtful about it. I felt why should I be doing this as my lifetime's work has been totally different in terms of classical dance. But now when I look at what '*Pasoori*' has managed to do in this one year, I realise that it has brought dance to another section of the society who had no familiarity with dance. Now, they talk about it – is the woman dancing in '*Pasoori*' a classical dancer? So, it has raised the issue in a different way, and it has brought dance up to another kind of dialogue. I am actually happy that this has happened. Even if it has happened in a pop music genre, people are watching and discussing that dance is a possibility on television and the screen. I am sure there are other programmes as well where people have started including and introducing dance in their content. Yes, television is huge in Pakistan and there are a large number of channels. They do show dance, but it is a filmy Bollywood and pop style of dancing. There is no dialogue or discussion on that platform on classical dance and it does not look like there is a possibility towards it in the near future. One can just keep hoping and trying for the best. But the fact that so many people have seen '*Pasoori*' on television and social media and are talking about it, I do think that it is social media that needs to be credited for achieving this. We just need to recognise and use this in a more positive way. Hopefully it will happen someday.

Priyanka Basu: What are your experiences of performing outside conventional spaces such as performing *dhamaal* at a Sufi shrine commemorating the victims of the Sehwan bomb attack, or performing in the streets? How do people respond to them, both men and women?

Sheema Kermani: The Sehwan bomb attack[6] was one of the most tragic events and when I went to the site to perform *dhamaal* there, it was taken in the most positive spirit. I got responses from people from all walks of life and even with diverse religious backgrounds in support of that performance event. Everyone felt that *dhamaal* is a part of our history, heritage, and culture. Someone decided to keep the continuity of this performance form because that is what they were trying to break through the bomb attack. Ours is a very complex society. On the one hand we feel that people are going to support this but on the other hand we also feel that nobody is going to do anything about it. It is a complex situation, and it is not easy to understand or explain as to what is happening in these countries. How do you navigate this complexity to understand why people support you when you are performing in '*Pasoori*' or performing *dhamaal* at the shrine? Nobody opposes you when you perform a dance at an Altaf Hussain Hali (Urdu poet) conference. I have performed in front of *lakhs* of people in these venues and continue to do that as often as I can.

It is a difficult issue. On the one hand I do say that these art forms are dying but I also find myself performing at these events and people not opposing even.

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[5] Coke Studio is a Pakistani television music series bringing together renowned and emerging artists from the country on an international platform. The series foregrounds different genres of music including classical, folk, hip hop and others. In Season 14 (curated by Zulfiqar Jabbar Khan), 13 vocal artists were showcased in a revamped musical and aesthetic setup. '*Pasoori*' emerged as one of the foremost of the music videos of Season 14.

[6] The Sehwan suicide bombing took place on 16 February 2017 at the shrine of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar in Sindh, Pakistan killing a large number of people and injuring hundreds. The bombing took place at the event of a Sufi ritual performance (*dhamaal*), and in protest against the attack activists re-performed the *dhamaal* at the site a few days later.

Figure 2. Sheema Kermani in 'Mujh Mae Tou Moujood', a theatrical play about a Sufi singer and dancer at Arts Council of Pakistan, Karachi (2021). © *Tehrik-e-Niswan.*

Priyanka Basu: There is a pressing need now for collaboration among artists in the Global South, especially South Asia since that dialogue is very important. This is an unprecedented time for the world, and more so for the Global South in terms of the devastating effects of climate crisis – the recent floods in Pakistan being a major example. How important do you think that this collaboration is necessary? How are you rethinking your social work and dance/choreographies to address the issue of climate crisis?

Sheema Kermani: I think this collaboration is extremely necessary and I think the way we have lived these 75 years (since independence) by dividing ourselves—India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka—we need to start rethinking our identities. We need to think of ourselves as South Asians rather than as Pakistanis, Indians, or Bangladeshis. That will make a lot of difference. The fact is that we do have and celebrate similarities in our cultures. For instance, my mother would feel closer to somebody from south India than to somebody from Punjab. These kinds of feelings exist. We have tried to ignore those feelings and have tried to submerge our identities totally. I think it is time to rethink and restart all of that so that we can come together as part of the Global South and celebrate our diversities and similarities at the same time. That is the only way in which we will be able to exist in harmony with each other. This is what we need to do otherwise we are dead countries and societies. 'Nation-states' is a useless concept today in the world. As far as climate change is concerned, we in Pakistan are seeing such a huge effect of climate change today. In Karachi, every day is different weatherwise because of climate change. The kind of unpredictability of weather that is taking place, the way glaciers are melting, there is stark water crisis in Pakistan and what will happen to the water situation very soon – these are urgent questions that need intervention. What will happen very soon to the population of these countries and how will we survive are of grave concern. I think we need to start thinking as one group of people who can only survive if we consider ourselves not enemies of each other. I do think arts play a huge role in all of this.

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Mothering and Radical Selfcare: An Autoethnography of Participating in a Facebook Parenting Group

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Published: March 1, 2023

> Caring for myself is not self-indulgence; it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political
> warfare. (Audre Lorde ([1988] 2017: 130)

ABSTRACT

The article documents the experiences of parenting of an urban Indian Hindu middle-class couple at the intersection of virtual and physical spaces and ideas. The experiences and ideas documented in this paper have co-evolved as the authors are parenting their four-year-old daughter and realised how their participation in a Facebook parenting group is influencing them as parents. The relational perspective in autoethnography is used to examine the mutual influences between the authors as partners, parents, and participants in the Facebook parenting group. This is done to understand how our participation in the Facebook parenting group mutually influenced our understanding of ideas of empowered mothering and self-care. The paper draws from Audre Lorde's idea of radical self-care to analyse the interactions on the online group on empowered mothering and self-care.

Keywords: mothering, motherhood, parenting, self-care, self-love, empowered mothering, online, Facebook, autoethnography, Indian, middle-class parents

INTRODUCTION

Smitha: Rajesh and I were doing our PhD together and were of the same age when we got married – that means, as per conventions, I was old, and he was the 'right age' to get married. My being old was directly co-related, with few years left for my capacity to reproduce 'without complications.' This 'without complications' is something that I constantly heard – this would be in the form of casual conversations, friendly advice, and inquiries by neighbours and 'community members.' I was also asked to visit a doctor to help me conceive. My partner was never privy to, or the recipient of, any advice to 'see a doctor'.

It seemed like a big responsibility, especially when we were completing our PhD and looking for a job. Rajesh was the first to get a job, and it came with exciting changes; one thing that increased was the push to have a baby because at least he has a faculty appointment now. In all of this, we were always unsure about having a child – will we be able to take care of a child? Are we in a financial position to take care of another human being? Is parenting something we want to do? These are constant discussions that we had as a couple. As an individual, I was unsure of my ability to be a 'good mother'.

I reached an age where I was considered a high-risk category to have a child. After a long wait, I got a teaching job at a university and came to know that I was pregnant. I had been waiting for a teaching job for a long time and was utterly perplexed about my situation. My workplace took me away from Rajesh, making it even more difficult. A new job, a new city, and the pregnancy created a turmoil of emotions. New support systems emerged – my mom came to stay with me and help with the pregnancy and in the form of a few new colleagues. I worked throughout my pregnancy and was able to handle all my

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responsibilities. Although I was constantly torn between whether I was doing enough at work and whether I was taking enough care of myself and the one I am responsible for.

> Anamika's[1] birth was through an emergency c-section, and she was admitted to the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit for five days after birth. All of which gave me anxiety and resulted in spurts of emotional outbursts and crying. A deep sense of despair and guilt did not leave. What did I do wrong? I should have taken more care – that would have helped – were the questions that plagued me. During the maternity leave, I relied on the suggestions of my mother, mother-in-law, and sisters. Some aspects of these suggestions troubled me and were not in line with my beliefs or worldview. My anxieties about raising a child continued to increase. A month before my maternity leave was over, I got introduced to the online parenting group, Online Prenting Village (OPV), on Facebook.[2] The group was an instant source of comfort because women expressed similar anxieties and frustrations that I had felt as a mother. These 'commonalities of experiences' were important reasons for me to connect with the group. OPV became a vital space because I found posts and comments that reinforced my ideological stand as a woman and mother.

I sent an invite to Rajesh to join the group with three aims: first, it could help him to understand the context of my conversations about posts; second, it could help him to engage with critical issues that women and mothers face and third, it was also a safe space for parents/caretakers to discuss their problems.

Rajesh:

> Although I do not remember my feelings when I received the invitation link or when I filled up the mandatory questions for membership, deep inside, it was another effort on my part to participate in parenting, albeit remotely. OPV was an assuring space where I would be able to contribute to parenting. Our communication was mostly over phone calls and video calls over WhatsApp and Google Duo. When Smitha shared her concerns over issues such as Anamika not achieving her development goals in time, and other growth indicators, my first reaction was to check OPV for threads on similar topics or dig into the OPV archives to find out if members have shared anything related. The collective wisdom of the group was reassuring. I would call up Smitha to discuss what I had come across. This was also a way for us to normalise our experience with parenting Anamika in separate cities. Learning that people are trying/tried different options to address the problems reassured me that we are doing okay; it also helps us to make decisions about parenting. Secondly, OPV has encouraged me to be kind to myself as well as Smitha as parents

> At a personal level, I felt guilty of being away from Smitha and Anamika and for leaving Smitha alone to struggle with parenting. There was hardly any social pressure on me to take part in parenting; few friends, relatives, and colleagues sympathised with my condition of missing Anamika's growing up stage. Reading about experiences, questions, frustrations, and everyday challenges with mothering of women in the group and conversations with Smitha helped me to understand the struggles with mothering and the pressure of expectations that she faced. The constant emphasis on OPV as a supportive space for mothers expressing their frustration over their mothering efforts influenced the way I approached 'expectations' in mothering and parenting as well. On self-reflection, I realise that the suggestions in the OPV, such as 'take it easy,' 'distract the child,' lingers in my mind each time I am dealing with Anamika. This can be concerning gentle parenting – when I am struggling to understand her tantrums/behaviour or the worry about low weight gain of the child or the child showing lack of interest in listening to the online class. Most important, OPV has helped me to stop blaming Smitha or myself when it comes to decisions about Anamika

We are heterosexual partners and have been together for over a decade and married for ten years. We are both from middle-class Hindu families. We met each other when we were pursuing our doctoral research together. We were twenty-nine years old when we got married in 2012. We are parents to a four-year-old who was born to us after five years of our marriage. In this article, we discuss our observations and experiences of being part of an online parenting group on Facebook. The article is a collaborative autoethnography written to discuss the co-constructed narratives of parenting and radical self-care that emerged when we engaged with OPV. Autoethnographies use the personal experiences and narratives of the author/researcher and place them within a

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[1] Anamika is a pseudonym that we are using for our daughter in this article.
[2] We will give the Facebook group the pseudonym Online Parenting Village (OPV) in this article; this is done to maintain the anonymity of the group and its group members.

social context, and they focus on systematically analysing personal experiences to understand cultural experiences (Sparkes, 2000; Ellis, Adam and Bochner, 2011). The relational perspective in autoethnography is used in this article to examine the mutual influences and observations between us as partners, parents, and participants in the Facebook group. We do this to understand how our participation mutually influenced our understanding of ideas of empowered mothering and radical self-care.

PROCESS OF DEVELOPING A RELATIONAL NARRATIVE

It was a call for paper around self-care in 2021, for a conference where we started putting together our thoughts about the group in an organised manner. We made notes about our discussion and put together a framework. The ideas had developed organically over the period of our three years of being members of the group. We talked about the space the group gave us and what we observed. We had many questions about the method to talk about self-care and motherhood. 'Is it autoethnography if we write our observations about the group processes?' 'Is it autoethnography if we make observations and interpretations about the posts of the group and the notion of self-care that we adhere to and understand?' 'Are we speaking for the group when we are putting together our analysis?' The group does identify as a feminist group, but can our interpretation of the posts be based on the group's position, or should it be based on the individual who writes it? Are we interpreting for the individuals? These were the questions that we went back and forth on. The group is a relational space we shared as parents to Anamika and with the group. We were passive participants in the group, but the discussions provided solutions, a sense of 'we-ness', and a little push to stand up for our beliefs. We were encouraged to read and make sense of our ideas. We understand the group as a cultural space that portrays different self-care ideas. Our perspective and positionality helped us understand self-care within a particular theoretical perspective. We use this understanding to analyse self-care as discussed in the group. We use the concept of radical self-care as conceptualised by Audre Lorde ([1988] 2017). Radical Self-care is understood as self-preservation to ensure that women are talking about their needs. Self-esteem and self-love are essential to self-care. Self-care and self-love are also based on respect, love, care, dignity, rights, and justice. It is a public and political act to choose and change one's life (Lorde, 1988; hooks, 1952). The group for us was that shared space where people presented their negotiations, challenges and assertions about self-care, which went beyond individual methods or maternal functioning (Troy and Dalgas-Pelish, 2003; Lloyd, O'Brien, and Riot, 2016; Kim and Dee, 2017; Barkin *et al.*, 2010). We argue that self-love cannot exist in a vacuum and is interconnected with the institutional structure of women's lives. It is a radical act against the construct of the 'good mother' and the social expectations of patriarchal Motherhood and intensive mothering. Self-love is essential for women's selfhood and to understand mothering as empowering and not critical to a woman's life.

Smitha and Rajesh:

> The engagement/participation with the OPV gained importance in our lives through everyday conversations and discussions. Self-care emerged as one of the topics of interest because we constantly saw it discussed in the group. 'It is important to give oneself a break,' 'Self-care is important for mothers,' 'Don't be too hard on yourself' were the constant suggestions we saw in the group. But these suggestions were not merely an indication to 'take a small break' or 'treat oneself;' in fact, the focus was on the importance of self-care for the mother's well-being, the support system she required, as well as assertions the mother must make to ensure that she is able to emphasise her needs. Self-care, expressed, asserted, and impressed aspects of a mother's wellbeing, emerged as an essential theme in the group. As faculty engaging with gender issues, women's health, women's rights, and self-identified feminists, our discussions steered towards the political and personal space the group provides for participants as part of this group and what our participation in the group means to us.

In her seminal work *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, Adrienne Rich (1976) distinguishes the patriarchal institution of Motherhood and the experience of mothering. The hetero-normative patriarchal institution of Motherhood is male-defined and is infused with beliefs and expectations from mothering practices. This institutionalised Motherhood produces what Foucault (1979) refers to as 'discourses of knowledge,' and they consolidate in the discourses of the 'good mother.' The patriarchal construct of Motherhood is constantly employed to ensure that the public-private domain is separated, and the mother remains confined to the private domain (Aneja and Vaidya, 2016). The mothers also are responsible for continuing/passing on patriarchal values and beliefs to the next generation. The 'good mother' behaves in a way that is considered acceptable behaviour, constantly under self-surveillance and with a compulsion to reproduce appropriate behaviour. In this ideology, the role expectations from mothers are to ignore their needs and focus entirely on their children. The construction of

the 'good mother vs. bad mother' debate is inherent to this institutionalised Motherhood. It relies on the universality of mothering in the construction of the good mother (Glenn, 1994; Arendell, 1999; Collins, 1994; Hays, 1996; Tardy, 2000; Goodwin and Huppatz, 2010). Culturally sanctioned intensive mothering characterises patriarchal Motherhood, which views mothering as entirely child-centred, emotionally involving, and taking on the child's responsibility alone without a complaint (Hays, 1996; Hallstein, 2006).

Empowered mothering and Feminist mothering (Hays, 1996; O'Reilly, 2008) argue that mothering can be an empowering experience, and the embodied experience of the mother must be given importance. Empowered mothering understands mothering as female-defined. It lays emphasis on the autonomy/agency and independence of the women that is denied to them by institutional Motherhood (Hays, 1996; O'Reilly, 2008). Feminist mothering believes that mothers and children benefit and lead enriching lives if there is a focus on mothers' selfhood where they are meeting their own needs. It believes in shared parenting and equal responsibilities (Ruddick, 1985; Arendell, 2000; O'Reilly, 2008). Aneja and Vaidya (2016) through their work highlight the different motherhood ideologies that shape the construct of Motherhood in India. In the Indian context, they argue there is a confluence of different frameworks from being idealised to deified, commodified, and devalued. They identify motherhood as an ideological system and mothering as the lived experience of the woman who attempts to balance her everyday realities with cultural rhetorical expectations. Bagchi (2017) argues that feminists theorising of Motherhood in India struggles with the contradiction of the ideological glorification of Motherhood constantly and the powerlessness faced by mothers in their everyday lived reality. Maithreyi Krishnaraj (2010) has argued that the feminist efforts in India around motherhood has been to retrieve it as a source of emancipation by providing terms and conditions in the social structure which will make it a creative experience. She also states the importance of understanding mothering as an important nurturing experience for everyone including the father.

The emergence of online spaces for parents/mothers' collectives offers us an opportunity to look at mothering/parenting practice at the intersection of individual and collective experiences. Online groups have created a space for new environments where experiences of Motherhood and mothering are performed, articulated, and negotiated (Orton-Johnson, 2017). The Social Networking Site (SNS) Facebook is used by mothers widely to post photos, videos, and updates about their children (Morris, 2014). These groups also create a space for broader discussion and have shown to be a space in which dominant discourses of Motherhood are challenged, negotiated, and redefined (Orton-Johnson, 2017). Kate Orton-Johnson (2017) argues that online groups are cultural sites where the identities and roles of mothering are (re)constructed and re(produced) in socioeconomic, temporal, and technological contexts. An extensive childcare network increases psychological, social, and emotional wellbeing through social support. The online mothering groups work to protect the collective identity and group boundaries (Ley, 2007). Not feeling judged by other members helps develop a sense of connection and authenticity. Interaction in mothering groups goes beyond online group engagement to offline meetings or personal friendships created on social networking sites (Ley, 2011).

India has 658 million internet users in 2022 with a staggering 467 million who use social media. India also has one of the highest Facebook users in the world with 329.7 million users in early 2022. The advent of the smartphone and access to affordable internet services has seen an increase in the use of social media platforms in the country with Facebook leading the race (Kemp, 2022). Facebook as a platform provides a space for personal as well as community interactions. A simple Google search for online parenting groups in India will elucidate articles that are primarily about/for urban, middle-class women mostly living in nuclear families accessing/relying on/depending on groups and parenting apps to make big or small decisions for themselves and their children (Haider, 2017; Jain, 2018). The primary purpose of the groups is to share information, create support and provide a space for parent interactions.

OPV STRUCTURE AND COMMUNICATION

OPV consists of around 32K plus members [As of April 2020]. The first criterion for membership is that users should be a parent or expectant parent. The admin members will only admit a new user after they answer a few questions related to parenting. The group has a clear ideological stand and refers to itself as a feminist group. It identifies itself as a feminist group explicitly because it is a pro-choice group, believes in women supporting women, believes in equal roles/partnership for both parents in bringing up a child, believes in the rights of the women and is strictly against caste and religion-based comments.

It has moderators and administrators who go through the posts and comments. They are responsible for the approval of new members and ensuring that the posts and comments adhere to the group rules/policies. This gatekeeping ensures that in the group, important posts get attention. This also ensures that the posts/comments are in line with the basic ideological tenets of the group. This scrutiny is also essential to ensure that the group adheres to the Facebook community rules. OPV consists largely of members from India and Indians settled abroad. All of them have one common identity as parents. They represent a microcosm of a particular stratum of society

– educated, middle class, and predominantly urban. As a rule, the medium of language of the group is English – this has a strict adherence policy – the posts and discussions must be in English. Strict adherence to the English language is to avoid confusion resulting from the use of regional languages. Administrators insist members to provide the English translation of the content of posts or references made in regional languages. Strict adherence to English language reduces confusion, chaos, and regional sub-group discussions. However, this may restrain the engagement of non-English speaking members. The group has fewer men than women, and their participation in the group remains limited. The women are married, working, stay at home, working from home, divorced, separated, grandmothers, adoptive or single mothers, and living in joint families, extended or nuclear families.

Many members start their posts with the statement: 'I have decided to write this here because this group will not judge me'. This non-judgemental space becomes an essential aspect of engaging with the online group. This was one of the reasons we continued to stay and engage with the group more so passively than actively. Our passive participation here corresponded with our overall behaviour on social networking sites. Rajesh rarely posts on Facebook and occasionally posts photographs on Instagram. Smitha occasionally posts on Facebook and Instagram. We check our social media accounts multiple times a day, respond to friends' posts and follow news and entertainment feeds. We are both not active on social media, but OPV allows us a space where we can feel a sense of community and belongingness. Our participation in the group by commenting on posts and posting emoji reactions to other members' post, can be characterised as what Orton-Johnson (2016) refers to as 'active lurkers'. 'Active lurkers' comprise of members in the community who may not be sharing posts or participating in discussions but use the discussions in the group to address their own practices of mothering/parenting.

The group uses several strategies to ensure that there are different levels of engagement by the members. This includes daily posts, weekly posts, and special occasion posts, anonymous posts.

Daily posts include:

> **#Suggestions posts**: Members ask for suggestions over a range of everyday things ranging from opinions on products to reliable doctors, schools, places to visit and others. The mundane things that are part of the family get space in the group. At a practical level, this saves time, money and energy for the members. Further, the members who post place their trust in other members and look forward to the genuine opinions of the community members.

> **#Ventout posts:** Ventout posts are a prominent part of the group. They give a space for the members to talk about their everyday frustrations. The posts are mostly related to the frustrations with family members, children, neighbours, officials, and schools. The members write Ventout posts to get opinions regarding others' behaviour or suggestions about one's own response/ behaviour.

Smitha:

> One of these posts was about the constant expectations from mothers that they had to be thankful that they get maternity leave and all that 'free paid time.' The assumption that it was free time for me was frustrating, and that it is a generosity extended to me instead of a right constantly irked me. This post on OPV received a lot of support – 'sailing in the same boat' replies; suggestions included the answers that they had tried, by replying 'how is it free time when I do not even get sleep or a human being is latched on to me continuously, and it is tiring.' The replies also said that it is okay to reply even if it upsets the person in front as the mother's mental health and 'peace of mind' is essential. Posts and discussions that stood for women's rights and psychological wellbeing become a source of comfort and validation.

> **#Bragposts, #Happy posts and #Gratitude posts**: these include posts that the members are excited and happy about. These posts may consist of personal achievements or achievements of children. Gratitude posts express gratitude towards the group for their suggestions, creating a safe space and enabling mothers to talk freely without judgment.

> **Weekly posts:** Weekly posts include posts that are designated for a particular purpose, which includes participatory posts. The purpose of these posts is to 'have fun', 'let off steam' – this includes meme sharing, fun questions/activities – anything that the members can engage in and enjoy. The group rules discourage these posts daily because they believe that this will result in essential posts being ignored or overlooked.

> **Posts for specific purposes:** These posts include topics such as politics, job opportunities, and discussions related to current and other pressing issues. The group specifies that a single thread should

be maintained for contentious and debatable topics to ensure space for all posts and duplication of discussions does not happen.

Anonymous Posts: These posts are anonymous and help the members to share personal issues that they are not comfortable sharing in the open. The admin shares the posts. The author's identity is not revealed; this enables the members to share personal information that would cause them distress or dilemmas. These posts are accompanied by 'trigger warnings' such as #domestic violence, #mention of cancer, and any other issues which may be distressing to the other group members. These posts also include necessary preventive measures such as – reminding the members that the group is pro-choice and believes in women's rights and LGBTQ rights. They often have material/links/resources to help the member. These resources support the members to get help, read, and educate themselves. The members also are refreshingly supportive of each other.

Smitha and Rajesh:

In this article we have organised our thoughts on mothering/parenting, self-care and OPV, into categories. We are aware that categorisation may limit the in-depth exploration of the idea of self-care. Still, it gives us scope to explore self-care and mothering as represented in the group. For us, many of the categories are simply observations and analyses, while some categories influenced our own mothering/parenting practices.

Me-time

Many #ventout posts discuss the importance of personal time as a break from expected duties. These discussions explore the constraints faced by mothers in availing 'Me-time' for themselves. Mothers complain about the lack of support from partner and other family members. Mothers can employ strategies to have 'me-time.' Members post about their interests or creative endeavours. Discussions about just doing nothing and taking time off for oneself are also important threads of conversations. One woman in her post talked about not going away with her husband and children to his parent's house and staying home for a much-needed break. The comments section celebrated her decision to take time out and prioritise herself over society's expectations from a 'good' wife or 'good' mother. The celebration of the woman's decision to stay back and take a break resonates as a simple act of taking control over one's life. This is against the patriarchal expectations of the mothering self as bound to the duties of parenting.

Smitha and Rajesh:

The pandemic started when Anamika was 2 years old, and we got an opportunity to be together as we had online classes. Our experience of taking control over our life is more related to our persistent wish to attain a level of fitness. We wanted to do it together. Managing Anamika during the time came up as an issue. We decided to walk together taking Anamika along with us. Rajesh would make Anamika sit on the bicycle and push the bicycle along. We planned our workout timing in such a way that it would coincide with Anamika's screentime. However, this was not without conflicts. From multiple sources as well as OPV we have learned about the implications of screen time on children. We tried to rationalise our actions by accepting that some amount of screen time is inevitable and if that time could be used by us as workout time/us time that would be productive for us, and we would be able to spend quality time with Anamika.

There are #ventout posts about the partners not helping or expectations that the woman should do all the household work and manage the child singlehandedly. This has been for working as well as stay-at-home mothers. The comments agree that in a patriarchal society, it is expected that women will put others in the household before themselves and continue to do all the work no matter how tired or ill. The most common suggestion that comes up is 'leave the things undone, nothing catastrophic will happen if things don't get done', 'you deserve a break', 'husbands should also contribute, leave it to him, they are his children also', 'just leave and go to the spa or shopping'. The importance of 'me-time' or taking time out is constantly reinforced by people sharing ideas and personal experiences. Here, the suggestion of encouraging me-time does not remain limited to taking the occasional hour for oneself but focuses on the importance of equal parenting as a means of self-care.

'Dressing up' vs. 'Taking care'

'Dressing up' is another area of discussion in the group. By 'dressing up,' we mean the expectations that the women should be dressed well and look good even while managing work and children. A set of discussions have

talked about these unrealistic expectations placed on women. We argue that these expressions against the 'yummy mummy' (Littler, 2013) tag are a political stand and an essential step towards self-care.

Another set of posts asks for suggestions about products, regimes, and routines people follow to take care of themselves, and the difficulties women face in taking care of themselves. Here the posts and comments are encouraging – 'you will be able to maintain a routine if you try', 'start slowly' 'involve the partner so you can set up a routine.' Body positivity is encouraged by people sharing their photos and struggles of taking care with the message that women should feel beautiful about themselves.

It is essential to understand the differences between 'Dressing up' and 'Taking care'. 'Dressing up' is a societal expectation of looking presentable after handling the multiple responsibilities of children and family. 'Taking care' is feeling good about oneself by following a self-care routine and doing things that make one feel good about oneself. This requires the woman to take care of herself where the family members support the women. Stress due to the expectation of 'dressing up' and the difficulties in 'taking care' form an important part of the discussions.

Deconstructing 'the good daughter in-law/wife'

Societal and familial expectations from a 'good daughter in-law/wife' are important discussions on the site. The patriarchal expectations which become everyday stressors for women are discussed through #ventout post and #suggestion posts. Posts and discussions include financial issues faced by working mothers – expectations that women should spend their income for the family, let spouse or in-laws manage her salary, and have or not have a separate account. Topics such as rights of a stay-at-home mother over finances of the house and her right to personal and family spending. Issues such as the expectation of caregiving from women and her ability to make decisions about how to bring up children also came up for discussion. Many women express complete frustration over family's / spouses' expectations to be a 'supermom' or 'superwoman' without expecting anything in return. One woman had posted about her frustrations with her husband's complete disregard for her work as a stay-at-home mom and his refusal to share the financial details with her. Posts about the in-law's interference in personal lives or husband's reluctance to consult the partner and instead relying on his family to make decisions also occasionally surface in the group. The members also vent about other family members overindulging the child despite the mother's disapproval or that the mother is constantly criticised for her parenting methods. Many women who are living in joint families face challenges when it comes to making decisions about finances, raising their child and even basic decisions related to care of the child. Even women who were in nuclear families had parents and in-laws imposing parenting decisions on them. This was a matter of concern and was constantly discussed in the group. The posts end with 'what should I do,' 'how do I tackle this,' 'how do I say it,' and 'please help.' The responses range from being supportive- simple 'hugs,' 'facing a similar situation,' validating their frustrations, and offering support. Another set of reactions is encouragement and suggestions to be assertive, maintain a separate account, strongly take a stand against child-rearing practices that do not match the parent's or mother's choice. Here, mother's choice is not articulated as an individualistic decision, but it is a push against the patriarchal values that deem the mother incapable of making decisions about her child while expecting her to continuously incorporate the mothering practices of others even if she does not agree with it. The idea is that the mother, although struggling, knows best and has the right to bring up the child in the manner they deem appropriate. The rights of the stay-at-home mom are discussed at length in different posts – the role of caregiving should not be taken for granted, and the mother should be part of all decision-making, including financial decision-making in the house. Women should remain within the threshold of the house, not have opinions related to finances, take views of the elders for child-rearing, and hold the family together under all circumstances are some of the stereotypical notions questioned on these threads. The mother's selfhood is given importance, and the attempt is to deconstruct the notion of 'good mother,' 'good woman', and 'good wife.'

Smitha:

> It is my everyday routine to go through the comments and to look up suggestions that people must have got for similar queries that I had or issues that I was discussing with Rajesh. I remember that I was constantly tensed about whether Anamika was achieving her height-weight parameters. She was on the lower end of the spectrum, and I was frequently questioned about it – 'Don't you feed her well?', 'How come is she so small?' and 'Do you starve her?' I had a feeling that I was an incompetent mother and worried about her long-term health. I had constant discussions with my mother, who was helping me with Anamika, about every meal she had and worried that we were not feeding her enough. It had become a habit for us to recount what she had eaten throughout the day, and then discuss if it was enough.

> Rajesh was the one who pointed out that many parents were facing the same issues, and they had written about it in the group. He sent me the links to these discussion threads and told me to check responses

where people had said that 'why is the mother blamed for all the issues related to the children's diet?', 'if the child is achieving the milestones, then it is okay', 'people will say what they want and simply getting worked up about it is not good'. Rajesh quotes the same discussions even now, saying that it is not only us who are facing these issues but also others. 'Why do you get stressed over this? You are doing the best you can'. The online discussions and our conversations have helped me believe a lot more in myself and Anamika.

Laughter, Opinions, and Desires

Patriarchal structures have perpetuated notions of the 'good woman' who is submissive, represses her sexuality, does not express her desires, does not openly laugh, and prioritises family over work and ambition (Radhakrishnan,2009; Jha, 2018). This is reinforced by family members, community members, and popular media. In the popular media women tread a thin line between being *'sanskaari'* (cultured) *and 'unsanskaari'* (uncultured) and it is marked by her behaviour – the depiction of a carefree woman as laughing and talking loudly is equated with 'irresponsibility' while the 'responsible' wife and mother is silently busy taking care of the needs of her loved ones (Sengupta, Roy, and Purkayastha, 2019; Habib, 2017). Women, especially mothers who have opinions, laugh, and express desires, are judged for their morality and often shamed into behaving in the 'proper way'. In such a repressive culture, the online forum allows mothers to freely talk about their sexual desires, sex toys, share funny memes, and friendly banter about finding time to 'do it' with children around. The online spaces become the backstage (Tardy, 2000) for conversations considered *'unsanskaari'* for women and mothers. These posts are often seen on weekly posts or #suggestions posts, or #anonymous posts. The importance of having such a space for these discussions 'to maintain their sanity' is often echoed in the group. This online space provided women with opportunities to express themselves more freely than in real life. The focus is on their self-worth and the perceived self-esteem of women to be 'comfortable in their skin'. The online conversations on the site were often a counternarrative to the dominant regressive norms the members of the group experienced in real life.

Violence and Abuse

Self-care, self-love, and self-esteem are the most articulated themes in posts related to women facing violence or abuse of any form. The institution of marriage in India is interlinked with religion, caste, and sub caste where the women are brought up to have an arranged marriage that is fixed by their family. The patriarchal institution of marriage is imposed on many Indian women where the decisions on life choices are made by her family. After marriage, the role of her family in making decisions for her is taken over by the husband and his family. Reproduction, and maintaining the lineage of the family are considered the duties of the women along with passing on the patriarchal values to the children. Divorce or separation is considered as a deviation from the gender roles that a married women and mother are expected to play in family and society (Srinivasan and James, 2015). Divorce or separation has disproportionately affected women culturally, socially, and financially. Jacob and Chattopadhyay (2019) argue that women prefer informal spaces such as natal family, friends, and others over institutional mechanisms to talk about their problems. The online spaces are an informal space where women can seek advice on abuse and violence they are facing. Many women of OPV posting anonymously have called the group a support system. Online space becomes an outlet for women to express their thoughts, get advice or vent out about their situations. The idea constantly expressed is that the group is a support system, 'soul sisters' and 'first place to turn' to vent out. The group provides a space for women to discuss their situations without the fear of judgement. Most of the posts on violence and abuse are expressed in #anonymous post, #ventout post, or #suggestion post. The moderators do attempt to ensure non-judgmental comments toward the person expressing the distress. Resources to seek help for gender-based violence are immediately shared. The underlying idea is that staying in violent and abusive marriages negatively impacts the mental and physical health of women and children. There was a consensus among group members that mothers should not choose to be in abusive relationships for the sake of their children and many of the online comments reflected this belief. The group members were empathetic of the women's position and supportive of her decisions. This group's stand resonated with our ideological stand on gender-based violence and against the sacrosanct view of the institution of marriage that is dominantly prevalent.

Affirmations and Empowering Language

Smitha and Rajesh:

> It is a thin line we walk between taking care of her and helping her grow as an individual. Our reading and interactions with others taught us the importance of practising affirmations with Anamika and their significance to her development. But practising that in our own lives was something we did not consider important or necessary. Both of us have always been hesitant to talk positively of ourselves. We realise it is a learned behaviour from years of socialisation. The cultural messaging that care for oneself is

considered as selfish and self-indulgent was accepted and practiced. The group provides us with a space to discuss self-love and being kind to oneself. It became a way of supporting each other.

An important aspect of the online forum is the repeated self-affirmation and the deployment of empowering language. One of the posts ended a vent about taking equal responsibility in caregiving with the statement, 'is it too much to expect, or am I overthinking?' The mother received immediate responses from members that provided emotional support. Another set of discussions was about engendered language – terms such as 'over-thinking' or 'over-reacting' were associated with femininity. Hetero-patriarchal discourse uses self-defeating language to reinforce that woman are 'emotional beings' and cannot make rational decisions. The empowering language used instead on the site counters this gendered language that helps women assert and believe in themselves. The encouragement, support, and language deployed contribute to the resistance to the patriarchal construct of motherhood.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Smitha and Rajesh:

> Our experiences of parenting at the intersection of virtual and physical spaces and ideas were enabled by the autoethnographic method. The experiences and ideas we have documented in this paper has co-evolved as we progressed through parenting Anamika and as we realised how OPV is influencing us as parents. The decision to write about our experience with parenting in the context of OPV was to acknowledge the relevance and importance of digital spaces such as OPV in contemporary parenting. We have also documented how the ideological background of the group and interventions of the moderators have played an important role in moulding the character of the group. A unique contribution of this work is in documenting the experiences of two individuals who have different social roles and expectations as parents in conventional Indian society. Our experiences are also a representation of the urban middle-class young population who are forced to live separately from extended family networks due to professional demands and engage in parenting alone.

Smitha:

> Mothering is tiring, dirty, mentally, and physically draining, sleep-depriving, and an extremely anxiety-inducing experience, and it was okay to express the same as part of this group. OPV gave me a space to examine my thoughts as a mother and helped me in understanding the kind of mother I wanted to be.

> *They come through you but not from you,*
> *And though they are with you yet they belong not to you.*
> *You may give them your love but not your thoughts,*
> *For they have their own thoughts.*
> *You may house their bodies but not their souls,*
> *For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow, which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams. (Gibran, 1995)*

> These are one of my favourite lines 'On children' by Khalil Gibran (Gibran, 1995). These lines, for me, represent the space that needs to be there between motherhood and mothering. It is a space that understands the child is an independent human being, and the mother also needs to grow in her own space. My anxieties about motherhood came from the fear that independence may be buried under societal expectations and my own doubts about raising an independent human being. Self-care is this process to be independent. Rajesh understands the struggle when we talk about it and the online group supports and supplements these discussions and mothering practices.

Parenting is a journey we undertook reluctantly. Our anxieties, and insecurities, coupled with societal expectations of parenting were the reasons why we were reluctant to have a child. But as we go further in the journey, we realise that it is a process of learning and unlearning as a parent that makes this journey interesting and our understanding that we are only facilitating Anamika's journey as a person. Our experience and analysis as members of OPV show that online space is an important cultural space to understand and support mothering/parenting. Posts and the comments they receive reveal snippets of the lived realities that can sometimes deconstruct the patriarchal understanding of Motherhood. The 'gatekeeping features' with the involvement of the administrators, the underlying ideological stand of being a feminist group, and the expectations of adherence to the group policies of non-discrimination and non-judgemental attitude aid community building. It is argued that active participation in online groups gives a high sense of trust, emotional aid, sense of belonging, information,

reciprocity, and interpersonal ties (Miyata, 2002). The online group with its gatekeeping and enabling features foster an approach to mothering that encourages parents and particularly mothers to question some of the patriarchal underpinnings of mothering practices, especially when those traditional practices are perceived as restrictive or repressive to women.

The categories that emerged when discussing self-care as expressed and asserted in the group helped us understand the online group as a public and political space. Mothering as a political space is not a new idea. There has been scholarship around the social construction of Motherhood and the expectations of a 'good mother' as deeply oppressive and compromising women's autonomy. Empowered mothering, which emerged as a counternarrative in the online space, questions the biological essentialism in mothering – not all women must become mothers, and not all providing care work and nurturing are women. These ideas of empowered mothering are performed in OPV as a mothering/parenting group, and it provides a space for people to find like-minded people to come together and get support. OPV's ideological position of being a feminist mothering corresponded with our ideological worldview; these openly stated critical positions and the different features within the group helped us express ourselves offline even as we were being rather passive participants online. OPV provided us with a support mechanism in our parenting in which we navigated the difficulties of staying apart and having to counter dominant views of motherhood around us.

Radical self-care (Lorde, [1988] 2017) is understood as self-preservation to ensure that women are talking about their needs. It is an essential part of empowered mothering – which believes in the autonomy and independence of the mother and believes that being a mother is only one, albeit key, aspect of her life. OPV was the space for women to talk, vent, discuss and express themselves. The mother's selfhood is given importance and recognised in the attempt to deconstruct the notion of 'good mother', 'good woman', and 'good wife'. Interactions in OPV highlight the idea that mothering for some can be an empowering process.

We realise the need for further research to understand how engagement in such virtual communities intertwines with real-life experiences and can develop into empowered mothering practices for community participants. But for us, these expressions were a radical act against the construct of the 'good mother' and the social expectations of patriarchal motherhood and intensive mothering. The surreptitious support (Johnson, 2015) offered by OPV is essential for the members to be able talk about intimate/embarrassing/painful experiences without the fear of being judged. This idea is constantly expressed – that OPV is a support system, 'soul sisters' and 'first place to turn' to vent out without fear of judgement. OPV provides what Ley refers to as a social and therapeutic space (Ley, 2007). In the group, self-care is personal care, standing up for oneself, asserting one's rights, and safeguarding and believing in one's self-worth. Here self-care does not mean a 'break from mothering duties' or a 'few days off from office' or paid leave from office (possible in the formal sector only) but a change in the individual, community, and societal attitudes.

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'How Did This Happen?': Making Retrospective, Present and Prospective Sense of Intimate Relationships Where Men Have Been Violent

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ABSTRACT

In seeking to explain intimate partner violence (IPV), feminist research has shifted its focus from individual explanations to the social contexts of such violence. Adopting such a perspective, we explore the narratives of three men who identify as perpetrators of violence and three women who identify as victims/survivors of IPV. Our analyses focus on how the participants present their relationships, employing the notion of affective – discursive practices as informing, at times constituting, the participants' experiences. Their stories are characterised by a chronological line – retrospective, present and prospective. Their understandings change in framing their experiences, with the relationships themselves becoming affective–discursive practices, albeit figuring differently in the participants' stories across time. Our findings also underline the significance of shame as a regulatory mechanism sustaining heteronormative practices.

Keywords: affective–discursive practices, intimate partner violence, shame, temporal perspective, violence against women

INTRODUCTION

Explaining, changing, reducing or stopping intimate partner violence (IPV) means attending to not only the immediate acts of violence but also the intimate relationships and broader societal contexts in which violence is perpetrated. IPV thus raises deep-rooted challenges for both perpetrators and victims/survivors in terms of the violence itself and their understandings of the whole, extended and contextualised relationship: 'How did this happen?' Deconstructing such different understandings is part of these necessary societal, political, policy and personal changes addressing IPV.

In this article, we present a feminist exploration of how both perpetrators and victims/survivors make sense of such intimate relationships where men have been violent towards women. Using an affective–discursive framework, we focus on the relationships themselves, the structures framing understandings of violence, and the gendered politics of shame in a 'gender-equal' Nordic context.[1] Through the narratives of perpetrators and victims/survivors of IPV, we explore shifts within the trajectories of the relationships – moving from what is gone (in the past) to what is understood (in the present) and to what is awaited (in the future).

IPV is manifested in different ways. Some violent acts, fitting within the legal framework, are easily identifiable; others do not fit such predefined categories, making them harder for many people to accept. To allow for the different manifestations of IPV, we recognise violence as a continuum or spectrum (Alcoff, 2018: 4-6; Kelly, 1988: 76; 1996: 194-197, 202), encompassing different experiences of different forms of violence, and making central their impacts on victims/survivors. The mainstream discussion on IPV has clear gendered aspects regarding how

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[1] Gender equality is a cornerstone of national image across the Nordic region. However, when viewed from the perspective of prevalence statistics, the image is compromised, with high levels of physical or sexual violence against women persisting in the Nordic countries. A European Union survey showed prevalence of IPV to be noticeably higher in the Nordic member states (ranging from 22% in Sweden to 32% in Denmark) than the European average (22%) (FRA, 2014: 28-29). This has led to a considerable debate on what is sometimes called the 'Nordic paradox' (see, for example, Garcia and Merlo, 2016; Humbert *et al.*, 2021; Wemrell *et al.*, 2019).

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well the violent act fits given norms on violence (Alcoff, 2018: 3). The more serious (as perceived) and the more damaging the violence, the more believable it is likely to be in the eyes of the public, as in many news media reports. In public debate, first, the violent man tends to be 'othered', pathologised and psychologised, thus removed from ordinary men (Hearn, 1998: 8-10, 81-83; Nilsson, 2019: 1178; Ólafsdóttir and Rúdólfsdóttir, 2022: 4). Second, victims/survivors are blamed for being violated if they cannot prove their stories to be true (Alcoff, 2018: 1-2; Lazard, 2020: 2; Nilsson, 2019: 1178, 1191).

Furthermore, understandings of what violence is (or is not) occur in their societal contexts in turn shaping perpetrators' and victims/survivors' experiences. While much research, especially mainstream research, on IPV has focused on individual factors, research informed by feminist epistemology highlights the importance of the societal context of such violence, as a structural problem taking different forms in different spheres of society (Gavey, 2018: x; Hearn, 1998: 3-4, 11; Wemrell *et al.*, 2019: 4-5). This directs attention to the societal construction of violence and assumptions with regard to gender, masculinity and femininity, as well as the role of shame, which itself can be understood in this context as a surveillance mechanism maintaining gender identities and normative power relations within the heterosexual project (Shefer and Munt, 2019: 146-147). With Western hegemonic masculinity, the subordination of women continues to be legitimized. Referring to enactments of masculinity as *dramas*, Ptacek (2021: 672) spells out men's different behaviours in private and public, as well as how their search for masculine recognition becomes a driving factor in their abuse. Their abuse of women becomes a way of conforming to patriarchal rule when it is perceived as failing (Ptacek, 2021: 674). Relatedly, Hanmer (2000: 13) asserts that only when the victims/survivors stop taking responsibility for their partners' feelings will they be able to end their relationships. Leaving violent men means reinterpreting the feelings of men, in relation to violence, as negative.

In this article, we analyse perpetrators' and victims/survivors' recounting of violent relationships. Our primary research question: how do the study participants present their violent relationships – retrospectively, in and from the present, and prospectively? To address this, we employ the notion of affective–discursive practices as informing, at times constituting, the participants' experiences, with specific reference to shame in a Nordic context.

HETERONORMATIVE POWER RELATIONS AND VIOLENCE IN THE NORDIC COUNTRIES

There is a high prevalence of violence against women worldwide (World Health Organization, 2021). Even in a society such as that of Iceland, known for its gender equality and highly rated in global gender equality rankings (World Economic Forum, 2021), IPV still thrives (Reykjavík Police Department and City of Reykjavík, 2021). Nonetheless, the Nordic countries take pride in being among the most gender-equal places in the world, forming a vital part of their national identities (Alsaker *et al.*, 2016: 480; Einarsdóttir, 2020: 140-141; Wemrell *et al.*, 2019: 2). Societal acceptance of IPV is low. It is generally considered a breach of gender norms – a flaw in the equality discourse (Alsaker *et al.*, 2016: 484; Brännvall, 2016: 51-52; Enander, 2010a: 20; Gottzén and Berggren, 2021: 69). However, traditional heterosexual norms infused with notions of romantic love and the accompanying hierarchical gender arrangements (Enander, 2010a: 24-25; Lahti, 2015: 432) still prevail in relation to sex/dating and intimate relationships (Gottzén and Berggren, 2021: 67-68; Holma *et al.*, 2021: 2; Jóhannsdóttir and Gíslason, 2018: 4; Ólafsdóttir and Kjaran, 2019: 51).

A considerable amount of qualitative research on IPV in Nordic societies focuses on gendered power dynamics and heterosexual masculinity norms. In their narratives, perpetrators of IPV tend to use individual reasoning, for example, drug use, a difficult childhood or mutual fights between partners, when explaining the violence, downplaying the severity of the act and making the victim/survivor complicit (Brännvall, 2016: 88-89; Ólafsdóttir and Rúdólfsdóttir, 2022: 13-14; Wemrell *et al.*, 2019: 7). This connects to masculinity norms where, on the surface, men adhere to new modes of being men where they can relate to women as equals. However, beneath the surface, normative heteromasculine values are still at work (de Boise and Hearn, 2017: 780; Gottzén and Berggren, 2021: 67-69; Jóhannsdóttir and Gíslason, 2018: 4).

Additionally, Icelandic research (Ólafsdóttir and Rúdólfsdóttir, 2022: 13-15) shows that the perpetrator's social positioning, closely connected to the surrounding masculinity norms, is important for his understanding of his committed violence. Victims/survivors rely on both individual and structural explanations in trying to make sense of their experiences. However, as the experience of violence is personal, the tendency is to lean towards explanations based on the pathology and the deviance of the perpetrator (Enander, 2010b: 83). Neoliberal discourses on equality portray Nordic women as empowered and strong; the resistance to identifying as a victim/survivor of IPV has been identified as a by-product of the discourse portraying female victims as different (weak) from 'normal', strong and independent women (Brännvall, 2016: 53; Wemrell *et al.*, 2019: 7-8).

Shame is a significant theme in some previous Nordic research on IPV. Shame is a synonym for a range of feelings, usually produced when we feel ourselves becoming smaller in others' eyes, often not measuring up to

expected societal norms. Gender norms can include the perception that one should not be violent towards a female/weaker partner. When breaching such gendered norms of violence, perpetrators experience shame, and through recognising their behaviour as shameful, they risk condemnation by society. All of these issues figure in *either* their inability to identify their acts *as violence* and accept responsibility for such behaviour *or* in their difficulty with doing so (Gottzén, 2016: 162; 2019: 289; Ólafsdóttir and Rúdólfsdóttir, 2022: 13-14). When subjected to violence, the empowered Nordic women are expected to show their strength and end their relationships with the abusive men. When unable to do so, women feel shame and guilt for not being *strong enough*, which in turn leads to more shame for staying with their partners (Alsaker *et al.*, 2016: 484; Brännvall, 2016: 52-53; Enander, 2010a: 20-21; Wemrell *et al.*, 2019: 7-8). For perpetrators and victims/survivors alike, shame and shaming processes are thus experienced as both (discursive) regulatory practices and embodied experiences. Due to its role in reinforcing the heterosexual project, the understanding of shame and how it relates to violence is of particular interest in this article.

AFFECTIVE–DISCURSIVE PRACTICES

Discourses are widely understood as forming a collective way of constructing knowledge and social practice. Discourses on relationships and gender (among other social relations) inform the participants' approach to violence. When examining the participants' stories, we focus on practices to allow our analyses of the juncture of the societal, the institutional and the personal, as well as the context where these relations are formalised, through which 'hidden forms of violating practices become visible and observable' (Husso *et al.*, 2021: 9).

Drawing on Wetherell's analysis (2012), we perceive emotion and affect as part of what shapes feelings (Husso *et al.*, 2021: 8), providing us with 'textured research on embodied social action' (Wetherell, 2013: 351). Discursive practices always have an affective element and are therefore affective–discursive (Wetherell, 2012: 21-22; 2013: 351). We understand affective practices as ways of being and doing (Husso *et al.*, 2021: 8), submerged in emotions. From this perspective, discourse and affect are not easily separable. Rather, they are intertwined in the patterning of everyday life, 'along with their social consequences and entailments' (Wetherell, 2012: 52), and should therefore be read together (Wetherell, 2013: 364).

The theoretical lens of affective–discursive practices helps us focus on how people are drawn in, both affectively and discursively, by accepted suppositions. The participants aim to make (cognitive) sense of their experiences, as well as the not fully articulated aspects, such as shame, that linger beyond rational explanations and terms. In other words, we explore the logics of *affective–discursive practices* that frame the retelling of the violent relationships from the participants' different perspectives, in the Nordic societal context.

METHOD AND DATA

Undertaking research on a sensitive subject is difficult. There are practical difficulties, such as locating participants and obtaining their consent, as well as ethical and psychological concerns. With the help of gatekeepers, prospective participants were recruited from the Icelandic prison system, as well as through a general call to men who self-identify as violent, and to women who identify as victim/survivor. Following established ethical procedures, the research plan stated that informed consent would be obtained from all participants prior to their participation, and their anonymity would be guaranteed.[2] The plan was submitted to and approved by the Ethical Board of the University of Iceland. Due to the gravity of the topic, a formal request to conduct interviews was sent to the National Bioethics Committee and the Prison and Probation Administration, both of which granted us permission to proceed. All participants received information on where and how to seek help in case the interviews proved difficult for them. All participants mentioned that it was important to them, knowing that their experiences could contribute to the discussion on IPV and help others. Their change of pace and relative boredom while incarcerated may have factored in some male participants' decision to take part in the research. Others were generous enough to be interviewed in their free time.

All participants who answered the research call were white and identified as cisgender, sharing their experiences of violence, varying in type and form, in a steady heterosexual relationship. Importantly, the participants were not connected to each other – not least as this could raise ethical issues and safety questions. From the larger study of 10 male perpetrators and 12 female victims/survivors, the analyses presented here draw on 7 interviews with 6 individuals, aged 20–40, comprising 3 men who self-identified their behaviour as violent and 3 women who identified their intimate partners' behaviour as violent. Icelanders have largely adopted ideas of a classless

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[2] Even though anonymity is guaranteed, it can be withheld if the participants disclose that they might harm themselves or others. The study participants did not disclose such information.

community (Oddsson, 2018: 18), and social class in the context of Iceland is under-theorised, including in relation to possible urban/rural differences. When determining the participants' socioeconomic status, we therefore focus on describing the interviewees in terms of background, occupation, and educational level.

Two of the male participants, Bjarki and Kristján, came from they themselves reported as unstable homes. They described a difficult upbringing, with one parent/both parents being alcoholic, having difficulties holding on to jobs, and themselves suffering from neglect due to their home situation. They did not pursue further studies after finishing compulsory education, both having traditional working-class careers that did not require formal education. The third man, Baldur, came from a stable home and attended secondary school after finishing compulsory education. His parents held economically middle-class jobs (with incomes above the minimum wage), but in terms of cultural capital, they can best be described as respectable working-class people. All the men who participated in the study described periods of substance abuse.

All the female participants had finished secondary school and described their backgrounds as stable. Lísa, coming from a middle-class family in terms of economic resources and cultural capital, held a university degree and a traditional middle-class job. Sigga and Magga had similar backgrounds, with one or both parents holding economically middle-class jobs but lacking status in terms of cultural capital. In their interviews, both shared their aspirations for career advancement in terms of education and work, with Sigga having already started her university studies.

In-depth interviews were conducted by the first author from December 2019 to June 2021. All participants were interviewed once, except Bjarki, who was interviewed twice in six months, providing a more extended account. The interviews lasted 50–150 minutes each. In-depth interviews open the possibility for the interviewer to respond to individual participants and create the trust needed for discussing sensitive subjects (Braun and Clarke, 2013: 88-90). The aim of the interviews was to understand the participants' experiences of IPV from their own perspectives as perpetrators or victims/survivors. Certain topics were highlighted, yet the format was sufficiently open to allow flexibility in the subject matter, according to the participants' wishes. The interviews were emotionally draining for both the interviewees and the interviewer. The participants often put themselves in a vulnerable position, recounting emotionally difficult experiences, leaving the interviewer deeply touched by their trusting her with their stories.

MAKING SENSE OF A VIOLENT RELATIONSHIP

There is a clear difference between the perceptions of perpetrators and victims/survivors in the participants accounts of the violence experienced. Previous research has shown that while a perpetrator generally views acts of physical violence as induced by *specific* events or circumstances (cf. Hearn, 1998), a victim/survivor describes the violence more in terms of a *process or system* of abuse (cf. Hanmer, 1998). When defining a relationship retrospectively, the interpretation is subject to the process of time, as well as to the influence of dominant discourses informing the participants' approach to violence, all of which are configured in the participants' narratives.

In this article, we focus on each storyteller's point of view and how he/she arranges his/her story into a narrative. We are interested in the dynamics holding a story together, what moves it along, brings it to a halt or dictates how it unfolds. Our analyses focuses on the perception of the participants as expressed by them, the aim to disentangle how they combine narrative elements to make sense of – build a story from – their experiences. More precisely, we seek to identify the affective–discursive practices that the participants have to work with when making sense of their experiences.

The participants' stories of relationships gone wrong unfolded as we read through the interview data. As the participants focused on making sense of their relationships, their stories were characterised by a chronological line – retrospective, in and from the present, and prospective. We identified three narrative elements featured in all of them: 1) recalling love, retrospectively; 2) understanding the relationship in and from the present; and 3) what happens next, prospectively?

The male participants reflected on their attempts to find their way back to good standing (and feelings of relief) after committing acts of violence. They identified limitations in their character, but at the same time, wondered how their relationship turned from good to bad and what the future would hold for them. The female participants longed to understand how their (former) partners could have inflicted such pain on them. Identifying their feelings of being stuck in the relationship and of 'losing their minds', they reflected on how they could recover from their experiences and continue with their lives.

1) Recalling Love

In their accounts, the participants often began by looking back to where the relationship started.

Men

All the male participants drew on traditional heteronormative discourses when recounting how their relationships began. Looking back, they positioned themselves as good boyfriends, describing a fairy tale-like love. Their girlfriends became characters in their stories, whom they adored and who were subsequently made responsible for their (un)happiness.

Kristján and Bjarki described a strong bond between themselves and their girlfriends. Kristján identified his girlfriend as *'the love of his life'*. Bjarki said that he *'worshipped'* his girlfriend. Positioning himself as a good boyfriend, he added that he liked to give her presents as tokens of love. Later, he added that he was a bit obsessed with her and felt good when he was with her. Kristján met a young woman who provided him with the love and warmth that he so desperately longed for; according to him, they quickly became *'addicted'* to each other. His narrative revolved around a love so intense that it was like *'two broken souls merging'*. When they were together, they just wanted to *'cuddle, eat, work, drink, do drugs and fuck'*, which was new to Kristján:

> I remember where I sat and how I was dressed and everything when I thought to myself that I was happy. Because it [the feeling] was new.

According to him, a person would want to be in a relationship to have someone to share their life with; it was about wanting – not needing. However, in the beginning of the interview, he stated that when a person was in a bad place oneself (he was using and dealing in drugs), one did not find a good partner, making a point that his girlfriend was not flawless, either.

Baldur mentioned having been in love *'a few times'*. However, he did not describe love as being as intense as the other male participants did. To him, there was more *'spark'* in the beginning of a relationship, in the first six months or so, after which it usually changed and became less exciting. Drawing on a heteromasculine discourse on hypersexuality and entitlement to women's bodies, he said that his attention moved quickly from one woman to the next.

Women

The female participants tried to understand how they got drawn into the relationship to begin with. While identifying excitement at its initial stages, they described how the relationship quickly turned for the worse. Looking back, they tried to identify the red flags that they might have missed early on in the relationship, drawing on normative discourses on heterosexuality to describe what romantic love is supposed (or not supposed) to be manifested.

Sigga met her boyfriend at a very young age; she was 15 and he was 19. She identified his behaviour as being romantic at first; he was kind and gave her gifts. Because she was young and naïve and had never experienced romantic love before, she thought that this was it, thus adopting a passive position towards him. In retrospect, she now recognised his behaviour as deviant; he was controlling very early on in their relationship, and his jealousy was unreasonable. Now she could not remember if the relationship was ever good:

> I can't really remember much of the good times; the rest is more memorable.

Lísa described her relationship in similar terms:

> It was all just horrible. Different kinds of horrible.

Describing her boyfriend, Lísa said that he was not a bad man, but he was *'surrounded by darkness'*; looking back, she wondered if she ever really knew him. The night when they first met, they had sex, which she now identified as a sexual violation. Taking on the feminine project of the caregiver, identifying her own behaviour as self-destructive and co-dependent at the time, she continued to date him. She now wondered if it was her need to save him from his substance abuse that made her stay in the relationship. After he became sober, the situation worsened; *'the darkness that surrounded us just got deeper'*. It became clear to her that his substance abuse was not the primary problem; he needed behavioural therapy as well. Looking back, she could only identify a few moments of happiness: *'I wished there had been more.'*

Magga, embracing new modes of femininity, explained the initial phase of her relationship with her ex-boyfriend as originating in intellectual and sexual tensions:

> I really liked how he challenged me intellectually; he asked me questions and was interested in what I had to say. I really found that attractive.

She did not identify as monogamous, creating some complications in the heterosexual project. Her boyfriend accepted this at first; however, driven by his need for masculine recognition, he began to make rules for her about

whom she could hook up with. The rules were reasonable at first but became more intrusive with time. He soon became more possessive of her. *'I had a bad feeling in the beginning but ignored it'*, she said. *'He spoke so highly of me, like I was his goddess and was perfect.'* Nonetheless, when she could not live up to the role he assigned her, he became angry with her.

Finally, the male participants drew on heteronormative discourses when sharing their experiences of love in a relationship. They positioned themselves as good boyfriends in an attempt to distance themselves from the violent Other. However, they all drew their girlfriends to the table, and partly blamed their girlfriends, in minimising the violence that took place. Looking back, the female participants wondered what their initial attraction to their partners was. Drawing on heterosexual discourses on romance, they were pathologising their former partners (the violent Other) when identifying signs that something was *'off'* from the start.

2) Understanding the relationship in and from the present

The participants' accounts continued with how the relationships were remembered, how these changed for the worse, and the effects on them.

Men

In accounting for what was remembered in their relationships from the present-day perspective, the male participants framed their problems as being out of their control; in this way, they individualised the problem of violence. For them, it was a violent event, a momentary loss of control, a framing that enabled them to distance themselves from the violent act and disregard its gendered context.

At the start of his interview, Bjarki told a story of a violent event that he identified as his turning point, resulting in his redefinition of his behaviour. He was imprisoned after physically assaulting his girlfriend, and for the first time, he felt the need to seek help about his behaviour. He admitted that this was not his first act of violence directed towards her, while stressing that he was a good guy: *'When I drink, there is a whole different person that comes out'*, he said. Later in the interview, he admitted having pushed his girlfriend and screamed at her when arguing, both while sober and intoxicated, although he did not acknowledge them as acts of violence. According to Bjarki, his greatest punishment was *'to have to live with having done* [the physical assault]*'*, identifying his behaviour at the time as self-destructive and the event as a consequence of his feelings of depression and anger. The event as such had become a discursive resource for him to make sense of the relationship, acknowledging his feelings of shame to condemn his own behaviour. Displaying remorse in that way called attention to himself, understanding that he overstepped gendered norms and positioning himself as a good guy who made a mistake, siding with the part of the community that condemned violence against women (Gottzén, 2016: 162).

After the initial blitz of new love wore off, both Kristján and Baldur described their relationships with their girlfriends as characterised by mutual violence and drug abuse. The drugs created tension between the partners that built up and finally exploded, which sometimes included violence. They both described arguing with their girlfriends, who responded by assaulting them. Consequently, they were forced to push back, which included intimidating their girlfriends, breaking things and holding the women so they would stop. *'I was forced to pin her down'*, Baldur said – not taking into account their difference in physical strength. To Kristján, it was clear that the violence was mutual:

> There was no one who started it. The atmosphere was just toxic; then we took turns exploding [being violent].

By ignoring the gendered context of violence, framing their experiences as mutual fighting, they positioned their girlfriends as flawed women. Framing their own violence as them lashing out only served to minimise the negative effects of their behaviour.

After a violent event, Baldur would feel ashamed, and he now recognised that his behaviour must have caused harm to his ex-girlfriend. However, he was quite sure that if it was not for the drugs, none of this would have happened:

> [I] felt bad afterwards, and she was really scared of me and really hurt because she loved me and I her. It must hurt when someone you love does something like this to you.

Kristján's behaviour towards his girlfriend was coercive.[3] He described his feelings at the time as characterised by insecurity, fear of rejection, feeling manic (due to drugs and depression) and controlled by anger. At one point, he had broken up with his girlfriend, after which he attempted to take his own life to *'win her back'*. Even though he now understood that his behaviour was at times violent and manipulative, he still held on to the belief that she

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[3] Drawing on Stark (2007), we understand coercive control as a pattern of behaviours designed to strip away a victim/survivor's sense of self, in an effort to dominate and take away their freedom.

provoked him to react that way. At the same time, he admitted feeling deeply ashamed of what he did to her. As he was losing control, his violence became a means to regain his position as a masculine subject in control (Ptacek, 2021: 674-675).

Women

Looking back, situating their relationships, the female participants reflected on how their lives changed during the course of the relationships, as well as their attempts to leave. Describing the damaging effects of her boyfriend's coercive and jealous manner, Sigga said that her boyfriend would get angry with her when he could not get in touch with her. Soon, she dropped out of college and became isolated, quitting her hobbies, not seeing her friends or family, a classic strategy of isolation deployed in coercive relationships. He told her proudly that he despised men who were violent against women, seeking recognition as a good man, well versed in the discourse on equality. However, he would put her through various forms of violence in private, including strangling and raping her. When she tried to leave him, he threatened to kill himself. She believed him and therefore felt obliged to stay with him. He even proposed to her, threatening to end his life if she would not accept, causing her deep shame when she accepted his proposal:

> Afterwards, I didn't want to tell people [about the engagement], as a way to stand up for myself.

Out of desperation, she later tried cheating on him and telling him about it, as a way to make him leave her, but he refused. She felt completely and utterly stuck.

Both Sigga and Lísa described their sex life as being on their boyfriends' terms. Sigga was very young when the relationship started and did not know how to enjoy sex; she thought that sex was important to make the relationship work. Subsequently, sex was on his terms, disregarding her sexual boundaries. She waited for him to finish at night, so she could go to sleep.

Lísa's ex-boyfriend would tell her of his former sex partners who were more sex-positive than she was. He would pressure her into performing as he wished sexually by slowly breaking down her spirit, body shaming her and making her understand how a good girlfriend should behave. Finally, she gave in. Today, Lísa identified many of her sexual experiences in the relationship as rape. Similar to Sigga, she felt completely stuck in the relationship in which she had invested so much to make it work.

Leaving a violent relationship is a difficult process; women often share the feeling of being trapped, due to the perceived danger associated with leaving (practical reasons), as well as feelings of shame (emotional reasons) (Enander, 2010a: 620-621). Both reasons figured in Sigga's and Lísa's stories. Additionally, both stories are examples of how the normative heterosexual discourse on sex figures in everyday life. Heterosexual masculinity is presented as agentive and entitled to women's bodies, whereas femininity and female sexuality are constructed as passive (Beres, 2007: 96-97; Gavey, 2018: 3; Lazard, 2020: 7-9, 20, 50). Their stories are examples of men enacting their (hyper) masculinity in private as a way of gaining power and masculine recognition. This further connects to the societal understanding of IPV as something private, which only serves to disconnect it from its gendered context.

Magga and her ex-partner were both using drugs during their relationship, which had a strongly negative impact on their relationship. She felt that it was his goal to have her by his side day and night:

> He did everything to have me by his side, first by being sweet, and then by threatening me or by using violence.

Her boyfriend accused her of being a coward who always ran away from her problems, belittling her to make sure that she did not leave his side. If that did not work to make her stay or do what he wanted, he would move on to physical and other forms of violence: pushing her to the floor, punching the walls and going through her phone. He would frame it as doing these things out of care for her, positioning himself as a good, strong man and her as weak, while seeking to dominate their private life where he was losing control. Magga further explained this as follows:

> He didn't recognise what he did as violence. There was always a good reason for doing what he did – protecting me from myself or others.

The male participants placed the origin of their problems as out of their control, connecting it to substance abuse. They expressed feeling shameful, but at the same time, framed the experience as *mutual* violence, positioning their girlfriends as ´bad´, downplaying the severity of the violence and ignoring gendered contexts. The female participants all described their partners as slowly losing control, using violence to gain masculine recognition. They emphasised feeling stuck in relationships that they knew were harmful to them, enduring multiple forms of violence and abuse in private, from men who felt entitled to their bodies.

3) What happens next?

Finally, the participants spoke of their expectations for the future, as well as their reflections on what was unfinished or had remained ambiguous.

Men

Wondering what would await them after the relationship had run its course, the male participants expressed their will to become better men. However, their definition of ´better´ and their approach to ´becoming better´ varied, as did their future expectations.

Bjarki's narrative was about being in love. He wanted to leave the anger and violence of his past behind him and start over:

> [To] work on the things that make me fuck everything up like that (…) leave all the bad behind and run away.

He had undergone psychological therapy and attended AA meetings, which to him, meant that he had done the work required of him to get better. By showing his will to change, he hoped to pass as a masculine subject in control. He loved his girlfriend, and she loved him; to him, that was enough for them to be together. However, due to the severity of the latest violent event, he feared that he had lost her for good. Consequently, it made him happy when she agreed to start seeing him again, even though she did not want to tell her friends and family about it. When they learned about the relationship and became upset, he had a hard time understanding the reason. To him, he had left all his bad habits behind. He said that people usually became better persons after making mistakes (without reflecting on how people became better), so he deserved a second chance at the relationship:

> I have been back and forth feeling sorry for myself. Why can't they just forgive me? They know I am not like that.

The people closest to Bjarki and his girlfriend all condemned the violent act. For him, it was important to acknowledge that what he did was violence, and to express feeling ashamed of it. Showing his shame made it possible for him to re-enter society. He had defined his actions as morally wrong; now he wanted to forget about it and did not care for friends and family questioning his good intentions. Swedish research (Gottzén, 2016: 170) shows how men do get initial pushback from their networks for their behaviours that breach gender norms; however, this is soon forgotten.

When asked if he had given any thought to how the violent events had affected his girlfriend, Bjarki answered that he *'hadn't given it that much thought'*. Their relationship had become a bit boring and toxic before it ended, *'but now (…) she knows that she is tough and beautiful, and I feel she is stronger for it'*. By reframing the relationship, positioning her as being empowered after the violent event, he turned the problem of his violent behaviour into a project for them to work on together. He showed a limited understanding of the harm that his violent behaviour had caused her, as well as the gendered power imbalances inherent in the heterosexual project.

Baldur stopped doing drugs and became confident that his problems were thereby solved. He would know if he was a genuinely bad guy:

> I would know if I was mean and nasty, that sort of character. I have seen that type of character, and I know I am not like that. I am a good guy, even though I have done some things [violence].

Baldur explained that he tried behavioural therapy but did not feel that it helped him much. The only thing that helped was to avoid taking drugs: *'You just react that way when you have reached this stage [of using].'* He claimed that all the girls whom he had hurt knew that it only happened because he was abusing drugs at the time. According to him, it was *'better for them to know that'* rather than *'thinking I did it knowingly and meant it'*, which only showed the limited extent of his understanding of the damaging effects of violence. To Baldur, masculinity was about control, which he had now regained, hence no more problems.

To Kristján, redemption was not in the cards, as he acknowledged that he would never master his own emotional control:

> My future is just being alone (...) to coast through what's left of life, with no expectations (…). That's enough [for me] (…). I can think about things now and not feel anything (...). Some of it might be acceptance, but some of it is also just [me] being numb and not dealing with it.

Nonetheless, to Kristján, the most important thing was to maintain control so that he would not repeat bad habits. He was sober now but would need to work on himself to become a better person, and he could now honestly admit that he was not ready to do that just yet.

Women

The female participants reflected on their relationship issues that remained unresolved. Sigga and Lísa both felt that they were losing their minds during the course of their relationships with their boyfriends. Shortly after breaking up with her boyfriend, Sigga even consulted a doctor, wondering if she might have a personality disorder, which her ex-partner had suggested to her:

> He had convinced me that what I saw and heard was just some nonsense and that I was just imagining [things]. I started to feel like I was crazy.

Lísa said that her boyfriend was very *'good at projecting'*; when she addressed a problem with his behaviour, he would mirror that remark to her, making her behaviour the problem. She explained how she only identified her experience as being a form of psychological violence (gaslighting) after their relationship had ended, designed to wear her down and make her feel bad. Before, she thought she was just being paranoid and anxious.

After her relationship ended, Sigga would have flashbacks regarding the violent relationship, causing her problems in daily life, for example, when communicating and having sex with her current partner:

> I didn't realise that it was violence until later, after we had broken up. Then I realised, 'Wow, that was not normal.'

She was later diagnosed with PTSD, which she was now still dealing with. She explained how *'the psychological [violence] was even worse'* than other forms of violence endured during the relationship. She added that it took her a long time after the relationship had ended to realise that she was a person whose needs and opinions mattered.

Psychological violence is often identified as one of the most damaging forms of violence in intimate relationships (Ptacek, 2021: 675-676). It wears down women's identities, ensuring their passivity, as part of the masculine subject's need for recognition and domestic misogyny. Their broken-down self-esteem and PTSD contribute to women's feeling of inability to leave/end a relationship.

Magga and Sigga both described how their boyfriends blamed them for the violence that took place. The men deemed their girlfriends' actions as triggering their violent reactions

> He always felt I deserved what happened. It was my own fault for doing something [wrong]. (Magga)

After a violent event, Magga's boyfriend would feel sad but simultaneously angry with her for allowing the event to happen. Once, she told him that she experienced these events as violence, to which he reacted by accusing her of being the violent one in the relationship. According to Magga, all she ever did was fight back when he turned violent; being half his size, she felt very scared. After the relationship ended, her boyfriend told her that he had only been angry with her twice during their relationship, not acknowledging his erratic and controlling behaviour as violence. Wondering about his current situation, Magga said that he was not a bad person, but he never learned to love in a healthy manner. She hoped that he would get better. However, taking a position different from her previous one, now focusing on her own wellbeing, she said, *'But I also know that it's not worth it to try to make his life better by sacrificing mine.'*

Positioning her boyfriend as out of control, Lísa recognised that he felt ashamed and scared when he lost control. At that time, he was abusing drugs and alcohol, and to Lísa, it was obvious that he *'needed to gain control of his life'*. After he became sober, Lísa hoped that he would find some peace, but the violence did not stop, and the apology that she so desperately hoped for never came. She was hurt. Similar to the other participants, she continued to wait for his full recognition of his abusive actions towards her as violence.

The male participants reflected on how to abstain from violent behaviour and become better men. Focusing on their sobriety as key to their lives as masculine subjects in control, they neglected the fact that they had not undergone substantial behavioural therapy to gain insights into the harm caused to their victims. After having ended their relationships, the female participants focused on the long-term toll of the psychological abuse on them. They wondered if their ex-partners would ever understand how the relationships affected them or would accept responsibility for their actions, fully recognising the pain that they caused.

DISCUSSION

In this article, we have explored how the participants recounted and (re)defined their experiences of violent relationships in relation to time, as well as how their understandings changed in framing their experiences. Each relationship, perceived as an affective–discursive practice, figured differently across its three phases: 'the happy relationship', 'the violent relationship' and 'the post-relationship'. First, recalling love retrospectively, framed in terms of the heterosexual project, became an affective–discursive practice. The male participants were adamant

about positioning themselves as being in love and good (not deviant) boyfriends. They reported how they loved their girlfriends dearly until the women fell short of living up to their expectations, triggering their need for masculine recognition and control. The female participants carefully rethought about their boyfriends' behaviour, asking themselves if love ever existed between them and their partners after recognising the latter's abusive tendencies retrospectively.

Understanding their relationships in and from the present-day vantage point, the male participants placed the origin of their problems as beyond their control. They framed the violence as mutual, resulting in their loss of control and ignoring the gendered context of violence. The female participants positioned themselves as subordinated and relatively weak in enduring multiple forms of violence, designed to increase their boyfriends' control over them, and resulting in their feeling of being completely stuck in the relationships.

Speaking prospectively, the men expressed their desire to pass as masculine subjects in control. Positioning themselves as deviant only when resorting to violence, they tried to escape being othered as violent men, without demonstrating a deeper understanding of the damaging effects of violence. Meanwhile, the female participants wondered if their ex-boyfriends would ever be able to accept full responsibility for the harm that they caused their partners or to understand the women's pain. The women had not yet experienced closure regarding their violent relationships; their violent relationships remained unfinished.

Looking back, the relationships themselves became an affective–discursive practice or practices, informing and constituting the participants' experiences as they re-lived and re-felt the violence committed and suffered, generating different embodied experiences, notably shame. Shame figured strongly in the participants' stories, sometimes expressed explicitly, at other times lingering more implicitly in their narratives, not fully articulated or understood but traceable through its regulatory role in sustaining heteronormative practices.

Representations of IPV in contemporary Nordic society rely heavily on individualising, pathologising and psychologising the discourse on the perpetrator as the violent Other in contrast to ordinary men. In the Nordic region, police investigations of IPV are frequently prematurely suspended (Brännvall, 2016: 31-32; Sæmundsdóttir and Einarsdóttir, 2018: 72-73), resulting in the assumption of the innocence of the alleged perpetrators. It is common for both perpetrators and victims/survivors to minimise and downplay the severity of the violence, with gendered societal norms deeming violence as shameful (Brännvall, 2016: 54; Wemrell *et al.*, 2019: 7). Against this backdrop, it is unsurprising that the research participants turned to individual factors in trying to make sense of their violent relationships. Gendered power relations rarely figure in such everyday understandings of violence (Päivinen and Holma, 2017: 2-3), as reflected in the participants' difficulties in acknowledging the structural factors enabling violence.

The male participants focused on the individual acts of violence that were unlawful (cf. Hearn, 1998), while the female participants described their relationships more broadly as abusive (cf. Hanmer, 1998). Framing the violence as mutual (cf. Ferguson, 2018) or resulting from drug abuse is an example of an individualising discourse – a product of the discourse on the perpetrator as the violent Other. Putting the blame outside the relationship helps the men participants cope with the negative affects attached to violence, such as shame, positioning themselves as good men who did bad things due to circumstances presented as beyond their control. However, this highlighted their lack of understanding of the severity of the violence committed, as well as the gendered structures enabling violence.

The female participants framed their experiences in broader terms, describing various forms of violence, including violent behaviour that was often dismissed as non-violence. Framing abuse such as coercion and gaslighting as violence, as well as using 'criminal justice terms' to do so, 'is a new phenomenon in its visibility and prominence in contemporary culture' (Lazard, 2020: 97). This was witnessed in the stories of the female participants, all of whom discussed the mental strain of their relationships in terms of violence, underlining its immense harm. In their relationships, they occupied positions weaker than those of their partners, with their emotions disregarded. They now awaited validation, a wish for real acceptance of the responsibility for and the recognition of the pain suffered at the hands of their former partners. That wish manifested their desire that violence would be understood as a structural phenomenon because without such knowledge their former partners (and society) would never fully comprehend their pain.

With this article, we seek to contribute to the analysis of cultural meanings of shame and shaming processes (Shefer and Munt, 2019: 145-146), as well as how and when shame should be felt, in making sense of a violent relationship and regulating the heterosexual project. Shame may seem to be simply a feeling, but it is also a complex affective–discursive practice, materialised in different ways, depending on the individual, time and place. Shame is 'a project of everyday ethics' (Probyn, 2004: 336), an affective–discursive practice that connects individuals to societal (in this case, Nordic) contexts, positioning participants positively or negatively.

For men, shame is at times performative. After their violent acts, the perpetrators express shame in breaking gender norms, fearing being othered as violent men. To perform shame correctly enables them to *come back*, to be redeemed, from violence, even if they do not feel or engage in the discomfort of shame that is needed to engage

with the structural problem of violence. Perpetrators are expected to express shame to start a conscious process to regain their previous masculine position; they need to admit (positive) shame for their violence and be rewarded by being excused. However, this is problematic, as it can distance themselves from the shameful act of violence (Gottzén, 2016: 170-172; Shefer and Munt, 2019: 150-151).

Shame, for women victims/survivors, is constructed differently. The regulatory effects of shame operate within the neoliberal discourse on gender equality, portraying Nordic women as empowered and able to protect themselves. Subsequently, victims/survivors of IPV are positioned and position themselves as relatively weak when violated, causing them (negative) shame. They are then expected to leave their violent relationships, adding further shame when they stay (Alsaker *et al.*, 2016: 484-485; Brännvall, 2016: 50). Being stuck in a violent relationship is regarded as a negative aspect of heterosexual femininity that gender-equal women do not identify with (Enander, 2010a: 20-21). All of these are configured in women's 'gendered shame' (Brännvall, 2016: 51; Enander, 2010a: 20-21; Shefer and Munt, 2019: 147) – the feeling that it is women's responsibility to solve the problem of IPV by simply and individually leaving. Shame thus has an individualising function, regulating the power relations that sustain structural inequalities, including the heterosexual project (Shefer and Munt, 2019: 145-147). Additionally, it can be a significant aspect of womanhood and female sexuality, already figuring strongly in their lives. When they find themselves in violent relationships, they may neither want to nor be able to acknowledge violence immediately, due to shame. In retrospect, they can now see the warning signs and recognise the relationships more broadly as violent. The discourses that they have to work with stop here – 'forgiveness' or 'acceptance' is not part of the discourses available after a violent relationship; women may feel stuck in their relationships due to shame. Considering the powerful structural nature of shame, we call for a deeper examination of the socio-political effects of shame in the Nordic context and elsewhere.

The participants' relations to violence and the violent relationship are informed, albeit differently, by gendered discourses, affective–discursive practices and shame. Experiences of violence are deeply personal, so it becomes difficult for the individual to disentangle themselves from the structural backdrop and place their experiences within a seemingly invisible gender system. Prevalence of IPV in Iceland, as in other Nordic countries, is high. Even though gender equality is widely considered achieved, normative, gendered, individualistic discourses on violence figure beneath the surface. The structures enabling such violence must be changed, including increasing exposure to discourses and affective–discursive practices that challenge and resist the self-policing heteronormative structures of society, and go beyond shame.

More broadly, in this article, we have sought to bring together of studies on violence against women, societal context, gendered affective-discursive practices, and shame. While these issues have often been dealt with somewhat separately, there is a relatively limited, but growing, research literature on affect, affective-discursive practices, violence, and violence against women (e.g. Dolan, 2022; Gottzén, 2016, 2017; Jones, 2018; Sakki and Martikainen, 2022; Venäläinen, 2020, 2022), including in societal conditions of relative formal gender equality. From this ongoing work, we see here considerable potential for further studies on various affective-discursive aspects of violence, including how violence is enacted, perceived, experienced, reported, represented, responded to, and politicised or not.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Book Review

Dreams of Flight: The Lives of Chinese Women Students in the West

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Published: March 1, 2023

Book's Author: Fran Martin

Publication Date: 2022

Publisher: Duke University Press

Price: $28.95 (Paperback)

Number of Pages: 368 pp.

ISBN: 978-1-4780-1761-5

In *Dreams of Flight*, Fran Martin investigates the 'deep entanglement of gender with educational mobility' (p. 5) in the lives of transnational Chinese millennials (i.e., born in or near the 1990s). She sensitively explores how Chinese women students abroad negotiate conflicting demands of neoliberal individualism and neotraditional femininity (indicating the resurgence of retrograde gender norms), and illuminates how they forge translocal belonging amid their spatial and social exclusion. This extensively researched ethnography draws upon multisite fieldwork Martin conducted between 2015-2020 with a cohort of 50 Chinese women students (pre-undergraduate, undergraduate, and graduate) at Australian universities.

During this period, before the Covid-19 pandemic, Chinese collectively were the largest proportion of international students in Australia (as in the US and UK), and women comprised nearly two-thirds of these Chinese 'student transmigrants' (p. 4, p. 24).

The methodology is innovative, incorporating study participants' hand-drawn maps, photos, text messages, and social media (WeChat) posts in addition to interviews and observations. Martin includes these data along with 'sensory and affective elements' (p. 29) of her fieldwork to viscerally convey the study participants' embodied experiences of study abroad, and underscore that transnational mobility is grounded in, and often bound by, materiality, practices, emotions, and specific geographies, which may limit its privilege and power. Further, Martin judiciously inserts herself into the narrative to reveal her research process, partial perspective, and ethical challenges, such as when she is confronted with participants' trauma (i.e., mental illness, interpersonal violence, medical emergency). The writing is exceptionally clear, and the arguments are well-supported. From study participants' stories and quotations, Martin extrapolates the complexity and variability of their individual circumstances and views, which confound generalisations and complicate abstract explanations. She contextualises thick descriptions with thoughtful analysis that engages broader scholarly concerns in migration and transnationalism, contemporary China, international education, and feminism.

Chapter 1 ('Before Study') draws on predeparture interviews with Australian-university bound study participants and their mothers to explore how gender, as well as class and race, contours their motivations and options, in complex ways. For Chinese students and their families, Western higher education is a mobility strategy to attain the credentials needed to secure desirable jobs, as well as the cosmopolitan habitus associated with urbane lifestyles, which together 'consolidate and reproduce [their] middle-class identity and privilege' (p. 13). Chinese daughters pursue transnational education to mitigate or even escape gendered constraints imposed by too-early marriage and male bias in local employment markets. Yet, women students concentrate in areas of study like

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finance that are considered appropriate to their gender (p. 11). Parents support tertiary education abroad in the hopes it will 'facilitate their daughter's progress toward normative feminine adulthood' (p. 4), by improving job prospects and inculcating qualities necessary to thrive in a highly competitive society. Australia, as a study destination, especially appeals to parents of daughters for its reputedly safe, low-crime environment. Martin rightly foregrounds her study participants' dreams and agency but recognises that choice is unevenly distributed; for academic underperformers and others without social or material advantages, transnational education is not an aspiration but rather a last resort to prevent downward social mobility.

Chapters 2-4 ('Place,' 'Media,' and 'Work') concentrate on participants' emplacement practices and self-making in Australia. Due to their structural, social, and spatial marginalisation in the host society, Chinese transmigrant students typically dwell in their own 'expatriate microworld' (p. 66). Study participants experienced Melbourne positively as a translocal place of self-extension and belonging, enhanced by digital technology and social media that connect them to friends and family near and far. But the city was also a site of their sociospatial encapsulation and racialised (as well as gendered) exclusion, sometimes manifest in violence directed toward them, which together negated their transnational mobile class privilege.

Understandably, Chinese transmigrant students held contradictory feelings about Melbourne, simultaneously affectionate toward and disdainful of its provincialism, which belies the city's cosmopolitan image projected in 'edu-tourism' marketing (p. 64). Martin sketches how the influx of Chinese transnational students transformed urban architecture and provided a windfall for real estate developers and service and retail businesses. Families of some students invested in newly constructed glassy high rises clustered in the central business district (CBD). Many students leased apartments in these new complexes or rented rooms in older 'dogbox' buildings (p. 70). Others congregated in the suburban 'ethnoburbs' (p. 84). Typically, the property owners and landlords were local or overseas Chinese, and occasionally were university faculty. Despite this spatial segregation, study participants endeavoured to make Melbourne the place of their dream; those who resided outside the CBD and shared housing with peers or a host family seemed to cultivate a stronger sense of belonging; others gained satisfaction through independent living.

Mobile technology is ubiquitous and essential to the translocal lives of Chinese students abroad. Digital media, particularly the popular WeChat app, expands and contracts their sociospatial bubble. It provides useful information; connects students to home; assists their navigation of geography, academics, and daily life; and forges shared interest groups, among other benefits. It also functions as an echo chamber; the 'affiliative structure' of groups and subscription feeds reinforces users' local marginalisation and strengthens their national-ethnic identification (p. 115). To demonstrate, Martin homes in on an incident in 2016 when a (racist) rumour about 'African gangs' perpetrating violent crimes against Chinese students went viral on WeChat, igniting fear among Chinese students and inflaming latent racial and class prejudice. Martin gathers evidence that disproves the rumour and shares it with her study participants, to no avail. She subsequently provides concrete suggestions for municipal and university authorities to better facilitate Chinese transnational students' integration into Melbourne's highly diverse society.

Martin also examines the exploitation and feminisation of transmigrant students' labour. Excluded from more desirable employment due to prejudice and immigration work restrictions, Chinese transnational students accept informal jobs in Chinatown restaurants or engage in parallel e-trading, to earn money and gain business experience. Martin identifies e-trading, a form of micro entrepreneurship that utilises WeChat digital media and Chinese-run courier services, as a weak and feminine form of 'network capital' (p. 134) that underscores contradictions. Study participants operationalise transnational networks and gender capital (e.g., knowledge of feminine commodities) because they have few alternatives to gain business expertise and profit. Here again, hypermobility is circumscribed by local place-based social and material structures.

Chapters 5-7 ('Sexuality,' 'Faith,' and 'Patriotism') explore the inner lifeworld of these student transmigrants regarding intimacy, religion, and nation. Young women use the liminal time of overseas study, absent the scrutiny of parents and social milieu back home, to rework their relationship to normative femininity and gendered life course. This 'zone of suspension' (p. 163) offers the potential to experiment with premarital sex and cohabitation, explore queer intimacy, and overturn gender hierarchy in the family by harnessing their academic and mobility capital. However, while study participants 'absorb the atmosphere' of Australia's liberal norms of sexuality (p. 173), they are mindful of conservative moral codes and sexual double standards that are enforced by peer pressure. They expend much energy to manage different value systems carefully; failure brings shame and humiliation or 'intimate isolation' (i.e., closeting) (p. 188).

Martin elaborates her argument that transnational mobilities are imbricated with locality by looking at student transmigrants' interactions with deterritorialised Christianity. Study participants' gendered vulnerability and racialised exclusion in Melbourne society led some to accept social welfare interventions of evangelical churches, which avidly recruit them. Martin profiles three women students to highlight their shared and unique religious experiences. Chinese millennials seek moral guidance such as offered by religion to mediate the uncertainties of

high-risk society and as part of their neoliberal self-making, as well as for companionship and psychological needs. Martin rightly criticizes the 'sacralisation' of social services that has accompanied the dismantling of education as a public good in Australia (as in the US), and voices concern about the undue influence of gender reactionary religious teachings on these susceptible young transmigrants.

This generation of middle-class Chinese youth hold dichotomous worldviews: they identify with cosmopolitan globalism yet were socialised by 'patriotic education' curriculum. She identifies two contextual 'logics' by which Chinese students overseas express their nationalism: a performative ethics of national representation and a developmentalist narrative of nationhood (p. 220). Study participants defend their homeland against Westerners' racist or patronising discourse about China. When among peers or in a neutral academic setting, they criticise China's government and frankly discuss social or environmental problems, which they anticipate will resolve as the nation-state modernises. Indeed, their generation is confident of China's economic and technological superiority to Western nations. As participants were exposed to diverse media and Chinese from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and elsewhere, they increasingly distinguished between nation and government and accepted the plurality of Chinese identity. Martin also remarks on the feminisation of patriotic sentiment through homeland-as-mother representations but could elaborate on how masculinity and misogyny contribute to virulent strains of nationalism.

The final chapter ('After Study') follows study participants' postgraduate trajectories and assesses their subjective change. The Conclusion ('Unsettled Dreams') expounds on the study's scholarly contributions to theories of subject formation, transnationalism, and higher education internationalisation. Time spent abroad increased these unmarried, middle-class, singleton women's identification with 'mobile entrepreneurial selfhood' (p. 286) and weakened their attachment to neotraditional femininity. But gender traditionalism, backed by a 'perverse alliance' of family and state interests, diverts them from the global corporate financial track to 'settle' down in early marriage with a stable job in the state sector back home (p. 276). These women may wield the ideology of individualism against patriarchal pressures, refusing to compromise. Their ability to do so varies by class position as well as personal characteristics. Martin thus surmises, neoliberal self-understandings and outlook alignment with global elites produces gendered benefit for certain (i.e., upper-middle-class) women, but reinforces the capitalist-class system, which disadvantages most women.

Martin's study ended just as the Covid-19 pandemic began. The Preface and Coda address the dramatic decline in international student enrolments in Australia (as elsewhere) precipitated by the pandemic and subsequent retrenchment of higher education globalisation still underway. *Dreams of Flight* is an invaluable resource for scholars, advanced undergraduates, and graduate students seeking a comparison or contrast to these present circumstances, a pleasurable and informative ethnography, and stimulating discussions of its themes and relevant theories.

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Contemporary Chinese Queer Performance

Siyang Cao [1*]

Published: March 1, 2023

Offering in-depth analyses of a wide range of queer performance in the People's Republic of China (PRC) in the post-Mao era, *Contemporary Chinese Queer Performance* is an excellent project of queer theatre and performance in the contemporary PRC context. This interdisciplinary research makes a prominent contribution to the existing literature on LGBTQ identities and communities through the lens of performance culture. Ranging from theatre, performance art, music, photography, and digital media to social activism, the dynamic interplay between cultural texts and practices is closely examined to unravel the pivotal role played by performance in shaping contemporary queer public culture in China and the Chinese diaspora.

In the book, Bao skilfully weaves together ethnography, interviews, and textual and discourse analysis to investigate the complexity of queerness and Chineseness. The analytical focus on body, space and practice enables a more nuanced understanding of queerness in relation to its materiality, sociality and emotional reflexivity. Equally of importance, the book brings to light the contingent and fragmented nature of Chineseness. Bao also develops a critical discussion of how Chinese queer performance is politically significant and globally meaningful. In so doing, the book critically reflects on the Western-centric narratives of China as the authoritarian and homogeneous Other in contemporary geopolitics.

The book includes seven chapters that are divided into three parts. Bao invites readers to navigate through the changing historical and social contexts where queer art and activism have emerged. Part I discusses two historical texts in post-Mao and post-socialist China, a particular historical time marked by China's participation in global neoliberal capitalism and hybrid queer subculture. The analysis reveals how photographic and cinematic representations are intertwined with and constitutive of the shifting cultural discourse and mainstream politics. The first chapter explores Chinese queer artist Ren Hang's photography as a form of performance. Drawing on the Daoist notion of *ziran* and the Deleuzian conceptualisation of body and affect, Bao contends that Ren's photography conveys the artist's subversion of normative perceptions of human subjectivity and gender identity. Featuring the entanglements between human and nonhuman bodies in the rapidly changing urban spaces, Ren's photography communicates a queer way of life that is both fragile and transgressive.

Chapter 2 looks at *Coming Out* and *Lan Yu*, two queer films from the GDR and China respectively. While *Coming Out* portrays homosexuality as an intrinsic part of socialist beliefs, *Lan Yu* suggests that queer identities can be a self-rediscovered process energised by socialist longings. Nonetheless, Bao argues that their shared theme of 'coming out of the closet' should be viewed as a political act with (trans)national and historical significance in the

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post-Cold War world order. Furthermore, the two queer films allow for an alternative imagination of queer resistance in contemporary neoliberal hegemony.

Part II shifts attention to queer activism, bringing out issues that have long been downplayed in the accounts of LGBTQ politics across many parts of the world. The two chapters examine how cultural events, performing arts and digital media serve to empower minority groups and strengthen community solidarity in the Chinese political context. These activities also effectively enhance public understanding of queer culture considering intense social discrimination against sexual minorities. As Bao emphasises, the 'soft' style of activism creates culturally specific queer politics in China, which potentially goes beyond the dominant framework of queer activism represented by LGBTQ Prides. Since the confrontational type of political engagement runs the risk of state intervention, local communities creatively come up with diverse social and cultural strategies to circumvent government censorship. In Chapter 3, Bao presents a case study of the Beijing Queer Chorus (BQC) to illustrate how music and sound can become a powerful impetus for social movements and community building. As the first major LGBTQ choir that performed publicly in China, BQC chooses to engage with queer issues through a gentle approach. For instance, BQC often holds concerts that address issues specific to queer people, and frequently organises choir rehearsals to provide a reliable space where queer identities can be expressed openly. In addition, the social impact of BQC is enhanced through the choir members' enthusiastic and strategic digital labour. Specifically, BQC makes effective use of varied social media platforms for video streaming and interaction with audience. Despite the seemingly apolitical nature, their activities serve as an important means of public engagement based on what he terms 'queer audibility'. As Bao argues, queer audibility contributes to challenging negative representations of minority groups by voicing their real-life experiences, and therefore the political potential of music and sound should not be overlooked.

Such practices of 'transmediality' become even more evident in Bao's discussion of queer filmmaker and activist Fan Popo in Chapter 4. Through documenting theatrical performance and disseminating the completed film, Fan articulates his own understanding of identity, feminism and queer rights. For example, Fan was one of the directors of *New Beijing, New Marriage*, a film documenting a same-sex 'wedding' event in 2009. The documentary showcases how the passers-by react to same-sex marriage and homosexuality, and raised heated debates on the Internet. Despite the event's lack of 'authenticity', in that it was performed by gay and lesbian volunteers, it was recognised as a landmark event in the history of China's queer movement. Indeed, the process of documentary filmmaking offers important insights into how local forms of queerness can be empowering and effective without subscribing to a 'global queering' discourse. Fan's most famous work 'family trilogy' takes a similar approach to rethinking intergenerational understanding between queer people and their families. Overall, what distinguishes Fan's queer activism is the innovative use of 'theatre-documentary-media-activism assemblage' (p. 79), which speaks to the contingent, flexible and culturally sensitive feature of queer politics in contemporary China.

Part III is of relevance to the increasingly transnational and transcultural contour of contemporary queer performance. Bao further captures the political significance of performance in a globalised world filled with new patterns of risk and uncertainty. Chapter 5 looks at the cultural translation of European avant-garde theatre and Western queer culture through the case of *East Palace, West Palace*, a gay explicit play performed in Beijing in 2005 and 2009. The play was based on a theatre script co-created by the late writer Wang Xiaobo and filmmaker Zhang Yuan and directed by a French theatre director. In this sense, the play allows for a destabilisation of fixed categories such as the global and the local, the modern and the traditional, as well as the progressive and the authentic. Bao considers the theatrical production of the play as a transcultural process during which the meaning of queerness can be reconstructed into different shapes. Another example of transnationalism and transculturality in theatrical production is Bao's critical examination of *About My Parents and Their Child*, a form of postdramatic theatre portraying parent-child relationships and intergenerational (mis)understanding. Drawing on interviews with the production team as well as textual analysis of the play, Bao explores how queer public sphere can be constructed through the techniques of intermediality and transmediality; by assembling a multiplicity of perspectives, narratives and media platforms, the play serves to trigger critical reflections on sensitive social issues. Meanwhile, the non-linear, fragmented and open-ended style of storytelling mirrors the unorganised nature of mundane life. Bao notes that *About My Parents and Their Child* articulates the complexity of social relations from diverse perspectives, thus challenging communicative hierarchies and hegemonic power relations. In this sense, the play also queers conventional and normalised understandings of parent-child relationship in transitioning China.

In the last Chapter, Bao shifts his focus to queer performance in transnational and diasporic contexts. Looking at three digital artworks created by Europe-based artists, the chapter demonstrates how food and culinary practices are creatively used to reflect on cultural differences and anti-Asian racism under the COVID-19 pandemic. While food has long been a particularly relevant topic among East and Southeast Asian communities, 'eating bats' and 'Chinese' culinary practices have been stigmatised in western popular discourse. Having discussed the political potential of 'soft activism' in previous chapters, Bao addresses the growing importance of applying similar types of activism to engage with the public using the digital format. Artworks and performances on the digital platform

can generate social and political impact just as the traditional formats, albeit requiring innovation and adaption. Furthermore, Bao argues for more attention paid to the critical role played by food and taste to articulate hybrid cultural identities in pandemic politics. In an era of political polarisation and rising nationalism, artistic exploration of culinary practices can act as culturally sensitive tools to enhance international communication and conduct queer activism.

Many of the cases presented in *Contemporary Chinese Queer Performance* are compelling. Bao's analyses capture the creativity, enthusiasm and tenacity of queer artists and communities under ongoing social pressure. The author makes a cutting-edge and critical contribution to studies of Chinese queer culture through the lens of 'soft activism'. For me, the powerful influence of cultural and social activities expands readers' understanding of the confrontational type of queer politics across many Western contexts. The performative forms of queer activism are effective and empowering by attending to cultural and social specificities of contemporary China; they also construct a non-heteronormative, and sometimes even non-anthropocentric, space for both queer and queer-friendly people. Meanwhile, Bao challenges fixed categories such as identity, avant-garde theatre and cultural belonging through the conceptual focus on transnationalism, transculturality and transmediality. For me, another strength of the book is its meticulous attention paid to a range of performances produced by Chinese queer artists and activists, some of which have received limited publicity due to strict government censorship. It would be good to see more discussion on queer performance and activism beyond the urban context, potentially in relation to the rural-urban division and regional diversity. Moreover, generational differences in terms of both art production and audience reception could be brought into future research to generate a broader understanding of contemporary queer performance. Overall, this book provides a detailed explanation of the historical context and political environment where contemporary queer performance was comprehended and practised. The book will appeal to a wide interdisciplinary audience, including students and scholars in queer studies, China studies, media and cultural studies and performance studies.

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Race and Masculinity in Gay Men's Pornography: Deconstructing the Big Black Beast

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Published: March 1, 2023

Pornography, however defined, has become a legitimate, established field of academic study since the seminal (pardon the pun!) collection of essays *Porn Studies*, from 2004 and edited by Berkeley scholar Linda Williams. A journal with the same title was launched in 2014 by Routledge and its diverse content is continuing testament to how varied the field of study is; including intriguing research byways such as '"The First Rip Off": Anti-Circumcision Activism in Men's Magazines' (Allan, 2018). Further, Williams's volume contained a mere dozen pages of 'Suggested Reading' and many of the essays and books listed were only laterally connected to hardcore pornography. These days it wouldn't be difficult to imagine a bookshop or library with a large, dedicated section and, again, the interests are methodologically and politically diverse: contemporary titles include, for example, Carolyn Bronstein's *Battling Pornography: The American Feminist Anti-Pornography Movement, 1976-1986* and Katherine Harrison and Cassandra A. Ogden's *Pornographies: Critical Positions*.

But a set of critical questions arguably hang over current porn studies: to what extent is the field focused on heterosexual productions and other heterosexist concerns; what is the health of studies of race and ethnicity, and pornographies from around the world; and how central are questions of 'power' to the field? The latter was a defining issue of feminist critiques of porn in the US and UK in the 1970s, and as these critiques brought the topic of porn to national attentions, set the ground for the studies (and activisms) that were to grow. Julie Bindel (2014) and Gail Dines (2011), amongst others, advocate an abolitionist politics based on the idea that porn is a manifestation of structural misogyny; while organisations such as Feminists Against Censorship (FAC) and Backlash have organised with counter-concerns, typically claiming a right to freedom of expression. But this polarity exists amidst, for example, Laurence O'Toole's (1999) liberal study of how public access to porn has increased due to new technologies-thus porn has become pervasive; and, very recently, Rita Therese's (2020) literary memoir of working across the range of the sex industry.

This reviewer couldn't begin to substantially answer the questions sketched above, but they spring to mind by the sheer fact of Desmond Francis Goss's weighty *Race and Masculinity in Gay Men's Pornography: Deconstructing the Big Black Beast* arriving at this point in history. Or, the book has a lot to answer to: between the diversity of interests and methods that attend contemporary studies of porn, the continuing history of feminist critiques and what fresh perspectives (if any?) can be brought to bear by studies of race. In regard to critical questions of race for gay male

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communities, there are active, heated, online and journalistic debates about racism prompted by declarations such as 'No Asians' on dating apps such as Grindr (Conner 2021). But, otherwise, it has been acknowledged that 'Very few studies have focused on the role pornography plays in influencing and modelling sexual desire on the basis of race and ethnicity' (Corneau *et. al.*, 2020: 579). However, Tan Hoang Nguyen (2014) does offer sophisticated textual analyses of the sexual representation of Asian men in mainstream-Euro-American-porn and film, arguing for a re-interpretation of the typical abjection of racialised bodies to suggest performative sexual pleasure.

Race and Masculinity in Gay Men's Pornography reads as both a symptom and a casualty of current porn studies: the field's amorphousness yet the persistence of a polarising, determined, understanding of power. This tension underlines the book's aim of marrying a new empiricism, for studies of porn and race, with theoretical debates. How can either allow us to think the other?

The book mixes methodologies through a case-study approach to user-submitted, online, gay porn and also theoretical frameworks largely derived from post-modernist thinkers including Jean Baudrillard and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Though, in Chapter 1, Goss describes his methodology as combining interpretivism, positionality, Black feminist epistemology and intersectionality, these can be considered subsets of the broad approach. Goss insists on the necessity and innovation of case studies, of actually *looking at* porn rather than abstract theorising or politics but doesn't mention precedents that would reinforce the need for this claim. (A lot of critical writing on porn does employ case studies though much of the politicking against it doesn't.) However, rather, his focus on user-submitted porn, specifically the now defunct Xtube.com, which he studied for six months in 2017, does propose the methodological interest of studying a consumer-led shaping of sexual desires against the mainstream, corporatised, industry of commercial pornography. It is argued that the latter more readily responds to white, or strictly racialised, tastes about 'ebony' bodies that the former might, in theory, refute given its 'amateur,' community-based, status. (User-led, for the uninitiated, are online platforms for the free-exchange of content.) The scope of Goss's research includes a survey and analysis of online user comments.

But his argument, hammered repeatedly throughout the book, is that user-submitted porn typically reflects structural racism at large and such is reinforced by the comments of viewers. These comments invariably 'discuss' black men in hyper-masculine terms, where their sexuality is perceived as a condition of 'race.' On the other hand, white performers are discussed according to a range of attributes including their talents as performers and as carrying values of beauty and love. The actual porn films typically stratify white and black performers according to narrative stereotypes (e.g. 'executive' and 'thug') and the sex acts performed, with black men usually emphasised as the top partner in anal sex.

Goss, nevertheless, provides a caveat that user-submitted porn is less likely to rely on these stereotypes than its corporate, mainstream, counterpart. But this is a wishy-washy caveat as he ultimately declares, in the final chapter, that similarities are more common than differences. And this claim is made after bringing the reader through chapters with titles like 'The Insolubility of Black and Queer,' 'Dark Phalluses: Preoccupation and Dismemberment,' and 'Missing Links: Primitiveness and Primality.' The language of a familiar anti-porn argument- essentially, that porn is dehumanising and mostly to already disenfranchised classes of people, runs throughout. He makes the latter link by pointing out the exclusion of People of Colour (POC) from historic homophile movements and, more currently, homonationalism.

However, Goss doesn't explicitly avow an 'anti-porn' stance, and never cites the genealogies of literature that would support this stance (Andrea Dworkin is probably exemplary here). Again, perhaps the field of study has become so diverse that seminal precedents are lost amidst the mass of publications; and, in tandem, unlike the 1970s, there are no longer central issues or arguments? In regard to the latter, *Race and Masculinity in Gay Men's Pornography* may have aimed to repurpose an old argument that a contemporary audience allegedly needs to hear, however unknowing Goss is about the lineage of the argument.

But, then again, the most critically compelling passages in the book are towards the end where the author attempts to grapple with questions of agency on behalf of producers and consumers of user-submitted, 'racialised' porn. That is, he makes a reasoned, if short, critique of an argument that stereotyped images of sexualised bodies offer viewers a type of 'disidentification' that subverts the ideologies that could be at work in those images. (Or, stereotypes function most effectively when subtle). The concept of disidentification was queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz's and/but Goss also points to the problems of a certain queer political mantra that 'pleasure cannot be regulated,' as if racial fetishising was part and parcel of all the promises and pleasures of sexuality *ipso facto*. He rightly points out that is a highly individualised view and the possibility of actual political change is arguably negligible. Instead, he goes on to insist, a collective, structural, reckoning is needed to bring about the self-determination-and a more nuanced view-of black bodies in porn and this also includes cis-, white men confronting their relationships to oppressive 'ideals' of race.

Race and Masculinity in Gay Men's Pornography would have benefited from the latter argument been woven throughout the book, from the start; and the inclusion of some notes on how a collective, structural reckoning might be imagined. If so, the familiarity of the long-standing argument that much porn can seem politically

reprehensible would have been effectively updated and the nuances of its relevance to questions of race emphasised. While, also, the interests of intersections between those questions and feminist precedents in theory and activism highlighted. However, the book reads importantly for its methodological diversity, seeking to link different types of analysis for the study of gay male porn. While this reviewer can claim that the conclusions could have been more originally and complexly drawn, Goss's mixed-methods approach nevertheless provides a model for interdisciplinary research that points to potential complexity. Readers and scholars can take it as provocation to think through relations between empiricism and theory generally and also in order to 'test' long-standing debates or precedents, critically bringing together structural and interpretative concerns about the content of much hardcore gay porn. And, indeed, collective reckoning about sexual representation and self-determination is something we all unquestionably need to think about.

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