

#MeToo Movement in India: Sexual-Violence, Casteism and Gender Bias

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Abstract

When we think of women exercising their freedom and rights, their confinement to their homes and gender stereotyping emerge as striking instances. However, there is much more than what meets the eye in this regard. Feminism in India witnessed a revolution by the #MeToo (#MT) movement through feminist voices across social media platforms. The so-called offensive aspect of being victimized was challenged when survivor stories started surfacing, thereby laying the path for cohesion. Various movements such as the "Pink Chaddi" against moral policing, the "Slut-Walk" battling blaming of victims, the "Pinjra Tod" targeting sex-based restriction in hotels, and the "Bekhauf Azadi" drive, sparked the #MT movement in India. This study delves into the aspects of solidarity, gender-based topics, caste and class identities, and the speaker's positionality. The study also highlights the role of the #MT movement in India in exposing the gory facets and peculiarities of "classist", "sexist" and "casteist" hierarchies. Our conceptual perusal also exposes the oppressive lives and erasure of Dalit women in the #MT movement and highlights the concealed Brahmanism of the #MT movement.

Keywords: #MT, Gender Bias, Casteism, Classism, Brahmanism.

Introduction

Tarana Burke, a social activist, coined the phrase "Me Too" in 2006 as part of a campaign to raise awareness about sexual assault and help survivors, particularly women of colour. The movement gained traction in 2017 as a result of the widespread sharing of personal tales on social media sites such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, based on the hashtag "MeToo". The world was taken by storm when the #MT movement, originated in the USA. Despite its early beginnings, the movement came to the forefront through social media in the year 2017. The movement was the first of its kind and was a response to the widespread frequency of sexual harassment, assault, and misbehaviour in different industries, particularly the workplace. Its goal was to raise awareness about the scope of these issues and to offer a forum for survivors to tell their stories. When allegations of sexual misconduct were levelled against Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein in October 2017, the campaign gained major traction. These charges, which were made public by investigative journalism and widely shared on social media, spurred countless people, predominantly women, to voice their personal encounters of sexual harassment using the hashtag MeToo.

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A dramatic impact on - public discourse, consent, power dynamics, and sexual assault was exerted by the movement. It resulted in the business-demise of many high-profile individuals who were accused of such misconduct. It also prompted employers, organisations, and governments to reconsider their harassment policies and processes and enact changes to provide safer settings for everybody. The need for cultural/behavioral change and provoked a broader societal confrontation with issues of gender inequity, power abuse, and sexual harassment were key stressors of the movement. It enabled survivors to tell their tales, feel solidarity with others, and work together to create a world where such behaviour is not accepted (V. Chandra, 2021: 172). According to Dr. Chandra,

“Sexual harassment is just not a serious issue for a majority of people. In India, you call sexual harassment ‘eve-teasing’ where the woman is usually held responsible for it, which in turn dilutes the issue. When you go and talk to people about it, they are surprised to hear that staring, stalking, etc., are actually criminal activities. Even women fail to recognize staring, texting, stalking, etc., as sexual harassment since this behaviour has been normalised and people are desensitized towards it. The need is to spread awareness to acknowledge that things we are enduring every day comprise sexual harassment and through this to let people know about the ordinance”.

The #MeToo movement has had a tremendous influence in India, not only in terms of combating sexual harassment, but also in the larger context of challenging gender stereotypes, reclaiming public spaces, and advancing feminist discourse through personal narratives and social media activism. The movement has facilitated feminist Articulations by incorporating feminist ideas and opinions into daily life through the effective use of social media. It has made feminist speech more accessible and relevant to a broader audience. The movement recognises its roots in past feminist activist movements in India, such as the "Pink Chaddi Movement" (2009), "Slut Walk Movement" (2011), "Pinjra Tod Movement" (2015), and "Bekhauf Azadi" (2017). These past movements similarly intended to challenge societal conventions and limits on women's presence in public settings. These #MT movements are also inspired by movements that advocate for women's freedom to freely enter and occupy public spaces. This recurring topic highlights the larger struggle for gender equality and confronting patriarchal conventions. The personal tales revealed by survivors are the driving force behind the #MT campaign. These stories humanize the movement and highlight the pervasiveness of sexual harassment and abuse. Personal stories have the power to evoke empathy and inspire collective action. The movement embodies the term "personal is political," implying that personal experiences are inextricably linked to larger political and social systems. This notion is exemplified by demonstrating how individual experiences of harassment and abuse are linked to wider societal concerns and power relations. V. Chandra notes that the appeal of social media is due to the removal of the corporeality from the setting, notwithstanding the challenges in speaking out about sexual harassment. According to her,

“The digital media offers an aesthetico-politics of hashtag stories without the physicality of women’s bodies or voices. It allows women to narrate their traumatic experiences to the neutral computer screen”.

Feminist Movements in India

Speaking of the #MT in India, the “Pinjra Tod” is a predecessor. Due to the restrictions imposed on the female hostelites of Delhi’s famous Jamia Milia Islamia staged an uproar on the streets, protesting against the same. The crux of the protest was the discriminatory treatment towards male and female occupants based on the plots of “surveillance” and “protection”. Named as “Pinjra Tod” (Cage Break), the protest paved way to expose broader issues affecting the lives of Indian women in various Universities (Barua, 2020). Notably, the “Pinjra Tod” movement also sought Justice by voicing against the rape and murder of two Dalit girls - Jisha and Delta. As a result the key aspects of the expansive reach of social media and debates on homogeneity and multitude were mirrored. By leveraging on technological advancements and the power of digital media, the initiatives

witnessed massive solidarity and support across social media platforms. The significant aspect of the Dalit background of Jisha and Delta Dalit was instantly aligned with minority politics, giving it a completely new angle. However, the “Pinjra Tod” movement was later criticized on the grounds of promoting the voices of the relegated and create an appearance of inclusiveness (LiveWire, 18 February 2019). As a repercussion many supporters dissociated themselves from the movement. Alternatively, “Pinjra Tod”, defended their viewpoint, underlining their "solidarities, unities," and recognition of difference.

In India, the “SlutWalk” movement was a feminist protest movement that began in 2011. The goal of the campaign was to combat victim-blaming, slut-shaming, and the culture of holding survivors accountable for sexual violence based on their appearance or behaviour. The “SlutWalk” campaign gained traction in India as activists organised marches and protests in cities such as Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, and Bangalore. It intended to address a variety of issues with gender, sexuality, consent, and the broader societal attitudes that perpetuate sexual assault and victim-blaming. The movement tried to disprove the concept that a person's clothes or behaviour excuses or encourages sexual harassment or assault. It attempted to move the focus from the survivor's choices to the responsibility of abusers and society's role in promoting a safe environment. Historically, the term "slut" was used to shame and stigmatise women for their sexual behaviour or appearance. The movement tried to reclaim this phrase and reject its negative implications. Women, men, LGBTQ+ people, activists, and concerned citizens all took part in the “SlutWalk” protests in India. It served as a venue for collective action and solidarity in the face of gender-based violence. The movement recognised the intersectionality of gender-based violence, taking into account how race, class, caste, and other characteristics overlap with gender to influence harassment and violence experiences. Conversations regarding consent, sexual autonomy, gender equality, and societal standards were sparked by the SlutWalk movement. It helped to raise awareness about the ubiquitous problem of victim-blaming and the need for cultural and behavioural reform. While the movement's goal was to confront regressive views, it was met with criticism and controversy within feminist circles. Some critics expressed concern that the movement would disregard the perspectives of marginalised people or commercialise feminist advocacy.

The "Pink Chaddi" movement in India in 2009 was a novel and creative form of protest. It was in response to a series of threats and violent activities by the Sri Ram Sena, a right-wing Hindu group. The organisation had declared that they would target young women celebrating Valentine's Day because they considered the festival violated Indian culture and traditions. In reaction to this threat, a group of activists and residents launched the "Pink Chaddi" campaign, mostly through social media. People were encouraged to send pink pants (chaddis) to the Sri Ram Sena's leader as a mark of protest against their regressive and patriarchal ideas. The goal of the movement was to oppose the group's attempt to regulate and dictate women's behaviour and choices. Satire and humour were used as effective protest strategies by the movement. The participants were able to make a strong statement while still employing a humorous and innovative strategy by mailing pink knickers. The movement raised the problem of moral policing, which entails attempts to impose a specific set of moral or cultural ideals on society. The Sri Ram Sena's threat to harm couples celebrating Valentine's Day was perceived as an example of moral policing. While the movement had a considerable influence in opposing the Sri Ram Sena's threats and emphasising the significance of individual choice, it also sparked broader dialogues about gender norms, women's rights, and the role of activism in Indian society.

Putting up a fight against patriarchy in their city, a large number of men and women took to the streets of Chandigarh's in August 2017, the movement was known as the ‘Bekhauf Azadi March’. The march was also witnessed the participation of people from outside the city. With an objective of ensuring that women could move around the city fearlessly at any point of time the movement was a response to a mishap with a woman, who was stalked by two men. One of the men was the son of a politician. As slogans and songs echoed in the notorious “Geri Route” of Chandigarh, the movement had a lasting impression on the

public. The 'Geri Route' symbolized obscene display by wealthy men who flaunted their luxurious cars and motorbikes and stalked and harassed young girls. Contextually, initiating the 'Bekhauf Azadi March' on this infamous route made a lot of sense. Through a large gathering of the community the movement was successful in attracting the attention of people across the nation towards the safety of women in the streets.

By flagging off a new wave towards the consciousness of feminism in India, the #MT movement has also sparked critical debates about the safety and security of women across different slices of their personal and/or professional lives. For highlighting casteism and classism aspects the #MT movement has also been criticized by many (Rowena, 2017; Tella, 2018; Vijayalakshmi, 2018). Dalit feminists have raised objections on the constituency of these movements and argue that "the concept of sexual harassment in the workplace comes at the cost of erasing caste and promoting a savarna perspective". This article exposes the highlights the concealed Brahmanism of the #MT movement by investigation the reasons behind the "erasure" of Dalit women. The variability of the categories "women" and "Dalits" as well as the erasure of "Dalit women" are discussed in the paper's first section, which deals with the topic of the #MT movement. The discussion that follows examines whether and how the #MT movement's key themes are adequate to meet Dalit women's concerns.

#Me Too In India: Dialogues and Debates

The two major responses derived out of the #MeToo movement show that there is a huge disagreement among opinions of feminists and the 'contested nature of Indian Feminism' (Roy 2018). The views of similarities and differences have laid the foundation of the growth of feminism and brought new theories about feminism for many decades. Various feminist theories starting from class, race, culture, background, origin, nationality, and ethnicity have countered the construction of 'women' as a single subject. These presumptions put a spotlight on the oppression faced by women due to patriarchy and deletion of differences between females by putting efforts to amalgamate women politics (Pan, 2020: 99-101). The most important input of identification of differences is that the identity of woman is not a single category, and then there is no need to acknowledge. Mostly it can somehow be concluded that 'woman' can't be categorized unitarily. Every woman category is different and it can't be categorized as one unit. It is important to note that companionship in feminine groups is a matter of constant debate.

There are various theories regarding disapproval of #MT regarding its ultra-heteronormativity, (Halberstam in G. Chandra and Erlingsdóttir), the discrimination and grouping of specially-abled women as if they do not belong to the workplace and constantly making them feel as inferiors (Halberstam, 2021; Haraldsdóttir, 2021). Haraldsdóttir makes use of the silence of the especially abled women group to raise their voice against such discrimination against feminist practices. Such assumptions can provide a safe space for a possible suture, a stitching together of ideologies, practices, strategies and emotional resonances among various feminist communities. (G. Chandra and Erlingsdóttir, 2021: 5).

As a matter of concern there are situations where women do not get the opportunity to claim their silence. What can be done in that case? How can the local voices be brought together with global voices? And does this help both global and local feminists? Do the women get any benefit? Does addressing anonymously benefit all women who are going through the same trauma? Who are the females who are benefitted from this and who all can claim solidarity by the #MT campaign - are the most important questions. Sexual availability and economic availability is very crucial. Such considerations give rise to #MT campaign in India.

The 'Me' in #Me Too: Articulating Difference

Citing double level of wiping out the audience and the speaker - V. Chandra points out that past travel narratives, traditional practices, archive of written letters, have given rise to dominant male (V. Chandra, 2021). Female's lack of courage to speak up is further stiffened

by their inferiority in their household. The #MT campaign has made it a safe forum for women to raise their voices in public and not suffer silently 'within domestic spaces, under protective clothes, in demarcating public spaces inaccessible to them, and in schooling their bodies to make them as inconspicuous as possible in the public gaze,' and points at the #MT movement's crucial attempt in breaking this silence (V. Chandra, 2021: 173). This has helped in bringing back women to public forums.

In the India of 19th Century women did not have access to the public domain. 19th century bengali female academicians represent women as key markers of nation's culture and also point out the patriarchal undertones faced by ladies and the reconstruction of "new woman'. The post-independence feminist movements focused on women's rights over their own bodies, labor etc. Various attempts were made to include women in history and bring out equality among the genders.

The feeling of "being incorporated" is mostly due to shared trauma. Victim blaming and victim shaming, gender bias, discrimination are a part of oppression on females. Due to these conditions, victims of sexual harassment are forced to keep their mouths closed and not share their stories with anyone else. In 'The Language of Gender Violence,' Keren elaborates how 'language holds victims accountable, rather than their perpetrators' (2012). It is argued that when a female reports a sexual crime, the word changes from "victim" to "accuser". It clearly depicts what society thinks of a sexual assault. The chances of sympathy towards the victim are narrowed down by the use of word "accuser" and hence the process of justice is slowed down. And public identifies with the male as the 'victim of accusations' rather than showing sympathy towards the actual victim. Abuse elicits a response of sympathy. Hence women do not voice against the crimes as their identity is diminished to "accuser".

When numerous women use #MT on social media, they are choosing to be safe. By using #MT they are regaining their identity and recognition.

In this way, using of the hashtag becomes an act of regaining personhood and agency. As Natanson claims, the opposite of anonymity is recognition, where recognition implies taking the whole person into account. Critical discussions have been brought forward with the #MT movement - like Fearless and Chamkiigirl in Unlimited Girls,¹⁷ the #MT movement 'has allowed spaces of support and solidarity to emerge, creating a means of dealing with the stories, memories, and experiences of sexual harassment and violence suffered by people of all genders' (G. Chandra, 2021: 104). Anonymity thus is definitely with regaining of confidence and identity and regaining affinity. As G. Chandra mentions the shield of anonymity allows the victims of sexual violence, break silence in a common safe space and they feel they are a part of the same community with fellow victims and speak a language of sympathy towards each other, to realise that they are not alone and to able to share their experience and understand it fully that it was not legal; to create solidarity among fellow victims and regain sense of empowerment. (2021:104).

The Problematics of Sexual Availability and Digital Access

Feminists of Dalit groups have evoked the emotions by citing the erasure of the question of caste and gender in the #MT campaign by bringing out the Bhanwari Devi case. (Rowena, 2017). The said Bhawri Devi was a social activist in Rajasthan who stopped the wedding of a minor 1 year old girl child. As a result, she was raped by five men of upper caste who were enraged by her act. An NGO called Visakha represented this case of gender violence and it eventually led to the very famous Visakha Judgement (1997) on women's sexual harassment in workplace (Mody, 2013: 91-97; Patel, 2005; Sarpotdar, 2012: 19-22). In 2013, the honourable parliament of India, replaced the previous act with the Sexual Harassment of Women (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act. But sadly Bhanwari Devi is yet to receive justice.

The Visakha Guidelines have been called for victory of Indian women and feminism. According to Rowena, the mobilizations around gang rape case of Bhanwari Devi acted as

a caste blind gender discourse to portray the need of protecting the needs of lower class women in elite workplace (2017). The strategic erasure of mainstream question represented women as a 'homogenised whole' where sexual harassment is considered to be of similar intensity for all women. Women are solely viewed as a single gender and not differentiated on the basis of caste. Further studies reveal that Bhanwari Devi's rape has roots towards the patriarchal idea of upper castes that Dalit women are sexually available due to their low value in public sphere. Sharmila Rege connects the sexual abuse of Dalit women to the labour they are engaged in their own places. She writes, that in a patriarchal set up, caste based and sexual division of labour are inter connected. This portrays that lower caste women are more accessible to sexuality as they participate in social labour. This infact, shows the failure of lower caste men to take control over the life of their women and protect their dignity. Thus gender ideology legitimises not only structures of patriarchy but also the very organisation of caste. (1998: 44)

India has mostly casteist society and here the prevention of marriage act by Bhanwari Devi was considered as a daring act and she was raped publicly to show that upper caste men are superior and emasculation of her husband who was present on the scene and still could not do anything to protect his wife. Thus the Bhanwari Devi case is an example of sexual atrocity of upper castes on lower caste women. (Rowena, 2017; Geetha, 2017).

But different situations demand different priorities and a Dalit woman's rape cant be entirely considered as a caste problem or issue of certain gender. We have to realise that Dalit women are in different social worlds and problems of caste and gender arises from intersecting structures. Unlike other upper caste women, the sexuality of a lower caste woman is not confined to private realm. Lower class women are seen as impure because of their public sphere of work.

It is hence important to highlight the lack of accessibility towards digital platforms by women. In case of Dalit politics, emancipatory politics has been seen predominantly here. (De Kruijf, 2015; Kumar and Subramani, 2014). Constant accessibility and epistemic authority are the two major concerns of Dalit women.

Smita Patil 2017 pens down that - complex social structure, inaccessibility to IT, and low level of education have increased the digital divide. Around 40% population are privileged to have access to internet and most people are disconnected from reality.

Complexity of digital access is addressed in the documentary 'writing with fire ' (Ghosh and Thomas,2021). Here, the female Dalit journalists of Khabar Lahariya are seen making a transformation in the world of reporting after the introduction of social media. This new transformation comes with new challenges. The voice of journalist Shyamkali can be heard shaken as she tries to destroy the smartphone. The fear in her voice reflects the digital mode of communication. Furthermore the digital divide is widened because of inaccessibility of English language. On one hand the documentary shows how social media is reaching global audience and making journalism easily accessible but on the other hand it shows how IT has created obstacles for Dalit women journalists. Suneeta mentions about the horrific casteist and sexist attacks on Dalit women journalists on comment section of youtube after appearing on Khabar Lahariya Youtube channel. The impact of social media is visible on how the youth mass consumes information. Writing with Fire shows how religious sentiments armed with politics utilises social media to promote casteist ideologies.

In such cases, we can see Dalit women occupy huge marginal position in the sphere. Lack of English knowledge on Shyamkali's part shows how Dalit women are getting benefitted. Many Dalit females find themselves outside these discourses and for this #MT movement fails to address reality of oppression in Dalit women.

According to, Aniruddha Mukhopadhyay, we often associate 'voice' as an empowering moment that is tangible – 'as direct (unmediated by power hierarchies) speech coming from a corporeal body on the other end of the gadget/computer' (2019: 2).

Such correlations are often viewed as simple as seen in the cases of Dalit women journalists in *Khabar Lahariya*, states that the agency is not ensured in case of physical manifestation of voice. The recognition is required to be in a better manner for negotiation

Ektara Collective, a top notch political organization has tried to bridge the gap between local and global and has tried to recognize cultural difference through aesthetic and creative reimaginings. The film named *Turup* (2017) set in Bhopal focuses on lives of women who are stuck on the premises of class, caste, gender and religion. The story is based on romantic relationship between a muslim male and a dalit female and opposition of a political party. This story portrays how the couple win legal battle only after all the women join hands together and come forward to fight against injustice towards them. The story follows the lives of the housemaid Monica and the upperclass journalist Neelima. The movie creates an environment where local and global merge with each other. The movie shows the possibilities that can emerge when solidarity and mutual compassion are built.

Conclusion

The complex nature of friendship in Dalit feminism is further defined by historically erasing the caste in question of gender analysis. In context of India, 'women as middle class and upper caste has a long genealogy that, historically and conceptually, goes back into nationalism as well as social reform' (Tharu and Niranjana, 1999: 502; Sangari and Vaid, 1989: 7, 8 and 18; Tharu and Lalita, 1993: xix). The reduction of differences in castes of feminism and gender in Dalit politics has given rise to fact that 'all the women are upper caste (and by implication, middle class Hindu) and all the lower castes are men' (Paik, 2009: 41). The role of women in quite significant in "anti - mandal" agitation. The unrest started with government's decision of implementing the suggestion of Mandal commission wherein they claimed that public services and other government jobs recruitment should be given to OBCs. According to Uma Chakravarty, as a response to this policy, females students gathered on streets with slogans that they do not want husbands with no employment! (2003, I). Chakravarti further argues that these slogans were rooted with severe patriarchal ideologies. They wanted to express that all these females will be deprived of upper class IAS husbands but also suggested that Dalits who would occupy the IAS positions can never be potentially their partners (2003;I)

Here Niranjana and Tharu show that in 20th century how anti mandal females considers herself as a citizen of India and not as a gendered human thus avoiding the battle of sexes with middle class males. This not just sets them against dalit men but all lower caste women as well (Tharu and Niranjana 1999).

A thorough evaluation of questions regarding caste/gender reveals that bodies of women were marked by Bramhanical tropes of sexual control which were established via dominance of learnings of The Vedas. This made females emerge as a broad segment characterized by class, religion and also recognizes their differentiation according to political views, cultural and social systems. The approach taken by Pinjra Tod can be taken as an example of exploring genders through oppression with other oppression structures.

As they mention in their response to the allegations of being savarna, they 'invested in a host of issues faced by women on campus such as the need for basic infrastructure, against discrimination based on caste, religion, race and region in university and private accommodation, implementation of reservations and redressal of sexual harassment' (Pinjra Tod, 20 March 2019). They keep on arguing that that their point of contention was never premised on intersectionality per se. Their attention seems to have emerged from various campus related issues which they have faced probably. The #MT movement represents gender in singular form and also ignores the viewpoint of accessibility to social media platforms. The crucial message of #MT that focuses on solidarity should also keep all the things in mind.

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