

Tech-mediated Misogyny and Communal Vitriol

Online hate speech targeting Muslim women in India further uncovers the right wing–Big Tech nexus.

Ghazala Jamil writes:

Abusive comments on the social media accounts of women journalists and activists who dared to question or critique the union government have nearly been normalised in India. However, since the early days of this regime, women influencers who spoke as “Muslims,” were especially singled out for excessive and graphic threats of sexual violence in addition to the offensive trolling.

While the online hate, targeting Muslim women influencers has only intensified, Muslim women’s political articulation on social media has strengthened. This is in part because of their determination to continue to have a voice when a combination of brutal violence and pandemic restrictions were used to force the anti-Citizenship (Amendment) Act–National Register of Citizens–National Population Register (CAA–NRC–NPR) protests to end from public spaces. It should be remembered that the hostility of the government to this movement was also because Muslim women appeared in public—unafraid, articulate, and armed with sharp political critique—contradicting all the stereotypes perpetuated about them.

The Sulli Deals–Bulli Bai incidents of tech-mediated violence against Muslim women reveal the discursive boundaries set by Hindutva ideology and actors seeking to discipline Muslim women’s speech and punish them for dissent. These incidents of targeting have to be necessarily read as “warnings” to Muslim women to not transgress their portrayal as voiceless victims. If there is ever an impartial investigation, we might learn whether the operatives behind these apps were working autonomously or at the behest of organised information technology (IT) cells, like the one using Tek Fog. In either case, designing apps (using GitHub, a specialised software development service and a social networking platform for developers) for online sexual abuse and humiliation is elaborate and deliberate violence perpetrated by these actors. It is way more than annoying, disruptive trolling. The level of effort, expertise, and resources that must have gone into the crafting of this humiliation is not only intended to have a chilling effect but also meant to terrorise.

The effort and intentionality of this tech-mediated misogyny and communal violence exposes the futility of advice to “ignore the trolls.” Muslim women were told that reacting would amount to “engagement,” which would only “encourage the trolls.” The question that Muslims should not need to ask, but are forced to, is this: Are these actors—radicalised by their hate for Muslims and on a long leash of impunity—in need of any encouragement from the victims?

What we have at hand is an entire subculture of Hindutva. Many actors in this right-wing subculture see hate as a sure pathway for proximity to power, a way to get a foothold in electoral politics.

Others have a clear political aspiration of playing foot soldiers of the majoritarian regime that promises to usher in the Hindu *rashtra*. They enjoy unmitigated impunity from the police, particularly in the Bharatiya Janata Party-ruled states and powerful patronage of those occupying high public offices in the union government. What was characterised as “fringe” for long was just the proverbial tip of the iceberg, as the recent exposé of the “Trad versus Raita” ecosystem shows.

On the other hand are Muslim women influencers and activists. Most of them are young and have no aspirations for careers in politics. They have no mentors, and no resources except personal. They are opinionated, extremely articulate, and extend solidarity to all manner of causes and marginalised groups—from queer rights to gig workers to environmental activists, not to mention the farmers’ movement, human rights defenders, Christians, Sikhs, and Dalits. They seek to educate and influence public opinion. They take on issues frontally, putting a lot of emphasis on appearing in public and speaking as Muslims, not merely for their personal freedom of expression but to claim the rights of their community.

What accounts for their struggle to have a voice on social media is perhaps a belief that social media platforms are digitised equivalent of public sphere. The belief in this potential of social media is a legacy of the way it was characterised as having facilitated popular dissent in the Arab Spring protests or the rape law protests following the Nirbhaya case in India in the late 2012.

A truly sticky question is, whether the “publics,” networked as users on these platforms, can hope to engage and get treated as if on a digital public sphere? And looking at the international experience, we can further ask, what makes Big Tech easy to be hijacked by right-wing manipulations? Big Tech social media platforms waging social media wars with each other for “engagement”—users, likes, retweets, comments, and views—turn a blind eye to the use of trolls, bots, and apps by actors and regimes inclined towards authoritarianism. If a space, whether analogue or virtual, does not foster the spirit of democracy, no amount of “stuff getting said” should be confused with the idea of public sphere.

Sulli Deals and Bulli Bai are a stark illustration of it being of no concern to Big Tech that this engagement is fuelled by hate, perpetuates a culture of violence, and destabilises democracy. Muslim women’s outrage against their targeting is not an exaggerated reaction to “deplorable but stupid trolling.” At the heart of their struggle are, once again, more profound questions than can meet even the most sympathetic eyes.

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