**Abusive exchange on social media: The politics of online *Gaali* cultures in India**

EASA Media Anthro
E-seminar

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11 June 2015

*On the rapidly expanding social media in India, online users are witness to a routine exchange of abusive terms and accusations with choicest swearwords hurled even for the seemingly non-inflammatory political debates. What is theorized as 'flaming' in new media literature acquires a menacing edge when the discussion centers on Hindu-Muslim politics, between the self-declared online activists of Hindu nationalism and avowed, yet elusive, Islamic supporters as well as 'secularists' active on online media. This paper turns a critical eye on the explosive growth of abusive exchange on social media, to understand the performative politics of 'abuse' in the digital age. I draw upon sociolinguistics of verbal art to uncover the distinctness, if at all, of online abuse as a means for political participation as well as for the encumbering it provokes and relations of domination it reproduces as a result. In so doing, I critique the conception of ludic as anti-hegemonic in the Bakhtian tradition as well as its celebration within a strand of postcolonial theory.*

Keywords: social media politics, online abuse, trolling, India.

For Roshni Dalal,[1] a young female journalist from Mumbai city, the 'nightmare' started when she inadvertently stepped on a volatile terrain on Twitter in India. A technology journalist feeding news on new communication gadgets and mobile phone applications for a major English newspaper in India, Roshni had decided to be different on that day. A major leader from the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in India was scheduled to arrive in Mumbai, to address a massive public rally as a build-up for national elections of 2014. The Twitter world in India on which the leader has considerable influence had made all preparations to shed the spotlight on the rally. A new hashtag was created for the event, and adulatory messages were flooded on the hashtag, as Mumbai city woke up to a huge crowd heading on foot, trucks and buses to the public ground where the leader was slated to arrive and address the gathering. Intrigued by the excitement built around the rally, Roshni decided to shun her technology beat for a day. She stepped on the streets, with an IPad in hand. Equipped with mobile Internet connection, she made sure to live-tweet every moment of her journey to BKC, the Bandra-Kurla Complex at the heart of Mumbai's business district, which was the venue for the rally.

Excited with what she saw and captured on the IPad, and swept by the urge to tweet it as instantly as she could, Roshni posted an admittedly innocuous tweet: 'Lots of men peeing in the open at BKC'. She promptly tagged it to the event hashtag, suspecting nothing that the tweet could provoke. Much to her dismay, there was a deluge of tweets from the self-confessed online volunteers of Hindu nationalism who had geared up for action. A Twitter handle bellowed: 'fucking bullshit paidmedia', followed by another tweet: 'r u collecting? Paidmedia can use that to get good brain power', and soon after, 'r u smelling men's pee and watching them? What a crook'. Two handles came to Roshni's defense and retorted, but the criticisms did not stop. Despite twenty-five retweets of her original tweet and criticisms wedged through them, Roshni did not relent. She continued her live tweets, and said, '[Leader is] speaking but some are leaving the ground for shade', and tagged the image of an empty side of the ground. This unflattering account of the rally was unpalatable for the online Hindu nationalist volunteers (known in the popular media as "Internet Hindus"), for they had made efforts to give a grand portrait of surging masses, swelling energy and undeterred adulation for their leader. 'Is this news?!!!" tweeted a handle, raising doubts about Roshni's credibility, while others were cynical: 'so you are very happy'.

With critical tweets rising in number, Roshni bit the seed of suspicion, and out there went a tweet which praised the BJP government in Gujarat for bringing technological wonders at tax check posts. As she tried to give the funnier side of the rally, capturing images of food supplies for rally participants and colorful cardboard portraits of the leaders – to tread the delicate path of 'balanced' reporting – the criticism for her original 'unflattering' tweet was only getting deeper. The tweets got caustic when Roshni used the official Twitter handle of her newspaper to tweet the link to the images, aside from her personal handle. The legitimating banner of the official handle of a newspaper for an unflattering tweet of the rally provoked a new tide of tweets. Roshni went on a defensive, clarifying that she did not get a VIP pass to the rally and had to enter the venue from the backside as an 'ordinary' rally participant and the images were a result of this specific vantage point. Her senior colleague came in defense, praising her multitalented personality, and so did a handful of tweets from personal friends who stood by her, but the tweets had started to swiftly drift to name calling – 'dud', 'lies, deceits', 'abominable', 'bluff', 'you are trying to be a bit too clever' or 'you can piss at Rahul Gandhi's [opposition party leader] rally, that is where you belong'.

A string of acts and counter-acts ensued: Roshni unfollowed some, and some started to follow the critical tweets, and allegations of trolling went up. Throughout this brisk episode of Twitter confrontation, tweeters hurled, dismissed or disowned what they squarely termed as 'abuse'. Abusive trolls were not mere accusations of professional lapse or cynical comments on loss of judgment, but a constant flow of tweets which hurled common swearwords in Hindi and new hybrid forms of abuses mixing Hindi, English and several regional languages. Roshni masked 'abusive' tweets from her Twitter account as quickly as they showed up, blocking several trolling handles along the way. Yet, the exhaustion left its mark. Roshni fretted over the abusive tweets, so much that she developed a health complication. Days after the rally, inside an air-conditioned conference room at her newspaper office, she recounted to me the tweet attack, her voice still shrill with shock and anger:

> To show that I am not biased, that I am showing only the empty ground, I tweeted
> another image of crowds to balance it out. And, that did not get noticed. But the previous
> tweet was massively retweeted and I was abused. I was questioned. People questioned
> my ancestry and told oh this girl has two colors, you have two family histories. For
> someone like me who is really serious about work, when people are questioning my work

and ethics, it kind of hurts me a lot, especially on social media. And it went on and on. I tried to reply to some of them. But after a point it really got to me.

This blitzkrieg of an online exchange confronting Roshni and numerous political commentators illustrates an important political practice emerging on social media in India and in the online world more broadly: the expanding form of abusive exchange which rides on another ubiquitous network practice of trolling. How do we understand this emergent online practice of abuse as it interfaces the field of politics and mediates political participation for a new generation of net-savvy urban youth in India and the digitally mediated publics more generally? Based on ethnographic fieldwork among social media users in Mumbai and Bangalore between 2013 and 2014, I explore this question to analyze the nature and consequences of the intriguing practice of online abuse exchange among net users.

The question gains significance as social media expand across the world, including India where the 200 million Internet users are next only in number to the Internet users in China (600 million) and the USA (270 million). Although several political ideologies are advanced on online media in India, including the evolving alternative media for socially marginalized Dalit communities who are active in creating 'their own content' as a counter-hegemonic discourse (Chopra 2014; Mitra 2001: 29), social media for political debates still constitutes a middle class urban phenomenon with an overrepresentation of privileged class groups. In the city of Mumbai – illustrative of a large Indian city – over 58 per cent of the 6.8 million active Internet users came from the higher income brackets (Sec A and Sec B categories in the media market surveys) in 2013, and the percentage was as high as 65 for the sample comprising 'heavy Internet users' (with more than 31 hours of Internet use in a week).[2] This paper therefore approaches abuse exchange as part of the privileged social location of online actors, while acknowledging that the Internet itself has been expanding beyond the confines of the educated middle classes with the rapid spread of affordable smart phones as well as through the revived ideologies of development communication as ICTD (Information and Communication Technologies for Development) which have brought global corporate power to local neighborhoods for technology enabled transition to modernity for the poor in the third world (Gurumurthy 2010). More important, political discourses on new media reflect the interconnections in a polymedia context, so that the urban phenomenon of new media debates spill into a broader media field through mutual references between media platforms. This is illustrated, for instance, by the latest globally shared

practice among television channels and newspapers to pick up online debates and trends for their newsfeed.

The attempt here is not to capture the full range of abusive terms on social media, since such an exercise is limited by the ambiguity of abusive contexts, users' dismissals and hesitations in naming anything as 'abuse', and the various contextual factors that define or evade accusations of abuse. Such an exercise is also challenging because of the enormous creativity in insult literature on online media, testified by the growing lists of abuse terms with new vocabulary and linguistic innovations.[3] Instead, this paper inquires the intersection of what is recognized as abuse by social media users (most prominently urban women) with the broader aspiration for political participation. The analysis thus proceeds with an emic use of the term 'abuse', which is a commonly invoked term among social media users active in political debates in India. Abuse connotes malicious intent for these users, and affects their social media participation in significant ways. In using the term as an aspect of social media practice and textual corpus with a particular 'audience effect' (Irvine 1993),[4] I stay clear of legal terminologies with their purported definitional clarity and a blanket approach to abuse as gross violation of dignity deserving no further academic scrutiny. Methodologically, this analysis is rooted in ethnography and an approach to social media as practice and performance, including speech acts in a social context which require analysis beyond purely linguistic analysis of textual features as well as assumptions around politeness, civility and abuse as universalist features with little cultural variation – a perspective common within a large crop of studies in political communication (Hutchens, Cicchirillo and Hmielowski 2014; Papacharissi 2004). This also prompts a departure from the broad ahistorical category of 'cyberbullying' that combines diverse online practices into a single frame of relational aggression hinging on the imbalance of power and strength (Marwick and boyd 2011; Olweus 2011).

In examining the intersection between abuse and political participation, I forward two arguments: First, abuses open up new lines of political participation, at least as a discursive engagement, for net savvy actors, albeit in a highly volatile conversational context. While it is not true that abuses are the only means to participate in online political debates in India, they however constitute a key communicational context for online users who increasingly feel the need to develop the skills to hurl, dodge or otherwise criticize abuses to remain active within online discursive spaces. Rather than a mere constellation of intentional tit-for-tat actions, abuse

frames the context where meanings of political participation are reconfigured for a growing number of online users entering the debate culture of new media. Second, online abuse has a deeply gendered structuring, in that the raking of 'the private' and sexual accusations represents the troubling re-politicization of the 'domestic sphere' through the masculinist logic of shame.

In the rest of the paper, I will briefly discuss the literature on abuse within anthropological and cultural studies traditions, to locate social media abuse within this broader scholarship. I will then contextualize social media abuse in India within two broad domains which influence each other: the verbal art of politics in India,[5] and global media institutional power. In the next two sections, I will elaborate the two arguments on the political consequences of social media abuse, and conclude with some reflections on considering abuse through the metaphor of sound which reproduces relations of domination in online contexts.

## Abuse: Between control and heteroglossia

Classical anthropology has largely approached abuse in relation to its propensity to initiate, sustain or resolve conflicts within close-knit face-to-face groups. The theoretical focus is on the production of social control and social cohesion within bounded societies, elucidated by classic anthropological works by Edmund Leach offering a three layered categorization of abuse (1964), Evans-Pritchard's description of the Zande concept of *sanza* (oblique speech forms which are usually abusive), or Judith Irvine's (1993) analysis of insult poetry (*xaxaar*) among the Wolof villagers in Western Sudan.[6] For scholars of linguistics, the textual features of insult and abuse in literary works and actual social events are the key concerns, although many studies are restricted by formalism lacking a theory of social power or rational critical approaches to abuses as intentional and tactical moves to cause insult (Conley 2010). For the cultural studies tradition inspired by Mikhail Bakhtin, abuse is an important element of 'unofficial language' and 'heteroglossia', subverting the dominant 'verbal-ideological life of the nation and the epoch' through play, ridicule and seeming obscenity (Bakhtin 1980: 273). Aside from the Bakhtian carnival, a telling illustration is the irreverence of Lutherian *Flugschriften* or the talking statue of Pasquino in medieval Rome with paper epigrams stuck below to criticize local politicians, often anonymously. A more recent and widely discussed occurrence are the unconventional dress codes of the 1960s North America which subverted the semiotic codes of authoritative

discourses by disrupting the standard of aesthetic excellence and social power coded in hegemonic aesthetics (Hebdige 1979). Within subaltern studies, postcolonial scholars recognize a similar semiotic exercise when peasant insurgency in colonial India launched a rebel speech which effected a 'perspective reversal' by 'massive and systematic violation of…words, gestures and symbols, which had the relations of power in colonial society as their significanta' (Guha 1983: 39). This reversal was significant in a context where humiliation inflicted by language draws on and legitimates tactile forms of discrimination practiced against the Dalits in the deeply troubling caste hierarchies of India (Guru 2009), with the nationwide legislation against caste-based insults representing a formal effort at disallowing them (Singh 2011).[7] Similarly, Achille Mbembe discusses how ordinary people 'played with' and 'manipulated' the representation of state power through verbal acts of travesty, illustrated by the 'obsession with orifices and genital organs' in Togolese 'popular laughter' which eluded state control, if not in a manner of 'resistance' that presupposed a neat binary between state power[8] and postcolonial 'subject' (1992: 8). Concerned with visual representations of homoerotic figures in popular print cultures and not as much the play of words, Lawrence Cohen (1995) analyzes the circulation of satirical literature and *gupt sahitya* (secret literature) during the carnival festival of Holi in the North Indian city of Banaras, to reveal how cartoons and poems of men penetrating one another exemplifies, for media producers and readers alike, the relations of hierarchy between sovereign power (*Sarkar*) and the "common people" (*Janata*). Cohen argues that although this might just represent relations of hierarchy, the figures and portrayals 'conveyed a kind of exchangeability and interchangeability that disrupted hierarchies or at the least called them into question' (2011: 692). In this reading, Cohen draws upon Michael Hardt's reading of Marx's concept of 'love' as non-narcissistic relations that are 'directly social' and imbued with the political effects of positing equality between exchanging and 'connecting' persons.

Continuing the line of inquiry on verbal art's constitutive role in configuring social and political power and its potential disruptive challenge to established authorities, recent anthropological work has increasingly linked semiotic practices with emerging political cultures, to unravel new performative politics of satire and parody which have expanded in reaction to growing neoliberal culture of market legitimacy in northern liberal democracies. In the case of Iceland, for instance, Dominic Boyer describes the rising popularity of 'overidentifying parody' or 'stiob' (Russian slang for a particular socialist-era technique of parody), to argue that classical

cynicism of early Europe as 'vulgar inversions of the norms of polite society' is revived in the decades of Washington Consensus, as the 'gap between northern democracy's self-imagination and its practices' continues to increase (2010: 282). Critical Internet studies theorize such verbal art and its seemingly most severe form of trolling, as 'agonistic democracy' representing the 'tensions, dynamics, injuries and productivities of negativity and disputation' (Wilson et al. 2014). Implicit here is the celebration of online subcultures as oppositional politics with historical links to absurdist avant-gardes as well as Internet culture's formative countercultural ethos (Turner 2011).

While the Internet culture of generative disputation analyzed by these studies and the earlier works on satire, parody and obscenity is no doubt salient, this paper maintains that abuse should be understood as an interplay of Internet ecology and the specific political-economic changes unfolding within societies and the cultural framework of 'moral assumptions, conceptions of the person, and notions of responsibility' constituting them (Irvine 1993). This implies not only a challenge to the universalist discourse of net-enabled disruption (cultural studies), local control (classical anthropology) or even the proposition that obscene metaphors are critical 'to the production of the political in the postcolony' (Mbembe 1992: 9),[9] but an analytical exercise to lay bare the infrastructure for online abuse in relation to historically defined political cultures and the current moment of globalization which together define what Clark et al. (2010) aptly term as 'protoagency' – heterogeneous preconditions for digital engagement.

For social media abuse in India, two contextual domains are particularly important. First is the growing popularity of creative wordplay in Indian politics in recent years. This builds on and alters the historical emphasis on language play as a key strategy for many political parties in India to 'semiotically dominate the opposition' (Bate 2009). If many of these earlier strategies of language, especially the Dravidian parties in South India, privileged high literary prose to create an unreflective domain of the aesthetic for popular consumption (Bate 2009), language play started to tilt more emphatically towards lighter, everyday speech forms at the turn of the millennium – a reflection of the popularity of colloquial language use on FM radio and private television which expanded at a blistering pace after media deregulation in the 1990s (Udupa 2015). This brought to the mainstream the thriving verbal cultures of tabloid journalism, a

section of vernacular theater and underside novels in which words are not burdened with the obligations of polite (elite) society.

Online media are by far the most vibrant site for such word plays today. This is evident in the surge of new linguistic practices online, which creatively combine regional language lexicon with English syntax or colloquial English words, to critique, satirize and parodize mainstream politics and mainstream media. The instantaneous creativity of young online users are evident in the new websites such as 'Qtiyapa' which derive the name from what is often considered as an obscene reference to female vagina, but with a phonetic twist that masks the original root literally but alludes to it more intensely through this masking. The Qtiyapa team produces low-cost videos and posts them on YouTube, to ridicule and satirize political leaders, Bollywood figures, and prominent television news anchors. The premium on word play is starkly evident in their videos – the actors engage directly in coining new aphorisms and sobriquets or other times link up political debates with satirical narratives. Across Qtiyapa, fakenews.com, theunrealtimes.com and the newly proliferating websites, political debates are rife with vivid imagery, pun, parody, allegory and close parallelisms, which turn 'the truth' upside down or in any angle, so skillfully that professional journalists too are drawn to it as an awkward vantage point to reckon with.

It is little surprising that the vibrant field of social media verbal art is now harnessed more systematically by political groups, most prominently the right-wing party BJP, which came to power in the national elections in 2014. The election campaigning leading to the victory of BJP witnessed bustling online media strategies, with several political marketing companies and common users alike parading a panoply of new phrases, slogan-words, slangs, curse-words, and praise words to deride, challenge or amplify the image of political leaders. Election sloganeering engineered by paid campaigners met with unending enthusiasm and bottom-up improvizations when users took upon themselves the task of adding new verses to the top-down '*ab ki baar Modi sarkaar*' (this time, it is Modi government), unleashing a string of catchy lyrical and rhyming lines shaped deeply by the new media rationale of 'going viral'. '*Ab ki baar Modi Sarkar*' was thus improvised by a range of rhyming lines drawing upon banal metaphors of the everyday and popular cultures of Bollywood:

*Twinkle Twinkle little star, ab ki bar Modi Sarkar*                    Twinkle Twinkle little star…

| | |
|---|---|
| *Rahul Gandhi ne khayi chocolate bar, ab ki bar Modi Sarkar* | [Opposition party leader] Rahul Gandhi eats chocolate bar… |
| *Paratho ke sat khavo achar, ab ki bar Modi Sarkar* | Eat pickles with flat bread… |
| *Dil ka bhanwar kare pukar, ab ki bar Modi Sarkar* | The whirlpool in my heart is calling out… |
| *Soniaji ne Manmohanji se kaha, ab to apni maun thoddo sardar, Manmohanji ne bol pade ab ki bar Modi Sarkar* | [Opposition party leader] Sonia Gandhi asks Manmohan Singh [incumbent Prime Minister] to break his silence; Manmohan Singh ends up saying… |
| *Bhayiyon mat maro chata bar bar ab ki bar Modi Sarkar* | Brothers, don't slap again and again… |

If social media trumpeted Modi's derisive naming of his opponent as 'Shehzada' (the prince, caustically alluding to Rahul Gandhi's dynastic roots), it was with an equally piercing pace that the famous battle was fought on Twitter between the hashtags of 'PappuCII' (dumb man at CII)[10] for Rahul Gandhi and 'Fekoo' (the liar) for Narendra Modi during the election campaigning when tweets were flooded to rally the voices and combat the opposition. A master of verbal art on social media, Dr Subrahmanian Swamy, known to be a maverick politician, for instance, relies on verbal wrangling on social media as an important means to amass supporters and sustain popularity for his Hindu nationalist ideologies. A Harvard graduate who entered formal politics and increasingly espoused the vision of Hindu India, Swamy capitalized on the growing enthusiasm of social media users to advance his caustic style to condemn his opponents, in particular the hegemony of the Indian National Congress and the intellectual crowd representing 'secular liberalism' which is historically a gloss for the class privileges of the Nehruvian legacy. Such is the popularity of his private lexicon of accusatory acronyms that there is a regularly updated blogpost that lists all his choice abbreviations – Patriotic Tweeple, for example, are 'PT's as opposed to 'CRT's, Congi Reptile Tweeple, a term used for the Indian National Congress Party, 'Fibrals' are liberals who fib, 'libtards' are 'liberal retards', and Hindu

mythological *asuris* (demons) for prominent Congress party leaders. Some of the Twitter heroes with the highest following are also those who are adept at coining or dodging such accusations, contributing to the growing creative inventory for name calling.

The popular Bollywood song 'Sadda Haq' appeared to have got the pulse right, when it proclaimed: '*negative, negative*, *sirf negative chalta he media mein*' (only negative works for the media). Almost in the same breath, columnist Aakar Patel cited an unnamed Hindi poet to aver: '*Badnaam agar hongay tau kya naam na hoga*?' (Defaming may happen, but would name not be made?).

It is in this context of the creative vibrancy of vitriol and the seeming legitimacy of negativity within a deregulated media culture that abuse has erupted on the social media, cementing an emergent social media colloquialism for political debates.

Implicit in the online political culture of name-calling is the second contextual domain of global media institutional power manifest in varied media technological affordances and communicative architectures which conditions the possibility for political participation and co-creates particular forms of political behavior online. If the premium placed on brief messages to augment data aggregation for market analytics and display on small screens is a key communicative intervention of technology and market (Fuchs 2013) – as with Twitter allowing 140 characters– the experiential salience of instantaneity, rapid reaction loops and message clutter has deepened the culture of quick retorts. An avid social media user in Mumbai said to me that messaging on Twitter is so real time that it 'has screwed our language. If you are in the political space it is very hostile.' Many others added that 'the really nasty fights are out on Twitter, because the comments and retorts are quick to pile up'. The culture of quick retorts is fuelled not only by the desire to be 'audible' on new media platforms but also by the location of niche platforms such as Twitter which are embedded within an expanding global subculture of self-declared transgressive spaces, from shock sites to hacker culture (Wilson et al 2014). Trangression dovetails with aggression on many new media platforms largely as a result of the affordances for relative anonymity. Recent quantitative studies on online political discussion spaces have revealed that direct challenges to one's political opinion increased intention to 'flame' (aggressive message exchange) when identities were not known (Hutchens, Cicchirillo and Hmielowski 2014).  The shared material architecture of Twitter to allow for trolling with relatively anonymous IDs, the prospect to automate trolls and invite attention of interested

bystanders through tags and retweets augment the conditions for confrontational encounters – a point I will discuss further in the sections to follow.

It is therefore important to understand abuse as performance – an embodied expressive practice (Féral 1982) – shaped by the mutually influencing domains of global cyber media and historically inflected national political cultures. To approach abuse as performance suggests that we take an agnostic approach to the 'Internet's City of Words', where the boundaries between the ludic, the intimidatory and disruptive absurdity intertwine in such a way that their political consequences cannot be traced in all aspects if the question is foreclosed with predetermined normativity on abuse exchange. What has online abuse then done for political discourses in India?

### *Gaali* culture: Lines of participation

'I am not sure if I am completely right or not but I just love creating discussions [online].'

- Imran Syed

Imran Syed[11] is a budding graphic designer in Mumbai city, residing in a middle class housing colony with his wife. He is financially comfortable enough to afford a two bedroom flat in an expensive city, thanks to a steady flow of freelance projects he gets from advertisers and media publicists. Inside the home office room, graphic posters designed by Syed were hung on the wall, and the two desktops and a Mac on the large table revealed his modest, yet busy, work area. Syed's enthusiasm to talk about his life and career, and his least concern for our customary introductions on data confidentiality and audio recorder hinted at his eagerness to be heard. As a poet and writer in Urdu and Hindi, Syed was vocal about 'politics' and 'society' – as he understood them – and the first issue he broached during our conversation was communal (Hindu-Muslim) tensions in Mumbai and Ahmedabad, even before we gave any clear description of our research topic. Vocal as he was on topical issues, Syed described his online activities as a deliberate attempt to stop shying away from addressing vexing issues of communalism or dowry problems ailing Indian society. He said he made sure to write about them to 'create discussions' on social media even if it meant that some muck-racking or swearing was needed along the way.

For many social media users we interviewed in Mumbai, abuse was the first assured way to draw others' attention, a way to 'gain some traction' in an otherwise dense flow of verbal and

video traffic. As with this graphic designer, manifestly contentious interactions have opened up avenues of political engagement for net savvy users in a manner that tabloidization techniques of newspapers have lowered the entry barrier for political debates in South America, as Silvio Waisbord (2010) argues, pointing to the potential democratic effects of colloquialism in media production. In some of these activities, abuses have revived a thriving culture of swear words at informal male hangouts and college campuses, where abuses are routinely detoxified with repetition and innuendo, in ways that words become 'not a term of abuse but of jocular familiarity' (Cloney 2010: 21) and affective rebuke. This is also shaped, if obliquely, by ritual contexts of abuse exchange sanctioned during some occasions of Hindu temple processions (in Puri) and Hindu festivities (Holi in the Konkan region of Maharashtra or Uttar Pradesh) which have sustained a mode of social exchange rarely acknowledged outside of ritual relations (Cohen 1995). The sharpness of the Hindi adage *'Goli maro parantu gali mat do'* (shoot me a bullet, but hurl not the words of abuse) is blunted somewhat during social media abuse exchange, as online users become increasingly aware of and participate in abuse culture and hurling swearwords gets distributed across net-literate groups through online mediation. A telling illustration is the online production group 'All India Bakchod' (senseless *ucker/gossip) which shot to fame with its online creations of 'insult comedy' around Bollywood actors and politicians, and its offline offshoot modeled on 'Roast' events in the USA.[12] Creating 'debris on Twitter' – as one tweeter worded it – lost some of its ominous edge during these repetitive acts of put-downs and affronts, in as much as paving way for avenues for arguments.

More important, the ability to 'engage' debates on social media by tiding over abuses or returning them on the same platter brought many new voices into mainstream politics in urban India, some of whom ascended to high-posts within major political parties in quick time. Neena Chaturvedi,[13] one of the official spokespersons for a major political party, was a political novice when she started confronting anti-Congress comments on Twitter. From an affluent family living in an expensive locality of Andheri in Mumbai, and barely in her late 30s, she entered the world of Twitter much as customary literacy in new media among educated classes in urban India. Most of her initial tweets, she admits, were a result of her chance encounters with political commentators on Twitter she started to follow. Soon, she reduced her tweets on personal life, upon what she described as the 'realization that political opinion on Twitter was very biased', and ventured to confront the debates with rebuttals, clarifications and counter-questions. The

official position of a party spokesperson followed soon after: 'Once you are in an official party position, whatever small role I was in, they started looking at me as a more serious voice, someone who engages people on Twitter'. A significant aspect of her new media capability – the ability to 'engage' Twitter –was her proven success in tiding over abuses or respond to trolls in an impressive manner.

Although social media abuses are bald assertions with little or no semantic mitigations, it has sparked a range of practices to handle them, including, most commonly, blocking them. 'One look of it, I block. DPI box', described a Twitter user, revealing an embodied habitual response to abuse – a pile of garbage to be routinely thrown out of the door, as it were. Some budding political voices have also developed strategies to modify their stance, change the tonality or disallow official handles (of the organizations) to respond to abusive trolls directly. To be forewarned has then meant more than simple blocking. It has involved inventing new ways to make oneself heard, advancing rhetorical and propositional techniques in improvised ways. For instance, new political parties such as the AAP and Loksatta routinely build social media strategies to confront the challenge of retaining social media audibility amidst heavily funded social media agendas of legacy parties. An office bearer of the Loksatta party in Mumbai spelled out a three prong strategy: block straight away if the person is 'planted' by organized parties to play spoil sport; engage if they are judgmental yet have a point by producing evidence and arguments for a 'fact-based discussion'; or ignore if the troll is undecided or full of somersault statements.

As effective as they are in creating ways for discursive participation in domestic politics – in all awkward angles as one may have it – abuses have also provided a means to respond to global debates for the tech-savvy middle class Indian youth restless to have their voice heard on a global forum and portray India as a global power. To challenge the gnawing stereotypes of India, disparate groups of tweeters, who are alert on news feeds, build on the existing online infrastructure to insert rebuttals, ridicule and abuses into prominent online media platforms. This was evident in several incidents of trending hashtags on Twitter, including the sudden rush of tweets against Maria Sharapova, the Russian tennis star, when she openly stated that she did not know who Sachin Tendulkar was, when the international cricket star from India went to watch her match in England. Such was the invective genius of a large number of tweets that Sharapova's ignorance was framed not just an assault on the cricket star but on a country that

had strongly staked claims in the world economy as an emerging power. Sharapova's ignorance was seen as a sign of stubbornness of the West to lock India in the stereotypes of the third world stricken by poverty and 'people shitting on the streets'. The hashtag 'whoismariasharapova' was a top trending topic worldwide on Twitter for a day in July 2014, with a swell of tweets belittling Sharapova for not knowing Tendulkar. Amidst the ever improvising tweets of ridicule, one of the tweeters claimed to nail it with a punch: 'Its ok that Maria Sharapova doesnt [sic] know Sachin Tendulkar. She might be an atheist [for Sachin is the God]'. This witticism was joined by a surge of abusive quotes invading Sharapova's Facebook profile and Twitter accounts.

The bluntness and possible detoxification of abuses is however just one part of the abuse culture. While opening up lines of participation, abuse has been subjected to varied levels of exploitation by political forces with an attempt to mute and threaten dissenting voices.

I met Manoj Joshi,[14] a television correspondent, at the noisy cafeteria on a heavily secured Mahalakshmi Complex, a business park carved out of a closed down textile mill in South Mumbai. In his mid-20s, Joshi heads the editorial desk for the channel, manages a team of political correspondents and also nurtures a deep interest in local political developments and regional language [Marathi] politics. News savvy as he is, Joshi started a personal Twitter account, alongside mandatory contributions to the official Twitter handle of the channel. Realizing that he needed a niche in the Twitter world, he narrowed his all-purpose Twitter handle to tweet mostly on political developments in Maharashtra, his home region. He advertised his Twitter account as a reliable site for Maharashtra related news – a strategy that bore fruits when people started to follow him for this specific stream of news feed. Reflecting the broader editorial ethos of his channel, Manoj was frequently critical of Hindu nationalism on his tweets. The first 'troll attack', as he described, started when he tweeted about minor bomb blasts in Pune in 2010. He tweeted that the anti-terrorist squad were probing the possibility of 'Hindu nationalist terror' in the incident:

> Soon, I was troll attacked. It really scared me. I woke up to read hundreds of abusive tweets. I didn't know that these people are trolls. They constantly need targets. One of them will start shouting something and it gets retweeted, something like he is anti-national, he is on the payroll of Congress, *kuch bhi likhenge* [they write things totally unreasonable]. If Shiv Bharat [Hindu nationalist Twitter handle] has 10000 followers and

he retweets my tweet, then I will have those many following me. I get more followers and more abuses.

The abuses for Manoj were not a one-off encounter. The alacrity and persuasiveness of organized abuse is evident in that the journalist continues to get abusive tweets whenever there is a bomb blast in the country or elsewhere in the world:

> Even now, whenever there is any bomb blast, they tag my original tweet and ask, 'Manoj, do you think this is also triggered by the Hindus?' They have saved my original tweet because they keep using it whenever there is a blast.

For the right-wing Hindu nationalist forces, shaped not only by top-down organizations but emergent networked publics, the key challenge is what they caustically dub as 'pseudo secularism'. Avowedly 'secular-liberal' intellectuals and journalists are to be suspected, specifically women journalists who are seen as hostile to the cause of Hindu nationalism and hypocritical in their garb of 'progressive politics'. Although verbal abuses are common across the ideological divides – as the diverse participatory lines attest – the prominence of right-wing tweets suggest that abuses as a gendered discourse are particularly significant for this online ideological camp although there are several voices within the camp that disagree or distance from the practice.

### 'Internet lumpen': Shaming punishments and gendered moral communities

> When this lot grows up they can come back to have a conversation. Till then, *mere se toh nahin hoga* [it's just not possible for me]. If you really want a label **'Internet Lumpen'** is a good one – this is not ideology driven. If it was, it wouldn't be manifesting itself in this manner. This is insecurity. This is half information. This is the kind of behavior you will expect from Roadside Romeos outside colleges – courage in numbers to give *gaalis* and make people uncomfortable, but not to be relied on for a fight …[15]

I read Harini Calamur's angry blog after meeting her at a plush café in the upscale locality of Andheri. Harini, one of the highest followed tweeters in Mumbai, was sitting across a round table, with a pack of cigarettes and a lighter, busy keying away something briskly on her smart phone, when I walked into the open backyard of the café marked as a smoking zone. In her late

30s, she seemed to be at home at the café; her ease explained why she was reluctant to come to the Punjabi restaurant next to it which I had proposed it as a possible venue. She was an avid tweeter, as I realized when she broke into checking the net on her smart phone at very short intervals throughout the course of our conversation. With a sharp wit and knack for crisp prose, she had amassed a huge following on Twitter, and attracted responses and retweets as she continuously commented on politics and culture, picking up threads from a wide range of resources from international news portals to local radio broadcasts. She taught students at a media school, wrote columns for newspapers, maintained a lively blog and ran a media company which produced short films. Passionate about social causes that 'cut party lines', she tweets regularly on gender violence, alongside regular commentaries on political developments in the country. Her vociferous voice in Twitter met with an unexpected affront when she commented on a corruption scandal involving BJP. Interpreting this tweet as the 'pseudoliberal's unwanted rant', the online right-wing brigade jumped on to cease the tweet, as they had done with Roshni, to accuse Harini of 'sleeping' with the Congress President. Harini put the tweet on her blog, to express her anguish and shock at what she squarely named the 'Internet lumpen'.



As with Harini and her politically savvy friends in Mumbai, assertive women voices commenting on politics constantly confront abusive trolls when they disagree – implicitly, explicitly or even

inadvertently – with what a section of tweeters understand as the agenda of Hindu nationalism which combines the pride of global India with the futuristic imagination of prosperous 'Bharat' (cultural India) rooted in its spiritual ethos. For sure, formal Hindutva organizations and key ideologues for various political parties including the BJP distance themselves from this practice. However, a growing number of tweeters claiming to represent political ideologies online enthusiastically participate in the abuse exchange. The common swear words in Hindi and varied regional languages and bodily metaphors common in offline culture find their way into the trolling tweets, even as the global lexicon of online swear words provide convenient ballast for the trolls. Through online mediation, bodily metaphors and abuse terms in offline spaces (streets, homes, offices and cinema) are transformed, in that they not only become more systematized through digital archives but also available for participation in the broader public domain through interactive platforms. Such is the salience of this 'global-local' field of abuse terms that there are regularly updated websites, such as youswear.com that list swear words in various languages across the world, including Hindi, Tamil, Bangla, and Arabic, with English translations tucked on the side. Social media users I met in Mumbai showed me abusive trolls which almost always invoked the image of vagina, illicit sex, and prostitution (pimps, guttersnipes, *randi*/prostitute, bitch) in proses and sexist epithets that sometimes revealed their preset and repetitive formats. As many female tweeters complained, these were ad hominem strategies aimed at persons than arguments. An active political tweeter in Mumbai described vividly the daily trolls she confronts, eagerly seizing the hints on social media abuse in my question, even before I had termed it in such straightforward terms:

> There is a corporator [elected city council representative] from Ahmedabad. I blocked her out. She tweeted and retweeted that I am not worth five rupees, forget fifty million dollars. And, so you can see the mindset. When she, as an appointed corporator, talks like this… so they can get away with character assassination, they can get away with abuses, they can get away with threats. I was under a lot of pressure. But my husband told me to calm down, that I should not go out and make a big thing of it, and that I should cool off on Twitter. So, I would go out of Twitter for four-five days and then come back. So, any woman who has a strong political opinion who is not in agreement with theirs gets shouted upon and everything is a fair game for them, character assassination, spreading rumors or spreading nonsense about anybody, so, it's very nasty…

Judith Irvine recognizes this form of abuse as 'evaluative talk'. This talk is grounded in the specific cultural systems of moral judgment and invokes practices of 'verbal obscenity' that replays gender as 'a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint' (Butler 2010). The deeply gendered nature of evaluative talk is shaped in part by the history of gendered constructions of anti-colonial nationalisms in India which developed moral prescripts for proper Indian womanhood as 'grounds' to articulate the meaning of Indian tradition (Mani 1987).[16] As Partha Chatterjee (1993) has famously argued, cultural nationalists of the late nineteenth century conceded inferiority in the outer/material domain of politics and technology while claiming autonomy and authenticity in the inner/spiritual domain. This 'resolution' of the epistemological challenge of colonialism involved the effort to assign the woman's question to the inner domain, which was co-elaborated with notions of autonomy and authenticity. Thus, as Mrinalini Sinha elaborates, 'the figure of the modern Indian woman, which emerged out of this reformed and revised nationalist patriarchy, carried the burden of being the symbolic embodiment or cultural essence of the nation: modernized yet simultaneously true to the spiritual traditions of the nation' (2014: 17).

The upper-caste, male nationalist thinkers' 'investment in the "privatized" domestic sphere' (Sinha 1014) has profoundly shaped Hindu nationalist movement in postcolonial India as it did to a section of Congress nationalist ideologues, counterposing the imaginations of 'modern Indian woman' (*Bharatiyanari*) to 'westernized' women and their presumed moral debauchery expressed as illicit sexual relations and promiscuity. Thus, female tweeters with avowed "liberal-secular" agendas and even those with no stated ideological purpose become targets when they relay anything less flattering of the Hindu nationalist agenda, however understood. Some of these tweets are automated (network build-ups exhausting the user with a deluge of insinuating tweets) which also shoot piercing threats such as death, gang rape and sacking inside companies (Arya 2013; Vij 2014). This form of abuse came out into the open, when many journalists tweeted about the daily harassment they face – the case of Sagarika Ghose, a well-known national television anchor, a striking illustration:

If the call for action by the journalist remains an honest plea for intervention, automated trolls regularly combine with tweets by real individuals to ensure that this online practice is not ready yet for decline. The dialectic of automation and voluntary participation by real individuals is played out starkly when this form of abuse moves beyond mere insult remarks targeting intangible markers of self and personhood – respect, honor, reputation, legitimacy and authenticity – and embodies perlocutionary effects as threats with tangible consequences for social and personal security with more precise knowledge of target individuals' life routines and lifestyle than the generic threats of mechanized trolls. These trolls, for example, would name the child of the female tweeter and the time her child would go to the school on a particular route.

Such close knowledge of life routines reveals the local character of abuse groups. Despite the flux and fusions of networks characterizing social media, the exchange of abuse takes on a more 'systematic' character in this gendered avatar at local levels, since groups are quickly allocated specific forms of speechmaking. Such intensely local struggles over political participation often create small moral communities in which persons are easily recognized, correctly guessed or, at the very least, intensely speculated. In Roshni's case, the attacking tweets declared themselves as males with many real names on the handles. Some of the tweeters referred to Roshni's primary opponent on Twitter as 'Dada' – a sign of brotherly affection and paternal care even as the primary opponent (a senior journalist) won the points on the publicity meter for taking the lead in the attack. The expansive networked worlds of social media are ironically brought down to their local levels in these instances, resembling the Wolof village (Irvine), the Zande (Evans-Pritchard) or the caste panchayats (*biradari or jati*) to draw gendered moral communities. In such abuses, the accusations of morally decrepit, ideologically debauched and politically discredited 'female' actors take a life of their own, claiming salience through their reiterative power.

In this overlap of automated and localized abuse, the seemingly disjunctive online economies – the 'A' economy of anonymity (Auerbach 2012) relying on intentional disconnect between online and offline selves, and the economy of self-publicity with enumerative publicity measures – become co-constitutive, one propelling the other. In some cases, abuse escalates to a full-blown shaming punishment, where online networks of swears and accusations create a bounded arena for shaming sanctions which fall 'most heavily on women in terms of governance of sexuality' (Baxi 2009: 72) – a gendered norm captured in Lauren Berlant's (1997) re-reading of 'intimate public sphere' to define a conservative politics focused exclusively on regulating sexuality. In the new media context, this dovetails with the global cyber-subculture of priding collective shame in shock sites and anonymous image boards through flaming, spamming, doxing and prankish discursive deceptions (Manivannan 2014).

If social consequences of shaming punishments were evident in several high-profile Twitter wars in recent years involving politicians, cinema stars and sportspersons, the moral injuries of abuse impact everyday interactions among an increasing number of youth entering political debates on social media.  Whereas class privileges and political connections help women from affluent families to shield from the debilitating effects of abuses in some measure, women from middle class background lacking this significant protoagentic privilege (Clark et al. 2010) are increasingly pushed to the dilemma of participation and withdrawal, forcing them to go mild, 'neutral' or completely silent. At times, women with political interests also participate in the cacophony of abuse exchange, when they, as Maitri[17] in Mumbai described, '*dabhadabhakar gali detehe'* [hurl a mouthful of swear words], deepening the gendered norms of the debate as legitimate un-inhibition in abuse exchange.

This is then not to reproduce stereotypes about women in the third world as enslaved by patriarchy or tradition – a challenge at the universalizing discourse of western feminism now well established within postcolonial feminist scholarship. Rather, it is an argument about gendered forms of verbal intimidation to command ideological loyalty, and how global cybercultures of abuse combine with historically inflected notions of modern Indian woman to dismiss all that is viewed as anti-Hindu.

This reveals the Janus-faced status of abuse as performance – whereas its routine detoxification opens up new lines of participation, it takes a menacing edge when they instantiate gendered discursive relations of what a section of tweeters understand as Hindu nationalism.

Moreover, online abuse signals the symbolic significance of the ludic and the obscene, which inscribes the seemingly democratic practices of participating 'netizens' within the masculinist ideologies of Hindu nationalism, even though these have not gone uncontested.[18] This points to the hegemonic impulse of the ludic that Mbembe (1992) grippingly captures in his analysis of Cameroonian public spheres.

## Conclusions

For Mbembe, the mutual 'zombification' of the systems of domination and dominated subjects through the obscene and the grotesque is an anti-hegemonic force, in that the acts of the dominated fail to build into resistance because of the logic of familiarity and domesticity that entrench verbal play between the state and the ordinary public (1992: 5). The argument could be read along with Walter Benjamin's (1969) formulation of aestheticization of politics, in which the means of expression serve not to capsize the material basis of domination, but as a symbolic conduit to ventroloquize that renders resistance powerless. But Mbembe takes the argument further, to suggest that obscenity and vulgarity – limited not merely to words but all manner of signs – 'constitute one of the modalities of power in the postcolony' (1992: 29) which is not specific to the dominated alone as Bakhtin's carnivalesque praxis imagined. Mbembe suggests that these provide arenas for subalterns to deconstruct or ratify systems of domination, reproducing the very epistemological field set up by state power. As he argues, 'The practices of those who command and of those who are assumed to obey are so entangled as to render them powerless' (30). It is this intimacy of tyranny – the dominated not merely mirroring but willingly devouring the obscenity of the dominant – that empties the ludic of its subversive potential. No doubt, the Indian context is different from the authoritarian upheavals that Mbembe analyses, and the nature of relation between Hindu nationalism as a historical-political force and online users is not one of dominant and dominated. However, the important insight on the *intimacy of recognition* that evacuates the ludic from counter hegemonic narratives is helpful in bringing to the fore the mediation of abuse exchange and online hilarity in reproducing the ideologies of Hindu nationalism among a growing number of self-declared volunteers.

For new media literature, this case opens up another line of analysis – the importance of recognizing online abuse through the metaphor of sound alongside the important optic of visibility and visuality to understand new media (Chow 2012; Pink 2010). Such an emphasis

would be generative since abuse drives online practice through the logic of 'creating a buzz' and 'noising out' adversarial tweets. The performative rationale then is to be the 'loudest' in the crowd through repeated and more effervescent (and purportedly creative) forms of tweets and messages. Moreover, the metaphor of sound allows us to distinguish online abuses from the evidentiary account of seeing. For online abuses, the problem is noising out adversarial tweets and not as much the veracity of content. A striking illustration is the online users' routine allegations of women sleeping with male party leaders. Online abuses, far from the grounds of veracity, gain valence through repetition and reverberation – two features recognized as essential characteristics of sound in rhetorical studies. Yet, these sounds are not 'unintelligible noise' that Ranciere defines, because of the constellation of meanings that emerge when online medium intersects with historically constituted field of power.

The metaphor of sound is also distinct from digital 'voice' (Mitra and Watts 2002) since sound allows and inhibits recognition at the same time. It is similar to voice in that it allows us to approach cyberspace as a 'discursive space that is occupied by the interface between humans and computers' (481). However, sound differs from the conception of voice as the instantiation of individual agency (the speaking subject). This holds true even when we assume that individual agency is not a pre-given capacity but results from its exposure to the 'public'. Based on the conception of voice as public, dialogic and intersubjective which accrues reality not just by speaking but also by being heard, Mitra and Watts conclude that digital voice represents the 'self-correcting potential of the Internet discourse' (2002). To consider abuse as sound is to point exactly to the inverse of this liberal assumption of self-correction, and to the protoagentic structures that shape online action and its political consequences.

That abuse is not as much an obstruction to the normal but the very site where social dominance is reproduced in India prompts a reconsideration of the dominant metaphors that define new media scholarship today. Although opening up new lines of participation, abuse culture, as the foregoing discussion illustrates, represents largely the conservative effects of political traffic on new media than the subversive radicalism of the ludic as subcultures.

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[1] Name is changed to protect anonymity.

[2] Indian Market Research Bureau (IMRB) survey data, 2013. Percentages calculated on the weighted base of 6,848,000 Internet users in Mumbai.

[3] For a detailed list of insult literature in the Western contexts, see Conley 2010; Schnakenberg 2004.

[4] Judith Irvine (1993) suggests that abuse has to be understood in relation to what the participants consider as 'insults' since without such a recognition of defamation, there is little justification for invoking the term 'abuse'. This point also distinguishes abuse from propaganda since abuse is essentially an interactional device.

[5] Here, I use 'verbal art' to refer to linguistic practices in a broad sense or, in Bakhtin's words 'forms that orchestrate their themes by means of languages' (1981: 275). This does not refer to a limited definition of verbal art as literary works subordinated to the domain of the aesthetics.

[6] The focus has largely been on the communities in the Caribbean and African regions, as well as Afro-American groups (Abrahams 1983; Goodwin 1990; Macdonald 1973; Reisman 1973), with some scholars exploring written and spoken insults in early modern Europe (Burke 1987; Gowling 1993) as well as the United States (Labov 1972).

[7] Gopal Guru (2009) argues that these practices were augmented in colonial India by nationalist thinkers' appropriation of the humiliation (race) discourse of the West to gloss over discriminatory practices based on caste and gender within their own society.

[8] Mbembe defines this power as 'commandement' understood 'as the institutionalized forms adopted by a regime of domination in seeking to legitimize violent practices' (1992: 5).

[9] Mbembe (1992) is concerned with eccentric and grotesque art as a constitutive element of dictatorial postcolonial authority, manifest in public ceremonies and celebrations.

[10] Rahul Gandhi addressed the Confederation for Indian Industries (CII) in 2014 prior to the national elections. Liberalization friendly commentators came down heavily on Gandhi's interaction with industry leaders at CII, criticizing his lack of political maturity and economic vision while implicitly ridiculing his pro-welfare position.

[11] Name is changed.

[12] *All India Bakchod* (AIB) was also a key champion of the recent 'SavetheInternet' campaign to demand net neutrality and challenge Indian government's plans to charge users for Over-the-Top (OTT) services. AIB's Roast event "AIB Knockout" in December 2014 and the "webisode" on Youtube drew criticism from a section of Bollywood and other interest groups, leading to legal cases filed against the organizers and Bollywood actors who participated in it: http://indianexpress.com/article/cities/mumbai/hc-stay-on-deepika-padukone-arrest-till-march-16/, accessed March 5, 2015.

[13] Name is changed.

[14] Name is changed.

[15] Retrieved from http://calamur.org/gargi/2011/04/26/internet-lumpen/. 16 July, 2014.

[16] Indian nationalism was also constituted by the gendered constructions of masculinity (Sinha 2014), and ideas of *pitrubhumi* (fatherland) in Hindu nationalist ideologue Savarkar's conception.

[17] Name is changed.

[18] Many protests organized in large cities of India through the channels of Facebook and Twitter, including the 'Kiss of Love' campaign in 2014 reminded that youth mobilization has not always been complicit, but challenged the conservative agendas to culturally capture the idea of womanhood in India. 'Kiss of Love' protest called upon friends and couples to kiss on the open street, as a definitive symbolic assault on 'moral policing' against inter-religious marriages and public display of affection.

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