

## The #MeToo Phenomenon on Indian Social Media: Moving Onward from the American #MeToo

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**Abstract.** This article sought to reflect upon the online #MeToo movement in India, as it began to unfold, especially October 2018 onwards. The focus lied upon the role of social media, mainly Twitter, in originating, sustaining and popularizing the movement both online as well as giving it a momentum in the real world, especially through mainstream news media. This article made a concerted attempt at examining technology and its interaction with gendered forms of social media communication. Through empirical and theoretical analyses, concepts such as trolling, anonymity and digital heterogeneity vis-a-vis social media feminist activism have been examined, as have been the structural shortcomings pertaining to class, caste, sexuality and race. It sought to assert that social media carried an effective potential in countering the neoliberal male discourse of selectively granting women agency and visibility in media spaces.

**Keywords:** #MeToo movement; India; social media activism; social media technologies; gendered performance

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## Introduction: Coming Out

The year 2018 saw the onset of a popular #MeToo movement in India when an almost-forgotten Bollywood actress, Tanushree Dutta came to India in October after having lived in the USA for a decade. She gave a sound bite to the media that she faced sexual harassment at the hands of Nana Patekar, a popular Bollywood actor, during the shoot of a film in 2008, in which her career as an actress went downhill (Starkey et al., 2019, p. 439). This incident served as a larger social stimulation, leading to a deluge of other allegations by women from the movie industry, news media, politics, entertainment and other sectors about their respective experiences of sexual harassment at the hands of powerful men in their professions. For the rest of the year, the issue caught much media attention and ‘predatory men’ were named and shamed in public like never before in the country.

The #MeToo movement in India was notably inspired from the #MeToo movement in the USA that momentarily unfolded in the year 2017. Susan Fowler, a former engineer at Uber and one of the major names associated with initiating the American #MeToo movement, posted an online blog narrating her encounters with sexual harassment during her tenure at Uber (439). As will also be apparent through this article, the Indian #MeToo was most characterized by a “a convergence of social media hashtagging and news media discussion” (Guha, 2015, p. 155), deemed as one of the necessary recipes of success for online feminist activism by Pallavi Guha.

Adrija Dey had argued how social media has created for Indian women, grappling with a rigid patriarchy and significantly hostile legal institutions, not only an alternative space for sharing their experiences but also a platform where women can get solidarity and support (Dey, 2018, p. 135). Starkey et al, while discussing the global ramifications of #MeToo, had similarly contended how the notion of collective identity becomes a central concept if one has to understand the impact of #MeToo, given the impact of social media on collective action (Starkey et al., 2019, p. 438). Their argument was that engagement within a social media community is liberating for women digital users and also grants them a feeling of belongingness and a sense of collective identity, and that #MeToo movement has succeeded in ushering in an enduring debate and distemper to the question of women’s safety and liberty in the workplace (440).

This article sought to follow this argument, and centered around the research question of how the online Indian #MeToo movement has also greatly served to grant agency and visibility to women, while also presenting the structural shortcomings incipient in an online feminist movement and its potential limitations in the real world.

Of course, Starkey et al have also pointed out the cultural limitations of this movement in the non-Western world, wherein visibility and unfettered agency is relatively harder to access, most particularly among women who are not a part of the “privileged career elites” (440). QZ India has reported how the digital gender gap among internet users in India was far more extreme than the global divide, and that only 29% of internet users in India were women, mostly confined to the strata of the urban user-base. Cultural barriers and deep-seated patriarchal traditions in the Indian society in general, and in rural India in particular, were cited as major reasons behind this gender gap (Bhattacharya, 2017)

In addition, even when we are to talk of the more privileged, urban class of women in India, the victims of sexual harassment face a major uphill task of facing shaming, trolling, harassment and retribution at the hands of a patriarchy-driven society and the information system, including social media and other forms of media, as well as the institutions of justice, as also expounded through the empirical examples cited in this article. Furthermore, it has been pointed out how India ranks very high in the power- distance cultural dimensions, which essentially implies that “the national culture emphasizes hierarchy and top-down communication, reflected in organizations that are hierarchical and centralized” (441). This contention implies that someone like Tanushree Dutta in India must have faced even more resistance from “formal and digital hierarchies” (452) than Susan Fowler in USA (of course, not to discredit her struggles against embedded patriarchal ideologies in America).

On similar lines, Rachel Loney-Howes pointed out how social, racial and economic privilege serve as important determining factors about voice and visibility accorded to victims online. She says, “While widespread access to digital communication technologies enabled victim-survivors to engage with the #MeToo movement on a global scale, it was a certain type of privilege that ‘broke’ the silence” (Loney-Howes, 2019, p. 30).

Sreeparna Chattopadhyay’s article for BBC lamented how the #MeToo movement largely comprised the educated, urban and privileged women and how the women working in informal sectors of the Indian society, such as domestic helps, have not found any agency or redressal to their experiences of facing workplace harassment (Chattopadhyay, 2019). Furthermore, the usage of social media is mostly concentrated amongst the urban regions of India and the effective dispersal and success of an online feminist campaign such as the #MeToo is greatly dependent upon its coverage in the mainstream news media (Mishra, 2020, p. 660). This furthers the commercial interests of news media and also reflects the mood of the middle class using social media (662).

Tanushree Dutta’s story, for instance, suffered a bid to sensationalize and generate controversy and gossip by a large section of the mainstream Indian media that normally appraises Bollywood film industry as the hub of trivial news and hearsay grapevine.

Furthermore, Dutta had to face a counter-attack to her act of coming out with her story of oppression. For instance, a report by *The Quint* stated that Nana Patekar's NGO slapped a defamation suit against Dutta (Quint Entertainment, 2019), while he garnered support from fellow colleagues like Rakhi Sawant and Widows' associations that he was helping. Their argument was that Dutta was concocting stories to kickstart her career once again in the film industry and garner some publicity, as reported by *Outlook India* (Dutta, 2018). Nevertheless, Starkey et al have also contended that mostly she was portrayed as brave by media outlets, especially the English media (Starkey et al., 2019, p. 448).

Dutta's celebrity status as well growing public access to technology and modernisation ensured that any attempts to discredit her story were met with indignant backlash on social media platforms like Twitter. A similar prominent story erupted on Twitter about MJ Akbar in October 2018, then serving as minister of state for external affairs in the government of India, who was accused by several women, mostly journalists, of sexual harassment and workplace intimidation. As reported by several media outlets, including *Vox*, it was begun by the prominent journalist Priya Ramani whose act of naming him in social media eventually culminated in Akbar being forced to resign from his position as a minister in the government, and Ramani being slapped with a defamation case by Akbar (Kirby, 2018). *Economic Times* in 2019 revisited the Indian #MeToo that unfolded in the last months of 2018 and updated about some of the most prominent cases that had emerged through (mostly) social media like Twitter that acted as vocal platforms for women to raise their voice. The article mostly indicates that most victims have been sued by their alleged perpetrators while the remaining cases had hardly had any conclusion (Roy, 2019). As reported by the news portal, *Mid-Day*, Ramani, in a court hearing on Akbar's defamation case against her, had asserted that women like herself speaking up against sexual harassment at workplaces must be celebrated and not punished (Daijiworld, 2020). Stories such as Ramani's and others' that gathered much media traction point to how social media was an effective medium to raise pertinent issues on women's safety and workplace equality—granting them a platform, an identity and an audience that traversed cultural and professional boundaries— but, at the same time, fell short of making much substantial impact in the non-virtual world. Platforms like Twitter reflected the power of hashtag feminist activism and its reach beyond social media to mainstream media, and also reiterated for us the questionable longevity of all the stories that it nurtures. As we move further in this study, we will also analyse aspects like collective feminism and individual agency, the manifestation of a woman's experiences in social media spaces most given to commercial voyeurism.

## **Scope and Methodology**

This article dealt with the online semantics of the #MeToo movement in India, made some limited references to how it transpired in the US and the role of the social, cultural and political structures in receiving the movement. It sought to study the role of social media, focussing greatly on Twitter, in furthering the #MeToo movement in India, and also juxtapose it with how the movement engaged with the broader questions of access and justice for Indian women, thereby making it a timely study on the subject of global challenges to online feminist activism

Towards the above research queries, this article has pursued a postfeminist inquiry, consulting theorists pursuing intersectional gender and media analyses such as Dey (2018), Foust and Hoyt (2018), into the affective encounters of (mostly) prominent Indian women with the #MeToo movement on social media. Along with citing relevant critical studies on the reach and influence of social media among the largely gendered Indian society (literature on visual cultures and technological materialism from critics like Schuster (2013) and Guha (2015), this article has also picked out a few prominent cases that caught public attention on mainstream TV and print media and social media. Several popular news media reports have also been cited from portals like Chatterjee (2018), Chattopadhyay (2019) and others to track the events around the movement.

In addition, this study has consulted advanced search options (on Twitter and otherwise) and saved screenshots from the author's diaries to also present some empirical evidence, and a more holistic viewpoint, on the perils of utilizing social media to seek agency, credibility and justice by Indian women users. Some sample tweets were cited in this study, collected under the #MeToo hashtag on Twitter, to build arguments; most have been deliberately anonymized to retain focus upon the discussions on digital cultures and practices rather than individuals. The author has deliberately attempted to pursue a theoretical analysis of the issues mentioned above while also engaging in a limited empirical preview of the #MeToo movement on Twitter. The motif has been to ground contemporary scholarship on digital media and gender activism in the Indian social and cultural context specifically, raising issues like social media visibility, digital time while also deploying concrete examples from the region to carry forth the objectives of this article. No interviews were conducted for this article. The Spirit of Social Media Social media technology, despite all its shortcomings, in my opinion, has been a powerful platform for women for voicing their grievances and demanding accountability during the #MeToo movement in both India and the USA. The nature of social media, just like other forms of media, is such that despite the commercial and patriarchal biases, and its perceptible inclinations to promote a certain set of ideologies and discourses, it is nevertheless significantly democratic for the ones that have

access to it. This is to say that social media, like all media, thrives on binaries — in ideas, in narratives — and binaries can only be created when the non-dominant side is also allowed space for expression; this enables the non-dominant side to diffuse its thought process within the social media system, however biased and unflattering it may be towards its ideas and demands. This opens an alternative, a possibility of audience, of some egalitarian platform for debate at some point — now or in the future.

The *New Yorker*, in an article titled Affect Theory and the New Age of Anxiety, has explored the affective paradigms of modern technology and how technology can serve to both spread positivity and optimism as well as paranoia and disillusionment. It further evoked Lauren Berlant's book *Cruel Optimism* to stress the idea of sentimentality, empathy, identifying with a victim's pain and humiliation as a hallmark of American cultural and behavioural expectations. It stressed upon how the affective power of technology could move people, but how such affective experience could sometimes fall short of a tangible action (Hsu, 2019). This is where a social media movement like the #MeToo movement needs to identify itself with more substance than just superficial online activism and online perpetuation.

Shefali Chandra and Saadia Toor's article has pointed out how the social media solidarities shown by women for other victims of sexual harassment may not well translate into any palpable change in the society or in the victim's ongoing struggles for justice and social and professional acceptance (Chandra & Toor, 2015, p. 16). Starkey et al have also shown such apprehensions about any substantial real-world impact of the movement (Starkey et al., 2019, p. 455), and in such a context, it is important to keep a realistic picture of what social media symbolises for a woman user and how she negotiates with its shortcomings and its great advantage to represent and connect. While Chandra and Toor have cynically traced the transformation of social media solidarities from being "leftist relics" to being fashionable as a new form of international activism, or popularly termed 'clicktivism' or 'slacktivism', they have also recognised their strength in popularising and emboldening an important cause (Chandra & Toor, 2015, p. 16). In *Social Movement 2.0*, Foust and Hoyt have also recognised the powerful capacity of social media like Twitter to "circulate and connect symbols and people" (Foust & Hoyt, 2018, p. 41).

Women's experiences in India, through the #MeToo movement, even though commoditised and subject to public and media voyeurism, have sought to reclaim the social media space, and frame an online ecosystem that questions male hegemony and yet remain commercially viable and fit for public dissemination. In other words, the #MeToo movement hinged on the question of a becoming — a more gender-absorbing social media platform, a perpetual opening to the experiential, eventual rendering of woman time in digital time, so

to speak. It hinged on the interconnected nature of the virtual architecture and its inherent ambition to reach out and influence. Social media technology allowed the visual and discursive tools to form the context and also articulate the unavoidable alterity and *difference* that each voice carried. The woman user, as a visual, and visualised, emblem traversed between an existing material culture and an anticipated libertarian future of the social media that could see the value of women as driving agents of digital as well as real-world discourses. The truth of the woman user's experience with sexual harassment was being realised and sent out for validation in the virtual world. The hope, of course, was acknowledgement, widespread reach and a renewed shot at long-delayed justice.

Foust and Hoyt have further contended how women can experience a feeling of 'centeredness', as it were, a feeling of being "the heroine of the story" on social media. Such a feeling is, on the one hand, empowers and pushes them into retaining and furthering themselves as images and stories in the digital world, but on the other hand, it may also occlude their understanding of the limitations of social media, which may lead to a re-enactment of social action online that may potentially leave them with little interest in action in the offline mode (Foust & Hoyt, 2018, p. 41–42). It is important to take into account the collective identity and strength that social media imparts and utilise it into furthering one's personal agenda as well a collective feminist voice.

Furthermore, Houst and Foyt contended that the idea of a social media identity being "fragile and evanescent" (Foust & Hoyt, 2018, p. 42) is real and warrants caution when it comes to exploring concepts like collective identity formation. The visual must also rely upon rhetoric, often polarising, that can push visual identities into becoming autonomous images that can survive their own transience amidst a more unifying discourse that expands by formulating collective identities that polarize other identities (42-43). In such a context, social media networks act as "a nervous system that conjoins and sutures people" (43). And therefore, statements, comments, retweets and likes of solidarity are equally accompanied with trolling, counter-accusations and victim blaming and shaming from the other spectrum. This is to say, social media has been undoubtedly a revolutionary media form for establishing collective concern at highlighting social, political and cultural injustices and forming complementing public support, yet it does not literally move out of its virtual space to prop up and sustain the positive sentiment it has built up for itself on an online platform.

Furthermore, the temporal limitations of the online space wherein images, narratives and opinions quickly fade and are tapered over by newer rhetoric cannot be discounted. While the American and the Indian #MeToo movements created quite a furore both on social media as well as in the real world, the movement slowly faded only over a few months in both countries, having failed to provide an outlet for several other women victims. One can,

consecutively, further argue that this gradual fading away of this important feminist movement is a commentary not only on the state of the institutional justice system in the real world but also on the reductionist understanding of social media as the central tool of transcending visibility and unbridled reach for its women users.

Houst and Foyt have argued that we must view social media as one of the several media and social connections that serve to work in conjunction with each other to reach the masses and serve their purpose of raising a relevant issue. The idea is that owing to technology, social media spheres overlap and entangle with each other; that is, all such platforms have a regular interflow of information between each other (45). Hence, we see how, despite cultural and structural differences between the US and India, social media greatly served to diffuse equitably the overall template on the #MeToo discourse and its reception— both the countries mostly adopted an empowering, encouraging and liberal approach towards the women coming out with their stories, at least on the social media world. Of course, this must be attributed not to social media platforms as a material entity but to the countless supportive, justice- seeking voices/ online users who were willing to devote their efforts to furthering this movement over the coming days.

Nevertheless, we cannot ignore the political dynamics and ideology that have influenced how the movement played out in both the countries. The online news outlet, *Scroll*, did a profiling of some of the prominent names in India, ranging from the world of politics to journalism to literature to film industry to advertising to education, that had been named by women in the post-October 2018 playing out of the Indian #MeToo movement. Through this report, one found that tracing the political ideology of many of the alleged perpetrators through their social media activities threw up a fairly interesting inference— they showed a detectable tilt towards right- wing ideology, also aligning with an extremely right-wing government in power in the country at present. This is, however, not to say that the list does not carry stories on the men from a relatively anti-authority ideology accused of sexual predation (Katakam & Lalwani, 2018). The online movement also saw women mostly displaying an anti-government stance which rendered support to each-other. The following screenshot depicts an interaction between two such women sharing their experiences with patriarchy and the looming fear of vindictive backlash if they choose to name their perpetrators. It also highlights how many powerful men in both the metropolitan cities as well as the conflict-stricken territories in India like Jammu and Kashmir have, over the years, harassed women. It also must be noted that both the women quoted in the below tweets lean towards the government's political ideology:



As a matter of fact, irrespective of their ideological leaning, several women who narrated their stories on social media, and also those who contributed to furthering the #MeToo movement in both India and USA, have been shamed, trolled and accused of participating in malicious attempts at tarnishing the reputation of a selected bunch of men who aligned with the dominant political ideology. That is to say, in maligning their image, these women were accused of trying to discredit the government of the day and its underlying foundation. This has also been a predominant line of defence and dismissal that the alleged perpetrators had taken in India after accusations surfaced against them— they were being targeted because of their position and their ideology that supposedly did not sit well with the ‘leftists’, as it were. The articles by *Scroll* and *Economic Times* (discussed above) have both outlined how such defences were propped up by the accused and how the women victims often ended up getting counter-accused and sued over the coming months. This also is a testament to the limitations of social media and how the propagation, reach and acceptance of a counter-accusatory and politically and patriarchally-backed discourse trumps a just social cause that may lag behind in its ability to influence behavioural templates of social media users.

This is the point in this article where it is necessary to present some more empirical precedents from Twitter to emphasise upon my arguments above about the structural limitations of social media and how sexist trolling and abuse continually attempted to derail the #MeToo movement. Random message and email exchanges between the concerned parties were often cited by others on social media as convincing proof that the woman victim was displaying promiscuous behaviour that encouraged the alleged perpetrator to make sexual advances towards her. Indian writer, Ira Trivedi’s allegations against another popular

Indian writer, Chetan Bhagat were met with email conversations being shared from the parties and a large section of the onlookers blaming Trivedi for being an opportunist, as also reported in a *Firstpost* article (Chatterjee, 2018). Trivedi, despite releasing a detailed trail of her email conversations with Bhagat on *The Quint* and clarifying her position (Chatterjee, 2018), continued to be trolled on Twitter by anonymous users, Sample the following screenshot of some tweets trolling Trivedi:



Similarly, Tanushree Dutta's #MeToo account was constantly scrutinized on social media and she was often accused of having fabricated lies in order to garner media-publicity. The following quoted tweet is by a prominent journalist and feminist who is of the opinion that Dutta is indeed leveraging the #MeToo movement to relaunch her Bollywood career



MJ Akbar, a minister in the Indian government, was accused by over 18 women journalists of sexual harassment and he defended himself by stating that the #MeToo storm was well-timed to damage his political career just a few months before the general Indian elections of 2019. His sound bite to the ANI news agency, posted on Twitter, further contends that he is a victim of lies and that he will pursue legal action against the concerned women (@ANI, 2018). On similar lines, women victims were callously targeted and shamed by a large number of trolls on Twitter. Mishra's article also makes a similar argument about how Twitter is an especially hostile platform for women journalists who face online harassment and trolling of the most vicious kind (Mishra, 2020, p. 664). Such a discourse should also be viewed as a re-manifestation of the sexual assault online for the women victims and their supporters, a virtual rendering into motion a similar trauma of assault that they are originally trying to put out for public perusal and attempt to build a cathartic fissuring through a difficult process of expression.

The following screenshot, for instance, shows online trolls targeting Indian journalist, Barkha Dutt, who also is a vocal feminist in media and social media, for her tweet in support of the survivors of women sharing their #MeToo experiences. One of Dutt's notable articles with Hindustan Times, 'Let's Talk about Trolls' underlined how social media abuse is a patriarchal weapon deployed to silence women (Dutt, 2017)



## Social Media: Technology and Activism

Social media technology is an enabling tool that can potentially assemble, propagate and solidify ideas. It acts as a mediating space for women users who are granted visibility and voice as public expressions, yet they can be private and anonymous from the confines of their home. The social media screen, thus, puts into motion a cultural stratification of visibility and narrative that depends on digital dispersion as well as digital time; and sometimes, visibility and narrative alternate between digital dispersion and digital time. The idea is to either align with the popular digital discourse in a particular digital time or to disrupt it and formulate a novel digital discourse that sets anew the digital time from there and then. The attempt is also to project a persona, an image that can negotiate with the post-truth delineation of narrative and reification of a woman image.

At the same time, one must take into account the overwhelming, inequitable and transient nature of social media. It is a space of performance and the woman user needs to channel the chaos within her experiences in order to render her authentic subjectivity and her pursuit of autonomy by performing her truth once again for the conviction and propagation from the online and real-world audience. She straddles between her vital individuality and the pressing feeling of strength and security she gets in being a part of a collective feminist movement. Her digital performance is, therefore, one that acts on external/community cues as it also attempts to frame from personal to public the materiality of her experiences and desires. The #MeToo movement attempted, in varying degrees and in various contexts, to both align with the popular discourse in order to gradually appropriate it as well as infringe it with a jarring discontinuity that often successfully managed to convince the initiators as well as the audience of the compelling necessity of this subversion in that time and in that discourse in current circulation.

The Indian #MeToo movement also suggested that even with such a movement—greatly reliant on the written word for its reach—the woman is markedly perceived as a visible entity for a media screen in a patriarchy and capitalism-dominated digital world; sexual is the banal. The cultural onus is on her to prove that she has been what, in the words of Starkey et al, , is perceived as a “stoic victim of an unjust system (437)—the craft of ‘looking at herself’, as it were, with humility to realise it for her audience as well. In other words, social media has an immense structural dependence upon spectacles and upon narratives that can convincingly concoct spectacles and hook the spectators/audience. For this reason, it must be noted, that this study chose to abide by the more conventional term ‘victims’ for the women affected by sexual harassment rather than ‘survivors’ since this is a culturally more acceptable terminology in India and elicits more sympathy for women who came out with their stories. As pointed out by Adrija Dey, many highly educated and

successful women are constantly battling gender stereotypes on an everyday basis in India, including the need for appearing as non-aggressive victims of unjust systems (Dey, 2018, p. 133).

In a complex social media ecosystem as India's, it is important to dwell upon how the #MeToo movement has affected growing efforts at mobilising support against sexual harassment at workplaces and power relations between the genders. Ratna Kapur had pointed out in an article written a few years ago about the need to take into account the cultural and social limitations that are peculiar to Indian women and, therefore, cautioned against viewing global feminist movements like SlutWalk from a universalized perspective. In other words, she vouched for a more local perspective on the milieu of historical oppression and lack of opportunities that Indian women were raised into and live in (Kapur, 2012, p. 14). In a similar vein, Moraes and Suhasranaman had contended how the #MeToo movement in India needs to be looked at from a more local perspective, but have additionally also discounted on the massive reach of the internet culture and how support for feminist social media movements like the #MeToo from international activists has served to add strength to them (Moraes & Sahasranaman, 2018, p. 408).

The social media sphere is a space of productivity – an opening to the future and yet a credible record of the heterogeneity of the past. It fosters virtual connections and virtual actions in the present, and, in a sense, imparts authority of choice and action to every user. In such a context, it does have its own merits. Moraes and Suhasranaman have also argued about the benefit that social media spaces have in organizing and mobilising feminist causes (409). They have further contended that social media has brought into the mainstream the controversial and often-repressed issue of sexual harassment of women at workplaces and challenge the deeply entrenched patriarchal practices in professional spaces; women coming out with their stories is no longer dismissed or labelled as an outlier (415-416).

In addition, the movement, even though precipitated in India by a purportedly failed Bollywood actress Tanushree Dutta, remained leaderless and that added to its credibility and its accessibility. Furthermore, while the movement has been often labelled as one involving majorly elite women from the Indian society, and rightly so, it is somewhat encouraging to see that several prominent faces of the Indian #MeToo movement are not exactly the A-listers or top names, in the conventional sense, of their respective professions. Women like Tanushree Dutta, Alisha Chinai from the film industry, Kanika Gahlaut, Prerna Singh Bindra from the journalism industry, Mahima Kukreja, Ira Trivedi cannot be deemed household names exactly in their respective fields. And yet, their brave accounts were able to push the movement forward and connect to the growing public sentiment in favour of putting a stop to sexual harassment at Indian workplaces.

## Social Media Activism and the question of Anonymity

Cohen, Forbis, and Misri have argued about the growing credence that Twitter activism can be accorded despite several valid concerns being raised by well-meaning social activists about digital and hashtag protests not being real activism. They say that “the recent global spread of protest against sexual violence through the #MeToo hashtag has shown us once again that hashtag activism can actually be a powerful tool, particularly in cases where those who are affected and marginalized do not have a voice in the public sphere and/or face repercussions for speaking out” (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 16).

Julia Schuster has also posited similar views about the online spaces providing less intimidating platforms to young women participants than traditional media platforms but she also asserts that one must not ignore other structural problems with such platforms such as “digital divide”, that is, internet access is not equally distributed among the populations but is mostly concentrated among the young and the privileged (Schuster, 2013, p. 11). This digital divide gets further expanded when we take into account the access to technology that women in India have, which is far less than that for women in first-world nations like the USA. Similarly, factors like caste, religion and class not only affect a woman’s access to social media platforms but also affect her credibility and her overall courage to speak out and a consequent resilience to a persecuting online, social and legal system. Sanjana Pegu, in her analysis of the movement, has cited studies to contend how online activism has been chiefly led by the dominant castes and class, and how, therefore, a movement like the #MeToo may not adequately represent the marginalized communities of women such as the *Dalits*, the Muslims, the queer, etcetera (Pegu, 2019, p. 153). She has further argued how the movement has had to face structural adversities in the form of capitalistic control over social media platforms and, of course, the lack of access to internet technology for working class women. The USA is, in contrast, better prepared to tackle such structural challenges and is in the nascent stages, she asserts, of transcending class divides. (153). In that sense, social media is a checkered dais for different voices originating from different strata of society. And even an inert presence of such marginalized voices would make significant impact on the discourse of the Indian #MeToo.

In the above context, it is interesting to interrogate the concept of anonymous online identities that women can possibly take on and how that plays out vis-a-vis the #MeToo movement. Schuster has pointed out in her study how women find the option of anonymity encouraging, especially in hostile online and social environments (Schuster, 2013, p. 18). She has quoted other past studies to indicate how the world of online activism is greatly gendered, as are the means of communication and social media abuse and harassment (19). The garb of anonymity has been quite contentious an issue for the critics of the #MeToo

movement. For example, Raya Sarkar's LoSha (List of Sexual Harassment Accused), that she published in 2017 on Facebook to name and shame men in academia on the basis of anonymous accounts was condemned by several Indian feminists like Nivedita Menon who claimed that "anybody can be named anonymously, with lack of answerability", and that this could "delegitimize the long struggle against sexual harassment" (Menon, 2017).

Social media technology that can grant women a unique and credible identity that traverses class, religion and regional barriers is also a technology that thrives on its promise to provide an openness to alterity and even hybridity. This is to say that experiencing social media is an ongoing attempt at forging an identity which may or may not align with one's real-world identity. While some women might prefer to employ their real identity to share their #MeToo stories, others may be too constrained— professionally, socially or personally— and may prefer the cloak of an anonymous Twitter handle to let out their past trauma of sexual harassment. In principle, no feminist critic would object to anonymous women sharing their experiences, of course. However, several objections have come up on the overall veracity of such anonymous accounts which may also serve to derail the entire movement, given their immense susceptibility to being false and vindictive towards certain public figures and attempting to malign an innocent person. One would further go on to say that anonymity, in this sense, is a virtual property of carrying little or no context, given it carries no real-world identity to back itself as context; anonymity seeks to thrive by minimizing *difference* as much as it can, given that it mostly attempts to blend in with the dominant discourse—of course, the discourse it chooses to align with may be a dialectic response to another dominant discourse.

### **Changing Feminist Paradigms**

The #MeToo movement on social media has been largely found to be an effective first step towards a bigger revolution. Keeping in mind the legal defamation cases and other social and institutional harassments that the 'victims' have had to face and that have also been outlined in the passages above in this article, we must also take note of the enabling role that social media platforms have played for victims of sexual harassment. Several accounts by women on social media and their adequate and sympathetic coverage in mainstream media resulted in the initiation of office inquiries, resignations, loss of income, lawsuits and public embarrassment for the alleged perpetrators, as has been studied by Pegu (2019, p. 152). A significant cultural achievement has been the overall acceptability of the victims' testimonies on the level of workplaces, media organizations and the general public. This achievement must be looked at in contrast to the repudiation and dismissal that Tanushree Dutta faced back in 2008 when she first raised the same story of her harassment

in India.

Similarly, the testimony by Tarana Burke, a black woman, was dismissed or relegated to the sidelines in the US in 2006 (Starkey et al., 2019, pp. 437, 441). It is quite pronounced that the immense growth of social media technologies and the relatively reduced digital divides have greatly served to dematerialise the past, as it were, and initiate a dialectical negotiation of class, ideology and experiential narrativity. This has imparted a unique and dynamic empiricism to the online world of social media vis-a-vis the #MeToo movement. The quality of interconnectedness that social media imparts to its users has not been a static value in the equation of online identity-formulation. With the growth of social media usage over the years and its evolving roles and manifestations as a means of public communication, it has increased the users' interconnectedness and has also set for them a self-awareness of being a part of a big virtual village community, so to speak, that transcends boundaries of class, gender, region and ideology. This self-awareness is empowering. It allows one to conceive a virtual architecture of human concordance and free-flowing ideas and envisage one's own place in this dynamic. In a way, it is an attempt at *becoming* a post-human technological identity that interacts with its likes and yet encounters the most hybridity realistically (or virtually) possible.

The women participants across the world of the #MeToo movement have sought to re-negotiate the power structures in the real world by their passionate engagement with the movement on social media. While this is a reductivistic approach on its own, the interconnectedness inherent in social media and its massive influence upon the mainstream media and other cultural centers of a society have emboldened the prospects of a pressing feminist movement such as the #MeToo. It is, of course, an evolving plot that is also metamorphosing itself with the changing times and the novel issues of feminism and social prejudices that it encounters and picks differences on.

The movement, in itself, was long overdue. Women in India have found a liberating outlet in the form of social media in an evolving society that has been becoming more receptive to women's issues. Critics like Pegu have, of course, outlined the need to make the movement more intersectional and accessible to women of all strata of society, and how the women with privilege and access need to initiate efforts to render social media activism more inclusive (Pegu, 2019, p. 165).

## **Conclusion**

This article has outlined the virtual models of activism that social media platforms like Twitter have enabled in India; at the same time, the inhibiting factors and the technological and structural shortcomings have been also examined. It has been argued that the social media space is a transactional public space that proceeds from the 'dark' (in the sense of being behind the scenes/not carrying the light accorded to visibility) complexities of technological innovation to emerge as one that gives out and relies upon narrative visibility and relaying consumption. In a widespread movement such as the Indian #MeToo, it played on the affective tensions between the unraveling victim discourse and the political trajectories it grazed with. The demand for visibility persisted for both the victim as well as the alleged perpetrators, along with all the participants/observers in between. In other words, social media platforms are visual spaces that focus on conceptualizing the private as the public— hinged on revealing, appearing, exposing, performing. In the #MeToo movement, these platforms played upon the confrontation between the female body and the professional space, between the woman aspirations and the male privilege. The dialectics were almost as instrumental in the virtual space as they would be in any real-world capitalistic space in shoring up conceptions and affirmations of dissent.

The social media space has served as a preliminary scaffold that women associated with the Indian #MeToo movement, like from all over the world, have engaged with; they have used the visibility and narrative accorded to them online as an effective agency to frame resistance and confrontation in public spaces. In a way, it is a metaphorical unclothing of a woman's traumatic past to revive it not only as a spectacle but as a spectacle that could potentially embody transformative and progressive power dynamics between men and women in the society. In that sense, the Indian #MeToo movement on social media has manifested for us a contemporary realm of aberrant gender politics that destabilizes as much as it cozies up to the visual demands of the medium. The movement has sought to render experiences of individual women porous and available to be imbibed and identified with and transferred; in that, it has certainly emerged as a productive possibility for change. Of course, factors like class, caste, religion, sexuality etcetera still need to be taken into account when analysing the enterprising and the consequential facets of a movement like the #MeToo in India. Nevertheless, the movement on social media articulately negotiates with the precariousness inherent in feminist politics in the media domains and valiantly seeks to capture the tensions between the female body and her professional ambitions not only in the past tense but also glaring in the present tense in the form of victim blaming and shaming.

## Notes on contributor

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