Title
Gender Violence, Neoliberal Institutions, and Digital Activism in India

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The women’s movement in New Delhi, India is spread across a number of diverse institutions—including large, well-funded NGOs, autonomous, non-funded activist collectives, and now numerous groups on social media. Through my research in Delhi, I have interacted with each of these types of organizations and have sought to understand the extent to which the rising availability and use of digital media might be shaping the way feminist activists construct and carry out their political goals. My talk today is about how development workers in one neoliberal NGO in Delhi discursively construct a feeling of ambivalence toward digital media as a tool for feminist activism and social change. I began my research at this organization in 2015 in order to investigate how activists feel about the upsurge of online campaigns to combat gender violence, particularly in light of recent large-scale protests following the 2012 gang rape of Jyoti Singh Pandey in New Delhi. In this paper, I analyze one patter that was salient in interviews and everyday conversations about gender violence that I encountered among employees at a large, neoliberal NGO. Here, speakers often conveyed a mixture of optimism about the power of digital technologies to re-shape attitudes about violence, tempered with a pessimistic feeling that online activism is both insufficient, and a new locus for further gendered harassment and abuse. While this organization is a proponent of viewing digital technology as a source of “empowerment,” development workers often have nuanced views on this topic that reflect the ways in which actors engage with and re-shape neoliberal discourses through their everyday linguistic practices. Their ambivalence, I suggest, is a type of moral sentiment (Throop 2012) that manifests in talk
and belies what activists believe to be the right and proper way of engaging in feminist activism—
that which is as politically committed online as it is offline.

**Background**

The sense of ambivalence that I am highlighting, in which online media is seen as a potentially transformative tool that also produces new and unforeseen vulnerabilities, is reflective of broader shifts taking place in Delhi right now regarding how young people take part in politicized debates. Voicing criticism of state and societal forces that propagate violence against women online has made activists susceptible to attack not just from anonymous trolls, but also the gaze of an increasingly repressive state government that views criticism of societal issues as a form of “anti-nationalism.” Recent protests took place in February 2016 at Delhi’s prestigious Jawaharlal Nehru University against the government’s secret hanging of a prisoner, Afzal Guru, who was convicted for his role in the 2001 attack on Indian Parliament. University students at JNU organized a protest of the Indian government’s secret hanging of Guru in Tihar Jail in 2013, and against the broader efforts by the right-wing government to stifle dissent from left-wing citizens. Three students at JNU were imprisoned on charges of sedition after a video was doctored and released on social media appearing to show the students shouting slogans that were seen as “anti-national.” This inspired a huge online campaign to have the students released, with people engaging internationally on social media. This points to the fact that digital media has both opened up new spaces for critical debate, it has also produced increasingly sinister mechanisms whereby civilians can be targeted and silenced. This sense of precarity attached to social media as a possible tool and a weapon mirrors the sentiment of ambivalence I encountered working at the NGO, which is reflected in their interviews and in the content of their programming.

**Literature Review**
Research on feminist activism in postcolonial contexts has demonstrated the shift away from social provisioning by the state under neoliberal governance, with NGOs proliferating to fulfill these roles. The rise of NGOs under neoliberalism been shaped by what Aradhana Sharma calls the “logics of empowerment,” in which it is the responsibility of the individual to lift herself out of poverty, rather than the state or the NGO to provide support in the form of welfare benefits (Sharma 2008; Bernal and Grewal 2014). The discourse of empowerment is central to the broader shift under neoliberalism towards what David Harvey calls “personal responsibility,” in which individual, entrepreneurial subjects are expected to achieve upward mobility by participating in the free market (2005).

The focus on “empowerment” rather than earlier forms of social provisioning in development work has now become integrated into new efforts to harness the Internet as a tool for lifting women out of violence and poverty. Social media has proven enormously influential in activists’ efforts to contest forms of gendered violence, and to hold the government accountable for failing to both protect women from sexual crimes and to properly adjudicate perpetrators. The protests that emerged after the 2012 gang rape of Jyoti Singh Pandey on a public bus in Delhi were largely organized by student groups through Facebook, and their collective mobilization online and offline pressured the government to respond to demands for new legislation. Their efforts resulted in the introduction and passage of the Criminal Law Amendment Act just three months after the Delhi rape, which expanded the definition of and sanctions for a number of crimes that disproportionately affect women.

Anthropologists have recently begun to analyze the affordances of digital media for forming new kinds of political counterpublics and have opened up new avenues for subaltern groups to engage in activism. Yarimar Bonilla and Jonathan Rosa, in their analysis of the Ferguson, Missouri protests, argue that, “Twitter affords a unique platform for collectively
identifying, articulating, and contesting racial injustices from the in-group perspectives of racialized populations” (2015: 6). Similarly, Elizabeth Losh has shown that during the 2012 protests in Delhi, communities used hashtags on Twitter such as #JusticeForJyoti to follow the unfolding events and voice their own critiques, resulting in what she terms “hashtag feminism” (2014). These works, as well as others, have demonstrated that social media is not peripheral to politics, but serves as a crucial site wherein groups collectively construct their own narratives as digital activists that run counter to the mainstream media.

Scholars who engage the topic of neoliberalism as it relates to gender and political activism have largely been skeptical of the ability of actors to resist hegemonic power structures. Sherry Ortner has articulated this as a turn to “dark theory” in anthropology, one overwhelmingly focused on overwhelming and inescapable precarity, inequality, and domination (Ortner 2016). In a parallel vein, Joel Robbins has argued that anthropology’s ethnographic focus since the 1990s has been toward what he calls the “suffering subject,” which has resulted in the subject of anthropology being legible primarily as oppressed victims of one or another form of violence (2013). This presents a dilemma for researchers who work with groups who are largely prosperous and optimistic, such as the communities of activists I have met who see themselves as actively confronting inequality and producing positive changes in their respective contexts. My interlocutors, as well online activities, present a challenge to work that has posited neoliberalism and market fundamentalism as hegemonic forces that result in increasing dispossession, particularly in the Global South. This finding is also in accordance with what Sharma has argued about the way in which neoliberal institutions, especially NGOs, often take a hybrid form that does not represent a complete break from earlier forms of governance (Sharma 2006). Neoliberalism as a mode of governance is thus negotiated and contested by actors in their everyday talk and practice.
Data and Analysis

I now turn to a discussion of one organization in Delhi that takes empowerment as its main goal and is currently engaged in an extensive project, sponsored by Facebook, to educate college students about social media. This campaign was planned and started while I was working with them in Delhi in Summer 2015, in which team members traveled to 35 colleges and universities across India to conduct workshops about online safety and what they call “social media for social change.” One of the main slogans of this campaign is “access is empowerment.” The idea is that by increasing the availability of the Internet and social media to women in particular, they will be able to gain information and resources that will allow them to improve their conditions. The second aim of the workshop is to teach students how to protect themselves from online harassment—this includes tutorials on privacy settings in Facebook, as well as exposure to what they term “counter speech.” The aim is to encourage young people to speak out when they encounter abuse online, as well as to speak online about issues that matter to them, but to do so in a way that is nonviolent, from a position of educated awareness, and with a safety net. The workshops themselves are vibrant and engaging, and require students to come up with their own social media campaigns in groups, which they subsequently presented in front of large audiences of their peers. This encourages the competitive, entrepreneurial, risk-taking type of subject formation that is so central to the neoliberal project (Mankekar 2011; Ganti 2014). The workshops themselves, while ostensibly about the power of social media as a tool for political activism, are thus ambivalent in the sense that social media is also presented as a source of potential danger, and thus disempowerment.

Another way in which digital media was often couched in terms of ambivalence was in how activists discussed the recent upsurge in online responses to local protest movements. All of my interlocutors explained to me that social media was profoundly broadening the impact of
political causes, particularly by allowing young people to learn about issues that are not openly
discussed in public life. I asked one friend, Priya1, who worked at the organization if she thought
more people had become interested in the women’s movement in recent years, and if she thought
this had anything to with social media. She said:
“...I think that for a lot of people, the problem was there but it wasn’t cool to talk
about it. Now it’s cool to talk about it, and I think that has made a really big difference...
I think now it’s okay to say that things are not okay... It’s okay to stand up for yourself.
So I think for a lot of people who used to suffer silently, this has been, like, a big deal. So
in that sense yes. But I think for people who are like idiots, it probably hasn’t made a
difference.”
Even in this short excerpt, it is clear that Priya is both optimistic about the impact that
social media has had on increasing the acceptance of discussing feminist issues in a way that was
it wasn’t previously. However, she also notes that “it probably hasn’t made a difference” for
those who aren’t already interested. In another interview with one of the primary organizers of
the workshop series, Asha, I asked if she thought more young people have become involved in
feminist activism following the December 2012 gang rape of Jyoti Singh, and whether she felt as
though this resulted in an increase in online engagement with feminist activism. Asha responded
in a mixture of Hindi and English using the pseudonym of the Delhi victim, “Nirbhaya,”

meaning fearless:
1 A:  *Jitni meri samajh hai, social media pe, social issues ke bare mein baten hoti thi*
[My understanding is that, on social media, social issues were discussed]

2  *Hamesha se hoti thi*
[They have always been discussed]

3:  *What happened on 16th December, ki woh campaign on ground bhi utna hi bada bana tha jitna ki online bana tha*

1 All names used are pseudonyms.
[What happened on 16th December is that campaign, it became as big online as it did on the ground]

4: That is probably according to my understanding why we all connect the Nirbhaya gang rape case to being in a social media uh campaign, an online campaign

5: Aur isi se hamein apni samajh banani chahiye ki ko koi bhi campaign sirf online baat khene se nahi badh sakta
[And from this, we should change our understanding, that any campaign, only by talking about it online cannot grow]

6: H: haan
yes

7: A: Jab tak woh utna hi effectively, with with the same energy, aap on ground us mein nahi kar rahe ho, us ke bare mein baat nahi kar rahe ho
[Until that [campaign], as effectively, with the same energy, you are not putting into it on the ground, you are not talking about it]

8: A: online, sirf online you cannot channelize any energy to, towards any issue
[Online, only online]

9: A: Meri understanding yehi kehti hai ki Nirbhaya gang rape case itna on ground uska itna zyada strong logon ne hol banaya tha tabhi jake woh online itna strong banvaya
[My understanding says this, that the Nirbhaya gang rape case, people made such a strong effort on the ground, then they went and made it as strong online]

10: A: And together whatever changes it could bring in whatever voices were raised it was a total you know it was an effort that went on in tandem together and not alone on social media and not alone on ground

For Asha, the online sphere is imagined as existing above our outside the realm of truly effective political action—that which takes place “on the ground.” Throughout her interview, she constructs digital sociality and activism as external to the grassroots. This mirrors what James Ferguson and Akhil Gupta have called the discursive “spatialization” of the state under neoliberalism (2002), in which the state is viewed as above the level of civil society, although here it is the sphere of digital communication that is reified as external to that which takes place “on the ground.” The effects of spatializing activism into two seemingly distinct spheres—online and “the ground”—is that Asha ironically delegitimizes the effectiveness of what her
organization seeks to promote through its workshops, i.e., the importance of digital activism as a method of political action. Asha’s view thus discursively constructs digital sociality as peripheral to the “grassroots,” thereby undermining her own position as a leader of a digital activist campaign, and further reflecting the ambivalence inherent to this organization’s project of tempered enthusiasm toward the online as a site of political action.

**Conclusion**

Asha and Priya both convey a moral sentiment about the necessity of incorporating digital media into the women’s movement, but they also express their reserves about its limitations as a method for social change. Online platforms not only pose possible problems for young people who want to speak out against violence against women, as they can be subject to harassment or hateful speech, but constructing a solid activist campaign cannot definitively work unless it is coupled with a physical response as well. Priya even voices skepticism that online activism even has the potential to change the minds of those who are resistant to feminist ideas in the first place. While they do believe that there are methods that young people can employ to engage in safe online debates—like the concept of “counter speech” that is central to their campaign—their discourses are invariably inflected with an ambivalence about the ultimate effectiveness of online debates alone. What the concerns of these three organizers demonstrate is the fact that they do not passively accept the neoliberal discourse of empowerment—especially empowerment via access to digital media—as a panacea for gender violence or other social problems. This is in accordance with what Sharma and other theorists have shown, which is that neoliberal discourses are never totalizing, particularly in the Global South. Instead, activists have a nuanced understanding of the changing dynamics of their how empowerment interfaces with the incorporation of new technologies. This reflects their commitment to creating sustainable campaigns that must in some way exhibit the conventional forms of physical protest that have
defined the women’s movement in India, and elsewhere, since its inception in a pre-digital world.

References


