Mapping Gender-based Violence through 'Gendertrolling'

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Social media in the present day has taken up many connotations, various online platforms have opened up spaces for people to not only interact with one another but also participate in larger discussions on various 'social issues'. The trending topics, created to generate traffic on these platforms, also feed into the participatory behavior of the net and social media users. Hashtags function as an easy tool for curating tweets and posts on any given topic, thereby clicking on the trending hashtag leads you to all the tweets or posts, from various people across the socio-economic and cultural spectrum, which are posted with that particular hashtag. It is important to note that it is this widening of one's social circle and opening up possibility of interaction with people with diverse opinions that lead to much of discussion in online spaces. To add another dimension to it, data has become cheaper and easily accessible, thereby opening up these online spaces to different people from various socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. Things get more complicated when we look at local Indian context, which is rich in diversity and differences in terms of cultural and traditional practices and notice how this trend is affecting our interaction in the online spaces.

In present day Digital India, with cheaper data plans and smartphones more access to technology and platforms, social media has become a common ground for people to interact. This is not bereft of its pitfalls. On one hand it has juxtaposed different kinds of people with one another but on the other hand we are also witnessing shrinking space of tolerance for opposing views. This shrinking of space is not unique to just online spaces but also in the offline/ real world. There has been a systemic rise in the right-wing ideologies and building a Hindu Rashtra through subtle and not so subtle rhetoric as well as practices. Atrocities on people from minority communities are on a rise followed by a stoic silence from the centre. These on ground realities are also mirrored in the online spaces. It is in this specific context of rise of right-wing ideologies that we try to follow some of the gender based abuse and violence in online spaces (specifically trolling) and try to tease out how the rise in building a masculinized Hindu nation rests on feminizing the "other" that poses a threat to it. Not only the other is feminized but the body is reconstructed in the online spaces only to be attacked and violated. In order to understand the phenomenon of trolling, it is important to understand the nature of social media and trolling.

Social in Social Media and the Participatory Culture

Social media is a product of technology as well as human interactions. There is a sense of community or attempt to build a community around these social networking sites. As Fuchs (2017) puts it "The Internet consists of both a technological infrastructure and (inter)acting humans. It is not a network of computer networks, but a network that interconnects social networks and technological networks of computer networks." (p. 37) The impetus remains on human interactions that mimic social interactions in the virtual space but this is enabled and mediated as well as contained by technology. He argues that media are not technologies but

'techno-social systems' (p. 37). According to him, "The Internet consists of a technological system and a social subsystem that both have a networked character. Together these two parts form a techno-social system. The technological structure is a network that produces and reproduces human actions and social networks and is itself produced and reproduced by such practices." Another important aspect of social media, as mentioned above is the participatory nature.

Social media, at the end of the day is regulated and controlled by corporates like Google, Facebook, among others. To equate the participatory culture of social media as democratic participation would be a gross misjudgment on our part (Fuchs, 2017, p. 54-57). However, in the context of this paper it is pertinent to recognize that the heated arguments and online vitriol that we witness is in some sense a political participation. News channels use online polls to generate traffic and viewership and in turn give a sense of "being heard" and "having a say" in the discussions (Udupa, 2017,p. 3). Thus while the social media users may not have any direct result on the democratic practices or any concrete decision making, there is a similitude that tricks the users into believing otherwise. Udupa's understanding of "aspiration for political participation" among online users is crucial to gain insights into the trolling tactics deployed by many to discourage people with opposing views. This in context of Fuchs' emphasis that, "an internet that is dominated by corporations that accumulate capital by exploiting and commodifying users can in the theory of participatory democracy never be participatory, and the cultural expressions on it cannot be an expression of participation" (p. 57). The sense of agency and political participation the users have is at best a twisted similitude and not real.

From Trolling to Gendertrolling

There are various forms of abuse that take place in the online space, these range from heckling and harassment to stalking and threats. Owen, Noble and Speed (2017) in 'Trolling the ugly face of the social network' gives a comprehensive list of characteristic traits of trolling / troll from being anti-social to designed to cause offence, designed to mislead, and extreme nature of content. The meaning of troll and trolling has evolved over the course of time. Among various characteristics that Owen, Noble and Speed discusses following three characteristics are crucial for our discussion here. These three characteristics are, the troll has the ability to "create and define victims" i.e. it is through their speech and comments that the victims are produced and defined. "Victims of trolling feel harassed and victimized with the untruths, slander and vitriol that the unwanted attention a troll can bring. Not only does the aggressive act create victims but it also defines them by highlighting a particular aspect of a user's identity and using this as the basis for the abuse" (p. 116) e.g. it is common to read people comment and call anti-establishment views as "libtard", "presstitutes", "anti-nationals". Not only are these harsh words and "extreme overreaction/ unjustified moralising" (p. 116) they also focus on a specific aspect of the user's identity i.e. their liberal views, media hungry nature, also sexualising the reporters (presstitute is often used for female reporters thereby bringing attention to their sexuality by playing on the word 'prostitute'). Another characteristic that Owen, Noble and Speed (2017) highlights is "power and dominance" which the troll exerts "by being rude, offensive, and threatening" (p. 116). The most important characteristic that is common to all the incidents we will be discussing is "hunting in packs". It is not an isolatory troll trying to disrupt conversations

or attack the user, it is the sheer number of people attacking the user that makes trolling unique form of abuse. It is also this magnitude of anonymous attack that makes it difficult for the user to take a legal action.

As Buckels, Trapnell and Paulhus (2014) state "Online *trolling* is the practice of behaving in a deceptive, destructive, or disruptive manner in a social setting on the Internet with no apparent instrumental purpose". (p. 1) Cyber-trolling, they argue, is an association between the personalities and behavior with the act of trolling. (Buckels, Trapnell and Paulhus, 2014) But trolling is not just about a practice, behavior, and personality; it is as complicated as our social systems especially when interaction happens between people and technology. The cyberspace makes it more complex, as it breaks the direct physical connection of the individual and society within the online environment. Cyberspace in itself becomes an extension of the self. The contestation starts when the online spaces start affecting the real-world spaces of humans. As such the trolling when directed towards a particular identity doesn't just remain as the practice of trolling but becomes a practice with many facets.

Thus, trolling becomes a digital-social practice in a sense as trolling is practiced and performed through technology and digital platforms like social media in particular. But a very important feature of trolling is its anonymity. But even the anonymity doesn't suggest that it's performed in a neutral environment. It's hierarchical, gendered, and political in the sense as it interacts with both 'technological systems and social subsystem' (Fuchs,2017, p. 37) through a networked character. As Fuchs puts it, "what is social about social media and the Internet, then we are dealing with the level of human agency" as Anthony Giddens (1984) calls it the duality of structure and agency on which Media are based (Fuchs, 2017, p. 37). *Trolling* doesn't just remain as the practice with no instrumental purpose but trolling becomes an embodied social practice which can be an organized social act.

There are numerous cases where trolling has been done in an organized, purposeful and targeted manner. If one takes into the question of identity, power, and political affiliations of both trolls and the trolled it becomes apparent that the question of identity is central to the question of trolling. From the numerous examples, we will discuss the implications of identity and gender on the practices of trolling. There is not one practice of trolling but practices of trolling. These various practices are contingent on the positionality of both the user (the trolled) as well as the troll. While social media has seemed to unleash the intolerant and dark side of human interaction and has transformed our society, it is equally important to note the virtual, cyberspace is an extension of real-world environments. The constriction of the duality of real-and-virtual has lead to insertion of real-world values into the online environments. As Adrienne Shaw (2014) states, "misogyny, racism, homophobia, etc. were not invented by the Internet, but they are enabled by technology and the cultural norms of Internet communication in which this behavior is supported, defended, and even valued" (p. 3).

Gendertrolling

So far we have discussed trolling in a general sense. This paper specifically looks at gendertrolling to map out the kind of violence and abuse women go through. Karla Mattila

(2015) conceptualizes gendertrolling as category for specific forms of trolling that women go through. Her contribution is important to give language to the gendered abuse faced by women in the online spaces. These misogynistic and violent online encounters are reflective of offline misogyny. By clubbing these instances and experiences under gendertrolling, the alleged gulf between virtual and real, online and offline is bridged and allows us to see these acts as an extension of "real"/ offline misogyny and patriarchy. She outlines different traits and characteristics of gendertrolling.

There are key insights in Mantilla's work, three of which stand out for our discussion. One, these attacks are not carried out individually and there is a strength in numbers. Because of the nature of the comments and the sexualised and dehumanizing language employed other members also start attacking the user (victim).This coming together of attackers/ trolls, she argues, is indicative of widespread misogyny. This strongly resonates with Noble's observations as well. Secondly, these attacks occur in huge numbers, "several threats or messages per day or even per hour" (p. 12). Lastly, gendertrolling attacks are perpetrated on women who are seen as asserting their opinions in online spaces (p. 12).

In the following section we will discuss some of the prominent instances of gendertrolling in recent past and examine them in the context of patriarchal misogyny as well as the rise of nationalistic Hindutva sentiments. This is not to say that people of other extreme religious or political leanings do not participate in online gendered abuse. Instead the attempt is to complicate this rise of online trolling by viewing it through the lens of nationalistic meaning making processes. In case of gendertrolling, the women become the primary targets of trolling. We attempt to show, through our discussion and analysis of these instances, the common thread that runs through them all in some form or the other.

Padmavat(i)

Intimidation, gender-abuses, death and rape threats are common in the case of gendtrolling. The women are targeted for their opinion, sometimes the threats have lead to consequences which have resulted in muzzling and silencing the voices of women on the internet. As argued by Mantilla (2013) that the features of gendertrolling consist of "the participation often consolidated, of numerous people, gender based insults, vicious language and credible threats, unusual intensity, scope and longevity of attacks" (p. 564-565).

In the case of 'Padmavat(i)' movie is based on Rajput queen Padmavati who is known in literary history for her act of *johar*. The movie became controversial after Shri Rajput Karni Sena and other Rajput groups protested against the depiction of Padmini, a Rajput queen, in the movie. Deepika Padukone plays the titular character in the movie, and as a result became the centrestage of the troll attacks on social media. In the wake of protests by Karni Sena demonstrating how the movie (trailer) has offended the sentiments of Rajput community, Padukone commented, "Where have we reached as a nation? We have regressed. The only people we are answerable to is the censor board, and I know and I believe that nothing can stop the release of this film." (Roy, 2017) In response to this Deepika was attacked by trolls on the twitter. One tweet mentioned that, "Just because there is oppn to her movie Padmavati--Deepika says country regressed--wht an

arrogance/wht a semi -literate/tell me your money source -will tell who is regressed:))))) RT" (Roy, 2017) There were threats to burn the cinemas and slap Deepika Padukone (Khole, 2017) Though Deepika and Sanjay Leela Bhansali, received numerous threats of violence, an award of Rs 1 crore was announced by Akhil Bhartiya Kshatriya Mahasabha (ABKM) to anyone who would burn Padukone alive. Karni Sena has also said they would ""cut off Padukone's nose" for "misrepresenting" the Rajput queen". (The Wire Staff, 2017). What we see here is a crossover between the "offline" world and "online" spaces. The twitter outrage is reflective of the on-ground outrage.

Kerala Flash Mob Case:
On 1st December 2017, a video was uploaded on the social media in which three dental college female students were dancing in a flash mob on a roadside in Malappuram, Kerala to raise awareness on World Aids Day. The post became viral with thousands of shares, comments on Facebook and tweets on Twitter. However, soon the three girls were trolled online for their identity and dress. The girls were shamed and derogatory comments were posted. The debate online became very religious in nature as the girls became a target for wearing a hijab while dancing. It became a centre point for trolls to make memes and comments. Many memes and posts pointed towards that those people (Muslims) who were against these three girls were the same who were saying 'Free Hadiya'.(TNM, 2017) One tweet mentioned in the article says, "Isn't this Haraam? Waiting for fatwa now". (The Quint, 2017) Another tweet by the username Real Sevak posted, "When did girls from Islamic religion started dancing in #FlashMob. #Malappuram in #Kerala is a mini-#Syria. Hindu people are living in fear and islamic people are Dancing .#SaveKerala #BJP4Kerala #RSS" (The Real Sevak, 2017) The case was also taken in cognizance by the Kerala Women's commission who registered a suo motu case against those who had posted "filthy comments and lewd remarks" and 'shamed' the three girls. (The Quint, 2017)

More instances

Sujatha Surepally, who is a Dalit activist, academician and Professor at Satavahana University, Karimnagar, Telengana. It has been alleged that on 25th December 2017, which Dalits celebrate as Manusmriti Dahan Diwas, she had burned the photos of 'Bharat Mata' inside the university. Soon after she was accused of this, she was trolled on social media accusing her of being a 'naxal', an 'antinational' and blaming her for spreading naxalism. In this case, Bandi Sanjay, Karimnagar BJP president and spokesperson has been leading the campaign against the professor.(Ganeshan, 2017) As Sanjeev Gunpenapalli writes about the posts shared online that, "The comment section is filled with misogynist, casteist and abusive words towards Prof. Surepally". (Gumpenapalli, 2018)

"What are you able to do? I am not afraid if you post this as status. Get lost..
"I lv Muslims. My life is my choice. Why are you bothered?.
"Why are you dying in the name of religion as we are all Indians?
"I don't care whatever you tell. My father and mother always support me." (Dutta, 2018)

This conversation happened two days before Dhanyashree committed suicide in her home. She belonged to Mudigere town in Karnataka's Chikmagalur district. The above conversation happened in Tulu and an English transcript of the same has been provided by the Chikmagalur police published by Indian Express. (Dutta, 2018) Dhanyashree, 20 years old and in her first year of B.Com, committed suicide in her home on January 6, 2018. The reason for her suicide is she had posted on a WhatsApp group that she liked Muslims (Express News Service, 2018). As a result she was intimidated and harassed by some men who were the members belonging to Bhartiya Janata Yuva Morcha (BJYM) and the Bajrang Dal. The Indian Express report writes that "It all began with Dhanyashree changing her WhatsApp profile picture, said Annamalai (Chikmagalur Superintendent of Police). It was just an image of her eyes, close-cropped. Held against a black background, it appeared — to some eyes – an image of her wearing a burqa. This image was posted on other WhatsApp groups as proof of her "love" for Muslims." (Dutta, 2018) In her suicide note she writes, "According to the police, in the note, she begins by asking, "If you Hindu boys do such an injustice to a Hindu girl like me, then where will I go for justice? I am not in love with any Muslim boy, not going out with any Muslim boy. Because of your unnecessary harassment, you have tarnished my reputation and name. Whatever has happened to me should not happen to any other girl." (Dutta, 2018)

Anita Wadekar, a transgender activist tried to commit suicide on 25th October 2017. Anita was added to a WhatsApp group-*Yaron ki Yaari, Sab se Pyari* which had around 120 members. (Hafeez 2017) On this group, Anita was added to this group by some persons who pretended to be 'fake transgenders'. She was abused and harassed on this group which lead her to take this extreme step. She had also tried to file a FIR as Anita was getting threats but the police has refused to take any complaint. (Fazal, 2017) The police failed to act on the complaint of the activist tells us the discriminatory character of police and how unserious online threats are taken.

Many prominent women activists, figures, singers, actors, writers, journalist have faced volley of abuses on online media and threats becoming the target of trolls from time to time, whenever they assert their opinion. Chinmayi Sripada, a Tamil playback singer has written her account of harassment, threats of rape, murder and kidnapping that she received from the trolls. Because of her stand on Tamil fisherman who were attacked by Sri Lankan navy issue in the year 2011. (Chinmayi 2012) Another prominent Dalit feminist poet and writer, Meena Kandaswamy, received same kind of threats, abuses, acid attacks and 'televised gangrape' for her support to the beef festival which was organized at Osmania University in 2015. (Pandey, 2012) Similarly, prominent women journalists such as Sagarika Ghosh, Barkha Dutt, Rana ayyub, Arundhati Rai and Swati Chaturvedi. Swati Chaturvedi,a journalist, has written a book *I am Troll: Inside the Secret World of the BJP's Digital Army* (2016), tries to trace the trolls by investigating the 'digital army' who are linked with BJP's social media cell, who intimidate the critics of the government by trolling them. In an article on The Wire, Chaturvedi mentions that "Modi has been called out several times for following abusive Twitter handles, most recently after the murder of Gauri Lankesh, but he doesn't seem to care." (Chaturvedi, 2017)

The Ministry of Women and Child Development released a draft National Policy on Women in the month of May 2016. Maneka Gandhi in her statement on the release of the draft had "announced that her Ministry for Women and Child Development is working to curb internet

misogyny. She said she has written to the Home Ministry to come up with a code for online behaviour that would classify trolling of women as violence". (Baxter, 2016) Her statement was welcomed on Twitter and social media in the beginning but Maneka Gandhi later became a target of trolls to express their misgony. (Baxter, 2016)

On 5th July 2016, Maneka Gandhi, Minister of Women and Child Development (ECD) posted a tweet, "Are you a woman who is trolled or abused? Inform me at gandhim@nic.in," (Gandhi, 2016). As a result of her tweet, she was 'trending' on the Twitter and became a target of the trolls on the Twitter. However, it is interesting to note most of the comments that it generated were populated by men asking for rights for men. While this was not violent form of trolling, there is clearly an attempt to subvert the power dynamics. It is only in the online space that one can not only 'talk' to the minister but also make fun of them. A large number of men, and some women, retweeted asking about protective laws for men. At no point there was an attempt to engage with serious discussion, instead these were diversion tactics to ridicule the need of women having protective laws.

In two reports by Alt News they have documented how 'organized trolls' have manipulated ratings of books on Amazon India. This has resulted in bringing the overall ratings for the books which has been done in a very organized manner. (Jawed, 2017a; Jawed 2017b) The author writes that, "It is a deliberate, well-planned and concerted online mob attack."(Jawed, 2017a) The patterns that emerge show that "Down-rating of books is not spontaneous. It is a well coordinated and accompanied by social media campaigns asking supporters to leave negative reviews for the book. In some cases this may be initiated by a high profile right-wing accounts."(Jawed, 2017a) According to this report, "Nearly 90%+ of the negative ratings come from those who have not purchased the book from the website. It is clear that many have not even read the book."(Jawed, 2017a) Further they state that, "The attack is personal. It is an attack on the author, not on the book and its contents. The comments often target the author than the book itself". (Jawed, 2017a) All the authors Barkha Dutt, Rana Ayyub, Swati Chaturvedi, Prerna Bakshi, Sagarika Ghosh and Arundhati Roy whose books became may have become the target by the trolls for being critical of BJP and Right Wing Hindu Nationalists.

We have tried to locate various instances of trolling and various different kinds of trolling. In all these instances the larger narrative of masculinized patriarchal Hindu nationalist ideology emerges. Each instance is gendered but the gendertrolling ranges from subtle to overt. Along with gender other identity markers are also identified and attacked. The moral character of women is questioned in subtle and overt ways.

Trolling as Disciplinary Rhetoric

The issues of control, surveillance and censorship of not only the content but the bodies and the online avatars has posed very difficult questions in the transforming and creation of new issues on the online platforms. Gendertrolling in effect becomes different than trolling, it doesn't bring only 'deceptive, destructive, or disruptive manner' but it also comes with particular threats and abuses. These threats and abuses are reflective of how gendered, hierarchical, and political it

becomes. The practice of trolling changes as the object of trolling, the person who is trolled, changes. If trolling becomes an organized, targeted and purposeful with a particular ideology or certain ideas to attack a person with different ideas. It changes the nature of trolling to an act that deliberately tries to silence, muzzle and obfuscate the voices that are dissenting. The threat of rape and gender-abuses to females and people with other identities such as belonging to powerless castes or minority proves that the trolling becomes a case of real threat to life and the freedom of expression and speech. Not only it's a deterrent to it but it comes with deep implications also. As Cole (2015) notes that there are similarities between trolling practices and disciplinary rhetoric as "Disciplinary rhetoric individualizes bodies which are distributed and circulated in a network of relations" (p. 356). She further states that trolls use violent language to deter and discipline woman in online spaces by "threatening her body with violence" (p. 356). As we analyze the contents and forms of trolling, we can from the instances cited above get an idea how body especially the body of a female and marginalized genders becomes the contested site of control, subjugation, and surveillance. This in the words of Foucault is the new 'political technology of the body' which produces new forms of power, subjugation and control. (Foucault, 1977) Thus, in itself, cyberspace has become a deeply contested space as it challenges as well as maintains the status quo that muddles the question of whether technology will lead to more dystopia in the society.

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