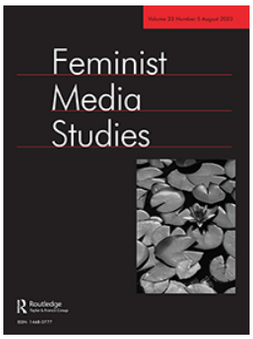

Feminist Media Studies

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rfms20

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To cite this article: Adrija Dey (11 Oct 2023): It's a joke, not a dick. So don't take it too hard": online sexual harassment in Indian universities, Feminist Media Studies, DOI: 10.1080/14680777.2023.2266150

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2023.2266150

Published online: 11 Oct 2023.

FEMINIST MEDIA STUDIES
https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2023.2266150

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

It's a joke, not a dick. So don't take it too hard": online sexual harassment in Indian universities

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ABSTRACT

Recently, while there has been some attention to the issues online harassment in higher education, the impacts of online sexual harassment have been lost within the broader focus. There is negligible research looking at these specific experiences within Indian universities. To address this gap, this paper explores three different but interconnected forms of online sexual harassment—image-based sexual abuse, online chat rooms, and trolling in the context of Indian universities. Following the works of Liz Kelly (1987) and Clare McGlynn, Erika Rackley and Ruth Houghton (2017), this paper establishes the importance of understanding online sexual harassment as a continuum of other forms of offline sexual violence having physical, mental, and financial impacts on survivors, deeply affecting their sense of safety. In doing so, this paper attempts to develop a materialist understanding of online sexual harassment in Indian universities in turn demonstrating the confluence of India's patriarchal and casteist society and an authoritarian state who use technology as a powerful disciplining tool to push women and queer people out of digital public spaces. This research attempts to establish that this disciplining and silencing of women and queer people are essential for the spread of both techno-capitalism and Brahmanical Hindutva nationalism.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 23 August 2022
Revised 21 September 2023
Accepted 27 September 2023

KEYWORDS
Trolling; online misogyny; online sexual harassment; online harassment; Indian universities

Introduction

The quote in the title of this paper is the description of a Facebook group which was started by university students in India. The posts shared on this group were deeply sexist, gendered, queerphobic, casteist, and Islamophobic. The targets of this group were fellow students and members of staff. This quote aptly captures the essence of this paper, both the experiences of online sexual harassment and the dismissal of it in Indian universities.

Academics have used varied terms to speak about sexual and gendered violence, harassment, and abuse in the digital sphere. Studies document the use of technology in child sexual abuse and grooming (Jennifer Martin and Ramona Alaggia 2013), online dating abuse (Sameer Hinduja and Justin W Patchin 2021), or online hate speech

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(Alexandra A Siegel 2020). However, none of these terms or definitions fully cover the spectrum of experiences of abuse within the digital environment. Keeping this in mind, in this paper I will use the term online sexual harassment as suggested by Anna Bull, Adrija Dey, Caroline Hilgers, Aisling Towl and Rachel Vogler (2022) in a recent report on UK Universities. They define online sexual harassment as,

> Unwanted conduct of sexual nature online, which has the purpose or effect of violating the recipient's dignity or creating an intimidating environment because of their gender or sexuality. Online sexual harassment exists on a continuum with other forms of sexual and gender-based violence and at the intersection with other protected characteristics and forms of minoritized positionality.

Regardless of some attention to the issues of online harassment in higher education (HE) globally in recent years (Andy Phippen and Emma Bond 2020), online sexual harassment has tended to be lost within this broader focus. Speaking about this, Nicola Henry in North South Feminist Dialogue (2022) writes,

> I struggled to find any existing research on online harms in the higher education sector that could answer the following questions: What kind of online harms are being perpetrated in university contexts? How are they enacted alongside so-called "traditional" sexual harms? What are the impacts of these harms? And what are universities doing to prevent and respond to online violence and abuse? (Henry 2022)

Further, there is little to no academic research looking at experiences of online sexual harassment within Indian universities.

This is the gap in knowledge this paper seeks to address drawing from empirical data collected in the form of 100 interviews with students, members of staff, and activists from 12 states, 30 universities, and 25 activist groups across India. Within activist groups, I include student unions, student wings of political parties, student societies, student-led collectives operating at the university, and independent organisations supporting student survivors within the university. I further draw from 5 focus groups with students from 5 different universities across India. These interviews were conducted between July 2018 to September 2019 as part of a postdoctoral research project at SOAS titled "Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV) in Indian Universities: A Study of Campus Life, Student Activism, and Institutional Responses" and ethical clearance was obtained for all fieldwork. In conducting these interviews, I was mindful of the deeply intersectional nature of SGBV and how power and privilege continue to shape which experiences are not only heard but recognised and believed (see also Linda Martín Alcoff 2018). As a result, I specifically sought out participants from Dalit and Muslim backgrounds, and queer communities. Many of these interviews were carried out through personal contact and networks with students, academics, and activists. Following this, I used the snowball sampling method to identify and interview other participants.

The data were analysed using a thematic analysis useful for identifying and analysing patterns of meaning in data (Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke 2006). Although several themes were identified through thematic analysis, the three I address below were the key ones emerging from the interviews and focus group discussions. The three themes are, a) image-based sexual abuse (creation and distribution of sexual images), b) online chat rooms, and c) trolling. While the above three categories of online sexual harassment

overlap, they also have some very specific characteristics and therefore require individual attention.

Addressing online sexual harassment as a structural issue linked to wider issues of gender equality and an expression of gender-based violence, Susan Watson (2023) writes that online sexual harassment frequently consists of seven key elements, which appear in whole or in part, within every abusive encounter online. These seven key elements are: defamation and/or libel, emotional harm, harassment, threat, silencing of women's voices, undermining in a professional context, and criticism of their appearance, age, or other physical characteristics. When viewed together, these elements provide a representation of and explanation for online sexual harassment directed at women in public-facing occupations. The data collected for this paper shows that all three forms of online sexual harassment discussed in this paper display the seven characteristics described above.

Further, this paper attempts to develop a materialist understanding of online sexual harassment in Indian university campuses to show how the patriarchal and casteist society along with an authoritarian state come together to use technology as a powerful disciplining tool to push women and queer people out of digital public spaces. This research attempts to establish that the disciplining and silencing is essential to the spread of techno-capitalism on the one hand, and Brahmanical Hindutva nationalism, on the other.

Literature review

Public engagement has become increasingly central to the individual academic role, and the expectation is often that academics should connect with the public and communicate their research to wider audiences (Charlotte Barlow and Imran Awan 2016). An online survey of 182 scholars, shows that online harassment is heavily entwined with the work, identity, and requirements of being a scholar. It is often compounded by other factors, such as gender and physical appearance (Chandell Gosse, George Veletsianos, Jaigris Hodson, Shandell Houlden, Tonia A Dousay, Patrick R Lowenthal and Nathan Hall 2021). Research conducted by George Veletsianos, Shandell Houlden, Jaigris Hodson and Chandell Gosse (2018) on women scholars' experiences of online harassment and abuse shows that women academics facing online harassment engaged in strategies aimed at self-protection and resistance, while often responding to harassment by acceptance and self-blame. They strongly recommend further research on online harassment within HE such as lived experiences of types of online gendered abuse such as online sexual harassment, rape threats, and doxxing. Similarly, a survey conducted by Wanda Cassidy, Chantal Faucher and Margaret Jackson (2014) among 121 faculty members at a Canadian University shows that female faculty members reported a higher level of online harassment. One of the key points highlighted in their research is the blurred boundaries between online and offline spaces. Societal power hierarchies are mirrored in virtual spaces. Therefore, virtual spaces should not be viewed as separate but rather as a continuum of physical spaces. Stine Eckert (2017) further argues that technology and gender co-evolve and influence each other and hence, online abuse and offline dynamics are enmeshed together and must be studied in conjunction.

Liz Kelly (1987), developed the concept of the continuum of sexual violence to recognise the inter-relationship and continuities between different forms of violence.

She states that violence needs to be understood as a series of events and elements that are undistinguishable and pass from one to another. Following this Claire McGlynn, Rackley, and Houghton (2017), theorise online image-based abuse as a continuum. They argue that there is a continuum of practices that need to be taken together to understand the concept of online image-based sexual abuse. But also, online image-based sexual abuse is on a continuum with other forms of offline sexual abuse. Even though McGlynn, Rackley, and Houghton (2017) were referring specifically to online image-based sexual abuse in their work, this concept of the continuum of violence lies at the core of this paper, and both the above points were echoed strongly by the participants of this research.

Due to the perceived distance between the online and the offline space, online sexual harassment is often treated as a "minor" or even disembodied experience (see Nicola Henry Clare McGlynn, Asher Flynn, Kelly Johnson, Anastasia Powell, and Adrian J Scott 2021, 41). However, Nicola Henry and Anastasia Powell (2015), argue against the problematic binaries of mind/body and online/offline to understand online sexual harassment and its impacts. In the case of online sexual harassment, the medium of abuse may change but the nature of the violence and the harm caused by it does not. So, while we understand online sexual harassment as a mediated experience, it is not disembodied (Emma A Jane 2016). This is echoed by participants in Sahana Sarkar and Benson Rajan's (2021, 7) research where they described their experiences of online sexual harassment as extremely physical- "I cringed," and "my whole body shivered every time"- showing that the body is not absent in the process of being present online.

Further, our attachment to digital technologies is not only metaphysical but also physical. We carry our devices, such as our phones, with us everywhere. In many ways, it has become a physical extension of our bodies. Speaking about human interaction with machines, Donna Haraway (2006) in her cyborg manifesto called the contemporary human a cyborg, a "cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism . . . . in short, we are cyborgs" (ibid, 3). Therefore, if machines are an extension of the human body, then harm mediated through these machines directly impacts the physical body as well. While Haraway (2006) reflects on the optimism of cyborgs helping humans transcend the rigidities of the physical, Henry and Powell (2015, 768), ask what happens "when the cyborg is violated." Hence, the centrality of the body in online sexual harassment cannot be ignored.

As survivors struggle to define the harm that is done to them, there is also a need to move away from a medical approach to harm. Henry and Powell (2015) state that in the case of online sexual harassment, "harm is whatever is defined as harmful by the subject" (ibid, 771). It is of paramount importance to consider the lived experiences of people facing harm within the digital environment and thinking of harm to the body but also moving beyond just the physical or biological body. This is a crucial first step to understanding online sexual harassment. In the following sections, I discuss the three forms of online sexual harassment that emerged from the interviews and focus groups.

Image- based sexual abuse

Nicola Henry et al. (2021), use the term image-based sexual abuse to capture the nature and harm caused to victim-survivors due to a diverse range of abusive behaviours

involving non-consensually taken or shared nude or sexual images and videos. Often discussions around sharing of non-consensual images and videos revolve solely around "revenge porn." However, Henry et al. (2021) state that using the term "revenge porn" to describe all non-consensual sharing is a misnomer because not all perpetrators are ex-partners or motivated by revenge. Hence, I use the term image-based sexual abuse in this paper to include the wide range of intersectional behaviour that the participants refer to while speaking about the non-consensual creation and distribution of sexual images.

Here, it is also important to acknowledge that the use of image-based sexual abuse as a form of retaliation is widely prevalent within Indian universities. Ex-partners threatening to leak and share images with the families of women through social media about their relationship to stop women from ending relationships, was frequently discussed by participants. Such examples were also echoed in the research conducted by Henry et al. (2021) where they found that social media has given abusive ex-partners access to their partner's extensive familial and peer networks (e.g.: through Facebook friend lists) and the opportunity to use that as a threat. Since romantic relationships, especially those which are also sexual, are largely considered taboo in the Brahmanical Hindutva society (expanded in the following section), such allegations have grave implications for women including withdrawal from education or forced marriage. In an interview with me, a member of staff who sat on a committee to investigate cases of sexual harassment in their institution spoke about the widespread nature of this problem, "we've had so many cases where the girls wouldn't inform their parents, and so their jilted lover would inform them of things and put it up on social media. And that was something that happened in 20–30 cases" (Mala 2018). Another student participant who sat on the committee to investigate reported cases of sexual violence said, "within the campus, I have had to deal with issues like this ex-boyfriend, and harassment based on not complying to their demands" (Akshay 2018).

Research across disciplines shows that online sexual harassment is often intentionally targeted at people with the most marginalised identities such as people of colour, and queer and trans-gendered people (Becky Gardiner 2018; Henry et al. 2021). For sexual and gender minorities, there is an additional fear of being outed via the publicising of intimate images and videos. Addressing this a Dalit queer student participant spoke about the trauma of both them and their partner being outed by their Brahmin flatmate- "imagine I had a roommate, who videotaped me and showed my video to people in Delhi, without consent." (Polo 2019).

Some of the participants of this research describe image-based sexual abuse to have an even greater impact than offline violence. As a participant states, the violence is not only committed but also recorded and circulated (Rose 2019). This distribution of images of violence shows how technology has enabled the continuation of harm beyond the original instance of abuse. This is supported by Majid Yar (2005), who in their research states three elements of the digital environment that further intensifies the impact of any violence taking place within that environment- a) the convergence of time and space making it easier to target people across geographical borders and time zones; b) multiple connectivities allowing a single person to target innumerable people; c) anonymity allowing for deception and making detection incredibly difficult. There is also a certain degree of permanence attached to this violence. Some participants spoke about the never-ending nature of this violence, i.e., once images are shared online it is very difficult

and sometimes impossible, for them to be completely removed from the internet or digital devices (McGlynn, Rackley, and Houghton 2017). Hence, there is a continuous fear that these images may reappear. That "it will never be forgotten," as a participant state (Rose 2019).

In a report on tackling online harassment in UK higher education, the authors state that one particularly harmful aspect of digital platforms is that they can be used to defame and abuse people within the sanctuary of their own homes (UUK 2019). In this context, a participant shares how the abuse she faced online affected her mind, body, and her idea of a safe space. Since the phone was the medium of her abuse, it felt like she could "never get away from it." It was always with her, and she was "carrying her abuse with her continuously." There was no way to disengage, as even to seek help or reach out to her peer network she had to use the same device that was the medium of her harm. In this case, the participant further states, that if abuse occurred in an external/offline space they could escape to another safer space. But because the boundaries between the digital and real being are blurred, abuse occurring online "made every space an unsafe space." When she first received the abusive messages and threats, she was in her bedroom. And that experience even made her most private and safe space into an unsafe space. Since then, there was always a possibility of any space/place becoming unsafe as it was impossible to disengage or disconnect from the technology (Priya 2019).

Online chat rooms

There is a long history of academic writing on misogyny in online chat rooms or patriarchal online communities which indicates that women may be subjected to more abuse online than men in chat rooms and online gaming environments (Walter S DeKeseredy and Martin D Schwartz 2016; Nicola Henry and Anastasia Powell 2018). Michael Kimmel's (2008) research into online communications shows,

[O]nline chat rooms are, by their nature, spaces of social interaction among men. These chat rooms are the closest thing to a pornographic locker room in which bonding is often accomplished by competing with the other guys. In the online chat rooms, a description of a violent sexual encounter might be followed by another user's "'Oh yeah, well, last night I did this to the woman I was with. . .'" which would be followed by another response designed to top even that. The competition can become heated—and violent—rather quickly. (ibid, 187)

While not much has been spoken about online chatrooms in the context of Indian higher education, several participants in my research spoke of various "online locker room chats." These exist on social media sites such as Facebook and Instagram or on apps such as WhatsApp. Some students even pointed out that men in these groups would share sexist comments in the online presence of women in the group leading to severe trauma and embarrassment. In a focus group discussion with students, nine of whom identified as women and one who identified as a man, they spoke about an online confessions page where women were constantly harassed and shamed. They also mentioned an unofficial class Instagram group for sharing offensive memes called "bikini bottom." Women and

queer people were part of the group and when some attempted to point out that such behaviour was violent and offensive, their comments were dismissed in the name of "dark humour" or "banter" (Focus group 2019). Another student speaking about a similar Facebook page stated-

> Like, they would upload really Islamophobic, really castiest shit . . . . I think that page was meant to be offensive in every way. The description of the page, - "it's a joke, not a dick. so don't take it too hard." And often the acting faculty would become a part of the joke. Often the guard who is a dwarf would become one of the jokes on that page. It was a really wild page. (Polo 2019)

With digital technologies and social media becoming an integral part of daily life, locker room conversations have automatically migrated online and have manifested in various group chat environments. So, the online has become a mere extension of offline spaces where offline gendered power relations, misogynistic violence, and lad cultures can continue unabated (Sophie Sills et al. 2016). The digital environment not only allows men to engage in violence but also allows them to create and access networks that are based on cultures of hegemonic masculinity and male dominance where women become mere objects to be conquered. So, these online chatrooms become shared social spaces where women's humiliation can be "achieved, observed, and enjoyed" (Henry and Powell 2015, 770). According to Danielle Keats Citron (2014), in these contexts, harassment becomes a team sport in which men compete to be the most offensive and abusive. So, it is important to view the harms of online sexual harassment in the context of such chat rooms in both collectivist and individualistic terms. According to Henry and Powell (2015, 769),

> The group mentality of these various behaviours can consolidate and radicalize sexist, racist, and homophobic views, and even incite physical violence in the so-called "off-line" world. Group dynamics also work to diffuse moral or legal responsibility for group members, displace accountability, provide greater anonymity, and dehumanize and blame victims in ways never before imagined.

Alison Phipps et al. (2018), describe lad culture as a group mentality articulated through activities such as sports and heavy alcohol consumption, and characterised by sexist and homophobic banter and blurred lines of consent. In India, this is also widely promoted through popular culture such as Bollywood movies with often used tropes of "no means yes" (Pascal Zinck 2019). Henry et al. (2021) in their research on online sexual harassment found that several of their survey respondents indicated that their images were shared online via social media, in chatrooms, or on imageboard sites. While such behaviour is often dismissed as just harmless locker room talk, "boys will be boys" (Aleesha Matharu 2020), "it was just mischief" (Sills et al. 2016, 936), or even celebrated as "typical" masculine behaviour (Karen Boyle 2019, 29), it is important to consider how social and cultural systems that make such behaviour permissible and widespread, extend to the digital space.

Participants point out that in some instances members of staff were aware of the existence of such online groups. However, action was rarely taken to address these issues. Describing one such situation, a participant comments,

> My issue has been when even the faculty know that such things are happening, that there is a bloody racist Facebook page going on, their level of intervention is, "oh let's remove the logo of the university because it will spoil the image of the university." But I don't give two fucks about your logo. What you need to do is really sort of call these people in who are doing such offenses. (Polo 2019)

Here we need to understand higher education in India, especially private universities, as developing and existing in an increasingly marketised space that prioritises profit and reputation over their duty of care towards the community. According toAlison Phipps and Isabel Young (2015), neoliberal universities view sexual harassment within the cost/benefit equation where complaints from students can cause reputational damage and affect recruitment. Hence, choosing to silence students, or protecting the university's reputation rather than taking corrective action or raising awareness become the mode of dealing with such violent online groups. In another instance when a queer student participant complained about an "offensive joke," a member of staff dismissed it saying- "don't send this joke in public but send it on the private text" (Mandy 2019). Another female student who was harassed by a senior student said- "You can't complain to the teachers, because there is so much hierarchy" (Shalini 2019).

Trolling

The phenomenon of cyberhate or online hate speech is not new and has been referred to in popular culture and academia as "flaming,""trolling,"" cyberbullying," or"e-bile," among other things, since the early 90s (Emma A Jane 2014). In this paper, I use the term "trolling" as it is the term most used in India to describe such behaviour and every participant used the term trolling to describe their experience of online gendered hate speech. Trolling is also the most common form of online sexual harassment spoken about by the participants of this research. According to Whitney Phillips (2012), the term trolling arose in the 1990s to describe online behaviour aimed "to disrupt a conversation or entire community by posting incendiary statements or stupid questions onto a discussion board." They were groups of troublemakers whose roots could be traced back to 4chan (Jane 2014). However, according to Karla Mantilla (2013), gendertrolling is a more recent form of virulent and threatening online trend and has seen a marked increase since 2011 (Jane 2016). While traditional trolls displayed depraved behaviour and embodied the worst racist, ableist, homophobic values, what made gendertrolling distinct and dramatically more destructive were the use of vicious language, gender insults, credible threats, coordinated participation of large groups of people, unusual intensity, scope and longevity of attacks, and reaction to women speaking out (Mantilla 2013). When using the term "trolling," the participants of this research point to these specific forms of gendertrolling as described above.

Karen Lumsden and Heather Morgan (2017, 928), state that gendertrolling targeted at women online, including death and rape threats, is only an extension of the re-emergence of the wider "rape culture" prevalent in society. Debbie Ging and Eugenia Siapera (2018) agree with this view and state that it is difficult to fully understand the phenomenon of gendertrolling without "taking into account the gender-political contexts of post-feminism, the rhetoric of masculinity in crisis, gaming cultures, and the emergence of a virulent new form of online anti-feminist men's rights" (ibid, 517).

Students and staff interviewed for this research speak about facing such online trolling from various groups of people- peers who disagreed with them, family, and conservative individuals online. However, a large number of participants specifically speak about two kinds of trolling that I will expand on in this section- a) trolling in response to social media posts shared by participants about SGBV, including personal testimonies of violence, or stories shared with them by other survivors, b) systematic state-sponsored trolling facilitated by the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government and their sympathisers, specifically directed at student activists vocal in their critique against the government.

Here it is important to acknowledge that several participants speak about how online technologies provided them with an alternative platform for seeking justice and healing around sexual and gender based violence and they received support from individuals and communities across the world (Adrija Dey and Kaitlynn Mendes 2022; Adrija Dey 2020). However, several participants also speak about facing severe backlash after sharing testimonies or speaking out against sexual violence. One participant said,

> Definitely, Me too did create a space where I knew that if I did put it[1] out, I knew that there was a certain chunk of people on social media who would believe me and take it at face value. I would never be able to do it in an environment where the story would be dissected and torn apart, which did happen by the way. There were a bunch of counter narratives. Some anonymous people posted a post saying that we were just mad at him because he cheated. (Rupa 2019)

Other participants talk about how groups of men, often friends of the perpetrators would gang up to not only delegitimise the stories being shared by survivors but would also indulge in blatant victim blaming In their research Martha Craven Nussbaum (2010), talks about online misogyny as being deeply connected to "shame punishment," an attempt to bring women down and have power over them. Other participants talk about a general culture of being blamed and shamed. This was particularly intense for participants who come from marginalised backgrounds. A Dalit queer activist participant states, "this violence is not documented. And when I documented it on social media, I become hacked! I become the hacked version of the victim whom nobody wants to listen to anymore anymore" (Polo 2019).

The struggle of women and other members from marginalised communities to become equal participants in technological cultures has been an uphill battle due to the "masculinization of the technological base, which privileges male efforts to defend gendered hegemonies" (Michael Salter 2018, 259). In this research, while women participants speak about their bodies and physical looks becoming targets of abuse, male participants talk about receiving death threats or attacks against their masculinity. A male university staff participant states how he continuously received death threats and taunts about "not being man enough to protect his family" while his partner received rape threats and had her morphed images released online (Amar 2019). This is echoed in the work of Jane (2014, 533) who writes that women are most commonly targeted online with words such as "unintelligence, hysteria and ugliness" combined with violent sexual threats. While men are targeted around masculinity often via derogatory homophobia.

Apart from this, the most common form of trolling mentioned by the participants of this research is state-sponsored trolling by the current ruling BJP government. India started specifically witnessing the vicious effects of trolling before the 2014

elections which brought the Narendra Modi-led BJP government into power for the first time in India. The rise in trolling has been directly related to the rise of right-wing politics in India (Maria Ressa, Sagarika Ghose and Hannah Storm 2018). This is also in line with the global rise of right-wing nationalism worldwide. Theodore Koulouris (2018), on talking about the relationship between online misogyny and the alt-right states that there is no other abuse that is more impactful to the alt-right than the ones in the realm of misogyny (Koulouris 2018, 755).

Since coming into power in 2014, some of the loudest critiques of the Modi government have come from within higher education institutions, especially public universities. As a backlash, university campuses have witnessed continuous repression from the BJP government (Apoorvanand 2018). Rahul, a student activist speaking about this said,

> Instead of the opposition political parties, it's the universities that are playing the role of opposition . . . almost every campus you see is up in arms against this government. And hence the anger of the government toward these institutions is almost direct. And they intervene daily, the way they put you in jail . . . . And unleash their troll army . . . (Rahul 2019)

A female Muslim activist participant states that she is "digitally raped and molested" by workers and sympathisers of the ruling party on an everyday basis (Ayesha 2018). Another female member of staff who is a vocal campaigner against the government states, "I can take abuse on Twitter, I don't open my Facebook messages because if I open that request folder, I would be invited to come to a particular place to be raped. Why should I do that if I know what's in there? So, it's very hostile" (Mala 2018). While often deemed harmless, online gendertrolling can cause profound harm to women, undermining their agency, dignity, and well-being. Every participant who shared experiences of gendertrolling, also speak of the harm caused by it resulting in severe mental health impact, anxiety, financial loss, and silencing. This indicates that individual cases of online misogyny are not exceptional but indicative of broader patriarchal attitudes and cultures (Jane 2016).

Jill Filipovic (2007, 302), writing about the relationship between online misogyny and real-world harassment states that online trolling is a method to remind women of their secondary status in society. Women are routinely warned against stepping out into the public sphere due to the fear of sexual assault. Hence, sexualised insults online are an attempt to put women in their place and relegate them to the domestic sphere. In this context, a woman member of staff speaks about how local BJP goons started patrolling her house to intimidate her as she was vocal against them online (Shruti 2019). Another member of staff speaks about a colleague who was beaten up ruthlessly by members of the student wing of the BJP for their "anti-national views online" (Ajay 2019).

A materialist analysis of online sexual harassment in Indian universities

In this section, following Eugenia Siapera (2019), I want to argue that to fully understand online sexual harassment within higher education in India, there is a need to move beyond the cultural and look at its material dimensions. Thus, there is an urgent need to understand online sexual harassment as a tool to restructure society in a specific way by silencing and preventing particular voices in building the forthcoming future. Siapera (2019), states that women's subjugation, violence, disciplining and exploitation are not aftereffects of capitalism but fundamental to it and hence also remained a quintessential

feature of the current moment of techno-capitalism. The development of capitalism saw thousands of women being tortured and killed in the name of witch hunts between the fifteenth and the eighteenth century, destroying any knowledge, belief, or behaviour which were incompatible with it.

Silvia Federici (2018, 33) further demonstrates how the state always relied on the construction of enemy figures: "the witch was the communist and terrorist of her times, which required a 'civilising' drive to produce the new 'subjectivity' and sexual division of labour on which the capitalist work discipline would rely"). In this context, online sexual harassment can be understood as a modern equivalent of witch-hunts, a disciplining tool. Online sexualised threats to women and queer people are a method of attacking their bodies and dehumanising them. It is also a way to break resistance by pushing them out of the digital public sphere and reducing them to their biological and mothering duties (Siapera 2019). A woman student participant who identified as a feminist was told by a fellow male student when she spoke out about abusive male behaviour in her university that, "women should not step outside the house because the environment is not safe, and you can't control all the men outside. You should just be making chappatis(bread) in the house" (Shalini 2019).

Many academics in India have pointed out that the escalation of violence against women and blatant misogyny is a result of what Ratna Kapur (2012) calls the "crisis of Indian masculinity." In times when women's roles in society are rapidly changing and with more and more women stepping out from the private sphere to the public and gaining economic independence, the rise in violence becomes an act of disciplining them emanating out of a challenge to patriarchal masculine practices with the notion of women as "equal citizens" still largely missing from the public discourse (Urvashi Butalia 2012; Usha Raman and Sai Amulya Komarraju 2018). In a study conducted by Sarkar and Rajan (2021), survivors state that online sexual harassment took away their authority over life and their agency in the digital space.

It is also essential to explore the use of technology as a disciplining tool for women by the authoritarian Indian state through the lens of caste and Hindutva nationalism. The current ruling party in India imagines India as a Brahmanical Hindu Rashtra (Brahmanical Hindu nation). Following this idea of nationhood, the Hindutva right wing in India evokes the figure of Mother India- A woman who is "fair complexioned, saffron flag-bearing, ready to bear a thousand sons" for the nation (Nivedita Menon 2017). According to Gail Omvedt (1975), the subordination of women is crucial to the hierarchical organisation of caste society in India as women are essential for passing on the Brahmanical culture. So upper caste women of the nation need to be Mother India's obedient daughters to enable her upper caste sons to create a homogeneous Brahmanical Hindutva identity.

In the Brahmanical social order, upper-caste men are considered to be the primary breadwinners and largely entrusted with protecting the family honour through their control over women within the family (Naila Kabeer 1988; Valentine M Moghadam 2004). Women, on the other hand, are "repositories" of household honour and prestige. In *Caliban and the Witch*, Federici (2018) writes that the reign of terror instituted by witch-hunts established a new model of femininity to which women had to conform to be accepted in the developing capitalist society- "sexless, obedient, submissive, resigned to the subordination to the male world, accepting as natural the confinement to a sphere of activities that in capitalism has been completely devalued" (Federici 2018, 32).

Brahmanism too constructs the ideal woman as "sexless, or one whose sexuality is confined within marriage" (Geetanjali Gangoli 2011, 113) and whose role is confined to the household and the reproduction of the next generation of upper caste sons.

Voraciously rejecting this narrative, large numbers of women and queer people, especially within university campuses in India, have fearlessly fought against this state propaganda as a core feminist issue (Adrija Dey 2019). This resonates in the words of *Pinjra Tod* (Breaking the cage), a feminist collective in universities, as they demanded —"*Ma se Aazadi, Ma ki Azadi* (freedom from being the Mother, freedom for the Mother)" or "We won't Mother India" (Menon 2017). Obedient daughters are essential for the making and furthering of the agenda of the Hindutva nation-state, which is fuelled by capitalism and Brahmanical patriarchy, just like domesticated women were essential for the advancement of capitalism. However, this goes hand in hand with the disciplining, silencing, and disappearance of disobedient daughters through offline[2] and digital witch hunts. They need to be pushed out of the digital public sphere to establish an upper-caste male social dominance both in the physical and cyberspace. In talking about backlash from BJP trolls, a Dalit women student participant states, "I have had threats of acid attack, gang rape, articles printed about me, hate crime" (Sneha 2019).

The online silencing of dissenting voices is done in planned and systematic way by the current BJP government. Swati Chaturvedi (2016), in her book *I Am a Troll*, writes about the presence on an active IT unit in the BJP headquarters in New Delhi since 2014. Every day, a Twitter agenda was sent out to hundreds of party volunteers and paid workers from there. An ex-troll explained to Chaturvedi (2016) that every day they were given a "hit list" of people who needed to be constantly attacked. Such disciplining practices of the state are a modern-day echoing of Federici's (2018) work where she showed that the majority of witch-hunts in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were conducted by lay magistrates and were organised and paid for by city governments. The state apparatus was used to control women and female sexuality which was seen as both a threat and a powerful economic force if regulated.

Based on the volume and striking homogeneity of the rhetoric of online sexual harassment, it needs to be considered a significant social problem. While the medium of this form of harassment is new, according to Jane (2016) it is a continuation of a much older tradition that "insists that women are inferior; that their primary value related to sexual utility; that they do not belong in the private sphere; and that those females who overstep the mark should be put 'back in their place' or otherwise punished" (ibid, 287). This makes online sexual harassment a deeply materialist and feminist issue.

Conclusion

This paper explores three forms of online sexual harassment—image-based sexual abuse, online chat rooms, and trolling in the context of Indian universities. Following the works of Kelly (1987) and McGlynn, Rackley, and Houghton (2017) this paper establishes that it is important to understand online sexual harassment as a continuum of other forms of offline sexual violence. Online sexual harassment is often dismissed as "trivial," "humour" or even disembodied (focus group 2019).

However, every participant in the research admitted to experiencing serious consequences of online sexual harassment such as physical and mental trauma, shame, financial loss, and loss of peer groups, seriously affecting their ideas of safety (also see Sarkar and Rajan 2021). So instead of subverting traditional gender norms, new digital technologies are often tools for the reconstruction and widespread dissemination of traditional gender norms (Henry and Powell 2015).

In the Indian context, the online targeting of women students and activists through different forms of online sexual harassment has been repeatedly termed as witch-hunts. Some of the biggest obstacles and strongest critiques of the current Indian state have come from women students and activists, specifically from the Muslim and Dalit communities. So, young women from minority communities become specific targets of these online witch hunts. A report released by Amnesty International on online harassment in India in 2018 showed that the more vocal a woman was, the more likely she was to be targeted online, the scale of this increased for women from religious minorities and disadvantaged castes (BBC 2022). Sarkar and Rajan's (2021), study shows that most women who faced online sexual harassment in India were forced to quit participating online. The participants of this research also echoed this. Many participants confirmed that the fear of abuse led to self-surveillance and self-censoring. A few participants quit the digital space altogether, others became silent observers and some others said that they would only comment on "*apolitical*" issues (Maya 2019). This demonstrates how online sexual harassment is continuously being used as a planned strategy for silencing dissent and for the spread of Brahmanical Hindutva nationalism in India. Therefore, to truly develop an in-depth understanding of online sexual harassment, in India and across the world, the boundaries of cultural analysis of online sexual harassment need to be pushed to develop a more materialist analysis establishing online sexual harassment as a disciplining tool for maintaining neoliberal, Brahmanical and patriarchal status quo.

Notes

1. Here the survivor is speaking about a post she wrote on social media about sexual abuse from a classmate towards herself and other peers.
2. Two members of the Pinjra Tod collective were arrested in May 2020 for allegedly being part of a premeditated conspiracy behind the communal violence that broke out in northeast Delhi in February that year. They were in prison for over a year and are now out on bail.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by The British Academy Postdoctoral Fellowship.

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