INDIAN W@MAN

Lessons from the Early Adopters of the Internet

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#STARTWITHTHEM

It was on 27 September 2018 that the #MeToo conversations in India started gaining significant momentum on Twitter. Actress Tanushree Datta's allegations against co-star Nana Patekar with regard to his behaviour on set in 2008 had resurfaced, but this time with a difference. Two things in particular stood out: First, the #MeToo movement against misogyny and sexual harassment, which had been successful in the United States, had emboldened women (and men) across the globe, including India, to lend their voices in support of victims. Second, there were now powerful platforms with global reach where these voices could be heard—a Tweet could be heard around the world in a matter of seconds; posts were going viral as they resonated with their audience. These platforms are known as social media platforms, where users can sign up for accounts and start following issues and people of interest. The content to be found on these platforms—Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Reddit, etc.—is user-generated; this means that ordinary people can comment on issues of interest, and others can locate these posts and comment on them as well. Popular subjects tend to dominate networks and become 'trending'. Depending on the platform, users can choose to have private or public profiles. On Twitter, which is used predominantly for public posts, the dominant conversation of the day often sets the news narrative for that day as journalists, politicians, activists, experts and regular people are seen to be engaged in the passionate discussion of current matters.

This happened with #MeTooIndia as well, which started taking over headlines, news bulletins and dinner-table conversations as the stories came tumbling out.

Workplace harassment became one of the strongest themes to emerge, with stories ranging from verbal harassment to rape. Women who had discussed these incidents previously—but left out specific names—began naming and shaming. Powerful men lost their jobs. At the same time, detractors questioned not just the accuracy of these stories, but their privileged background. Could this truly be a 'real' movement for women's empowerment if the voices speaking came from educated and urban backgrounds, they seemed to ask.

As the debate rages on, this online space has become the engine behind the developing conversation. It became a space for women to not only speak out, but collaborate, corroborate and challenge countering views. As an illustration of just how powerful it is, data from Twitter showed that the monthly tweets from India on #MeToo surpassed the volume in the United States (Mehrotra, 2018). A visualisation by Google Trends revealed that #MeToo was being searched across India, and not just in the big cities (Sathe, 2018).

Therefore, it would be useful to examine this online space more closely, and draw an accurate picture of its users and their methodology.

ACCESS

While the number of mobile phones and Internet connections continues to grow in India, it is clear that access to the Internet still remains an issue when seen through a gendered lens. Research by Learning Initiatives on Reforms for Network Economies Asia's (LIRNEasia)[1] shows that of the countries surveyed, India has the highest gender gap in mobile phone ownership—women in India are 46 per cent less likely to own mobile phones. Despite this, their research shows that approximately half the Indian population between the ages of 15 and 65, who have either below-average or zero income (mostly women and those below 25 years), do own mobile phones.

Their report also reveals that the Indian mobile phone market (along with those of lower-income countries) still predominantly comprises basic phones, with limited or no Internet capability.

Just 28 per cent of mobile phone owners have smartphones—less than some of the less-developed countries surveyed. As expected, smartphone ownership among urban respondents was higher at 40 per cent than among rural respondents at 20 per cent. The gender gap was not as high in device type as compared to the mobile phone ownership statistics earlier noted. Forty-seven per cent of Indian men aged 15 to 65 and 40 per cent of women in the same age group had an Internet-enabled phone (i.e., smartphone or feature phone). It appears that the bigger hurdle is for women to get connected (become mobile phone owners); thereafter they are almost as likely as men to get an Internet-enabled phone. Rural women, and those less-educated and with lower incomes, lagged behind in their use. Social media use was seen almost entirely among smartphone owners.

Much has been written in newspapers and journals about the barriers to mobile phone access. Regular reports from *khap* panchayats (an assembly of community elders) and villages around the country reveal that mobile phones are banned for girls in order to keep them away from men. Often women reveal that husbands have access to their social media passwords, or that a shared phone or device means that they don't have the agency and privacy to use the Internet as they like.

Data from Statista[2] reveals that overall, social network-user penetration in India was barely 14.64 per cent in 2017, and is expected to rise to 18.86 per cent by 2019. Therefore, it is fair to say that very few women have access to the Internet in India, and the voices emerging are about the experiences of a small subset of women. However, it would be a grave mistake to assume that these voices either don't capture the reality of women's lived experiences, or that it doesn't require extreme courage to come out and speak in an environment in which your voice is in the minority.

THE ISSUES OF WOMEN

When reading about the experiences of women online, there is one area that tends to dominate—the online harassment and gendered abuse that women face. Unfortunately, these experiences are not limited to social platforms where they post regularly. There are stories about women using e-commerce sites to sell products and their listed phone numbers are then flooded with unwanted calls. Even as

early as 2014, the Minister for Women and Child Development was taking a stern line with matrimonial sites, as reports surfaced that they were being used by predators and traffickers (Sehgal, 2014). It is often said that the offline misogyny that exists follows women to the online world.

But it would be unfair to talk about women online and not focus on the experiences that women bring to the online space. These include the subjects they choose to speak about and the communities they build for themselves. A simple search of hashtags and terms across the social media platform you use would throw up samples of conversations led by women. Often, platforms allow you to read public conversations even if you don't have an account. However, to comment and engage with the issue you would need to create an account.

#IWILLGOOUT

This campaign followed the mass molestation case during New Year's Eve celebrations in December 2016 in Bengaluru, which was reported in the press. This hashtag was used by women who organised public marches in Delhi, Pune, Bhopal, Bengaluru, Chennai and Mumbai, among other cities, to reclaim public spaces. Social media platforms were used by those participating in these marches to help others follow their journey online. Many shared stories of street abuse and harassment, one anecdote at a time, shining light on how unsafe public spaces can be for women.

#TRIPLETALAQ

A hot-button issue in real life and social media, the online debate was fierce in the summer of 2018. Many women saw it as a fight against customs and traditions, while others thought the new law could be abused to send Muslim men to prison. With the recent updates on the Supreme Court verdict on the Sabarimala Temple, the conversation has resurfaced to examine women's agency, and whether a uniform civil code should apply to women equally.

#LAHUKALAGAAN

This campaign, fought by NGOs, lawmakers and ordinary women alike in April 2017, contested the levy of 12 per cent Goods and Services Tax (GST) on sanitary napkins. After a year of sustained

fighting on the issue, including reaching the finance minister, the government exempted sanitary napkins from GST.

#NOMOREMANELS

In 2016, working women across the globe decided to band together to insist that panels at conferences and events should no longer compromise only men, or what they began to call 'manels'. Not only did they point out events when 'manels' were announced, but they used social media to crowdsource lists of women experts from various fields as a ready resource for those who claimed not to know of a woman expert in a particular field.

#TALKTOAMUSLIM

Driven by extraordinary women, in 2018 this hashtag was provoked by a discussion that challenged stereotypes about other communities—in this case Muslims. The idea was to combat stereotypes by getting to know them. Some felt it opened up a valuable discussion, while others considered it exclusionary by singling out a particular community. The discussion was sometimes uncomfortable, but rich in its diversity of opinion from women.

COMMUNITIES OF WOMEN

What they might lack in numbers, they make up for in strength: online communities run by women band together to lend support and create safe spaces to discuss issues. Take, for example, Sheroes. Started in 2014, it is today one of India's largest online communities for women. It is a website and an app, and is available through social media feeds. It helps women not only to connect for employment opportunities, but has also grown into a community that offers resources on subjects as varied as health, relationships and, yes, workplace harassment.

SheThePeople.tv, started in 2015, is a platform that offers digital storytelling for women. It tries to tell stories with a focus on women—their views, successes and opinions. They even have a series called #FeministRani, which explores the much contested concept of feminism. Communities are not all urban, either. An example from Uttar Pradesh is of a rural community media collective called Khabar Lahariya, which has been in operation since 2002, featuring video reports from their team of women reporters who take

on power structures and issues close to their lives and their reality. Also started in 2015, SheSays is a group which takes on the issue of sexual abuse, including marital rape, by focusing on legal rights and remedies. There are many such examples.

Newer voices on the Internet, previously unheard in the mainstream, are also finding a space on social media platforms. Take, for example, the Dalit–Bahujan women for whom social media is beyond entertainment (Thaali, 2018). Offered spaces 'without mediation', these women are able to articulate their responses to ongoing social issues. They run hashtags like #BeingADalit (Munshi, 2018) in their attempt to reclaim their identity by sharing their lived experiences in their own words. Many posts fight against what they call the Hindu patriarchal structure, often creating ripples online. Accounts such as @DalitWomenFight, available on Twitter, take on a range of issues that include caste-based violence and caste representation in decision-making bodies, ensuring that their attention to these issues translates into mainstream media giving them more attention.

But, then again, the idea of a community isn't always structured. When a conversation becomes popular on social media, often centred on a hashtag, people find other voices engaging with the issue. Depending on the subject, they often know each other from the real world, and increasingly from their online personae. I have personally been to more than a hundred events where women have known each other 'from Twitter', but are now meeting in person for the first time.

There are also instances of 'threads'—a series of tweets—that capture the imagination because what is articulated in particular posts is another's reality as well. Take, for example, a series of Tweets by an ordinary woman who rued the lack of work–life balance in Indian companies.[3] This resulted in people being 'trigged' by the post as it echoed their own experiences of bad bosses and workplaces.

Creating a safe space for this camaraderie means different things, depending on the platform being used. Closed groups have moderators, or private chats can choose to add only those they know and trust. Common spaces—public spaces of the Internet, such as Twitter or public Facebook pages—can prove to be more challenging. If social media platforms were to be asked, a safe experience online would be high on their list of priorities. This is

achieved by companies focusing on three things: their policies, their tools and their programmes. Policies mean 'rules' or 'community standards' that spell out for users the content they are allowed to post on these platforms. For example, promoting terrorism, engaging in abusive behaviour and impersonation is not allowed on most social platforms. The tools a platform offers would include options such as muting, blocking and reporting of content. So, depending on the bandwidth of users, they can either choose to stop engaging with the content they do not like, or choose to report the content to the platform. Once the report is received by social media platforms, teams of experts will weigh the report against their rules and determine if the content should remain on the platform or be taken off. Finally, none of this works if the users are unaware of these systems. Therefore, through a range of partnerships with civil society, the government and academia, among others, companies create innovative programmes to engage with their end users and teach them about their rights on the platform. Twitter, for example, runs #PositionOfStrength across the globe, engaging with women to help them learn safety rules and tools so that they can have safer online experiences.

What can be more difficult to understand is how women themselves come together to create safe spaces to power conversations. During the #MeTooIndia conversations on Twitter, for instance, many women offered to post stories on behalf of other women. This meant that victimised women sent across chat screenshots or a write-up of their experiences, and those who received it would crop out the name of the victim and post it from their own accounts. As media reports indicated, many of the women who had taken on the responsibility to offer a safe space attempted to corroborate the story, or waited for a few women to send in stories relating to the same man, before posting publicly (Lalwani, 2018). The process of reading so many personal and painful accounts can be rather overwhelming, and many involved had to take a break to recover from this intense experience. This creation of a 'safe space' has been witnessed before; many women kept open Direct Messages (DMs) and helped others share stories of their experiences with sexual harassment.

And as much as these conversations are throwing up new challenges for women to deal with, they are also opening up new

avenues of support which were previously harder to access. The deep conversations around mental health that take place on the Internet across platforms are an example. These conversations are brought to the mainstream around #WorldSuicidePreventionDay and #MentalHealthDay. The same community is rallying around the #MeToo conversations and offering help to those who might be 'triggered' by reading some of the anecdotes of sexual assault and reliving their trauma. This specific and tailor-made advice is possible as the audience and their shared experiences are on open social media platforms, where it has been easier to identify the help they require.

There are also other subjects which women rally around. Another excellent example was when independent journalist Rituparna Chatterjee (@masalabai) started the #Sisterhood initiative to help women in the media find jobs (Shaligram, 2018). She, and the others who joined in, would immediately repost news of open positions using the hashtag #Sisterhood to help other women find it quickly. This initiative also spun off into offers to mentor their younger colleagues, and resulted in many Indian women joining the #ThankAMentor campaign and listing out positive stories of support from the workplace.

Organisations too spend considerable time and resources crafting campaigns meant to spur positive social change. Feminist organisations such as the Centre for Social Research, Breakthrough India, Point of View, among others, routinely run campaigns which focus on subjects such as women's reservation in Parliament, sexuality and disability, online safety and creating empathy online. An online campaign essentially means that the organisation, once it has decided on the message it wishes to popularise with its stakeholders, works on a 'content calendar' to put on various social media platforms. These could be posts that inform the audience about a topic through the aid of visual graphics, short videos and detailed posts; or these could be chats with a wider audience on social media where the audience is asked questions to provoke thought. It also often means that offline events are livestreamed on social media so that those who cannot join in person can engage virtually. Throughout the length of the campaign, thanks to readily available social media metrics, these organisations can assess which pieces of content are working with the audience and which

statements garner the most attention, and can thus continue to fine-tune their content for maximum impact. Social media is a two-way process: even as you post content, others can immediately comment on it, helping an organisation understand who its audience really is, and their thoughts on a certain topic. This is one of the strengths of using social media.

THE VALUE PROPOSITION

As the Internet grows in India, one needs to ask how projects and campaigns can be designed to ensure maximum reach. For example, the Internet and Mobile Association of India's (IAMAI) report revealed that video streaming is a key driver of the rapid absorption of mobile Internet, contributing up to 65–75 per cent of mobile data consumption. A report by Google and KPMG, 'Defining India's Internet',[4] estimated that 536 million consumers are expected to use regional languages for online services—compare this to 199 million in English. And, finally, women's own feedback with regard to their online experiences needs to find its way into the design of the apps and websites that want to cater to them. A survey by the group Feminism in India (FII)[5] found that Indian women do not report any online abuse because they feel overwhelmingly that their reports will not be taken seriously. In addition, they also lack confidence in the police and/or are embarrassed by these experiences.

Perhaps what can overshadow all these challenges in the long run is building a real-value proposition for the Internet for women across India. In hyperconnected cities, we often take for granted that the usefulness of the Internet isn't in question; it provides access, relevant formats and languages, and a smooth user experience. Of course, these are all essential ingredients.

But research suggests the value proposition must also be clearly defined for new users—why do they need the Internet? What does it do for them? Is it going to be a net positive for them or add to more problems at home? For example, in 2015, Google reported that half the women they surveyed in India had little use for the Internet,[6] and many reported that their in-laws or families would see it as a distraction from their household duties. Not long after, the company launched its ambitious 'Internet Saathi' programme which saw its trainers go to villages and small towns to teach women how to use Google products. The experience taught the company that the

Internet couldn't be introduced as a parachute concept, but instead the community had to hear about it from trusted trainers, given the many myths and misconceptions around it (Sen, 2017).

But the villages are hardly the only area where women need to see more value from the Internet. One of the big areas of focus for many companies across the board has been to pivot the Internet not just as a place to 'see the world' or 'chat with friends', but as a tool for small business and working from home (Mehta, et al., 2018). Currently only 27 per cent of women in India, spanning both urban and rural populations, work in paid employment. Research on reasons for the dismal participation of women in the workplace reveals gaps which are being echoed, anecdotally, on social media through women's voices. In the Observer Research Foundation's (ORF) report on 'How to Make the Future of Work Gender Neutral' (Sonne, 2018), the first reason listed is that workplaces are not women friendly; they need to cater to the work–life balance needs of women, and offer opportunities for mentorship. Cultural barriers, facilities for mothers, including day care, and skill development programmes are required. These are all subjects that have already been echoed online. It can be safely assumed that after 2018, there will be more focus on harassment in the workplace as a major factor in retention as well.

THE NATIONAL DISCOURSE

The question, then, can be asked: If these are the factors that really do affect the retention of women in the workplace, is there a way to tap into the collective experiences and demands on women that would lead to better policies and infrastructure? The simple answer is—yes. As we have seen, women are already banding together to discuss these crucial questions, and offering their own solutions. Their articulation of a more equal society has already begun. We can see this across the Indian Internet, on websites and on social media, in chats across apps. But therein lies the rub: as data has shown, this is a small subset of women we are referring to. But even as a minority, we can see the effect of women's voices on agenda setting: it was the fact that women were driving the #MeToo conversation in India, and, indeed, not letting men get away with diluting it or distracting from it, that helped it remain an essential part of India's national discourse for the Autumn of 2018.

Even before #MeToo, consider how important these voices are to our national discourse: In 2018, on Rakshabandhan, Prime Minister Modi 'followed' 55 women on Twitter—this was a signal that they were directly being heard by him. As mentioned, #NoMoreManels is a campaign to ensure that women's voices are included at every level of public debate, be it proposed privacy laws, planning for smart cities or even healthcare policy. All issues are women's issues, and claiming that there are 'not enough women' experts will no longer be an excuse in the days to come.

Given this context, it isn't very difficult to understand the criticism that the experiences being bared on the Internet in India today as somewhat limited to an educated and often urban point of view. But to dismiss this as irrelevant would be to miss the wood for the trees. What you really have is valuable lived experiences of women out in the workforce, in political and social life, of women who are expressing opinions on issues important to them—often unprompted. Women need to *come* online, and women need to *stay* online, and women need to *speak* online. That will be the true Digital India.

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NOTES

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