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Asia Research Brief

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Locating the Indian Woman and LGBTQIA+ Online: Digital Activism in #Section377 and #MeTooIndia

My dissertation explores the relationship between technological platforms and gender minorities in Indian cyberspaces. Specifically, I investigate the role that social media plays in locating the voices of Indian women and members of the LGBTQIA+ community. I am both interested in how gender minorities engage with digital media, and also in how they are represented on these platforms. In order to answer this core question, I study digital gender activism in the Indian context. Specifically, I examine the queer and feminist movements around the use of the #Section377 and #MetooIndia hashtags on Twitter and Instagram by conducting a qualitative and quantitative textual and visual analysis of discourse surrounding their use.

Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code was first introduced to India by the British raj in 1861, and criminalized homosexuality and homosexual acts. It was later adapted into the Indian constitution until it was officially read down in August 2018 following a wave of digital protests.

On the other hand, #MetooIndia is the Indian counterpart of the global feminist movement. It was first adopted into India by Raya Sarkar, a Dalit diasporic scholar who released a list of names of sexual harassers and abusers on university campuses in India and the West (#LoSHA). However, her list was shunned, and #MeTooIndia moved from conversations about Dalit feminism to discourse on Bollywood celebrities.

In order to understand how marginalized gender communities are represented on social media, I collected data from Twitter and Instagram over the course of two years between 2018 and 2020. I also collected tweets originating from Canada, and a dataset in Hindi (a regional language in India) using the language and location filters on Twitter. I manually coded each tweet/Instagram post according to criteria questions I designed. For instance, I asked whether each post is indicative of a personal opinion, a personal experience, a particular emotion or sentiment, whether it displays empathy for the movement, who is speaking, and finally whether the post demonstrates hate speech against Indian women and queer communities. These questions enable an understanding of both the affordances and constraints that social media creates for vulnerable communities.

Social media platforms empower these marginalized communities, amplify their voices, and help create safe spaces for their interaction. First, in the queer movement, I demonstrate that a small percentage of tweets and Instagram posts indicate a desire to either return to India's ancient and fluid sexuality, or to move forward in the future to become a modern and transnational state that grants the LGBTQIA+ communities a right to their sexualities, identities and desires.

.Marvin Meyer photograph via unsplash.com

I coded these posts as indicative of what I term "decolonized in sentiment" owing to their utter rejection of Victorian institutions. These posts actively attempt to engage in a process of "decolonizing" by moving away from colonial legacies of what gender and sexuality constitutes.

Second, social media platforms enable marginalized communities to perform and construct their gender identity. The graphs below depict the percentage of users in both gender movements who employ protest hashtags to talk about their own personal experiences of growing up transgender, coming out as a gay or lesbian, or to share testimonies of sexual violence and feminist isolation on social media. Although few in number, these users employ both textual and visual media to amplify their voices, bodies, and narratives.

Third, I demonstrate how social media platforms create opportunities for a networked empathy to emerge in both movements in favour of these communities. This means that protest hashtags are not merely employed by individuals from these groups, but also by those 'outside,' including individuals, organizations, and large corporations to indicate solidarity and empathy, and construct bonds of friendship and allyship with the movements. The graphs below depict the higher percentage of empathy in both movements.

Finally, social media platforms enable diasporic solidarity with gender minorities in India. The datasets collected from Canada textually and visually demonstrate empathy, jubilation and celebration of the queer and feminist movements.

However, although social media empowers gender minorities, it also silences the voices of individuals within these communities. First, I demonstrate that these movements are not inclusive of individual voices. In #Section377, the majority of users who talk about their experiences growing up queer, do not use their own Twitter or Instagram handles. Instead, they publish their stories with other organizations on social media. In #MeTooIndia, there is barely any discourse about survivors of violence, Dalit and/or transgender feminisms. Instead, the discussions center on Bollywood and elite personalities. Therefore, there is a lack of representation, inclusion, and participation of the individual.

In addition, these protest hashtags are also exploited by far-right groups to engage in misogyny and homophobia to delegitimize the movements. Hate speech emerges in the form of memes, jokes and GIFS on both platforms. Particularly in the Hindi dataset, a much larger number of users engage in the rhetoric of hate in parallel with nationalist discourse and the glorification of traditional Indian values of heteropatriarchy and masculinity.

By visibilizing the ways in which social media both amplifies and silences the voices of gender minorities, I demonstrate that technologies are merely a reflection of our culture. While they can be employed by vulnerable groups to perform their political identities, they also disempower the individual and create problems in access, representation and participation, especially in postcolonial nations such as India.