

Digital Dangers: Feminist Insights into Women Journalists' Experiences of Online Harassment in India

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Submitted in fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Completing this Ph.D. degree is not merely a four-year journey but a culmination of the experiences, challenges, and lessons that life has bestowed upon me. It represents the collective influence of everyone who has, in their own way, shaped my academic and personal growth.

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Abstract

Digital Dangers: Feminist Insights into Women Journalists' Experiences of Online Harassment in India

Historically, humanity has witnessed the silencing of dissenting and vocal women across various spheres of life. In the contemporary world, this suppression has infiltrated the digital realm, where women journalists are often targeted with alarming intensity. The chilling implications of such digital harassment are transnational, with some of the most severe cases culminating in physical harm and even fatalities.

The focus of analysis is on the pervasive issue of sexualized digital harassment and its profound impact on women journalists' professional and personal lives. I argue that such harassment not only affects their psycho-emotional well-being but also impairs their ability to work, generating fear, trauma, and self-censorship. While a global issue, the journalism industry in India is plagued by deep-rooted misogyny which is distinct from sexual harassment in its varied forms. Despite the dense and diverse media landscape, research on online harassment against women journalists in this region remains sparse. Moreover, much of the existing scholarship has historically focused on Western media, leaving the global south underrepresented in academic considerations.

This study employs Feminist Standpoint Theory and Intersectionality as its analytical frameworks, thereby facilitating a nuanced understanding of how intersecting identities exacerbate the experiences of digital harassment. It applies a mixed-methods approach,

combining quantitative surveys with qualitative in-depth interviews. Quantitative data were collected from 183 participants through online surveys administered via Qualtrics, across multiple states in India. Subsequently, qualitative data were gathered through in-depth, in-person¹ interviews, offering a comprehensive interpretation of the issue.

The key findings reveal that, while only a small fraction of women journalists experience severe instances of online harassment, those who do face it endure its intensity, resulting in significant emotional and professional consequences. The study highlights the remarkable resilience demonstrated by these journalists, despite enduring these challenges. Furthermore, the interviews highlight the persistent role of Brahmanical Patriarchy as a unique and pervasive source of harassment for women journalists. The findings also reveal that caste dynamics vary across regions, with significant disparities in caste-based discrimination between North and South India, leading to distinct, region-specific challenges for journalists.

¹ Three of the 20 interviews were conducted online

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Disclaimer

This thesis explores the topic of online harassment, a subject matter that inherently includes references to aggressive and potentially disturbing language. While these elements are crucial for an authentic representation of the issue and to substantiate the research findings, readers are advised that some sections of this document contain language and descriptions that may be upsetting or triggering. Reader's discretion is therefore advised.

Introduction

“There is a moment where you have to choose whether to be silent or stand up”

Malala Yousafzai

(Women’s education activist & youngest Nobel Prize laureate)

Setting the scene

On the evening of 5 September 2017, the air in Bengaluru carried a sense of routine calm, a deceptive prelude to an event that would soon shake the foundations of citizen’s safety and journalistic freedom in India. Gauri Lankesh, a renowned 55-year-old journalist and editor of the Kannada weekly '*Gauri Lankesh Patrike*', was shot outside her own home, by unidentified gunmen. Known for her fearless critique of right wing and the *Hindutva*² politics, the journalist was shot outside her home by assailants on motorcycles — a calculated act that occurred in a city widely regarded for its technological progress and progressive ethos. This assassination illustrates the escalating risks faced by journalists in India who challenge entrenched power structures and pursue accountability.

² Hindutva, frequently referred as “Hindu-ness”, represents an ideology that frames Indian culture through the lens of Hindu identity and values. Closely linked to the political movement spearheaded by the (BJP) and affiliated organizations such as the (RSS), Hindutva advocates that India is inherently a Hindu nation, underscoring the importance of safeguarding and promoting Hindu culture, traditions, and values. While it has bolstered right-wing political agendas, Hindutva has faced criticism for fostering exclusionary practices against religious minorities, particularly Muslims and Christians. Supporters of Hindutva frequently engage in historical revisionism, presenting Indian history from a Hindu-centric perspective while minimizing or disparaging the contributions of other communities (Kamal, 2023; Natrajan, 2021).

It also opened up questions about press freedom, political dissent, and the safety of women in media. The assassination of Gauri Lankesh was more than a tragic event; it was a chilling reminder of the escalating dangers faced by women journalists in the exercise of their freedom of expression (Godbole, 2017). Her death became a catalyst for public outrage and a symbol of resistance against the suppression of the press. This brazen assassination did more than claim the life of a prominent voice in Indian journalism; it ignited a maelstrom of outrage and sparked nationwide protests (ET Bureau, 2017). The incident even drew condemnation from the United Nations and fuelled a discourse on the safety, rights, and role of journalists in a democracy that is increasingly showing authoritarian tendencies.

My dissertation opens with the harrowing account of Gauri Lankesh's assassination to set the stage for a deeper exploration into the complex web of digital journalism, gender dynamics, and political activism in contemporary India. Lankesh's story is not just an individual tragedy, but a reflection of broader societal tensions and the critical risks faced by women journalists who challenge entrenched power structures. Notably, she endured sustained online threats and vilification over several years, reflecting a climate of hostility that preceded her murder (CPJ, 2017; Reporters Without Borders, 2017). While her assassination involved multiple factors, her experience exemplifies the continuum between online harassment and the wider culture of violence against dissenting women journalists.

'She faced social media threats, and she never used to take it seriously. But the fact is, she was killed – Sagarika Ghose, consulting editor at The Times of India' (Al Jazeera English, 2018). This sequence of events highlights the insidious ways in which online hostility can translate into physical violence (Maniyar, 2022). This dissertation examines the complex dynamics of resistance

and resilience among women journalists in a context where India's democratic ideals are continually tested by an increasingly digital and polarized society. These incidents should not be viewed as isolated cases but as part of a broader pattern that exposes tensions within the principles of freedom, equality, and justice in a rapidly evolving media environment.



[Fig. 1: Source- Scroll.in Sep 26, 2017, 07:19 pm, Updated Oct 02, 2017 · 12:57 pm]



Fig. 2: Source- (NDTV.com) Gauri Lankesh murder (Thousands had turned up for a march in Bengaluru) [Updated: September 13, 2017, 11:06 pm IST]

Several studies in recent years have highlighted the increased risk of online violence against women journalists and emphasized the need for further exploration of the problem in multiple geographies (UNESCO, 2018; Chaturvedi, 2016; IFJ, 2017). A 2022 extensive survey, encompassing over 700 female journalists across 125 countries, revealed that approximately 73% had encountered online abuse, characterized predominantly by sexually explicit language. This digital harassment frequently escalates into incidents of harassment and subsequent physical violence (Posetti & Shabbir, 2022). Similarly, an earlier 2016 study analyzing 70 million comments on The Guardian's website found that among the ten journalists who experienced the highest levels of abuse, eight were women (Gardiner et al., 2016).

A substantial body of literature exposes the existence of the problem and identifies the relationship between online culture and misogyny, in addition to the implications for women journalists across the globe. Broad scholarship in the domain suggests that women have

disproportionately been the targets of harassment and hate speech in cyberspace. Fadnis (2017) posits that the journalism industry in India is plagued by deep-rooted patriarchal hegemony and subordination of women, largely perceived as an unsuitable profession for women.

Moreover, the limited attention paid to the academic discourse on online harassment against women journalists indicates that it is not considered a serious hazard both by the journalists themselves and media institutions – a poignant reminder of the way sexual harassment at workplace was largely overlooked until the 1970s. The trivialization of online harassment shifts the responsibility onto the victim to manage the trolls, while largely disregarding the physical and emotional harm inflicted upon them.

To effectively address online misogyny in India, it is crucial to contextualize it within the current socio-political dynamics related to gender. This, in turn, cannot be understood without addressing India's complex history. Several key factors distinguish India from most countries in the Global North, particularly the post-colonial nation-building process, which is characterized by re-masculinization and the reinforcement of traditional roles assigned to women. Furthermore, the distinct interplay of religion, caste, and the Indian feminist movement influences the dynamics of gender-based hate online, leading to its manifestation in ways that differ from other cultural contexts.

Purpose of the study

This research is deeply rooted in my personal journey: not only my years as a news anchor in India, but also the profound experiences of navigating and bearing witness to socio-cultural

challenges in their most extreme forms. My resolve to undertake this study emerged from years spent in Indian newsrooms, where I bore witness to the widespread online misogyny routinely directed at women journalists. These were not abstract concerns; they were palpable threats that shaped my professional life and that of my colleagues. Stepping from the newsroom into academia offered me the crucial space to transform these personally felt experiences into a critical and purposeful inquiry.

Positioned as a practitioner-scholar, I bring to this study an insider's perspective on the structural inequities embedded within Indian media spaces. This dual identity has informed my methodological and theoretical choices – from the decision to use qualitative interviews and Critical Discourse Analysis, to the integration of intersectional feminist and media studies frameworks. My journalistic background offered me access to participants who might otherwise have been cautious or guarded, and my familiarity with media logics enabled a more nuanced reading of the language, power dynamics, and digital cultures relevant to this investigation.

Furthermore, having navigated Indian society marked by deeply entrenched patriarchy, caste hierarchies, and socio-political conservatism, I recognize how these structures are mirrored and, at times, amplified in digital spaces. My position is not neutral, but reflexive. This study, then, is not only an academic examination but also an act of reclaiming narrative space—one that seeks to interrogate the systems that silence dissenting women journalists in India and to foreground their voices as producers of both media and knowledge.

Online misogyny has escalated into a significant threat to democratic functioning,

particularly within a media landscape already compromised by privatization, profit motives, and algorithmic interference (Johanssen, 2022; Illing, 2020; IFJ, 2017; Newman et al., 2024). As widely established in scholarly literature, these factors create a volatile environment conducive to the spread of harmful narratives and the silencing of dissenting voices. While online harassment is a global concern (Jane, 2017), much of the extant scholarship has emerged from and been framed within the Global North, both in theoretical framing and empirical scope, thereby overlooking the specific socio-political configurations that inform the Indian context (Bhatt, 2023; Kathuria, 2018).

Consequently, there is a notable lack of studies addressing the unique challenges faced by women journalists in India – a country with a distinct media environment shaped by its colonial history, caste system, religious diversity, and deeply entrenched patriarchal norms. The Indian news media landscape, characterized by its complex ownership structures, employment statistics, and varying levels of public and private control, further complicates the issue. Drawing on existing analyses of this media environment, the dominance of profit-driven motives, political influences, and algorithmic interference exacerbates the vulnerability of journalists, particularly women, who are disproportionately targeted in this environment.

In this context, gender-based and sexual harassment manifests differently within Indian mediascape, thus requiring a re-evaluation of frameworks typically applied in Global North. These complexities, including the interplay of socio-political factors and media structures in fostering online misogyny, will be comprehensively examined in Chapter 2 and 3, building upon the foundational arguments presented here.

This study posits that gender-based and sexual harassment manifests distinctly within the Indian mediascape, thereby necessitating a departure from frameworks typically applied in the Global North. This recognition underscores the critical need for a focused investigation into the unique Indian context, which this thesis undertakes. Building on these critical omissions in existing scholarship, my research aims to fill a significant spatial, methodological, and empirical gap by employing intersectional and postcolonial feminist frameworks to analyze the experiences of Indian women journalists.

It seeks to uncover how intersecting factors such as caste, religion, and gender shape the nature and experience of online harassment for these journalists, thereby modulating their vulnerability and coping mechanisms in the digital sphere, and how these factors collectively exacerbate the impact of online harassment on both personal and professional levels. Additionally, this study highlights the broader implications of this harassment for press freedom and democratic discourse in India. Through this work, I intend to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of gendered online harassment in the Global South, offering context-specific insights and strategies to address the systemic inequalities that perpetuate this form of violence.

Study Precursors: Situating the research

In a relatively recent occurrence, The Network of Women in Media, India (NWMI)³ issued a statement condemning the derogatory remarks targeted at Haseena Shaik, a *Telugu* television journalist. This harassment originated on social media platforms associated with a political entity

³ The Network of Women in Media, India (NWMI) is a collective that supports women in the media industry through resource sharing, idea exchange, and advocacy for gender equality and media ethics. It includes over 2000+ members across print, digital, and electronic media, representing most Indian states and some international locations (www.nwmindia.org).

in Andhra Pradesh. After her broadcast on 14 January 2024, Shaik became the subject of a barrage of obscene and vitriolic comments on social media. These attacks were predominantly orchestrated by supporters of the *Telugu Desam Party*, the primary opposition party in the Indian state of *Andhra Pradesh*, and were amplified by inputs from some of the party's official social media accounts.

JOURNALISTS' RIGHTS, ONLINE HARASSMENT, STATEMENTS

“Stop Online Harassment of Haseena Shaik”: NWMI

JANUARY 17, 2024



Haseena Shaik. Photo courtesy: TV9 Telugu

LATEST POSTS

JOURNALISTS' RIGHTS, STATEMENTS

- 1 **NWMI Condemns Exclusion of Women Journalists from the Taliban Press Meet in Delhi**

JOURNALISTS' RIGHTS, ONLINE HARASSMENT, PRESS FREEDOM, STATEMENTS

- 2 **“Stop Harassment of Journalist Gafira Qadir” - NWMI**

STATEMENTS

- 3 **The NWMI Stands in Solidarity with Banu Mushtaq**

JOURNALISTS' RIGHTS, STATEMENTS

- 4 **Social Media Post on Journalists Killed in Gaza**

Fig. 3: Haseena Shaik, Source- NWMI (January 17, 2024)

In both 2017 and 2024, the NWMI condemned the online abuse targeted at Dhanya Rajendran, Editor and Co-Founder of *The News Minute*, while advocating for the creation of safer online spaces. Furthermore, the organization voiced its support for the Delhi High Court's directive to remove defamatory and intimidating content, including articles and videos, circulated by certain

right-wing news portals targeting her (Roy, 2017).

Such incidences underscore the extreme dangers that members of the press face when exposing corruption and abuse of power. While physical violence remains a grave threat, the insidious nature of online harassment poses equally significant challenges to journalistic integrity and safety. A 2015 *Guardian* article states, 'when Anita Sarkeesian launched a YouTube series on misogyny in video games, she received death threats and was forced into hiding' (Valenti, 2015). Named one of Time magazine's 100 most influential people of 2015, Sarkeesian was targeted by extreme online harassment, including a game where users could virtually punch an image of her face until it was bloodied. The situation worsened significantly after the #Gamergate⁴ controversy. The vitriolic comments posted to Anita Sarkeesian included the following comments (Sobieraj, 2017):

@femfreq You are a despicable whore 😊

your fucking ugly you Arab bitch

@femfreq, I hope you get raped by 4 men with 9-inch cocks

@femfreq BITCHES WERE NOT TALKING ABOUT THAT SO I HOPE YOU GET RAPED U FUCKING WHORE

In her book, *Misogyny Online: A Short (and Brutish) History*, Emma Jane (2017, p1) describes online harassment as an 'epidemic' and cites grotesque comments similar to those referenced

⁴ GamerGate, a controversial event that emerged in the U.S. gaming community in 2014, marked a large-scale harassment campaign targeting women in the video game industry, including developers, critics, and journalists. The incident fueled discussions about sexism, inclusivity, and the treatment of women in gaming and online spaces. It also highlighted issues of digital harassment and the role of social media platforms in addressing abusive behavior. Prominent figures like Anita Sarkeesian and Brianna Wu faced severe harassment (Burgess et al., 2017), including death threats, rape threats, doxing, and coordinated online attacks. The hashtag #GamerGate, coined by actor Adam Baldwin on August 27, 2014, became synonymous with the controversy and its broader implications for online safety and harassment policies (Barnes, 2018).

by Sarah Sobieraj (2017) in their article titled *Bitch, slut, skank, cunt: patterned resistance to women's visibility in digital publics*. By directly quoting these graphic and violent remarks, Jane (2017) forces the readers to confront the raw and disturbing reality of online misogyny. Her work emphasizes the urgent need to address this 'epidemic' not only as a digital issue but as a fundamental human rights challenge that affects the freedom, safety, and dignity of women globally.

Jane (2014; 2018) has identified several patterns of online attacks against women that distinguish gender trolling from a more generic form of trolling which she refers to as 'e-bile'. Her extensive empirical research for over two decades builds on the broader concept exemplifying how 'gendered vitriol is proliferating in the cybersphere; so much so that issuing graphic rape and death threats (against women) has become a standard discursive move online' (p.558 Jane, 2014).

In acknowledging the time period since Jane's earliest research, it is important to reflect on the enduring relevance of her findings within the context of my literature review. Spanning over two decades, Jane's work profoundly contributes to the understanding of gender dynamics online. She encapsulates the disturbing proliferation of 'gendered vitriol in the cybersphere', highlighting how issuing graphic rape and death threats against women has disturbingly become a normalized discourse in online interactions (Ibid.). Her insights, although several years old, remain acutely pertinent in today's digital landscape, underscoring the continuous and intensified challenges faced by women in online environments. It is, therefore, important to explore the concept of 'gender trolling', as coined by Karla Mantilla, which explains the specific ways women are targeted online.

The stark reality of the online public sphere sharply contrasts with the initial optimism of early internet researchers, who envisioned a digital landscape free from societal inequities such as gender discrimination and racism. Early researchers held that the advent of the internet would eliminate gendered inequities, racism, and hatred by offering equal opportunities to all (Zoonen, 2002 as cited in Raman & Komarraju, 2017, pp. 131-157); facilitated by technology.

Anne Balsamo's work is of crucial significance in this respect as she juxtaposes these 'potential liberating aspects of the Internet' with 'the virtues of anonymity' while stating that the online world was always 'gendered and marked by race' (Balsamo as cited in Vickery & Everbach, 2018 p.36). In recognizing the potential of digital spaces as arenas for exploring and redefining gender identity, Donna Haraway's seminal (1991) Cyborg Manifesto paper continues to remain pivotal in cyberfeminist studies. The core proposition of this paper argued that the digital world offers an opportunity to create a new language and framework for gender identity, one that could potentially liberate individuals from traditional gender norms and constraints.

This groundbreaking idea ignited extensive debates among feminist scholars, particularly those focusing on internet studies. Central to these debates was the concept of identity in digital spaces – was it possible for a woman to express and experience her gender differently online compared to the physical world? These discussions also examined whether the internet, once envisioned as a disembodied and anonymous medium, could serve as a new frontier for feminist liberation or merely replicate the patriarchal structures prevalent offline (Raman & Komarraju, 2017). These tensions underscore the dual nature of digital platforms, serving both as spaces of empowerment and opportunity and as mirrors of entrenched societal power imbalances.

Scope of the Study

This study examines the impact of online harassment on women journalists in India, focusing on its psycho-emotional, professional, and socio-cultural dimensions. It explores how gendered abuse in digital spaces perpetuates societal inequities and undermines women's empowerment in journalism. Additionally, my research aims to explore the broader implications for the field of journalism. Employing a mixed-methods approach that integrates quantitative surveys with qualitative in-depth interviews, the study provides a comprehensive analysis of this complex issue.

While I review the existing literature to provide a historical context, the analysis primarily focuses on the past decade, a period marked by the rise of social media and increased online harassment. This focus captures the contemporary digital dynamics affecting women journalists in India. This research primarily concentrates on *gendered forms of online harassment*, including sexualized threats, doxxing, and caste-based abuse, which are particularly prevalent in the Indian context. While other forms of cyber abuse, such as general trolling or non-gendered hate speech, are acknowledged, they are not the primary focus of my research.

However, gendered elements within these broader forms of harassment, including instances where general trolling targets women specifically due to their gender, have been considered as part of the analysis. Offline harassment is outside the scope of the study, unless directly resulting from or escalating due to online abuse. The research centers on women journalists, including non-binary, gender-fluid, and transgender individuals, across various media platforms in India, highlighting the gendered nature of online harassment.

A total of 183 participants from multiple Indian states were surveyed, ensuring a regional analysis of how harassment dynamics differ across various geographic and socio-cultural contexts, highlighting variations in experiences, and perceptions of online harassment. While my investigation uses a robust methodology, it does not seek to generalize its findings beyond the specific sample. Instead, it offers nuanced, context-specific insights that can guide future research. The study's ethical framework⁵ prioritizes participant privacy, safety, and confidentiality, which also limited the scope of in-person interviews.

This research does not explore mitigation strategies or legal recourse for online harassment, though these are vital to the broader discussion. Instead, the focus is on how harassment affects the daily lives and professional practices of women journalists, rather than on policy solutions or legal protections. While these issues are acknowledged, they fall outside the scope of this dissertation and are recommended for further exploration in future studies.

Chapter Outlines

The opening chapter examines the complex interplay between gender, caste, nationalism, and politics in shaping feminist discourses and women's roles in India. It begins by tracing the historical connections between gender dynamics and nation-building, particularly in the post-colonial context, where imperial legacies and ethnic divisions have perpetuated systemic inequalities. The chapter critically examines contemporary right-wing nationalist agendas and their role in shaping the construct of the 'ideal Indian modern woman,' which serves to reinforce

⁵ Ethics approval was granted by the DCU Research Ethics Committee (Reference Number: DCUREC/2022/163) before data collection commenced. A copy of the approval letter is included in Appendix [C].

patriarchal norms and constrain feminist advocacy.

Additionally, it evaluates the legal frameworks addressing gender discrimination and harassment, highlighting their limitations in safeguarding women in male-dominated fields like journalism. The chapter also explores the challenges faced by women in Indian journalism, including systemic barriers and harassment, while addressing the rise of antifeminist narratives led by Men's Rights Activists (MRAs). Together, these discussions provide a foundation for understanding the broader socio-political and cultural factors influencing the experiences of women journalists in the digital age.

Chapter 2 focuses on gender-based harassment within digital culture. It identifies and evaluates the concepts and definitions surrounding digital harassment, highlighting how it is perceived and addressed in different contexts. Relevant literature on digital journalism in India is reviewed, highlighting how technological advancements have shaped the media landscape. The chapter also addresses media ownership patterns in India, analyzing how they influence journalistic practices and content, especially in the digital age, and demonstrating how they can both exacerbate and mitigate the risks of online harassment faced by journalists.

The third chapter (*Chapter 3*) addresses the realities of online harassment, specifically targeting women journalists in India. It examines the nature of this harassment, its impact on the personal and professional lives of female journalists, and the broader implications for freedom of speech and gender equality. It reviews the key ways in which forms and manifestations of online misogyny and abuse against journalists have been researched and theorized, drawing upon real-life examples and case studies.

Because there is considerably less academic research on this topic in the context of India than in the Global North, it is important to identify here the ways in which western scholarship in this field is both useful and sometimes inadequate for understanding the Indian context. The literature highlights that the intersection of gender, media freedom, political extremism, and the rise of right-wing nationalism has significantly increased the risks faced by Indian women in journalism, manifesting in culturally specific ways.

Overall, this chapter provides a comprehensive overview of relevant academic scholarship on the complexities surrounding gender, feminism, digital culture, and journalism in India, with a particular emphasis on the unique challenges faced by women in the field.

Chapter 4 outlines the research design, data collection process, and methodological approach, detailing the challenges faced and the ethical considerations observed in this study. It also justifies the chosen methods, emphasizing the importance of Critical Discourse Analysis in exploring my research questions.

I present my findings from Chapter 5 through Chapter 8, which collectively analyze the key dimensions of gendered online harassment and its broader implications. *In Chapter 5*, I present the key findings from both quantitative and qualitative data, offering a comprehensive analysis of the issue and concluding the mixed-method approach's contribution to understanding gendered online harassment in my research.

Chapter 6 reveals how caste and gender intersect to shape experiences of institutional discrimination, media representation, and socio-economic disparities, while also addressing the resilience and normalization of these inequities.

Chapter 7 presents findings on how right-wing political ideologies shape journalistic practices through targeted online suppression and structural control, underscoring their broader implications for democratic principles in the country. Additionally, it highlights the global relevance of these findings, given the rise of far-right subcultures and their influence on journalism and democratic processes worldwide.

Chapter 8 offers evidence of the resilience demonstrated by women journalists, detailing their psycho-emotional responses, strategies for adaptation and empowerment, and the complex duality of resilience as both a source of strength and a burden. It concludes by offering a redefinition of gendered online harassment and identifying directions for future research.

Chapter 9 synthesizes my research findings, highlighting their significance, theoretical and policy implications, as well as their limitations.

Chapter 1

Gender Discourses and Feminism in India

This chapter delves into the intricate relationships between women, gender, and feminism in the Indian context, tracing the historical impact of nation-building on gender dynamics. Beginning with an exploration of the nation-building process and its impact on women's roles, the review will trace the historical trajectory of gender dynamics in India, highlighting significant shifts and continuities.

It critiques the concept of the 'Ideal Indian Modern Woman,' exploring how societal expectations shape identities and experiences. The chapter also addresses challenges faced by women in journalism, focusing on issues of harassment and resilience as they navigate a predominantly male-dominated field. Finally, I will address the rise of Men's Rights Activists (MRAs) and antifeminism in India, considering how these movements respond to and challenge feminist discourses. Through this analysis, the chapter highlights the complexities of gender relations and contemporary feminist issues in the country

1.1 Gender Dynamics and Nation-Building: A Historical Perspective

Gender discourses and feminism in India are deeply intertwined with the nation-building process, a dynamic that predates its colonial rule (Kumar, 1993). Feminism historically intersected with various national movements, including the struggle for independence and the subsequent shaping of a modern Indian state (Ahluwalia, 2003). Notably, the field of gender in India is extensive, multifaceted, and profoundly contested, with historical antecedents spanning several

centuries, rendering it impossible to provide a comprehensive overview within a single review (Purkayastha *et al.*, 2003). Since independence, feminist movements have played a crucial role in advocating for women's rights and gender equality. These movements have led to significant legislative and social changes, including the introduction of laws against domestic violence and dowry practices⁶, and the amendment of inheritance laws and property rights.

With the progression of urbanization and an increasing emphasis on education, a significant number of Indian women have entered the workforce, making substantial contributions to the nation's economic development (Mammen & Paxson, 2000). This demographic shift has disrupted traditional gender roles, sparking critical discourse on women's economic contributions within the broader framework of nation-building. Although women's representation in politics remains limited, there has been a gradual increase in leadership positions over recent years (Varghese, 2020).

The increase in women's participation in Indian politics has been well-documented, particularly the notable advancements in local governance through mechanisms like the Panchayati Raj system, which reserves seats for women (Duflo, 2005). The enactment of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments in 1993 (Khan, 2023), mandating one-third representation for women in local governance, was a significant step toward integrating women into the nation-building process. Despite these advancements, Indian women continue to face significant challenges, including gender-based violence, discrimination, and underrepresentation in certain

⁶ The dowry system in India, involving the transfer of wealth from a bride's to a groom's family at the time of marriage, has evolved from a financial security mechanism for women to a tool of gender oppression, contributing to inequality and financial strain (Srinivasan & Lee, 2004). Despite being outlawed in 1961, it persists, often fueling domestic violence, dowry-related deaths, and the commodification of women (Gondal, 2015), reflecting deep-rooted patriarchal norms and economic pressures.

sectors (Varghese, 2020). The patriarchal structure of Indian society often resists the changes brought about by feminist movements, creating ongoing challenges in the nation-building process (Sethi, 1996).

The trajectories of post-colonial nation-building are extremely complex, with the interplay of gender identities and associated power hierarchies forming a critical part of their dynamics. Historically, such processes of reconfiguration and reconstruction have been shaped by factors such as gender, race, class, religion, caste, and color, often resulting in the exclusion of women. Several scholars have examined the roles of ethnicity, class, gender, and religion in the construct of a nation's identity (Yuval-Davis & Anthias, 1989; Lorentzen & Turpin, 1998; Berger, Lorenz & European Science Foundation, 2011). According to (Mayer, 2000 p.1),

The ideology which members of the community, those who are of the same kind, share— through which they identify with the nation and express their national loyalty— is what we call nationalism [...] nationalism becomes the language through which sexual control and repression (specifically, but not exclusively, of women and homosexuals) is justified, and masculine prowess is expressed and exercised

In addressing the dichotomy of goals that men and women foresee for a nation, Nagel (1998) states that a constellation of masculine socio-political ideologies glorify motherhood yet subordinate women. Despite women revolutionaries and activists playing a significant role in the 'making and unmaking of states [...], scripts in which these roles are embedded are written primarily by men, for men, and about men, and that women are, by design, supporting actors whose roles reflect masculinist notions of femininity and of women's "proper place"' (*Ibid.*p.

243). Late 19th and early 20th century scholars from Europe and the U.S. have examined the link between gender and nationalism, rooted in political ideologies and cultural norms (Yuval-Davis, 1997; Cohn & Enloe, 2017), often portraying women as supporters of male-led endeavors or symbols of national honor. These perspectives remain relevant in analyzing gender and nationalism in contemporary post-colonial and global contexts.

Mosse (1982, p.222) explains how nationalism was instrumental in controlling sexuality 'to reinforce what society considered normal, but it also provided the means through which changing sexual attitudes could be absorbed and tamed into respectability'. Manliness or the qualities traditionally ascribed to men by virtue of their gender such as physical strength, toughness, restrictive emotionality, bravery etc. were 'accepted as the real source of power, and men had to think of their nation-states first. Femininity was accepted as a national symbol, and woman was the guardian of the traditional order' (Aydoğan, 2021 p.2). Gender binaries were thus created and reinforced to deploy a certain set of roles, behaviors, and attitudes appropriate for a respective gender.

Kandiyoti (1991 p.429) has examined the elements of a nation's construct in post-colonial states that are manifested in varied forms of control over women according to 'men's interests'. This view is also supported by Nira Yuval-Davis (1997) and Floya Anthias (1989) who advocate that control over women's sexuality is considered vital to a nation's identity as they are controlled for their capacity and characteristics associated with motherhood. Similarly, Acker (1989 p.235) notes, 'patriarchy, in radical feminist versions, was seen as universal, trans-historical and a trans-cultural phenomenon; women were everywhere oppressed by men in more or less the same

ways'. Cabrerizo et. al, (2014 p.10) note, as a discipline, history has been hardened by the masculinization of literary discourse and the exclusion of women and women writers.

Women were historically considered biological reproducers shaped by 'socio-religious norms' (Lorentzen & Turpin, 1998 p.43; Davis & Anthias, 1989) and the manifestations of cultural narratives. Much of the academic debate that has dominated the post-colonial Indian construct in recent years has its antecedents in political issues that were particularly contentious in the post-partition times. The gendered power hierarchies⁷ and the colonial domination leading to the demarcation of 'insiders vs outsiders' (Talbot, 1995) are inextricably linked to the nationalist underpinnings of masculinity over femininity.

While the broader literature demonstrates that post-colonial debates are heavily influenced by the political upheavals of partition (Butalia, 1998; Menon & Bhasin, 1998), I contend, this formulation risks oversimplifying the diversity of these debates. Post-colonial feminist scholarship in India has engaged with a wide array of issues, including but not limited to partition. These debates encompass a broader critique of how colonial and nationalist discourses have shaped gender relations, intersecting with class, caste, religion, and sexuality.

Dibyesh Anand notes, 'Muslim women who were identifying their common interests with Hindu women before the 1993 riots in Mumbai felt that, during violence, it was their "Muslimness" that marked them and their being a "woman" became irrelevant' (Anand, 2007

⁷ Gendered power hierarchies refer to the social structures and systems that distribute power, authority, and resources unequally between genders, often privileging men over women and other gender identities. These hierarchies are embedded in various aspects of society, including institutions, cultural norms, workplace practices, and interpersonal relationships, and they reflect broader patterns of gender inequality. They are deeply ingrained systems of inequality that distribute power unevenly based on gender. (Butler, 1990; Chowdhury, 2020; Pande, 2018).

p.205). The stereotype of the 'overpopulating Muslim' is associated not only with religious factors but also with the perceived heightened virility of Muslim men and the supposed excessive fertility of Muslim women. This constructed notion of virility serves to depict Muslim masculinity as driven by an uncontrolled and unrestrained sexual desire (*Ibid.*), thereby positioning it as a perceived threat to Hindu women.

Nationalism has historically been treated as a basis to promulgate heteronormative ideologies. This, in turn, subjugates sexual minorities in its epistemological foundation, thereby cementing gender binaries in societal structures. Societal structures, including legal systems and cultural norms, are predominantly built around the binary concept of gender, which posits two distinct and opposite genders - male and female - leaving little space for non-binary or gender non-conforming identities (Foucault, 1980). These binaries become deeply embedded in nationalist discourses, where the family and reproductive roles of women are framed as central to cultural continuity (Chatterjee, 1993; Yuval-Davis, 1997).

However, Foucault's concept of power/knowledge suggests that the epistemological foundations of such societal constructs, including nationalism, are not fixed or monolithic but are instead contested and reshaped through various forms of resistance, such as queer activism (Foucault, 1976). This critique posits that while nationalism has often enforced heteronormative ideals, counter-narratives and subaltern epistemologies – those emerging from marginalized communities – actively challenge the binary gender norms central to nationalist ideologies.

R.W. Connell's⁸ (1990) framework of gender hierarchies is also useful here, not simply in relation to Western state institutions but because it highlights how nationalist projects reproduce hegemonic masculinity within state structures. In the Indian context, scholars such as Sinha (1995) and Sarkar (1995) show how nationalism mobilized particular masculine and feminine roles – warrior men and sacrificial women – to reinforce gender binaries, echoing Connell's analysis of how institutional hierarchies are structured along gendered lines. Thus, nationalism and nation-building can be seen as deeply implicated in the reproduction of heteronormativity, even as they remain contested by alternative feminist and queer imaginaries. Despite advancements, the imprint of gender stereotyping remains deeply embedded in the internal dynamics and practices of institutions. According to Arpita Chakraborty (2017 p.55)

In postcolonial states, the oppression of women takes a completely different turn. Women who are at the margins of these postcolonial nations, in particular, face the worst kinds of oppression. Not only do the power dynamics between men and women here lead to rape and assaults on women, but the oppression is worsened by the power relations between the state and marginalized civilian populations

In practical terms, postcolonial feminism advocates for policies and practices that are informed by the specific contexts and needs of women in postcolonial states. This includes supporting grassroots movements, promoting local leadership, and ensuring that international aid and development programs are designed with an understanding of local gender dynamics.

In their book 'Woman–Nation–State', Anthias & Yuval-Davis (1989) present a theoretical

⁸ Raewyn Connell is a trans woman who transitioned later in life. She previously published her work under the gender-neutral name 'R. W. Connell' until 2006, when she began using her new name.

framework outlining women's role in nation-building. They are women as: 1) biological reproducers of national populations, 2) maintainers of national boundaries through marital and sexual norms, 3) active transmitters and creators of national culture, 4) symbolic representatives of national differences, and 5) engaged participants in national struggles. This model positions women as central, active contributors to the shaping and sustaining of national identities.

Paradoxically, as Jennifer Thomson notes, while the third and fifth categories imply an active engagement of women, the remaining ones depict a more passive and traditional role (Thomson, 2020). Nationalism intersects with sexuality through stereotypes that embody perceived sexual traits specific to nationalities (Pryke, 1998). The prominence of such stereotypes in specific historical periods highlights the fluidity of national identities and their susceptibility to historical and cultural contexts. Moreover, the most extreme manifestations of this dynamic, such as sexual violence in warfare, underscore the use of gender and sexuality as tools of power and control in conflict situations. What emerges from this examination is how ideologies such as nationalism exploit individual and bodily autonomy to advance political or military objectives, thus underscoring the role of gender and sexuality not only in shaping national identity but also as mechanisms of power in conflict.

The imprint of historical imperialism and colonial rule, marked by power, control and domination, is a crucial lens for understanding the fabric of our contemporary world. Naaman (2000) takes a postcolonial view of the state of female subjectivity and the evolution of a nation arguing how women who rise to prominence had to renegotiate their positioning in the contemporary patriarchal world. According to McClintock *et. al*, (2010: 89):

No nation in the world grants women and men the same access to the rights and resources of the nation-state. Yet with the notable exception of Frantz Fanon, male theorists have seldom felt moved to explore how nationalism is implicated in gender power [...] women are typically constructed as the symbolic bearers of the nation but are denied any direct relation to the national agency

Therefore, essentially a woman's citizenship or relation to the nation is anchored in social relations to a man through marriage. Moreover, even globally during the 19th century, men were prominently awarded citizenship/voting rights and women were nowhere in consideration. The late century saw incremental progress in women's acquisition of constitutional rights, including property ownership, alongside their formal entry into the political landscape (Reid & Ward, 2014). Even so, they were predominantly regarded as subordinate to men rather than as autonomous political figures.

This not only limited women's legal and political rights but also reinforced their dependency on men for access to citizenship and the benefits it conferred. The legacy of such historical exclusions continues to influence contemporary gender relations and the political status of women. These processes underline the historic relegation of women to symbolic roles within nationalist narratives, often excluding them from direct participation in national decision-making process. It highlights the systemic denial of political agency and rights to women, an issue that is being gradually addressed over time.

Overall, the interplay between nationalism and gender offers a vital framework for examining how nations construct identities, legitimize political agendas, and shape gender norms and relations, extending beyond their borders to the global arena. The literature on nationalism,

however, has gradually evolved from focusing solely on women's roles to examining gender as a social construct, exploring how masculinity and femininity influence and shape roles and concepts within nationalist ideologies. This has opened up new avenues for understanding the intersections of gender, power, and nationalism.

1.2 Nation-Building in Post-Colonial Societies: The Legacy of Imperialism and Ethnic Division

Nation-building is a diverse and discursive process that involves myriad strategies along with linguistic devices – a process wherein boundaries of the modern state and the national community become congruent (Mylonas, 2020). State-making in post-colonial polyethnic societies is even more complex as the colonial powers have in the past attempted to divide the indigenous population into categories to serve their imperialistic purposes. 'Perhaps the most complex example of the dominant-ethnic pattern of state-making and nation-building is provided by India' (Smith, 1986 p.254) with its numerous caste and religious communities.

'In the important religious-ethnic divisions, Hinduism has proved a potent, if unstable, unifying bond, despite communal violence between Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs' (*Ibid.*). While Hinduism provided a unifying framework, its instability as a cohesive identity has perpetuated communal violence, often framed as a Hindu-Muslim conflict.

However, this narrative overlooks the nuanced socio-political structures and religious dynamics that existed before colonial intervention. Scholars like Wolpert (2009) and Talbot (1995/2009) argue that colonial policies played a pivotal role in reconfiguring these relationships, framing communal identities in adversarial terms. The leading scholarship over the last decade

expounds on the colonialists' implications in India, and the extremities of the religious identities but what remains broadly obscure and ambiguous is whether religion had always been the focal point of the Hindu-Muslim conflict.

There is a handful of work on Hindu-Muslim identities in ways that allude to their 'pre-colonial' form of religious communities. A few writers believe that communal violence was a British construct (*Ibid.*) but there is a limited literature on the gendered implications of this historical violence wherein women eventually bore the burden of the ethno-religious construct.

These divisions were not merely structural but deeply ideological, shaping the ways in which different communities, including women, were positioned within the emerging national framework. The literature suggests that women's position within nationalism and nation-building is 'germane to the making of the Indian nation' (Chaudhuri, 1999 p.113). Navarro-Tejero (2019) has examined the brutal and traumatic account of how women (raped, paraded naked) from all ethnic backgrounds became the greatest victims of post-partition India in 1947. Horrific accounts of mutilated female breasts 'framed in the rhetoric of *Mother India*, as the violence inflicted upon women was equivalent to a sacrilege against one's religion, family and country' showcases the reduction of women to their bodies which are supposed to be the procreator and nurturer, bearing the honour of their nation.

According to Menon & Bhasin (as quoted in Navarro-Tejero, 2019 p.45), 'amputating her breasts at once desexualizes a woman and negates her as wife and mother; no longer a nurturer (if she survives, that is) she remains a permanently inauspicious figure, almost as undesirable as a barren woman'. So, while men are generally expected to defend the 'ego' of the nation, women's national importance is based on their roles including biological, ideological, and cultural

reproduction (McClintock, Mufti & Shohat, 2010; Mayer, 2000; Yuval-Davis, 1997).

In examining the intersection of gender and nation-building, it is essential to consider how women's roles have been constructed within national narratives, particularly in the context of India's post-independence formation. Their roles in national discourses were shaped by cultural constructs that positioned them as symbols of sacrifice, motherhood, and purity. Throughout my upbringing in India, I frequently encountered the expression '*Sati-Savitri*⁹ *naari* (woman)', which is traditionally used to describe a woman embodying cultural refinement and purity. This term, deeply embedded in Indian societal narratives, serves as a benchmark for ideal femininity (Singh, 2021), encapsulating virtues of devotion and moral rectitude.

Given that gender norms in India are deeply rooted in religious texts, it is important to examine how traditional practices like the 16th-century '*Sati Pratha*' were enforced upon women. *Sati* refers to the now-outlawed practice in which a widow was compelled – or in some cases ideologically persuaded – to burn herself alive on the funeral pyre of her deceased husband. Although Sati was abolished and declared a criminal offense under Regulation XVII of 1829, its legacy continues to influence the socio-cultural ethos of the country, reflecting the enduring impact on the legal and social status of women in India. 'Its glory was commemorated long after it was abolished: its hold on Hindu emotions and pride proved amazingly strong' (Sarkar, 2019).

Scholars such as Mani (1998) and Hawley (1994) have shown how colonial and nationalist discourses around *Sati* were not merely about "saving women," but became deeply entangled with questions of tradition, community honor, and the symbolic role of women in constructing

⁹ In Hindu mythological tale, Savitri, a princess marries Satyavan, a prince destined for an early death. Defying fate, she confronts Yama, the god of death, using her wit and determination to convince him to revive her husband. This tale showcases her resourcefulness and steadfast love, securing Satyavan's life against all odds.

nationhood.

Much of the academic discourse depicts how a modern, educated, upper-class, Hindu woman is expected to 'behave'; long after such horrific practices have been invalidated (Singh, 2021). The term '*Sati*' although a poignant reminder of the bygone era, is reminiscent of why a modern Indian woman in a post-colonial nation must naturally embrace such qualities of sacrifice and selflessness. Such concepts are often invoked to ensure the oppression and subordination of women who are deemed to be 'influenced by Western culture'. Furthermore, Chandrashekar (2021) emphasizes how the colonial encounter is key in understanding the racialization of caste-based differences in India.

European scholars, particularly during the 18th and 19th centuries, undertook extensive studies of ancient Indian texts. This period saw the emergence of Indology, a field dedicated to the study of Indian culture, languages, and history. Scholars like Max Müller translated and interpreted Sanskrit texts, often through a Western lens that included contemporary European ideas about race and hierarchy. These scholars applied racial theories prevalent in Europe at the time, which were influenced by emerging ideas in fields such as anthropology, and re-interpreted the *Varna* system, which was originally a socio-religious classification, as a racial hierarchy.

This was influenced by the racial classifications in Europe that often ranked people based on physical and supposed intellectual differences. For instance, the portrayal of the Aryans in these texts as light-skinned conquerors was taken to signify a racial conquest of dark-skinned indigenous people, thus racializing the *Varna* system.

'European Sanskritists¹⁰' often read ancient Indian texts, such as the *Vedas* and the *Manusmriti*, and interpreted the distinctions between *Varnas* as racial distinctions, interpretations which were then propagated through colonial administration and education systems, reinforcing a racial hierarchy that was not originally present in the same form in Indian society. The British colonial policies further institutionalized these racial distinctions, which affected social and political life in India, contributing to a legacy of caste-based discrimination seen through a racial lens (*Ibid.*).

In *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*, Dirks argues that colonialism, influenced by racial thinking, rigidified the caste system. He examines how European Orientalists interpreted the *Varna* system through a racial lens, which shaped colonial policies and reinforced caste-based views of Indian society. Dirks challenges the notion of caste as an unchanging institution, highlighting Indian society's responses to its colonial reification.

Gender, as a pivotal pillar in the nation-building process, has been deeply shaped by the caste-based structures and women often bear the dual burden of caste and gender oppression, with their roles confined to maintaining both familial honor and caste purity. This intertwining of caste and gender continues to influence societal expectations and their status in both public and private spheres. The imperial and post-colonial legacies of nation-building have, indeed, left an indelible mark on the position and rights of women in the society.

Post-independence nation-building efforts did little to dismantle these entrenched

¹⁰ Notably, despite an exhaustive literature search, no peer-reviewed English-language publications focused on Sanskrit learning in non-heritage settings in the West could be identified. The topic only occasionally appears in studies related to spiritual and religious beliefs (Bassetti & Reinboldt, 2023)

structures. Instead, as Smith (1986) and Leidig (2020) suggest, the state often leveraged caste and gender norms to create a unified national identity, which has exacerbated particularly under the BJP's *Hindutva*-driven agenda. Women have been positioned as symbolic bearers of cultural and religious identity, reinforcing their roles within patriarchal and caste-based frameworks. [The intricacies of this gendered dimension will be explored in detail in Chapter 3 of this dissertation].

1.3 Intersection of Caste, Gender, and Politics

The caste system in India, rooted in ancient texts and religious beliefs, divides society into hierarchical groups based on birth and occupation. Although initially intended to organize social structures, it evolved into a rigid, hereditary structure, which continues to shape social dynamics, from education to marriage, politics, and economics (Deshpande & Kerbo, 2010). Despite reforms over the years, including during the British rule, the system remains deeply embedded in India's socio-cultural fabric, perpetuating cycles of privilege and deprivation.

Hindutva, a political ideology advocating Hindu dominance, has gained significant traction under the BJP, particularly under Prime Minister Narendra Modi. While distinct from Hinduism, *Hindutva's* focus on cultural and political hegemony often targets minority communities, especially Muslims and Christians (Arya, 2020; Najar, 2023). Coined by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar in 1923, *Hindutva* now influences policies and rhetoric promoting Hindu nationalism (Kamal, 2023; Natrajan, 2021). Framed within the broader context of press freedom repression under the BJP regime, the intricate dynamics between caste and *Hindutva*—one of my primary findings—will be examined in the subsequent findings Chapter 7.

Despite significant socio-political movements, caste identities remain entrenched in India,

influencing modern socio-economic conditions. The persistence of caste-based discrimination, both in rural and urban areas, is evident in practices like the ‘two-tumbler¹¹’ system and housing discrimination, where lower-caste individuals face exclusion in various forms. (Abraham & Janarthanan, 2024). These divisions remain deeply ingrained in society, showing that caste-based inequalities are still a significant issue in India today.

Therefore, understanding the historical context is essential to understanding the challenges women face in asserting their agency. The modern state’s attempts to craft a unified identity continue to instrumentalize gender, subjecting women to both offline and online forms of control and violence. The historical marginalization of women within these communal frameworks finds a troubling continuity in the digital age. Online harassment of women, particularly those in positions of power such as journalists, activists, or political leaders, often draws on the same ethno-religious and gendered narratives.

For instance, women journalists reporting on sensitive issues like communal violence or state policies often face gendered and religiously charged abuse online (Posetti et al., 2021; Bhat, 2024). Such attacks are not simply personal but seek to delegitimize women’s professional authority while reasserting control over public narratives (Fraser, 2014; Udupa, 2018). They also draw on longer histories of ethno-religious antagonism, where the colonial construction of communal identities continues to reverberate in the digital sphere (Ahmed, 2023). In this sense, gendered harassment functions as a tool for reinforcing socio-political hierarchies that are both

¹¹ The ‘two-tumbler system’ refers to a form of caste-based segregation where upper-caste individuals use a separate drinking glass (tumbler) to avoid direct contact with lower-caste people. This practice, symbolizing untouchability, persists in some rural and urban areas in India, highlighting the continued social exclusion of Dalits and lower-caste communities despite legal reforms.

contemporary and historically embedded.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty critiques how Western feminist scholars often depict 'Third World Women' as a monolithic group, reinforcing ethnocentric universalism within the global dominance of Western scholarship. She highlights how this discourse frames these women as a homogeneous, powerless group shaped solely by cultural and socio-economic constraints, overlooking their diverse lived experiences and historical contexts.

Mohanty critiques Western feminist interpretations of sexual control over women in Third World countries, particularly their conflation of '*purdah*' with severe human rights violations like rape and forced prostitution. She argues that such views overlook the cultural and ideological nuances of practices like '*purdah*'. Additionally, she critiques the oversimplified use of terms such as reproduction, family, marriage, and patriarchy, emphasizing the importance of considering their local, cultural, and historical contexts.

Mohanty (1984) critiques the universalization of the sexual division of labor, emphasizing that while it symbolizes women's oppression, its historical explanations vary and cannot be treated as identical. She argues that literary texts must be interpreted within their specific socio-historical contexts. Feminist analyses that overlook these distinctions risk constructing monolithic representations of 'Third World Women', ignoring the nuanced interplay between their lived oppressions, political choices, and broader discursive portrayals.

Additionally, the author is conscious of using such terms as 'third world' that 'implicitly reinforce existing economic, cultural and ideological hierarchies. It is crucial to examine what constitutes the 'Third World' in light of the ontological perspectives offered by scholars in the

field, rather than relying on the simplistic and widely used definition of 'poor countries'. Although the term has always been somewhat ambiguous, during the Cold War, nations aligned with the Western bloc were referred to as the First World, the Communist bloc as the Second World, and the remaining countries, those not aligned with either group, came to be known as the Third World (Silver, 2019).

Tomlinson (2003, p. 307) observes that the term 'Third World' has often been used normatively rather than analytically, complicating its application. Following World War II, the global position of these nations shifted, with many labeled as 'Third World' due to poverty and histories of European conquest or colonization (Owusu, 2015).

Many nations previously classified as 'Third World' face incomplete industrial modernization, political instability, and lower per capita incomes compared to developed countries. However, as the World Bank notes, we now live in a multipolar world where several of these nations, such as India, Brazil, Indonesia, Mexico, and China, are recognized as developing economies and emerging economic powers (Zoellick, 2010; Owusu, 2015).

Returning to the feminist discourse on women's position in the 'Third World,' it is notable that many of these countries are located in the Southern Hemisphere and are often referred to as Developing Nations, with India being a prominent example.

1.4 Contemporary Indian Women and Right-wing Nationalist Agendas

Following Mohanty's critique of hierarchical representations of 'Third World Women,' Partha Chatterjee's *Women & Nation Revisited* shifts attention to the specific experiences of

contemporary Indian women. His analysis highlights the tension between their increased public visibility and enduring socio-cultural restrictions, challenging conventional constructs.

The author contends that despite women's growing presence in public spaces such as education, employment, and leisure, they continue to face stringent socio-cultural restrictions. These restrictions encompass enforced norms related to security, dress, behavior, and mobility, underscoring the persistent disparities that constrain freedoms typically afforded to men. (Ray, 2019). This aligns with Michel Foucault's view of power, which subtly shapes norms and behaviors through everyday interactions and institutional practices, reinforcing societal divisions without overt coercion. Foucault's framework expands our understanding of power, illustrating how gendered restrictions are perpetuated beyond overt dominance (Taylor, 2014).

The various narratives that have their manifestations in the construction of a woman's identity in 21st-century India are significantly impacted by right-wing nationalism. Women have always remained central 'signifiers of nationalism' to the present '*Hindutva* (Hinduness) project' (Singh, 2016, p.494). The paradox of women being venerated as divine figures (*Devi*) in ancient religious exegesis, yet subjected to systemic oppression and violence, underscores deep contradictions that remain largely unaddressed.

According to *Ibid.*, 'the dual construction of the feminine identity, a priori is universally shared but is more specific to the Hindu culture and traditions, particularly by the way of cathartic actions of the Hindu nationalists'. As discussed previously, the academic discourse on nationalism in the field depicts the association of a country's geographical boundary to a virgin female body hailed as a motherly figure that has been attacked by foreign invaders (Nagel, 1998; Mookherjee,

2008; Singh, 2016). According to (Yuval-Davis, 1997, p.20) 'citizenship has been linked with the ability to take part in armed struggle for national defense, this ability has been equated with maleness, while the female has been equated with weakness and the need for male protection'. Thus 'political motherhood' (Mookherjee, 2008) is used as a tool through which women are epitomized in the nationalist project representing even those women who refrain from being stereotypically situated, breaking down the public/private dichotomies in the process.

Basu (1996) argues that, compared to other political entities, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has facilitated greater engagement for women within its ranks particularly during the 1991 election campaign, which coincided with the contentious *Ayodhya* issue. The dispute revolved around the Babri Masjid in Uttar Pradesh, which Hindu nationalist groups, including the BJP, claimed was constructed on the birthplace of Ram. Throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Ayodhya movement became a powerful mobilizing strategy, with women encouraged to participate in rallies, demonstrations, and cultural campaigns, thereby expanding their political presence within the party. The mosque's demolition in December 1992 triggered widespread communal violence but also marked a turning point in Hindu nationalist politics, where women's participation was central to the movement's mass appeal (Jaffrelot, 1996; Hansen, 1999).

A serious weakness with this argument, however, is that religious politics in the name of Hinduism and associated women's activism serve as a stark example of how women are used to further the political aims of the Hindu right. These dynamics highlight a conflict between women's and minority rights and the broader agenda of religious politics, often sidelining genuine women's rights issues (Hasan, 2010).

The Shah Bano case¹² exemplified this tension, igniting a debate between women's rights and religious freedoms. Critics, including feminists and secularists, saw the government's response to this case as regressive for gender equality, denying Muslim women fair post-divorce financial support (Fayiza, 2021). Despite India's predominantly non-religious governance since the independence, excluding the incumbent BJP-led coalition period, Hindu nationalism has grown, often exploiting anxieties about Hindu identity and perceived state favouritism towards minorities by the previous governments, particularly Muslims.

Human Rights Watch (2020) reported a surge in gender-based violence linked to political ideologies in India. Muslim women were specifically targeted, with abuse centered on both their religion and gender, including threats of rape. This reflects a broader patriarchal and communal agenda designed to reinforce Hindu dominance. Zara Ismail (2020) examines how the 2002 Gujarat riots¹³ set a precedent for using sexual violence as a political tool, with many cases remaining unresolved, reinforcing impunity for such actions under the *Hindutva* ideology.

Upper-caste Hindus, who dominate politically and culturally, use this nationalism to unify Hindus against a common 'enemy within' rather than shared values. The rise of Hindu nationalism

¹² A landmark legal battle in India concerning the rights of Muslim women to maintenance after divorce, the Shah Bano case (1985) in India involved a Muslim woman, Shah Bano, seeking alimony after a divorce. The Supreme Court granted her maintenance, interpreting Islamic law in line with secular principles. This ruling sparked controversy among Muslims, leading to political interventions. The government, under pressure, then passed a law limiting the maintenance rights of Muslim women, sparking debates on secularism and religious laws in India.

¹³ The 2002 Gujarat riots were a series of violent incidents that occurred in Gujarat, India, following the Godhra train burning, in which 59 Hindu pilgrims died. The violence that ensued primarily targeted Muslim communities, resulting in over 1,000 deaths, with many victims subjected to horrific acts of violence, including sexual assaults. Human rights organizations, such as Human Rights Watch, have criticized the role of the state government, led by then-Chief Minister Narendra Modi, for failing to intervene and, in some cases, for alleged complicity in the violence. Despite numerous investigations, many cases, particularly involving sexual violence, remain unresolved, contributing to ongoing debates about justice and accountability.

has also been fuelled by opposition to affirmative action for lower castes, particularly in northern and western India. This statement refers to the political and social dynamics in India where Hindu nationalism - a political ideology promoting the primacy of Hindu values and culture in the Indian state - has gained momentum, in part, due to its stance against affirmative action policies designed to help lower castes (Chatterji et al., 2019).

In India, affirmative action, often known as reservation, is a set of policies aimed at improving the socio-economic status of historically marginalized groups, including Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and Other Backward Classes (OBCs¹⁴). These policies include quotas in government jobs, educational institutions, and even in legislative bodies, intended to ensure representation and opportunities for these groups [See also: (Bhojani et al., 2019)].

During the Ayodhya movement in the 1990s, Hindu right-wing groups, particularly the Sangh Parivar, mobilized women through affiliated organizations like Rashtriya Sevika Samiti, Durga Vahini, and Mahila Morcha. This marked a strategic effort to project women leaders and involve middle-class, educated women in *Hindutva* activism, despite their general indifference to women's issues. Women activists often played traditional roles in public, such as preparing food for volunteers (Hasan, 2010). Notably, women were vocal in promoting violence during the

¹⁴ The term 'Other Backward Classes' (OBCs) in India denotes a collective of castes that are socially and educationally disadvantaged and are identified for affirmative action under the government's reservation policies. The recognition of OBCs is embedded in the Indian Constitution, specifically under Articles 15(4), 16(4), and 340, which provide the legal framework for their inclusion in educational and employment opportunities. The Mandal Commission Report of 1980 was a landmark initiative that identified 3,743 castes as OBCs, estimating that they constituted approximately 52% of India's population. The Commission recommended reserving 27% of seats in government jobs and educational institutions to promote social inclusion and reduce historical inequalities. The implementation of these recommendations has been central to India's broader efforts to achieve social equity and address systemic caste-based disadvantages. Subsequently, the 102nd Constitutional Amendment Act of 2018 established the National Commission for Backward Classes (NCBC) as a constitutional authority under Article 338B, tasked with monitoring, safeguarding, and advising on the interests and welfare of OBCs. The evolution of OBC classification reflects ongoing efforts to balance historical redress, socio-economic development, and constitutional mandates, making it a critical aspect of India's affirmative action framework (Roy, 2024; Hasan, 2022).[See also: Mandal Commission Report, Government of India, 1980].

Ayodhya movement, with some directly participating in attacks against Muslims, a clear departure from the Fig. of pacifism often associated with women.

Based on fieldwork with women in several Hindu nationalist organizations, Kalyani Devaki Menon (2010 p.27) in her book, *'Everyday nationalism : women of the Hindu right in India'*, explores how explores how gendered constructions of religion, history, national insecurity, and social responsibility are used to recruit individuals from a variety of backgrounds, documenting 'how women use these histories not only to recruit women into the movement to expand its base, but also to reiterate normative Hindu nationalist constructions of the past and "naturalize" them in their social worlds', thus explaining 'what draws thousands upon thousands of women, and men, to a movement that is xenophobic, exclusionary, and tremendously violent'[...] (*Ibid.* p.25)

These episodes highlight the paradox of women's participation in public activism for *Hindutva* while reinforcing conservative roles (Sarkar, 2001). Despite appearing in public roles, these women often returned to traditional domestic spheres, indicating that their activism was more aligned with *Hindutva's* emotional appeal than advocacy for women's rights. *Hindutva's* proponents express pride in women's active street campaigning for *Hindutva*, seeing it as both reinforcing a Hindu communal identity and signifying the emancipation of Hindu women.

Bacchetta (2004), in *'Gender in the Hindu Nation: RSS Women as Ideologues'*, also supports Sarkar's view by analyzing how the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh)[See RSS' description in footnote 39] and its women's wing utilize women's participation to promote Hindu nationalist ideals while reinforcing gendered divisions of labor. Women's activism is encouraged in times of communal violence but remains firmly rooted in maintaining traditional, conservative

roles for women. The Samiti's emphasis on self-sacrifice and motherhood does little to advance women's true emancipation.

The ideology behind this, Sarkar argues, amounts to a capitulation to patriarchy, prioritizing the RSS's objectives over genuine women's issues. (Sarkar, 1999 as cited in Hasan, 2010). 'Women in both their capacities are quite accepting of their 'self-objectification' by the BJP, which is evidenced given that they account for their space of femininity, both as *nari* (women) and *narishakti* (women power as militant), in the service of the Hindu glory and a Hindu bomb (Das, 2006 p.386)'. Thus, while the broader women's movement seeks to challenge women's subordination in family and society, *Hindutva* ideology, despite bringing women into public spaces, continues to reinforce a patriarchal model that confines them within traditional private roles.

While individual acts of defiance against oppressive practices are sometimes celebrated and uplifted into public consciousness, stark contrasts in societal attitudes are highlighted by 'India's Daughter', which exposes the deep-seated patriarchal mindsets still prevalent in many segments of Indian society. 'India's Daughter' a hard-hitting documentary and a poignant reminder of the brutal rape incident of Jyoti Singh in Delhi (2012) 'revealed the dangerous patriarchal mind set of society where the death awaiting rapist, 28-year-old bus driver Mukesh Singh, threatened everybody in front of the camera that - the death penalty will make things even more dangerous for girls. Now when they rape, they won't leave the girl like we did. They will kill her. Before, they would rape and say, "Leave her, she won't tell anyone". Now when they rape, especially the criminal types, they will just kill the girl' (Monira & Pritu, 2017).

Such ideologies maintain women's silence through force, reinforcing the chauvinistic view

that women should not protest even in extreme circumstances, such as during or after a rape. This ideology also contributes to a societal framework where a 'good girl', as defined by traditional beliefs, would neither be raped nor disclose any experience of sexual violence (*Ibid.*). Consequently, women who seek justice for such crimes are often vilified and marginalized, as their actions challenge entrenched norms surrounding chastity and reflect broader patterns of victim-blaming.

I argue these are not merely patriarchal attitudes because patriarchy is only defined by a system of control in the hands of males which might not necessarily be toxic, but rather, they reflect a broader cultural and systemic entrenchment of harmful norms that extend beyond mere gender-based control. These norms, often embedded in social, religious, and political structures, perpetuate a framework where power is exercised not only through male dominance but also through societal validation of these dynamics. Toxicity arises when these norms reinforce exclusion, marginalization, and violence, particularly against women, under the guise of preserving cultural or moral integrity.

The issue extends into cultural misogyny, a more virulent form of gender bias where negative beliefs about women's roles and worth are culturally ingrained and actively perpetuated. This broader context allows for a society not only structured around male dominance but also one that actively punishes and marginalizes women who defy these norms. The BJP government's ban on the documentary, under the pretext of protecting the victim's dignity, highlights how patriarchal structures suppress discourse that challenges systemic injustice. This suppression silences victims and reinforces the cultural norms sustaining gender-based violence, thus perpetuating the very oppression it claims to protect against.

Several scholars have investigated the claim that the BJP's *Hindutva* ideology instrumentalizes Hindu women, using their representation as a means to define communal differences and reinforce Hindu nationalism (EPW Engage, 2021; Dhingra, 2023; Agarwal, 2024). This narrative also serves to maintain post-colonial tensions, particularly with Pakistan, while supporting a Hindu patriarchal framework within India. In this context, Hindu women are positioned as symbols of communal identity and difference, affecting their roles and status within both the community and the broader national discourse (Das, 2006). The BJP's approach thereby intertwines gender dynamics, communal relations, and interstate tensions in its political strategy.

Moreover, women in Hindu Right movements and *Dalit* women are characterized by differing representations and practices. While both groups can be seen as empowered, their political affiliations diverge significantly (Ciotti, 2006). In the context of Hindu women, their entry into politics often stems from a desire to break free from the constraints of domestic roles. This aspiration for greater mobility, however, aligns them with agendas that can be detrimental to minority groups. In contrast, Dalit women involved in political entities like the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) approach politics differently. Their involvement is shaped by the strategic objectives of their party, which prioritize securing power and advancing caste-based interests rather than pursuing broader liberal ideals. *Dalit* politics and Hindu Right groups both engage in identity politics, yet they advocate for distinctly different causes and social objectives.

As noted by Singh (2016), 'Sexual purity is thus inextricably linked to power, but power under patriarchy'. This raises critical questions: How has the state constructed the identity of women in contrast to that of men, and in what ways has the position of women been utilized as a manifestation of a male-centric nationalist agenda in India? Das (2006) discusses the rise of

cultural nationalism together with Hindu cultural patriarchy in early twentieth-century India, 'where the latter was a consequence of the challenges posed to the upper caste and class Hindus by peasants, activists of the non-Brahmin movements and the newly emerging non-Hindus (Muslims and western-educated Indian elites who had been, so-to-speak, de-Hinduicized)' p.371. It was then the new politics of community building started to gain ground and led to the control of female sexuality by Hindu men through patriarchal power (Van der Veer 1994 as cited in *Ibid.*).

Prominent scholars in the field have noted how Brahmanical patriarchy¹⁵ has been reformulated to include Hindu nationalist ideology as contemporary India's religious and cultural anchor. The recent Indian polity, as opposed to the much-heralded secular fabric, is relying on the post-partition and post-colonial demarcation between the 'insiders' i.e. the Hindus and 'outsiders' i.e. Muslims, owing to which women bear the burden of maintaining honor and purity within the family and community (Basu, 1993; Das, 2006; Menon, 2012; Alwis & Jayawardena, 1996). Runa Das maintains it is the woman who must protect the principles of Hindutva, i.e. *pitrabhoomi* (Fatherland), *jati* (bloodline) and *sanskriti* (culture) of the Hindu *Rashtra* (Nation) (Das, 2006).

A critical examination of literature on Hindu nationalist ideology, grounded in Brahmanical patriarchy, is essential to grasp how it has resulted in the control and oppression of women, which is a significant aspect of our study on digital hate and misogyny. Indian historian Uma Chakravarti is regarded as a pioneer in caste and gender studies and has written extensively

¹⁵ Brahmanical patriarchy is a socio-cultural system that intertwines caste and gender hierarchies, deeply rooted in the historical context of Indian society. The term describes how upper-caste (Savarna) men maintain dominance over both women and lower castes through a structured framework of oppression. This system is characterized by the control of women's sexuality and reproductive rights, which are crucial for preserving patrilineal lineage and caste purity.

on the intricate relationship between the two sub-fields. A prominent scholar of women and feminist history, she coined the term *Brahmanical Patriarchy* to explain the core reasons for the oppression of women on the basis of their caste which perpetually aims to maintain patrilineal succession and 'caste purity'. So, the necessity to maintain caste purity in society eventually has its manifestations in the need to control women's sexuality as well as their social behaviour. It will also be pertinent to examine how the age-old system of Brahmanical patriarchy in India profoundly reinforces itself and manifests in the harassment of women journalists in contemporary times.

A recent incident in India ignited significant social media backlash when a photograph of former Twitter CEO, Jack Dorsey, with a group of women journalists, activists, and writers went viral. The Fig. depicted Dorsey posing with the group, one of whom held a placard stating 'Smash Brahminical Patriarchy'. Following this event, Twitter issued multiple apologies. The photo emerged after an informal discussion hosted by Dorsey with women journalists, during which a participant shared her experiences as a *Dalit* woman on Twitter. At the conclusion of the session, she presented the placard to Dorsey as a gift, symbolizing the struggles and resistance of low-caste women against systemic oppression (Das, 2018).

Many users also slammed Twitter's statement saying the company should take a strong position against the oppressive caste system and patriarchy (Iyengar, 2018). Recent media discourse provides evidence of the surging incidences of tensions between the higher castes (Brahmins) and lower castes, in particular (*Dalits*) since the rise of Hindu nationalist ideology under the incumbent Prime Minister Narendra Modi (Krishnan, 2017; Vishwadeepak, 2017).

The evolving gender dynamics in India highlight a complex interplay of historical, cultural,

and socio-political factors. The incident with former Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey and the ensuing social media backlash exemplifies the ongoing struggles and resistance of marginalized communities. These contemporary events underscore the enduring impact of traditional power stressing the need for continued advocacy and reform. As India progresses, it is imperative to recognize and address the deeply rooted inequities that persist, ensuring that the voices of all individuals, irrespective of caste or gender, are heard and valued.

1.5 The Notions of 'Ideal Indian Modern Woman'

'In the Indian context, while the women's movement is a much earlier phenomenon, the term Feminism is a modern one' (Pande, 2018 p.2) comprising numerous socio-cultural and political movements, theories, and moral philosophies concerning equal rights for women. Ghosal (2005) contends that analysis of women's issues in colonial India was limited and concerned with upper-caste Hindu 'bhadromohilas' of the society. In the initial years of the post-Independence period, gender issues invariably got subsumed in issues about economic growth and matters of poverty alleviation. In the post-independence period, the women's movement concerned itself with issues such as dowry, employment rights, land and property rights, political participation of women, *Dalit* marginalized women's right, etc. (Pande, 2018).

If first-wave feminism focused upon absolute rights such as suffrage, access to education and employment etc., second-wave feminism was largely concerned with other issues of equality, such as the end to discrimination, and became broader as the intersectionality of caste, class and culture were also formally incorporated by the state (Phillips, 2004 as cited in Pandey, 2018 p.3; Jain, 2020; Misra, 1997). The key difference between the first and second waves was

that while the former was advocated by men on behalf of women, the latter was primarily led by women and women's organizations.

The 1990s in India marked the rise of third-wave feminism, which also focused on issues of intersectionality, challenging caste, class, and religious divides within the broader feminist movement. This wave emphasized grassroots activism and sought to address the unique experiences of marginalized women, especially *Dalits* and minorities, who faced compounded forms of oppression. By the 2000s, the effects of economic liberalization and advancements in technology catalyzed a cultural shift that emphasized women's rights to freedom, choice, and independence.

While the term 'fourth-wave feminism' originated in the West, it emerged almost simultaneously in India, driven by the widespread adoption of social media (Jain, 2020). With the advent of fourth-wave feminism, cyberfeminism has become a powerful tool for fostering connections and advancing feminist causes across traditional societal barriers. Cyberfeminism has since paved new pathways for feminist activism, enabling women to form solidarities across conservative societies. Movements such as the anti-Hijab protests in Iran and India's #MeToo campaign exemplify how digital platforms amplify voices and foster global connections in the fight against patriarchal oppression. This shift towards interconnected activism aligns with the principles of transnational feminism, which emphasizes examining gendered experiences across borders and fostering coalitions around shared goals.

'In the new millennium, however, Third World feminism seems to have lost its appeal. Transnational feminism, by contrast, has become influential among Third World feminists'

(Grewal and Kaplan 2001 as cited in Herr, 2014 p.2). Accordingly, Third World feminism, while pivotal in challenging Western-centric narratives, often risked homogenizing the experiences of women from the Global South under the singular category of 'Third World Women'. This framing sometimes obscured internal diversities and the ways in which local struggles were shaped by global phenomena such as capitalism, migration, and digital technologies.

Transnational feminism, by contrast, gains traction as it transcends these limitations, offering a more flexible framework for analyzing the intersectionality of gender, race, class, and nationality. Recent scholarship under the transnational feminist paradigm delves deeper into the interplay of gender, state, religion, and community. This approach recognizes that women's experiences cannot be fully understood without considering the influence of state policies, religious ideologies, and communal identities.

In the preceding discussion, Mohanty's critique of Western feminist discourses, particularly their tendency to homogenize 'Third World Women,' emphasizes the importance of context-specific analysis and a nuanced understanding of intersecting oppressions. These insights align with transnational feminism, which examines gendered experiences across cultural and national boundaries. It resists reductive generalizations and provides a framework for building coalitions that balance shared struggles with contextual differences.

While transnational feminism offers a critical lens to examine the intersectionality of gender, state, and community across borders, these intersections are not confined to political or social activism alone. Cultural artifacts, particularly cinema, play a pivotal role in shaping and perpetuating gender norms within specific national contexts. In India, cinema has historically

been a powerful medium for constructing and disseminating societal narratives about women. The portrayal of women in Indian films reflects the complexities of their roles within familial, religious, and national frameworks—narratives that are both shaped by and contribute to the global feminist discourses transnational feminism seeks to address.

These portrayals are crucial to understanding how women in India navigate their identities in both offline and online spaces, including how they experience harassment. Such cinematic narratives often echo the same patriarchal and communal structures that transnational feminism critiques, a localized perspective that resonates globally with women's ongoing struggles. These depictions are pivotal in examining how Indian women navigate their identities and cope with harassment across both offline and online environments.

Pink (2016), a Bollywood film, serves as a critical lens into societal perceptions of financially independent Indian women, who are often viewed as corrupted by Western ideals. It highlights how stepping outside the domestic sphere is framed as damaging to the moral and cultural integrity of the nation. The film critically engages with regressive stereotypes, illustrating the stigmatization of women for behaviors such as drinking or working late-night shifts.

Through a detailed textual and discursive analysis of two recent films – *NH10* (2015) and *Pink* (2016), Tupur Chatterjee subtly captures the cinematic depiction of misogyny, gendered violence, and rape culture in the country (Chatterjee, 2017). Besides, the study presents piercing insights into women's position in contemporary Indian society irrespective of class, caste, and geographical location. 'The very fact that women are out in the public space is considered reason enough for them to be violated. However, the film, *Pink*, makes an important intervention in the

discourse around rape culture [...] especially if the criminal belongs to an upper-class, upper-caste[...]', notes Chatterjee (2017 p.142). Hence, financial independence for women is not necessarily a determinant of social and domestic independence and primarily remains a theoretical concept, especially for single, unmarried Indian women (Lau, 2010).

Such societal impediments are also reflected in contemporary literary and academic discourse. Sharma (2000) concurs that from the liberal, cultural and structural perspectives it is crucial to include men within the domain of women's emancipation movements. In the broader discourse men have been excluded from all the mass movements – a significant reason for an impediment to the cause of gender equity. Interestingly, very few male scholars have researched the domain of women and gender studies in India.

Existing studies on the 'ideal Indian modern woman' often fail to account for the diversity within India's regional and linguistic contexts. There is a significant gap in the literature regarding how these ideals differ across various regions, particularly between northern and southern states, and how they are influenced by local cultural and religious practices (Kapur, 2021). As such, there is a need for more nuanced research that examines regional variations in the conceptualizations of modernity and gender roles.

If we refer to Radhakrishnan's (2009, p.196) conclusions, the study suggests an ushering in of new discourses of respectability and feminism in the nation. This change has emanated from the country's booming high-tech industry that has drawn a majority of women in the workforce to earn equal pay as their male counterparts, 'putting them at the economic and cultural cutting edge of a rapidly changing urban India'. This evolution symbolizes a critical step towards gender

equality, showcasing the potential of economic empowerment in altering traditional gender norms both in the professional sphere and the cultural realm.

It is noteworthy that in India, the 1990s signaled a new development in the status of women in society, with Sushmita Sen and Aishwarya Rai securing the crown of Miss Universe and Miss World titles respectively in 1994 followed by a series of other Indian global beauties winning many more such international contests. These revered personalities hailed as 'beauty with brains' in the post-liberalization era were heralded as the 'global' Indian woman who could be an international achiever, have 'burning' ambition, and yet preserving the traditional Indian culture and values (Parameswaran, 2004).

Therefore, it can be determined that while Indian women are making strides in areas like the high-tech industry, societal expectations still emphasize the importance of upholding traditional Indian culture. This dynamic suggests that even as women gain economic and professional empowerment, they navigate a complex cultural landscape where modern aspirations intersect with traditional values. The tension between these two spheres can shape their experiences and identities, reflecting broader societal attitudes towards gender roles and cultural norms.

Although I have endeavored to review the literature on gender and feminism through various lenses, it is vital for the reader to acknowledge the extensive heterogeneity inherent to India. The nation's large population, geographical variation, and complex caste and subcultural structures prevent any one theoretical framework from fully encapsulating its diversity. With 79.8% of the population following Hinduism, the religious composition of India has remained

fairly stable since the partition in 1947, as per the latest Pew Research report (Kramer, 2021). Moreover, mythology is deeply engrained in the socio-cultural, religious, and political landscape of India in addition to being a subject of academic and historical discourse.

In her examination of Hinduism's most venerated mythological tale, *Ramayana*, Chakraborti (2022) interprets the tale by various feminist authors as they revisit its patriarchal narrative and challenge its androcentric representation that has historically dominated as a 'true' or the mainstream narrative. The feminist authors critique the portrayal of *Sita*, a central figure in Hindu mythology, who, according to Hindu nationalist proponents, embodies the ideal of Indian womanhood (Banerjee, 2012). *Sita* is often depicted as a figure of soulful suffering, unwavering devotion, and quiet resilience.

These qualities are celebrated as virtues in the patriarchal framework, making her a revered archetype in Indian cultural narratives. However, such idealization has far-reaching implications. While these mythical portrayals may appear benign or even empowering, they subtly reinforce and legitimize restrictive gender norms. The veneration of *Sita* as a model of ideal womanhood serves to uphold a normative framework that expects women to embody patience, sacrifice, and subservience. These expectations, deeply ingrained in the Indian social fabric, constrain women's agency and perpetuate their subordination within familial and societal structures.

Thus, the exaltation of such mythical figures, while appearing to celebrate women, has contributed to the perpetuation of a gendered social order that privileges obedience and sacrifice over autonomy and resistance. Feminist critiques of these narratives seek to uncover and

challenge the ways in which cultural and religious symbols continue to shape, and often restrict, the lived realities of women in contemporary India. The confluence of socio-cultural norms, religious beliefs, and caste dynamics in India has shaped the stereotypical Fig. of women as pure, dependent, and in need of protection, epitomized by terms like 'adarsh bharatiya nari' and 'sarv gunna sampanna stri.' This patriarchal view extends to the digital realm, where efforts to 'protect' women often reinforce their role as subjects of state control.

1.6 The Legal Framework

As we shift from discussing the cultural expectations of the 'Ideal Indian Modern Woman' to the practical challenges posed by online harassment, it is essential to explore the legal structures that seek to protect women in the digital realm. This transition highlights the gap between societal ideals and the protections offered by law. Bhandari & Kovacs (2021) contend that while the IT Act is meant to secure digital rights, its provisions, particularly those related to obscenity and the protection of children from sexual offences, have been used to reinforce traditional views about women's sexuality and bodies, leading to a narrowing of the scope of digital rights. The authors state:

The controversial section 66A¹⁶ of the IT Act, which prohibited the sending of 'offensive messages', was justified by the government as an essential tool in fighting the online harassment of women. Instead, it enabled widespread censorship, often targeted at women, and was finally

¹⁶ Section 66A of the Indian Information Technology (IT) Act, intended to prohibit 'offensive messages' via digital communication, was defended as a tool to combat online harassment, particularly against women. However, its broad and ambiguous language led to widespread misuse, including censorship and suppression of dissent. Critics argued that the vague definition of 'offensive messages' enabled arbitrary enforcement, infringing on freedom of speech. In the landmark *Shreya Singhal v. Union of India* case (2015), the Supreme Court ruled Section 66A unconstitutional, deeming it vague, overbroad, and a violation of the fundamental right to freedom of speech under Article 19(1)(a) of the Constitution. This decision marked a pivotal moment in safeguarding digital rights and curbing misuse of law under the pretext of harassment protection. This case is often cited as a pivotal moment in the fight against arbitrary censorship and the protection of digital rights in India

struck down by the Supreme Court in *Shreya Singhal v Union of India* 5 in 2015 for being vague and unconstitutional

(Bhandari & Kovacs, 2021 p.07)

While digital rights laws aim to protect users, their application, influenced by societal and cultural norms, can inadvertently reduce the scope of these rights, especially for women, by reinforcing traditional and often patriarchal norms. The paper examines how judicial decisions have shaped digital rights, particularly in their impact on traditional stereotypes of the 'Ideal Indian Woman.'

For example, the landmark *Joseph Shine* case in which the Supreme Court of India decriminalized adultery, acknowledged that state policies and judicial decisions can significantly shape gender roles and identities, either perpetuating existing societal stereotypes or broadening opportunities for women's agency and self-expression. The analysis categorized cases based on whether they portrayed women primarily as objects of control or as subjects with their own agency.

Sections 67 and 67A of the Indian IT Act, aims to police women's online representations under the guise of protecting modesty, thereby branding any expression of female sexuality as vulgar or immoral (*Ibid.*). Brinda Bose argues that this positions women as both a potential threat to societal norms and the focal point of regulatory efforts. This is echoed in Public Interest Litigations (PILs) like those by Kamlesh Vaswani, which claims to protect women's dignity but primarily serve to enforce middle-class morality and restrict broader digital rights under the banner of 'moral governance' (Bose, 2013 as cited in *Ibid.*).

Despite these challenges, the report concludes on an optimistic note with the trial court (in Animesh Boxi's case¹⁷) acknowledging new forms of harm against bodily integrity in the context of non-consensually shared sexual figures, highlighting a progressive shift towards recognizing and addressing digital abuses impacting women, even as societal anxieties about female sexuality continue to inspire legal actions that prioritize preserving traditional values over genuine gender and sexuality rights.

While the Animesh Boxi case signals a judicial shift towards a more nuanced understanding of violations against bodily integrity in digital spaces, the broader conversation on how these legal frameworks intersect with the media industry, particularly in relation to women in journalism, remains critical. A recent example of inaction by both the police and the social media company, Facebook, showcases how the lack of a regimented legal framework spurs online assailants. In September 2020 HRDA issued an urgent appeal to the National Human Rights Commission of India regarding the online abuse of Ms. Kavin Malar, a journalist based in Chennai¹⁸.

While the social media platform refused to take any action, citing that the alleged post did not violate their community standards, the police also failed to act until, three years later, more women filed complaints against the same abuser. 'Most of the abuse I have faced since 2013 are in text format. This was different. I was portrayed as a prostitute. It was cruel', stated

¹⁷ In the State of West Bengal v. Animesh Boxi (2018), the Judicial Magistrate in Tamluk, Purba Medinipur sentenced Animesh Boxi, a final-year engineering student, to five years of imprisonment and a fine of Rs. 9,000. Boxi was found guilty of uploading intimate photos and videos of his former girlfriend on pornography websites without her consent. This case marked a significant moment in addressing issues of non-consensual sharing of intimate Fig.s in India.

¹⁸ <https://hrdaindia.org/online-abuse-and-police-inaction-in-the-case-of--journalist-kavin-malar>

Malar (Isaac, 2020).

Notably, the Reuters Foundation, INSI & UNESCO's (2021) guide for women journalists highlights a significant gap in legal frameworks globally, with most countries lacking specific legislation to address online harassment, particularly harassment targeted at journalists. Instead, general criminal and civil laws, such as those addressing defamation, intimidation, or privacy violations, are often relied upon. However, these broad legal provisions fail to cater to the unique challenges posed by digital spaces, leaving gaps in enforcement and protection.

Kenya and the U.S.A. stand out as exceptions. Kenya's Computer Misuse and Cybercrimes Act explicitly penalizes online harassment, while the U.S.A. offers protections through state-level harassment and cyberstalking laws. However, even these frameworks have limitations, particularly in scope and enforcement. This lack of specificity in most legal systems is especially concerning for journalists, who face distinct threats such as coordinated abuse, doxxing, and smear campaigns designed to silence their work.

In India, key laws addressing online harassment include the Indian Penal Code (1860), the Information Technology Act (2000), the Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act (1986), and the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act (2013). These laws collectively aim to safeguard women, including journalists, from various forms of online abuse, under various sections and subsections. However, 'there is no separate legal framework specifically addressing online harassment of journalists in India' as documented in the guide report (*Ibid.*, p. 67).

Evidently, digital abuse continues to challenge and redefine the boundaries of legal and social norms. This evolving judicial perspective requires a comprehensive examination of the

experiences of women in journalism – a field where harassment remains pervasive and intersects with digital rights and gender equality.

1.7 Women in Indian journalism landscape & harassment

Historically, journalism in India has been a male-dominated profession, with women significantly underrepresented, particularly in leadership positions. While recent years have seen a notable increase in the number of women entering the field - specially in television, where they now outnumber men – their advancement into senior leadership roles remains constrained. This phenomenon mirrors broader societal shifts and ongoing efforts to promote gender equality within the media sector, underscoring the persistent structural barriers that women face in achieving leadership parity.

According to the Global Media Monitoring Project (India) 2020 report, the highest number of women in media are found in the television industry. Almost 52% of reporters and presenters in television stories are women, compared to 20% in radio newscasts and 13% in print stories (GMMP, 2020). The Media Rumble report (2021) highlighted a significant lack of women in leadership roles within major English and Hindi dailies, thereby corroborating my earlier observation. With only 13.6%, 20.9%, and 26.3% of leadership roles occupied by women, respectively, the television industry reflected a similarly disproportionate gender imbalance.

However, digital media organizations fared much better, comprising over 50% women, yet the disparity exists (Media Rumble, 2020). The results concluded that a majority of gender related issues were authored by women including some of the leading online platforms. However, most women were primarily representing energy, environment, cultural and

entertainment beats as opposed to sports, defence and national security beats both in prime-time television debates as well as online. Since the early decades of entry of women journalists in the 1970s and 1980s, economic and political beats were the bastion of men.

A recent survey of 1,600 U.S. journalists found that female journalists predominantly cover traditionally 'feminine' beats and are significantly less likely to cover 'masculine' beats compared to their male counterparts. (Santia et. al. 2024). These findings align with several other recent studies (Tomasik & Gottfried, 2023; Van Dalen et al., 2021 as cited in Santia et al., 2024).

A major research study that included a sample of 200 major online and offline news outlets in ten different markets across four continents was recently conducted by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. The findings highlight significant gender inequality within newsrooms across major global markets. Despite women constituting, on an average, 40% of the journalistic workforce in the sampled markets, only 23% of top editorial roles are held by women. This disparity underscores a persistent gender gap at the leadership level. Interestingly, the study reveals no correlation between broader societal gender equality, as measured by the UN Gender Inequality Index, and the representation of women in top editorial positions (Andi et.al.,2020).

It suggests that gender inequality within the media industry cannot be solely explained by broader societal gender gaps, indicating that industries like media and politics may operate under distinct institutional structures that perpetuate gender inequality independently of national gender inequality indicators. The absence of correlation may stem from factors beyond societal gender dynamics, including entrenched media cultures, editorial biases, and the predominance of male networks in senior position.

For instance, despite performing well on the index, countries like Germany and South Korea have very few female top editors. Furthermore, the data show stark geographical differences, with 77% of South African online news consumers getting news from outlets led by female editors, compared to 0% in Japan, where none of the major outlets are led by women (*Ibid.*). These findings suggest that while progress has been made in terms of women's representation within the journalism workforce, significant barriers still prevent women from attaining leadership roles, even in countries with high gender equality. The variation across countries also highlights the complex interplay of cultural, societal, and institutional factors that contribute to gender disparities in media leadership.

At this juncture, it is pertinent to briefly revisit the period preceding the exponential growth of the internet era in Indian media. In a 1989 paper, Meena Rana (1989) analyzed how the challenges faced by women journalists were entrenched in the colonial past and deeply 'conservative mentality' of the society that made it inconceivable for women to enter this field. In the pre-internet era, particularly during the 1980s, women journalists in India were few and far between. Among the most notable figures of the mid-1980s was Mrinal Pande, renowned for her influential editorials and substantial contributions to Hindi journalism. As the first woman editor of the Hindi daily *Hindustan*, Pande played a pivotal role in shaping the discourse and advancing the prominence of Hindi journalism (Ahmed, 2022; Anuja, 2015 as cited in Tomar, 2022).

Other notable women journalists from this era include Madhu Trehan, co-founder of *India Today* and a pioneer of investigative journalism with *Newstrack* in 1986, and Nalini Singh, renowned for her investigative reporting and her television program *Aankhon Dekhi* on

Doordarshan. Tavleen Singh, a prominent political journalist, made significant contributions through her work with major publications such as *The Statesman*, *The Telegraph*, and *The Indian Express*. Later, Barkha Dutt, who began her career in the late 1990s, gained acclaim for her frontline reporting during pivotal events, including the Kargil War. This highlights the critical gap in scholarship on women journalists and writers, despite their substantial contributions.

In undertaking a comprehensive study on the online harassment of women journalists in India, it is imperative to acknowledge the historical context within which these issues have evolved in India. However, a significant gap exists in the academic literature concerning the experiences of women journalists in the pre-internet era. This gap poses challenges for researchers attempting to draw comprehensive comparisons across different historical periods. Despite the scarcity of the detailed academic studies, anecdotal evidence and historical accounts suggest that women journalists have long faced substantial challenges in the media industry.

These challenges included gender-based discrimination, marginalization in newsrooms, and harassment, both overt and covert including those related to mobility, social scrutiny, and limited professional networks. 'In 1996, The Working Paper on a National Media Policy submitted to the Indian government by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting made no specific recommendations relating to women as participants, consumers of media or in terms of media representations of women'(Pain, 2019 p. 88). While these accounts provide valuable insights, they often lack the empirical rigor and depth found in contemporary academic research. This gap in the literature highlights the need for future research to explore and document the historical experiences of women journalists more thoroughly.

While examining the role of gender identity in the functioning of women political journalists in India and the structural influences that percolate in their narratives Paromita Pain quotes a woman journalist who states:

Since I started covering politics, I have forgotten my jeans and trousers. All I can wear are my salwar kameezes [long loose baggy garments] with, of course, the dupatta [long piece of cloth covering the chest]. Once I forgot to take it as I left the house, I had to stop and buy it on my way to the press conference. In hindsight, maybe, more people would have been willing to speak to me. But would I be willing to have that kind of conversation?

(Pain, 2016 p.1326)

The aforementioned quote encapsulates a profoundly broad matrix of the functioning of a woman journalist in India and is possibly why women reporters are best 'deemed fit' for covering press conferences. 92% of respondents in the author's study stated that their gender was the 'single most' important factor that made political journalism not just hard but 'sometimes downright unpleasant'. The influence of gender was felt from the very start of their careers [...] Respondents said that political press conferences were usually full of men, from those organizing it to those reporting it (*Ibid.*)

'Early in the 1990s, there were so few female employees that newsrooms didn't feel the need to have separate toilets for women' (Media Rumble, 2020 p.5). This statement serves as a poignant reminder of the excruciating gender disparities that existed in Indian newsrooms during the early 1990s. Despite progress over nearly three decades, the role of women in the industry remains contentious, with their positioning still fraught with challenges. As discussed above, often denied access to key decision-making roles and critical beats such as politics and defence,

most women find themselves ghettoized in the area of soft news journalism.

A cross-national study on women journalists in India and South Africa found consistent limitations in their influence over political news coverage and persistent professional stereotypes (Rao & Rodney-Gumede, 2020). Participants described newsroom culture as 'hegemonically masculine' (Rao & Rodney-Gumede, 2020, p. 70). This observation persists despite the noticeable increase in women news anchors, particularly in the media hubs of Delhi, Mumbai, and Bengaluru. The critical question remains whether such economic and media growth translates into equal power for women to influence news agendas. Paromita Pain's prior research underscores that gender remains the 'single-most' significant factor impeding women's progress in political journalism (Pain, 2016, p. 1326). She emphasizes the absence of statistical data on the number of Indian female journalists who either decide not to pursue career advancement or opt for roles outside of political reporting.

While the classification of news beats as 'feminine' and 'masculine' is grounded in established theories of gender-based issue ownership and stereotypes, such rigid distinctions fail to account for the evolving nature of gender roles. I contend that additional factors, such as race, class, personal experiences etc., play an equally critical role, rendering this binary classification overly simplistic. Moreover, fear of harassment may also deter women journalists from covering certain topics (Sobieraj, 2020). Gender stereotypes play a pivotal role in shaping audiences' perception of journalists' credibility and competence, with women journalists often being evaluated through the lens of gender-typical standards, which can negatively impact their assessments.

Michel Foucault's ground-breaking work is crucial to understanding these power dynamics. Foucault argued that power circulates and moves around us and is not a mere top-down bottom approach [...] (Felluga, 2011). A 2020 study shows women journalists are constant targets of online harassment which is much more brutal and violent than that received by their male counterparts. It is, indeed, axiomatic that they face a greater degree of virulent attacks when they engage with certain areas such as investigative reporting, politics, race, immigration, feminism etc (Chen et al., 2018).

In India, women journalists covering topics such as Kashmir issue or minority discourses often face disproportionate levels of harassment (Pain, 2017). 'In the Indian-administered Kashmir region, cases filed against journalists are often accompanied by illegal raids on their houses and harassment of their families' (Al-Rawi et al., 2023 p.91).

Dhanya Rajendran, an Indian journalist, was blatantly harassed online for her review of a Bollywood film. As Rego (2018) notes:

Within a few minutes of her tweet, her phone was bombarded with over 31,000 Twitter notifications trolling and sexually abusing her, and an abuser even 'wanted to penetrate her with a metal rod'

(Marino, 2017 as quoted in Rego, 2018)

Another prominent Indian journalist, Neha Dixit, writes about the barrage of sexually explicit abuse and harassment she encounters on a daily basis. 'She is one of many journalists who are perceived as conspiring against the state if they report and write critically on the rise of the Hindu

fundamentalism’ (p.46 Rao, 2018). It is worth mentioning that the level of abuse and online violence varies according to the geographical region. For instance, slurs pertaining to women’s genitals and Fig.-based abuse are used in various local and cultural contexts in ‘religiously conservative’ countries such as India and Pakistan.

Terms such as ‘presstitute’ have often been used to ostracise and isolate women journalists (p.77 Dias, 2016). Al-Rawi et al., (2024) found that a staggering 85% of journalists (in their sample) targeted with this term were from India. Despite contacting over 40 journalists globally, only a few participated in their study, and all 12 were of Indian origin. The authors assert that the apparent selection bias was not due to predetermined criteria. Instead, they suggest this likely reflects a higher incidence of online abuse within the Indian media landscape and a greater willingness among Indian journalists to express serious concerns. This perspective resonates with my own research and observations, which highlight how the digital space in India often mirrors and amplifies existing societal hierarchies and power imbalances.

While the study found no clear gendered dimension in the usage of the term, all respondents acknowledged that right-wing supporters constitute the majority of these abusers. Muslim female journalists, in particular, bear the brunt of the trolls, facing disturbing sexual and racial slurs and often being marginalized as not being part of India. The term ‘presstitute’ is one manifestation of what (*Ibid.*) refer to as the Abusive Meta Journalistic Discourse (AMD) i.e. the personalized abusive content targeting journalists ‘to achieve sinister objectives’(*Ibid.*, p.4). This form of discourse seeks to undermine the credibility of journalists and instill fear, thereby not only discouraging them from performing their duties effectively but also leaving psychological

scars that can be profound and potentially irreversible.

In her major study focusing on the #MeToo movement in India, Nanditha (2021) delves into the complexities of inclusivity and intersectionality within digital feminist movements. She evidences the differential experiences of women from various backgrounds and critiques the often-limited representation of marginalized voices, thus providing a comprehensive analysis of contemporary Indian feminism. Priya Ramani, a prominent figure in #MeTooIndia, accused journalist and minister MJ Akbar of sexual harassment and misconduct.

These accusations often become part of cancel culture without leading to legal action or substantive public debate on sex and power dynamics. In the days surrounding Ms. Ramani's tweet, 14 women journalists came forward with similar or even more serious allegations against Mr. Akbar. Some of these allegations were substantiated through articles and tweets, which were subsequently presented as evidence in court. Mr. Akbar, a powerful figure, held significant influence as the editor-in-chief of The Asian Age newspaper, a former Member of Parliament, and a former spokesperson for the Congress party (BBC.com, 2021).

The movement marked a pivotal moment in exposing systemic sexual harassment and abuse. However, many women who courageously shared their experiences have faced a complex and painful aftermath, often characterized by a deep sense of injustice and unresolved trauma. The legal and social mechanisms intended to offer redress have frequently fallen short, leaving survivors without the validation or closure they sought. Additionally, the repercussions for those accused have been inconsistent. While some have faced public disgrace and legal action, many others have experienced little to no disruption to their reputations or careers, allowing them to

maintain their power and influence.

Nair and Banerjee (2020) highlight that digital feminist movements like #MeToo have brought attention to gendered online harassment but often overlook its impact on women in male-dominated fields like journalism. Research remains limited on the challenges women journalists face in engaging with such movements and navigating organized online abuse. Furthermore, the link between cultural narratives of masculinity and online harassment, particularly in the Indian journalistic context, remains underexplored.

The intersection of gendered online harassment and power dynamics can be further explored through Pierre Bourdieu's field theory, which provides insight into the structured social spaces in which these interactions take place, even though his writing on the subject preceded the internet. The theory is a cornerstone of his sociological framework, offering a nuanced understanding of such social structures and power dynamics. Central to this theory is the concept of social fields, which Bourdieu describes as structured spaces of positions (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Each field operates according to its own rules, norms, and forms of capital, and individuals within these fields engage in struggles to maintain or improve their positions. This theory provides a comprehensive framework for analyzing the complex interactions between individuals, social structures, and various forms of capital, highlighting the power dynamics and struggles inherent in different fields.

Bourdieu conceptualized the journalistic field as an integral component of the 'field of power' within society as it comprises 'those agents who possess high volumes of capital' i.e. economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital (Benson & Neveu, 2010, p. 5). Bourdieu places

journalism in the 'dominated' subfield of cultural production. This means that, while journalism interacts closely with powerful agents and is critical in shaping public discourse and opinion, it simultaneously operates under constraints imposed by more powerful fields.

Paul (2022) highlights how field theory situates journalism within the larger structures of power, emphasizing that while journalism operates with a degree of independence, it is still significantly shaped by political, economic, and social forces from the larger field of power. These external influences are not merely imposed upon journalism; instead, they are translated and integrated into the field's practices, norms, and values, thereby maintaining a balance between autonomy and dependency. For example, the author highlights how Indian journalists in the UAE often benefit from their professional networks and sometimes borrow exclusive human-interest stories from Malayalam-language newspapers. This practice exemplifies the concept of social capital underscoring the interconnectedness and collaborative nature of journalistic networks.

Operating within a field influenced by economic, social, cultural, and symbolic forces, a journalist's position in the industry affects their exposure to harassment and their capacity to respond to it. Online harassment can be viewed as an external force that is translated into the journalistic field, impacting the practices, norms, and values within the field. This includes how journalists perceive risk, allocate their attention, and support each other. Journalists with strong social and symbolic capital, i.e. professional networks have a greater potential to mobilize support, gather allies, and raise awareness about harassment.

In their analysis of the depiction of women in the media through the lens of sexuality and

class, Saayan Chattopadhyay narrates the incident of the 'Pink Chaddi Campaign'¹⁹ in 2009, when a women journalist, Nisha Susan, invited people to join her Facebook group titled '*Consortium of Pub-Going, Loose and Forward Women*²⁰' as a 'faintly bitter joke' in response to an assault by a few right-wing Hindu extremist groups on women partying at pubs on the Valentine's Day²¹. The radical vigilantes openly claimed responsibility for several such attacks as a 'spontaneous reaction against women who flouted traditional Indian norms of decency' (Chattopadhyay, 2012 p.77).



Fig. 4: 'Pink Chaddi Campaign'

Source:

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-34125840>

¹⁹ Pink Chaddi Campaign was a non-violent protest movement launched by a group of women journalists in 2009 wherein a bunch of pink chaddis (underwear) were dispatched to the head office of the Indian right wing extremist group (members of the Shri Rama Sen) in response to an attack on pub-going women in Manglore for purportedly undermining Indian cultural values through collective consumption of alcoholic beverages and engaging in revelry (Srivastava, 2019).

²⁰ The Consortium of Pub-Going, Loose and Forward Women, a group founded by Nisha Susan was started and she along with a couple of other young women launched the Pink Chaddi Campaign. They solicited women from all over the country to send in a pair of pink 'chaddis which would be delivered to the office of the head of the right-wing party. On Valentine's Day, as promised, 500 pairs of pink undergarments were couriered by Susan and her group. News reports state that many more couriers were also sent directly to the party office by volunteers, groups and individual women from across India. At its peak the group had over 30,000 members on Facebook (the account was subsequently hacked and vandalized.) The campaign got covered by every leading news channel, daily and was even picked up by the international press. It was blogged about, spoken about and debated on by women and men across age groups and social stratas.

²¹ Valentine's day is not traditionally celebrated in India as in the Western countries.

By using symbols like pink underwear, the campaign challenges traditional symbols of femininity to critique and contest entrenched patriarchal and conservative attitudes. Moreover, in this context, the 'Pink Chaddi Campaign' can be viewed as a form of protest that leverages irony and non-conformity to make a political statement. This approach draws attention to the absurdity of moral policing by mirroring the same absurdity in the form of the protest itself. Furthermore, by choosing a garment that is intimately feminine and traditionally private, the campaign brings the personal into the public sphere, thus politicizing women's private lives as a site of feminist resistance.

It is imperative to foreground the argument that Nisha Susan, effectively leveraged her cultural capital to rally support against right-wing Hindu extremist groups. By using her networks, social media presence, and understanding of cultural dynamics, she was able to mobilize a significant number of people, particularly urban, not only educated women, but also men to participate in the protest. The campaign can be analyzed as a strategic interplay of humour, defiance, and feminist critique, which collectively contributes to a broader discourse on gender, autonomy, and the right to participate in public life free from violence and repression.

'Many people, including men, supported the cause[...] Deep down, this gesture does not just stand for a right to raise a mug in toast, but for an ideology, for freedom and for justice, for liberation from oppression and the right to dignity' (Supertrampo, 2009 as cited in Chattopadhyay, 2012). This form of activism underscores the ongoing negotiation between global feminist movements and localized cultural identities, illustrating a unique trajectory of feminist resistance within the Indian socio-political landscape.

Based on the reviewed literature so far, it can be concluded that socially constructed gendered pressures, sexual harassment, cultural and religious norms, and virulent online threats are some of the key challenges that women journalists in India have been confronting for decades now. Existing scholarship proves that although the digital public sphere has imparted a powerful voice to women journalists, it has also become a haven for their oppression in the same space. Considering the aforementioned points, it is evident that toxic nationalist narratives in online spaces lead to the silencing and self-censorship of women journalists.

1.8 Men's Rights Activists (MRAs) & Antifeminism in India

Building on the discussion of online misogyny and its manifestations, it is essential to consider the historical roots of the ideologies that underpin such hostility. The roots of what later came to be called the men's rights movement can be traced to the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when debates around paternal custody rights and family law began to surface, though the organized movement as such only consolidated in the 1970s (Wright, 2017; Messner, 1997). According to Lilly Mary, 'most people's frame of reference for the manosphere is writing about the offline/wider men's rights movement, and the two are often confused, or the distinction between them is not made clear' (Mary, 2016 p.12). This predisposition is conspicuous in several scholarly work on men's rights movement but lacks in acknowledging the subtle changes in manosphere since the early 2000s that have transformed into much more than just a diffuse aggregation of online circles. In her dissertation on 'The representational politics of the Manosphere', (*Ibid.*) posits:

The literature on the men's rights movement tends to either focus on the offline work, discourse, and rhetorical tactics of men's rights and fathers' right groups [...] Where studies do look at the manosphere, they tend to do so to supplement research on offline men's rights groups and engage only superficially with the venues of the manosphere

Similarly, Sugiura (2021) notes that manosphere is not governed by any single authority and constitutes a decentralized network of online portals that have violent ideologies infused with widely debatable issues such as right-wing extremism, white supremacy, and sexism conflated with misogyny.

The rise of online anti-feminist movements is a key factor in digital misogyny. The concept of Men's Rights emanated from the men's rights movement that started gaining prominence in Western countries during the 1960s and 1970s and proliferated around the 1980s and 1990s in several parts of the world (DiBranco, 2020; Flood *et.al*, 2007). Men's rights activism (MRA) surfaced online around 2010 as a backlash against feminism and has since flourished worldwide via digital communication technologies (Cockerill 2019). According to MacKenzie Cockerill (p.89, 2019) 'MRA memes across the globe reflect misogynistic attitudes and ideology, and this points to a growing social movement that transcends cultural and geographical differences by mobilizing resources and ideology online'.

Moreover, the Manosphere²² (digital manifestation of the Men's Rights Movement [MRM]) has been actively involved in fostering gendered online harassment in recent times since

²² The manosphere is an informal cyberspace network of blogs, websites, and forums that concentrate on issues concerning men and masculinity — issues as diverse as men's rights, the male sex role, sex and relationships with women, the economy, and feminism.

'motivated by feelings of resentment, anger and a sense of power lost or stolen, misogyny supports open violence against women [and] Patriarchy supports and justifies misogyny and violence in a myriad of ways across the world' (*ibid.* p.93). Today, the manosphere consists of four sub-cultures: men's rights activists (MRAs), pickup artists (PUAs), men going their own way (MGTOW), and involuntary celibates (incels).

In recent years, MRM has indeed proliferated with the technological affordances of new media. So 'they built organizations around men's anxieties and anger at feminism' (Mary, 2016 p.37) such as the National Coalition for Men. Prominent groups today include the National Coalition for Men (NCFM), Canadian Association for Equality (CAFÉ), and Men's Rights Edmonton, Voice 4 Men, and the Men's Rights subreddit, a subforum of the popular platform Reddit, 4chan/b/, the web forum for memes etc.

Broader literature suggests that the origins of the manosphere and the men's rights movement (MRM) are rooted in the belief that masculinity is under threat due to the rise of feminist movements and the increasing push for gender equality (Valkenburgh, 2018; Ging, 2017; Nicholas & Agius, 2018; Maricourt & Burrell, 2022). Furthermore, common representations of women in leadership or decision-making positions as 'man-haters' contribute to pervasive online misogyny, which manifests in both psycho-emotional and physical harm. Within the manosphere and MRMs men who identify as involuntarily celibate (incels) blame women for their 'perceived' loss of masculine power and therefore have resorted to anti-feminist backlash online through acts of mass violence.

In India, the followers of the movement are associated through loosely organized online groups, Facebook pages, Reddit fora, and many others that bring together cisgender males who

believe that men are disadvantaged relative to women in society (Cockerill 2019; Flood *et.al.* 2007). Considerable research has been done on anti-feminist men's rights in India. Both in the West and India, MRAs follow structural ideologies of controlling women's bodies, restricting them to domestic affairs, and promoting violence against them in both physical and mental forms. 'It is a self-sustaining cycle: a violently misogynistic meme attracts people who agree with its message, and their participation in the community generates more violent content to fit their tastes', affirms Cockerill. (Cockerill 2019, p.89).



31 August 2013, Bangalore, India – Members of the Save Indian Family group, a non-governmental organisation, held placards and shouted anti-government slogans against the UPA administration and Union Minister for Law Kapil Sibal, condemning the proposed amendments to laws related to domestic violence and dowry harassment.

Fig. 5: Source: www.sbcitr.in

Various Indian groups such as MensRightsIndia.net, MensRightsAssociation.org and Masculinist-India.com are primarily united by ideologies that promote flagrant misogyny. So, it is pertinent to mention that Indian MRA groups are broadly united by legal issues such as anti-dowry laws, divorce, child custody specific to India (wherein they believe that men are at disadvantage as compared to women).

In evaluating the discourse surrounding Indian Men's Rights Activists (MRAs), I would exercise caution in characterizing it as a 'movement' within the Indian subcontinent because the designation 'movement' is imbued with considerable political, social, and cultural significance, and its application in this context may lead to complex implications, particularly within the intricate socio-political landscape of the region. Although *Gender Hate Online* (Ging and Siapera, 2019) was pioneering as the first collection to incorporate perspectives from the Global South, including Pakistan and India, it offers limited exploration of the unique socio-cultural ideologies that drive online harassment in these contexts.

Ging & Siapera (2019, p.101) note, 'MRAs often see gender relations as a power struggle – one side is always trying to dominate the other'. A meme titled 'Win for the Masculinists' from Masculinist-India showcases a screenshot of a news article titled 'Forced intercourse in marriage, not rape', a grotesque Fig. of two bloody fingers held up in a peace sign and a text that reads 'if a wife can't emotionally and sexually satisfy her husband, what is she good for? Would you ever marry a woman [sic] like her?'. The authors' research integrates diverse theories, examining the evolution and current state of feminism and its connections with technology and media. It explores how women reclaim online spaces, providing practical advice and critical insights.

Furthermore, it extends beyond the Global North and English-speaking world, addressing these issues in various cultural contexts with intersectional and cross-cultural perspectives. The Indian 'manosphere' comprises online men's groups that oppose progressive gender equality, advocating the idea that men are 'naturally dominant'. Within these circles, those who boldly express these regressive views often rise as influencers (Umachandran, 2024). These leaders propagate narratives that aggressively undermine gender equality, reinforcing traditional gender

roles and perpetuating myths of male superiority. This discourse not only hinders progress but also fosters an environment where sexist attitudes are validated and spread through online platforms, making the 'manosphere' a powerful echo chamber for such harmful ideologies.

Extensive research in Western contexts examines how media construct representations of masculinity, yet little attention has been given to the masculinist behaviors exhibited by journalists. In the Indian media landscape, there is a notable gap in scholarly analysis on this subject, despite its frequent discussion in professional circles and among women journalists. NWMI's Media Monitoring Project report titled '*Staging Aggressive Masculinity*' notes (NWMI, 2022 p.8) 'there is a dearth of scholarship that looks at masculinities from either perspective in the Indian media context' [See also Consalvo, 2003; Trimble et al., 2015; Nilsson & Lundgren, 2020]. Ojajärvi (as cited in NWMI, 2022) argues that news as a genre inherently embodies values traditionally associated with masculinity, creating a 'gender logic' within journalistic work. This logic often relegates women in the media to secondary roles unless they conform to these masculine norms.

Moreover, discussions about masculinity are not exclusively about men; societal expectations of masculinity can become toxic and oppressive, affecting men, women, and trans persons alike. These norms permeate professional, public, and private spheres, reinforcing associations with traits like courage and assertiveness, making it difficult to identify the origins of such oppressive behaviors. One of the key findings of the report stated:

Toxic masculinity combined with right-wing, hyper-nationalist, majoritarian ideology was evident in discourse on social media. Anyone critical of the ruling establishment was branded

'anti- national' and subjected to verbal assault by online trolls. Online violence sometimes included increasingly real threats of offline violence.

(NWMI, 2022 p.13)

This combination of toxic masculinity and hyper-nationalism creates a potent force for enforcing ideological purity. By labeling critics as 'anti-national', this ideology not only delegitimizes dissent but also justifies aggression against those deemed disloyal. It reinforces a climate of fear and suppression, where expressing dissent can lead to severe consequences, thus creating an environment where only conformist views are tolerated, undermining democratic principles. This aspect shall be discussed further in Chapter 3.

The dynamics outlined in this chapter significantly shape the contemporary digital landscape, intensifying the visibility and vulnerability of women journalists. While systemic barriers and cultural biases have historically hindered women in journalism, these challenges have been magnified within an increasingly hostile online environment. In the current digital paradigm, women journalists are not only expected to report and analyze but also to maintain a prominent online presence to ensure the dissemination of their work across diverse social media platforms. This heightened visibility exposes them to targeted harassment and intimidation, facilitated by the anonymity and expansive reach of digital platforms.

Chapter 2 critically examines the interplay between cyberutopian ideals and techno-social culture, highlighting how this intersection has contributed to the emergence of an online ecosystem where toxic masculinity and hyper-nationalism intersect, creating new mechanisms for harassment and the suppression of dissenting perspectives.

Chapter 2

The Dangerous Techno-Social Digital Culture

This chapter commences with a comprehensive overview of techno-social digital culture. A broad examination of the optimistic visions and inherent dangers that characterize the contemporary digital era is followed by tracing the evolution of digital journalism and the media landscape in India. The discussion subsequently narrows its scope to analyzing the shifting patterns of media ownership that exert significant influence over the dissemination of news in India.

Through this progression, the chapter aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how digital culture shapes and is shaped by complex social dynamics, highlighting the intersections between technology, media, and gender politics. The chapter also provides a comprehensive understanding of online harassment, situating it within the broader context of digital culture. This exploration underscores the dual nature of the digital realm, where the potential for innovation and connection coexists with the dangers of misuse, including the perpetuation of harmful behaviors such as digital misogyny and targeted harassment.

2.1 The Techno-Social Digital Culture: Opportunities and Threats

The internet does not hate women. People hate women, and the internet allows them to do it faster, harder, and with impunity.

Laurie Penny - award-winning journalist (Penny, 2018)

As previously discussed, Barlow (1996) and other notable cyberfeminists, such as Sadie Plant, held an overly optimistic perspective on digital technologies (Plant, 1997). Before the emergence of concepts like cyberfeminism, feminists such as Judy Wacjman and Cynthia Cockburn advocated for inclusion of women in the digital realm. Similarly, Donna Haraway emphasized that women's participation should not only be ensured but also accompanied by a heightened political awareness of their roles within digital technological systems (Mia, 2012).

Plant's utopian perspective was characterized as 'an absolutely post-human insurrection – the revolt of an emergent system that includes women and computers, against the worldview and material reality of a patriarchy that still seeks to subdue them' (Plant, 1997, p.110). However, feminist scholars such as Susan Luckman and Anna Munster contended that mere technological intervention is insufficient to fundamentally alter the societal position of women (Mia, 2012). They argued that deeper structural changes are necessary to address the entrenched power dynamics that continue to marginalize women, suggesting that technology alone cannot dismantle the patriarchal frameworks that sustain gender inequality.

The prevailing discourse on gender and technology has primarily concentrated on their intersection within industrial settings, i.e. in professional domains where technology is designed, marketed, and utilized. This focus has informed critical structural issues such as the underrepresentation of women in STEM fields, persistent gender biases, and the leadership gap. However, few studies have examined women as consumers or designers of technology within an information-based society (Fountain, 2000; Rosser, 2005), thereby overlooking the broader socio-cultural implications of technology, including how digital spaces shape and perpetuate

gender norms and power dynamics. Recognising these dynamics is crucial to understanding how technological spaces not only mirror existing social inequities but also actively sustain and normalise gendered hierarchies through everyday digital interactions.

While it can be unequivocally stated that information and communication technologies (ICTs) have profoundly and revolutionarily transformed the contemporary world, offering unparalleled freedom to connect and exchange information; a more insidious characteristic of the digital environment exists—one that has also evolved into a 'breeding ground' for both nefarious and unlawful activities (Levmore & Nussbaum, 2010 as cited in Henry & Powell, 2014, p. 84). The Internet also reflects and amplifies deeply rooted racial, class, and gender inequalities that pervade our societies. This is particularly evident in the rise of online hate and misogyny, which have escalated with the proliferation of new social media platforms.

Debate continues over the most effective strategies that social media giants such as Facebook and Twitter should implement, along with necessary policy interventions, to combat digital violence. Jane's (2014) scholarly work on 'e-bile' has shown that although international media has increasingly spotlighted this issue in recent years, she contends there remains a significant gap in scholarly research. Moreover, the existing research often lack meticulous representation of the virulent online communications depicted in anti-feminist discourse because 'e-bile is heavily laced with expletives, profanity and explicit Fig.ry of sexual violence' p.558 i.e., aimed at breaking down and dehumanizing the target and thus fall outside the bounds of conventional civil academic discourse.

Jane asserts, 'Despite the risk of causing discomfort or offense, my argument is that e-bile must not only be addressed, but it must be discussed in its unexpurgated entirety because

euphemisms and generic descriptors such as 'offensive' or 'sexually explicit' simply cannot convey the hostile and hyperbolic misogyny that gives gendered e-bile its distinctive semiotic flavor' (*Ibid.*). Notably, the author has conducted a longitudinal study over a 15-year period, assembling a comprehensive textual archive of 'e-bile' or 'electronic venom' directed at women.

The concurrent development of science, media, and capital under the aegis of digital technology produces a kind of fast forward effect in which everything appears to take place at an accelerated rate and to produce a dramatic change in a very short time”.

(Charlie Gere as quoted in Creeber and Martin, 2008 p.5)

Historical scholarship identifies certain ubiquitous characteristics of digital cultures, which transcend specific geographical contexts. Drawing on an extensive range of sources Qiu and Loader (2015) present crucial insights into the nuances of digital cultures. One such distinction is the intricate relationship between traditional media and its contemporary digital counterpart. The rapid diffusion of digital technologies has profoundly transformed the media landscape which can be aptly described as 'hybrid media system'- a concept proposed by Andrew Chadwick (2013).

These advances have exponentially democratized content creation and its dissemination, allowing individuals and non-traditional media entities to participate in the media ecosystem. For instance, platforms like YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram enable users to produce and share content widely, bypassing traditional gatekeepers such as news organizations and publishers (Jenkins, 2011), the participatory culture thus challenging the passive consumption model of mass media.

While traditional²³ media organizations are still not completely redundant, they exert a considerable influence over their respective digital extension or counterpart in India. In aggregation with broader technological advancements, digital technology has swiftly penetrated the traditional media industry, where media convergence has become a defining characteristic. It is noteworthy here that media convergence does not merely indicate the technological shift from broadcast to digital, but also how people connect and exchange communication.

Jenkins examines the evolving dynamics of popular culture, highlighting a shift towards a model in which audiences engage in more authentic participation in the creation, consumption, and re-creation of cultural products (Jenkins, 2011). While technological determinism provides a framework for understanding the impact of media convergence, it overlooks the agency of individuals and social actors in shaping technology's role in society. The theory has been criticized for its broad scope and lack of comprehensive analysis, suggesting that societal changes are not solely driven by technology but also by human agency and cultural context.

Martin Hirst notes:

In volume one of *Capital* Marx wrote that manufactured objects (including technology) take on a commodity form and thus become 'a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties' in which 'the social characteristics of men's own labour' appear to be properties of the objects themselves. It is these commodity forms, not their human producers, that take on the 'socio-natural properties' of relations between people

(Marx, 1990, 1867, pp. 162-164 as cited in Hirst, 2012)

²³ Media that originated prior to the internet, including newspapers, radio, and broadcast television or any form of mass communication available before the advent of digital media can be defined as traditional media. This includes television, radio, newspapers, books, and magazines.

The passage emphasizes how these commodities forms of technology displace any recognition of human labor and social ties, allowing objects to dominate social relations. In this context, the labor inherent in the creation of commodities is rendered obscure, resulting in the commodities themselves seeming to possess intrinsic social powers and relationships. This occurrence, which Marx designates as commodity fetishism, causes individuals to regard objects as inherently valuable, detached from the human labor that brought them into existence.

Marx's critique elucidates how capitalism transforms material goods into commodities, concealing the social and labor relations that underlie them. In doing so, it fosters a skewed perception of value, wherein human connections are relegated to a subordinate position relative to the perceived autonomy of commodities (Ricci, 2024). This analysis emphasizes the necessity of revealing the concealed social dynamics within the production and exchange of goods, compelling us to transcend superficial appearances to comprehend the human relationships that commodities encapsulate. 'Rather than relying on a determinist view of social media, [...] it is more productive to examine the relationship between technology and social revolution in a series of dialectical moments', contends Hirst (2012).

Scholars have observed the convergence of demand and supply in the exchange of information, wherein, as people demanded instantaneous access to information and knowledge, companies adapted to meet these needs and requirements – for example, through platforms like Facebook and LinkedIn etc. This aggregation eventually resulted in significant cultural, social, economic, and regulatory transformations besides the technological shifts, reshaping not just how we communicate, but also how societies organize, economies function, and regulations are

enforced in the digital age (Jenkins & Terminology, 2012; Dwyer, 2010).

While the participatory nature of online and digital media has enhanced consumer engagement, it is crucial to recognize that algorithms in the digital realm are frequently adjusted to prioritize selective content, making it more visible to consumers (Wilding, 2018). Therefore, media not only serves as a reflection of society's values, norms, and culture but also wields the power to transform or manipulate public opinion. This dual function highlights the media's significant influence in both mirroring and shaping societal perceptions (Wilding, 2018; Pariser, 2011). This influence is further amplified in the digital age, where the speed and reach of information dissemination have grown exponentially. I contend that the algorithms controlling the visibility of content on digital platforms are often instrumental in reinforcing existing biases or creating echo chambers that limit exposure to diverse perspectives.

The proliferation of digital technologies, including online news forums and newsgroups, has facilitated both geographically unrestricted 'peer-to-peer interactions and many-to-many communication' (Albrecht, 2006 p.64). These technological advancements have enabled dynamic and multifaceted exchanges among users and media professionals, further complicating the demarcation of traditional media boundaries and fostering an interconnected global media environment. Luis Suarez-Villa, in his 2000 work, articulates a critical perspective on the relationship between scientific creativity and corporate techno-capitalism, arguing that scientific innovation is increasingly being driven by utilitarian values that serve corporate interests rather than the broader societal good.

This shift raises significant concerns about the fundamental mission of science in society,

its credibility, and the integrity of the process of paradigm discovery (Suarez-Villa, 2000). The author's analysis highlights the inhumane elements inherent in the capitalist system, where economic imperatives often overshadow ethical considerations and the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. This view is supported by Tabrizi (2013) who writes that as the contemporary economic and political system transforms into new corporate capitalism or techno-capitalism, creativity is increasingly being commodified wherein digital networks are acting as conduits for their corporate exploitation.

Guillaume Chaslot, a former YouTube engineer, critiques an algorithm he helped develop, asserting that it inadvertently fuels societal polarization by amplifying divisive content and entrenching ideological divides. In the Netflix documentary *The Social Dilemma*, he acknowledges that, while detrimental, this polarization effectively maximizes user engagement by extending watch time (Orlowski, 2020). The documentary serves as a crucial intervention, raising public consciousness about the manipulative dimensions of contemporary technology. However, it predominantly addresses the symptomatic manifestations without offering many solutions (Du, 2021). In sum, the rapid acceleration of technological advancements underscores the necessity for a nuanced governance framework that rigorously protects individual privacy while overseeing the ethical deployment of artificial intelligence (AI), aligning its vast potential with the overarching goals of societal well-being.

Former Google design ethicist and Co-founder of the Centre for Humane Technology, Tristan Harris at the U.S Senate Hearing on Persuasive Technology says, 'It is not about the technology being the existential threat, it is the technology's ability to bring out the worst in

society and that being the existential threat'. Harris explains how technology is creating incivility that is reflected in online communication, mass chaos, outrage, lack of trust in each other, loneliness, alienation, more polarization, more election hacking, and more populism [...] without the digital platforms taking responsibility for taking over the public sphere. (*Ibid.*).

Likewise, Suzor et al. (2018) examine how the existing social media platforms are attempting to establish themselves as the champions of liberty and guardians of human rights. The authors argue that the business models and technical architecture of tech companies are aimed at maximizing content sharing which, in turn, further exacerbates online incivility and misogyny. Together these studies provide crucial insights into the corporate model of fostering and cultivating online enslavement for profit and sustenance of techno-capitalism through 'unrestrained monetization of consumer surveillance' (Crain, 2022).

The evolving techno-social digital culture offers new opportunities for engagement and expression but also presents significant challenges, particularly concerning privacy and safety. Against this backdrop, Elon Musk's recent (September, 2024) policy alterations to the platform, now X (formerly Twitter), further amplify these concerns, introducing significant risks to user privacy and safety, particularly for women journalists, who remain prime targets of harassment (Mishra, 2024). By forcing users to choose between making their tweets visible only to selected followers or to everyone, including those they have blocked, the platform potentially exposes vulnerable users to further harassment. Such platform-level shifts can exacerbate the vulnerabilities of marginalized voices, reinforcing the need for structural interventions to safeguard user security and uphold freedom of expression.

This policy change has raised concerns about user privacy and safety, particularly for those who use blocking to protect themselves from harassment. X clarified that while blocked users can view public posts, they cannot interact with them – such as liking, replying to, or sharing posts. Despite this, the change remains contentious among users and privacy advocates. To maintain control over content, X offers an option to protect posts, restricting visibility and interaction to approved followers. In summary, while blocked users can view public posts, they cannot engage with them, and users concerned about privacy should adjust their settings or consider alternative platforms.

In the Indian context, these dynamics are especially relevant given the rapid evolution of digital journalism. As traditional media outlets adapt to the digital age, they increasingly rely on this corporate model to sustain operations. Next, I will explore how digital journalism in India has evolved within this techno-capitalist framework, highlighting its implications for journalistic practices, audience engagement, and the broader media landscape.

2.2 Digital journalism & its evolution in India

Historically, the evolution of journalism in India has been marked by several pivotal shifts across different media platforms. Initially, journalism was heavily rooted in the print media, with newspapers playing a critical role not only during India's freedom struggle but also in shaping post-independence public discourse. During this period, radio also emerged as a crucial medium, with All India Radio (AIR) established in 1936, becoming a vital tool for disseminating news and information across India's vast and diverse landscape.

The late 20th century saw the rise of television journalism in India, beginning with *Doordarshan's*²⁴ broadcasts in the 1960s. This new medium added a visual dimension to news, making it more immediate and engaging for the audience, and playing a crucial role in shaping public opinion and discourse.

The transition to digital journalism in India commenced in earnest with the advent of the internet in the late 1990s and early 2000s, marking a yet another pivotal shift in the media landscape. This period witnessed a significant migration of news platforms to online formats, enabling continuous, real-time updates and substantially expanding the reach and scope of news dissemination. The subsequent decades further accelerated this transformation, particularly with the proliferation of mobile internet usage, which firmly established digital platforms as a core component of the news ecosystem.

As Salaverría (2019) notes, the evolving nature of journalism in the digital age has led to significant debate over how best to define and categorize this transformation. As technological advancements continue to reshape the production, dissemination, and consumption of news, scholars and professionals alike grapple with terminological distinctions that reflect the multifaceted nature of contemporary journalistic practices. Among these, terms such as 'digital

²⁴ Doordarshan, established by the Government of India, serves as the nation's public service broadcaster. It stands as one of the world's largest broadcasting organizations in terms of studio and transmitter infrastructure. Officially inaugurated on September 15, 1959 as an experimental television service in New Delhi, Doordarshan initially focused on broadcasting educational and developmental programs. Over time, it expanded its content portfolio to encompass news, entertainment, and cultural programming.

journalism', 'online journalism', and 'multimedia journalism' have gained prominence, while 'cyber journalism' is often dismissed as outdated.

However, the term '*cyber*' retains its relevance, as it underscores the interconnected and networked nature of the digital environment – a foundational characteristic of contemporary journalism. While I concur with this view, it is evident that '*digital journalism*' remains the most prevalent expression among professionals in most countries. Internationally, however, academic usage varies, with scholars adopting different terms depending on the linguistic, cultural, and contextual specificities of each country (Ibid.).

Globally, online or digital journalism came into existence in the 20th century. Although there is a lack of consensus on its absolute historical birth, Zhaoxun Song has traced three timelines to determine the possible birth year of online journalism – 'the 1969 version, the 1993 version, and the 1952 version' (Song, 2016 p.18). Further, David Carlson traces the roots of online journalism to 1970 (Kawamoto, 2003), while Glaser (2009) claims that commercial production of the news for the World Wide Web began only in late 1993. The *Chicago Tribune* distributed by *America Online (AOL)* in the U.S. was the first newspaper to publish its content online in 1992, followed by the *New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and *USA Today* (Díaz-Noci, Meso-Ayerdi, 1998 as cited in Salaverría, 2019).

The *Electronic Telegraph* in Europe – (an online version of the *Telegraph*) was the first newspaper in Britain to produce an online website (The Telegraph, n.d.). The *Telegraph* is considered to be the pioneer of web-journalism. In January 1994, the *Palo Alto Weekly* in the U.S. became the first weekly newspaper to publish its entire editorial content on the world wide web (Díaz Noci, 2013; Glaser, 2009; Scott, 2005; Salaverría, 2019). The *Guardian Unlimited* (GU)

network of websites was launched in January 1999 (Guardian Staff, 2017). Consequently, by the mid-1990s almost every country across the globe saw its publications go online (*Ibid.*).

In the nascent stages of internet proliferation within India during the 1990s, the country's established media conglomerates ventured into the digital realm, pioneering the online dissemination of news. This foray was spearheaded by notable entities including the *India Today Group*, *Zee Media Corporation*, *The Times Group*, *HT Media*, *The Hindu*, and *Network18 Group*. These organizations not only transitioned to the digital landscape but also expanded their media spectrum to encompass a variety of content genres, ranging from news to entertainment. Prominent among these were *NDTV* and *The Times of India*, which rapidly emerged as leading online news sources (Aneez *et al.*, 2019). Other traditional media houses, including *Hindustan Times*, *The Hindu*, and *Indian Express* also garnered substantial online readership.

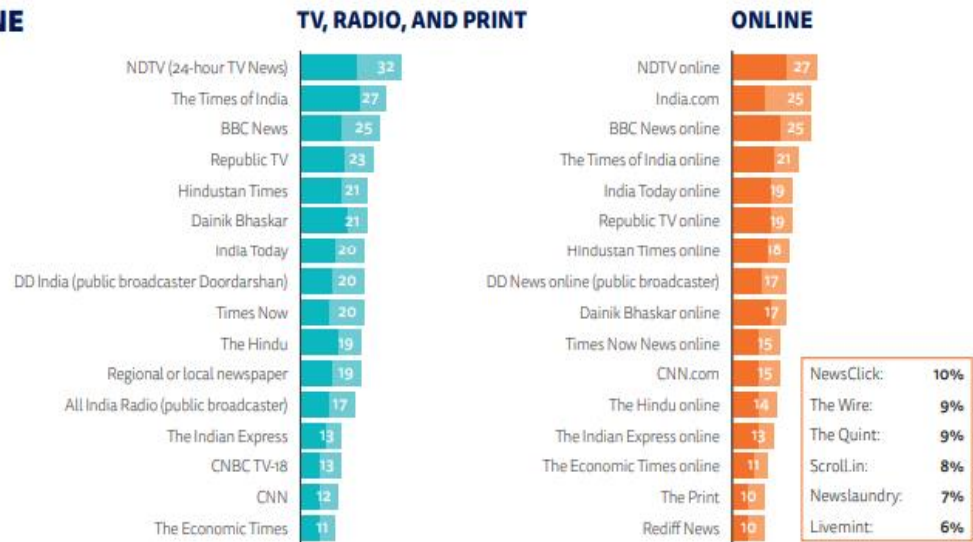
Concurrently, internet aggregators such as *Yahoo!*, *Rediff*, and *MSN* captured significant market shares, with international broadcasters like the *BBC* establishing a strong presence in both broadcast and online sectors among India's English-speaking demographics. The digital news ecosystem was further diversified by digital-native media outlets like *Firstpost* and *Scoopwhoop*, which gained notable weekly engagement. Even with their smaller audience base compared to legacy media, platforms like *The Wire* and *Scroll* have significantly impacted the digital news landscape in India, reflecting its rapid evolution (*Ibid.*).

WEEKLY REACH OFFLINE AND ONLINE

TOP BRANDS

% Weekly usage

- Weekly use TV, radio & print
- More than 3 days per week TV, radio & print
- Weekly use online brands
- More than 3 days per week online brands



METHODOLOGY NOTE

These data are based on a survey of mainly English-speaking, online news users in India – a small subset of a larger, more diverse, media market. Findings in this online poll are not nationally representative and will tend to under-represent the continued importance of traditional media such as TV and print.

Fig. 6: The Reuters Digital News Report (2024)

The digital news environment in India is characterized by a broad range of platforms, including both long-standing sites and new competitors. Established in 2006, *Oneindia.com* was one of the early pioneers of online news in India, with *India.com* and *FirstPost* both launching subsequently in 2011. *The Quint*, another significant entrant in the digital news domain, initially debuted on *Facebook* in 2015 before expanding into a full-fledged website in March of the same year. *Scroll* and *Inshorts*, both launched in 2014, have also emerged as noteworthy platforms. *Dailyhunt*, originally launched as *NewsHunt* in 2009, underwent rebranding to its current name in 2015, as documented by Nielsen and Sen (2016). *Newslaundry*, a notable addition to the digital journalism

sphere, commenced operations in September 2012 (Girija, 2019), while *The Mooknayak*, another prominent digital news outlet, made its online debut in 2021 (Kumar, 2023). Collectively, these platforms constitute key players in India's digital news environment.

Notably, despite significant advancements in the study of digital journalism, a persistent challenge remains: the limited transfer of research findings from academia to the professional world. As the media industry faces profound technological and ethical challenges, the role of academic research in providing actionable insights is crucial. As Ramón Salaverría (2019) notes:

Another pending task is improving the transfer of results from the scholar community to the professional world in order to spread sorely needed innovation. In the academic community, there are those who, with good reason, state that universities should not be at the service of industry. But they should not turn their backs on it either. Unfortunately, that is what tends to happen. In studies on digital journalism, there is a dearth of academic contributions that are of use for solving the very serious problems of the media and journalists.

In examining the evolution of digital journalism, the rise of social media emerges as a transformative element. Several recent studies have explored the relationship between journalism and social media, focusing on public opinion and political participation. The resurgence of personalized media, driven by social media algorithms and user profiling, tailors content to individual preferences. Additionally, as Salaverría (2019) notes, advances in AI

(Artificial Intelligence), which generate and distribute customized information, pose significant ethical and professional challenges for journalism, including issues of bias and misinformation.

Platforms such as *Facebook*, *Twitter*, and *Instagram* have revolutionized communication and fundamentally altered journalistic practices and public discourse, significantly shaping the dynamics of online interactions, including harassment. The proliferation of social media has cultivated a symbiotic relationship between journalists and their audience, enhancing reach, facilitating direct engagement and streamlining the process of news gathering. This shift has also heightened the vulnerability of journalists to online harassment, a risk that is particularly pronounced for women.

The Reuters Digital Report (2024) based on a survey of 2,016 respondents in India, features the growing influence of social and video networks in amplifying alternative voices. Equipped with advanced creator tools and global reach, these platforms have enabled a diverse range of content creators to emerge. While much of this content is not news-related, certain influencers have gained significant traction in politics and other key areas, reshaping how information is disseminated.

As younger generations increasingly rely on social media for news, influencers are becoming vital opinion makers. This shift presents both opportunities and challenges for journalism, particularly concerning the accuracy of information and the risk of disinformation. The rise of personalized media, driven by sophisticated algorithms and artificial intelligence (AI), further complicates the landscape, prompting ongoing academic examination of the ethical implications for influencers in shaping public opinion and mobilizing political action (Newman et al., 2024).

The findings further highlighted that Indian media landscape is facing increasing threats to press freedom due to recent legal and governmental actions. The DPDP (Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023), which lacks specific exemptions for journalists, could severely impede investigative reporting by subjecting journalists to stringent data protection requirements. The Telecommunications Act of 2023 further tightens state control through surveillance and access to encrypted data.

In March 2024, the Supreme Court put on hold the government's plans to make its fact-check unit under the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting — the primary body to flag false information, citing serious constitutional issues that could affect freedom of speech. (*Ibid.*). In October, Delhi Police raided the homes and offices of *NewsClick* journalists under terrorism charges, intensifying fears of state efforts to stifle independent media (The Hindu, 2023). These developments signal a troubling decline in press freedom in India.

Media Landscape & Media Ownership Patterns

Before examining digital harassment in journalism, it is essential to contextualize the issue within India's broader media landscape. This involves analyzing the dynamics of media ownership and digital journalism and their intersection with journalists' experiences, particularly women. This section analyzes how ownership influences media content, editorial bias, and the overall dissemination of information, which is crucial for understanding the underlying power dynamics. These factors collectively define the digital media landscape, offering crucial insights into the unique challenges faced by women journalists in India.

The Reuters Digital News Report (2019) reveals that while ‘Indian publishers have offered online news and invested in their websites since the 1990s’ (Aneez *et al.*, 2019 p.8), the digital media landscape in the country has seen exponential growth only since the beginning of the last decade i.e., early 2010 (*Ibid.*; Chaudhry, 2016). Based on the data from a survey of English-speaking online news users in India, the report mentions that India is a ‘mobile-first and platform-dominated market’ wherein its social media news consumption has outpaced print as the main source of news, and nearly 73% of its citizens consume news via smartphones (Aneez *et al.*, 2019). This shift reflects broader global trends where digital platforms, particularly social media, are becoming the primary avenues for news dissemination.

According to the Columbia Journalism Review, India is the ‘lone star of the global web, racking up an astonishing 40% year-on-year growth rate at a time when the rest of the world is flattening at 7 to 9%’ (Chaudhry, 2016). The latest report by the equipment maker Nokia claims the country’s overall average data usage per month saw a compound average growth rate (CAGR) of 76% between 2015-2020 and ‘India stands tall amongst the mature markets’ (nokia.com, 2021 p.2). The report also highlights that the data traffic in India grew approximately 60 times over the last five years which is among the highest globally (*Ibid.*). Besides, these statistics and projections are underpinned by a confluence of favorable economic and global factors.

While ‘India’s internet penetration rate is still relatively low: 20% in rural areas, and 65% in cities at the end of 2017’ (McKinsey Global Institute, 2019 p.118), the estimates of economic value by 2025 depict a significant potential with ‘the number of active internet users expected to grow and reach 900 million by 2025’ (IAMAI and Kantar Group, 2021 p.4). These metrics from

global research organizations exhibit remarkable growth in India's consumer digital economy indicating a segue into the next phase of maturity.

India has one of the most dynamic and thriving media landscapes on the globe with over 900 TV channels, 550+ radio stations, 1 million registered publications, 560 million internet users, and the numbers continue to surge each year (Min. of Information & Broadcasting, 2019). The concentration of media ownership reveals a complex landscape, with both public and private players commanding significant viewership in the most populous country on the globe. Additionally, the numerous dominant political affiliations of the major private media conglomerates dramatically shape news content (Ranganathan & Rodrigues, 2010). The news media markets are regionally fragmented, with a few family-owned organizations dominating a significant portion of the nation's viewership alongside the regional players – a structure that raises deep concerns over media diversity and objectivity (Reporters Without Borders & DataLEADS, 2019).

The political organizations exercise significant control over the regional news media players, and a similar model exists at the national level, for example, Mukesh Ambani and Subhash Chandra (a Member of Parliament) own [Network 18 Media and Investments Ltd, its subsidiaries TV 18 and Viacom 18 (a joint venture between TV 18 and Viacom CBS in India)], and [Essel Group operates over 45 channels in the news and entertainment business combined], respectively (Parthasarathi & Agarwal, 2020, p.4). Both these businessmen have non-media business interests and control a major portion of news media viewership. Besides, they also have a considerable presence in print and digital media via their subsidiaries.

AMG Media Networks, part of Adani Enterprises, has expanded its media holdings by increasing its stake in Indo-Asian News Service (IANS) and acquiring a stake in the company behind the digital financial platform BQ Prime (Newman et al., 2024). This move underscores the growing corporatization of media in India.

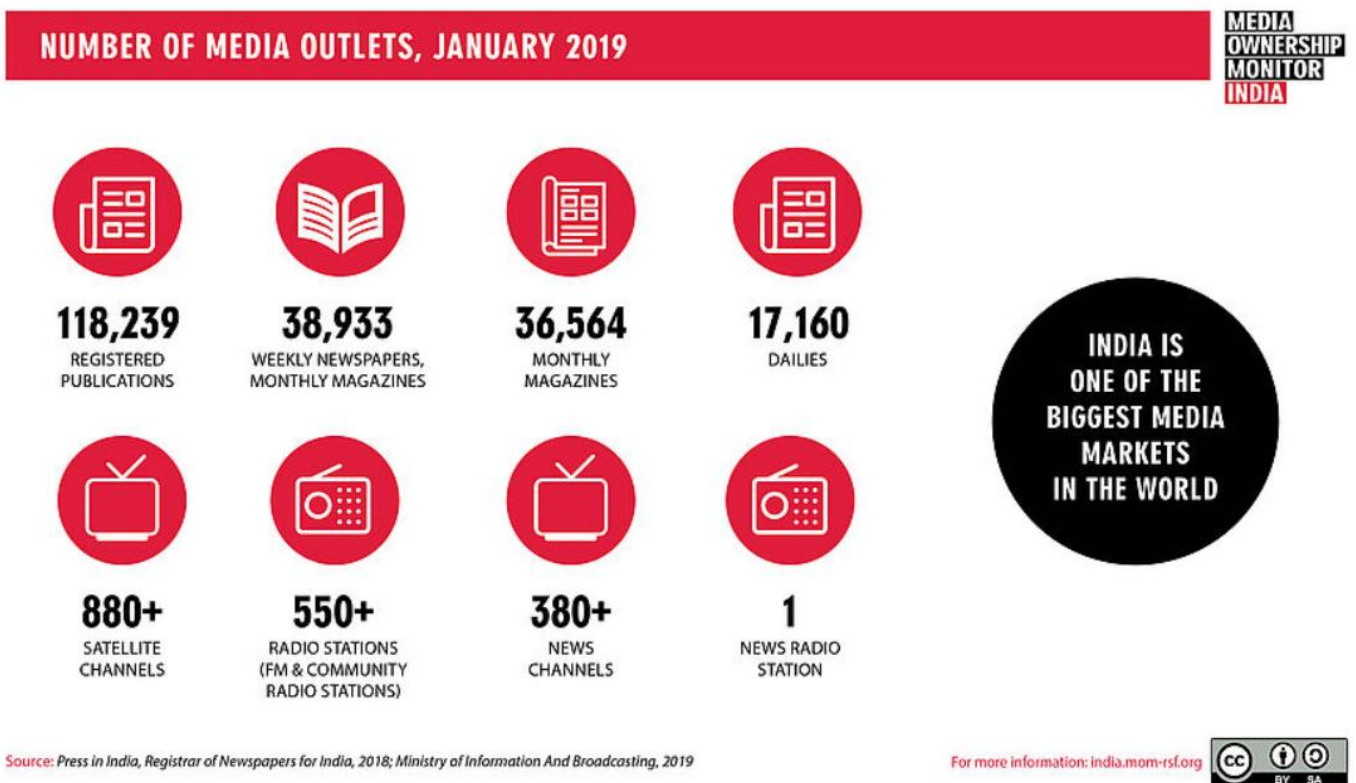


Fig. 7: Source: Min. of Information & Broadcasting, 2019

These structural dynamics raise several questions about whether the monopolization and corporatization of news content can uphold the pillars of democracy in India without

undermining the media's ability to hold those in power accountable. Chadha (2017) challenges the celebratory narrative surrounding the dramatic growth of India's media sector, arguing that the media landscape is increasingly characterized by rising commercialism, concentrated media ownership, and politicization.

The exponential growth in the number of media organizations in India largely ensued because of the Liberalization, Privatization, and Globalization (LPG) reforms in the 1990s, which drastically transformed the country's media landscape. Chiumbu & Radebe (2020 p.1) interrogate the ownership and structure paradigm through a Marxist critical political economy lens stating, 'how the media are organized and funded has implications on who gets to speak and the stories that are told or silenced'. According to William Melody, 'the greatest threat to freedom of expression in the United States or elsewhere is the possibility that private entrepreneurs will always tend to monopolize the marketplace of ideas in the name of economic efficiency and private profit (Melody 1978 as cited in Meier, 2002)'. Hence, factors such as cross-media ownership and market concentration are pivotal elements in the structure of media within a country.

Furthermore, the advertising-based model has been a principal driver of growth in the Indian media business, maintaining a symbiotic relationship with news content. According to India's largest media conglomerate, advertising not only provides information but also caters to audience segments interested in fashion, lifestyle, and similar categories (Times News Network, 2003). It is crucial to differentiate between paid news, which typically aligns with the interests of specific political factions or corporate entities, and impartial news content. This distinction is particularly pertinent within the digital news landscape where the boundaries between

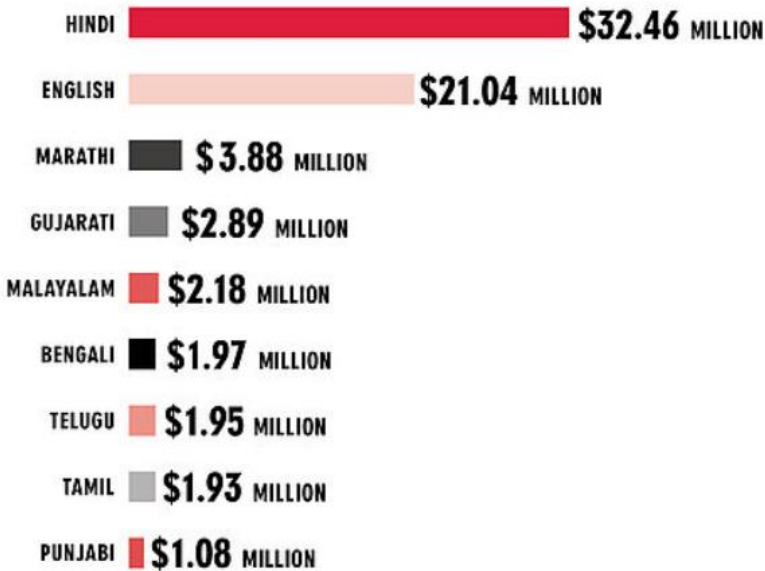
advertising and the editorial content are often blurred.

The rise of native advertising and branded content further complicates this landscape, as such forms of advertising are designed to mimic journalistic articles, making it increasingly difficult for readers to discern between paid content and independent reporting (Thakurta, 2012). As digital platforms prioritize user engagement and virality, sensationalism often overshadows in-depth, impartial reporting. This trend raises ethical concerns, as it compromises journalistic integrity and risks eroding public trust in news organizations.

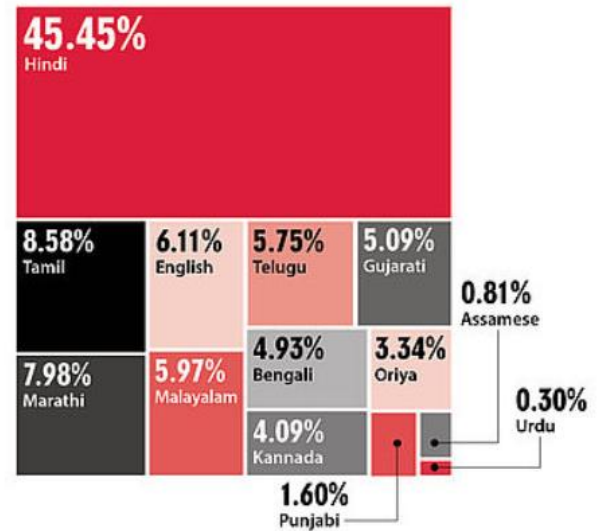
In response, scholars and industry experts argue for stronger regulatory frameworks and transparency standards to ensure a clear distinction between editorial content and sponsored material, thus safeguarding the credibility of journalism in the digital age (Nielsen & Ganter, 2017)

VALUE OF ADVERTISEMENTS GIVEN BY THE CENTRAL GOVERNMENT TO PRINT MEDIA

LANGUAGE-WISE ADVERTISEMENT



LANGUAGE-WISE READERSHIP



Source: Directorate of Advertising and Visual Publicity 2018; IRS 2017

For more information: india.mom-rsf.org



Fig. 8: Media Ownership Monitor (India) 2018

While advertising remains the primary source of revenue for most traditional and established media organizations in India, many digital news media outlets have adopted alternative subscription-based models, such as paywalls, etc. A 2012 journal article by Saayan Chattopadhyay examines the symbiotic relationship between India's traditional media corporations and political entities, revealing how this alliance shapes the country's political discourse and manipulates news narratives to serve specific agendas (Chattopadhyay, 2012). This analysis highlights the

complex interplay between media and politics within the current zeitgeist, underscoring the challenges this relationship poses to democratic discourse in the Indian context. I contend that, even a decade later, this perilous synergy has permeated the digital medium, further complicating the landscape of news and public dialogue.

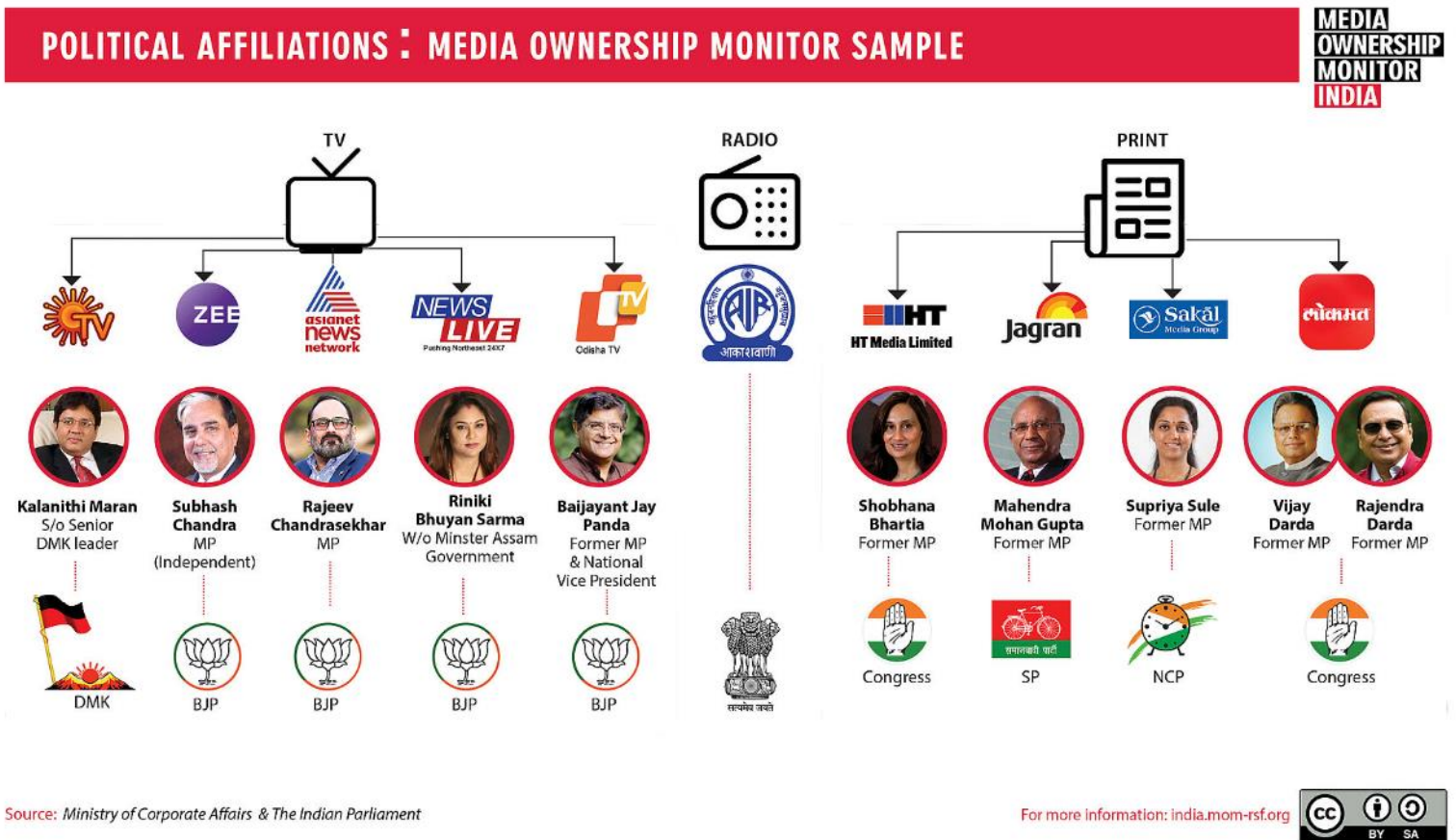


Fig. 9: Media Ownership Monitor India, 2018 (Available online at - <https://india.mom-gmr.org/en/findings/politicalaffiliations/>)

Governments can exert control over the information landscape through various mechanisms. One approach involves the direct limitation of media freedom via restrictive legislation or the

strategic influence of reporting through state-funded advertising and ownership of media outlets. This nuanced form of control not only shapes political discourse but also constrains the capacity for critical journalism.

Moreover, governments may employ coercive tactics to induce self-censorship within media organizations, thereby subtly manipulating public perception and steering the media narrative to align with their interests. Undoubtedly, the theoretical framework of Herman and Chomsky's 1988 propaganda model remains highly relevant for investigating contemporary Indian media. Sharma and Pegu (2023) build on the foundational concepts of this model, noting in their analysis that 'the corporate media is playing its part in the machinations of the BJP' (Ibid., p. 238).

Digital platforms have significantly reduced entry barriers for marginalized groups, enabling a more inclusive and participatory information ecosystem. However, despite their potential to broaden discourse, these platforms remain vulnerable to political and corporate influence. This creates a paradox: while they democratize access to information, they still operate within existing power structures. Women journalists face unique challenges in the digital space, where their gender often makes them targets of sexist and misogynistic harassment. While the digital environment offers increased visibility, it also subjects them to heightened scrutiny, particularly regarding their credibility.

2.4 Understanding Online Harassment

‘Misogyny has long been understood as something men feel, not something women experience. That is a mistake.’

Kate Manne (Mane, 2019)

Shifting the focus from media structures to the subtler yet pervasive aspects of digital culture, this section critically examines academic theories and real-world manifestations of digital harassment. It delves into the diverse forms of online abuse while scrutinizing the social and legal frameworks that address or challenge these issues. Given the interdisciplinary nature of the subject, this research primarily operates at the intersection of media and gender studies, engaging with a broad spectrum of academic discourse on online harassment.

A majority of the early scholarships in ethnographic studies on cyberbullying pertains to youth and children. In recent academic literature on digital harassment, scholars have repeatedly underscored the lack of a unified definition of the terminology. However, many feel that it does not differ much from the offline form of stalking and hence does not need to be rigidly defined (Sheridan and Grant, 2007; Bocij and McFarlane, 2003). Online harassment is often used as an umbrella term encompassing various malicious behaviors on digital platforms. Scholars have interchangeably used terms such as digital violence, cyber harassment, cyberbullying, online violence, gendered cyberhate, and electronic bullying (Li, 2005; Segrave & Vitis, 2017) to describe the act of targeting individuals in virtual spaces with the intent to harass them.

According to Tokunaga (2010, as quoted in Marwick p.2), the term was first used by scholars researching cyberbullying to mean ‘bullying’ and it went on to be conceptualized more expansively over the years. As stated by the International Journal of Cyber Criminology ‘cyber harassment typically involves engaging in an act or behaviour that torments, annoys, terrorizes, offends, or threatens an individual via email, instant messages, or other means with the intention of harming that person’ (Hazelwood and Koon-Magnin, 2013, p.157). The term encompasses ‘online bullying, electronic bullying and internet harassment’ (Tokunaga, 2010, p. 278).

A more severe form of online violence is known as cyberstalking, characterized by persistent and unwarranted contact with the victim through electronic means, with the intent to harass or threaten (Reyns, 2010). Reyns highlights that online violence is a relatively new phenomenon, emerging only with the advent of the internet. This examination provides a framework for analyzing the menace and its repercussions from a contemporary perspective, without explicitly engaging with the debates surrounding sex-based and sexual harassment. Notably, Segrave and Vitis (2017) use the term ‘*target*’ instead of ‘*victim*’ when discussing online harassment, aiming to challenge the connotations of helplessness and passivity often associated with the latter.

A 2019 conference paper by Glaser (2009) elaborates on various forms of online interventions and trolling techniques aiming to cause distress, amplify disinformation, and gaslight journalists into reacting on digital platforms (Marwick and Lewis, 2017). Ranging from terminologies such as ‘source hacking, sock puppetry, dogpiling, and conspiracy seeding’ etc. to analogies comparing black hat, white hat and grey hat hackers to trolls in the digital media

community, the author has elucidated the expansive methods trolls employ to achieve their objectives.

In a 2020 magazine article, San Francisco-based journalist Padmini Parthasarathy (p. 49) recounts the harrowing experience of Indian journalist Rana Ayyub, whose digitally altered pornographic video was circulated by trolls online and shared ‘at least 40,000 times through WhatsApp and social media’. This incident underscores the alarming rise of extreme forms of technologically facilitated deviant behaviors. Terms such as deepfakes, flaming, doxing (or doxxing), astroturfing, phishing, swatting, and zoombombing exemplify the diverse and insidious tactics employed to harass, intimidate, and silence individuals, as highlighted by PEN America (2022).

PEN America defines the terms online harassment/online abuse, as the ‘pervasive or severe targeting of an individual or group online through harmful behavior’ (Pen America, 2018).

Below is a table outlining the definitions of key terminologies as provided in Pen America’s *Online Harassment Field Manual*

<u>Terminology</u>	<u>Definition</u>
Astroturfing	Astroturfing is the dissemination or amplification of content (including abuse) that appears to arise organically at the grassroots level and spread, but is actually coordinated (often using multiple fake accounts) by an

	individual, interest group, political party, or organization.
Concern Trolling	Abusers pose as fans or supporters of a target's work and make harmful and demeaning messages and comments masked as constructive feedback.
Cyberbullying	An umbrella term, cyberbullying encompasses many harassing behaviors, but boils down to 'willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices' (See also: Cyberbullying Research Center, 2018). The term is primarily used in relation to children and young adults.

Cyber-Mob Attacks (aka Dogpiling)	When a large group of abusers collectively attacks a target through a barrage of threats, slurs, insults, and other abusive tactics. A form of mob justice focused on publicly exposing, humiliating, and punishing a target, often for expressing opinions on politically charged topics or ideas the outrage mob disagrees with and/or has taken out of context in order to promote a particular agenda
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Cyberstalking	In a legal context, 'cyberstalking' is the prolonged and repeated use of abusive behaviors online (a "course of conduct") intended 'to kill, injure, harass, intimidate, or place under surveillance with intent to kill, injure, harass, or intimidate' a target [See: <u>18 U.S. Code § 2261A</u>].
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<p>Deepfake</p>	<p>The use of “a form of artificial intelligence called deep learning” to make manufactured figures, audio, and/or video that appear real. [Source: Guardian] These figures, audio, and/or video are “mimicking speech or facial expressions so as to make it appear that someone has said or done something they haven’t.</p>
<p>Doxing (aka Doxxing)</p>	<p>The publishing of sensitive personal information online – including home address, email, phone number, social security number, photos, etc. – to harass, intimidate, extort, stalk, or steal the identity of a target. Short for ‘dropping docs’, doxing was a revenge tactic among ‘90s computer hackers.</p>

Phishing	An online scam that starts with some form of communication – an email, a text, a Whatsapp message – designed to look like it comes from a trusted source. The aim is to trick you into <i>doing</i> something, usually clicking on a link or opening an attachment, which may automatically download a virus onto your device or lead you to enter private information, like login details, which could then be used to gain control over your online accounts, impersonate you, or sell your info to others.
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Until the beginning of this century, no legitimate definition existed for the term cyberstalking in most developed nations. ‘Legislation from the UK, US, Canada and Australia fails to define cyberstalking [...] Legal definitions of stalking and harassment fail[ed] to take into account many of the behaviors associated with cyberstalking, such as electronic surveillance’ (Bocij, 2002, p. 31). As discussed above, Pen.org (2018) uses the term interchangeably, defining both as forms of harmful behavior that involve the relentless or intense targeting of an individual or group in online spaces. This definition underscores the serious nature of online harassment, recognizing

it as a significant issue that can have profound emotional, psychological, and even physical impacts on the targeted individuals or groups. Detailing how little attention has been paid to the 'technology-facilitated sexual violence and harassment' (TFSV) as compared to other forms of cybercrimes, Henry and Powell, (2015 p.759) categorize TFSV in six different forms:

(a) the unauthorized creation and distribution of sexual images (including non-consensual sexting or revenge porn), (b) the creation and distribution (actual or threatened) of sexual assault images, (c) the use of a carriage service to procure a sexual assault, (d) online sexual harassment and cyberstalking, (e) gender-based hate speech, and (f) virtual rape

So, a significant number of researchers have unequivocally included the following three elements:

a) willingness/targeted b) repetition and c) intention to harm; in the description of cyberbullying – a blanket term that has been used to encompass online/digital harassment (Hinduja and Patchin, 2010; Bailey, 2014; Levy *et al.*, 2012; Powell and Henry, 2017). 'For the past two decades, Olweus' definition of bullying has been used as the basis for much research and literature on cyberbullying - the term has been broadly used in the scholarly research for defining online harassment or bullying'. (Kofoed and Staksrud, 2018 p.1008).

In her article titled *Gender trolling: Misogyny adapts to New Media*, Karla Mantilla argues that Gender trolling as opposed to generic online trolling is aimed at harassing the target to breaking point. It encompasses distinct characteristics such as coordinated gendered insults, voyeurism, doxing, and lethal threats. Moreover, the trolls go to the extent of following the targets and their families in real life (Mantilla, 2013). At present, there still exists no such formal

definition of digital harassment within the Indian legal system (Praveen Duggal, personal interview, 7 April,2021). ‘Section 66A²⁵ of the Information and Technology Act (2000) was included after the Act’s amendment in 2008 and criminalizes the sending of offensive messages’ (*Ibid.*). Although this section was intended to address digital harassment, it has been criticized for its vague language and broad interpretation, leading to concerns about its potential misuse.

In 2015, the Supreme Court of India struck down Section 66A of the IT Act, citing it as unconstitutional and a violation of the fundamental right to freedom of speech and expression. This ruling has left a significant gap in the legal framework for addressing digital harassment in India, as no specific or comprehensive legislation has been introduced to replace it [See also: *Shreya Singhal v. Union of India*, (2015) 5 SCC 1. (Asokar, 2015)].

Despite the repeal of Section 66A, other provisions in the IT Act, such as Sections 67 and 67A, which deal with the publication of obscene material, remain in force. However, these sections are often seen as inadequate for dealing with the full range of behaviors that constitute digital harassment, such as cyberstalking, revenge porn, or gender-based online abuse. The lack of a clear and formal definition within the Indian legal system highlights the ongoing challenges in effectively addressing and combating digital harassment, leaving victims with limited legal recourse. This situation underscores the need for updated and more precise legal provisions that can adequately address the complexities of digital harassment, including its various forms and the evolving nature of online interactions.

²⁵ Until March 2015, most forms of online harassment in India fell under Section 66A of the IT Act.

Collectively, these studies outline that digital harassment is not merely a subjective experience, but a manifestation of intended harm. While there exists no universally accepted definition of the terminology that subsumes all kinds of malicious behaviors online, primarily owing to the difference in its origin, frequency, and nature of harassment; it broadly encompasses a malicious intent by the harasser/troll to silence, stigmatize and threaten the target. The evidence presented in this section suggests that the malicious content and inflammatory comments directed at women are most often toxic and gendered in nature.

This prompts critical inquiries into the persistence of misogyny in the 21st century, a period often characterized as post-feminist. What factors sustain this enduring animosity towards women? Does it remain entrenched in patriarchal norms, or does it stem from broader socio-cultural crises in the contemporary world? Such questions underscore the need to interrogate the underlying structures and conditions that perpetuate gender-based hostility despite significant advancements in gender equality.

In her comprehensive analysis of the problem of misogyny, Kate Manne in her book *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny* (Manne, 2019) presents an epistemological account of the terminology exploring answers to some of such questions. The author argues that neither should the term be understood as a 'purely structural and social' phenomenon nor something that has been spread by a few 'bad apples' (p.74). While challenging the definition of misogyny, broadly understood in public discourse as deeply entrenched hatred against women, the author suggests that the problem persists largely due to a social system that reinforces patriarchal norms, enforces gendered roles, and punishes women who resist conforming to male dominance.

References are often made to Kate Manne's critical analysis of the term misogyny, which challenges the historical idea of misogyny and argues, 'misogyny is not about male hostility or hatred toward women – instead, it's about controlling and punishing women who challenge male dominance. Misogyny rewards women who reinforce the status quo and punishes those who don't'. (Illing, 2020). Women who step out of their traditional roles of homemakers and caregivers (while attempting to take away certain masculine-coded positions of leadership and authority) are often the target (*Ibid*). Manne notes, 'such hostility need not be levelled at women disproportionately (i.e., as compared with male counterpart), in order to count as symptoms and expressions of misogyny. It is enough that the treatment is distinctive along some gendered dimension' p.70.

While critiquing the metaphysical dependency of misogyny on patriarchy, Manne contends that misogyny can exist with or without misogynists i.e. independently of individual misogynists. In agreement with Manne's argument, I contend that the cultural and institutional reinforcement of gender biases and stereotypes can perpetuate misogynistic outcomes even when individuals may not consciously harbor or express hatred toward women. Misogyny functions as a structural force within society, deeply embedded in institutional practices, media representations, and cultural narratives.

Gender pay gaps, lack of support for women in male-dominated fields, and inadequate protections against gender-based violence are all examples of how misogyny can be perpetuated institutionally. While the author acknowledges that exploring the origins of misogyny and its existence in various sub-cultures are beyond the scope of her book, her conclusions would have

been far more compelling if she had addressed the persistence of online misogyny in the contemporary world.

Manne's analysis of misogyny in the U.S., U.K., and Australia, described as 'allegedly post-patriarchal' societies, underscores a significant gap in current research, which has primarily focused on the Global North and developed economies. My argument is further reinforced by the need to expand the scope of inquiry to include diverse global contexts, particularly in the Global South, where the dynamics of misogyny may vary considerably due to differing cultural and socio-economic environments. More specifically, in the context of an immensely populated country with several races and ethnicities such as India, the analysis of misogyny needs to be examined from its intersection with race, class, and caste dynamics.

Another view addressing technology-facilitated gendered violence pronounces that existing research is silent on whether web-based pornography consumption 'encourages an even more sexually hostile work environment for women than they would otherwise experience' (Clark & Gorski, p.34, 2002). Based on in-depth interviews with women web designers, Kennedy (2000) concludes that while women have encountered both positive and negative experiences online, many continue to engage in digital spaces. The author contends that, notwithstanding the dehumanization of women through the use of derogatory epithets such as 'cunt' and 'bitch,' the internet has paradoxically emerged as a vehicle for empowerment.

Moreover, the harsh and vitriolic comments directed at women have engendered a sense of solidarity among them. This phenomenon underscores the dual nature of digital spaces: while they are often arenas for pervasive misogyny and abuse, they simultaneously offer platforms for

women to connect, share their experiences, and collectively resist such hostility. This solidarity has catalyzed the formation of online movements, support networks, and advocacy campaigns that confront misogyny and demand accountability from both individuals and institutional structures.

In their analysis of #YesAllWomen, Jackson and Banaszczyk (2016) found that such online movements serve as feminist ‘counterpublics’, challenging the naïve narrative that only some women are victims of violence and that incidents like the Isla Vista killings are isolated and rare. Many scholars argue that gendered violence should be understood as a structural social issue rather than a series of isolated incidents. The universality of harassment, regardless of geography, the lack of an intersectional lens in understanding experiences of gendered violence, and the frequency of such violence underscore the seriousness of this issue (Manne, 2019; Jackson and Banaszczyk, 2016). Therefore, these analyses collectively emphasize the widespread nature of gendered violence, advocating for a comprehensive societal acknowledgment and a robust, systemic response to address this deeply entrenched issue.

The dominant theoretical frameworks used to understand online misogyny and its impact on individuals and society are diverse. From psychoanalytic and feminist theories to discourse analysis and cultural contextualization, each offers unique insights into the motivations, expressions, and societal consequences of misogyny, underscoring the need for interdisciplinary approaches to address it effectively. For example, Jacob Johanssen’s (2021) book uses psychoanalytic theory to explore the contradictory desires and fantasies within the manosphere, a network of online communities that express misogynistic views. This perspective examines the

unconscious forces and fantasies that drive misogynistic behavior, emphasizing the role of sexuality, racism, and the male body in shaping these attitudes.

Online misogyny and violence against women have been theorized as deeply intertwined with historical, socio-political, and economic systems, extending far beyond the realm of technology. Scholars have emphasized the need to understand this phenomenon as both deeply rooted in cultural logics and dynamically shaped by contemporary political and economic forces. This perspective allows for a nuanced analysis that moves beyond the digital sphere to consider how intersecting factors like nationalism, class, and gender shape and amplify online aggression.

Bulut & Can (2023 p.677) conceptualize online misogyny as ‘networked structure’ that is a ‘violent and continuous’ interconnected and intersectional phenomenon operating across spaces such as the ‘online manosphere, masculine newsrooms, and authoritarian states’. They argue that this form of misogyny is not merely technological but instead deeply embedded in the socio-political structures of authoritarian regimes. In contexts like Turkey, networked misogyny targets women journalists through suspicion rather than overt illegality, with accusations of treason and terrorism serving as tools to delegitimize their intellectual labor and public visibility. This approach reframes networked misogyny as a violent war on women’s expertise and truth-seeking practices, which authoritarian regimes perceive as existential threats. Unlike liberal democratic contexts, where misogyny may appear as a violation of rights, its manifestation in authoritarian states aligns with nationalist and anti-Western ideologies, adding another layer of complexity.

Jagayat & Choma (2021) provide additional insights by linking online misogyny to sociopolitical ideologies, particularly right-wing authoritarianism and social dominance orientation. Drawing on Integrated Threat Theory, they argue that cyber-aggression functions as a mechanism to preserve social hierarchies and control subordinate groups, such as women in gaming communities. This framework reveals how digital spaces become battlegrounds for maintaining traditional power structures, with cybervictimization serving to suppress challenges to established norms.

Siapera (2019) on the other hand, draws a historical parallel between online misogyny in techno-capitalism and witch hunts during the transition from feudalism to industrial capitalism. She theorizes that both phenomena serve to exclude women from participating in transformative economic systems. Just as witch hunts violently coerced women to conform to the labor demands of emerging industrial capitalism, online misogyny aims to marginalize women from shaping the technological future under neoliberal informational capitalism. Silvia Federici's analysis, (as cited by Siapera, 2019) underscores this argument by demonstrating that femininity in capitalism was constructed as a tool for biological and social reproduction, masked as biological destiny, and enforced through systemic violence. These historical and structural perspectives emphasize the continuity of misogyny as a mechanism for reinforcing patriarchal labor divisions across eras.

Ging (2017), however, focuses on the cultural underpinnings of contemporary misogyny, situating its rise within the rhetoric and discursive logics of postfeminism. She argues that postfeminism's celebration of individualism and its portrayal of women as hypersexualized, narcissistic, and consumer-driven have undermined feminist efforts to address systemic issues

such as domestic violence, poverty, and racism. This cultural framework has paved the way for new forms of anti-feminism, amplified through digital platforms, where the backlash against feminism finds fertile ground. She discusses how postfeminist narratives have facilitated a backlash against feminist gains and contributed to the resurgence of misogynistic ideologies, especially online. Ging's analysis complements Siapera's by highlighting how cultural narratives intersect with structural forces to perpetuate misogyny in the digital age.

Collectively, these perspectives converge to reveal online misogyny as a multilayered phenomenon that cannot be understood in isolation from historical, structural, and cultural contexts. While some scholars emphasize the intersection of authoritarianism, nationalism, and class, others highlight the role of sociopolitical ideologies and historical continuities in shaping digital aggression. The arguments collectively demonstrate that online misogyny operates as both a product of deeply entrenched patriarchal logics and a tool for maintaining contemporary power structures. Understanding its interconnected and intersectional nature is crucial for addressing its pervasive impacts on women's public participation and intellectual labor.

This interconnected and intersectional understanding of misogyny stands in contrast to perspectives that deny its systemic nature, framing it instead as an innate or biologically determined phenomenon rooted in traditional gender roles (Brandt, 2023). Together, these frameworks highlight the necessity of interdisciplinary approaches to address the intricate and deeply embedded nature of digital misogyny.

Chapter 3

Digital Misogyny: The Unseen Challenges for Women Journalists in India

The Virtual Frontline: Confronting Online harassment

A recent study by Silvio Waisbord (2020) which primarily emanates from the New Censorship Theory by Bunn (2015), expounds on the concept of ‘mob censorship [...] made possible by the dislocation of speech conditions in contemporary societies’. In his seminal work, the researcher demonstrates how the suppression of press by netizens, through individual or collaborative acts of violence, has grave implications both for journalists and the nations at large. Aimed at stifling the voices of journalists by deriding them, mob censorship is filled with contempt and aggression towards a specific group of people resulting in toxic digital cultures. As Nigerian journalist and media entrepreneur, Simon Kolawole states:

Mob sentiments are not usually based on logic or facts. [...]When a mob seizes control of public discourse, if you don't read the room and fall in line with them, you will become a subject of attack, which could be physical. [...] It is very real in Nigeria

(Bertram, 2021)

This points to the critical need for an in-depth analysis of the repercussions of mob censorship on journalists, particularly among women and minority groups across multiple regions.

Interestingly, New Censorship theory visualizes censorship as a ubiquitous phenomenon in which a range of actors (including individuals, institutions, corporations, and social groups) can function as an impediment to speech. Referring to the work of Michael Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu the author clarifies that such indirect modes of censorship are far more severe and formidable than formal modes of repression. (p.27 Bunn, 2015). ‘Censorship thus represents a coercive action, an act of arbitrary power infringing upon the natural communicative rights of individuals’. (p.30 *Ibid.*)

While mob censorship highlights the destructive potential of collective online aggression, Lu & Luqiu (2023) demonstrate how collective audience intervention can serve as a powerful antidote to such toxicity. The study highlights audience intervention as a key strategy to combat online harassment of women journalists, distinguishing between active and passive bystanders. The paper shows that factors such as age, news consumption, and collective efficacy influence willingness to intervene, with responsive bystanders – those expressing anger at harassers – playing a crucial role. This is particularly relevant in regions with declining press freedom.

In Hong Kong, press freedom rankings fell from 18th in 2002 to 148th in 2022, while India saw a similar drop from 80th in 2002 to 161st in 2023. Both regions face oppressive media environments, making audience intervention critical. The study also finds that ideological similarity between audiences and journalists increases the likelihood of intervention, aligning with research on bystander-victim similarity. However, while audiences address overt misogyny, they often overlook subtler forms like benevolent sexism. Although the study’s use of a fictitious journalist profile raises questions about ecological validity, it offers crucial insights into fostering active bystander engagement in oppressive media climates like Hong Kong and India.

This raises a critical question: *In what ways do anonymous online comments inflict psychological and emotional harm on women journalists?* A 2017 Pew Research study highlights the dual-edged nature of online anonymity, which, while enabling destructive behaviors like trolling, simultaneously serves as a crucial mechanism for fostering open dialogue on sensitive or stigmatized subjects (Duggan, 2017). One of the leading academics in the field researching online violence against women journalists, Julie Posseti examined the disturbing experiences of the journalists, at the World Press Freedom Conference showcasing excerpts from the documentary film 'A Dark Place'.

Posseti notes how women journalists are disproportionately confronted with scourge of online violence, terming this as 'intersecting digital psychological and physical safety threat which is not just an issue contained within the digital realm but also has a chilling effect on journalism broadly, whereby female representation and press freedom are both deeply affected. This has led to women imposing self-censorship and quitting journalism all together (IPI, 2018).

In her analysis, Posetti underscores the frequent marginalization of journalists from the Global South within academic discourse, resulting in a substantial gap in the understanding of the distinctive challenges they encounter within their professional contexts (UNESCO, 2020). Researchers have unequivocally argued that digital harms have deep psychological impacts on the victims and must be taken seriously as 'distinct harms' (Henry and Powell, 2015, p.765). According to Obermaier, et al. (2018, p.502), 'organizations like Freedom House and Reporters without Borders (RWB) point that freedom of the press has come under increasing pressure especially in otherwise democratic societies like Poland, Hungary, or even the US'.

In her seminal report titled, 'Social Media & Online Hostility', Dawn Wheatley (2023 p.10) examines lived experiences of women in Irish journalism, specifically documenting the pervasive negativity they face and the strategies they employ to 'deal with the negativity, including filtering practices', in addition to the 'perceived professional obligations' (*Ibid.*) that are necessitated in the profession. Notably, she examines the 2019 case of a man convicted for persistently harassing six women journalists, resulting in a three-year prison sentence – a rare outcome, as most such cases go unaddressed for various reasons discussed earlier.

The author points to the less visible, yet significant, pressures that journalists navigate and confront regularly, such as the consideration of anonymity while reporting to protect themselves from potential backlash or harassment. Such instances reveal the significantly profound impact of these daily challenges on journalistic integrity and press freedom, as well as the broader implications for the quality and scope of news reporting. The report mentions several online comments being neither vitriolic nor threatening, but rather deeply personal that made the women uncomfortable. Moreover, the respondents noted a discernible shift in the tone of the online environment in recent years, indicating that it has become less interactive than it was previously.

Many respondents reported becoming 'desensitized' to online harassment, perceiving it as an inherent aspect of their profession. In her report, the author systematically delineates five phases of journalists' engagement with social media: initial enthusiasm, rising prominence, recognition and targeting, reaching a tipping point, and eventual withdrawal (*Ibid.*). While these phases may resonate with the experiences of many, I argue that even those who have become

desensitized can still experience profound psychological and emotional distress from a single harsh and toxic comment at any stage. This highlights the persistent vulnerability that even the most experienced journalists face when confronted with online hostility. The variability in individual responses to such harassment points out the complexity of the issue, suggesting that psychological resilience is not uniform and can be disrupted by specific triggers.

Several recent studies have explored the debilitating consequences of online harassment on women journalists, wherein the scholars have unanimously cited how relentless intimidation, and discrediting has impacted their professional life profoundly, jeopardizing their mental health. (Barak, 2005; Citron, 2014). These findings, however, do not explain the severe ramifications on their personal and professional life in substantial detail.

A cross-country report issued by UNESCO and the International Center for Journalists in 2020 reveals that three out of four women respondents (73%) experienced online violence, and one in five women reported that they experienced physical attacks stemming from the initial online harassment. Many press freedom organizations like the International Press Institute (IPI) recognize the severity of this threat on the safety of journalists and implement programs to help newsrooms protect their staff (International Press Institute, 2022).

Uwalaka & Amadi (2023, p. 294) observe that ‘a meta-journalistic analysis reveals that the Nigerian government fears a free press could lionize the ordinary citizen to the extent of causing a shift in the power base’. A comparable dynamic exists in India, where the press similarly operates under intense scrutiny. Furthermore, journalists in both countries note that online harassment often stems from the misconduct of a few, which is unfairly generalized to the entire

profession, further challenging the credibility of the media. This broad-stroke criticism amplifies the challenges posed by digital victimization, linking individual misconduct to widespread trauma among media professionals.

The adverse effects of digital victimization have been well-documented, and scholars have chronicled the manner in which cyberbullying results in trauma and other adverse outcomes (Kowalski et al., 2014, Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Staude-Müller, 2012). Hamby et al., (2018 p.383) state that in severe cases the victims have fallen 'within the clinical range of depression and anxiety'. The scholars, for the first time, incorporated the concept of digital poly-victimization in their analysis of its repercussion on the victims/targets, and found that 'digital poly-victimization is uniquely associated with post-traumatic stress and anxiety/dysphoria symptoms and other outcomes' (*ibid.* p.393). Poly-victimization is understood as an aggregate psychological burden of numerous kinds of victimization on a person.

Most of the research on its repercussions in the discourse pertains to children and youth. My research, thus, highlights a significant gap in a broader in-depth analysis of a range of online victimization and its consequences on the personal and professional lives of journalists, in particular, women. As Hamby & Grych (2013 p.2) aptly explain:

Narrow labels misrepresent and minimize the true burden of violence. Awareness of the interconnections among different forms of violence will provide a more accurate understanding of how violence affects people's lives, which in turn will facilitate efforts to reduce violence and the suffering that it causes

Zelizer & Allan (2002, as quoted in Richards, 2007) highlight journalism's crucial role in guiding societies' transition from trauma to recovery. This process involves guiding populations through stages such as establishing safety, remembering and mourning past events, and eventually reconnecting with everyday life. This perspective suggests that journalism is not just about reporting facts but also about facilitating collective healing and social cohesion after traumatic events. Building on this idea, other scholars, such as Hopper & Huxford (2020) and Kotisova (2020), have recognized the emotional dissonance that journalists often experience while covering such traumatic events.

Emotional dissonance refers to the conflict between the emotions journalists feel internally and the emotions they are expected to display or suppress while performing their duties. This dissonance can take a significant toll on journalists' mental health, particularly when they are constantly exposed to distressing or violent content. However, despite this recognition, there has been limited research specifically addressing the trauma and psychological impacts faced by journalists in the Global South, particularly those subjected to harassment. This gap in research is significant, as journalists in these regions often work under more challenging conditions, with fewer resources and greater risks, which can exacerbate the emotional and psychological strain they endure. The lack of in-depth studies on this topic leaves a critical void in our understanding of the full extent of the mental health challenges faced by journalists in these regions.

Kim & Shin (2022 p.17) examine the intricate dynamics of harassment faced by journalists, focusing on how perceived quality and ethical standards in reporting contribute to these

experiences. They argue that journalists often endure harassment not only due to the nature of their work but also as a result of the broader public's scepticism towards the media. This scepticism, I contend, can be heightened by instances of poor or unethical reporting, prompting a demand for 'perfection in their news work process' as a defensive response to such scrutiny.

The authors employ the concept of 'giraegi discourse' to explore how journalists navigate these challenges. Giraegi²⁶, a Korean term, reflects the public's disdain for unethical media practices and influences journalists to establish professional boundaries. In this context, journalists employ symbolic boundaries to distinguish themselves from peers who engage in unethical reporting practices, thereby reinforcing their credibility and ethical standing within the profession.

By establishing these boundaries, journalists not only reinforce their commitment to ethical standards but also seek to distance themselves from the negative perceptions associated with less scrupulous reporting. The authors suggest that the ongoing harassment and public disdain may lead to feelings of alienation and self-doubt among journalists. Additionally, Kim & Shin (*Ibid.*) raise a critical question: 'Should journalists serve members of the public who deny the reason for their existence', thereby suggesting a further need to analyze the emotional and psychological consequences of such hostility towards journalists.

²⁶ Giraegi is a combination of gija, the Korean word for journalist, and tsuraegi, the Korean word for trash.

3.2 Gendered harassment against women journalists in India - From the streets to social media platforms

Numerous surveys conducted by organizations such as UNESCO, the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ), the International News Safety Institute (INSI), and the Pew Research Center have documented a significant rise in the online harassment of women journalists globally (as discussed earlier). This issue was further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic in recent years (Posetti et al., 2020). In a 2020 UNESCO study, Posetti highlights that journalists from the Global South are often overlooked in academic discourse, which has contributed to several women imposing self-censorship and, in some cases, leaving the profession altogether (UNESCO, 2020).

Building on the global perspective, the unique challenges faced by women journalists in India, as explored by Shakuntala Rao, reveal the intricate interplay of religious nationalism and societal dynamics which further complicates their professional landscape. In her paper, 'No Country for (Women) Journalists: Reporting on Religious Nationalism and Sexual Violence in India,' Rao underscores how religious nationalism has led to an increase in threats and violence against journalists, particularly those critical of the government or who report on sensitive issues such as caste, religion, and sexual violence. The author offers a critical analysis of the role of social media in amplifying violence against women in particular, citing cases such as that of Neha Dixit, who faced severe online harassment following her investigative report on the trafficking of tribal girls by Hindu fundamentalist groups.

In 2016, Neha Dixit authored an investigative report titled 'Operation Baby Lift': A five-part investigation on how a Hindu fundamentalist group was involved in inter-state trafficking of

young tribal girls to 'Hinduize' them. Following the publication of this exposé, Dixit faced a torrent of hate speech and numerous death threats (Schmall, 2023). The harassment extended into the digital sphere, with Dixit's identity being misappropriated by counterfeit accounts on platforms like Facebook and Twitter (Rao, 2018). Human rights organizations have consistently highlighted instances where authorities have targeted journalists and broadly suppressed dissent, emboldening Hindu nationalists to intimidate, hound, harass, and verbally assault journalists those are critical of the government.

Women journalists who report on issues deemed sensitive by Hindu nationalists often face severe backlash, including online harassment, rape threats, and even physical violence. For example, journalist Rana Ayyub received death and rape threats following her coverage of police brutality in Kashmir (Singh & Helms, 2021). To further advance the understanding of gendered violence encountered by women in public life, Madhumita Pandey's research on the misogynistic views of convicted rapists underscores the cultural context in which women journalists experience harassment. The analytical framework of this paper draws on historically and socially constructed power dynamics, embedded in daily life, and intricately linked to coercive cultural norms and structures of oppression.

Pandey's interviews with over 100 convicted rapists in India reveal pervasive misogyny, wherein women are perceived as inferior beings, their value often reduced to their sexual purity and marriageability. This mindset parallels the attitudes of individuals who issue rape threats to women journalists online, reflecting similar patterns of dehumanization and objectification. I argue, both groups operate under the belief that women who step out of traditional roles or who

assert themselves publicly deserve to be punished (Pandey, 2023). This mindset is an extension of what scholars term as 'rape culture', where sexual violence and threats are used as tools to silence and control women (Patil & Purkayastha, 2017; Krishnan, 2015).

In the digital age, this culture has deeply permeated online spaces, where anonymity emboldens perpetrators to issue threats attempting to intimidate and silence women in public discourse. Pandey's observation that rapists showed little remorse, viewing their victims through a lens of dehumanization can be related to the way online harassers dehumanize women journalists. This dehumanization results in a normalized culture of online threats. Moreover, just as the stigma and trauma of rape can socially and emotionally isolate victims, the constant barrage of threats can isolate women journalists, affecting their ability to work, express opinions, or engage in public life without fear.

Human beings form mental models that shape their understanding and responses, providing a useful theoretical framework for examining how online harassment affects women journalists' perceptions and behaviors. These cognitive frameworks, or mental representations, enable individuals to interpret and make sense of the world around them. They encompass beliefs, assumptions, and generalizations that influence how people perceive situations, make decisions, and solve problems.

In his foundational work, Johnson-Laird (1983) developed the theory of mental models, explaining how individuals construct cognitive representations to interpret their experiences, including social and digital interactions. Norman (2014) discusses how mental models act as internal representations of external reality, influencing decision-making and user behavior in

both physical and digital contexts. Although not exclusively focused on mental models, Wilson and Gilbert (2005) examine how people predict emotional responses to future events, which is relevant to understanding how women journalists might anticipate and mentally prepare for online harassment. Klein (2017) explores mental models in decision-making, particularly in high-stress environments, offering insights into how women journalists develop coping strategies in response to online harassment. [See Also: Seel, 2001]

I would like to emphasize that the study on online harassment of women journalists should not only focus on the immediate impacts of such threats but also understand them as part of a broader continuum of gendered violence. This continuum spans from the physical to the digital, reflecting deep-rooted societal misogyny that manifests in various forms, from the streets to social media platforms.

In this context, the rise of citizen journalism, particularly among women in marginalized and resource-poor areas, represents a significant counter-narrative. The paper 'I know my work has effect. The Rise of the Woman Citizen Journalist in India' by Paromita Pain (2024) offers a critical examination of how platforms like CGNet Swara and Video Volunteers empower women to challenge traditional power dynamics, despite the persistent threat of harassment. By fostering a participatory media environment, these organizations enable women to produce impactful journalism that addresses both community needs and systemic gender inequalities. Through in-depth qualitative interviews, this study sheds light on the resilience of women citizen journalists who, in the face of gender-based harassment, continue to assert their voices and contribute to meaningful social change in India.

3.3 Under Siege: Women Journalists, Press Freedom, & the Right-Wing ‘Hindutva’ Agenda

Following is an excerpt from an interview with the investigative journalist Rana Ayuub] (Cadwalladr, 2022)

Last Sunday her words were jumbled, her voice on edge. She said she had not slept. That she could not eat or keep food down. That she had had thoughts of self-harm. “I was on a plane yesterday and I said to my brother, ‘Can you feel me sitting next to you?’ And he said, ‘Have you completely lost it?’ And I said, ‘No, I’m just not sure I’m sitting next to you. I feel like I’m in a dream.’ And afterward, I spoke to my psychiatrist, and she said, ‘you’re dissociating. You’ve had a traumatic experience – that’s your brain shutting down.

One of the prominent Indian investigative journalists, Rana Ayuub, has been brutally trolled online on several occasions. There are numerous instances where her Twitter page was bombarded with virulent comments, often filled with sexually explicit language. Most of these abusive comments flagrantly violate the norm of a civilized conversation, frequently including descriptive and graphic violent rape threats. Notably, even when threats are directed at a male journalist, trolls often threaten to rape the women in their families. Thus, the subject of sexual violence is predominantly women, a pattern now replicated in the virtual world.

The narrative presented above poignantly illustrates the psychological distress and emotional turmoil experienced by the investigative journalist as a result of persistent and aggressive trolling intended to silence her voice. The pervasive nature of these attacks fosters a profound sense of isolation, forcing journalists to endure an unrelenting barrage of vitriol. This

hostile environment can significantly undermine their sense of security and lead them to question both their professional role and the broader impact of their work on society.



Fig. 10: Source- Hindustan Times @htTweets 5:15 AM · Apr 26, 2017

'She was calmer when I spoke to her last Wednesday, partly because the United Nations had issued a statement in support of her, citing her 'judicial harassment' and 'misogynistic and sectarian targeting' (Cadwalladr, 2022)

The UN's intervention served as a critical turning point, offering her both moral support and a layer of protection that had previously been absent. Such international backing and acknowledgement can reinforce the role of international bodies in safeguarding human rights and freedom of expression. While a more in-depth exploration of support systems for journalists, particularly women facing digital harassment, shall be provided later in this dissertation, it is crucial to contextualize these measures with real-life examples.

Journalists who challenge the dominant narrative of the ruling BJP government and its *Hindutva* nationalist agenda are increasingly subjected to intimidation. This was strikingly evident during the global Pegasus spyware scandal, in which the Indian government was reportedly implicated. It was alleged that Pegasus, an Israeli spyware, was used by authorities to breach the mobile phones of several Indian journalists between 2017 and 2019, including prominent women journalists like Rohini Singh, who had reported on corruption within the highest levels of power (Bhardwaj, 2021; Basu, 2022; The Hindu, 2023).

Although the claims are significant, the government refrained from acknowledging its role or disclosing the authorities behind the surveillance authorization. The matter still remains unresolved in court, with the government denying involvement (BBC, 2021), though it is widely known that the Israeli company behind Pegasus deals exclusively with governments. Such attempts to spy on journalists and uncover their sources have contributed significantly to India's plummeting rank on the World Press Freedom Index (The Hindu, 2024), now standing at 159 out of the 180 nations that were analysed.

In a recent publication, Nupur Basu emphasizes that, despite the assassination of journalist Gauri Lankesh, online trolls continued their assaults, further eroding her legacy through persistent hate speech. The harassment did not cease with her death; instead, it extended to other women journalists, who were subsequently named as potential future victims. In India, online abuse has manifested in particularly heinous ways in recent years, including the morphed Fig.s of women journalists with pornographic content and the publicizing of their personal information. The emergence of cybercrimes associated with the #SulliDeals and #BulliBai

platforms, which facilitated the online auctioning of Muslim women journalists (Jagani, 2022; Basu, 2022), represents a troubling and unprecedented decline in the digital crime landscape in India.



Fig. 10: Twitter, 2017 – Tweet targeting Indian journalists

A 2018 Bloomberg investigative report provides evidence of state-sponsored trolling campaigns in India, where a former troll named Khileri describes his experience working for a 300-person team that aimed to intimidate opponents of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, including journalists. This report outlines the magnitude and methods utilized in the manipulation of social media by state-sponsored entities in India. The results highlight the systematic trolling strategies employed by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), aimed at stifling opposition and bolstering Narendra Modi's

political position, raising significant concerns regarding potential misconduct. Khileri was recruited in 2014 during Narendra Modi's campaign as a Prime Ministerial candidate. By identifying key targets such as political opponents, journalists, or minority groups, the supervisors directed the trolls to create content that aligned with their 'strategies meant to inflame sectarian differences, malign the Muslim minority and portray Modi as savior of the Hindus', (Roberts & Voskuhl, 2018) including memes and viral posts.

The BJP's engagement in these efforts suggests not just a passive endorsement but an active orchestration of online intimidation campaigns to shape public discourse. These efforts contribute to cultivation of an echo chamber filled with pro-government narratives, capitalizing on the anonymity and vast reach offered by digital platforms. These activities included the rapid dissemination of coordinated content through WhatsApp groups, which facilitated the viral spread of hashtags and political messages. The report suggests these tactics are not limited to India but were uncovered in 7 other countries (*Ibid.*).

'I Am a Troll: Inside the Secret World of the BJP's Digital Army' by Swati Chaturvedi provides a comprehensive account of India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) use of social media, particularly Twitter and Facebook, to intimidate political opponents, journalists, and dissenters, effectively creating a culture of fear. Chaturvedi explores how the BJP developed a highly organized and systematic online presence, often referred to as its 'IT Cell' or 'digital army'. This operation involves a network of paid and volunteer social media users responsible for spreading the party's messages, attacking opponents, and shaping public opinion (Chaturvedi, 2016). The author documents the role of internet trolls—individuals who use social media to

harass and intimidate critics of the BJP – and how they were employed to influence public opinion, manipulate social media narratives, and suppress dissent.

These trolls, as revealed, are not merely rogue elements but are often coordinated and encouraged by the party's digital strategists. Through interviews with former BJP insiders and social media strategists, Chaturvedi provides insights into the operations and strategies behind the party's digital campaigns. The broader implications of this digital strategy on Indian democracy are discussed in the subsequent sections, particularly how the use of digital platforms has transformed political campaigning, often blurring the lines between genuine public engagement and manipulative propaganda.

During his election campaign around 2014, Modi criticized leading journalists, labeling them as 'news traders' for allegedly misrepresenting facts (Sonwalkar, 2016, as cited in Koliska et al., 2023). Upon assuming office, Modi largely circumvented traditional press conferences, restricting his engagements to pre-scripted interviews with media outlets favorable to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). This controlled media strategy not only limited direct press scrutiny but also fostered a narrative supportive of the government's policies (Bhat, 2023).

Modi has also extensively used Twitter to criticize journalists and promote his campaigns, such as #MainBhiChowkidar. This approach reflects a strategic effort to control the narrative and limit dissenting voices in the media landscape (Koliska et al., 2023). Consequently, the environment shaped by Modi's media strategy has been described as intimidating for journalists, leading to self-censorship and a reluctance to report critically on the government.

The confluence of right-wing Hindu nationalism and the targeted harassment of women

journalists in India poses a grave threat to press freedom and democratic discourse. Women journalists, who already navigate the complex landscape of gender-based violence and discrimination, are now at the forefront of a broader ideological battle.

The aggressive tactics employed by right-wing nationalist groups, including online trolling, doxxing, and physical threats, serve not only to silence these voices but also to erode the principles of free speech and independent journalism. The growing convergence of state power and intimidation tactics employed by allied forces highlights the vital role of women journalists, whose resilience serves as a significant defense against the rise of authoritarianism.

The harassment of journalists in India operates as both a grassroots phenomenon and a state-supported effort, blurring the boundaries between mob and state censorship (Abhishek, 2022). Bhat and Chadha (2022) link this harassment to right-wing populism, which undermines journalistic legitimacy by framing the media as part of a corrupt elite. Right-wing Hindu nationalists, often referred to as 'Internet Hindus', systematically target journalists critical of the BJP and Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Women journalists and those from minority communities, particularly Muslims, face intensified harassment, including misogynistic abuse, doxxing, and threats, reflecting broader societal biases.

Prashanth & Kalyani, in their paper 'The Mob, the State and Harassment of Journalists via Twitter in India', categorize the harassment strategies into three main types: canceling journalists, intimidating international media, and monitoring journalists. An Associated Press investigation revealed that Facebook overlooked hate speech violations by these nationalists, likely to avoid government backlash. These nationalists frequently use derogatory terms like 'paid

media', 'sickular media', and 'presstitutes' to delegitimize journalists seen as antagonistic to the Hindu-nationalist agenda (Bhat & Chadha, 2022 p.1789). The harassment is often validated by BJP leaders through social media endorsements, with some harassers even rewarded with political opportunities. This faction, also called 'yoddhas' or 'warriors', works closely with the BJP's social media cell to target journalists on the party's 'hit list'. (Reporters Without Borders, 2018 p.6).

With an estimated 100,000 active online 'Hindu nationalists', this group consistently defends the BJP while attacking opposition parties and mainstream media. For example, when Siddharth Varadarajan, a Modi critic, was invited to speak at a government-funded institute, right-wing activists successfully campaigned to cancel the event (OpIndia, 2022), accusing him of spreading anti-Hindu propaganda. These 'nationalists' strongly oppose foreign media, particularly when it reports on human rights abuses by the Modi government or vigilante violence against minorities, viewing such coverage as biased against India and Hinduism.

While I agree that Western media often portray countries such as India as less progressive and sensationalize poverty (Raj & Suresh, 2023; Begam, 2024), the coordinated efforts of these online 'nationalists', often supported by the state, have significant implications for press freedom in India. By labelling dissenting voices as 'anti-national', such groups foster a narrative that undermines public trust in journalism. The combination of state-endorsed online intimidation and global media representation shapes a restrictive environment for free expression and democratic discourse.

Moreover, such depictions contribute to a skewed global understanding, where the rich

cultural, historical, and political contexts of countries like India are subject to reductive stereotypes. This narrative is often perpetuated through selective reporting that emphasizes negative aspects, such as poverty or social strife, while neglecting the broader context in which these issues exist.

Journalists like Hida Beg from *The Quint* reported self-censorship due to fears of retaliation (RSF, 2022). The Modi administration's withdrawal of government advertising from critical media outlets – a vital revenue source – is seen as a retaliatory measure, pressuring news organizations to avoid unfavorable coverage. This has led to a media environment where critical reporting on the BJP and Hindu nationalism has become increasingly scarce.

Research has shown that online violence is often treated as a personal challenge for individuals within the media industry (Claesson, 2022; Chen et al., 2018). While 'growing a thick skin' serves as a deliberate coping mechanism for some journalists, internalization typically involves the unconscious normalization of harassment. This process can sometimes result in a conscious decision to tolerate such behavior rather than address its systemic origins.

There is a pressing need for further research to understand how women journalists in India internalize harassment – a phenomenon often shaped by rigid patriarchal norms that suppress resistance and reporting - and its broader implications for their professional trajectories and credibility. Most women fear backlash or believe that acknowledging online harassment could jeopardize their professional reputation, thus leading to a cycle of silence and acceptance of unacceptable behavior.

Aman Abhishek (2022) analyzes the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and

Digital Media Ethics Code Rules) 2021 in India, contending that these rules institutionalize online vigilantism by allowing grievances to be filed against digital news outlets, thus blurring the lines between state censorship and mob censorship. The author examines them within the context of rising Hindu nationalism and the harassment of journalists, particularly women, reflecting trends seen in the Global North. The paper argues that online harassment is not solely orchestrated by the state but is also fuelled by ‘vigilante publics’ that feel empowered to act against perceived threats to their ideology. The paper places the IT Rules within a global trend wherein governments, especially in the Global South, use ‘fake news’ as a pretext to curb press freedom.

The current regulatory framework treats digital journalism and traditional media separately, leading to vague applications of the rules across different types of news organizations. In 2021, international assessments downgraded India's status regarding press freedom, indicating a shift towards ‘electoral autocracy’. (*Ibid.* p. 1771) notes, ‘Under the existing legal system, ‘the regulatory regime governs ‘digital’ and ‘journalism’ separately. [...] The IT Rules 2021 are vague in how they apply to news websites of legacy (broadcast and print) news organizations versus native digital news organizations’.

The IT Rules 2021 have faced criticism for their expansive definitions of grievances, which can include virtually any criticism of the government, effectively reducing journalism to a commodity vulnerable to public complaints. This has fostered a chilling effect, prompting journalists to self-censor out of fear of retaliation from the state or vigilante groups. These rules are widely perceived as a tool for the government to exert control over the narrative and stifle dissent under the guise of promoting accountability.

The government's justification for these rules often cites the need to address online harassment and fake news, framing its actions as accountable governance. However, this bundling of issues allows the government to maintain a moral high ground, while simultaneously empowering vigilante groups to police the media. The rules exacerbate the segmentation of the Indian media landscape, disproportionately affecting independent digital news organizations that are critical of the government. English-language urban reporters, for example, enjoy more protections compared to rural Hindi-language reporters.

The paper also critiques the Indian government's framing of these rules as necessary for public accountability and as a model for global media regulation, arguing that this rhetoric obscures the rules' true intent to control and suppress critical journalism. 'The definition of grievance is broad and it includes "any complaint, whether regarding any content"', expounds the author. Various organizations assert that the IT Rules violate both the Indian Constitution and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) (Mendiratta, 2021), to which India is a signatory.

Moreover, the requirement to swiftly resolve 'grievances', coupled with the threat of punitive actions from higher levels of the grievance redressal mechanism, effectively enables and encourages mob censorship. The definition of what constitutes a 'grievance' under the IT Rules 2021 remains ambiguous, raising significant concerns about the potential for arbitrary and subjective interpretations. This lack of clarity in defining grievances leaves room for broad and potentially abusive applications of the rules, enabling actors – whether state or non-state—to target digital news media under the pretext of addressing grievances.

This shrinking space for critical reporting emphasizes the pivotal role of ethical journalism, as demonstrated by many women journalists who advocate for constructive rather than destructive engagement.

In the following chapter, I will elaborate on the methodology I have adopted, providing insight into the rationale for my research design, the techniques for data collection, the methods of analysis, the ethical considerations involved, and the strategies implemented to address challenges and ensure the integrity of this research.

CHAPTER FOUR

Unravelling Methodological Threads as a Feminist Researcher

4.1 Overview

In this chapter, I provide a detailed description of the methodological approach employed to investigate the consequences of digital harassment, a phenomenon that is often insidious in nature and disproportionately affects women journalists. My research focuses primarily on India, and its significance lies in the country's high population density and intricate socio-cultural environment involving multiple interconnected factors, which amplify the challenges faced by women journalists. While the findings are rooted in the Indian context, the study aims to offer insights that could inform broader discussions on mitigating online harassment and supporting women journalists in diverse settings.

However, the applicability of these strategies to global contexts should be considered with caution, recognizing the unique socio-political dynamics of each region. This research aims to explore the contemporary phenomenon of online harassment faced by women journalists in India, with a particular focus on understanding its prevalence, forms, and impact on their professional and personal lives. This study investigation centers on the digital epoch, acknowledging that the rise of the internet and social media platforms has fundamentally reshaped the dynamics of journalistic practice and public engagement.

This transformation has not only redefined how journalists engage with their audience but has

also introduced new vulnerabilities. Unlike conventional forms of harassment which were often confined to physical spaces, online harassment transcends geographical boundaries and may occur incessantly, thereby exacerbating the challenges faced by women journalists.

My decision to pursue doctoral research on the online harassment of women journalists in India was driven by the imperative to develop a comprehensive understanding of this increasingly prevalent phenomenon. The study adopts an interdisciplinary approach by incorporating insights from sociology, political science, media studies, and law, thus leveraging various disciplinary traditions to contextualize the issue within broader socio-political and institutional frameworks.

Concurrently, it is transdisciplinary, as it involves women journalists not just as subjects of research but as epistemic contributors whose lived experiences inform the creation of knowledge. The objective is to enhance both public and academic comprehension of the interconnections between gender, caste, and press freedom, while also shedding light on the structural intricacies that underpin digital violence, rather than focusing solely on remediation strategies. While recognizing the significance of historical context, this study also concentrates on contemporary experiences and the resilience strategies employed by women journalists.

This emphasis is warranted due to the limited scholarly work on pre-internet experiences and the distinct characteristics of online harassment, which necessitate a specialized focus.

My research aims to provide actionable insights and recommendations for media organizations, policymakers, and digital platforms to create safer online environments and support systems for women journalists. The methodological approach of this study outlines the trajectory of my four-

year research journey, guided by its underlying principles, assumptions, and philosophical foundations. In the latter part of this chapter, I discuss the theoretical and conceptual framework, detailing the practical steps, techniques, and tools used for data collection, interpretation, and the analysis. This research employs mixed-methods design integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of the subject under investigation. This chapter concludes with the ethical considerations and limitations integral to this study. Ultimately, it serves as a roadmap, guiding the reader through the methodological journey and scholarly exploration undertaken in this research.

4.2 Research Design & Methodological Approach

I approach this analysis from the standpoint of a post-colonial subject residing in a first world country. As a woman from the Global South, specifically from a developing country like India and endowed with the sociocultural capital of the Indian merchant class from *Vaishya Varna*, my identity profoundly influences my theoretical engagement with postcolonialism and feminism. This vantage point allows me to critically engage with the intersections of race, class, and gender, examining how these dimensions interact within both post-colonial and feminist frameworks.

The comprehensive review of existing literature reveals a significant gap in research on the prolonged psychological impacts of online harassment experienced by women journalists in India. This gap includes critical aspects such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and depression, highlighting the need for thorough and extensive research. Additionally, the review identifies a notable lack of scholarly attention to the complex interplay of gender with factors such as caste, religion, and socioeconomic status in the context of online harassment targeting

women journalists in India.

The rationale for selecting mixed-methods approach is based on its potential to deliver a comprehensive insight into the research problem. This approach is grounded in Standpoint Theory and Intersectionality, which provides a critical lens to analyze how intersecting identities such as gender, caste, religion, and socioeconomic status shape the experiences of online harassment faced by women journalists in India. By situating their lived experiences at the centre of inquiry, this framework acknowledges the power dynamics and structural inequalities that influence these interactions. The mixed-methods design complements these theoretical foundations by integrating qualitative narratives with quantitative analysis, enabling a holistic understanding of both the subjective and systemic dimensions of the issue under consideration.

While Standpoint theory has faced critiques for its perceived tendency toward essentialism, it remains a valuable framework for understanding how the intersections of identity - such as class, religion, and economic position - shape diverse perspectives. Rather than opposing differences, it emphasizes the importance of context and specificity in shaping experiences. This approach acknowledges that systems of power affect historically excluded groups in varied ways, offering a nuanced lens for examining diverse voices (Raman & Komarraju, 2017), particularly in digital spaces.

Prominent scholars have discussed pragmatism extensively highlighting its role in guiding the mixed methods approaches (Creswell, 2014; Sandelowski, 2000; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010; Yardley & Bishop, 2017). The approach is grounded in the belief that the value of a research lies in its utility and applicability to the operational challenges and field-specific issues. Pragmatism's

central characteristic is the 'process where theory is extracted from actions, and applied back to practice in an iterative process [...] notwithstanding that finding absolute truths about social phenomenon is impossible' (Christ, 2013 p.111).

Critics argue that combining qualitative and quantitative methods is inherently flawed due to their divergent philosophical underpinnings, including the incompatibilities of positivist and constructivist paradigms and concerns about methodological rigor (Bryman, 2006; Howe, 1988). In contrast, pragmatists advocate for integrating diverse methodologies to gain a comprehensive understanding of the research topic, emphasizing adaptability over rigid methodological boundaries.

My decision to pursue doctoral research on online harassment of women journalists in India, was driven by the imperative to comprehensively understand and address the evolving nature of this increasingly prevalent problem. This study falls within the trajectory of transdisciplinary framework due to the integration of perspectives from sociology, political science, media studies, and law. The research draws on the diverse insights of women journalists to examine caste-based discrimination and the state-sponsored online targeting. Its objective is to enhance awareness, broaden public understanding, and illuminate the complexities surrounding these topics, rather than focusing on strategies for alleviation.

The central research question seeks to investigate the magnitude, forms, and nature of online harassment and its correlation with the psycho-emotional state of women journalists in India. This investigation further aims to acquire an understanding of how gender power dynamics are amplified in digital settings within the socio-political landscape of India. The research question

evaluates the core debates arising from existing literature and lays the foundation for a scholarly exploration of the substantial gap that exists therein.

4.3 Practitioner-Scholars and the Imperative of Reflexivity in Feminist Research

The advent of practitioner-scholars, i.e., individuals who navigate both the realms of professional practice and scholarly investigation, has significantly contributed to the production of situated knowledge (Hesse-Biber, 2010) especially in feminist and media studies. Practitioner-scholars occupy a unique epistemic space as their research is often grounded in lived realities and professional experience, which enables deeper insight into institutional and discursive structures. As both a journalist and feminist scholar, I bring a situated perspective that informs and complicates the critical framework of this study. This dual positioning underscores the importance of reflexivity, as my professional and scholarly trajectories inevitably shape how I interpret and engage with the phenomenon under investigation.

The emphasis on reflexivity in feminist research has historically been a key aspect of epistemological discussions within the discipline. Sandra Harding's (1987) standpoint theory urges researchers to acknowledge their social and epistemic locations, thereby challenging the supposed neutrality of positivist paradigms. Similarly, Donna Haraway's (1988) concept of 'situated knowledge' urges researchers to consider how their specific and embodied perspectives shape the creation of knowledge. These perspectives recognize the practitioner-scholar as an active, politically situated subject whose knowledge is informed by their positionality and the contexts they inhabit.

This approach resonates particularly with the work of Bell Hooks (1984), who argues that

feminist theorizing must emerge from the margins and must remain accountable to lived experience. In media studies, scholars such as Carolyn M. Byerly (2011) and Linda Steiner (2012) have similarly emphasized that researchers examining journalistic cultures must grapple with their own location within, or in relation to, those very cultures. The practitioner-scholar is thus required not only to reflect on power relations in the field but also to be attentive to the dynamics of authority, vulnerability, and complicity in their own roles.

4 .3.1 Reflexivity Statement:

As a former journalist who has occupied editorial roles in mainstream Indian media, my positionality is shaped by both professional privilege and gendered vulnerability. Having experienced the double bind of navigating male-dominated newsrooms and managing public-facing roles as a woman journalist, I approach this research not from a neutral standpoint, but from an involved, informed, and politically conscious position. This insider perspective provided access to participants and insight into institutional silences around gendered harassment, while also demanding reflexivity to avoid over-identification or universalization of their experiences.

In alignment with feminist research principles, I engaged in self-reflexive journaling, used bracketing to decentre my subjectivity during interviews, and relied on peer engagement with feminist scholars to interrogate interpretive biases. In addition, I acknowledge that my interpretations are influenced by my higher educational background in the Global North, and my personal and professional experiences in India, a dynamic that highlights the necessity of maintaining epistemic humility and political accountability as fundamental principles of this endeavor.

In sum, this study seeks not only to generate knowledge about the research topic but also to interrogate the broader frameworks—media institutions, digital infrastructures, and patriarchal-nationalist political structures—that enable and sustain such violence. Reflexivity, therefore, is not peripheral but central, underpinning both the ethical commitments and the epistemological integrity of the research.

4.3.2 Anonymity, Participant Consent, and Ethical Constraints

Although pseudonyms were assigned to all participants in compliance with ethical approval guidelines, several individuals specifically requested to be named in the study. These participants, especially those with significant public visibility or activist inclinations, perceived attribution as a political statement and a means of asserting ownership over their stories. However, full identification was not permitted due to GDPR regulations and the ethical protocols of the university.

To address this complexity, a considered approach was taken: while participants' names were anonymized, selective identifying details—such as the nature of their media organization (digital, print, or broadcast) or their reporting beat—were included where relevant. This was done only when participants gave clear verbal consent and when such context was essential to the analysis, for instance, in drawing distinctions between the experiences of women working in legacy media versus digital-first platforms. This decision-making was guided by an ethic of situational confidentiality (Fine, 1993), balancing participants' autonomy with a commitment to safeguarding their well-being.

This methodology reflects a careful balance between feminist principles of voice and institutional

requirements of anonymity, with ongoing assessment to ensure alignment with evolving ethical standards. It also underscores the broader challenges feminist researchers face in honoring participants' subjectivities while navigating institutional and legal constraints.

4.4 Research Questions

This study investigates the impact of online harassment on women journalists in India, with a focus on gendered, caste-based, and political dimensions of digital violence. The research employed a mixed-methods approach to answer the following questions:

Central research question: How does online harassment affect the personal and professional lives of women journalists in India, particularly in the light of factors such as gender and caste discrimination, the socio-political challenges under the BJP administration, and broader concerns related to press freedom in the country?

Quantitative Sub-Questions

- 1.1 To what extent do women journalists in India perceive that digital harassment impacts their psycho-emotional well-being and professional efficacy?
- 1.2 What is the distribution of perceived sources of hate, harassment, and threats (government, political parties, individuals, etc.) as reported by women journalists?

(1) Qualitative Sub-Questions

- 2.1 What is the nature of relation between online violence and the psycho-emotional state of women journalists in India?
- 2.2) How do intra-caste biases manifest in the Indian mediascape, and what specific challenges do women journalists from marginalized castes face in navigating these issues?
- 2.3) What unique obstacles to press freedom and the position of women journalists have arisen during the BJP administration, and in what ways have these obstacles affected their capacity to perform their journalistic duties effectively?

4.4.1 Analytical Framework and Methodological Approach

This study employs a multi-method qualitative approach rooted in feminist epistemology, drawing on *Thematic Analysis*, *Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)*, *Feminist Standpoint Theory*, and *Intersectionality*. Rather than applying these approaches in isolation, it weaves them into an integrated, layered framework that captures both the complexity of the research question and the intersectional dimensions of participants' experiences.

Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis served as the foundation for coding and categorizing data derived from in-depth interviews, enabling the identification of patterns related to psycho-emotional impact, institutional responses, and coping strategies. This method foregrounded the narratives of participants and provided an inductive structure for engaging with their lived experiences. This analysis was employed to examine qualitative interview data from 20 participants.

Data were systematically coded using NVivo software to uncover recurring themes associated with psychological effects, coping mechanisms, professional repercussions, and institutional reactions. This approach was essential for addressing sub-questions 2.1, 2.2, and 2.3, as it facilitated the identification of grounded themes derived from lived experiences without the constraints of pre-established categories.

4.4.2 Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

According to Fairclough (1992) and Wodak and Meyer (2016), Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) does not prescribe a rigid set of procedures. Nevertheless, researchers frequently initiate the process by identifying recurrent linguistic patterns across texts. In this study, I describe these preliminary patterns as themes, not in the sense of thematic analysis as articulated by Braun and Clarke (2006), but as a pragmatic device to organize a large corpus of interview data. As Braun and Clarke (2006) emphasize, the identification of patterns constitutes a foundational element of qualitative research more broadly, though its analytic function varies according to epistemological orientation.

Within my framework, these themes operated as provisional scaffolds that facilitated the grouping of extracts and the surfacing of shared concerns. The subsequent stage of analysis reconceptualized these themes as discourses, understood as socially and ideologically embedded modes of meaning-making that reproduce power relations and social hierarchies (van Dijk, 1993; Wodak, 2001). Thus, while thematic identification provided an organizational foundation, the critical discursive interpretation formed the analytic core of this study.

Utilizing Van Dijk's (1998) Ideological square model, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) enriched the thematic findings by revealing the ideological and discursive mechanisms that drive online harassment. Through the analysis of lexical choices, rhetorical structures, and patterns of othering, CDA highlighted the ways in which digital abuse sustains broader frameworks of misogyny, casteism, and political repression. CDA enabled the identification of discursive strategies such as othering, delegitimization, and symbolic violence - central to understanding how language enacts power. This was particularly useful in addressing the qualitative RQs, where the ideological construction of harassment was explored in relation to *Hindutva* hyper nationalism, caste, and gendered discourse.

I adopted a reflexive approach to the data, which required a continual examination of my own assumptions and positionality as a researcher. This orientation ensured that the analysis was not directed toward seeking confirmatory evidence or aligning findings with pre-existing theoretical expectations. Instead, it foregrounded the complexity of participants' accounts, attending to moments of contradiction, ambivalence, and nuance. By doing so, the analysis resisted reductive interpretations and acknowledged the layered, and at times conflicting, realities through which participants articulated their experiences.

The narratives included in this study were selected through an inductive coding process, wherein patterns were derived from the data itself. This method allowed for both convergence and divergence in experiences, ensuring that the findings are not shaped by selective emphasis but by the textured realities expressed by participants. While formal coding was not employed at the outset of data collection, a post-hoc inductive review of the interview transcripts enabled the

identification of recurring themes and discursive framings, in line with the principles of feminist qualitative research and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA).

The transcripts were reviewed iteratively to trace how participants narrated their experiences of online harassment in relation to broader structures of power, such as gender, caste, media institutions, and state authority. The themes were conceptualized as recurring patterns of meaning that captured how women journalists made sense of online harassment and its consequences in their professional and personal lives captured through personal narratives. These included psycho-emotional responses, workplace dynamics, platform accountability, and mitigation strategies.

Discourses were interpreted as broader narrative logics or ideological frameworks within which those themes were embedded, for example, nationalism, liberalism, or techno-capitalism. Thus, while a theme such as ‘being left to navigate harassment alone’ captures the experiential reality of participants, it may be more accurately understood as embedded within the discursive macrostructure of Institutional Discrimination and Media Representation, wherein caste-blind liberalism and dominant media cultures obscure systemic marginalization and delegitimize demands for institutional accountability.

The following tables outline the key themes and discourses that emerged from the data, along with the frequency of their appearance across the 20 interviews conducted.

Table 1: Recurring Themes Identified in Interview Data

Theme	No. of Participants (n = 20)	Description
Emotional distress and burnout	15	Participants reported anxiety, fear, helplessness, and in some cases, psychosomatic symptoms.
Gendered abuse and objectification	18	Experiences of harassment often included sexual threats, moral policing, or appearance-based shaming.
Institutional neglect and lack of support	14	Respondents described media houses as dismissive, unsupportive, or complicit in silencing victims.
Platform inaction and tech indifference	12	Participants criticized digital platforms for slow or absent moderation, particularly in Hindi media.
Professional precarity and self-censorship	13	Many women spoke of withdrawing from certain beats or moderating their speech to avoid backlash.
Solidarity and peer support	06	Informal networks, especially among women journalists, served as crucial emotional support systems.
Intersectional marginalization	17	Respondents from marginalized caste or linguistic backgrounds experienced layered vulnerabilities

Table 2: Discursive Macrostructures/Discourses Identified through CDA

Discourses	No. of Participants (n = 20)	Interpretive Description
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Institutional Discrimination and Media Representation	15	This discourse captures participants' accounts of structural biases within Indian media institutions, where caste and gender hierarchies are embedded in recruitment, newsroom culture, and story
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		selection. Participants reported being marginalized, tokenised, and erasure in ways that reproduced broader social inequalities.
Normalization of Discrimination and Acts of Resistance	14	The discourse reflects how everyday casteist and sexist behaviors are normalised as workplace culture. While many participants described this normalization as disempowering, others detailed small and strategic acts of resistance, ranging from calling out slurs to building solidarities with other marginalized colleagues.
Access to Resources and Socio-economic Impacts	13	This discourse highlights the material consequences of structural inequality. Participants from marginalized backgrounds reported limited access to education, mentorship, language privilege, and professional mobility, impacts that were deeply entangled with caste, gender, and regional identity.

These categories were not mutually exclusive. For instance, a participant describing exclusion from editorial meetings may simultaneously point to entrenched newsroom hierarchies (Institutional Discrimination and Media Representation) and reflect on how casteist remarks were routinely normalized without redress (Normalization of Discrimination and Acts of Resistance). Similarly, accounts of struggling to access English-language mentorship or metropolitan opportunities were embedded within the broader discourse of Access to Resources and Socio-economic Impacts.

These intersections underscore how the discursive formations identified through feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) are not discrete silos, but overlapping structures of meaning that co-constitute journalists' lived experiences. Drawing on van Dijk's socio-cognitive model and feminist CDA (Lazar, 2005), Chapter 6 interrogates how caste, gender, and institutional power materialize through discourse, producing not only symbolic marginalization, but also tangible constraints on professional agency, visibility, and mobility. The mapping of these discourses thus reveals both the ideological foundations of media exclusion and the subtle resistances that emerge within structurally hostile environments.

In sum, drawing on the CDA framework as articulated by Fairclough (1995) and van Dijk (1998), I analysed the language, framing, and underlying ideologies embedded in these discourses. Rather than treating them as isolated themes, I examined how this discourse strands functioned in relation to broader structures of power, identity, and institutional control.

The word-tree visualization (Chapter 7) displays the lexical patterns that emerged around the term "caste" during interview discussions. Because the data was derived from semi-structured interviews, these lexical links reflect participants' articulated responses to the interview prompts rather than unprompted free association. Nevertheless, the visualization is analytically useful: it highlights a recurrent tendency among participants to situate caste within institutional domains – for example, references to "elections" and "media." This pattern is substantiated by the coding developed in NVivo and by the relevant extracts in which participants explicitly link caste to institutional mechanisms governing public life. Consequently, the word tree

functions as a descriptive heuristic that signals discursive frames warranting further interpretative attention, rather than as dispositive proof of spontaneous lexical association.

In Chapter 7, a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was undertaken to examine how far-right political discourse and organized digital harassment intersect with gendered and caste-based hierarchies to shape the experiences of women journalists in India. The analysis was guided by van Dijk's socio-cognitive model and feminist CDA (Lazar, 2005), enabling attention to both ideological structures and the social cognition that sustains them.

4.4.3 Discourses Coded:

A total of two principal discursive macrostructures/discourses were identified in this chapter:

- a) Targeted Suppression and Structural Control*
- b) Impact of Right-Wing Political Ideology on Journalistic Practices*

These discourses were not treated as isolated entities but were analyzed for how they overlap, reinforce, or contradict one another, revealing the broader discursive terrain within which harassment, censorship, and ideological policing occur.

Thematic Analysis: For the CDA, four major descriptive themes were identified across participant narratives in this chapter. These were inductively derived during the coding process and served as entry points into the discursive formations:

Theme	No. of Participants (n = 20)	Description
Harassment by Right-Wing Troll Armies	12	Participants described coordinated online attacks marked by gendered, casteist, and communal slurs intended to intimidate and delegitimize their journalistic work.
Political Surveillance and Digital Targeting	9	Journalists recounted experiences of being digitally monitored, hacked, or falsely profiled, often as a consequence of reporting on sensitive political issues.
Self-Censorship Due to Threats and Institutional Apathy	10	Persistent threats and a lack of institutional support compelled several participants to adopt cautionary editorial strategies or

Theme	No. of Participants (n = 20)	Description
Caste and Religious Vilification in Online Spaces	11	<p>reduce their public engagement</p> <p>Dalit, Adivasi, and Muslim journalists detailed sustained abuse involving caste slurs, religious hate speech, and dehumanizing threats.</p>

These thematic patterns served as empirical entry points into the broader discursive formations identified through feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Drawing on van Dijk’s socio-cognitive approach and feminist CDA (Lazar, 2005), the chapter examined how right-wing ideological dominance is sustained through digitally mediated harassment and institutional complicity. For example, the theme of “Harassment by Right-Wing Troll Armies” was situated within the discursive macrostructure of Targeted Suppression and Structural Control, highlighting how digital abuse operates as a tool of authoritarian discipline.

Similarly, themes such as “Political Surveillance” and “Self-Censorship” intersected with the discourse on the Impact of Right-Wing Ideology on Journalistic Practices, revealing how political power constrains not only media content but also the embodied experiences and professional autonomy of women journalists. These findings demonstrate the mutually reinforcing relationship between discourse and experience, ideology and embodiment, and thus

illustrate the value of combining thematic analysis with feminist CDA in unpacking the structural and symbolic violence embedded in contemporary digital political cultures.

Table 2: Discursive Macrostructure/Discourses Identified through CDA – Chapter 7

Discourse	No. of Participants (n = 20)	Interpretive Description
Targeted Suppression and Structural Control	13	This discourse captures how digital harassment – particularly by organised troll networks – is employed as a mechanism of silencing dissent. Women journalists, especially from Dalit, Adivasi, and Muslim backgrounds, described being subjected to orchestrated abuse and surveillance, with state complicity or institutional apathy further normalising such attacks.
Impact of Right-Wing Political Ideology on Journalistic Practices	14	This discourse reflects how far-right ideological dominance has reshaped editorial cultures, leading to increasing self-censorship, delegitimization of minority perspectives, and marginalization of critical reportage. Journalists articulated how Hindutva narratives have entered mainstream newsrooms, constraining what can be reported, by whom, and how.

These categories were not conceived as mutually exclusive. For instance, a participant's account of exclusion from editorial meetings simultaneously revealed entrenched newsroom hierarchies (Institutional Discrimination and Media Representation) and the routine normalization of casteist remarks without redress (Normalization of Discrimination and Acts of Resistance). Similarly, accounts of struggling to access English-language mentorship or metropolitan opportunities were embedded within the broader discourse of Access to Resources and Socio-economic Impacts.

These intersections underscore how the discursive macrostructures/discourses identified through feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) self-contained categories but overlapping and mutually reinforcing structures of meaning that shape journalists' lived experiences.

Drawing on van Dijk's socio-cognitive model and feminist CDA (Lazar, 2005), this chapter interrogates how caste, gender, and institutional power materialize through discourse, producing not only symbolic marginalization, but also tangible constraints on professional agency, visibility, and mobility. The mapping of these discourses thus reveals both the ideological foundations of media exclusion and the subtle resistances that emerge within structurally hostile environments.

4.4.4 Feminist Standpoint Theory

Feminist Standpoint Theory (Harding, 1987) provided the primary epistemological foundation for this study, anchoring it in the lived experiences of women journalists as situated knowers. While caste constitutes a critical axis of structural inequality in the Indian context, I adopted a deliberate

methodological stance not to foreground it as an explicit category within this study. This decision was informed by several considerations: the small number of participants from marginalized caste backgrounds within the sample; the orientation of the research questions, which prioritized participants' subjective experiences of online harassment and professional life; and a reflexive awareness of the potential influence that foregrounding caste might exert on both interview dynamics and interpretive processes.

This approach is consistent with the epistemological commitments of Feminist Standpoint Theory, which privileges the emergence of situated knowledges through participant narratives rather than through the imposition of predetermined identity categories. This also reflects an ethical orientation attentive to the complexities of representing marginalized identities without reducing them to categorical markers. In line with an intersectional analytic praxis, identity markers such as caste, region, and language were allowed to emerge organically within participants' accounts when and where they themselves deemed these relevant to their experiences. This approach aligns with the core tenet of Standpoint Theory: that knowledge is produced through lived experience and reflexive engagement, not assumed neutrality.

By foregrounding the partial and inherently political nature of knowledge, this framework informed the design of interview protocols, and shaped interpretive strategies across all six research questions. This theoretical orientation not only influenced the formulation of the research questions and recruitment process but also directed the analysis, with particular attention to issues of power, voice, and agency.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality served both as a methodological and analytical tool to investigate the interplay of gender, caste, religion, and professional status in shaping experiences of digital violence. This lens was crucial for the qualitative RQs, revealing compound vulnerabilities and how multiple systems of oppression operate simultaneously. It also informed thematic analysis coding, ensuring that multiple identity markers were not treated as add-ons but as integral to the structure of online harassment. It also informed the thematic analysis and coding, ensuring that multiple identity markers were not treated as discrete or additive factors, but as constitutive elements of the structure of online harassment. This approach avoided reductive framing of marginality and instead facilitated a nuanced understanding of how intersecting identities shape layered experiences of oppression.

4.4.5 Integration of Methods

In sum, the integration of these methodological approaches culminated in a feminist analytical framework that is epistemologically coherent. Thematic analysis enabled grounded engagement with experiential data; CDA offered a structural critique of language and ideology; Standpoint theory foregrounded the politics of knowledge; and intersectionality maintained a consistent attentiveness to the multiplicity of social locations. Rather than treating each method as discrete, this framework allowed for an interplay where situated knowledge was contextualized within broader power formations.

This methodological synergy enabled a more textured understanding of how online harassment functions not merely as isolated incidents of abuse, but as manifestations of entrenched social hierarchies and institutional complicity. Ultimately, this layered approach ensured that the

analysis remained attentive to both the micro-level narratives of participants and the macro-level systems that shape and constrain their journalistic lives – thereby fulfilling the feminist imperative of producing knowledge that is both descriptive and transformative.

Given that quantitative (QUANT) research often seeks to evaluate the impact, outcomes, or disparities between dependent and independent variables (Dewasiri, Weerakoon & Azeez, 2018), it was essential to commence the study with pan-India surveys to address the quantitative (QUANT) research questions effectively.

Dependent Variables: These variables represent the outcomes or effects being studied in response to the independent variables:

- **Impact on personal life:** Indicators such as mental health challenges, stress, anxiety, depression, or disruptions to personal relationships.
- **Impact on professional life:** Indicators such as professional performance, career progression, job security, or withdrawal from certain types of reporting
- **Frequency of harassment:** Number of incidents reported over a specific time frame
- **Psycho-emotional well-being:** Indicators such as perceived stress levels, emotional exhaustion, or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).
- **Professional efficacy:** Self-assessed ability to perform journalism duties effectively, confidence in reporting, or changes in productivity.

Independent Variables: These variables represent the factors that might influence the

dependent variables:

- **Type of digital harassment:** Forms such as verbal abuse, doxxing, trolling, threats, stalking, or misogynistic comments
- **Demographic factors:** Age, geographic location, and socioeconomic status.
- **Source of harassment:** Government entities, political parties, organizations, anonymous individuals, or social media users

4.5 Mapping Variables to Quantitative (QUANT) Research Questions

1. RQ 1

- Independent Variables (causal factor or influence): Nature of harassment, frequency, severity (type and intensity of harassment)
- Dependent Variables (outcomes being measured): Psycho-emotional well-being (Emotional states, perceived mental health impacts), professional efficacy

2. RQ 2

- Independent Variables: Categories or types of harassment sources (government, political parties, individuals)
- Dependent Variable: Perceived distribution of harassment sources (subjective assessment by participants, refers to how women journalists attribute harassment to different sources)

4.6 Scholarly Lenses: Perspectives and Theories

Researcher's Positionality: As I reflect on my four-year journey, I realize that this dissertation is not merely a culmination of formal years of my research; it is, in fact, an amalgamation of my upbringing within Indian society, numerous professional experiences as a journalist, and my unconventional path to entering a field traditionally dominated by men. In navigating the intricate web of online violence, my research is grounded in feminist standpoint theory and employs an intersectional lens. Hence, as an insider, this approach proved particularly relevant in uncovering how journalists experience and perceive the nature, extent, and prevailing attitudes towards online violence.

The insider-outsider dynamic in research highlights the complex nature of positionality in the field and the importance of reflexivity, with each position offering distinct advantages and challenges. An insider researcher shares characteristics, experiences, or membership with the group being studied. (Berger, 2015; Giwa, 2015). As a former journalist, researching the experiences of other women journalists provides me certain advantages. In addition to my nuanced knowledge of the in-group culture, and familiarity with the contextual subtleties of the group in terms of the political climate; I also understand the multifarious challenges of navigating life as a woman in India.

In addition, I was able to decode unspoken cues, symbolic gestures, and local dialects that play a crucial role in participants' interactions and communication patterns. In summary, researchers who have access to insider perspectives, such as myself, are more inclined to gather

empirical data that genuinely reflects the lived experiences of participants, thus safeguarding against the unintentional omission or misrepresentation of crucial information.

My analysis is informed by my own positionality as a woman researcher and former journalist, located within both Indian and international academic contexts. This dual standpoint shapes my interpretive lens and my relationship with participants, particularly in relation to questions of gender, caste, and press freedom. Acknowledging positionality enables reflexivity about how knowledge is co-produced in the research encounter and avoids presenting analysis as detached or neutral.

Standpoint Theory: Standpoint theory, first articulated by Dorothy Smith in the 1970s and later elaborated by Sandra Harding, provides a framework for recognizing marginalized groups as producers of distinctive and situated knowledge (Smith & McCarty, 2016; Harding, 1987). Rather than treating knowledge as universal, standpoint epistemology emphasizes how lived experience structures perception and insight. In this study, standpoint theory foregrounds the narratives of women journalists in India as critical vantage points for examining the entanglements of gender, caste, and media power.

Informed by their personal experiences, women, as a distinct social group, possess not only different but unique perspectives shaped by their gender. *Feminist theorist Dorothy E. Smith* articulated this argument through her development of Standpoint Theory in the 1970s, a framework that has since gained significant traction in studies related to race, ethnicity, and sexuality (Smith & McCarty, 2016). Sandra Harding further expanded and articulated standpoint theory within feminist epistemology, emphasizing the situated nature of knowledge and the

value of marginalized perspectives (Harding, 1991).

Harding's feminist standpoint theory is predicated on a specific theoretical conceptualization of power relations. Within this framework, power is understood as the capacity of an individual or collective entity to limit or circumscribe the array of choices available to another individual or collective group. This conceptual framework posits power as a dynamic mechanism that can constrain or influence decision-making processes and behaviours within social structures. As Rolin (2009, p. 219) argues, 'relations of power do not always involve domination; they function as vehicles of domination and include hidden aspects'.

Since the concept of standpoint refers to historically shared, group-based experiences, enabling group-based realities to transcend individual experiences (Collins, 1997), this framework is employed in my research study to investigate both the shared and individual experiences of journalists.

Furthermore, as the dominant theme of caste emerged during the preliminary findings of my survey results, it necessitated a nuanced analysis through an intersectional lens. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, a renowned postcolonial theorist, has made significant contributions to the discourse on intersectionality and her scholarship, deeply rooted in deconstruction, engages with the complexities of identity and the intersections of gender, race, and colonialism emphasizing the often overlooked dimensions of colonial history and power dynamics in shaping these identities (Piu, 2023). Nanditha (2021) demonstrates how, even during the #MeToo movement in India, the focus was primarily on elite journalists and media celebrities for 'coming out.' This gap in the conversation neglects the distinct challenges faced by marginalized groups, such as Dalit women professionals, whose experiences differ significantly from those of elite, urban women.

In summary, the critical analysis of scholarly perspectives highlights the need for an inclusive and intersectional understanding of gendered online harassment, particularly as it pertains to marginalized groups. Building on these theoretical foundations, this research employs a mixed-methods approach to offer a comprehensive exploration of the experiences of women journalists in India. To better understand the multifaceted nature of online harassment, the study utilizes a blend of quantitative and qualitative methodologies.

The following sections will outline the core types of mixed-method research designs, as articulated by Creswell and Plano Clark (2018), and provide the rationale for selecting the specific design employed in this study. This discussion will highlight how the chosen design ensures both depth and breadth in data collection and analysis, thereby effectively addressing the research objectives.

Types of core MMR Designs

- Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) classify core MMR designs in 3 types:
 - ✓ Convergent Design
 - ✓ Explanatory Sequential Design
 - ✓ Exploratory Sequential Design

Fig. 12: Types of core Mixed-Method Research Designs (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018 as cited in Fabregues, 2023)

Each one of these designs integral to mixed methods research is explained briefly, and the rationale behind categorizing this research as an ‘Explanatory Sequential’ design is detailed further ahead in this section. In integrating quantitative (QUANT) and qualitative (QUAL) data within a study, several key steps are necessitated such as: *a) Temporal sequencing* i.e. the order and timing in which different components of a study are conducted. Temporal sequencing determines whether these methods are applied concurrently (simultaneously) or sequentially (one after the other). *b) Weightage*, i.e. the weight given to each method i.e. whether the study is primarily qualitative (QUAL) or quantitative (QUANT) *c) Integration point* – which involves how the data gathered in one stage of the research is integrated with and informs the following stage. Each of the aforementioned designs incorporates these three elements.

While Convergent Designs involves integrated interpretation after a broader comparison of quantitative and qualitative designs (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998), the Exploratory Sequential Design starts with qualitative (QUAL) data to explore a phenomenon and then uses these findings to shape the subsequent quantitative (QUANT) phase, often to measure or test the concepts developed from the qualitative insights. In contrast, the Explanatory Sequential Design framework begins with the collection and analysis of quantitative (QUANT) data. The findings from this initial phase then guide the subsequent phase, which involves gathering qualitative (QUAL) data.

According to Ivankova, Creswell & Stick, (2006 p.5), ‘The qualitative data and their analysis refine and explain those statistical results by exploring participants’ views in more depth (*Ibid.* p.5). This subsequent phase is instrumental in facilitating an in-depth and profound exploration

of the initial results achieved by the quantitative (QUANT) data analysis.

It is noteworthy that a crystal-clear distinction between ‘explaining’ and ‘further exploring’ is difficult to make, and in some cases, there may be clear overlap i.e. further exploring the quantitative (QUANT) findings is itself a way of explaining them. This intersection highlights the intricate and sometimes indistinct boundaries between explanatory and exploratory facets within research methodologies. Based on the description of these design methods, this project is classified as an *Explanatory Sequential Design method*.

4.7 Centrality and importance of integration:

One of the most crucial aspects is the point of integration of the quantitative (QUANT) and qualitative (QUAL) data during the several stages of a research project. Integration refers to ‘the intentional and coherent mixing of qualitative (QUAL) and quantitative (QUANT) approaches throughout the research process with the goal of producing a new outcome related to the research design or interpretation of findings that would not be possible by using either approach alone’ (Fabregues, 2023).

According to Woolley (2009), ‘Quantitative and qualitative components can be considered ‘integrated’ to the extent that these components are explicitly related to each other within a single study and in such a way as to be mutually illuminating, thereby producing findings that are greater than the sum of the parts’. However, the employed integration strategy is dependent on various elements of the research structure and is interconnected with the study's purpose, overall design, and integration tactics during the multiple stages of the research and not necessarily during its entire process.

The centrality of integrating qualitative and quantitative research lies in its ability to offer a more holistic, robust, and contextually grounded approach to investigating research questions. Plano Clark (2019) expounds that the integration within a research framework necessitates meticulous consideration of several dimensions: (a) The purpose of integration which entails determining the underlying rationale for integrating diverse components within a research study, decisions about the specific aspects to be integrated which encompasses raw data, results, inferences, and the philosophical or theoretical perspectives, among others (b) Defining the optimal junctures within the research timeline at which integration occurs to enhance the study's coherence and selecting the appropriate tools and techniques for integration.

The following table demonstrates how specific quantitative (QUANT) survey questions from a Qualtrics questionnaire correspond to qualitative (QUAL) interview questions, forming a complementary relationship in a mixed-methods research design.

The purpose is to integrate data from these two approaches, enabling a more comprehensive exploration of patterns identified through quantitative analysis, enriched by qualitative insights.

Table 1: Example of matching the Qualtrics questionnaire to Qualitative interview questions

QUANT

QUAL

In the rapidly changing landscape of contemporary society scholars tend to agree that integrating quantitative (QUANT) and qualitative (QUAL) methods is tremendously challenging, especially the decision on the point of integration of the two methods (Ivankova, Creswell & Stick, 2006; Bazeley, 2016) that includes both philosophical and epistemological dimensions of mixed-methods research. Merging of the methods within a research process can take place at multiple junctures, including throughout the study.

It may occur during the initial stage of data collection, as research aims and objectives are established, leading to the concurrent formulation of both quantitative (QUANT) and qualitative (QUAL) research questions. Alternatively, it can take place during the analytical phase, where the findings from both the quantitative and qualitative methodologies are examined and synthesized. Fetters & Molina-Azorin (2017) emphasize that combining quantitative (QUANT) and qualitative (QUAL) perspectives can be equally effective and pertinent at various stages of research, including the literature review, philosophical underpinnings, and the conceptual or theoretical framework.

Thus, mixed-methods research enables a robust exploration of phenomena by integrating the strengths of both perspectives, applicable across various components of the research process. The accompanying table illustrates how these approaches are implemented in my study.

Table 2: Example of matching the Qualtrics questionnaire to Qualitative interview questions

<u>Research Design</u>	<u>Research Approach</u>
Theoretical paradigm	Pragmatism, Standpoint theory and Intersectional feminist theory
Methodology	(Mixed-method) Explanatory Sequential Approach
Participants	Women journalists in India
Data collection method	Online survey administered via Qualtrics platform. Interviews conducted both in-person and online through Zoom
Ethical factors	The University code of ethics adhered to and data protection ensured in compliance with the Data Protection Act, 1998.
Data analysis	Survey data analyzed using descriptive statistics i.e. bar graphs. Qualitative data analyzed using Vivo, employing Critical Discourse Analysis
Validity, reliability	Measures and considerations implemented to ensure validity and reliability of the research. No inter-coder reliability test was conducted, in line with reflexive qualitative traditions. As Braun and Clarke (2019) and O’Connor and Joffe (2020) note, coding in such approaches is

	interpretive and situated; requiring identical codes would undermine the epistemological stance. Instead, rigor was ensured through systematic documentation, and analytic transparency.
Limitations	Limitations identified and explicitly acknowledged

4.8 Reasons for conducting the online survey: (Phase 1)

Numerous global surveys and studies on digital violence against women journalists - such as UNESCO’s *The Chilling: Global Trends in Online Violence Against Women Journalists* (Posetti et al., 2020), the UNESCO - ICFJ *Online Violence Against Women Journalists: A Global Snapshot of Incidence and Impacts* (Posetti & Shabbir, 2022), the International Federation of Journalists’ (IFJ) *The Gendered Nature of Online Abuse Targeting Women Journalists Worldwide* (2018), and the Thomson Reuters Foundation’s *Holding the Line: Journalists at Risk* (Simon, Lauría & Flores, 2023) - have documented the escalation in both magnitude and impact of online harassment across regions including South Asia, Latin America, North America, Europe, and Africa.

These reports underscore the profound implications of harassment for the mental health, well-being, and professional trajectories of women journalists, while emphasizing the urgent need for comprehensive interventions to safeguard their security and enable them to perform their societal roles without fear of abuse or intimidation. While these studies are valuable in

shedding light on the global landscape of online harassment, they had a notable dearth of representation for women journalists in the South - Asian countries, particularly India.

Despite being the most populous country on the globe with a substantial number of women journalists, India has been either omitted or inadequately represented in these global surveys. The sample sizes for South Asian countries are often minuscule, making it impossible to derive meaningful data on the prevalence of online harassment specifically experienced by women journalists in India.

The inadequate inclusion and disproportionately small representation of Indian women journalists rendered it impossible to extrapolate reliable data on the prevalence of online harassment they face. During my examination of the scholarly literature, I discovered significant methodological limitations, particularly in evaluating the challenges and issues faced by Indian women journalists in the broader framework of global studies.

A pan-India online survey targeting women journalists was, therefore, undertaken to assess the magnitude and frequency of harassment nationwide. The survey results then informed the selection process for subsequent in-depth interviews. The integration of quantitative (QUANT) and qualitative (QUAL) methods in this sequential explanatory design resulted in a more nuanced and layered analysis of the phenomenon under investigation. As previously mentioned, in the absence of universally accepted terminology to describe online gendered harassment, I have employed a range of interconnected terms throughout my dissertation. These include *online harassment*, *abuse*, *violence*, and *attacks*, which collectively describe unwarranted and unprovoked aggressive online actions directed at individuals.

4.9 Recruitment, Sampling, and Data Collection

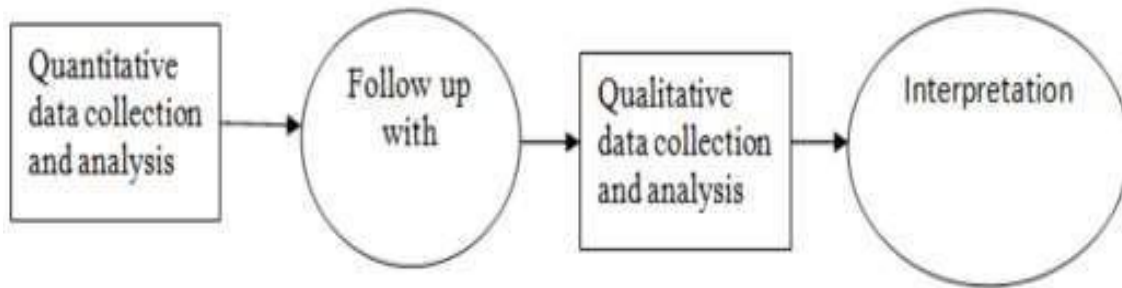
To achieve the objectives of this study, a dynamic and iterative participant recruitment process was adopted. Recognizing the challenges associated with engaging women journalists across India, no fixed sample was predetermined in advance. Instead, participants were contacted through professional networks, including journalist associations and forums, as well as via direct outreach on social media platforms, email, and phone. I have employed a combination of link-tracing and snowball sampling methods to expand the pool of respondents, ensuring a broad and diverse representation across geographical regions, media platforms, and journalistic specializations.

The quantitative phase comprised an online survey, which served as the first stage of the explanatory sequential design. Recruitment efforts were ceased once 150 respondents had been contacted; however, continued participation yielded 182 valid survey responses. This facilitated an in-depth understanding of the prevalence, typology, and impacts of digital harassment on women journalists.

For the qualitative phase, in-depth interviews were conducted with 20 participants, purposefully selected from the survey respondents who consented to follow-up discussions i.e. from the same cohort of journalists who participated in the initial survey. Notably, 17 out of the 20 interviews were conducted in-person, involving extensive travel across multiple cities within India. I engaged in this endeavor to cultivate a more personal and trusting environment, encouraging the participants to share their experiences in greater depth. The remaining three

interviews were conducted virtually using video conferencing tools, ensuring accessibility for participants who were unable to meet in-person. This phased and adaptive approach ensured a comprehensive data collection process, capturing both the breadth and depth of experiences, thereby effectively integrating insights from quantitative and qualitative methodologies.

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Explanatory Sequential Design

Phase	Procedure	Product
Quantitative Data Collection	Cross sectional survey	Numeric data
Quantitative Data Analysis	Use of descriptive and inferential statistics	Meaningful measures
Connecting Quantitative and qualitative Phase	Selection of participants purposefully and interview questions development	Interview protocol
Qualitative Data Collection	In- depth interview	Textual data
Qualitative Data Analysis	Coding and thematic analysis Theme development cross thematic analysis	Codes and themes similar and different themes and categories cross thematic matrix
Integration of the Quantitative and Qualitative results	Interpretation and explanation of the quantitative and qualitative result	discussion implication future research

Fig. 13: Explanatory Sequential Research Design (Dhanapati, 2016)

4.10 Data Collection Phase

Guided by pragmatic principles, I began the data collection phase of this mixed-methods study 18 months after completing a detailed literature review. As noted earlier, I organized this process into two sequential phases. For Phase 1, i.e. the quantitative stage, online questionnaires were distributed via the Qualtrics survey platform. Phase 2 of data collection focused on qualitative data to gain a deeper understanding of the quantitative findings. This phase involved conducting in-depth interviews with a different subset of women journalists selected from the same sample. The interviewees represented a diverse range of profiles, including young and experienced journalists working in various roles such as reporters, editors, columnists, and independent journalists.

The qualitative data collected were subjected to rigorous analysis using NVivo software. This analysis employed Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as proposed by Van Dijk (1993, 2006), which was particularly suited to the study's focus on power, ideology, and language in online harassment. While thematic analysis is valuable for identifying and organizing patterns across qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006), CDA extends beyond surface-level themes to interrogate how discourse reproduces and legitimizes broader socio-political hierarchies. Given that the research investigates how gendered and caste-based harassment functions as a tool of control within digital public spheres, CDA provided the necessary framework to connect individual narratives with structural power relations.

4.10.1 Data collection

a) Quantitative Phase: Survey design

Survey Purpose and Objectives: The purpose of this nationwide survey was to assess the magnitude and frequency of harassment experienced by women journalists across India. Beyond quantifying the extent of the issue, the survey aimed to explore the long-term repercussions of such harassment, including its impact on both their professional lives and overall well-being. Additionally, the study sought to examine how harassment affects the profession of journalism itself.

Survey Instrument: A questionnaire developed through a combination of open-ended and closed questions was hosted online using Qualtrics survey platform (see Appendix A). The participants were selected using link-tracing/snowball sampling methods such as LinkedIn, the Network of Women in Media's²⁷ references, Twitter web-scraping, and the personal network of journalists. I administered the online questionnaire to a total of at least 450 potential participants out of which 183 began the questionnaire. The bar charts below present key data from the survey responses, illustrating the consent process and demographic characteristics of the participants.

The first chart provides a breakdown of the consent process, showing that all participants began the survey, but only a subset (121 out of 183) completed it through to the last question.

The 62 individuals categorized as 'False' either withdrew or did not continue at various stages of

²⁷ NWMI is a forum for women in various media professions in India. It is a 100% not-for-profit organization – a voluntary, informal, non-hierarchical, participatory collective with no institutional affiliation, infrastructure or paid staff.

the survey.

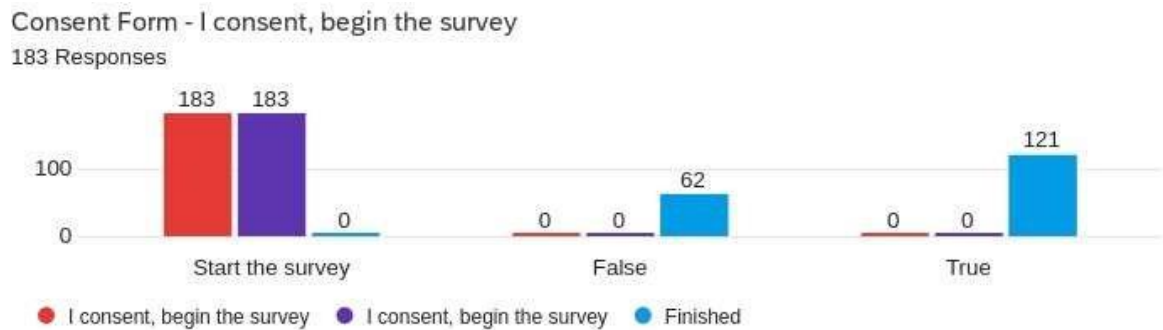


Fig. 14: Qualtrics survey data (consent form)

Sampling Method: Several critical factors are necessitated for the execution of relevant sampling procedures in a research study. According to Heckathorn & Cameron, (2017 p.102), ‘Some populations have attributes that make them hard to reach or are ‘hidden’ because it is unfeasible to construct a sampling frame, i.e., a list of population members from which the sample can be drawn’. Incidentally, the hidden population encounters scrutiny due to its inherent lack of a sampling frame, leading to criticism regarding the statistical validity of the obtained sample.

This sampling method is frequently characterized as snowball or convenience sampling. It is also categorized as link-tracing, whereby samples are acquired by meticulously tracing connections to individuals within and beyond a social network. However, the rationale behind the continued validity and acceptability of this sampling methodology lies in the absence of

alternative means to access a sample from an elusive and unidentified population [See Network Sampling in Changing Populations (Thompson, 2017)].

Survey Population: The target population in this study consists of individuals who identify as women, trans-women, non-binary, or gender-fluid, and engage in journalism as a profession. For the purposes of this dissertation, this category includes women working across various forms of media, such as print, broadcast, digital, and online journalism, and who are currently moderately to significantly active on global social media platforms. They might be employed in the Indian media industry with public, private, multinational, community, or non-profit organizations; digital platforms funded by venture capitalists; government-funded research institutions; news agencies; news-oriented social media platforms; hybrid media outlets; or NGOs and civil society media organizations.

Their roles could include reporters, editors, columnists, correspondents, anchors, producers, photojournalists, or they may serve as independent journalists. However, the term is inclusive and considers women from diverse backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives who actively participate in the profession within the Indian media industry, and the geographical boundaries of India. Additionally, some participants currently employed outside India's geographical boundaries but who are or were natural citizens of India and/or are active on social media platforms were also included in the data collection to analyze the research questions (RQs) of this project.

In total, 183 women journalists attempted the questionnaire, of which 121 completed all the questions applicable to them. While the 121 fully completed questionnaires offer valuable

insights into the experiences and perspectives of women journalists, for the analysis, only these fully completed questionnaires were considered, ensuring the dataset's integrity and reliability.

Participant Recruitment: In my quest to forge strong relationships within the journalist community for this research, I reached out to various groups representing Indian journalists, including those specifically dedicated to women in the field. Prominent among these were the Press Information Bureau, Indian Women's Press Corps (IWPC), the Indian Journalists' Union, Press Club of India, and the Network of Women in Media (NWMI). The NWMI's annual in-person conference, which was held in January 2023, particularly stood out as a crucial venue for engaging with industry professionals.

The three-day conference in Bihar, a region renowned for its cultural heritage, served as a valuable platform for professional networking and academic exchange. Through panel debates and informal meet-ups, I engaged with experienced and emerging journalists, fostering constructive engagements. Additionally, I presented my Ph.D. project, during these interactions, receiving valuable feedback, gaining new perspectives, and exploring potential collaborative opportunities within the journalistic community.

My participation in the NWMI conference was pivotal in deepening my understanding of India's journalistic landscape. It provided a foundational opportunity for networking, potential collaborations, and gaining valuable insights into the media industry. Beyond an academic exercise, the conference was an immersion into the practice of journalism in India, offering a closer view of its inner workings. I also actively engaged in the cultural events at the conference,

a deliberate effort to highlight my connection to my Indian roots despite studying at a foreign university. This involvement allowed me to demonstrate my continued identification with Indian culture and values.

In addition, Twitter's direct messaging feature facilitated direct engagement with women journalists active on the platform. LinkedIn served as a professional networking avenue, connecting with women journalists who might not be active on other social media. Informal WhatsApp groups, widely used for professional discussions, also proved invaluable in reaching a diverse pool of women journalists with varied backgrounds and experiences.

Overall, I adopted a diversified approach for my data collection, combining online platforms, professional networks, and direct communication to ensure an inclusive representation of women journalists in India. This strategy ensured broad participation and captured a wide range of perspectives.

Questionnaire Development: The survey was designed to align with the research objectives, focusing on the experiences of women journalists in India and capturing the complexities of online harassment within the Indian socio-cultural context. It comprised 25 questions in various formats – multiple-choice, Likert scale, and open-ended – to gather both structured and detailed qualitative responses. To ensure accessibility, the questionnaire also allowed responses in Hindi, accommodating linguistic diversity.

Furthermore, to ensure the validity and reliability of the survey instrument, a comprehensive review by subject-matter experts in media studies and gender-based violence

(Prof. Debbie Ging and Prof. Colleen Murrell from Dublin City University) was conducted to assess its relevance and alignment with the study's objectives. Pilot testing for both the survey and in-depth interview questionnaires was conducted with two respondents from the target population of journalists. This process aimed to identify potential issues with question wording, structure, and clarity, enabling refinement to the questions and statements in preparation for the final Qualtrics questionnaire.

As Grimm (2010) suggests, this small sample helped uncover potential ambiguities and sensitivities in the questionnaire. Additionally, debriefing sessions with my respondents provided further insights, guiding necessary revisions. This iterative feedback process ultimately enhanced the instrument's validity, ensuring it effectively measured the intended constructs.

Response Rate: A total of 183 Indian women journalists participated in the survey; however, complete responses were received from 121 participants. The remaining respondents began the survey but did not finish it. The overall response rate was approximately 66.12%, which exceeded expectations given the sensitive nature of the subject matter.

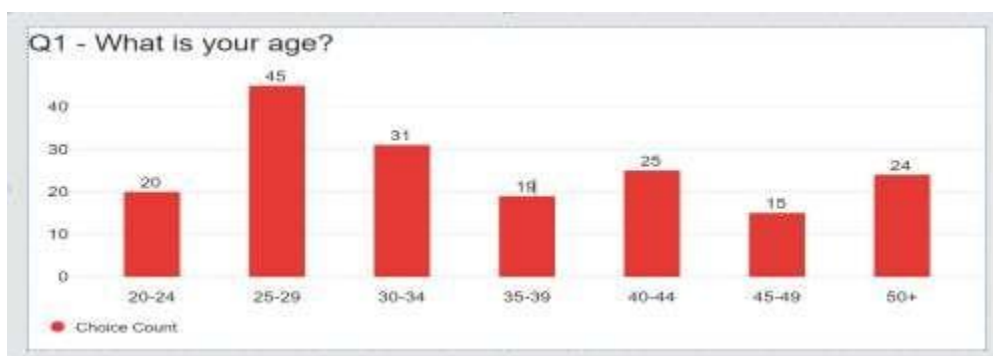


Fig. 15: Journalists' age-profile (survey participants)

As depicted in Figure 15, a predominant proportion of participants, accounting for 25.14 % fell within the age range of 25 to 29 years. Eliciting responses from journalists for the survey proved to be a formidable challenge, requiring considerable effort and persistence. I consistently reminded and contacted each participant, typically resulting in an average of five to six follow-up phone calls per respondent. After three months of link-tracing and networking, I collected a total of 183 responses, with 121 being fully completed.

The survey's response rate, while not extensive, is noteworthy given the sensitive nature of the topic and the challenges involved in engaging the target population. This rate highlights the relevance of the research and demonstrates participants' willingness to contribute to scholarly discourse on this critical issue. While the sample size may limit the statistical power and generalizability of the quantitative findings, it is important to acknowledge the challenges of achieving high response rates in studies on sensitive issues like violence and harassment. Despite its modest size, the sample yielded valuable insights, offering depth and nuance that enhanced the research.

The sophistication and precision of the participants' responses significantly contributed to a deeper understanding of the topic's complexities, underscoring their vital role in advancing knowledge in this area.

The final question of the questionnaire asked participants to provide their contact details if they were open to further involvement in in-depth interviews. Upon collecting the survey responses, the Qualtrics platform generated a comprehensive report in a single PDF document,

which included charts, graphs, and responses to the open-ended questions. The data visualization features were instrumental in selecting participants for the in-depth interviews and in shaping the structure of the interview process.

Research Ethics: Throughout the research process, I strictly adhered to established ethical standards. All necessary protocols were followed, and ethical clearance was obtained from the DCU Research Ethics Committee, ensuring the integrity and protection of human participants in the study.

4.10.1 Quantitative Analysis:

Data visualization: The process of data visualization involved the use of bar charts to ascertain the maximum and minimum values for each variable, thereby facilitating the identification of prevailing themes. For instance, the bar chart enabled the determination of the age group that is most commonly subjected to harassment, as indicated by the varying heights of the bars representing each age category.

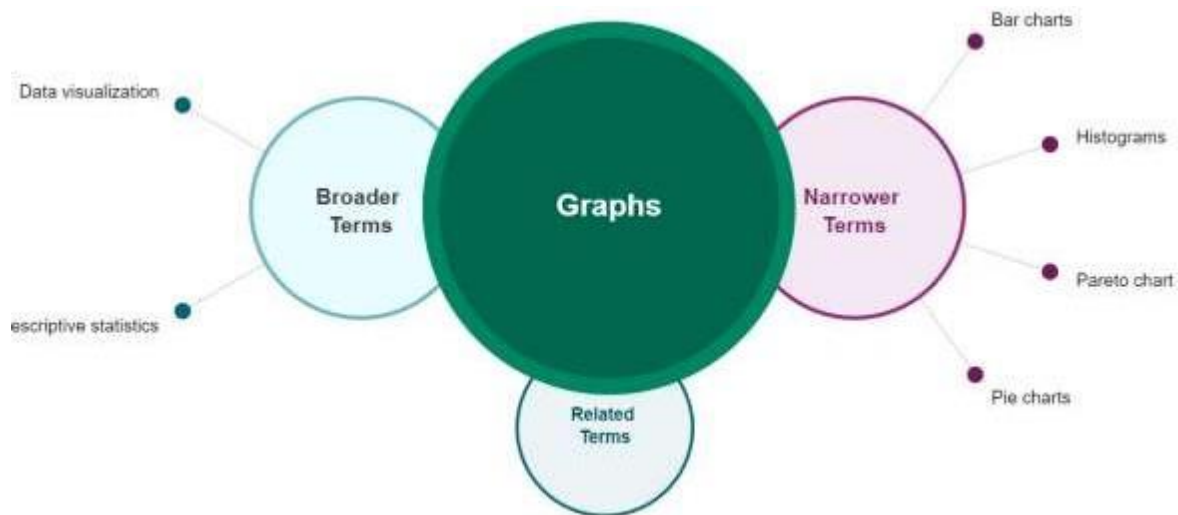


Fig. 16: Methods Map (Clark & Bolt, 2010)

4.10.2 Qualitative Analysis

This phase began with an inductive²⁸ approach to coding, identifying key patterns reflecting participants' lived experiences and the socio-cultural context of online harassment in India. These patterns informed the subsequent critical discourse analysis (CDA), allowing for a deeper examination of the language, power dynamics, and ideologies underlying participants' narratives. Methodological rigor was maintained through systematic coding and cross-checking to ensure reliability and validity.

4.11 Beyond the Obvious: The Imperative of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

CDA frequently adopts the perspective of those marginalized or adversely affected by these power dynamics (see Section 4.4.2 for a detailed rationale for this methodological choice). By focusing on their experiences, CDA seeks to uncover the underlying societal inequalities and injustices embedded in language. The approach applies a rigorous apparatus of interpretation to the study, critically examining how those in positions of power – including political leaders, institutions, and other influential entities – use language to shape, reinforce, or perpetuate societal divisions. These divisions often manifest along lines of class, race, gender, and other factors highlighting the role of discourse in maintaining or challenging existing power structures (Dijk, 2006) [See also Van Dijk, T.A., 2013, *Discourse, Power & Access*].

²⁸ The inductive approach to coding is a qualitative research method used in data analysis, particularly in fields like sociology, anthropology, and media studies. It involves deriving codes, categories, and themes directly from raw data, rather than applying pre-existing theories or frameworks. This approach is data-driven and allows patterns to emerge organically, making it particularly useful for exploratory research.

Furthermore, CDA recognizes that those who hold power are not only responsible for perpetuating these inequalities but also have the capacity and opportunities to effect positive changes.

Through the analysis of the role of language in sustaining power imbalances, CDA seeks to advocate for and contribute to more equitable and just social conditions. Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Teun A. Van Dijk's approach to CDA, while converging in their overarching objective of describing the nexus between discourse and power structures, diverge in their thematic focus and theoretical frameworks. Feminist CDA, deeply entrenched in feminist theoretical paradigms, specifically interrogates how discursive practices contribute to the perpetuation of gender imbalances and the sustenance of a patriarchal social order.

Conceived by Norman Fairclough in 2003, a central aspect of feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) involves the analytical dissection of discourses that reinforce patriarchal social constructs (Dalton, 2019). This analysis crucially probes into the power dynamics that systematically elevate men as a group, simultaneously leading to the marginalization, exclusion, and reduction in power of women as a specific social segment. It examines the nuances of language and communication to uncover the roles they play in marginalizing, oppressing, and stereotyping women and other gender minorities.

This branch of CDA is pivotal in unveiling the gendered dimensions of power dynamics in discourse, addressing the representation and construction of gender identities, and exploring the dichotomies of power in both public and private discourse. Conversely, Teun A. Van Dijk's CDA

extends beyond the domain of gender, encompassing a broader spectrum of social inequalities and dominations (Noor & Hamid, 2021). Van Dijk's work is seminal in understanding how discourse is instrumental in reinforcing the hegemony of dominant societal groups, encompassing issues like racism, classism, and the exertion of institutional power.

His approach is distinguished by its emphasis on the cognitive aspects of discourse, delving into how power relations within society are not only manifested but also replicated within individual cognitive processes and larger social structures. This approach is particularly relevant in the analysis of media and political discourse, as well as the elucidation of the role of ideology in shaping discourse.

In essence, while Feminist CDA and Van Dijk's CDA are aligned in their pursuit of deciphering the discourse-power axis; the former is intrinsically focused on gender dynamics and the critique of patriarchy, while the latter encompasses a wider analytical lens, probing into various forms of societal power disparities. 'For CDA, language is not powerful on its own – it gains power by the use powerful people make of it [...] Power does not derive from language, but language can be used to challenge power, to subvert it, to alter distributions of power in the short and long term. Language provides a finely articulated means for differences in power in social hierarchical structures' (Dijk, 2006 p.1-13). In essence, Critical Discourse Analysis theorizes that language in itself is not inherently powerful but becomes a tool of power depending on how it is utilized by those in positions of influence.

Van Dijk's Ideological Square Model, rooted in the seminal works on social identity theory from the late 1970s, delves into the 'us versus them' narrative – focusing on the ideological

mechanisms that promote a favorable depiction of one's in-group while casting the out-group in a less favorable light. This model examines the discursive tactics that individuals employ to positively frame their own groups and negatively characterize those they are not part of (Dijk, 2006, 2013). Such discursive practices amplify the positive attributes of one's group in juxtaposition to the negative descriptions of the other, thereby generating biases that align with in-group favoritism and out-group derogation. This polarizing tendency, which is intrinsically ideological, manifests through multifaceted expressions in both textual and spoken exchanges, perpetuating the 'us versus them' division.

Both methodologies, however, are integral to the critical discourse studies field, contributing significantly to the understanding of the complex interplay between language, power, and society. The qualitative phase, thus, marks a crucial transition from broad quantitative analysis to a more nuanced exploration of the topic. The in-depth interviews were conducted using the laddering²⁹ technique, while critical discourse analysis (CDA) was employed to capture the rich, subjective narratives that quantitative data alone could not convey.

I used the laddering interview technique to explore the deeper motivations, values, and beliefs of women journalists regarding online harassment. By asking probing 'why' questions, I

²⁹ The laddering interview technique is a qualitative research method used to explore the deeper motivations, values, and beliefs behind participants' behaviors and decisions. It involves a series of probing 'why' questions that encourage respondents to reflect on and articulate the underlying reasons for their actions or perceptions. By continuing to ask 'why' until no new information emerges, researchers can uncover the core values or personal goals driving a particular behavior. This technique is often used in conjunction with other qualitative methods, such as critical discourse analysis, to provide a more nuanced understanding of participants' experiences and the social or psychological factors influencing their responses. In this study, laddering was employed to explore the personal and value-laden aspects of women journalists' responses to online harassment (Lindsay et al., 2023).

was able to uncover the underlying reasons for their behaviors and decisions, such as reluctance to report harassment. This approach revealed how their experiences were influenced by perceptions of institutional inefficacy, fears of professional repercussions, and broader societal norms.

Developing proficiency in deciphering a respondent's body language while interviewing with minimal information is crucial for navigating semi-structured interviews. This involves evaluating the respondent's engagement or discomfort with the narrative. Laddered questioning, thus, is not an instant solution but a skill refined over the course of a research project. As Price (2002 p. 273-281) elucidates, 'The researcher does not know their life history or their personal experience of the phenomena in question [...] By understanding the premises of what is likely to be uncomfortable, observing closely, using a notebook and alternative questions to manage the level of intrusion, it seems possible to conduct an interview without leaving the respondent feeling unduly invaded or incompetent as an interviewee.' The laddering questioning technique, prominent in qualitative research, has the distinct advantage of providing an in-depth exploration into a respondent's perceptions, beliefs, and values.

Observation Summary: Adapted from Miles & Huberman, (1994)

Observer	The name of the principal investigator was documented
Date (of the Interview)	The date of the interview documented
Time (of the interview)	Time of starting and ending of the interview documented

Place/Location (of the interview)	The location of the interview documented
Actors	Interview participant reference code number documented
Notes	Hand-written field notes were referenced

This approach enables a comprehensive understanding of participants' cognitive and emotional processes, thereby enhancing the depth and richness of the data. However, the effective implementation of this technique presents certain challenges. It requires a high degree of skill and sensitivity on the part of the interviewer to navigate the conversation adeptly, probing deeper into the subject matter while avoiding any unintentional influence on the respondent's answers. The efficacy of laddering hinges on the interviewer's ability to establish rapport and foster an environment conducive to open and honest communication. Furthermore, the analysis of laddering results can be intricate, given that the data often encompass multiple layers.

The qualitative phase of this research, consisting of in-depth interviews, was instrumental in uncovering the lived experiences and personal narratives at the core of this study. A total of 20 women journalists from across the country participated in these interviews. These participants were selected from the initial sample of 121 journalists who completed the survey. While 32 respondents initially consented to in-person interviews, this number was narrowed to 20³⁰ due to time and logistical constraints, as well as the point of data saturation, where no new insights were gained. Additionally, some participants declined due to the distress associated with revisiting past traumatic online experiences.

³⁰ The participants provided explicit consent to participate in the in-depth interviews conducted between May and July 2022

The themes derived from the initial data collection phase (derived from the survey responses) served as a guiding framework for the semi-structured in-depth interviews. The Qualtrics Survey report provided a comprehensive analysis of online harassment and hate through a series of bar charts, each offering critical insights into various aspects of this pervasive issue based on the participants' responses.

I planned the logistics to ensure I could allocate significant time to engage with my participants and build rapport with each one of them. Over the span of three months, I travelled extensively across multiple cities in India to conduct these in-person interviews alongside three interviews conducted via Zoom platform. I spent a few days to several hours with the journalists to understand their broader perspective not just on the topic of my dissertation but also their reflections on society, the political climate and a range of other topics to have a deeper understanding about each person's background.

This rapport-building process often involves the interviewer reciprocating by sharing their own perspectives, emotions, or thoughts on the subjects being explored, especially if the interviewer is a current or former member of the group being studied (Gubrium et al., 2012). Nevertheless, I made every effort to ensure no discussions or viewpoints had any influence on my participants in any manner prior to the research interview.

I transcribed the in-depth interviews using the auto-transcription function in Adobe Premiere, the editing software available at the DCU School of Communications, under the guidance of the department's Senior Technical Officer. Upon receiving the AI-generated transcriptions, I listened to each interview recording and manually edited the text for accuracy.

However, for the three interviews conducted in Hindi or a combination of Hindi and English, the auto-transcription feature proved ineffective, necessitating manual transcription for these sessions.

The transcription involved a detailed process of listening to the audio recordings and transcribing the speech verbatim, paying attention to grammatical structures and standard punctuation. Additionally, I also made strategic decisions in representing non-standard speech elements, such as pauses, intonations, and overlaps in speech, as well as vernacular terminologies and certain Hindi language words. These terms, commonly understood not only within the journalistic community but also by Indian social media audiences, were retained to preserve the nuances of the spoken word without unnecessarily complicating the text.

As Braun & Clarke (2013) note, 'Very simple errors or mishearings in transcription can radically change the meaning of data', for instance long pauses, mistaken word/phrase errors or vernacular language. Hence, this adaptation of the transcription notation system was crucial for maintaining the authenticity of the data while ensuring that the transcriptions were accessible and useful for further analysis.

The table below presents a detailed demographic and professional breakdown of the 20 women journalists interviewed for this study, categorized by medium, language, age bracket, professional role, and geographic location at the time of the interview. The participant pool comprises of 20 women journalists working across diverse media platforms and linguistic contexts in India. The predominance of online media among participants (13 out of 20) reflects the ongoing shift toward digital journalism. However, several participants (05) were affiliated

with legacy media such as television and print. Notably, many of these journalists (07) held multi-platform roles, contributing across both traditional and digital formats.

Even those primarily associated with print journalism maintained an online presence, as their work was concurrently published in e-paper formats, further blurring the boundaries between legacy and digital media. Participants held a variety of professional positions, ranging from bureau chiefs and editors to YouTubers and multimedia journalists, indicating a wide spectrum of journalistic roles and institutional affiliations. Notably, (06) were independent journalists, reflecting the rising trend of freelance and self-directed reporting among women in the field.

Age-wise, the sample was relatively balanced, with a concentration in the 25–39 bracket (11 participants), but also including older professionals (six participants aged 45 and above), thus ensuring intergenerational perspectives. Geographically, participants were drawn from a diverse range of cities, including metro areas like Noida, Bengaluru, Chennai, and Gurugram, as well as smaller towns such as Coimbatore, Shillong, and Shamli. This geographical spread allows the study to engage with location-specific nuances in the experiences of online harassment in India.

Taken together, this sample provides a nuanced, intersectional understanding of the professional trajectories and challenges faced by women journalists within India's evolving media landscape. By foregrounding diverse voices across caste, language, and media platforms, the study addresses a critical gap in existing scholarship and offers fresh insights into the structural and digital barriers shaping women's journalism.

Codes	Language	Medium	Age bracket	Role	Location (City)
Case profile 1	English	Online + Print	45-49	Independent journalist	Coimbatore
Case profile 2	English	Online	30-34	Special Correspondent	Noida
Case profile 3	English	Online	35-39	Independent Digital journalist	Chennai
Case profile 4	English	Online + Television	35-39	TV News Anchor	Ahmedabad
Case profile 5	English	Online	35-39	Staff Reporter	New Delhi
Case profile 6	Hindi	Online	25-29	Chief Editor	Noida
Case profile 7	English	Online	30-34	Sub-Editor	Bengaluru
Case profile 8	Hindi	Online	25-29	Independent Digital journalist (YouTuber)	Ahmedabad
Case profile 9	English	Online	35-39	Correspondent	Noida
Case profile 10	Hindi	Online	45-49	Editorial	Bengaluru
Case profile 11	English	Multimedia	20-24	Multimedia Journalist	Noida
Case profile 12	English	Online	25-29	Principal Correspondent	Chennai
Case profile 13	English	Online	25-29	Digital Content Producer	New Delhi
Case profile 14	English	Online	50+	Editorial	Gurugram
Case profile 15	English	Television/Online	45-49	Bureau Chief (Regional)	Bengaluru
Case profile 16	English	Online/TV	40-44	Independent journalist	Chennai
Case profile 17	English	Online	40-44	Independent journalist	Gurugram
Case profile 18	English	Online	25-29	Correspondent	Gurugram
Case profile 19	English	Online	50+	Independent journalist	Shamli (U.P)
Case profile 20	English	Print/Digital	50+	Bureau Chief	Shillong (Meghalaya)

Distribution by Language

English	18
Hindi	02
Bilingual*	04

*While primary languages are noted, some participants report in both languages, particularly when working on digital platforms

Distribution by Professional Role

Role	No. of Participants
Independent Journalist	06
Correspondent/Reporter	05
Editor/Editorial Roles	04
Anchor/Bureau Chief	02
Sub-editor/Digital Producer	02
YouTuber	01
Multimedia Journalist	02
Special/Principal Correspondent	02
Total	20

Age Distribution of Participants

Age Bracket	No. of Participants
20–24	1

25-29	5
30-34	2
35-39	4
40-44	2
45-49	3
50+	3
Total	20

Fig. 17: Transcription template (Braun & Clarke, 2013)

Table 7.1 Our transcription notation system for orthographic transcription (adapted from Jefferson, 2004)

Feature	Notation and explanation of use
The identity of the speaker; turn-taking in talk	The speaker's name, followed by a colon (e.g. Anna:) signals the identity of a speaker (use Moderator/Mod: or Interviewer/Int: for when the moderator/interviewer is speaking; or the moderator/interviewer's first name); start a new line every time a new speaker enters the conversation, and start the first word of each new turn of talk with a capital letter
Laughing, coughing, etc.	((laughs)) and ((coughs)) signals a speaker laughing or coughing during a turn of talk; ((General laughter)) signals multiple speakers laughing at once and should be appear on a separate line (to signal that no one speaker 'owns' the laughter)
Pausing	((pause)) signals a significant pause (i.e. a few seconds or more; precise timing of pauses is not necessary); can also use (.) to signal a short pause (a second or less) or ((long pause)) to signal a much longer pause
Spoken abbreviations	If someone speaks an abbreviation, then use that abbreviation (e.g. TV for television; WHO for World Health Organization), but do not abbreviate unless a speaker does so
Overlapping speech	Type ((in overlap)) before the start of the overlapping speech
Inaudible speech	Use ((inaudible)) for speech and sounds that are completely inaudible; when you can hear something but you're not sure if it's correct, use single parentheses to signal your best guess or guesses as to what was said – for example (ways of life) or (ways of life/married wife)
Uncertainty about who is speaking	Use ? to signal uncertainty about the speaker – just ? for total uncertainty, F? or M? if you can identify sex of the speaker, or a name followed by a question mark (e.g. Judy?) if you think you might know who it is
Non-verbal utterances	Render phonetically and consistently common non-verbal sounds uttered by your participants. For English-as-a-first-language speakers, these include 'erm', 'er', 'mm', 'mm-hm', but note that how these are written is context-dependent. In Aotearoa/New Zealand, the first two would be written 'um' and 'ah'
Spoken numbers	Spell out all numbers (and be mindful of the difference between 'a hundred' and 'one hundred')
Use of punctuation	It is common to use punctuation to signal some features of spoken language (such as using a question mark to signal the rising intonation of a question or a comma to signal a slight pause but with the intonation of continuing speech). However, adding punctuation to a transcript is not straightforward and it is important to be mindful of the ways in which adding punctuation can change the meaning of an extract of data. Equally, punctuation enhances the readability of spoken data, especially extracts quoted in written reports (see Box 11.5 in Chapter 11)

Table 7.1 (Continued)

Feature	Notation and explanation of use
Cut-off speech and speech-sounds	This level of detail is not necessary for most experiential forms of analysis, although it can be useful to signal moments when participants are struggling to articulate their thoughts, feelings etc.: to signal cut-off speech, type out the sounds you can hear, then add a dash (e.g. wa-, wor-, worl-); try to capture this at the level of phonetic sound
Emphasis on particular words	Again, this level of detail is not necessary for most experiential forms of analysis, although it can be useful to indicate words or sounds that are particularly emphasised by underlining (e.g. <u>word</u>)
Reported speech	Reported speech is when a person provides an apparent verbatim account of the speech (or thoughts) of another person (or reports their own speech in the past). Signal this with the use of inverted commas around the reported speech (e.g. ... and she said 'I think your bum does look big in that dress' and I said 'thanks a bunch'...)
Accents and abbreviations/ vernacular usage/ mispronunciation	It's important not to transform participants' speech into 'standard' English; however, fully representing a strong regional accent can be a complex and time consuming process. A good compromise is to signal only the very obvious or common (and easy to translate into written text) abbreviations and vernacular usage, such as 'cos' instead of 'because' or a Welsh speaker saying 'me Mam' (instead of the English 'my Mum'), unless it is absolutely critical for your analysis to fully represent exactly how a speaker pronounces words and sounds. Don't 'correct' mispronunciation or misspeaking of words, such as 'compostle' instead of 'compostable'
Names of media (e.g. television programmes, books, magazines)	Should be presented in italics (e.g. <i>The Wire</i> , <i>Men's Health</i>)
Identifying information	<p>You can change identifying information such as people's names and occupations, places, events, etc. in one of two ways (see also Box 7.2):</p> <p>By changing details and providing unmarked, appropriate alternatives (e.g. 'Bristol' to 'Manchester'; 'my sister is 14' to 'my sister is 12'; 'I'm a really keen knitter' to 'I'm a really keen sewer')</p> <p>By replacing specific information with marked generic descriptions (indicated by square brackets, so 'London' might be replaced with [large city]; 'Michael' with [oldest brother]; 'running' with [form of exercise])</p>

Employing the six-step thematic analysis framework by Braun & Clarke (2006) facilitated consistent engagement with the data throughout the research process (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017).

Table 5: Thematic analysis framework (Braun and Clarke, 2006)

<p>1. Familiarising yourself with the data</p>	<p>All the interviews were reviewed extensively through an in-depth analysis of the transcripts. This process allowed for the identification of key themes and trends. I aimed to approach the data with an open mind, allowing insights to emerge that were not anticipated at the outset of this research.</p>
<p>2. Generating initial codes</p>	<p>Systematic categorization of data segments—such as phrases, sentences, or paragraphs—was conducted by assigning labels or 'codes' that succinctly captured their essence or underlying concepts. Codes were derived from both the research objectives and the data itself. I started with a set of preliminary codes based on my research questions. As I analyzed the data further, additional codes emerged organically, capturing new insights or nuances that had not been considered initially.</p>
<p>3. Searching for Themes</p>	<p>Each labelled code type was connected to a 'central organizing concept' through relevant themes derived from the related data sets, as</p>

	<p>described by Braun and Clarke (2006). This technique involves the creation of themes from the 'active codes,' which are then systematically associated with a central organizing concept.</p>
<p>4. Reviewing Potential Themes</p>	<p><i>Critical Discourse Analysis follows a flexible process that often begins with the identification of recurring patterns in language use.</i> In this study, these patterns are described as <i>themes</i>, serving as a pragmatic device to organize a large corpus of interview data. The themes provided an initial scaffold for grouping extracts and tracing recurring concerns. The subsequent stage of analysis developed these themes into <i>discourses</i>—socially and ideologically embedded constructions that reproduce relations of power, gender, and caste. The thematic stage functioned as an organizational step, while the critical discursive interpretation formed the analytic core of the study.</p>
<p>5. Define and label or name the themes</p>	<p>A thorough examination of each theme was conducted to understand the narrative it conveys and its placement within the broader context of the data. Throughout this process, continuous attention was given to the central organizing concepts.</p>

<p>6. Producing the report</p>	<p>Crafting a compelling and cohesive narrative from the data, while situating it meaningfully within the context of existing scholarly literature, is a critical step in my research process. In this phase, my primary objective was to refine and focus the data to align with the specific research questions at hand. Rather than attempting to present an exhaustive account of the entire dataset, I prioritized a targeted analysis that highlights</p>
	<p>the most relevant and impactful aspects, ensuring the findings contribute meaningfully to the broader academic discourse.</p>

The interview data were initially coded with reference to the research questions. This stage functioned as an organizational step to facilitate subsequent critical interpretation, rather than constituting a thematic analysis, allowing me to systematize the large corpus of material and ensure analytic coherence. While this stage may resemble a thematic organization, the objective was not to produce themes as end-points of analysis. Instead, these coded clusters served as an entry point into a deeper discursive examination, where they were interpreted as manifestations of broader discourses - socially and ideologically embedded ways of constructing reality that reproduce or contest relations of power, gender, and caste (Fairclough, 1992; van Dijk, 1993;

Wodak, 2001). Thus, the relation between codes and research questions was procedural, facilitating the transition from data management to critical discourse analysis.

The following table presents the initial coding of interview data in alignment with the research questions; these codes were subsequently clustered as scaffolding for the critical discourse analysis, rather than constituting a thematic analysis in themselves (Fairclough, 1992; Wodak, 2001).

Fig. 18: Codes generation [Using NVivo]

Name	Files	References	Created on	Created by	Modified on	Modified by
EXPERIENCE AND AGE IN JOURNALISM	3	4	10/25/2023 9:09 PM	PG	10/29/2023 9:29 PM	PG
GENDERED ONLINE HARASSMENT	20	199	10/27/2023 1:34 PM	PG	11/4/2023 10:23 PM	PG
physical threats & its manifestations	3	3	11/3/2023 1:29 PM	PG	11/4/2023 11:23 PM	PG
RQ 2 PROFESSIONAL LIVES IMPACT	17	37	10/23/2023 9:34 PM	PG	11/4/2023 11:36 PM	PG
RQ1 PERSONAL LIVES IMPACT	19	93	10/23/2023 9:05 PM	PG	11/4/2023 11:35 PM	PG
Reflections or Coping with online harassme	14	31	10/26/2023 4:49 AM	PG	11/4/2023 11:38 PM	PG
Women in Journalism	14	30	10/29/2023 1:42 PM	PG	11/4/2023 11:17 PM	PG
LAW & GREVIENCE REDRESSAL	12	32	10/26/2023 8:50 PM	PG	11/4/2023 11:38 PM	PG
MITIGATION STRATEGIES	14	51	10/26/2023 4:51 AM	PG	11/4/2023 11:37 PM	PG
Support System	8	24	10/26/2023 5:25 AM	PG	11/3/2023 1:23 PM	PG
OTHER FINDINGS	11	48	10/25/2023 4:48 PM	PG	11/4/2023 11:17 PM	PG
RELIGION BASED ABUSE	9	17	10/27/2023 9:07 PM	PG	11/4/2023 10:49 PM	PG
RQ 3 AFFECT ON JOURNALISM	7	13	10/24/2023 6:49 PM	PG	11/1/2023 12:21 PM	PG
RQ 4 DISTINCT FORMS OF HARASSMENT	7	12	10/24/2023 6:52 PM	PG	11/3/2023 5:51 AM	PG
RQ 5 SELF CENSORSHIP CAUSES	5	9	10/24/2023 7:04 PM	PG	11/2/2023 12:01 PM	PG
RQ6 PRESS FREEDOM	17	71	10/24/2023 7:16 PM	PG	11/4/2023 11:39 PM	PG
Bearing towards Right-Wing	8	9	10/25/2023 5:28 PM	PG	11/4/2023 8:23 AM	PG
BJP & Hate Politics	6	13	10/25/2023 8:37 PM	PG	11/2/2023 10:09 AM	PG
Repression of Press Freedom under the presen	9	29	10/25/2023 3:19 PM	PG	11/4/2023 11:21 PM	PG
Repression of press under BJP	6	12	10/25/2023 9:03 PM	PG	11/4/2023 11:32 PM	PG
SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS	3	7	11/3/2023 2:40 PM	PG	11/4/2023 10:27 PM	PG

Methodological Justification: Snowball and Link-Tracing Approaches

Unique Population Characteristics: Women journalists facing online abuse represent a specialized group with unique experiences. Traditional sampling methods would not have effectively captured the nuances of these experiences. Due to the sensitive nature of online abuse, potential respondents were reluctant to participate in a study unless approached through a trusted network or contact. Therefore, the link tracing/chain referral sampling methodology is employed. The participants for this data collection were approached using the referrals and trusted network and contacts.

Utilizing Existing Networks for Access: Leveraging personal contacts helped in gaining the trust of potential respondents, which is crucial for sensitive topics. Professional Platforms: Utilizing professional networks like Twitter and LinkedIn allows access to a broader, yet still relevant, segment of the target population

Journalists' Network Groups: These groups can provide access to individuals who might not be active on other platforms, ensuring a more diverse range of perspectives. Hence, these 3 unique points were chosen as the starting points for the data collection process. Snowball/ link tracing/ chain linking methodologies were employed to collect the relevant data.

Snowball Sampling Merits: Snowball sampling is particularly effective for reaching individuals who are difficult to identify or locate through conventional means. This particular dataset is not publicly available due to privacy issues, and considering the sensitivity of the topic, regular sampling methods are not effective here.

Addressing the Research Question Effectively: Depth over Breadth: While this method may not provide a statistically representative sample of all women journalists, it allows for an in-depth exploration of the experiences of those who have faced online abuse.

Filling Research Gaps: This approach is well-suited for exploratory/explanatory research where the existing literature is limited, helping to build foundational knowledge on the topic

Informed Consent: This method respects the autonomy of participants, especially important in sensitive research topics. Participants can choose whether or not to refer others, ensuring a level of control over their involvement. Hence only the participants who provided consent completed/participated in the survey

Addressing potential Bias		
<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Self-Selection Bias</u></p> <p>Nature of Bias: In convenience and snowball sampling, individuals who choose to participate might have stronger opinions or more significant experiences related to the subject, potentially skewing the data</p> <p>Diverse Recruitment Channels: By using a mix of personal contacts, social media platforms, and professional networks, the study aimed to reach a more varied group of participants, and not just those who were highly motivated to share their experiences</p> <p>Diverse Starting Points expansion: From the initial points the network is expanded to reach out to diverse participants to ensure that all kinds of opinions are collected</p> <p>Anonymous Participation: Offering anonymity can encourage participation from individuals who might have more moderate views or concerns about privacy, thus balancing the sample</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Network Bias:</u></p> <p>Nature of Bias: The sample may overrepresent certain viewpoints or experiences, as initial contacts and their networks might share similar backgrounds or perspectives.</p> <p>Broad Initial Contacts: Starting with a wide range of contacts from different backgrounds and with varied experiences in journalism can reduce the likelihood of a homogenous network</p> <p>Diverse Starting Points: By initiating the sampling from various sources (personal contacts, social media, journalist networks), the self-selection bias is somewhat mitigated. (or maximum bias is eliminated/ or reduced). Diverse data collection starting points helped in reducing this network bias.</p> <p>Qualitative Insights: Emphasizing the qualitative nature of the study, which seeks depth and variety of experiences rather than statistical representation of the entire population. (Means, as the population is unknown, cannot say out of x number of people y number of people experience online abuse, but certainly can say about the depth and variety of the online abuse participants face using the collected data points.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Lack of Randomization:</u></p> <p>Nature of Bias: Without random selection, the sample may not be representative of the broader population, potentially affecting the generalizability of the findings.</p> <p>Exploratory Focus: The research is designed to explore and understand the depth and nuances of the experiences of women journalists facing online abuse, rather than to quantify these experiences across the entire population</p> <p>Contextual Representation: While not statistically representative, the sample aims to capture a range of experiences within the target population, providing valuable insights into the issue</p> <p>Transparency in Reporting: Clearly stating the sampling methodology and its limitations in the study helps in setting the right expectations regarding the scope and applicability of the findings</p>

<p>Referral Diversity: Encouraging participants to refer a diverse range of contacts, not just those with similar experiences or views, helped in reducing network bias in this study. (Assuming that) The participants did not refer their colleagues from the same organization or someone with whom worked on the same story. (means no work collaboration).</p> <p>Equal weightage for each data point: All the participants are treated equally and no weightage (special preference) is given to the participants based on their work experience or age. Hence there are no influential points in the data set.</p>		
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In the process of selecting the testimonies for the qualitative analysis, the key criteria included their relevance to the central themes of the study, the variety of experiences represented, and their potential to provide analytical depth. Each testimony was selected for its direct connection to critical aspects of the themes being explored, thereby offering rich and illustrative examples of the online harassment faced by women journalists. This strategy ensures that the testimonies

not only capture the complex nature of the issue but also play a significant role in fostering a thorough understanding of the subject matter.

Furthermore, I prioritized diversity in the selection process by including testimonies from journalists representing varied backgrounds, affiliations with diverse media organizations, and experiences with unique types of harassment. This diversity is essential for ensuring a wide-ranging representation of the obstacles encountered by women journalists within each thematic area. Moreover, the selected narratives enable a deep analytical engagement, as they reflect intricate emotional and professional challenges, allowing for an exploration of the nuanced realities of online harassment.

4.12 Limitations of the research study:

One area for further exploration in this study is the differentiation between participants based on their levels of internet usage. By treating all participants as a homogeneous group, this study may not fully capture the nuanced differences in behavior, engagement, and the impact of internet use on the variables being investigated. Future research may categorize participants into groups based on their internet usage, such as high, moderate, and low users, to enable a more comprehensive and precise examination of how different levels of engagement affect the results. This stratification would enhance the understanding of diverse experiences and effects associated with internet use.

My research focuses on documenting and analyzing the systematic online harassment of women journalists, with particular attention to its gendered, caste-based, and political dimensions. The methods and data employed were not designed to capture mitigation strategies

in a systematic way. While some participants occasionally referred to coping mechanisms or informal practices of resilience, these were not foregrounded in the research design, which was oriented primarily toward exposing the structural and discursive dynamics of harassment.

Future research, however, could productively build on this work by examining how women journalists, collectives, and professional networks develop strategies of resistance and self-protection in hostile digital environments. Such an inquiry would not only complement the present findings but also contribute to the development of policy and institutional frameworks better equipped to support journalists at risk (see Posetti et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2020). Future investigations could also focus on identifying effective interventions, ranging from legal measures and organizational policies to the development of digital safety tools, thereby offering practical approaches to mitigate the harms of online harassment.

4.13 Challenges and Obstacles in data collection

- a) Access to the data on journalists: While several Indian journalists' organizations, (as mentioned earlier in this chapter) were formally contacted with requests for the lists of their women journalist members, each one explicitly refused to share this information, citing data privacy concerns. Furthermore, many senior NWMI journalists highlighted a 2021 GDPR breach³¹ at University College Dublin, resulting in a €70,000 fine.

³¹ The Irish Data Protection Commission (DPC) fined University College Dublin (UCD) €70,000 for various GDPR violations in 2021. These violations included failure to implement adequate security measures, prolonged data retention, and delayed reporting of data breaches between August 2018 and January 2019. The breaches at UCD involved unauthorized access to email accounts and the exposure of login credentials. The DPC found UCD in breach of GDPR Articles 5(1)(f), 32(1), and 33(1), leading to the €70,000 fine and enforcement measures to ensure compliance [For details see Irish Examiner: <https://www.irishexaminer.com/news/arid-40222742.html>]

- b) Consequently, participation was sought through the group's shared email, requesting voluntary involvement. I would like to mention that during the entire phase of my data collection, I experienced the arduous journey of engaging with journalists at multiple stages of my research. The professionals in this field are often seen as difficult to reach due to their demanding environments. Journalists' demanding schedules, mobility, and professional discretion pose significant challenges for researchers, as my own experience confirmed, often limiting their availability and willingness to participate.
- c) Skepticism and Anonymity: Given the sensitive nature of the study, some potential participants may have harbored reservations about revealing their experiences openly. Additionally, skepticism about the research's foreign origin could have deterred some women journalists from participating or speaking candidly.
- d) Self-Selection Bias: One notable limitation is the potential for self-selection bias. Respondents who chose to participate in the survey may have different experiences or perspectives regarding online harassment compared to those who declined to participate. This bias could affect the generalizability of the findings to the broader population of women journalists in India.
- e) Language Barrier: While efforts were made to offer the survey in Hindi to accommodate participants, some respondents might have preferred regional languages or dialects. The language barrier could have deterred potential participants from taking part, potentially excluding voices from diverse linguistic backgrounds.
- f) Digital Literacy: Administering the survey online assumed a baseline of digital literacy, which may have excluded some women journalists, especially those from marginalized

backgrounds with limited access to technology or digital skills.

g) Limited Sample Size: Despite extensive recruitment efforts, the sample size remained limited.

During the preliminary phase of data collection, particularly while administering surveys, I encountered significant initial resistance. Over the course of three months, I engaged in extensive telephone and email outreach to journalists, both soliciting their participation and seeking references to broaden the study's reach. This phase presented considerable challenges to the progress of my dissertation, but it also offered valuable insights into the journalism landscape and the dynamics of professional networks. Direct engagement with journalists enhanced my understanding of their perspectives on the issues being studied and illuminated the barriers they face in sharing their experiences.

The challenges I encountered, along with the strategies I employed to navigate them, were later reflected upon in an article I authored, where I documented my experiences and detailed the practical approaches that proved effective in overcoming these obstacles (Chandel, 2024). This persistence underscored the importance of building trust within this professional community. The relationships I cultivated during this process not only enriched my research but also contributed significantly to the depth and validity of my findings. Ultimately, this experience shaped the trajectory of my dissertation and deepened my commitment to advocating for safer and more supportive environments for media professionals.

Interestingly, despite the collective institutional challenges, there was a dichotomy in

response at an individual level. Several journalists from the same organization, i.e. NWMI, who were institutionally reticent, demonstrated personal support and reached out privately to express their willingness to participate in my study. I would like to emphasize that this individual-level engagement underscored a complex landscape where personal convictions and institutional policies diverged, ultimately enhancing the richness and diversity of participation in the research.

I believe, the success of my study in eliciting responses from such a population is, therefore, noteworthy. By leveraging digital communication platforms, utilizing and accessing professional networks, I was able to employ targeted outreach methods that respected the time-sensitive nature of journalists' work.

Chapter 5

Harmonizing Numbers and Stories: Key Findings of the Mixed-Method Approach

5.1 Overview of Findings:

This chapter serves as a foundational overview of the study's findings, providing a cohesive synthesis of the quantitative and qualitative data collected. The purpose of this chapter is to present the top-level findings that emerged from the quantitative data analysis, establishing the context and groundwork for the more in-depth thematic explorations in subsequent chapters. It highlights the overarching patterns and trends revealed through the survey responses, offering a numerical snapshot of the experiences, perceptions, and challenges faced by Indian women journalists.

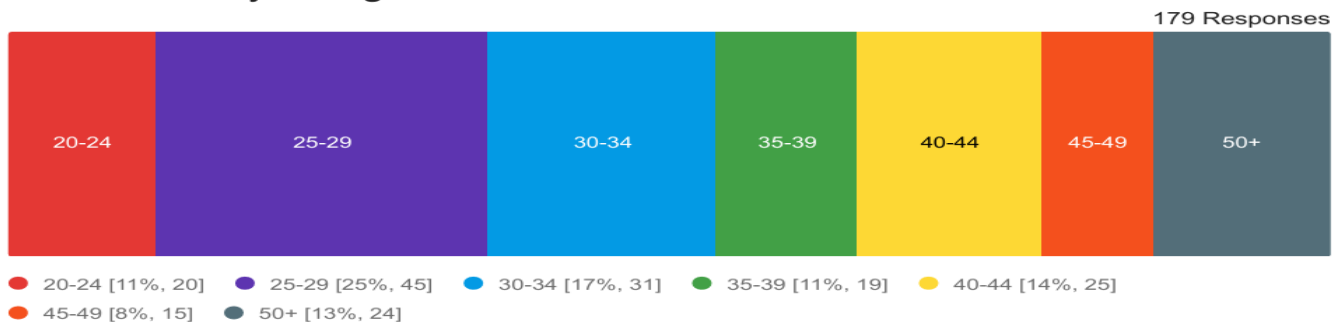
The analysis in this chapter focuses on the quantitative data obtained through structured questionnaires, complemented by an integrated discussion of relevant responses from the in-depth interviews. This mixed-methods approach enhances the depth of analysis by contextualizing the quantitative findings within participants' lived experiences, thereby offering a more nuanced exploration of the research questions. In doing so, it bridges the gap between numerical trends and narrative insights, illustrating how the two strands of data intersect to produce a holistic understanding of the phenomenon under study.

As outlined in the previous chapter, the online questionnaire was distributed to approximately 450 potential participants, of whom 183 initiated the survey. Three respondents discontinued

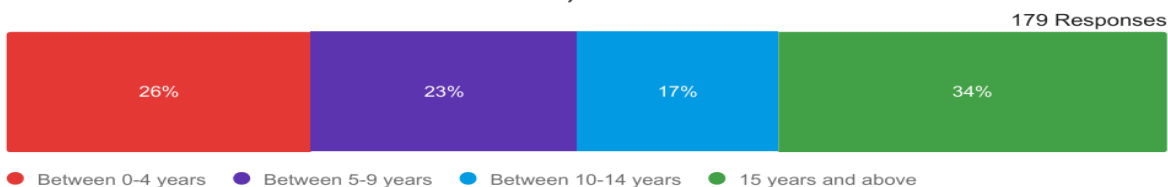
participation at the outset, and 179 answered the initial question regarding age. In total, 121 participants completed all applicable survey questions, including two identifying as non-binary and one as gender-fluid. It is important to note that, given the self-administered nature of online surveys, which are often accompanied by varying degrees of participant motivation, it can be challenging to ensure sustained engagement and prevent arbitrary responses. Accordingly, appropriate measures were implemented to enhance the statistical validity and internal consistency of the data, as detailed in the subsequent sections.

5.1.1 Quantitative and Qualitative data findings

Q1 - What is your age?



Q3 - For how many years have you worked as a journalist? (Please round to the nearest whole number)



Q1 & Q3 Response Count: 179

Fig. 19 (Qualtrics report on results from the survey)

The image shown above (Q1 above) illustrates the age distribution of questionnaire respondents, totaling 179 responses. Distributed across seven age categories, from '20-24' to '50+', this distribution offers valuable insights into the demographic composition of the survey participants. I would like to emphasize that, within the qualitative phase of my research, which involves in-depth interviews with 20 participants, the age distribution also demonstrates notable uniformity with the quantitative phase. This consistent age distribution is crucial to my study, ensuring that the narratives gathered span multiple age demographics.

The bar chart (below Q3) categorizes journalists' professional experience into four ranges: 0–4 years, 5–9 years, 10–14 years, and 15 years or more. A significant 34% of respondents fall into the most experienced category, having worked in journalism for 15 years or more. This indicates strong representation from seasoned professionals, whose extensive experience offers depth and continuity in perspectives on journalistic practices and industry challenges.

The second-largest group, comprising 26% of respondents, consists of early-career journalists with 0–4 years of experience indicating a steady influx of new professionals entering the field, potentially introducing innovative approaches and ideas to journalism. Journalists with mid-level experience, having worked for 5–9 years, account for 23% of the sample. This group balances a fundamental understanding of journalistic practices with adaptability to the evolving media landscape. The smallest segment, at 17%, includes those with 10–14 years of experience, representing individuals who are well-established in their careers but may not yet have reached the extensive expertise of the most senior cohort.

Collectively, this distribution demonstrates a diverse range of professional experience among my participants. This diversity is critical for understanding varied perspectives on my research topic, as it reflects the interplay of generational experiences and the shifting dynamics of the media industry over time.

Before presenting the overview of my findings, it is essential to highlight a gradual decline in the percentage of respondents completing the questionnaire as they advanced through it. When conducting a survey, acknowledgement of such reductions in response rates and the occurrence of missing data is statistically significant, as these issues can lead to bias or diminish the power of the analysis conducted. This aspect has been carefully considered in the interpretation of the collected data.

Analyzing each question individually in a survey where respondents drop off after certain questions can provide valuable and statistically valid insights depending on the approach of the research analysis. In this research, the aim of the quantitative phase is to decipher broader trends and patterns of online harassment and its repercussions. Therefore, only the responses of participants who answered a particular question have been analyzed for each question during the process of data visualization of bar/pie charts.

It is important to note that change in the number of respondents from one question to the other results in change in the base number of respondents. Therefore, to ensure statistical validity of the analysis, relative percentages have been used instead of the absolute number of participants. This approach ensures that the data for each question are interpreted in relation to the number of respondents who answered that specific question. One of the primary benefits of

this technique lies in its ability to standardize the data representation.

By converting raw response counts into percentages relative to the respondents of each individual question, the analysis achieves a consistent base of 100%. This uniformity facilitates an accurate and equitable comparison across various items in a survey, irrespective of the actual number of responses received for each question. Furthermore, using relative percentages effectively mitigates any potential distortions, ensuring that the data interpretation is not skewed by disproportionate respondent attrition/participation.

I employed a standard methodological approach to calculate percentages for survey responses in this study, accounting for the possibility of respondents selecting multiple options for certain questions. This method was specifically chosen to align with the nature of the responses, wherein the participants were given the flexibility to choose more than one option per question³². It is important to understand that, in surveys allowing multiple responses per question, the sum of the percentages for all options can exceed 100%. This reflects the multiple selections by respondents and is a typical aspect of such survey data (Muhly, Maxwell & Cravero, 2014; Korb, 2013). This method ensures that the data analysis accurately reflects the choices of the respondents and provides valuable insights into their preferences and viewpoints.

The survey began with general questions designed to set a comfortable pace and ease participants into the process. These initial questions gathered information about the participants' age, professional experience, and whether they were freelancers or affiliated with a media

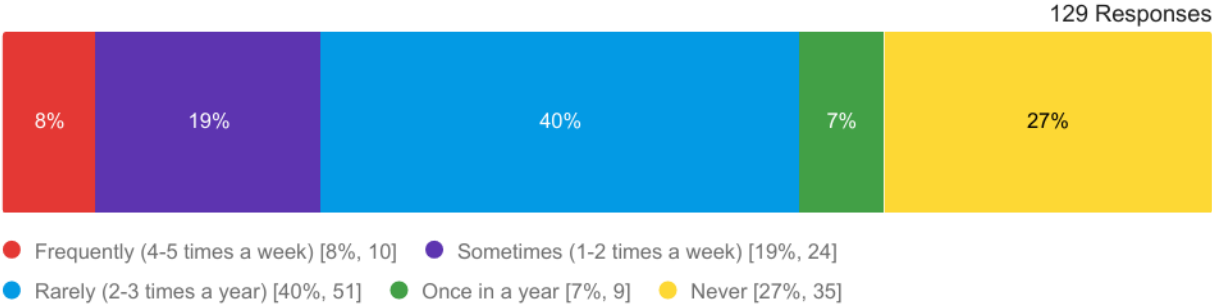
³² To determine the percentage for each option, the number of respondents who selected that particular option was divided by the total number of survey participants. This figure was then multiplied by 100 to yield a percentage. This approach provides an accurate representation of the proportion of participants selecting each option, ensuring a precise measurement that reflects the diverse choices of the survey population.

organization. This demographic and professional data is crucial for the subsequent qualitative interviews, serving as a foundation for analyzing and comparing the support systems and resources available to each group.

The data depicted in the accompanying bar graph (below) addresses the critical question regarding experiences of harassment, illustrating the distribution of responses. This graph offers a quantitative summary of the challenges faced by participants.

Q9 - Have you ever experienced (harassment) in your professional career?

Q9_2 - Harassment



Q9 - Response Count: 129

Fig. 20 (Qualtrics report on Q9)

The data reveals that 40% of respondents experience harassment rarely (2-3 times a year), while 27% report never encountering it. However, 19% face harassment occasionally (1-2 times a week), and 8% endure it frequently, with 7% experiencing it only once annually. While the majority fall into the 'rarely' or 'never' categories, the 27% in the 'frequently' and 'occasionally'

categories highlight a significant concern. Those in these groups are likely the most at-risk, as recurring harassment can lead to negative psychological and professional outcomes. This uneven distribution suggests that harassment is experienced in varying intensities across the sample, with a minority reporting sustained exposure that warrants closer examination. The implications of such recurring harassment will be addressed in later sections, particularly in relation to its psycho-emotional and professional consequences.

A qualitative follow-up to this question invited respondents to describe the nature of the posts they encountered. Among those who reported experiencing harassment, most described multiple forms of online abuse, with the targeting shaped by their reporting beats/topics and their class, caste, and religious backgrounds. One journalist recounted facing a steady stream of insults, even when covering less politically charged topics such as medical negligence and noted receiving hate messages from professionals like doctors across India. Another respondent also emphasized that the nature of harassment often intersects with identity markers such as caste, class, and religion— a perspective highly relevant from the standpoint of feminist intersectional theory.

I think... there is a class and caste and religion angle when it comes to online harassment against female journalists. So, when Rana Ayuub or Fatima or Arfa would get threats, they would be sexually harassed... And also (the respondent shifted to *Hindi* language) ... involves Hindu rape fantasies on Rana. So, it is Hindu versus Muslim.... But when it comes to Meena Kotwal it is caste-based trolling. Most upper-caste Brahmins comment negatively on her. But I am neither a Muslim woman nor a Dalit woman. I am from OBC who comes from rural India so my journey my experience with online harassment is similar yet very different

(Indrani, 25-29, digital journalist, Delhi)

Standpoint theory asserts that knowledge is inherently shaped by the lived experiences of social actors, emphasizing that marginalized perspectives offer critical and unique insights into social realities (Goldstein, 2022). I argue that experiences like Indrani's offer perspectives distinct from dominant literature on binary forms of marginalization, reflecting a form of marginalization that is often overlooked in media scholarship. While scholarship on *Dalit* discrimination in Indian media is extensive, studies addressing discrimination against Other Backward Classes within media and journalism remain comparatively scarce. Indrani described how these subtle forms of disadvantage shape her professional life, particularly in terms of recognition and access to opportunities within the newsroom.

Her narrative highlights the gap in existing research and points to the need for a more nuanced understanding of caste-based hierarchies beyond the binary of Dalit and non-Dalit experiences. Mohanty's critique of Western feminists for homogenizing 'third world women' without acknowledging caste and class distinctions [see notes in Chapter 3] underscores the importance of such nuanced analyses.

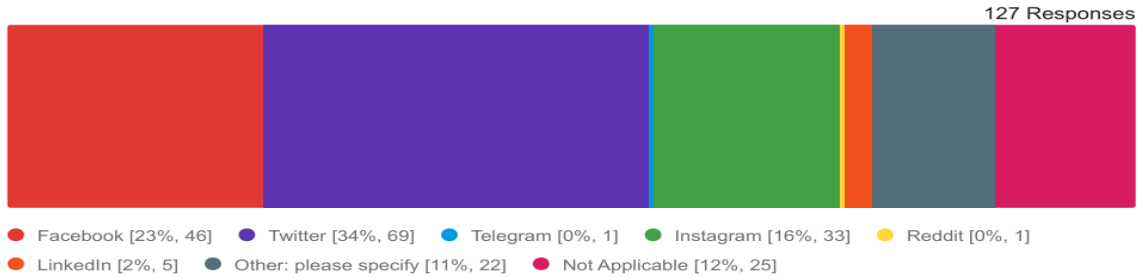
Seventeen out of the twenty participants (85%) recognized that maintaining an active presence on social media platforms is an integral aspect of their professional responsibilities. For freelancers, this necessity was described as even more significant, since social media often serves as their primary avenue for reaching a wider audience and promoting their work. Among these platforms, Twitter and Facebook emerged as the most commonly utilized by journalists for professional engagements.

This is also evident from the breakdown bar below, wherein a major percentage of

harassment was reported on *Twitter* (34%) followed by *Facebook* (23%), and *Instagram* (16%) respectively³³.

5

Q9 (a) - If Yes, on which platform did it occur (Choose all that apply)? - Selected Choice



Q9 (a) Response Count: 127

Fig. 21: Qualtrics report on Q9 (a)

In analyzing online harassment, the findings reveal that the primary vectors of digital harassment targeting women journalists in India align with those observed in other countries, a conclusion consistent with prior studies (McRoberts & Voskuhl, 2018; Nyst & Monaco, n.d.), albeit with some variations in usage of the platforms. Twitter was reported to be the most widely used social media platform by Indian journalists. However, a noteworthy point was that in the ‘Other: please specify’ i.e. text section of the questionnaire many journalists identified YouTube comments sections and WhatsApp groups as prevalent channels for abusive behavior in addition to their personal email addresses. Many noted that WhatsApp forwards serve as conduits for spreading

³³ Facebook owns Instagram and WhatsApp

toxic anti-feminist messages including mis/disinformation.

During the in-depth interviews, participants observed that political parties across the spectrum actively engage in efforts to discredit journalists, with social media functioning as a primary instrument for such campaigns. These actions are strategically employed to delegitimize journalistic work, erode professional credibility, and suppress dissenting perspectives. The findings therefore reframe online harassment as a coordinated and politically motivated practice, particularly directed at women journalists, rather than a series of isolated incidents. Several testimonies from participants provide firsthand accounts of these dynamics and reveal the extent of political involvement in orchestrating online abuse.

These are what I have seen as a pattern on social media and Twitter. So, if your narrative doesn't suit them, there will be people, targeting you in the form of paid trolls. Whether it is from the Right-wing trolls or Left

(Chitra, 25-29, digital journalist, private enterprise, Hyderabad, Telangana)

Facebook has always supported the right-wing groups. Facebook has always supported the people who pay them...the marketing groups. End of the day the political parties are close to Facebook. They have teams which interacts with Facebook

(Shaina, 40-44, Independent journalist, Chennai, Tamil Nadu)

Chitra's description of 'paid trolls' and Shaina's insights into political collaborations with Facebook highlight the deliberate use of social media to shape narratives and stifle dissent. These observations underscore the influence of monetary and political forces on platform dynamics, raising concerns about misinformation and polarization. Collectively, they reflect journalists'

belief in systemic, politically driven online harassment beyond individual ideologies.

Next, the questions in the survey examine the magnitude and nature of harassment, specifically focusing on derogatory remarks in the digital realm. This exploration delves into various facets of identity, encompassing religious affiliation, gender, caste, professional expertise, and personal aesthetics. The aggregated responses to this query are visually represented in the bar chart Fig.

below for Question 10:

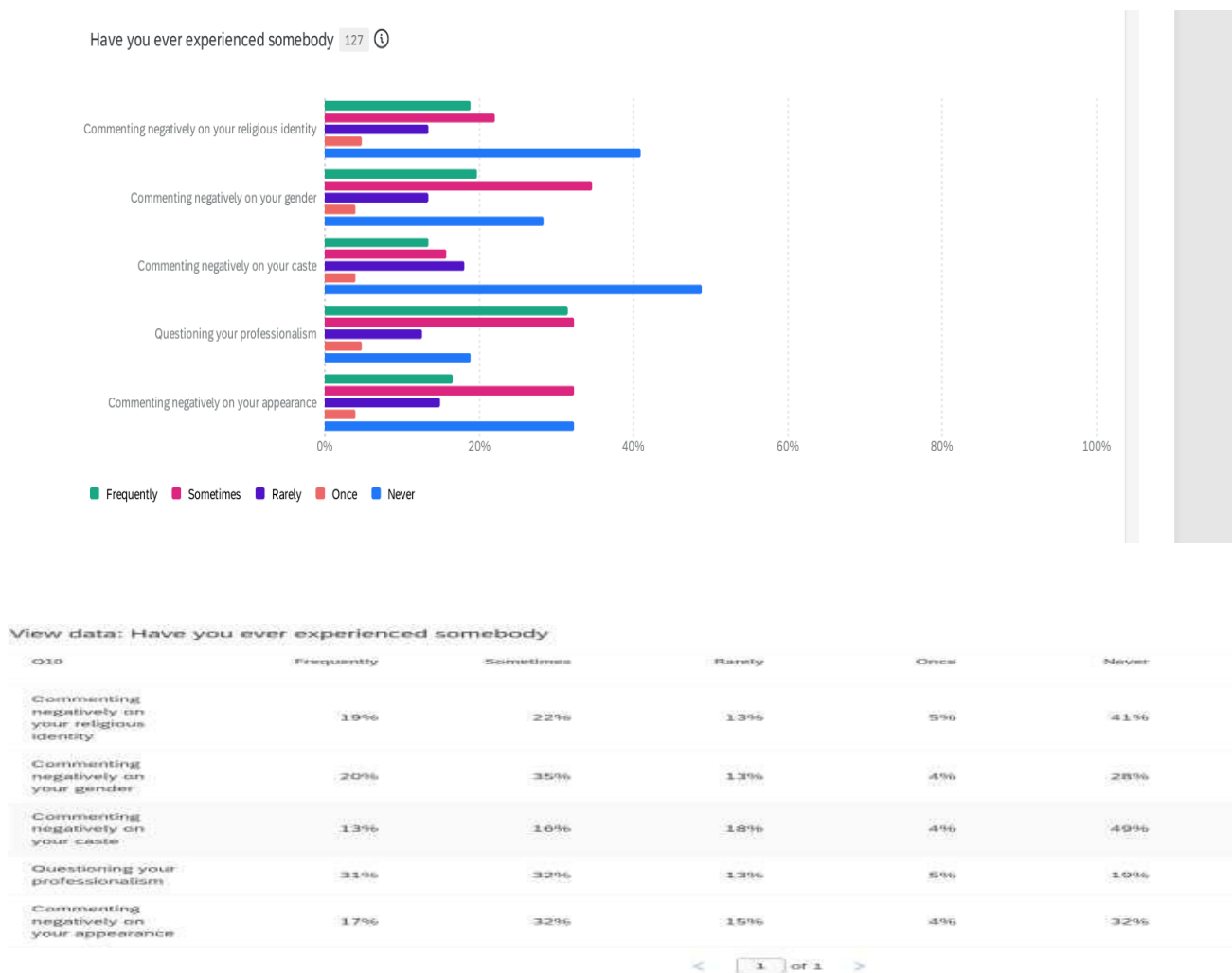


Fig. 22: (Qualtrics report on Q10)

Q10- Response Count: 127

a) *Religious Identity*: 19% percent of the respondents reported frequently receiving negative comments based on their religious identity. The percentages are calculated on the full response count (N = 127). So, 19% under 'commenting negatively on your religious identity' represents 19% of all 127 respondents, and not only those who reported experiencing online negativity. In contrast, a combined total of 54% indicated that they experienced this rarely or never, suggesting that a significant portion of respondents do not regularly encounter this form of harassment. 22% of the respondents reported sometimes experiencing religiously motivated negative comments online, indicating occasional encounters with this form of harassment. b) *Gender*: Negative comments based on gender are frequently experienced by 20% of the respondents, the second highest frequency among the categories. 35% of journalists report sometimes receiving negative comments related to their gender.

When combined with those who receive frequent comments, this suggests that gender-based negativity is a prevalent issue. Therefore, a significant portion of the comments targeting gender and religious identity contributed to a substantial number of incidents reported by the journalists surveyed. In total, 39% of respondents reported being targeted with religion- and gender-based threats or comments at least 4-5 times a week, with 20% specifically experiencing harassment through gendered comments. However, 28% indicated that they never experience this type of harassment, suggesting that not all respondents are subjected to gender-based negative comments.

13% of the respondents frequently experience negative comments related to their caste, which is less common compared to harassment based on gender and religious

identity. While this minuscule percentage may reflect the nature of harassment and the infrequent targeting of journalists on account of caste-based marginalization, it also highlights the disproportionate presence of lower-caste journalists in the Indian media landscape.

Several studies indicate that upper-caste individuals dominate leadership positions in Indian media, while Dalit and Adivasi voices remain severely underrepresented across both field and managerial roles. If my survey sample reflects this structural imbalance, the reported frequency of caste-based harassment may be shaped more by the lack of representation than by the absence of discrimination itself. Another plausible explanation is that lower-caste journalists refrain from reporting such experiences due to fears of retaliation, inadequate institutional support, or the normalization of casteist behavior within media organizations.

These findings underscore the need to interpret harassment data within the broader framework of structural inequality, highlighting the importance of addressing systemic exclusion alongside individual experiences of abuse. Notably, 49% of respondents reported never encountering this form of harassment, suggesting that caste-based discrimination may persist in subtler, less openly articulated forms within newsroom cultures.

d) *Professionalism*: People questioning journalists' professional credentials online accounted for one of the highest percentages of sources of online harassment, at 31%. This indicates that questioning professional credibility is a common basis for harassment. Additionally, 32% of respondents sometimes face such questioning, which may impact

their professional reputation and self-perception as journalists. e) *Appearance*: 17% percent of respondents frequently receive negative comments about their appearance, indicating that personal attacks on looks are also a significant issue for women journalists. A combined 47% of respondents report rarely or never receiving negative comments about their appearance, suggesting that this form of harassment is less pervasive.

Overall, the data indicate that questioning professionalism and gender-based negativity are the most commonly experienced forms of harassment among respondents. A notable portion of respondents rarely or never encounter these types of negative comments, highlighting variability in experiences. The comparatively infrequent experience of harassment based on appearance suggests that it may not be the primary target of negativity in professional settings, yet it affects a significant portion of the respondents. As studies have demonstrated (Silva et al., 2022; Demir & Ayhan, 2022) that these forms of personalized abuse and harassment can have severe emotional, psychological and economic impacts on those targeted.

As discussed in the literature review chapters, most global studies have found that a significant percentage (over 70% in most cases) of women journalists continue to face online harassment (Posetti & Shabbir, 2022, 2020; Haynes, 2018). This study did not find the numbers to be as significant as revealed in the numerous global studies (which is depicted in the bar charts above). The lower percentage can be attributed to cultural and contextual factors. One possibility is that Indian women journalists are often inured to harassment, leading them to overlook or refrain from classifying milder forms of aggression as harassment. In India, gender-based harassment is often normalized in

societal and professional settings, and women often internalize these experiences as part of their daily lives (Butalia, 2023). ‘Eve teasing’ is deeply rooted in India, often perceived as a minor or acceptable behavior rather than a serious offense. This cultural normalization makes it difficult for individuals to recognize and challenge harassment (Natarajan, 2016).

Furthermore, coping mechanisms and resilience influence journalists’ ability to recognize and report harassment, as seen in other studies (Posetti & Shabbir, 2022; Haynes, 2018). Additionally, harassment in India is often more subtle or institutionalized, with forms of caste- and class-based discrimination blending into everyday experiences, making it harder for women to identify these as harassment (Kureel, 2021). However, consistent with other studies, the repercussions were found to be deeply profound, as is discussed in more detail in the following chapters.

Beyond the numbers, my research aims to uncover the nuanced complexities that lie beneath the surface of the aggregated data. The qualitative aspect, uncovered through the comprehensive interviews, indicates that even sporadic instances of online targeting can leave significant and enduring effects on individuals. Moreover, such incidents often lead to widespread self-censorship within the professional community, thus underscoring the complex and pervasive effects of harassment that go beyond simple numerical representation to influence behavior and professional discourse.

The follow-up in-depth interview responses offered some of the most profound insights into these aspects:

I am not saying because I belong to a certain religion. But everyone in totality *every minority felt safer before this* government has come in. And now the freedom of expressing... the freedom of writing...is going to cost you. It is not about freedom of expression anymore

(Deepa, 35-39, digital journalist, private enterprise, Bengaluru, Karnataka)

The journalist's reflection on feeling safer in the past signals a shift in the country's socio-political climate and its impact on her lived experience. Standpoint theory frames this individual perspective as a starting point for examining broader systemic issues related to freedom of expression (Lund, 2023), while Intersectional Feminist Theory builds on this by analyzing how intersecting social identities – such as minority status and religious affiliation—shape experiences of power and oppression (Crenshaw, 1991).

The respondent's mention of 'every minority' reflects an understanding that her experience is not isolated but shared among other minority groups, highlighting a collective awareness of marginalization. The perceived loss of freedom and the risks associated with taking a stance highlight intersectional oppression, where compounded disadvantages stem from overlapping identities, such as minority status, intersecting with systemic structures of power and discrimination. The following comments further illustrate this:

About men, probably, it's just abusive language, but with women and they get personal, and caste and religion do play a huge role. I guess if you do not conform to the majority religion, probably to leave the country [...] In India, specifically over the past 10 years, I feel that there has been a shift .. The *We, and you shift*. 'We' is majoritarianism. 'We' are Hindus in India. India is a Hindu nation. ...which for me is very disturbing. I always thought this country is secular, at least the principles. We do not have a state religion. But we do have an unofficial state religion, now. And it's disturbing to see certain news events, news items. I see that shift, people a lot more vocal about their religious Hindu identity, and not in a good way

(Usha, 35-39, digital journalist, private enterprise, Delhi-NCR)

Caste is so seeped in... it's so institutionalized, it is everywhere. So, you cannot just escape it. For example, somebody will post something and if there is a caste name there, the caste identity is very clear, the kind of hatred they would get based on the caste itself...And if it's a woman, of course it's gendered, it's sexist

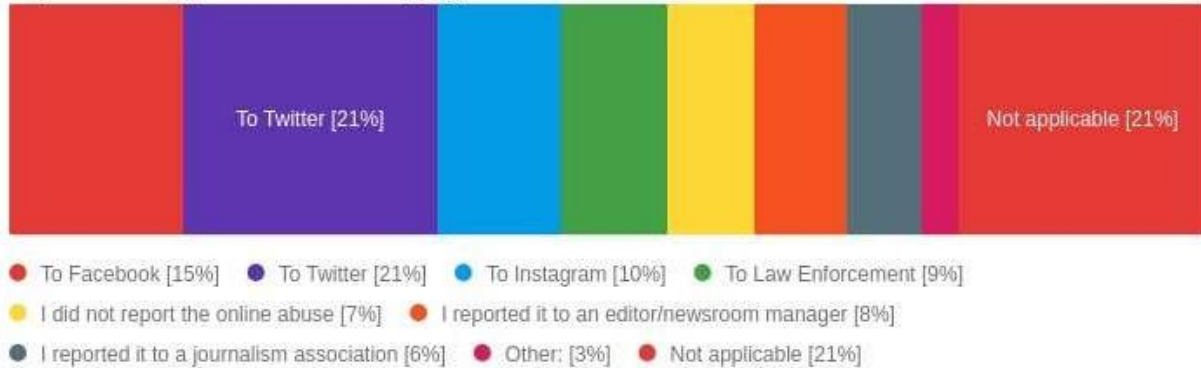
(Kavya, 25-39, digital journalist, Indian Express, Delhi-NCR)

The intersectionality framework reveals how women from religious minorities in India face compounded discrimination, as gender intersects with caste and religious identity to create unique challenges (Hussain, 2020; Beteille, 2020). The rise of majoritarianism³⁴ exacerbates these layered forms of harassment, undermining secular principles and amplifying both sexist and casteist biases. In the context of my research, the participants predominantly consist of educated women journalists, many of whom hold prominent, high-profile positions in the field of journalism. Their experiences and insights are particularly valuable in understanding the dynamics of online harassment in the realm of media, as their visibility and public engagement presents unique challenges and perspectives in the context of digital communication and social media interactions.

³⁴ Majoritarianism is a central topic in Indian political and social discourse, often referring to Hindu majoritarianism. In this context, Hindu majoritarianism refers to the political and social ideology where the Hindu majority is prioritized, often at the expense of religious minorities such as Muslims and Christians. It is characterized by policies or ideologies that support the interests, values, and beliefs of the Hindu community, sometimes to the exclusion or marginalization of others. This term highlights the perception that the government, or political leaders, favor the Hindu majority in decision-making, policies, and governance, reflecting a form of majoritarian rule. Critics argue that this undermines the secular and pluralistic ideals enshrined in India's constitution, which guarantees equal rights to all citizens regardless of religion. In essence, Hindu majoritarianism does not merely acknowledge that Hindus constitute the majority but suggests that political rhetoric and policies increasingly reflect or bolster the interests of this group. This, in turn, risks sidelining or neglecting the rights of religious minorities, challenging India's foundational ideals of secularism and inclusivity. (Palshikar, 2022; Singh, 2017).

In feminist theory, a standpoint ties a woman’s perspective to her lived and physical experiences, emphasizing the interplay of body, mind, and societal realities. This perspective reveals how issues like beauty and appearance connect deeply to a woman’s bodily experiences and socio-economic context. For instance, a respondent’s decision to change her Twitter profile picture, after being body-shamed for her weight (field notes, 2023), illustrates how women navigate digital spaces. The participant changed her picture from a front profile to a side profile to appear slimmer, a choice that was not merely aesthetic but a strategic negotiation of identity in a scrutinized public sphere, reflecting the intersection of individual agency and societal expectations.

Q13 - [If you have never experienced any form of online incivility, harassment or violent behavior, please choose Not Applicable in the following questions] Did you report the online abuse you experienced? (Choose all that apply) - Selected Choice



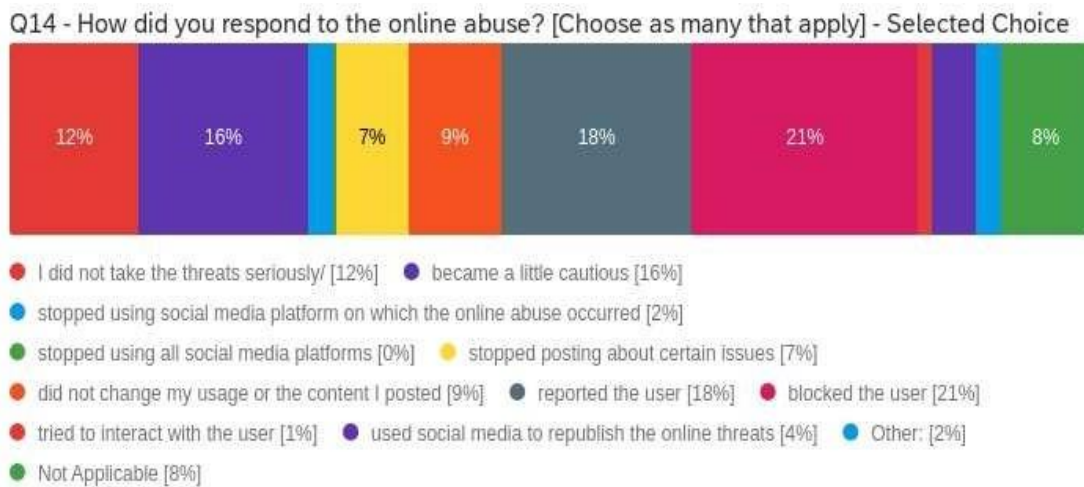
Response Count: 124 Responses

Fig. 23 (Qualtrics report on Q13)

21% of respondents reported incidents of online harassment to Twitter, indicating it as a common platform for complaints, as reflected in Q9(a). An equal percentage (21%) marked the question as ‘Not applicable’, suggesting they either did not experience harassment or chose not to report

it. Reporting to Facebook (15%) and Instagram (10%) was less frequent, possibly due to differences in reporting mechanisms or the prevalence of harassment on these platforms.

A smaller percentage of respondents reported online harassment to law enforcement (9%), suggesting concerns about legal recourse or trust in the system, which will be explored further in the qualitative analysis. Fewer reported to journalism associations (6%) or editors/managers (8%), pointing to potential gaps in industry support structures. A minority (7%) chose not to report the abuse, possibly due to barriers or lack of trust in the process. The 'Other' category (3%) included alternative actions, such as reporting to political organizations or local police.



Response Count: 124 Responses

Fig. 24 (Qualtrics report on Q14)

A minority of journalists (0.5%) stopped using all social media platforms in response to abuse, suggesting most value their online presence despite negative experiences. Similarly, 0.5% stopped using the platform where the abuse occurred, while 1% engaged with the abusers, possibly to address or understand the harasser's mindset. Notably, 4% republished the threats, likely to raise awareness or seek support. Other strategies included blocking users (21%), reporting the user (18%), becoming more cautious online (16%), and self-censorship (7%). The 'Other' category (2%) encompassed a range of diverse actions.

A small percentage of respondents (9%) maintained their social media use and content despite the abuse, while 12% dismissed the threats, possibly as a coping mechanism. Additionally, 8% found the question inapplicable, indicating no abuse or no perceived response. Upon probing deeper on this issue during the in-depth interviews, it was revealed that online spaces, much like physical ones, are embedded with gendered power dynamics and systemic biases, as discussed further in subsequent chapters. Most respondents make conscious efforts to manage and control the personal and professional identities they choose to present online. Such decisions are influenced by individual experiences and the perceived risks of online exposure.

Standpoint theory helps illustrate how individuals' perceptions and reactions to online harassment are influenced by their continual experiences, social positions, and the coping strategies they develop in response to persistent exposure to such environments. It is noteworthy that this also points to a concerning aspect of digital culture - the normalization of hostility and trolling. It is evident that constant exposure to aggressive online behavior desensitizes individuals, leading them to downplay potentially serious threats.

But when I go and report posts like that, like threatening me, to kill me or rape me or slap me or beat me, then the platforms say, it doesn't go against our community standards. What community standards do you have then? Who's maintaining things? I know about the AI algorithm behind it, but what about the people who are running it? What kind of standards do they have?

(Elina, 45-49, Independent journalist, Chennai, Tamil Nadu)

It is ridiculous. Half of those trolls are very funny!! Now, I think we've stopped seeing them as threatening, we find it funny. Because, that sort of a behavior...It is very strange!

(Usha, 35-39, digital journalist, private enterprise, Delhi-NCR)

From an intersectional perspective, Elina's frustration with the dismissal of threatening online harassment reflects systemic biases within platform policies, which fail to address the gendered nature of the abuse and, in doing so, uphold patriarchal norms by not taking threats against women seriously (Posetti & Shabbir, 2022; Jane, 2017). Usha's desensitization to trolling, where she finds it 'funny', illustrates how repeated exposure leads to the normalization of harassment—a coping mechanism shaped by her standpoint (Crenshaw, 1991; Collins, 1997). Both quotes emphasize how gender and repeated exposure to online abuse influence the ways in which female journalists navigate and react to digital harassment.

These quotes align with findings by Suzor et al. (2018), highlighting campaigns like the 2006's *Take Back the Tech*³⁵ (#whatareyoudoingaboutVAW) that pressured platforms such as

³⁵ In 2006, the Association for Progressive Communications Women Networking Support Programme (APC WNSP) launched 'Take Back The Tech' (TBTT) the campaign aimed at empowering women and girls to reclaim technology to combat violence against women, particularly in developing countries.

Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube to address violence against women (VAW). Despite some progress, monitoring systems remain opaque and inadequate. Reddit’s design and policy framework, for instance, fueled misogynistic activism during #gamergate (Massanari, 2017). A significant concern is that the prevailing business models and software architectures of social media platforms are structured to enhance content sharing and user interaction, which unintentionally fosters an environment conducive to extensive abuse and harassment [See Also: Pavan, 2014].

Subsequent survey questions explored the impact of online hostility on respondents’ personal well-being and professional growth, aiming to assess how such experiences influence their careers. A corresponding question investigated the intensity of this impact, providing a scale ranging from negligible to significant effects.

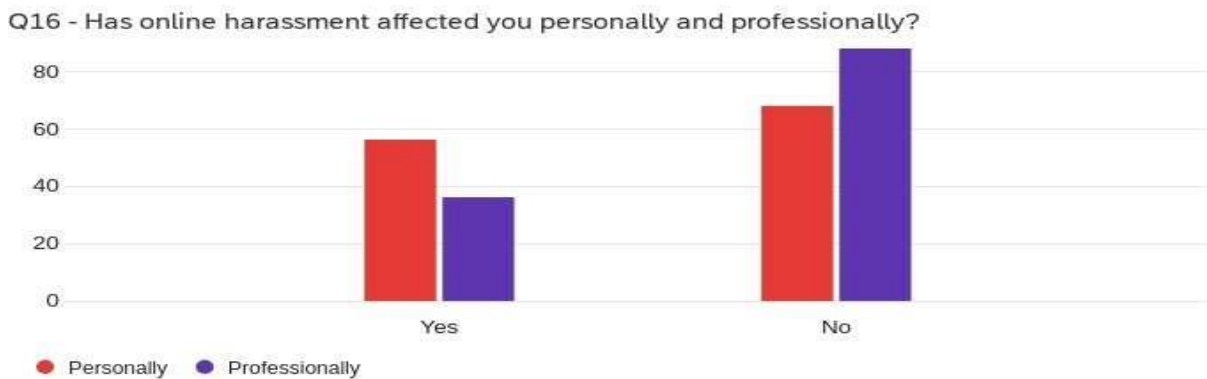


Fig. Response Count: 124

Fig. 25 (Qualtrics report on Q 16)

The bar chart Fig. (above) depicts that a notable proportion of respondents, 45% (comprising individuals who experienced harassment in any manner, from rare to severe) affirm that they have been personally affected by online harassment. This indicates that nearly half of the respondents either experienced or witnessed harassment that had a personal impact, which could encompass emotional distress, psychological effects, or a sense of personal vulnerability. However, it also means that 55% of those who faced harassment reported no personal impact. This could reflect factors such as individual resilience, effective coping strategies, or the perception that certain forms of harassment are minor or inconsequential. It might also indicate a normalization of such behavior in online spaces, where victims may downplay its effects.

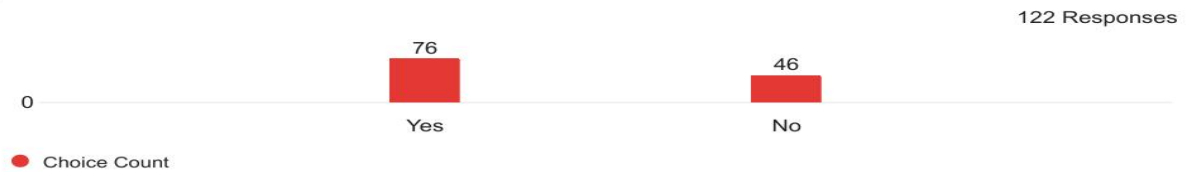
When this is contextualized against the broader survey, the 27% (in the 'frequently' and 'occasionally' categories in Q 9_2) who reported frequent or occasional harassment earlier do not necessarily align with the 45% personally affected. This suggests that even individuals encountering harassment rarely (e.g., once or twice a year) can experience significant personal repercussions, emphasizing that *frequency alone does not determine the severity of impact*.

In terms of professional impact, with only 29% of harassed respondents noting professional consequences, it appears that online harassment more commonly affects personal well-being than professional circumstances. Nonetheless, the nearly one-third affected professionally may face challenges such as strained workplace relationships, reputational harm, or career stagnation, which can have long-term consequences for their well-being and success.

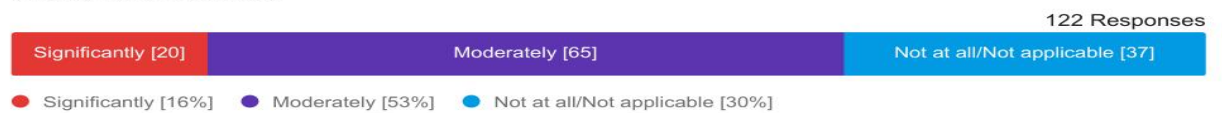
This shows that the consequences of online harassment extend beyond individual careers to affect the broader work environment, requiring focused approach to mitigate its individual and organizational impact. The majority, 71%, reported that online harassment had no impact on their professional lives. This finding could indicate a normalization of harassment in certain contexts, where individuals downplay its professional consequences due to social or cultural conditioning. Alternatively, respondents might underreport its impact, fearing professional repercussions or stigma. It could also indicate that certain professions or workplace cultures are less susceptible to the spillover effects of online harassment.

This topic may have arisen organically during the interviews, depending on the participants' responses and the direction of the conversation. It is important to note that examining whether participants may have minimized the effects of online harassment necessitates thoughtful deliberation. Phrasing such a question directly could jeopardize the impartiality of the interview process, potentially introducing bias or swaying their answers. Therefore, open-ended prompts were used to facilitate participants in sharing their experiences genuinely, thereby ensuring that their accounts were not influenced by prior assumptions.

Q17 - Has online harassment experienced by others made you change your online behavior



Q17 (a) - If yes, to what degree have you consciously or unconsciously censored yourself, and why (Please enter your response to "why" in the relevant text box)? A FEW MORE QUESTIONS LEFT, PLEASE!!! - Selected Choice



Response Count: 122

Fig. 26 (Qualtrics report on Q 17 and 17(a))

The more striking result that emerged from the data is reflected in the pie charts (above). This follow-up question expands the investigation to encompass the wider social ramifications of harassment, reflecting both personal experiences and the indirect effects of observing peers being subjected to harassment. The data indicates that 30% of participants reported no instances of self-censorship, suggesting a level of confidence in their capacity to participate in online interactions without alteration. Conversely, a substantial 53% reported moderate self-censorship, emphasizing the impact of harassment-related concerns on their online conduct and illustrating the widespread nature of this issue.

Furthermore, a miniscule 16% of respondents indulge in high self-censorship, significantly altering their digital conduct due to fears of harassment or safety risks. This finding underscores

the profound impact of online harassment, which reshapes how individuals interact within digital spaces. While some manage to navigate these challenges with resilience, a significant portion adjust their behavior due to concerns for personal safety. Overall, the data reveals a concerning online environment where harassment impedes digital participation, raising critical questions about safety, inclusivity, and the broader implications for user engagement.

These questions delve into the broader cultural and psychological impact of online harassment, exploring whether a contagion effect leads even those not directly targeted to alter their behavior due to the harassment of peers. This reflects a pervasive culture of intimidation, shaping a climate of fear, self-censorship, and suppressed expression within the professional community. By examining how awareness of others' harassment influences self-censorship and silences voices, these questions highlight the unseen pressures shaping media narratives and the stories left untold due to fear of backlash. This discussion sets the stage for the nuanced analysis in Chapters 5 and 6, which draws on qualitative insights from the in-depth interviews.

The adaptive strategies demonstrated by journalists reveal their careful maneuvering through digital platforms, as they endeavor to sustain their visibility while addressing the inherent risks of harassment. This careful approach to online engagement highlights more extensive challenges within the profession, including the necessity for institutional backing and the safeguarding of journalistic independence amid threats and targeted harassment. The ensuing interview questions explored these dynamics in greater detail.

One of the reporters, I got to know that someone asked him online, I know your daughter goes to this school. That's all. There's ... just one sentence there. And you can understand the kind of impact it would have had. And I have never seen him write the same way again... [...] I am self-censoring. And why am I doing this? [...] We have seen journalists who have been thrown into jail

for just doing their jobs for tweeting something, writing something on Facebook, writing even liking something or sharing something on Facebook

(Bharti, 45-49, News Anchor, NDTV, Delhi- NCR)

So even though I didn't experience it, if I feel that my certain story or my certain writing a certain way or behaving in a certain way can have a negative impact on me, even if not, I automatically stop myself from doing it. So that is my internal guard that is just internalized in me and it protects me. And so yeah, it's more internalized. So I think the covert thing is so absorbed right in my blood now that, you know, '*kuch karungi toh shayad mujhe rape threat mil sakta hai*' (if I will do something I might get a rape threat, death threats etc.). So, it is better to refrain.... Because as much as I love the profession, I love my life also. That's the truth!

(Jhanvi, 20-24, digital journalist, private enterprise, Delhi-NCR)

In her 2022 article, Adrija Dey contends that online sexual harassment is a continuum of other forms of offline sexual violence that has psycho-emotional and financial impacts on survivors with profound consequences on their sense of personal safety (Dey, 2023). While the repercussions are indeed deep and malicious, Dey's analysis does not take into account the new forms of technology-facilitated violence, discussed in the literature review chapters (Henry, 2015). The failure to adequately address the changing dynamics of technology-facilitated violence is illustrated by the tangible consequences of targeted online harassment, as seen in the case of a journalist whose personal safety was compromised by what appeared to be a candid online remark (as mentioned in the first comment above).

The first quote by Bharti (above) reveals how a single online comment about a journalist's daughter attending a specific school had a lasting impact on his writing. This instance exemplifies the power of implied threats – without making an explicit threat, the harasser conveyed enough to instill fear. The result was a significant alteration in how the journalist approached his

profession, likely opting for more caution or avoiding certain topics to protect his family. The situation illustrates how a journalist's ability to practice press freedom is significantly impacted, as the awareness of personal information by ill-intentioned individuals may result in self-censorship.

The subsequent quote by Jhanvi (above) underscores the difficulties journalists encounter from state authorities, which may include the risk of imprisonment for seemingly minor actions such as posting a tweet, sharing a Facebook post, or even liking particular content. This situation often escalates to self-censorship when the apprehension of legal consequences takes precedence over journalistic integrity and the freedom to express dissent. Consequently, a profound internal conflict emerges between commitment to professional obligations and the imperative of personal safety, highlighting the external pressures that threaten the core principles of journalistic freedom and ethics.

Sarkar & Rajan (2021) report that survivors of online sexual harassment expressed how such experiences diminished their control over their own lives and reduced their agency within digital environments. The presence of women in public spaces threatens the stability of the public/private dichotomy of a patriarchal society. Consequently, the nature of the threats women face is often brutal, predominantly consisting of rape threats. As is evident in the young journalist Jhanvi's quote (above), the speaker discusses not having personally experienced direct threats but still feeling compelled to alter her behavior due to the potential for violence.

This indicates a deeply internalized fear, influenced by observing the experiences of peers. The mention of potential rape or death threats as consequences of certain actions reveals the severe

and specific nature of threats women journalists face in the digital realm. The journalist's acknowledgment of prioritizing personal safety over professional passion reflects a profound personal struggle and a decision many journalists might grapple with in such hostile environments.

The journalists' experience highlights how patriarchal violence, both overt and covert, transcends cultural and national boundaries to restrict women's agency, thus underscoring the need for global solidarity that addresses the systemic nature of these threats while recognizing the cultural specificity of individual experiences. I contend, the fear of violence is not confined to one culture but is a transnational issue perpetuated by structural inequities. The respondent highlights a conflict between professional passion and personal safety - a dynamic where women must navigate their roles as professionals while being acutely aware of their vulnerability to gendered violence.

Transnational feminism frames this as a systemic issue, highlighting how intersecting factors such as societal norms, digital harassment, and the global misogynistic cultures curtail women's freedom of expression. It critiques the covert policing that denies full agency to women and perpetuates structural inequalities, by making them complicit in their own subjugation through fear, even as they resist or adapt to survive.

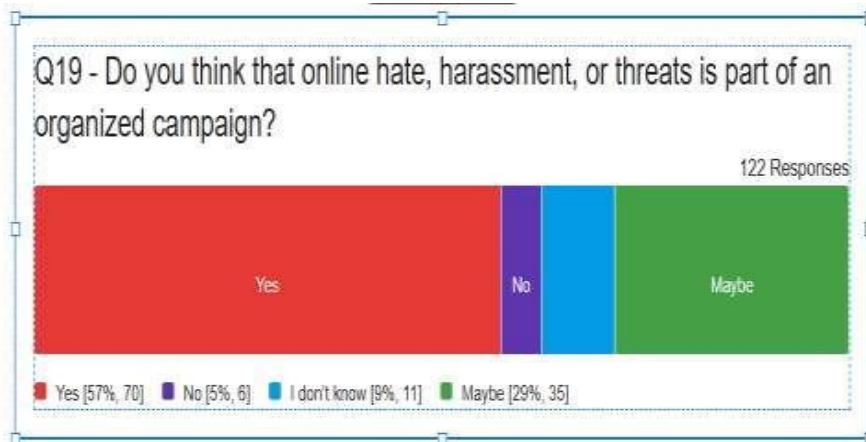


Fig. 26 Response Count: 122

Q20 - Have you ever been confronted physically?



Response Count: 122

Fig. 27 (Qualtrics report on Q 19 & 20)

The concluding part of the survey indicated that 57% of the participants perceive the negative online behaviors they face are being orchestrated as part of a concerted effort. This viewpoint corresponds with the systematic strategies allegedly utilized by the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party's digital apparatus, which intentionally focuses on journalists who critique its Hindu-nationalist ideology.

Such actions are interpreted as components of a larger strategy aimed at suppressing dissent, eroding press freedom, and intimidating individuals who oppose its narrative (Bhat, 2023). Additionally, the lack of protection from commercial media outlets, which often align with the government, further reinforces the notion of a coordinated attack against journalists, particularly women (Murthy, 2018). The data emphasizes the systemic, coordinated, and structurally embedded nature of online hate campaigns.

Addressing this issue requires prioritizing the lived experiences of individuals situated at the intersection of multiple axes of oppression, while acknowledging the epistemic significance of their insights. The perspectives (discussed above) challenge dominant narratives that portray online abuse as isolated or individual occurrence. Moreover, 14% of participants reported experiencing physical confrontations, underscoring the alarming potential for online harassment to escalate into real-world violence – a critical threat to journalist safety.

As discussed earlier, the assassination of Gauri Lankesh serves as a stark reminder of how sustained online abuse can escalate into offline violence, underscoring the critical need for a comprehensive approach to addressing these interconnected threats. In this context, when participants were asked to elaborate on their responses to the aforementioned questions (Q19, Q20), they offered the following insights:

The BJP does have an IT cell...which means a bunch of people online. And they are paid to harass journalists, they are paid to harass anyone who has opinion that differs from theirs and harassment of women and journalists especially... has been phenomenal over the past 10 years

(Ananya, 45-49, Independent journalist, Madurai, Tamil Nadu)

Rana Ayub received 50-60 abuses per day...this is all systematic violence. They have a dedicated team and they are supposed to do only this. I know what the government is doing... why am I fearful of going to U.P.?

(Indrani, 25-29, digital journalist, Delhi)

Earlier, it was one individual at whose behest, they were doxxing me and stuff. Right now, they are these are just political parties' IT wings...like DMK IT wing...mainly. they are very active and very efficient

(Mridula, 35-39, media enterprise owner, Bengaluru, Karnataka)

The mention of the BJP's IT cell by (Ananya) indicates her understanding of the political dimensions underpinning the harassment. Her standpoint is not only shaped by her personal experience but also by a broader awareness of how (political) power structures can influence online behavior, particularly in targeting dissenting voices, thus signifying that the BJP IT cell is not just a digital communication strategy but a structured entity that particularly employs individuals to harass dissenters online. Such acts raise grave concerns about the institutionalization of harassment, making it systemic rather than sporadic or incidental.

Furthermore, the reference to the 'past 10 years' implies a connection with the BJP's rise to power in 2014, highlighting how political authoritarianism exacerbates online abuse.

Both comments by (Indrani and Mridula) identify political parties as key perpetrators, with explicit mentions of the BJP and DMK³⁶, thus pointing towards variations in how different political entities (national and regional) wield online harassment.

While a few respondents mentioned attacks by various political parties, including one regional party, the majority (18 out of 20) identified the BJP as the main perpetrator of online harassment. Many respondents frequently associated the BJP with terms like '*Sanghi*³⁷' and 'saffron trolls,' reflecting its ideological alignment with *Hindutva* and its role in fostering a climate of online harassment. These terms signify the party's association with aggressive nationalist rhetoric and its supporters' use of digital platforms to target critics, particularly journalists.

Overall, these quotes highlight the systemic, politicized, and evolving nature of online harassment in India, demonstrating its strategic use to suppress dissent and intimidate critics. They further underscore the broader socio-political context in which digital abuse intersects with geographic, institutional, and ideological power structures.

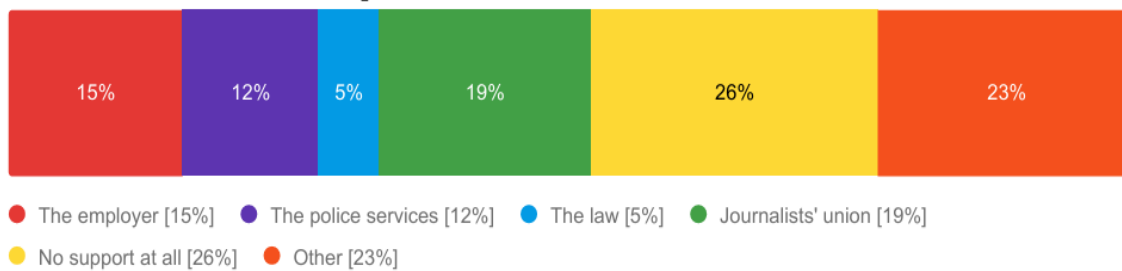
Thus, the findings of my study enhance our understanding of state-sponsored trolling, which emerged as an important theme in the literature review, by revealing how under the prime

³⁶ The Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) is a prominent regional political party based in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu . It was founded in 1949 by C.N. Annadurai, emerging as a breakaway faction from the Dravidar Kazhagam, a movement led by E.V. Ramasamy (Periyar) advocating for social reform and anti-caste principles.

³⁷ The term '*Sanghi*' is a colloquial, often pejorative label used to describe individuals associated with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a right-wing Hindu nationalist organization in India. It is commonly used by critics to imply that someone supports Hindu nationalism, is intolerant of religious minorities, or aligns with the broader agenda of the Sangh Parivar. While it is frequently used in a derogatory context, some individuals embrace the term as a symbol of pride, reflecting their commitment to promoting Hindu identity and values. The connotation of the term varies significantly depending on the speaker's perspective.

ministership of Narendra Modi, state sponsored trolling has not only grown in manifold ways but has also become dangerous as 'India's ruling party directly coordinated social media campaigns against leading journalists' (Theguardian.com, 2016). Furthermore, there has been an alarming rise in physical assaults against journalists since the time BJP has come into power in India (Ayyub, 2017; Dutt, 2018; Swati Chaturvedi, 2016; The Hindu Bureau, 2023).

Q22 - What kind of support have you received from [Please enter details in the relevant text box] - Selected Choice



Response Count: 106

Fig. 28 (Qualtrics report on Q 22)

Responses to the final question indicate a significant gap in support systems for journalists facing harassment, with 26% of participants reporting no assistance. Employers were the next most common source of support, cited by 15% of respondents, followed by journalists' unions at 19%, underscoring their role in advocacy and aid. However, the data indicates that freelance journalists face greater challenges in obtaining support. This observation is further substantiated by the qualitative responses, as explored in detail in Chapters 5 and 6.

To contextualize my theoretical framework, I have selected the following quotes, which capture diverse perspectives from women in the profession on the effectiveness and functioning of support mechanisms within India's current socio-political climate.

I paid a price ... I did not file single report, as I was told to do so..., However, I was never fired despite so much pressure... what if Gupta, my boss had not supported me? I would have gone back to my village. I would have been married to somebody in the village...fetching water and my life would have been different...these are the repercussions of being a marginalized woman...these are the women who these journalists look for...the marginalized, destitute women, that is what I do...I do such ground reporting because I see my own reflection in these women

(Indrani, 25-29, digital journalist, The Print, Delhi)

I have usually just ignored it. But, I know that my Editor-in-Chief is also aware because she gets abused a million times more than I do, and that too from people from five-six states. So, she would be aware of it. She might reach out and say, Hey, you ok? And then...there are people who are friends, who are also public figures who will maybe tweet something saying in response or come to my defence...

(Savitha,30-34, digital journalist, The NewsMinute, Chennai, Tamil Nadu)

He is a very supportive Editor...very helpful. So, he dealt with those guys. [...] I got messages saying that the government will look into you ...Basically... a threat, that you will be handled by the government. [...] I used to get serious panic attacks [...] my Editor and the organization were supportive throughout. Because, I did that story as a freelancer...Imagine an organization supporting a freelancer! if you can you must mention in your work..that are a very few organizations who are really supportive of the reporters. It was *The Wire*. They are a small group and do not get much funding... they do not pay well. But, even if they pay less, I do stories for *The Wire*...because I know, if I am in trouble, they will support me. [...]they were all very supportive and my other freelancer friends told me that...the company supported them also

(Sanjana, 25-29, Independent journalist, Delhi-NCR)

In the (first quote above) Indrani's experience emphasizes the intersection of caste, gender, and socio-economic marginalization. Her reflections reveal how support from a superior can be transformative, preventing her from falling into the cycle of rural patriarchy. The connection to reporting on 'marginalized, destitute women' and seeing her 'own reflection' in them indicates a deep empathy shaped by her own experiences of marginalization. The narrative underscores the vulnerabilities of marginalized women and the personal connection journalists feel toward the stories they report.

Sanjana's (quote above) experience reveals that systemic harassment is not merely personal but deeply intertwined with political dynamics. Threats referencing government action underscore how institutional power amplifies vulnerability. However, the journalist acknowledges the exceptional support from her editor and organization, *The Wire*, contrasting it with the broader landscape where freelancers often face neglect. Sanjana's praise for *The Wire* reflects a positive deviance, emphasizing the organization's commitment despite financial constraints.

In synthesizing these insights, the chapter underscores a key point: while quantitative data provides structure to the analysis, the lived experiences of journalists impart depth and context. By connecting the numerical findings with participants' narratives, I aim to highlight individual stories that clarify and humanize the statistical patterns presented in the figures above. The bar charts offer a visual representation of the findings; however, numerical data alone cannot capture the complexity and emotional nuance of the respondents' experiences. Therefore, the follow-up interviews were conducted to explore the underlying reasons and mechanisms,

addressing the 'why' and 'how' behind these trends and offering a more comprehensive understanding of participants' realities.

5.1.2 Resilience or internalization?

I argue that the most striking finding of the quantitative component of this study is the relatively lower rates of abuse reported by Indian women journalists compared to studies conducted in the UK (Gardiner, 2018), Ireland (Wheatley, 2023), and various other contexts. Although the survey is not representative of the Indian women journalist population as a whole, these results are both unexpected and significant. Several factors may account for this disparity, including the self-selecting nature of the sample, which may exclude women who have left the profession due to abuse – such as those from regions like Kashmir.

In addition, a key theme emerging from the interviews is resilience and, in some cases, the tendency to downplay the impact of abuse. The frequent references to resilience in the narratives suggest that Indian women journalists may exhibit a higher tolerance for abuse compared to their counterparts in other cultural contexts. Internalization, being a largely subconscious phenomenon, is inherently challenging to document or provide concrete evidence for. Yet its presence is discernible through the ways participants describe their coping mechanisms and professional decisions.

For instance, several journalists articulated how they have learned to 'ignore' or 'rise above' online harassment as a means of preserving their mental well-being and continuing their work. This approach, while framed as resilience, may also reflect a deeper normalization of abuse

and an internalized expectation to endure such challenges as an inevitable aspect of their profession. Furthermore, the narratives reveal that while participants consciously reject these societal expectations, the subconscious effects of enduring sustained abuse manifest in subtle ways, such as hesitance to cover certain topics, reduced engagement on social media, or self-censorship to avoid provoking further attacks. Many narratives reveal underlying tensions or moments of vulnerability. For instance, the necessity to ‘block and ignore’ harassment and to ‘stick to my ground’ demonstrates a reliance on personal resilience as a coping strategy. This strategy highlights the individual agency and self-reliance frequently required in response to systemic challenges such as online harassment.

Ultimately, these findings highlight the complex interplay between resilience, internalization, and the structural inequities that shape the experiences of Indian women journalists, emphasizing the need for systemic interventions to address the root causes of such abuse.

Conclusion

What makes this finding particularly noteworthy is the systematic nature of such harassment. Unlike individual trolls, the involvement of political parties suggests a more coordinated use of social media as a tool to attack and intimidate. Journalists have characterized social media platforms as having been weaponized, revealing profoundly troubling trends on prominent platforms that facilitate these campaigns.

This point underscores the institutional and structural dynamics of online harassment, extending beyond personal or isolated acts of abuse. It not only raises questions about

accountability and the role of political actors in perpetuating gendered harassment, but also the complicity or inaction of social media platforms.

From the findings of the survey and explanatory quotes, we can conclude that while not all women journalists are experiencing online harassment daily in its most severe form, the subset that does face it encounters such violence in an extreme manifestation. These journalists have endured significant personal turmoil, including mental and psychological challenges. Despite these adversities, they have exhibited extraordinary resilience, persisting in their professional endeavors with unwavering determination.

This is in contrast to what most global studies have reported. Whereas international research often suggests a high prevalence of online harassment among women journalists, my findings indicate a more nuanced reality. In the current study, while a smaller proportion of women journalists experience this harassment, the impact on those affected is devastatingly profound and significant. This discrepancy underscores the need for more localized and context-specific research to understand the varied experiences of women in journalism across different regions and cultures. Such insights are crucial for developing targeted strategies to support those facing severe harassment, while also acknowledging the resilience and determination of women who continue to work in the field despite these challenges.

The in-depth interviews reveal the complexities of harassment, highlighting a contrast with the quantitative data that suggests a lower frequency of certain forms. Many women journalists have internalized harassment due to its regularity in professional contexts, leading to its normalization in daily life. As a result, such occurrences are often neither consciously

acknowledged nor reported. For many, it has quietly become a part of their daily routine - unnoticed yet harmful, an ordinary but damaging feature of their work environment.

Furthermore, this normalization raises significant concerns about the nuanced and subtle nature of such harassment. This implies that the experiences of these women may be minimized or overlooked, as the subtle and constant nature of the harassment has led to its normalization. Consequently, they may not fully recognize or express the significance of these incidents, allowing them to blend into their daily routines and be underestimated in both personal and societal perceptions.

In Chapters 6, 7, and 8, I present the results of my qualitative analysis (in-depth interviews), structured around key thematic and discursive categories derived from the dataset. These categories include: (1) caste-based discrimination in the Indian mediascape and its repercussions on women journalists, particularly how caste dynamics intersect with religion to exacerbate systemic inequalities; (2) systematized online harassment targeting women journalists, framed within the broader context of the BJP regime's repression of press freedom and the coercive role of far-right digital subcultures in silencing dissenting voices, (3) distinct forms of gender-based harassment and misogyny that women journalists navigate in the contemporary Indian mediascape.

This analysis emphasizes the profound psycho-emotional toll of such harassment, highlighting its impact on women journalists' autonomy and professional efficacy. Together, these findings examine the intersecting challenges faced by women journalists in India, revealing how caste, politics, and digital harassment undermine press freedom and adversely affect their psychological, emotional, and professional well-being.

CHAPTER – 6

The Double Bind- Caste & Gender

This chapter addresses the first of these major themes, namely that of caste and how it intersects with gender. It begins with visual representations, including a word cloud and word tree to map linguistic patterns in the qualitative dataset, providing an overview of the central terms and narratives related to caste. These visual tools provide an overview of the prevalent terms and phrases used by respondents, highlighting the centrality of caste in their narratives. The discussion then delves into specific instances and patterns of casteism experienced by women journalists. It examines how caste-based hierarchies influence career trajectories, access to opportunities, and professional treatment within the media industry.

Through excerpts from in-depth interviews, this chapter highlights the compounded challenges faced by women journalists from marginalized castes, emphasizing how caste and religion intersect to perpetuate systemic barriers. It sheds light on structural mechanisms sustaining oppression while showcasing the resilience strategies and agency of women navigating these inequities within the mediascape. I would like to emphasize that caste-based intolerance emerged unexpectedly as a prominent theme in both the survey results and the follow-up interviews.

This significant level of existence reflects the poignant influence of such stigmatization in various aspects of Indian society, including the workplace and media production cultures. Furthermore, I identified that the intersection of gender, caste, and religion emerged as a

significant pattern, profoundly influencing various aspects of life and highlighting the need for a deeper understanding of its broader implications.

So, what began as an unanticipated thread in the initial stages of my research eventually demanded a methodological recalibration, leading to the incorporation of feminist critical discourse analysis (CDA) into this study. This shift was necessitated by the byzantine, often convoluted ways in which caste intricacies were interwoven with gender issues, presenting themselves as a powerful force shaping the experiences of not just women, but particularly those from perceptibly lower caste and disadvantaged caste backgrounds in India.

Focusing primarily on the in-depth interviews, I explored how these individuals navigate their social and professional landscapes, confront and resist prejudice, and construct their identities. The points of comparison and contrast encompass various historical and cultural contexts along with the existing legal framework in the country around caste-based ideologies (Chakravarti & Krishnaraj, 2018; Arya, 2020; Chakravarti, 1996).

At the core of our understanding of caste dynamics is also the recognition that individuals from the (historically/socially constructed) higher castes often benefit subtly from their status, if not explicitly, and accrue advantages without overt acknowledgment of their privileges. Conversely, I argue that some individuals from the (socially constructed) lower castes, despite achieving socio-economic mobility, continue to leverage the societal stigma attached to their caste to maintain a victim identity, thus eliciting sympathy and support.

My analysis further highlights the remarkable resilience and ingenuity of the women, emphasizing their methods of resistance and avenues for empowerment. Moreover, I maintain

that the effects paradigm should not be stymied by a focus on a single cause, as this perspective limits the thorough comprehension of the range of effects that various causes can produce.

By adopting a feminist CDA approach, I delve into the layered, and often subtle manifestations of caste and gender discrimination, uncovering how they are perpetuated, challenged, and negotiated within the realm of Indian mediascape. This methodological axis aligns the research with a framework that critically examines power structures, societal norms, and the complexities of identity and inequality.

In this analysis, I integrate Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis and Van Dijk's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to uncover underlying discourses. Applying CDA to testimonies from in-depth interviews, I examine participants' shared experiences, which reveal both the discomfort and trauma faced by some journalists and the resilience demonstrated by others.

Although caste constitutes a foundational axis of social stratification in the Indian context, my data collection process did not include the explicit documentation of participants' caste identity. This decision was guided by ethical, epistemological and methodological considerations grounded in feminist research principles, particularly those informed by Standpoint Theory and intersectionality. Given the sensitivity of the topic of online harassment, which often intersects with deeply personal and traumatic experiences, introducing direct questions on caste identity, particularly in the absence of prior rapport or context, risked retraumatizing some of the participants and potentially compromising the openness and trust required for in-depth qualitative inquiry.

The Global Investigative Journalism Network³⁸ (GIJN) guidelines on caste-sensitive reporting underscore the need for caution and consent when addressing caste, noting that caste identity can carry significant social risk, especially for individuals from Scheduled Castes, such as discrimination in professional and residential spaces. The guidelines highlight that many lower-caste individuals adopt upper-caste surnames to mask their identities and avoid stigma. In such contexts, directly inquiring about caste in professional interviews may reinforce power asymmetries or introduce discomfort, particularly when participants have not volunteered this information themselves.

Given the deeply entrenched social stigmas and personal experiences that often accompany caste identity in India, I chose to prioritize the psychological safety and autonomy of my participants. Moreover, in the professional domain of Indian journalism, caste is often obscured or unspoken, particularly among English-speaking journalists working in urban, elite-centric newsrooms. While some participants self-identified as belonging to structurally marginalized communities, caste was not uniformly disclosed across the sample. Instead of using fixed identity markers as classificatory tools, this research centered participants' narratives and allowed intersectional insights related to caste, region, gender, and class to emerge inductively through thematic engagement. This aligns with a broader ethical commitment to resisting extractive or tokenistic forms of representation and prioritizing the agency of participants as narrators of their own experiences.

However, the absence of systematic caste-based identification constitutes a

³⁸ Choudhary, 2025. Guide to Investigating Caste. Global Investigative Journalism Network. Available at: <https://gijn.org/resource/guide-investigating-caste> [Accessed 11 June 2025].

methodological limitation in that it precludes detailed intra-caste comparisons. As such, the analysis may not fully capture the specific ways in which caste hierarchies interact with gendered digital harassment. Nonetheless, given the ethical risks involved and the broader objective of the study to foreground lived experience rather than essentialize identity, this limitation is methodologically coherent within the framework of feminist qualitative research. I acknowledge that this decision has limited the granularity of my intersectional analysis.

Drawing on linguistic, geographic, and institutional indicators, the data demonstrate that the majority of interviewees are situated within relatively privileged caste locations. Such a distribution constitutes a telling marker of upper-caste dominance in Indian media, while simultaneously foregrounding the structural exclusion of Dalit, Bahujan, OBC, and Adivasi women journalists, whose presence remains significantly limited in both newsroom hierarchies and academic scholarship. The absence of explicit caste data is therefore not approached as a descriptive gap but as an epistemological silence, one that reproduces broader patterns of caste invisibility within elite media circuits.

Future iterations of this research would benefit from adopting a more explicit caste-sensitive framework, including the possibility of targeted outreach to caste-marginalized journalists through networks such as the Khabar Lahariya. Doing so would enrich the intersectional lens of analysis and deepen our understanding of how online harassment operates along multiple, overlapping structures of power. Nevertheless, my current study contributes to this terrain by foregrounding gendered and professional vulnerabilities, while acknowledging its limitations in accounting for caste in full analytical depth.

6.1 Findings:

6.1.1 Word cloud overview

The analysis I present below was aided by NVivo software. In the initial phase of my analysis, I employed NVivo software to generate a *word cloud* from the interview transcripts, concentrating on the code 'caste-based discrimination'. This visualization helped to visualize word frequency, offering a preliminary view of the key sentiments expressed in the narratives.

Subsequently, I created a Word Tree (using NVivo) which captures the nuanced patterns of word usage, providing insights into the linguistic and thematic context in which specific terms appear. By illustrating how particular words are situated within broader discursive structures, the *word tree* facilitates a more comprehensive understanding of the data, supporting the identification of key themes, concepts, and narrative flows.

Following the presentation of the Word Cloud and Word Tree visualizations i.e. a preliminary overview of word frequency and contextual patterns within the dataset, the analysis advances to a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of the interview transcripts.



Fig. 1. Word Cloud using NVivo

The word cloud³⁹ presented here emphasizes themes central to the discourse on social stratification within the Indian context. The conspicuous presence of terms such as ‘caste’, ‘dalit’, ‘upper’, ‘brahmin’, and ‘muslim’ speaks to the salience of hierarchical social categorizations, underscoring the prevalence of identity-based divisions. The prominence of ‘woman’ and ‘journalists’ anchors these discussions within a specific geographical and cultural milieu, suggesting a focused inquiry into the nation's media landscape.

The larger-sized words ‘India’, ‘caste’, ‘dalit’, and ‘brahmin’ seemingly highlight a concentration on the issues of the caste system and the experiences of those within these social divisions, discussed later in this chapter. The word ‘upper’ adjacent to ‘caste’ and ‘brahmin’ suggests a discussion around upper-caste individuals or communities, which are historically seen as holding more power and privilege in the Indian societal hierarchy. Additionally, the presence of words like ‘media’, ‘journalist’, and ‘woman’ together in this word cloud signify a discourse on the experiences of women journalists in India, discussing the intersectionality of gender, profession, and caste. This triad of terms evokes the critical discourse surrounding women journalists in India, with a potential emphasis on their experiences at the intersection of gender, profession, and societal status.

The lexical prominence of ‘power’ and ‘community’ further alludes to an examination of the dynamics of authority and solidarity within these intersected identities. This lexical representation allows us to deduce an examination of the intricate layers of discrimination and

³⁹ Circular layout depicting the most frequent terms at the center and the less frequent ones positioned toward the perimeter.

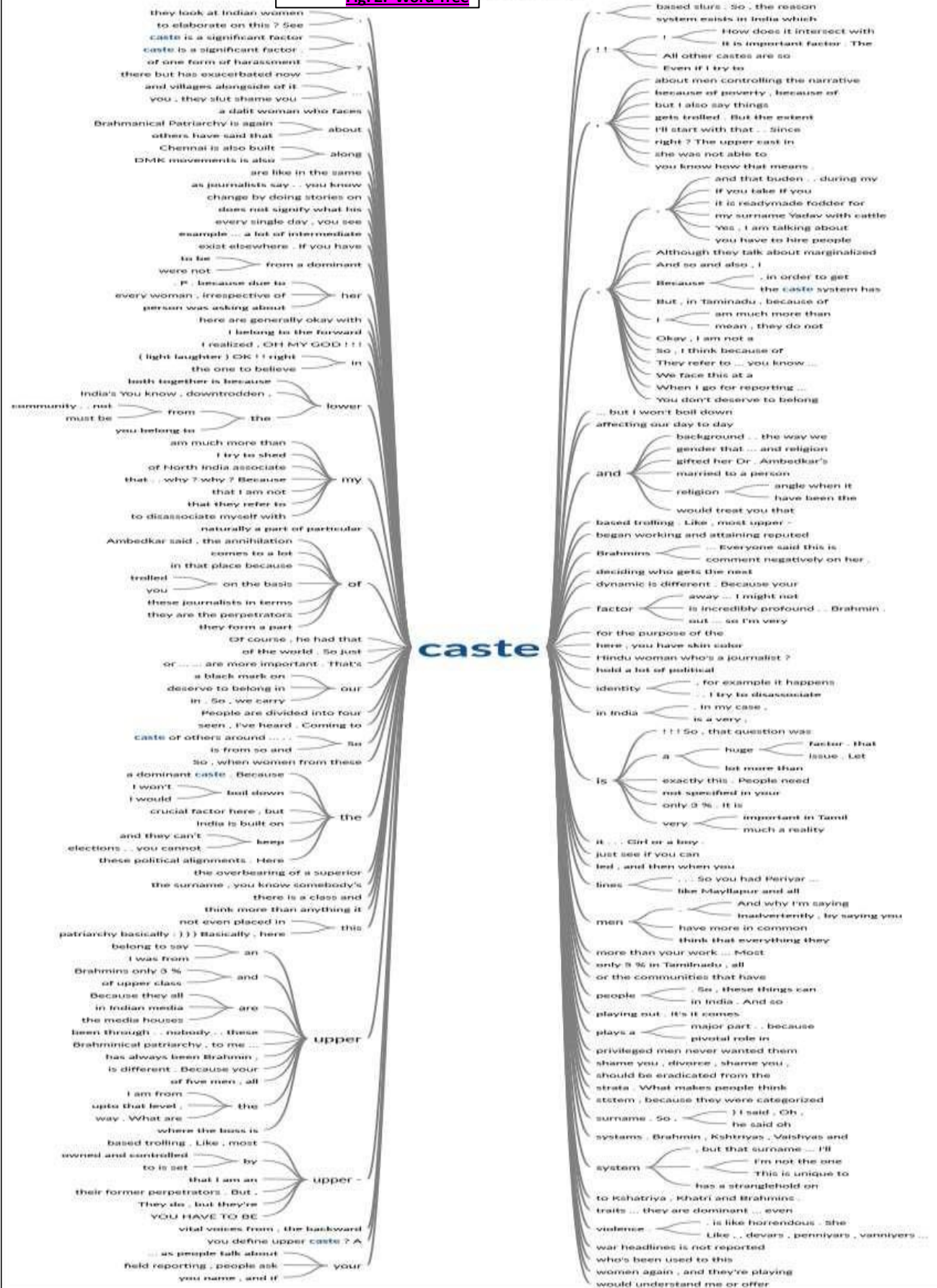
privilege that influence the experiences of women, especially journalists, in a nation characterized by the historical impacts of caste and religion.

Moreover, the terms 'power' and 'community' can imply a narrative around power dynamics within communities, and also the influence of media or journalism within these structures. Overall, this word cloud originates from discussions or data related to societal structure, discrimination, and the specific experiences of journalists in India, with a particular emphasis on women and those from marginalized castes.

I created the following word tree based on the data coded under the theme of caste-based discrimination, which amounted to approximately 7,000 words. The word tree was generated using NVivo's word frequency tool, enabling a focused exploration of dominant themes and keywords within this specific code. This visualization provided valuable insights that informed a more detailed analysis of the transcripts.

Fig. 2. Word Tree

Results Preview



In NVivo, a *word tree* serves as a visual instrument for examining the usage of words within textual data. It illustrates the words that accompany a chosen term, enabling researchers to assess both the frequency of the term and its contextual variations. This functionality assists in recognizing recurring themes and investigating the relationships between different concepts within the discourse (Allsop et al., 2022). This analytical approach leads to more in-depth analysis and reveals unexpected insights, thereby facilitating a deeper comprehension of linguistic patterns and themes.

The various branches stemming from the central term, 'caste' in the above figure, indicate conversations or textual data points where it is discussed in relation to other social categories such as 'upper' and concepts such as 'Brahmanical patriarchy'. The branches pointing towards terms like 'Brahmanical', 'upper', and 'lower' suggest a discourse on issues of hierarchy and dominance within the caste system. The presence of phrases like 'from downtrodden community' and 'I am much more than my caste' reflects the recognition of socio-economic divide between different caste groups.

The repeated juxtaposition of 'upper' and 'lower' alongside 'caste' signifies a deep dive into the entrenched societal divisions and the discrimination faced by lower castes in India. Conversations about the 'dominant caste', 'Brahminical patriarchy', and being 'trolled' or 'tried' further suggest an exploration of the social mechanisms that enforce caste hierarchy and the potential repercussions on individuals from marginalized communities, especially when their identities are publicly known.

In terms of methodology, this *word tree* represents a segment of qualitative analysis aimed at uncovering patterns of language surrounding the concept of caste. A broader overview of the tree reveals how participants discuss their experiences with caste discrimination or privilege, particularly in the context of women journalists who face additional layers of discrimination due to their gender and the profession.

The scattered yet interrelated use of terms like ‘people’, ‘woman’, ‘journalists’, and ‘media’ suggest an exploration of how caste intersects with these identities, particularly in the context of women journalists navigating their professional environments. The references to specific locations like ‘North India’ and social actions like ‘trolled’ or phrases such as ‘you have skin color’ hint at the prevalence of colorism and regional biases within the caste discussions, which can compound the experiences of harassment online.

The word tree highlights how participants situated caste in relation to institutional domains, for example through references to “elections” and “media”. Since the data were generated through semi-structured interviews, these lexical connections reflect articulated responses to interview prompts rather than free association. The visualization is therefore best understood as a descriptive heuristic, signaling recurrent discursive frames that merit further interpretative analysis. The *word tree* also reveals an awareness of the systemic nature of these issues, as evidenced by references to institutional elements like ‘India is built on the elections’ and ‘India's media’, suggesting an exploration of how caste is embedded in the institutional structures, and systems that govern public life and discourse.

Overall, the tree highlights the depth and breadth of caste-related discourse among the

participants. It underscores a need for a nuanced understanding of the sociocultural and political context in which Indian women journalists operate, particularly regarding digital harassment. The data visualized here would facilitate a thorough examination of how these journalists articulate their experiences and perceptions of caste, patriarchy, and identity within the context of their professional lives and personal histories.

The screenshot shows the NVivo interface with a list of codes. The table below represents the data shown in the image.

Name	Files	References	Created on	Created by	Modified on	Modified by
CASTE BASED DISCRIMINATION	17	81	10/26/2023 4:16 A	PG	11/4/2023 11:34 PM	PG
EXPERIENCE AND AGE IN JOURNALISM	3	4	10/25/2023 9:09 P	PG	10/29/2023 9:29 PM	PG
GENDERED ONLINE HARASSMENT	20	199	10/27/2023 1:34 P	PG	11/4/2023 10:23 PM	PG
LAW & GREVIENCE REDRESSAL	12	32	10/26/2023 8:50 P	PG	11/4/2023 11:38 PM	PG
MITIGATION STRATEGIES	14	51	10/26/2023 4:51 A	PG	11/4/2023 11:37 PM	PG
OTHER FINDINGS	11	48	10/25/2023 4:48 P	PG	11/4/2023 11:17 PM	PG
RELIGION BASED ABUSE	9	17	10/27/2023 9:07 P	PG	11/4/2023 10:49 PM	PG
RQ 3 AFFECT ON JOURNALISM	7	13	10/24/2023 6:49 P	PG	11/1/2023 12:21 PM	PG
RQ 4 DISTINCT FORMS OF HARASSMENT	7	12	10/24/2023 6:52 P	PG	11/3/2023 5:51 AM	PG
RQ 5 SELF CENSORSHIP CAUSES	5	9	10/24/2023 7:04 P	PG	11/2/2023 12:01 PM	PG
RQ6 PRESS FREEDOM	17	71	10/24/2023 7:16 P	PG	11/4/2023 11:39 PM	PG
SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS	3	7	11/3/2023 2:40 PM	PG	11/4/2023 10:27 PM	PG
TROLLERS & THEIR MINDSET	11	22	10/28/2023 2:59 P	PG	11/4/2023 10:11 PM	PG

Image 29: NVivo Codes

The analysis in this chapter draws on a set of codes generated through iterative engagement with the interview transcripts. Using NVivo to organize and refine these codes, I identified recurring

patterns and discursive strands across participants' narratives. These codes provided the analytical framework for interpreting the ways women journalists described their experiences of online harassment.

6.2 Qualitative Findings

Having established a broad understanding of the key words and sentiments, I now turn to a more nuanced and in-depth Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). In this next phase, I examine thoroughly how the language in the transcripts reflects, reinforces, or challenges the deep-seated social structures of caste discrimination. I focus on the following two aspects: a) How do caste biases manifest in the Indian mediascape, and b) what specific challenges do women journalists from lower sub-castes face in navigating these issues, while employing strategies of mitigation and resilience to overcome such barriers?

I concentrate on these two codes, as they were the most prevalent in the transcripts (see NVivo coding visualization, Image 29). These codes illuminate how caste discrimination is reflected, reinforced, or challenged in the interview data. Importantly, they intersect with the research questions on caste and gender, by shedding light on how these dynamics shape women journalists' experiences in career progression, workplace interactions, and social recognition.

From my interviews, which detail diverse experiences of caste- and religion-based discrimination, I identified four overarching themes (or macrostructures) for Critical Discourse Analysis. These themes were developed through a coding hierarchy: individual codes were first clustered into sub-themes, which in turn informed the construction of broader themes that capture the dominant discursive patterns across participants' accounts. While some excerpts

overlap across categories, the four principal themes provide a coherent structure for interpretation: **a) Institutional Discrimination & Media Representation b) Normalization of Discrimination and Resistance c) Intersectionality of Caste, Gender, and Religious Identity d) Access to Resources and Socio-economic Impacts.**

Understanding journalistic approaches to digital violence requires an exploration of both macrostructures and microstructures. For this research, I use Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine both macrostructures and microstructures in the narratives of women journalists. Macrostructures identify overarching themes such as caste discrimination, gender bias, and systemic oppression, linking individual accounts to broader societal dynamics. While Microstructures focus on linguistic nuances like word choice, syntax, and tone, uncovering implicit biases, power dynamics, and resistance strategies.

By examining how specific terms or phrases are used within their immediate context, I aim to understand not just what participants are saying but how they are framing their experiences (Afzal, Hameed & Jabeen, 2022). This dual approach provides a comprehensive analysis, capturing both systemic patterns and the ways participants articulate and navigate discrimination. This method provides a nuanced understanding of how caste and gender intersect in professional contexts, addressing both systemic themes and localized expressions of discrimination in the narratives of women journalists.

Van Dijk's approach examines how language choices reflect and construct social identities and relationships of power between the journalists and their aggressors, or journalists and the audience. By intertwining these approaches, I examine how journalists frame their mental

models of digital violence and uncover the ideologies challenged or reinforced through their discourse (Norman, 2014).

In this study, two participants identified as belonging to 'lower' castes, including *Dalit* and OBC groups. The topic of caste was highly prevalent across the transcripts, emerging in over 17 files (i.e. 17 out of 20 respondents) of the total coded segments (NVivo fig. above Fig. 29), with a particularly significant presence (81 references) in the narratives of participants from these communities. The comments and sentiments shared are representative of recurring themes voiced by the interviewees, reflecting both personal experiences and broader systemic issues. While not every participant articulated these issues in identical terms, the chosen excerpts highlighted patterns and shared concerns that were consistent across multiple interviews.

These were among the most recurring discourses, consistently emerging in the majority of the participants' narratives. Participants from *Dalit* and OBC communities frequently highlighted acts of resistance, while some upper-caste participants reflected on witnessing such resistance. I selected these comments for their relevance to the key themes of caste discrimination and their ability to illustrate prominent patterns observed across the interviews.

They represent recurring sentiments voiced by multiple participants, including those from *Dalit* and OBC communities. While these excerpts do not capture the full spectrum of experiences, they reflect broader trends and are indicative of the narratives shared by the interviewees about caste-related challenges in their professional lives.

6.2.1 Institutional Discrimination & Media Representation

This theme explores how caste-based biases are embedded within institutional structures, including media houses and journalistic practices. I analyze how these structures influence the representation of different castes and religious groups in media, focusing on who gets to tell these stories and whose voices are marginalized.

1. I would not just put it at Brahminical patriarchy, to me... upper caste is a lot more than Brahmins. A lot more people also belong to the other caste who do the same kind of dirty things, basically I feel like there is a lot of deep-seated prejudice that has not been resolved

(Ananya, 45-49, independent journalist, Madurai, Tamil Nadu)

2. So the first place I went to work I was asked, What's your name? So, I was an intern. I said, *****ni. So that person was silent for a second. .and then he asked what is your father's name. So, I told him that. His surname also does not signify what his caste is!!! So, that question was a bit okay, Next, he went...what is your grandfather's name? So, I was like, (okay!! I know what you're asking because that is two generations back. Of course, he had that caste surname :)) I knowww :) what you are asking. . Then, he said... oh this... "Pahela batana tha" (you should have told me earlier...You are one of us! I was like... (in my mind) I am not one of you, but I was too junior to say that and too taken aback by this, because it was a conscious decision on my part... that while I was graduating, I would not use my surname!

(Bharti, 45-49, News Anchor, NDTV, Delhi (NCR))

3. Though 75 years have passed since our independence, the landscape remains devoid of any dalit, adivasi representation in leadership, decision-making, or editorial roles. Consequently, the concerns of marginalized communities remain in the shadows. A 2006 Oxfam research report and senior journalist Anil Chamaria's findings highlight the enduring absence of dalit adivasi presence in significant positions across print, radio, TV, and digital platforms [...] Remarkably, there hasn't been a single instance where a dalit or adivasi has occupied a leadership or editorial role within any of the mainstream media establishments

(Chandrika, 25-29, media enterprise owner, Delhi-NCR)

4. the biggest challenge, I , as a woman face in the field of journalism would be, my religion came into my path. [...] instead of everyone, looking at me as an empowered muslim woman who's out there[...] they put me into a box [...] but here I am with 15 years of media experience and I am going to continue working for the rest of my life because that's who I am

(Deepa, 35-39, digital journalist, Bengaluru, Karnataka)

5. Basically, here this caste factor is incredibly profound... Brahmin... if we were to hire somebody... they will say, 'thoda experience kam hai toh kya hua, brahmin hai ley lo na yaar'(It is Ok if their experience is a little less, they⁴³ are brahmins, hire them!) and gender is not a crucial factor here, but the caste is!... Girl or a boy...if that's a brahmin, they should be given the preference

(Niharika, 35-39, Aaj Tak TV, Ahmedabad, Gujarat)

Senior journalist (45-49) from Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, Ananya (first quote) challenges the common focus on Brahminical patriarchy alone, expanding the critique to include other upper castes involved in discriminatory practices. The use of 'a lot more than Brahmins' and 'other castes who do the same kind of dirty things' highlights a broader, systemic issue rather than isolated incidents. This discourse implies deep-seated, unresolved prejudices, not confined to a single caste group but pervasive across multiple upper castes, reflecting entrenched hierarchical structures in society that transcend professional settings.

In the transcript (2), the broadcast journalist (Bharti, 45-49) from a prominent television news channel in Delhi, narrates her experience that captures an institutionalized form of caste scrutiny disguised as a casual conversation. The progression from asking the intern's⁴⁰ name to

⁴⁰ The respondent is narrating her past experience when she had joined as an intern with a media organization at the beginning of her career.

probing about her grandfather's name illustrates a subtle yet profound method of caste identification. This practice signifies how deeply are the caste considerations ingrained within workplace dynamics, even in supposedly professional environments. Moreover, Bharti's) forced concealment of her surname to avoid caste-based judgment and discrimination showcases the personal strategies employed to navigate these institutional biases. Also, she internally denies being part of the inquiring individual's caste group, indicating a rejection of associative identity based on caste.

The (3rd.) quote by a Delhi-NCR based independent journalist (Chandrika, 25-29) directly addresses the lack of representation of *Dalit* and *Adivasi* communities in media leadership roles. Phrases like 'devoid of any *Dalit*, *Adivasi* representation' and 'enduring absence' underscore a systemic exclusion within the media industry, perpetuating a cycle where the concerns and narratives of these communities remain marginalized or invisible. The mention of a specific report (OXFAM) and the duration since independence, stresses the chronic nature and the historical depth of this issue, challenging the progressive narrative often associated with modern India.

The quote (4.) by an independent journalist, (Deepa, 35-39) briefly but powerfully links her religious identity with professional hurdles in journalism, exposing how non-normative religious identities can obstruct career paths in a democratic and secular⁴¹ country such as India. This

⁴¹ The Indian Constitution aims to establish a secular State. And a secular State means in essence that the State will not make any discrimination whatsoever on the ground of religion or community against any person professing any particular form of religious faith. No particular religion in the State will be identified as State religion nor will it receive any State patronage of preferential status. The State will not establish any State religion; nor will the State accord any preferential treatment to any citizen or discriminate against him simply on the ground that he professes a particular form of religion [See: Rajaram, Indian Constitution, New Age International Ltd, 2008. ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/dcu/detail.action?docID=3017386>]

underscores the intersectionality of discrimination where religion intersects with both gender and caste, complicating the individual's professional experience and growth in the industry.

Another respondent (Niharika, 35-39, from Aaj Tak Tv, Gujarat, 5th quote) by way of the direct quote 'brahmin hai ley lo yaar' (Hire them, they are brahmin) reveals overt caste-based preferences in hiring practices. This thought-process highlights a blatant institutional bias where professional expertise seems to be overshadowed by caste identity or caste identity can take precedence over professional qualifications, thus perpetuating a 'casteist' culture within the media sector. The dismissal of experience in favor of caste affiliation starkly illustrates the intensity of prejudices based on the societal hierarchical structure, influencing who gets the opportunities and who remains marginalized. Indian historian Uma Chakravarti (1996) has written widely on this subject as mentioned in the (Literature Review chapter 1) of this dissertation.

Moreover, CDA reveals how language functions as a mechanism of power, reinforcing and challenging social hierarchies. The invocation of caste status in some of the comments (above) also aligns with Bourdieu's concept of symbolic power, where social distinctions are maintained and legitimized through language. Thus, CDA engages with sociopolitical perspectives, encompassing both action and cognition. It involves influencing minds through various strategic methods such as persuasion, dissimulation, or manipulation to serve one's interests.

I analyze discursive strategies that legitimize control and inequality, alongside counter-discourses by women journalists, particularly from marginalized or *OBC* castes, to resist harassment, assert agency, and challenge dominant narratives (This will be explored further in this chapter). Words

like 'dirty', and phrases like 'deep-seated prejudice', 'devoid of any *Dalit*, *Adivasi* representation', 'remain in the shadows' connote a strong negative sentiment towards the status quo and the systemic exclusion of certain groups. The lexical choices by the journalists are strategic, framing caste discrimination not only as a systemic issue but also as a personal confrontation with injustice. (Bharti) provides a personal anecdote that illustrates subtle yet pervasive caste inquiries in professional settings, highlighting the societal preoccupation with such identities, while (Chandrika) discusses the lack of representation in significant positions for *Dalits* and *Adivasis*, using data to substantiate claims about systemic exclusion.

Social scientists assert that personal identity stems from group affiliation, and social groups construct their identity through comparisons with other groups. This idea is central to *The Social Identity Theory (SIT) or the Theory of Inter-group Relations & Social Change*, developed by Henri Tajfel & John Turner in the 1970s. Social comparison enables individuals and groups to establish a sense of distinctiveness and superiority, which can enhance self-esteem and group cohesion (Coates, 2016) [See also: Tajfel, 1981]. Tajfel proposes two situations; either the members of the socially perceived inferior group will accept their position or reject it.

In the former case, they will aim to achieve success and fulfill their esteem and self-actualization needs at an individual level but not as a group. However, if they choose to reject it, i.e. the latter case, they will often attempt to transform things as a group. [See also: Maslow's need hierarchy theory]. This example clearly resonates with the *Dalit* journalist, Meena Kotwal whose story has been widely covered in the international media. A 2023 *New York Times* article titled '*With Stories of Her Oppressed Community, a Journalist Takes Aim at the Walls of Caste*'

discusses how a journalist from a socially marginalized caste has confronted caste-based injustices and founded an independent media organization (Singh, 2023).

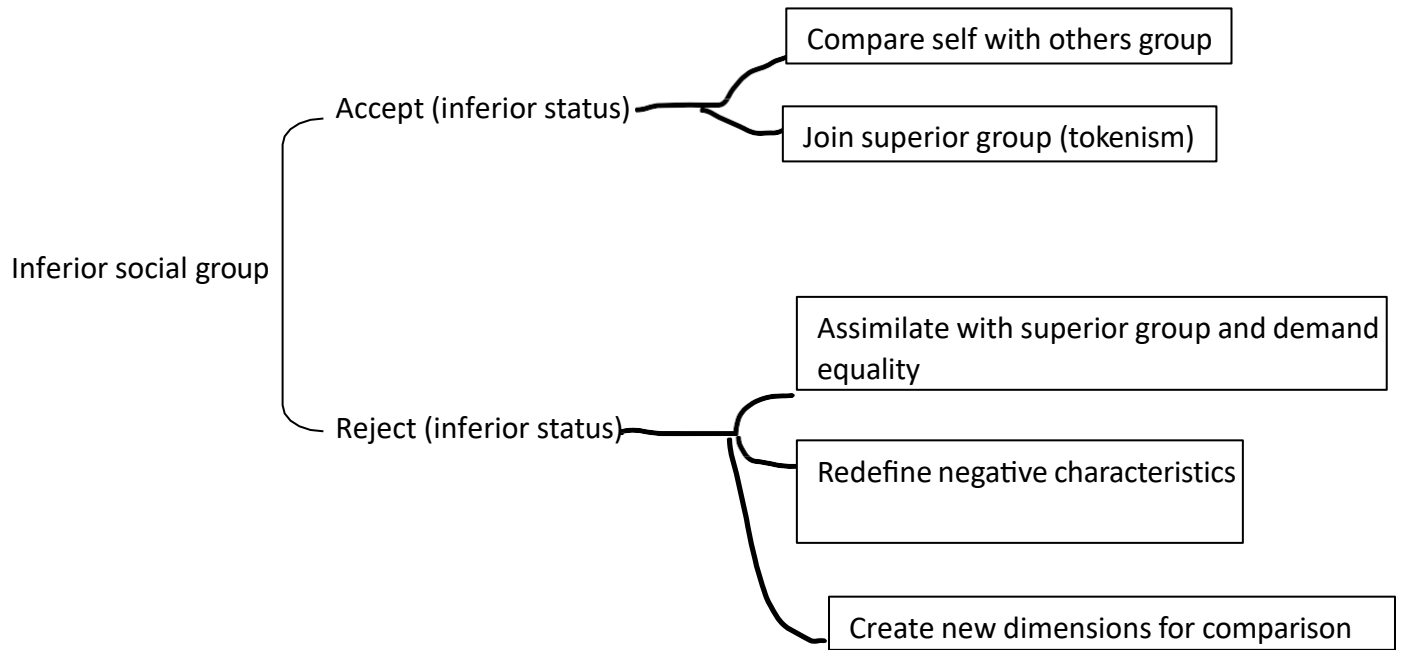


Fig. 30: Tajfel's theory of inter-group relations and social change

These comments underscore that upper-caste privilege is not confined to *Brahmins* but extends across other upper-caste groups, perpetuating systemic inequality. Furthermore, they reveal the absence of inclusive representation and diversity within mainstream media, highlighting the structural exclusion of *Dalit* and Adivasi voices from leadership and editorial roles.

One of the most significant current epistemological discussions about the perennially pervasive Indian caste system is its existence in the contemporary times: how and in what form? Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, a key figure in postcolonial theory and feminist critique, explores the

silenced voices of marginalized groups in her seminal essay, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (Bhattacharjee, 2018). Borrowing Antonio Gramsci's term 'subaltern', Spivak refers to populations that exist outside the hegemonic power structures—socially, politically, and economically marginalized communities whose voices are often excluded from dominant discourse.

In her essay, Spivak questions whether these groups can ever truly articulate their perspectives within the confines of structures designed to suppress them, arguing that even well-intentioned attempts to 'represent' the subaltern frequently reinforce power hierarchies. She examines the ways in which colonial and intellectual paradigms have traditionally marginalized the subaltern, diminishing their agency and voice to mere subjects of analysis instead of recognizing them as active contributors to discourse.

This concept can be applied beyond the colonial framework to analyze caste hierarchies and gender dynamics in India, particularly the marginalization of *Dalits*, *Adivasis*, and other oppressed caste groups. These communities are frequently excluded from decision-making and representation, not only within broader societal structures but also within spaces like media, where their voices are often tokenized or ignored. By building upon Spivak's framework, we can examine the ways in which systemic inequalities persist in obstructing these groups from obtaining a platform to contest prevailing narratives and affirm their agency.

Furthermore, Spivak criticizes Western feminism for its tendency to universalize women's experiences, often overlooking the specific contexts and struggles of women in the Global South, as discussed previously in the Literature Review chapters. In agreement with Sharma (2012), I

argue and propose that caste has become more of a 'socio-epistemic stance', influenced by contemporary changes that have reshaped its manifestation in the realm of media. The aforementioned communication (in-depth interviews) challenges the perception of gender equality in journalism by highlighting the intersectionality of religion and gender-based discrimination. It suggests that religious identity can profoundly intersect with gender to create additional barriers for women in media, challenging the ideology of gender neutrality in professional settings.

6.2.2 Normalization of Discrimination and Resistance

This theme includes discussions on how journalists and activists confront the prevailing norms through their endeavors, the resistance they encounter, and the strategies they employ to manage and resist systemic inequalities.

Young journalist, Jhanvi's narrative reveals subtle cues about how dominance and internalization manifest in discourse, shaping not only the way she navigates her professional environment but also how she perceives and asserts her own agency within it.

I will do something I might get a rape threat, death threats...etc. so it is better to refrain [...] as much as I am protecting myself, there's always that fear or it is that internalized fear that runs behind my head. More than that, I think it is also transcended in my personal life somewhere to a great extent

(Jhanvi, 20-24, digital journalist, Delhi NCR)

In the (above) quote by Jhanvi, phrases such as 'internalized fear' and 'transcended in my personal life' provides insight into how structural oppression becomes deeply embedded in the

psyche, affecting the individual in ways that extend beyond their professional identity. The journalist's self-defensive position, although reflective of personal agency, also reveals a recognition of fear as an enduring presence, highlighting the manner in which systemic inequalities are normalized and sustained through internalization.

Internalization, in the context of online harassment refers to the process by which women journalists absorb and unconsciously adopt the negative messages, stereotypes, or power dynamics perpetuated by their harassers. This can shape their self-perception, behavior, or professional practices, often leading to self-doubt, altered engagement online, or changes in how they express their views.

Another significant dimension of this analysis is the role of self-censorship in maintaining systemic inequalities. The reproduction of social hierarchies may manifest through explicit support, enactment, representation, legitimation, denial, mitigation, or concealment, as evident in the narratives here. At a macro level, the journalist's (Bharti) narrative illustrates how external threats translate into an internalized sense of fear, which transcends the professional domain to affect personal lives. This form of control aligns with Van Dijk's (1993) concept of 'top-down' dominance, where power is exerted to suppress dissent and maintain existing social structures.

It is more like, self-censorship, because we have been seeing things happening around us [...] F.I.Rs being filed against journalists. So, when you write something on social media and even report, you start questioning yourself

(Bharti, 45-49, News Anchor, NDTV, Delhi-NCR)

Nonetheless, in certain contexts – and sometimes paradoxically—relations of power and instances of its abuse may appear to be 'jointly produced', for example, when subjugated groups

are co-opted into accepting dominance as a 'natural' or legitimate state of affairs. The quote illustrates how journalists internalize the risks associated with critical reporting, adopting self-censorship as a rationalized response. The phrase 'you start questioning yourself' reflects the psychological dimension of systemic oppression, where external threats evolve into self-imposed restrictions, indicating an internalization of doubt and fear, and reflecting how systemic pressures translate into individual self-regulation.

This was evident through the broader discourse in my in-depth interviews with the participants, where narratives often reflected an internalization of caste hierarchies and gender roles. For example, at a macro level the above quotes reflect the broader societal patterns of dominance, where the pervasive threat of violence is used as a tool to silence women, particularly those attempting to challenge systemic hierarchies. Participants frequently described instances where resistance to discrimination was muted, not due to a lack of awareness, but rather because of a deep-seated acceptance of the status quo as 'unchangeable'.

The macrostructure reveals a chilling effect on media freedom, where self-censorship becomes a widespread practice among journalists due to institutionalized retaliation. While, the microstructure highlights the subtle ways in which language reflects internalized fear and compliance, such as the use of hedging and self-questioning phrases. Through this analysis, it becomes evident that the systemic silencing of journalists is not merely imposed externally but is also internalized, manifesting as hesitation and self-doubt.

And I don't mean 'owned' by owning houses, I mean own in the sense, own the narrative, and we are so comfortable and so satisfied that we don't feel that it's automatic

(Himani, 50+, Independent journalist, Shamli, Uttar Pradesh).

Upper-caste men think that everything they do and say is the norm. So, they set the narratives [...] Even if I studied from Miranda House... I would not know about that because of my historical background...because of my marginalized background...because of my lack of social and cultural capital...WE DON'T HAVE CULTURAL CAPITAL...how they used to talk... 'my grandfather met the then PM Nehru'. I have no idea about my grandfather...or whether he had any kind of influential connections ever. So, the cultural capital is captured by the brahmins...we have never cultivated it... the societal ideals are also owned by them...So, how will we shine in this field if we do not fit in...that's how you are OUTCASTE[...] Sometimes, there are other things...such as eating habits... a brahmin can yell in the office and say... who has got chicken in here...its stinking...they consider their eating habits as superior...when u loudly announce...u mean that either a *Dalit* person can have food before or after that brahmin...so, you don't build an inclusive newsroom..."

(Indrani, 25-29, digital journalist, The Print, Delhi)

Caste in India is a very, very dominant factor. It's especially in the rest of India. I don't say this for the tribal states of the Northeast, because, here we do not experience so much of adversities with regards to castes. We are tribes and when we when we go out of this region, we are made fun of. And I think we've learned to take that in our stride. But it should not be there. Why should we be made fun off because of the way we look? We eat...etc..But in the rest of India, every single day, you see caste playing out. It's it comes in many shapes and forms

(Mini, 50+, Editor-in-Chief, print publication, Meghalaya)

Words such as 'so comfortable and so satisfied' referred by (Himani, 1st quote) point to a complacency that comes from being in a position of privilege, where the dominant group takes its power for granted (*Ibid.*). The phrase 'we don't feel that it's automatic' indicates a call for greater awareness of these subtle forms of discrimination. The Delhi-NCR based journalist-cum-author with over three decades of industry experience, indirectly defends marginalized voices by highlighting how upper-caste dominance over narratives leaves little room for alternative perspectives. By stating 'I don't mean owned by owning houses', she clarifies that she's not just referring to material ownership but narrative ownership. In addition, she emphasizes how the

lack of awareness among privileged groups perpetuates such discrimination.

In the 2nd quote, the young and the prestigious Ramnath Goenka awardee journalist Indrani (25-29) points out how the discrimination is normalized through everyday conversation. 'My grandfather met the then PM Nehru' versus 'I have no idea about my grandfather' contrasts the privileged backgrounds of upper-caste individuals with the invisibility of marginalized family histories. She emphasizes the lack of social networks and influential connections among marginalized groups due to historical discrimination, which essentially points to the social and cultural capital. By calling out upper-caste norms around food and cultural capital, Indrani challenges the normalization of caste discrimination in professional settings.

The critique that Brahmins 'consider their eating habits as superior' suggests an implicit cultural supremacy that marginalizes other dietary practices. While it can be argued that many vegetarians might be uncomfortable with the smell, 'food odor' or presence of non-vegetarian food due to ethical, religious, or personal reasons, addressing these concerns requires sensitivity and mutual respect. The lexical choices, such as 'yell' by Indrani conveys a sense of aggression and dominance. Moreover, the phrase 'it is stinking' emphasizes disgust and disdain and can be perceived as disrespectful, as it is expressed to demean others' food choices. This choice of words reflects the Brahmin's attempt to assert superiority and control over the environment.

Furthermore, the adverb 'loudly' suggests an intentional, public assertion of dominance and exclusion. The sentence structure, with its forced binary 'before...or' highlights the rigid, discriminatory practices that restrict freedom and systematically exclude lower-caste individuals. The concluding phrase, 'you don't build an inclusive newsroom', underscores the direct

consequence: the inability to foster a diverse and accepting environment.

The perspective of Mini, a 50+ year-old renowned editor-in-chief and veteran journalist, offers valuable insights for analysis through Standpoint and Intersectionality Theory. Her lived experiences highlight the intersections of caste, tribal identity, and regional differences in India. As a member of a tribal community in Northeast India, she observes that caste plays a less dominant role in her region compared to the rest of the country. However, people from Northeast India, including the journalist herself, often face prejudice and discrimination based on their tribal identity and physical appearance in the rest of India, highlighting the persistent marginalization they experience outside their home region.

This perspective highlights how caste operates differently across regions in India and how the speaker's tribal background informs their critique of societal norms around appearance, caste, and identity. The journalist, identifying with a tribal group in the Northeast, notes that while caste is less prominent in their region, their tribal identity becomes a source of marginalization elsewhere. She experiences discrimination based on her tribal identity, physical appearance, and cultural practices, such as food habits. These distinct yet equally oppressive experiences underscore the principle of intersectionality, where overlapping identities like ethnicity, region, and appearance create unique forms of marginalization.

Therefore, to understand the reproduction of social and gendered inequalities, a nuanced approach is essential – one that moves beyond overt expressions of dominance to explore the underlying conditions that render such dominance both acceptable and legitimate.

In exploring the intersection of caste-based discrimination and gender, it is essential to

consider contemporary incidents that highlight these dynamics. One such notable event involves Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey (also discussed in the Literature Review chapter). During his visit to India, a photograph of Dorsey holding a placard reading ‘Smash Brahminical Patriarchy’ alongside women journalists went viral and sparked significant controversy (Das, 2018). This incident offers a compelling case study to further understand the entrenched power structures and the reactions they provoke. Many prominent Indians, particularly from higher castes, viewed the placard as an attack on Brahmins, accusing Dorsey of promoting hatred and disrespecting Indian culture.

The slogan challenges traditional power structures and hierarchies internalized by both upper and lower castes, disrupting their accepted norms. The controversy highlighted the ongoing oppression faced by lower castes, especially women, and how these issues are normalized within Indian society. This incident underscores the deep entrenchment of caste hierarchies among both the oppressed and the oppressors. The placard's message was perceived as a threat to the historical and cultural dominance of *Brahmins*, illustrating the tension between addressing systemic inequalities and the resistance from those benefiting from the status quo.

While the placard aimed to raise awareness and foster resistance among marginalized groups, it was met with significant backlash. Twitter initially responded by explaining that the placard was given to Dorsey by a *Dalit* activist during a private discussion with women journalists. However, Vijaya Gadde (Twitter’s Chief Legal Officer) later apologized by stating, “I’m very sorry for this. It’s not reflective of our views. We took a private photo with a gift just given to us – we should have been more thoughtful (Ibid.)”.

Twitter's apology can be interpreted as a reflection of the power and dominance of *Brahmins*

within the Indian social and cultural context. The incident underscores the significant influence of the *Brahmin* community in eliciting an apology from a global corporation, thereby reinforcing its dominance. This response may also highlight how the voices of marginalized communities are often overshadowed or silenced when challenging dominant power structures. The apology, however, can also be seen as an attempt to mitigate backlash and maintain Twitter's user base in a sensitive and diverse market like India.

Most of the discourses reveal a significant power imbalance in the media domain, with upper-caste journalists predominantly holding dominant positions. The convergence of caste, gender, and religion uncovers intricately complex and multiple layers of oppression and privilege, revealing the dynamics that shape social hierarchies and individual experiences, thus reflecting the density of social discrimination. Notably, as respondent Bharti (in her quote below) states, 'reverse casteism' frames the perception of discrimination against Brahmin women due to their upper-caste status.

Furthermore, her remarks, '*Brahmanical* patriarchy has affected every woman' underscore the idea that patriarchy extends beyond caste divisions, influencing all women. The question, 'What makes people think that a Brahmin man would not be practicing patriarchy against a Brahmin woman?' indicates that even women from upper-caste backgrounds are not exempt from patriarchal practices within their own communities, often facing severe consequences. She critiques the biases directed at Brahmin women, which arise from their assumed advantages, while simultaneously holding Brahmin men accountable for sustaining patriarchal norms within their caste. Additionally, she asserts that Brahmin women, despite their caste-based privileges,

are also victims of patriarchy.

Now women face all sorts of problems here...if let's say you are a Brahmin woman, so that is reverse casteism [...] Brahmanical patriarchy has affected every woman. It has affected the women most, even the women who are like in the same caste strata. What makes people think that a Brahmin man would be not practicing patriarchy against a Brahmin woman?

(Bharti, 45-49, News Anchor, NDTV, Delhi-NCR)

My father is a Muslim and my mother is a Hindu Dalit. So, this combination is a deadly combination [...] Initially, I was responding actually. I was responding to the trolls and I was since sincerely giving replies to them. It was a prolonged harassment for me. Reading all those comments distracts you and makes you unproductive. The kind of thoughts, Will my friends ..No, what if my father reads this? What will he think? He will be suffering. So, there were the kind of concerns I had.

(Elina, 45-49, Independent journalist, Chennai, Tamil Nadu)

Elina's quote reflects the intersectional marginalization experienced by individuals embodying multiple marginalized identities, such as the speaker's Muslim and *Dalit* heritage, which she describes as a 'deadly combination'. The narrative reveals macrostructures of systemic dominance, as seen in the prolonged harassment targeting the journalist's identity, and the microstructures of internalized fear and self-doubt, evident in fragmented thoughts and concerns about family and social judgment. The ellipsis ('Will my friends...No, what if my father reads this?') captures Elina's fragmented thought process, illustrating the anxiety and internal conflict caused by harassment. In the sentence, 'I was sincerely giving replies to them', the tone reflects an initial attempt to engage constructively, which contrasts with the emotional exhaustion conveyed later. Furthermore, her shift to familial concern shows the emotional burden harassment places on her relationships. This analysis demonstrates the dual operation of

dominance: overt silencing through harassment and covert internalization of societal stigmas.

In their 2022 paper, Balmurli expounds on how Dalits are ethicized as the ‘internal other’, integrated within the Hindu social order but in a subordinate position, and how this ethnicization represses their radical difference and potential to challenge the Hindu caste hierarchy. The *Hindutva* ideology, hence, aims to incorporate *Dalits* within a multi-caste Hindu family, portraying them as part of the Hindu fold while maintaining their subordinate status (Natrajan, 2021).

Balmurli observes the intersectionality of religion and caste and how they are ‘potential threats to the *Hindutva* project of fixing unitary identities’[...] *Hindutva* votaries using lexicon demonizing various social groups and media persons, such as prostitutes, sicalar and libtarts’ (Natrajan, 2021 p.305). While it is indisputable that *Dalits* have endured and continue to face severe hardships, I argue that numerous other castes, aside from *Dalits*, also undergo marginalization in various forms, and it will be prudent to examine the resistances and contestations against *Hindutva's* hegemony. These OBS groups often face subtle forms of exclusion and discrimination that are not as widely acknowledged or addressed as the overt oppression faced by *Dalits*. This oversight necessitates a closer examination of the nuanced ways in which these groups navigate and resist the socio-political landscape dominated by *Hindutva* ideologies. In sum, these narratives illustrate how caste, gender, and religion intersect to exacerbate discrimination against women from marginalized groups. The transcripts offer a critical insight into the pervasive nature of caste and gender discrimination in India, particularly in the media and online spaces.

6.2.3 Access to Resources and Socio-economic Impacts

This sub-theme focuses on the tangible impacts of caste and religious discrimination on access to resources, and economic opportunities. The comments coded in this category demonstrate how these disparities are represented in the media, and the role of journalism in highlighting or obscuring these issues.

- 1) If you are a Dalit or you belong to the lower caste... Yes, I am talking about today, Today... about last week. So, for the water you have to walk about 45 minutes away. Because you are from the lower class and the upper caste, people control, the village water supply, and so they have like complete control over it [...] There is another incident where there is really horrific, upper caste people..... they contaminated the lower caste, people's water with eagle matter. These were the headlines here in our part of the world. So just caste war headlines are not reported as much

(Ananya, 45-49, independent journalist, Madurai, Tamil Nadu)

- 2) I think because of my last name that is Oberoi, sometimes people.... I have personally felt.... people have felt attracted or there has been a willingness to talk because they think that my last name, because of that, I come from a privileged and relatively wealthier background, monetarily and economically, which may or may not be the case [...] So, I feel that somewhere the last name had a bearing or a weight in my professional life as well, because more than my first name, my last name became my identity. And somewhere I didn't get time to get used to that transition

(Jhanvi, 20-24, digital journalist, Delhi NCR)

- 3) That's caste! How does it intersect with gender? Because women are therefore doubly disadvantaged. So, if you are a woman from one of the Dalit castes, then you are doubly proscribed. not only will you not get an education, but you might not get water, you might not be able to wash your clothes. You will not have sanitary napkins. So, you are in a very different universe. So how will you ever control narratives? And then, if you dare confront power, you are raped either online or offline only for challenging that and being able to look a man in the eye

(Himani, 50+, Independent journalist, Shamli, Uttar Pradesh)

Ananya's quotes (1. above) reveal how upper-caste groups control essential resources such as water, even in the 21st century. She refers to a recent incident⁴², and the way the mainstream media underreports caste-based violence, framing her statement in a way that defends marginalized communities against any claims that discrimination no longer exists by emphasizing 'Yes, I am talking about today, today... about last week', countering any notion that caste-based discrimination is a thing of the past by emphasizing its contemporary nature.

In the (2nd quote above), the young Delhi based digital journalist Jhanvi suggests that privilege and wealth are often incorrectly inferred from caste – 'Because of my last name that is Oberoi, sometimes people have felt attracted or there has been a willingness to talk'. The quote exposes how caste-based assumptions lead to privilege and biases in professional settings, reinforcing caste identity over individual merit oftentimes. The repeated use of her surname, 'Oberoi' by the Delhi based journalist, underscores how surnames and associated social capital influence professional interactions and identity.

In the (3rd quote above), the statement 'How will you ever control narratives?' by the senior journalist (Himani) emphasizes the powerlessness of historically marginalized women from the lower castes. A tactic often employed in maintaining dominance is the denial of its presence, claiming that all individuals in society are equal with equal access to resources. The question prompts the reader to reflect on the systemic barriers that silence marginalized women

⁴² About 71% of Dalit settlements in villages have no access to public water supplies. Discriminatory water practices in Gujarat's villages disproportionately affect lower-caste women, subjecting them to extreme precarity and vulnerability to sexual abuse by 'upper' caste men [See: Report by <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/access-to-water-is-a-crisis-for-the-powerless-5283649>]

and deny them a voice in public discourse.

The exclamation, ‘that’s caste!’ conveys frustration and urgency, emphasizing the deeply entrenched nature of caste-based oppression. Moreover, phrases like ‘confront power’ and ‘look a man in the eye’ exemplify courage required for resistance, while ‘raped either online or offline’ starkly reveals the brutal and violent consequences faced by those who dare to challenge the status quo. These narratives illustrate how inequalities are reproduced, not just materially (through deprivation) but also symbolically (through exclusion from public discourse).

In sum, I proffer that these transcripts provide a powerful critique of the systemic inequalities entrenched within the media industry. They reveal how access to resources constitutes not only a significant impediment for women journalists from marginalized castes but also confers additional advantages to those from higher castes. However, this analysis must be contextualized within broader socio-economic and cultural frameworks to fully comprehend the intricate dynamics at play.

While much has been written about *Dalits* and their lack of access to basic resources [See also: Dijk (2013)], my focus extends beyond *Dalits* to include other castes that do not belong to the *crème de la crème*. So, the most prominent patterns in my interviews reflect caste-based disenfranchisement, both overt and subtle, evidenced by the limited representation of ‘lower castes’ in positions of power and other insidious forms of subjugation. Moreover, the pre-eminence of *Brahmins* in academic fields underscores the axiomatic and deeply entrenched nature of their long-standing privileges.

However, what is remarkable is the resilience and the fortitude exhibited by individuals from

marginalized communities in overcoming the social barriers. An award-winning journalist Jyoti, frequently targeted for being an OBC from an agricultural community, exemplifies such resilience. Notably, she transformed her adversities into strengths by featuring a news story on the best breed of buffaloes in her home state, focusing on the very community she was disparaged for belonging to – an article that earned her immense appreciation. Furthermore, her extensive reportage on gender sensitivity issues culminated in her being awarded several prizes, including the distinguished *Laadli Media Award* for three consecutive years⁴³.

Another example is the success of *The Mooknayak*, a news organization founded by Dalit journalist Meena Kotwal, that exemplifies the transformative power of journalism in breaking social barriers in India. Drawing its name from Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's 1920 newspaper *Mooknayak*, the platform amplifies marginalized voices, particularly those of Dalits, often excluded by mainstream media. Kotwal's experiences of caste discrimination in India's upper-caste-dominated media – such as pitch rejections and the non-renewal of her contract at BBC Hindi—exposed deep-seated biases and inspired her to establish a space dedicated to amplifying marginalized stories. A 2023 news article quotes a young journalist as saying:

Bhumika Saraswati, a 24-year-old journalist and recipient of the UNFPA Laadli Award 2022, says casteism follows her wherever she goes despite her commendable achievements. 'Why are you always pitching *Dalit* stories?' 'Why are your ideas so radical?' are only some of the ridiculous questions Saraswati says she is asked by editors. Saraswati expresses how the subliminal casteism in newsrooms often restricts her journalistic freedom and impacts her mental health.

(Rao and Sonawane, 2023)

⁴³ See: <https://theprint.in/india/theprints-jyoti-yadav-wins-laadli-media-award-unnati-sharma-gets-jury-citation/1195707/> (2020,2021,2022); See: <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/ramnath-goenka-excellence-in-journalism-awards-winners-8513161/>

The intersection of caste and gender discrimination faced by women journalists in India is deeply rooted in historical patterns of social and economic dominance. For instance, the *Brahmins'* historical control over land and resources perpetuated systemic inequalities, reinforcing their hegemony and creating entrenched power dynamics. In response, movements like the *Dravidian* movement in Tamil Nadu in the early 20th century arose to challenge this dominance, signaling resistance against deeply ingrained hierarchies. These historical struggles provide important context for understanding the contemporary acts of resilience among women journalists, who, like their predecessors, continue to navigate and challenge the dual pressures of caste and gender discrimination.

To illustrate this, my in-depth interviews revealed a distinctive regional pattern. Respondents from Southern India traveled to my location for interviews, unlike their northern counterparts. Some reported experiencing more vitriolic harassment, which may have fueled their eagerness to share their stories. For instance, one participant from Chennai took a day off work to ensure her narrative was heard, underscoring the profound impact of such harassment and the urgency of advocacy.

The interviews conducted in Telangana, Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka provided insights into the region-specific caste dynamics. While caste discrimination in these states differs from northern patterns, it is deeply influenced by unique socio-cultural practices. For example, Tamil Nadu's history of anti-*Brahmin* movements has shifted the power dynamics, with *Brahmins* facing exclusion in media spaces, contrasting the broader perception of their inherent advantage. At the same time, portrayals of OBCs as power-seeking sustain existing hierarchies and frame

Brahmins as victims of reverse discrimination. This regional variation highlights how caste and gender intersect differently, with Southern women journalists facing compounded marginalization based on caste, religion, and their professional roles.

I would, therefore, like to propose a term '*Antithetical Casteism*' to describe the phenomenon, discussed above, wherein policies and measures designed by the State [See: Karekurve-Ramachandra & Lee, 2020] to address caste-based inequalities and to uplift historically marginalized castes (such as the reservations and affirmative action policies) are perceived as creating new forms of discrimination against higher-caste groups. This concept highlights the contradiction between the intended goal of social equity and the experiences of those who feel disadvantaged by such measures.

In sum, the dominance of upper-caste *Brahmins* in media underscores the systemic barriers to entry for marginalized groups. However, these issues are being discussed and acknowledged by several upper-caste sections of society. The phrase by Dalit respondent Chandrika (25-29) '*yeh log to shit uthate they, aaj inke bacche thoda padh gaye toh yeh sina choda karke chalte hain*' was one of the most derogatory references made for people from oppressed castes, which loosely translates into, 'These people used to pick up shit, and now that their children have received a bit of education, they walk around with their chests puffed out'.

In conclusion, Van Dijk's focus on the cognitive dimension of power and discrimination is particularly illuminating. The dominance of upper-caste men in digital spaces and newsrooms not only reinforces structural inequality but also shapes the cognitive frameworks through which discrimination is perceived and internalized. The compounded disadvantage experienced by

women from marginalized castes underscores the intersection of cognitive biases and systemic structures in perpetuating inequality, revealing the deeply entrenched nature of these power dynamics.

I have endeavored to explore the epistemological challenges in understanding caste dynamics, shaped by deeply ingrained social prejudices. The rise in caste-based discrimination is often concomitant with social stigmatization and exclusion. Although numerous research studies highlight the absence of inclusivity in media representation, they do not adequately clarify how discrimination is experienced in the everyday lives of journalists, both on a personal and professional level.

Chapter 7

Mapping The Far-Right Troll Universe and Threats to Democracy

I think because of the government in power... it is a very staunch right wing and a pro-Hindu government. It's not too comfortable for me anymore... to say I am a Hindu, because for me, there comes a sense of fear that people might label me as Sanghi, even though I'm not

(Jhanvi, 20-24, Digital Journalist, Delhi NCR)

This chapter focuses on the systematic online harassment targeting women journalists in India, framed within the broader context of severe repression of press freedom under the current government, i.e. Bhartiya Janta Party (hereinafter, the 'BJP') government. In recent years, far-right digital subcultures have emerged as coercive tools for restricting civil liberties, silencing dissenting voices, particularly those of women journalists who challenge the dominant narratives of hyper-nationalism, caste supremacy, and religious intolerance.

The trolls, operating through coordinated campaigns on social media platforms, unleash relentless gender-based abuse, explicit threats, and targeted disinformation, creating a climate of fear and hostility. By leveraging and manipulating digital and traditional media platforms as tools of control, these virtual groups strategically manipulate information ecosystems, thereby weakening journalistic independence and stifling freedom of expression.

This chapter will present my findings on the intersection of misogyny and political ideology, demonstrating how far-right troll networks reinforce a culture of silencing women in journalism and sustain authoritarian dominance within India's media landscape.

I identified this theme during the coding process of my qualitative interviews, as the majority of participants (18 out of 20) in my research explicitly mentioned repression of press rights under the BJP government. Although this theme was not initially anticipated as a central focus of my research, the compelling narratives that surfaced during fieldwork necessitated its inclusion. Notably, except for two, all the participants vividly articulated how systematic and aggressive the BJP government's suppression of journalistic freedom is compared to the previous political dispensations. Although no administration in India's history has been notably tolerant of criticism, the current government has not only retaliated but also intensified its responses to unprecedented levels (The Hindu Bureau, 2023; Swati Chaturvedi, 2016).

According to The Hindu Bureau (2023), there has been an unprecedented rise in online trolling and harassment of journalists critical of the current administration, often with no legal consequences for the perpetrators. This lack of accountability indicates how the government, directly or indirectly, fosters an environment for digital harassment of dissenting voices. Meanwhile, the weakening role of traditional journalists as gatekeepers of information—brought about by the proliferation of alternative media platforms – has further emboldened these hostile elements, allowing online harassment to spread unchecked (Agarwal, 2024; Abhishek, 2022; BBC, 2022; Rao, 2018).

In my Literature Review, I critically examined how coercive tools have been employed to suppress dissent, including the strategic capture of institutions such as the media, the manipulation of laws to restrict access to remedial measures for dissenters, and the misuse of state machinery to delay justice or fabricate evidence. This analysis provides the necessary context for understanding the broader socio-political environment in which my research findings are situated.

International organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have issued multiple reports criticizing the Indian government for targeting journalists, academics, and activists who speak out against state policies, especially regarding human rights abuses and religious intolerance (Amnesty International, 2022). These organizations have documented cases where individuals are arrested or silenced under sedition laws or anti-terrorism legislation, including the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA).

Coercive tactics, including threats of physical violence, rape, and even death, have been ruthlessly employed in the digital space to silence dissenting voices. A very prominent example of such threats being carried to their tragic conclusion is the case of Gauri Lankesh (Maniyar, 2022). The disturbing trend was starkly revealed during my in-depth interviews with the participants, underscoring the perilous climate of fear and repression that has been pervading the socio-political landscape since 2014⁴⁴. This chapter also examines how the current regime markedly and dangerously differs from previous administrations in its approach to managing the political parties in the opposition. Unlike its predecessors, the present government employs more

⁴⁴ The Narendra Modi-led government in India came to power on May 26, 2014. Narendra Modi, the leader of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), was sworn in as the Prime Minister of India after the BJP won a decisive victory in the 2014 general elections [See: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/elections-that-shaped-india-2014-the-year-narendra-modi-rose-to-power/article67606901.ece>]

overt and systematic strategies to suppress dissent (TheHindu Bureau, 2023), raising profound concerns about the erosion of democratic norms and press freedoms. This shift calls for a deeper investigation into the mechanisms in operation.

The analysis of the interview transcripts revealed two key themes: **1) Targeted Suppression and Structural Control, and 2) Impact of Right-Wing Political Ideology on Journalistic Practices.** These are discussed in detail below. However, I preface the thematic findings with three testimonies from senior journalists. This is because their perspectives offer valuable insights into the broader context of press repression, providing first-hand accounts of the challenges faced by journalists under the current regime. Their testimonies lend credibility and depth to the analysis, grounding the theoretical themes in lived experiences and highlighting the real-world consequences of the political environment on journalistic practices. These testimonies, therefore, serve as a microcosm of the larger data set and contribute to a nuanced understanding of the issue.

My focus on senior journalists' quotes here is deliberate, as their decades-long experience in the industry offers a longitudinal perspective that is particularly relevant for understanding the historical and structural challenges in the field.

Senior respondents have witnessed significant transformations in the media landscape, and their insights are critical for identifying long-term patterns and shifts, such as changes in press freedom, technological adaptation, and evolving audience dynamics.

For example, Ananya, an independent journalist with over two decades of experience, states:

when there is a rape and the rapists are Hindus and they get away, there is no journalist who questions that, right? There are very few who write reports about it. There are very few who challenge Uh..., these issues. Um..., either journalists want to save their own skins, or they just want to be a part of the clan...uh... They are Hindus themselves and identify strongly with that religion and want to go along with the BJP or they're getting paid for it and you know they are certainly... favorites!

(Ananya, 45-49, Independent journalist, Madurai, Tamil Nadu)

Ananya transitioned from the Indian media environment to engage with international publications as she feared victimization and stereotyping. She received death threats and, hence, became cautious of her reportage considering her family's security. Ananya also mentioned that her decision to write for international publications was influenced by the economic dynamics within the Indian media landscape, where journalists frequently find themselves pressured to align with corporate or political agendas, in particular under the current BJP government, thereby diminishing editorial autonomy. Her self-imposed limitations and caution are not solely personal decisions; rather, they are profoundly shaped by her experiences within the field of journalism.

The interviewee contends that many Indian journalists refrain from questioning offenders from the Hindu community out of concerns for personal safety. This behavior fosters a culture of fear or loyalty that inhibits critical reporting, resulting in biased media coverage that favors Hindutva narratives while downplaying or ignoring instances of violence against women perpetrated by members of the Hindu community (as discussed in Chapter 3 of this dissertation).

Ananya's frustration highlights a broader issue of silencing dissent in the media, where critical journalism is limited and actively discouraged, allowing anti-pluralist narratives to dominate (Javed & Imran, 2023). I would like to emphasize that media operating under a

convergence of populist rhetoric and authoritarian practices plays a key role in spreading propaganda, suppressing dissent, and marginalizing opposition voices, as seen in India under the current government.

The senior journalist's reference to 'Hindu rapists' evading accountability highlights a discourse of impunity afforded to certain groups, underscoring the media's inability or reluctance to challenge entrenched power structures, including those aligned with Hindu nationalist ideologies and the BJP-led government. The assertion illustrates that journalists who identify as Hindus tend to place their religious identity above their commitment to journalistic integrity, thereby emphasizing how the power dynamics within the media serve to reinforce and sustain the prevailing ideology of Hindu hyper-nationalism.

The proposition here is that these journalists may be complicit in shielding Hindu perpetrators from scrutiny, thus aligning themselves with state power, particularly the BJP. Such implications raise critical questions about the role of media in shaping public discourse and accountability, emphasizing the necessity for a more rigorous examination of potential biases in reporting sensitive issues.

Prior to the BJP regime, during the UPA (United Progressive Alliance) era, terms such as 'Lutyens media,' 'Khan market Gang,' 'limousine liberals,' and 'champagne socialists' were frequently used to critique left-leaning, elite, and liberal intellectuals or media personalities. These labels were employed to disparage individuals perceived by their critics as leading privileged lifestyles while advocating for socialism or liberal causes. Politicians, in particular, frequently work to cajole journalists into offering favorable coverage, highlighting the persistent pressures on the press to

conform to political interests.

As mentioned by several participants, under previous regimes, journalists participated in sovereign affairs by engaging in the formulation of narratives and agendas that, while often serving the government's interests, were not conspicuously aligned with its agenda. While the media operated within the broader framework of state power, it retained a degree of autonomy, allowing for critical scrutiny and accountability in its coverage.

Many respondents in my research interviews concurred that under previous regimes (i.e. prior to the BJP), the press, though serving government functions to some extent, was not fully constrained and could still exercise its role as a watchdog. In contrast, the current landscape under authoritarian populism has severely curtailed this independence, with media increasingly functioning as an extension of the state, erasing the lines between journalistic integrity and political propaganda.

Under the current regime, such journalists and their affiliated organizations have come to be labeled as 'Godi media' – a reference to the Modi era (Chakravarty, 2024). The term has often been used to describe media outlets that are seen as overly compliant or sycophantic towards the government. The usage signifies the perception that such media are no longer neutral watchdogs but instead complicit in propagating government narratives, often at the expense of journalistic integrity and the truth.

Referring back to the above testimony, Ananya highlights the intersection of gender and religious identity in the reporting of crimes like rape, often influenced by the perpetrator's religious affiliation. She critiques the lack of journalistic accountability regarding sexual violence

by Hindus, revealing how patriarchal structures and religious bias shape media discourse. The interviewee notes that journalists who strongly identify with Hinduism develop a sense of solidarity with their religious community, which can result in implicit or explicit pressures to align their reporting with narratives that reflect and reinforce the values and priorities of that community.

This alignment may arise either from genuine ideological support or from apprehension regarding potential repercussions for dissenting from the dominant narrative. Moreover, when a substantial number of journalists or media institutions share a similar religious or ideological orientation, such biases can become institutionalized, normalizing selective reporting practices that privilege specific perspectives while marginalizing others. Such patterns point to an ideological bias that Tajfel classifies as in-group favoritism – a tendency for people to favor their own group and, consequently, reflect that bias in media reporting (Tajfel, 1982). This kind of in-group solidarity results in discursive exclusion, where certain crimes (such as those committed by Hindus) are downplayed or ignored in media narratives, while crimes by out-groups might be sensationalized. This reinforces the dominant ideology that protects certain groups from scrutiny.

It is, therefore, essential to examine how the media's reluctance to challenge these narratives contributes to a cycle of complicity and normalization of violence, particularly against women. While the aforementioned testimony presents a valid critique of media practices, it may oversimplify the challenges faced by journalists operating within a politically sensitive landscape. The pressures of self-censorship, fear of backlash, and economic constraints are real, but I contend, attributing these challenges solely to identity and financial incentives may overlook the

nuanced realities of journalistic practices. Alternatively, there have been several recent precedents where journalists have successfully challenged the dominant narratives, thereby providing a more balanced view of the media landscape. I shall discuss this evidence in the next chapter of this dissertation.

My engagement with journalists revealed that the BJP-led government's media control involves a systemic effort to suppress dissent rather than merely imposing restrictions. Respondents described a climate of intimidation, where direct and indirect pressures curtail journalistic inquiry, especially on sensitive political issues. Many also noted a gendered dimension, with women journalists facing heightened harassment and scrutiny both online and offline, fostering a pervasive sense of paranoia. These experiences often result in significant psychological and emotional repercussions, which will be further examined in the next chapter.

As this chapter further examines the testimonies of these journalists, it becomes evident that the repression of press freedom under the current political dispensation is more insidious than previously acknowledged. Another senior journalist from Northern India (Himani, 50+), with over two decades of experience offering insights from both personal and professional encounters asserts:

By making an example of Rana Ayub, the right-wing troll universe is sending shivers down the spine of people like me and everyone else...People who are not stars and not in that universe. and therefore, they have done their job, they don't need to go after every single person but use the big stars to send the message out to everyone else. So, that's an algorithm universe, wherein you target a few and let the troll universe do its job online, in the sense that you target a few and everyone around them behaves exactly as you want them to. So, if everyone else is scared, you have achieved your target

(Himani, 50+, Independent journalist, Shamli, Uttar Pradesh)

Himani's statement highlights how right-wing trolling in India, particularly targeting prominent figures like journalist Rana Ayyub, functions as a calculated strategy to instill fear. By targeting high-profile individuals, these groups send a stark warning to other journalists and critics: if such prominent figures can face vicious attacks, those with less visibility are even more vulnerable. This fear-based approach does not require trolls to target everyone; instead, they focus on specific individuals, creating a ripple effect that pressures the broader community into self-censorship out of fear.

These dynamics foster an 'algorithmic universe,' where the actions taken against a select few shape the behavior of many, effectively silencing dissent and curbing critical discourse. The journalist opines that the use of prominent figures like Rana Ayyub as symbolic targets is strategic (Sharma, 2022). The discourse thus far provides much needed explanation about these assaults not being arbitrary but, in fact, orchestrated to optimize their effect. By targeting high-profile figures, the troll ecosystem cultivates a pervasive sense of threat, compelling others to conform without the need for direct attacks.

Power in modern societies frequently operates not through overt coercion, but through more subtle mechanisms of control, where individuals internalize dominant norms and self-regulate their behavior accordingly. Michel Foucault's concept of disciplinary power illustrates this shift, where power is exerted by instilling a fear of surveillance and punishment, leading to self-regulation (Galal, 2017). Himani's statement illustrates how targeting a few individuals prompts others to pre-emptively modify their behavior, aligning with the dominant ideology

without the need for overt enforcement. This process of internalized control, as highlighted in the journalist's narrative, shows how fear of similar attacks leads individuals to self-regulate, effectively upholding the dominant ideology without direct coercion.

Foucault articulates that disciplinary power functions through mechanisms of surveillance, leading individuals to internalize control and modify their behavior to conform to societal norms (Heller, 1996). It is, however, crucial to approach power relations with a nuanced understanding that accounts for the historical and social contexts within which disciplinary techniques are deployed, rather than adopting a rigid interpretation of Foucault's theories.

Baudrillard critiques Foucault's premise by suggesting that in postmodern societies, power is exercised less through direct discipline and more through deterrence mechanisms involving information, surveillance, and media, which subtly shape behavior without the need for overt coercion (Bogard, 1991). Theoretical insights from Foucault and Baudrillard highlight the evolving forms of power in modern societies, and these concepts find concrete application in the BJP's approach to media control.

The BJP, under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has effectively used media – both traditional and digital – to disseminate its *Hindutva* ideology, which promotes Hindu hyper-nationalism. The party has strategically controlled the narrative through media channels, silencing dissenting voices and amplifying its own ideological stance. This control extends to the selective promotion of content that reinforces the values of *Hindutva*, including gender roles that align with traditional patriarchy system (Amarasingam & Desai, 2024).

Women, especially influencers who support the BJP and *Hindutva*, play a crucial role in

this media ecosystem. These women help normalize and soften *Hindutva's* often aggressive rhetoric by emphasizing traditional values such as motherhood, family, and cultural preservation. Women BJP supporters often disseminate these messages across social media, creating narratives that blend empowerment with nationalism. They are positioned as protectors of the family, bearers of Hindu culture, and defenders against perceived threats from minorities (such as through the propagation of myths such as '*Love Jihad*').

These gendered roles are communicated and reinforced through BJP-controlled or BJP-influenced media (Hasan, 2010; Basu, 1996; Bacchetta, 2004). While the BJP's control of media has elevated the visibility of women within the *Hindutva* movement, it has done so in a manner that reinforces patriarchal norms rather than challenging them (as discussed in the Literature Review chapters). Women are given space within the movement and in media only when their roles align with traditional expectations, such as motherhood or protection of the family.

The BJP's media narrative strategically co-opts women's participation in *Hindutva* to consolidate its political power. I argue that the portrayal of women as empowered within this framework operates as a calculated mechanism to preserve patriarchal control while projecting a superficial image of inclusivity and empowerment (see also Mohan & Bhayana, 2023). This control is exercised through the regulation of narratives surrounding women's roles and the manipulation of public perception to reinforce the ideological dominance of the BJP.

The control over mainstream and digital media allows the party to selectively amplify the roles of women in ways that serve its ideological objectives. Women are given visibility, but their visibility is managed to ensure it aligns with the patriarchal order. Thus, media representation

becomes a tool of control, where women are celebrated for their roles in *Hindutva* but kept within the symbolic boundaries set by the male-dominated leadership (as discussed in Chapter 1). The exclusion of feminist critiques from mainstream media, which could challenge the BJP's patriarchal foundations, further reflects this control. Feminist perspectives that demand gender equity and equality are marginalized, while women who conform to *Hindutva's* narrative are elevated as examples of ideal female participation. Most interviewees emphasized that the BJP government's tactics range from legal harassment, such as frivolous lawsuits, to more covert methods like economic pressure on media houses and targeted campaigns against individual journalists on social media platforms.

This analysis not only aligns with broader findings on press freedom in India but also highlights the distinct challenges faced by women in journalism. The resilience and courage demonstrated by these journalists underscore the indispensable role of a free press in sustaining a democratic society, even amidst unprecedented challenges. Based on the comprehensive interview transcripts, the following themes or macrostructures have been identified for conducting a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). These themes encapsulate the underlying narratives and may encompass multiple sub-themes, with certain excerpts fitting into more than one category:

7.1 Targeted Suppression and Structural Control:

This theme merges the direct harassment of journalists with the structural mechanisms used to control the media. It explores both the personal experiences of targeted attacks (online and offline) and the institutional strategies such as legal harassment, economic pressures, and manipulation through misinformation campaigns. By examining these interconnected elements, the analysis highlights how systemic barriers and aggressive tactics contribute to an environment of fear and self-censorship among journalists, ultimately undermining press freedom.

To anchor this analysis, the section examines three testimonies from my participants that serve as critical case studies. These accounts were carefully selected for their ability to vividly illustrate the interplay between individualized targeting and broader structural repression. While these testimonies represent distinct experiences, they reflect wider systemic patterns, offering a window into how targeted actions against journalists perpetuate fear, self-censorship, and compliance with dominant power structures. By placing these narratives at the forefront, this theme provides a grounded foundation for the critical discourse analysis that follows, highlighting how lived experiences reveal the deeper dynamics of control and suppression in contemporary media.

I am talking about Gauri Lankesh. Well, I was celebrating my birthday on 5th Sept. and in the morning, I heard that she was shot. You see. You do not even have to be a journalist to get targeted. You just have to question the government. You can be a student. Activist or anyone. This is the worst time

(Sanjana, 25-29, Independent journalist, Delhi-NCR)

So, the BJP does have an IT cell, all right...which means it is a very bunch of people online. Um, and they're paid to harass journalists, they are paid to harass anyone who has opinion that differs from theirs and harassment of women and journalists especially has been phenomenal over the past 10 years

(Ananya, 45-49, independent journalist, Madurai, Tamil Nadu)

And I feel that we're in a structural emergency now in the sense that there's no declared emergency so that the government in power does not fall...they have curtailed our freedom in a roundabout way, [...] in the sense that anyone who critiques the government is accused of being either someone who is disrupting the country's peace and communal harmony or defaming someone or anti-national. And immediately has a litany of cases slapped on them from anti-terror laws in which you can be incarcerated without being able to apply for bail and therefore guilty until proven innocent, which is the inversion of how our normal legal structure works[...]! Previous administrations were not as single mindedly focused on achieving this goal of destabilizing freedom in order to expand their space and be in power for ever. This regime has succeeded at that!

(Himani, 50+, Independent journalist, Shamli, (Uttar Pradesh)

All the participants in this research acknowledged that governments invariably utilize various methods to curtail press freedom. Furthermore, from a social cognition perspective, the mental models of each interviewee reveal a shared anxiety regarding the potential state repercussions for expressing dissent in the current socio-political climate. These testimonies construct a collective understanding of the political environment wherein dissent is both being dangerously and actively repressed in ways that are inimical to the continued operation of democracy in India. By stating, 'You don't even have to be a journalist to get targeted', the young, independent journalist (Sanjana) broadens the scope of vulnerability to include all dissenters, implying that questioning the government puts anyone at risk, signaling a discourse of fear.

The mention of Gauri Lankesh's death highlights the use of violence to suppress opposition, framing the government as dominant and intolerant of dissent. In terms of Text and Discourse structure, the shift from 'I' to 'You' in the sentence 'You don't even have to be a journalist' creates a broader, more inclusive discourse, generalizing the threat to include any dissenting voice. This rhetoric universalizes fear and positions the journalist as a representative of a wider, oppressed group. The narrative conveys a critical juncture of authoritarian repression, shaping a negative perception of the current political climate, as reflected in her statement, 'This is the worst time'. Additionally, the interviewee's perspective illustrates a depiction of a repressive regime, where violence and suppression are ingrained as commonplace.

The senior journalist, Ananya, in (Testimony 2) highlights the organized nature of the BJP's IT cell, suggesting that the harassment of dissenters is a coordinated effort, which reveals how power operates in a digital sphere, where social media is used as a tool for maintaining dominance by not just silencing but canceling opposing viewpoints. By specifying the severity for vulnerable groups, the interviewee implies that women journalists frequently encounter heightened susceptibility to harassment as a result of an interplay of gender-based discrimination, prevailing societal norms, and entrenched power dynamics.

The lexical choices here serve as crucial indicators of specific patterns. The repetition of the word 'paid' emphasizes the deliberate, organized nature of harassment, implying that the IT cell's actions are not spontaneous or organic, but orchestrated by a higher authority, thus emphasizing (the first respondent) Sanjana's view of institutionalized repression. The senior journalist, Himani, in (Testimony 3) frames the current political situation as an undeclared 'structural emergency'. By utilizing the term 'emergency,' Himani indicates significant restriction of individual rights, drawing

an analogy between the current situation and a national emergency without an official declaration. This description implies that the present administration is subtly eroding democratic principles.

The journalist highlights how anti-terror laws are being weaponized to label critics as ‘disruptors of communal harmony’ or ‘anti-national’, indicating a form of legalized repression wherein the legal system is transformed into a tool to silence dissent. Furthermore, the phrase ‘guilty until proven innocent’ critiques how the conventional functioning of the legal system has been inverted, thus serving as a discursive strategy that highlights how power manipulates legal norms to maintain dominance. As Khaitan (2020), including several media reports contend how Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s government has been attempting to silence the media through unconstitutional means by criminalizing sedition, for example invoking action against journalists under the Official Secrets Act (TheHindu, 2024).

A significant proportion of the respondents in my study asserted that the severity, force, and systematic nature of these actions have intensified under the leadership of the Modi administration. The Bharatiya Janata Party not only classifies journalists into ‘pro-BJP’ or ‘anti-BJP’ categories but has increasingly utilized criminal defamation laws (*ibid.*), often inappropriately applied, to suppress journalistic expression.

Himani perceives a shift in how freedom is undermined, from direct actions to more covert legal and institutional manipulations. In addition, the comparison between the current and previous administrations suggests that the journalist views the current government as uniquely focused on consolidating power, a view shared by most of my respondents. The

consequent emotional and psychological toll on journalists marked by fear and self-censorship highlights the broader societal implications of such repressive tactics, which shall be further analyzed in the next chapter.

This analysis underscores the complex interplay of power, technology, and repression in contemporary India, as reflected in the experiences and perceptions of the individuals in these transcripts. The normalization of aggressive tactics against dissenters aligns with Van Dijk's analysis of how media representations can either challenge or reinforce existing power structures (Van Dijk, 1998; 2006).

I maintain that the use of organized harassment serves to create a narrative that discourages dissent and promotes conformity among social groups. While such actions affect group identity by reinforcing solidarity among those who are targeted, they also instill fear in potential dissenters. A spectrum of solidarity often coexists alongside intrinsic discord, as individuals who are targeted may face increased pressure to conform to group norms in order to evade further repercussions.

As Althusser (1972 as cited in Tobin, 2000, pp. 3-4) suggests, ideology functions by 'hailing' individuals, recruiting them into specific subject positions through repeated encounters with the same message. This process, termed interpellation, operates gradually over time, embedding ideological norms and values into the everyday lives of individuals. I contend, *Hindutva* ideology employs interpellation to construct and sustain a collective identity rooted in cultural nationalism.

By repeatedly invoking symbols, narratives, and discourses that exalt Hindu values and vilify the perceived 'others,' individuals are hailed into accepting and internalizing the ideology.

This process is perpetuated through diverse channels, including educational reforms, political rhetoric, and mass media campaigns. Social media platforms play a critical role in this process, functioning as powerful apparatuses of the *Hindutva* interpellation. Through viral content, repetitive messaging, and targeted campaigns, individuals are continuously exposed to narratives that glorify *Hindutva* while delegitimizing dissent and alternative ideologies. The accrual of repeated experiences of interpellation under the *Hindutva* ideology not only solidifies its dominance but also marginalizes dissenting voices.

As highlighted in the testimonies of journalists like Himani and Sanjana, those who resist the 'hailed' subject positions of *Hindutva* are often labeled anti-national or subjected to structural repression, creating a climate of fear and self-censorship.

7.1.2 Impact of Right-Wing Political Ideology on Journalistic Practices:

This section examines how the political ideology of the BJP influences journalistic practices and shapes journalist identities. The analysis focuses on discourses surrounding alleged bias, including the categorization of journalists based on political affiliations (e.g., 'Sanghi'), and considers the implications of such classifications for professional trajectories and public perceptions. The findings are drawn from a Critical Discourse Analysis of the interview transcripts, with attention to the specific discursive patterns most relevant to questions of ideology, identity, and journalistic practice.

It is a very staunch right wing and a very pro Hindu government... It's not too comfortable anymore to say I am a Hindu, because for me personally, there comes a sense of fear as well that people might label me as Sanghi..., even though I'm not

(Jhanvi, 20-24, digital journalist, Delhi NCR)

A clear binary has been created in the last... over eight years ...you are either a part of us...of a part of the HINDU RASHTRA...it is imagined by the BJP or you are not. So those who do not fall into it are a much wider, diverse, larger group. So that way of targeting and OTHERING, I think of being immediately digging up any marker of that person's identity that tells them that they are not part of the narrative or the imagined ideal of who is a member of the Hindu Rashtra[...] And I used the words that historically make sense, like the RSS is built on Nazi ideology. But then...it results in tweets like..Oh! you anti-Brahmin Nazi!!! The arrests ...is quite terrifying like I don't think that that has in a in many decades perhaps the last one was the emergency time... that it has been more dangerous to be a reporter in India

(Savitha, 30-34, digital journalist, The NewsMinute, Chennai, Tamil Nadu)

There is an attempt by the present government to control the media, to control the narrative. They do not like anything negative to be portrayed. And you then see that in most of our TV channels. It's so obvious

(Mini, 50+, Editor-in-Chief, print publication, Meghalaya)

These testimonies reveal the manner in which the BJP's right-wing political doctrine influences journalistic practices and public perceptions through media regulation, labeling, and othering. Young digital journalist Jhanvi, a recent entrant to the industry with significant academic achievements, identifies the current government as 'staunch right-wing and pro-Hindu,' thereby positioning the BJP within a specific ideological framework. Such narratives from media professionals reflect the dominant power structures in the country, where Hindu nationalist ideology significantly shapes both

public and private identities.

The interviewee's reluctance to openly identify as a Hindu, due to fear of being labeled '*Sanghi*' – a term often used to pejoratively indicate association with right-wing *Hindutva* ideology – demonstrates the broader reach of the BJP's ideology, influencing not only political discourse but also social identity and public attitudes. The sentiment underscores a broader societal tension where religious identity is heavily politicized, often serving as a tool for divisive rhetoric and mobilization.

Consequently, Van Dijk's (1993) focus on ideological discourse is evident here, as religious identity becomes not only a marker of personal belief but also a means of signaling political allegiance, affecting discourse in both public and private spheres. The intertwining of religion and politics creates a context where being Hindu is no longer a neutral cultural identity but a politicized marker, laden with implications of ideological alignment.

In terms of discourse and social cognition, Jhanvi shows an internalized sense of anxiety, suggesting that the label '*Sanghi*' is negative and socially undesirable. This fear of being labeled and stigmatized demonstrates the power of discourse in shaping social perceptions and identities, highlighting how language and labels can be employed as tools of social control and division. This represents a form of discursive dominance, where specific ideological labels are strategically employed to marginalize individuals, even if they have no direct involvement in the political sphere.

Such incendiary politicized epithets function as discursive tools that shape identity, causing individuals to fear even an innocuous association with a political party's

ideology due to its polarizing effects, thereby influencing both the way journalists and citizens identify themselves, and how they are perceived by others. The respondent uses phrases like 'to say the least' and 'even though I am not' to create distance from the label '*Sanghi*,' which implies an effort to avoid the negative connotations associated with this political affiliation.

The cognitive dissonance arising from the tension between the ruling ideology's influence on identity and public perception is evident in this narrative. The term serves as a signifier of ideological bias, and the journalist's fear of being labeled as such, highlights the internal conflict between maintaining personal ideological autonomy and conforming to societal labels. The dichotomy within the journalist's mind underscores the symbolic power of the term, which categorizes individuals as aligned with a specific political ideology, even if they do not fully embrace it.

In the next quote, respondent Savitha's choice of phrases, such as 'binary has been created', 'targeting' and 'othering', illustrates the divisive and exclusionary nature of the discourse propagated by the BJP. These linguistic choices illustrate how particular narratives are crafted to reinforce social divisions, silence dissenting voices, and consolidate power by fostering an 'us versus them' discourse.

Discourse thus serves to marginalize individuals and perpetuate divisions within society (Dijk, 2006). The respondent's mention of the phrase 'anti-Brahmin Nazi' that was used to target her online, reveals how labels are recontextualized to attack critics and delegitimize their viewpoints. Such language highlights how the dominant group uses discourse to construct a false equivalence, conflating dissent with radical opposition,

thereby silencing critical perspectives.

Savitha situates this binary discourse within the broader framework of *Hindutva* ideology, promoted by the BJP and rooted in RSS ideology. Van Dijk's focus on the reproduction of ideological dominance is applicable here, as this discourse consolidates power by creating an exclusionary vision of the Hindu '*Rashtra*'. The narrative marginalizes those who do not conform to the constructed ideal, fostering a culture of exclusion and alienation. The historical parallel she draws to Nazism emphasizes how ideological control relies on systematic exclusion and the suppression of dissent.

This narrative underscores the journalist's assertion that the current climate is among the most dangerous for journalists in recent history, as discourse not only reflects power dynamics but also actively shapes and sustains them. Savitha's narrative reveals how such strategies create an environment of fear and self-censorship, effectively stifling journalistic inquiry. Moreover, as noted by the journalist, the arrests of journalists and the invocation of stringent laws create a hostile environment reminiscent of the Emergency era⁴⁵ in India, when press freedom was severely curtailed.

In Testimony 3, veteran journalist and the editor of a major print publication from Meghalaya, Mini suggests that mainstream media has become a 'mouthpiece for the government's narrative'. Teun A. Van Dijk (1993) provides a framework for analyzing how language reflects and perpetuates power structures in society. The language used in the quote reflects the journalist's critical stance toward the government and its control over

⁴⁵ Microstructures delve into specific linguistic features, such as word choice, pronoun usage; lexical choices such as specific words or phrases used in the text; grammar and syntax; sentence structure, i.e. tense, and modality; pragmatic features such as implications, presuppositions, interaction patterns, and contextual nuances.

media discourse. The phrase 'attempt by the present government to control the media', and 'to control the narrative' employs the repetition of the verb 'control', which highlights the dominant role the government seeks to establish over the media.

This repetition emphasizes the deliberate and strategic nature of the control, suggesting that it is not a passive process but an active manipulation of information. The choice of the word 'attempt' subtly conveys a sense of resistance or an ongoing struggle, framing the government's efforts as not yet fully achieved but still significant. Furthermore, the use of the word 'negative' as a descriptor of content signals the government's preference for portraying only favorable image of itself, presenting an oversimplified dichotomy between positive and negative portrayals.

This framing shapes the cognitive model of the audience by suggesting that the government is inherently hostile to any critique or unfavorable representation. Furthermore, the expression 'so obvious' provides a conclusive judgment on the visibility of media manipulation, marking it as self-evident. This statement reinforces the journalist's position, drawing attention to the ease with which media bias can be perceived, and implies a broader acknowledgment of its systemic roots within the profession.

The respondent's claim about the government's preference for only 'positive' portrayals aligns with an authoritarian or semi-authoritarian ideology, where media acts as a tool for maintaining political stability and promoting the interests of those in power. Besides, Mini's suggestion that 'most of our TV channels' are complicit in this control speaks to the widespread nature of the government's influence, implying that the media

landscape as a whole is subjugated to the government's agenda. The media, in this sense, is not merely a neutral space for information but becomes an instrument for political control, serving the interests of the ruling party.

This reflects a power imbalance where the media is co-opted to reinforce government narratives, silencing opposition (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2017 as cited in Khaitan 2020) and alternative viewpoints. Media manipulation, when framed as 'obvious', signals that the public may be aware of the limits placed on their access to diverse and critical viewpoints. The inability of the media to present negative portrayals of the government signals a constraint on freedom of expression, which, in turn, affects the public's capacity to make informed decisions.

Critical discourse analysis examines power abuse, particularly how the BJP government undermines journalism, targets journalists, and stifles dissent. It focuses on how these actions reshape the media landscape, eroding press independence and threatening democracy. In her scholarly work, *The Politics of Fear: What Right-Wing Populist Discourses Mean*, Ruth Wodak investigates the manner in which right-wing populist parties engage in both discursive and material practices, employing narratives in the form of text, speeches, and visual Fig.ry to instill terror and anxiety, while simultaneously positioning themselves as the guardians of societal order and saviors (Ma & Zhang, 2017).

Overall, the testimonies reflect the broader social and political landscape, where journalists and citizens alike experience the pressure to conform to the dominant pro-Hindu, nationalist narrative or face social exclusion, harassment, and censorship. Across

the transcripts, there is a recurring theme of systematic intimidation and control aimed at silencing dissent and maintaining power. Whether through labeling, co-opting discourse, or controlling media, these tactics reflect a broader strategy to consolidate authority and marginalize opposition. The manipulation of identity and the creation of binaries serve to enforce a homogenous national identity while excluding those who do not conform to such narratives.

The (BJP) has been systematically regulating and repressing media channels, employing them as instruments to disseminate anti-Muslim narratives in pursuit of maintaining its sociopolitical supremacy. This strategy is fundamentally associated with its *Hindutva* philosophy, electoral methodologies, and endeavors to consolidate authority by catering to majoritarian sentiments. Several recent research studies have comprehensively documented these strategies (George, 2016; Khaitan, 2020). Media outlets that support the BJP, in conjunction with numerous social media platforms, have been instrumental in perpetuating the marginalization of Muslims by exaggerating incidents involving them and framing them as threats to national security and public safety. Such representations perpetuate harmful stereotypes, depicting Muslims as violent, regressive, or disloyal, thus entrenching their marginalization within public discourse.

Additionally, while the government's approach to social media can raise concerns about the dissemination of misinformation, it is imperative to acknowledge that misinformation is a widespread issue that transcends the political spectrum; thus,

addressing this challenge necessitates a comprehensive strategy rather than solely attributing it to the actions of a singular political party. A comprehensive understanding of the intricate dynamics between authority, media, and democratic structures is consequently essential, given the diverse functions that both power and journalism fulfill in the construction of societal narratives, rather than simplistically framing the discourse within the dichotomy of oppression and liberty.

Tarunabh Khaitan's (2020) paper titled 'Killing a Constitution with a Thousand Cuts: Executive Aggrandizement and Party-State Fusion in India', deeply informs my research by providing critical insights into the broader political environment that enables and exacerbates such harassment. Khaitan's analysis of the Modi regime's incremental erosion of democratic norms, media freedoms, and civil society spaces highlights how authoritarian populism, hyper-nationalism, and party-state fusion contribute to the suppression of dissent and independent journalism – factors central to understanding the environment in which online harassment occurs.

The author's analysis of how hyper-nationalistic discourse justifies authoritarian measures directly correlates with the rise of anti-media sentiments in India, particularly against journalists who challenge government narratives. This climate, as described by Khaitan, creates an environment where critical voices, including women journalists, face increasing hostility not only from the government but also from citizens emboldened by such narratives. The government's crackdown on dissenting media – through raids, intimidation, and encouraging self-censorship – exacerbates the risks faced by women journalists who are particularly vulnerable to gendered online harassment. This

harassment can be seen as part of a larger strategy to silence critical voices under the guise of protecting national unity and security.

Furthermore, Khaitan's exploration of discursive accountability—the role of media, civil society, and academia in holding the government accountable—provides a framework to understand how the weakening of this axis of accountability directly affects journalism in India. As media freedoms erode, journalists, especially women, become more susceptible to targeted harassment without institutional protection, thus curbing their ability to report freely on government policies, including issues that are sensitive to the regime's narrative. These findings correspond with my research on online harassment, illustrating how the press's ability to act as a watchdog is compromised, with detrimental effects on public discourse.

Additionally, Khaitan's work highlights how the ruling party's influence over institutional appointments and the judiciary weakens the very systems meant to protect individual rights, including freedom of expression. This systemic undermining correlates with the lack of institutional recourse available to women journalists who face online abuse, as the institutions that are supposed to defend their rights are either compromised or co-opted by the ruling regime.

Khaitan's argument about the fusion of the BJP and the State provides a backdrop for understanding why harassment of journalists, particularly women, continues unchecked in India. The ruling party's politicization of institutions like the Election Commission and the judiciary, as outlined in the paper, reduces accountability and enables the culture of impunity under which online abuse thrives. In conclusion, Khaitan's

paper provides a broader political and institutional context for the online harassment of women journalists, illustrating how authoritarian populism, hyper-nationalism, and media suppression contribute to a hostile environment for journalism in India.

7.1.3 Conclusion

While preceding studies, such as those by Bhat and Chadha (2020) and Javed and Imran (2023), utilized a combination of content analysis and survey methods, this mixed-methods study advances the field by offering richer interpretive insights into journalists' perceptions and by addressing aspects that remain underexplored in existing scholarship. The existing literature supports the themes I have identified, emphasizing targeted suppression and structural control within the broader framework of Hindu nationalism in India's political landscape. It connects the rise of anti-media sentiments to the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its supporters.

Moreover, anti-media populism has emerged as a defining characteristic of contemporary right-wing movements globally, where mainstream media is frequently portrayed as biased and part of a corrupt elite, eroding public trust in traditional media institutions [See also: Chatterje & Crilley, 2019]. This narrative is strategically employed by populist leaders to strengthen their political base. By positioning themselves as authentic representatives of the 'common people', these leaders contrast themselves with the media, which they accuse of distorting facts to serve elite or opposition interests. This tactic not only consolidates their support but also delegitimizes critical media coverage, enabling them to control public discourse and reinforce their power.

Consequently, this polarization has contributed to the rise of disinformation, as it creates an environment where truth becomes secondary to ideological alignment. This dynamic not only amplifies existing divides but also erodes public trust in journalistic integrity, weakening the media's role as a reliable source of information and a cornerstone of democratic discourse. The implications of this shift are profound, as it not only alters media consumption patterns but also challenges the very foundation of democratic discourse, which relies on a well-informed citizenry.

This trend is evident in several countries, including the United States, Brazil, and India, where populist leaders have successfully capitalized on anti-media rhetoric to bolster their own political legitimacy (Novais, 2023; Holtz-Bacha, 2021) [See Also: Carlson et al. 2020]. The result is a media landscape where the boundaries between fact and opinion become increasingly blurred, and where journalism's epistemic legitimacy is continually undermined in favor of ideologically driven narratives. In the next chapter, I delve into the intricate relationship between online violence and the psycho-emotional well-being of women journalists, examining how they navigate the distinct challenges of gender-based harassment and misogyny in the digital mediascape. The chapter will reveal the strategies they employ to build resilience, highlighting both the personal and professional impacts of such experiences and their broader implications for gender equity in journalism.

Chapter 8

Resilience in the Face of Threat: The Psycho-Emotional Journey of Women Journalists

The preceding chapters of this thesis addressed the overarching results in Chapter 5, while Chapters 6, 7 focused on the two most significant findings drawn from my mixed-methods research. In this concluding finding chapter, I analyze additional testimonies to address the first two qualitative research questions (RQ1 and RQ2). These questions focus on the nature of the relationship between online violence and the psycho-emotional state of women journalists, as well as the distinct manifestations of gender-based harassment and misogyny they navigate in the contemporary mediascape.

While this chapter is organized thematically for ease of comprehension, the analysis draws on standpoint theory and intersectionality to critically examine participants' experiences. These theoretical lenses enable an exploration of how intersecting identities and power structures shape the psychological and emotional dimensions of online harassment. In my earlier chapters, I employed critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine participants' quotes, which allowed me to uncover the structural and discursive strategies underlying online harassment. This concluding chapter excludes CDA to eliminate repetition, ensuring that the presentation remains structured and focused.

This decision also signifies the particular focus of this chapter, which investigates the psycho-emotional resilience of women journalists. Here, my emphasis is on interpreting the lived

experiences of participants through the lenses of standpoint theory and intersectionality, rather

than revisiting the discursive dimensions already addressed. This shift in analytical approach allowed me to highlight the nuanced interplay between identity, power, and resilience.

Much of the scholarly research to date has examined the broad spectrum of online harassment faced by women (Dey, 2023) ranging from overt forms of abuse such as verbal threats, sexual harassment, and doxxing, to more subtle yet insidious tactics such as mob censorship, Fig.-based abuse, and coordinated disinformation campaigns (Bhat & Chadha, 2022). Specifically, studies examining women journalists' experience have explored the diverse forms of online violence they encounter (Rego, 2018), its impacts—such as self-censorship—and the ways in which it disrupts their routine practice of reciprocal journalism. Furthermore, some studies have also documented the coping strategies journalists employ to mitigate such abuse (Pain, 2022; Bhat, 2022,2023; Chen et al., 2020).

However, *no prior research*, to my knowledge, has thoroughly explored both the overt and subtle manifestations of the relationship between online violence and the psycho-emotional state of women journalists in India's current media landscape. This includes an examination of how distinct forms of gender-based harassment and misogyny intersect with their mental health, sense of agency, and professional roles within the contemporary mediascape. The gap in this area leaves significant room for research that examines how online violence impedes journalists' ability to exercise journalistic freedom, connect with their sources, and contribute substantively to public discourse.

Furthermore, addressing this gap will explain the nuanced psychological impacts, such as prolonged stress, depression, mental inhibition and self-censorship, and burnout, as well as the social isolation that often accompanies such harassment.

This chapter engages with the topic on three distinct levels: from a critical *feminist explication, through a socio-cultural lens, and from a political economy viewpoint*. Although these perspectives appear distinct, they are interconnected and shaped by the overarching socio-political discourse in India, reinforcing the systemic barriers women face in journalism. Drawing on evidence collected over a period of 12 months, I have explored the severe manifestations of online harassment in excruciating detail, providing a nuanced examination of its psycho-emotional toll on women journalists through my empirical analysis.

This encompasses not only verbal abuse and threats, but also the more dangerous spectrum of online violence aimed at generating a pervasive climate of fear that impacts both their mental well-being and personal safety, in addition to the professional engagement. This research gives centrality to women journalists' narratives which vividly illustrates the pervasive nature of online harassment and its profound impact on their professional and personal lives.

The extensive psychological and emotional impact of online harassment emerged as one of the central concerns in the data (Fig. NVivo codes, Fig. 18 and 29). However, a closer examination of the transcripts/testimonies revealed that most journalists have internalized this fear, accepting it as an inherent aspect of their profession and a fundamental element of their work. As veteran respondent Himani highlighted (Chapter 6) that targeting a select few (high-profile) media personnel is often sufficient to instill widespread terror among others.

This observation is corroborated by my quantitative analysis, which shows that although only a small number of journalists encountered severe repercussions, the effects were substantial. Specifically, 5 out of 15 respondents reported severe personal impacts that required medical intervention, and 3 out of 20 respondents encountered considerable professional setbacks, which will be further elaborated upon in this chapter.

Table 7: Respondents' Experiences and Psycho-emotional Responses to Targeting

Experiences of respondents	Psycho-emotional Responses
<p>a) Sharing of morphed intimate photos without consent on social media</p> <p>b) Spreading malicious rumors to damage their personal and professional reputation</p> <p>c) Creation of fake accounts used to send malicious comments via direct messages</p> <p>d) Public insults and disrespect aimed at humiliating them on social media platforms</p>	<p>Constant Fear and Anxiety: The journalists who have been subjected to online harassment, especially <i>non-consensual sharing of sexual photos</i>, public insults, or <i>malicious rumors</i>, live in a state of <i>perpetual fear</i>. The trauma of seeing intimate parts of their life exposed to a broad audience leaves them feeling vulnerable, isolated, and profound inability to establish trust with others, both in the virtual realm and physical world</p>
<p>Testimonies of my research participants</p> <p><i>Respondent Chandrika:</i> 'My picture was photoshopped, I can't even show those toxic abuses and Fig.s to anybody. The comments have utterly scornful tones'</p>	<p>Loss of Control and Powerlessness: Having been a target of malicious rumors makes the journalists feel they have <i>lost control</i> over their own identity. The <i>anonymity</i> of the attackers adds to the powerlessness because there is no clear entity to confront, no face to</p>

<p>Respondent Savitha: ‘They took screenshots, photos that were from our social media, put our name, a picture. They picked up tweets of mine from way before I joined <i>TheNewsMinute</i>, and then said, ‘Oh, look at what she is doing’! And, the explosion of tweets after that was relentless for three, four days. And then the kind of stuff would be, ‘Oh, you ‘Shudra⁴⁶ Dog’!!</p> <p><i>Respondent Elina:</i> ‘If you open social media, you could see lot of obscene and vulgar comments with my photograph[...]. So ruling party’s support was there and they started abusing me like anything. Full character assassination [...] So, it affected my career actually. So, I filed a complaint to cyber police Chennai (2013). So, when I gave the complaint, not even an F.I.R was filed at the time. [...]I was so shocked! I had no fear at all before that. But, from that day even if some vehicle came near me, my body used to be in shivers!!! This was 2014. [...] They even called</p>	<p>harassment, making it an invisible yet omnipresent threat.</p> <p>Invasion of Privacy: The invasion of privacy is not only psychological but also tangible. Knowing that personal information, Fig.s, or rumors are <i>circulating online</i>, potentially accessible to anyone, creates a <i>deep sense of shame and embarrassment</i>, even if the content is falsified. This invasion often forces the journalists to retreat into themselves, feeling unsafe in public and online and engage in self-censorship</p> <p>Fear of Retaliation: The women constantly fear that any endeavor to express dissent or resist will provoke further harassment, intensifying the situation. The <i>fear of retaliation</i>, either in the form of escalated online abuse or real-world violence, becomes</p>
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⁴⁶ Shudras are typically considered the lowest of the four varnas and were historically assigned to perform tasks that were considered menial or physically demanding, such as manual labor, farming, and working as artisans or service providers.

me a sex worker, a prostitute...Actually, whole Indian knows that... I think... With my photograph, one RSS person, wrote, my rate is thousand rupees with my photograph. It went viral on Facebook; the year was 2021'.

Respondent Shaina: 'Trolls was ok!! Memes was ok, morphed pictures was ok, because I am a feminist, so I am strong, and I can take care of it. But sending threat emails to my husband with my child and my photo with threat to her and me, a three-year-old child...that was hard'.

Respondent Gauri: It was an old group photograph of my college days. And the first comment was, 'You need to lose weight'. And this was me at 19 years. If someone says this to me right now, it won't bother me but I am very conscious of that. But I was just 19-year-old that time. I was very fit at that point of time. And I think it was a bot..But, another person who stalks me comments, and makes positive comments about me stating, 'No, you can't say that about her...she's such a beautiful girl'. Then the first person comments again stating, who cares for your comment.

a heavy burden, trapping the individual in silence and a state of reticence.

<p>She is fat and needs to lose weight. I realized the first one was not a bot and they were having a conversation. I am telling you disturbingly so, the other person, who defended me is an old man, and he's one of those types of stalker profiles who positively stalk me, but he's stalker profile. And then the whole conversation was so disturbing.</p>	
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In this chapter, I analyze testimonies from six participants, focusing on the sub-themes of psycho-emotional resilience, professional impact, and coping strategies in response to online threats. These testimonies were selected for their relevance in highlighting the experiences of individuals affected by online harassment, particularly its impact on mental health, professional stability, and the capacity to endure and recover.

While not exhaustive, the selected accounts reflect key themes from the broader interview sample, offering diverse perspectives on the challenges faced by women journalists. Each testimony sheds light on the toll of harassment, the strategies used to navigate it, and the resilience required to sustain their roles, contributing to a nuanced understanding of their struggles and perseverance. Furthermore, I shall examine how digital aggression undermines the credibility of the profession and its repercussions on the journalistic landscape. Unlike Chapter 5 – which is more descriptive and features a diverse array of netnographic elements (e.g., screenshots/bar-charts and material published online) – this chapter relies heavily on the interviews, as it is more interpretative and critical.

Together, they encompass a range of responses to the psycho-emotional toll of harassment, the strategies employed to build resilience, and the ongoing efforts to sustain their roles as journalists.

8.1 Key Themes identified in the in-depth interview data:

1. **Psychological and emotional impact:** Cognitive anxiety, psychological distress, and deterioration in self-efficacy
2. **Resilience and agency:** Persistence and agency despite systemic barriers

8.1.1 Psychological and emotional impact:

Several participants described experiencing profound cognitive anxiety, psychological distress, and a deterioration in their self-efficacy as they navigated relentless online attacks. These accounts reveal the insidious nature of digital violence, which extends beyond the virtual realm to affect the mental well-being and professional confidence of journalists.

The phone started ringing and I started recording each call that came. And one of the calls was... I am going to come, and I am going to rape you... and I am going to put chili powder on your private parts. I said, 'very nice'! I went to the police commissioner [...] I sort of crashed. I had to seek psychiatric help because I went into a severe... very severe depression. And then I had to get medicated and then come back. So, it is... I think how have... if you ask me, how have you changed...there has been a lot of change in my personality, because...see when this whole thing is happening to you... you realize that you're alone

(Respondent Mridula, 35-39, Media enterprise owner, Bengaluru, Karnataka)

Mridula, a 38-year-old independent senior journalist, experienced these ordeals a few years ago. Following her complaint at the police station, she was assigned two police constables to ensure her safety through continuous, round-the-clock protection. Although she did not suffer any physical harm, she was forced to navigate a relentless barrage of many such vicious and derogatory comments over an extended period. Standpoint Theory suggests that people who face harassment and oppression develop unique insights regarding the functioning of societal power structures, which in turn offers important perspectives that reveal the intricacies of inequality and dominance. (Sweet, 2020).

Mridula's experience with harassment, and the institutional response (police protection), reflects the broader marginalization and vulnerability women often face, even in positions of power. The duality of her experience, acknowledging that experiences beyond such dualities may also exist, underscores the tension between her professional authority and her vulnerability to harassment. This juxtaposition highlights the complex interplay of power and precarity faced by individuals in her position.

Additionally, it juxtaposes her authority with the institutional response to her harassment – an institution designed to provide protection, yet simultaneously revealing systemic inadequacies in addressing such issues within the society. Notably, senior journalists are particularly susceptible to harassment due to their involvement in investigative reporting and public commentary, which often correlates with greater risks of intimidation.

Ilmari Hiltunen's (2024) study emphasizes that aspects of journalistic work, such as engaging in investigative reporting or maintaining a high level of visibility on social media, are stronger predictors of harassment than demographic factors like age and gender. (*Ibid.*) emphasizes that the nature of journalistic work plays a more crucial role, with not all journalists being equally targeted or affected. This is consistent with my own findings, which reveal that only a small proportion of journalists experience regular harassment, while the majority report being targeted infrequently. I contend that the law enforcement safeguarding (police protection) respondent Mridula received, while addressing her physical safety, fails to alleviate the psychological and emotional distress engendered by relentless online targeting, thereby underscoring the potential inadequacies of institutional frameworks in fully addressing the emotional labor and mental health challenges encountered by women in similar situations.

Moreover, the fact that Mridula, despite being a senior professional, requires police protection underscores the societal failure to adequately protect women from gendered violence, illustrating a broader intersection of institutional inadequacies and gender-based vulnerability. As a distinguished and accoladed journalist, she possesses significant professional authority; however, her gender exposes her to ongoing and more acute manifestations of harassment. Mridula's position at the crossroads of gender and profession reveals the way power structures disproportionately affect women in public roles, and how systemic responses may address physical safety without acknowledging the deeper emotional and psychological impacts of harassment.

My journey of collecting data for this research proved to be both a challenging and deeply insightful experience. This duality of difficulty and discovery shaped the overall research process, offering invaluable perspectives that I had not anticipated at the outset. One particular difficulty I encountered was arranging qualitative interviews with journalists, many of whom were occupied with intense political coverage at the time. For instance, securing an interview with Mridula was particularly difficult due to her involvement in the state elections. (After two rescheduling attempts, I was finally able to meet with her in a quiet meeting room at a café in Bengaluru).

Throughout the conversation, I found her to be poised and composed, thoughtfully engaging with each question I posed. She furnished comprehensive responses, and at one point even asked if I would like her to recount a particularly distressing incident when she was followed by individuals she described as ‘dark-colored, fat goons’ after conducting an interview for a news report. These interviews, though at times logistically challenging to arrange, provided me with rich, textured data. The candid reflections from journalists like Mridula allowed me to uncover significant patterns related to the harassment they face.

Building on Sampaio-Dias *et. al.* (2023), who discuss the emotional labor involved in managing responses to harassment, my research further suggests that younger journalists confront a different set of emotional challenges as they navigate early stages of their career without the burden of harassment. However, the absence of reported harassment among younger journalists raises important questions about how their experiences might change as they gain visibility and experience, particularly in light of the increasingly virulent nature of online

harassment. Although these attacks may initially seem disembodied, disconnected from the physical world, their impact remains profoundly toxic and deeply distressing, as highlighted by Dey (2023). This implies that, as younger journalists gain more visibility, they may encounter similar, if not heightened, emotional challenges in dealing with digital threats.

It started with me being very anxious... because once this, once these calls happened...and then after that, uh..., things got worse, it steadily got worse. And I started worrying for my family, more than my own safety. Because my parents are not very young, so... and I was married at that time, I didn't know whether, you know, my husband would face negative consequences as a result of my work. I mean, he was supportive. But I know that he was also extremely anxious. And anxiety...it sort of peaked

(Respondent Mridula, 35-39, Media enterprise owner, Bengaluru, Karnataka)

Mridula recounts experiencing a profound psychological crisis, characterized by a severe episode of depression that necessitated psychiatric intervention and pharmacological treatment. When you read the Tamil tweets... they are very filthy [...] I was called a 'papati'. It is a derogatory term for a Tamilnadu brahmin', she recounts. Such experiences led to substantial shifts in her personality, notably an acute sense of isolation despite the presence of her family. While familial support was available, the interviewee notes a disconnection, as her family members lacked a full understanding of her professional circumstances and the underlying motivations behind her actions, thereby exacerbating the sensation of being misinterpreted.

The journalist recounts the initial tremors of feeling restless and nervous with a constant sense of fear. Facing both criminal defamation charges and financial constraints as a freelancer, Mridula successfully obtained pro bono legal assistance, resulting in a historic ruling from the

Madras High Court that dismissed all the charges filed against her. Her unwavering commitment to justice exemplifies her dedication to defending press freedom in the face of considerable adversity. Also, the unyielding pursuit of justice reflects the internal resilience I sensed during our exchange, while also bringing to mind our earlier professional rapport; re-engaging with her in a work-related context years later infused our interaction with an unanticipated depth and richness.

I found myself occupying the dual role of both insider and outsider during this interview. In 2008, Mridula was my supervisor, and reconnecting with her a decade later as a researcher was an unexpectedly profound experience. The passage of time had created a formal distance, yet the sense of familiarity remained, giving rise to a complex dynamic. No longer in the capacity of her junior colleague, I had assumed the role of an interviewer, tasked with exploring her personal and professional experiences, with a particular focus on the topic of online harassment.

This shift in our relationship provided me with a unique vantage point. My prior knowledge of her professional history allowed me to approach the interview with an insider's perspective, yet the nature of my inquiry necessitated the objective stance of an outsider. The interplay between these roles enriched my understanding of her responses. Mridula's openness, particularly in recounting incidents of harassment, revealed the emotional toll that long-term public engagement in journalism can exact. Her willingness to revisit these difficult experiences illustrated the enduring emotional labor that seasoned journalists, like herself, often endure.

The interaction with Mridula highlighted the progressive nature of emotional labor in journalism, shaped by years of exposure to both the profession's rewards and its inherent

vulnerabilities, particularly in the increasingly hostile digital landscape.

‘Professionally...two things have happened. One... I won the Ram Nath Goenka award for it, so that was a good thing. Now, I am an award-winning journalist. It sounds nice! The second thing is that people started recognizing me and there was a specific caliber attached to my words and to my work. People believe, I will tell the truth, again a good thing! So, professionally, I think I have benefited’, quips Mridula.

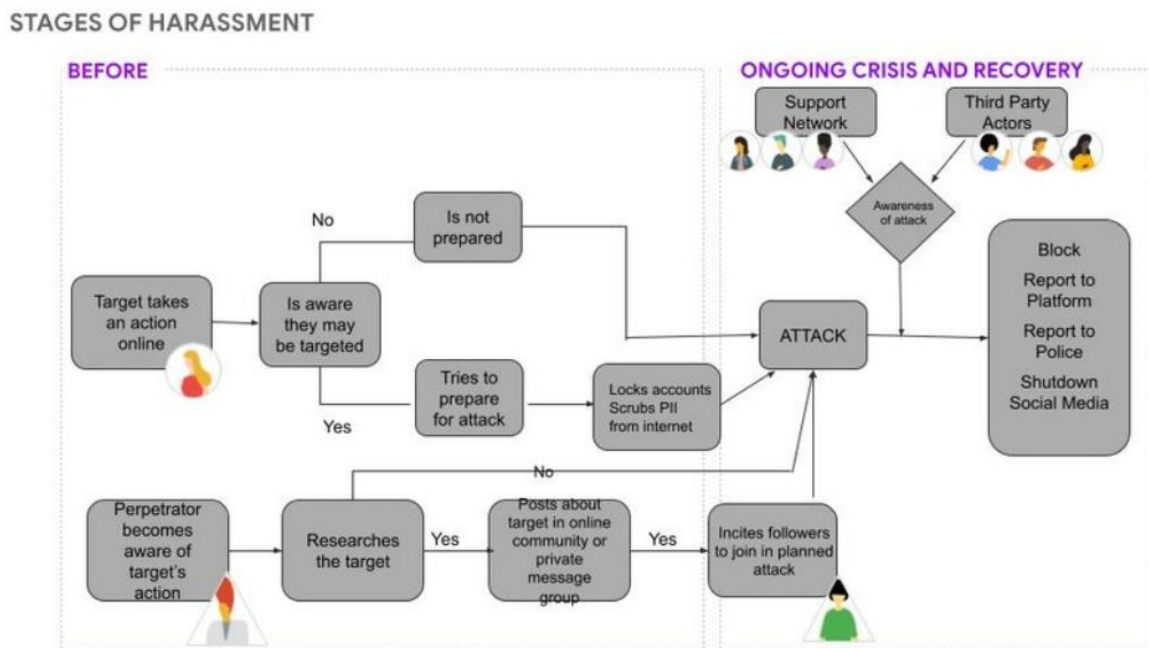


Fig. 32: Stages of Online Harassment – Before, During and After [Source Goyal et.al (2022)]

A recent study conducted on 27 women journalists by Goyal et al. (2022) revealed that participants' experiences with online harassment followed a clear timeline, with distinct phases occurring before, during, and after the incident (Fig. above). In another significant study conducted recently on Irish women journalists (as discussed in Chapter 3) Dawn Wheatley

identifies five distinct ‘phases’ that many journalists undergo in their engagement with social media, beginning with early-career enthusiasm culminating in fatigue, self-censorship, and eventual withdrawal as strategies for self-preservation and to mitigate negative consequences or backlash.

These phases are categorized as: eager and enthusiastic, growing in status, becoming well-known and subsequently targeted, reaching a tipping point, and finally, withdrawal from social media (Wheatley, 2023). I concur that even though the majority of women in my sample have exhibited a resolute commitment to their profession despite facing continuous harassment, the experiences of journalists in India reveal substantial differences that are influenced by the state or region of their location or origin.

I am part of a matrilineal society, but there are so many disjointed junctures in the society where women are not really empowered [...] It has been a troubled journey because I voiced out all these concerns against my society. And that is not taken too kindly by my society [...] there is always this targeting against me whenever I say some things that they do not like. What they will tell me, in short, is do not ever say anything about this Khasi society. We do not want the outside world to know. In fact, I was called by the conglomerate of the village heads to a meeting. And they said, if you want to write about this society, write in Khasi language, do not write in English

(Mini, 50+, Editor-in-Chief, print publication, Shillong, Meghalaya)

While matrilineal societies, such as the Khasi community⁴⁷ in the state of Meghalaya⁴⁸ are often

⁴⁷ The Khasi are an indigenous ethnic group in the northeastern Indian state of Meghalaya, with a population of nearly 1.5 million.

⁴⁸ North-East India is distinct from the rest of the country due to its rich cultural diversity, geographical isolation, and political instability. Comprising eight states — Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and Sikkim — the region is home to over 200 ethnic groups, each with unique languages and traditions. Geographically isolated by mountainous terrain and poor infrastructure, the region faces significant developmental challenges, including limited access to education, healthcare, and employment. Political unrest and insurgency movements further exacerbate these issues, while the region's geopolitical significance due to shared borders with Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, and Myanmar influences its socio-political dynamics. Moreover, national media often oversimplifies and stereotypes the region, marginalizing its complexities. Understanding these regional challenges is crucial for analyzing the unique experiences of North-East journalists, whose narratives are shaped by the socio-political context of the region (Wouters, 2023; Singh & Barath, 2023)

perceived as more equitable in terms of inheritance and lineage, respondent Mini highlights significant disjunctions in actual women's empowerment. Her response points out contradictions or discrepancies in the way women are purportedly empowered within the community. There is a gap between the idealized Fig. of matrilineal societies and the actual experiences of women in terms of power and agency. This contradiction emphasizes how social location influences knowledge and experience; despite the societal structure that theoretically supports women, real-world practices and attitudes can undermine their agency. The insistence from village leaders that she should write in *Khasi* rather than English suggests an attempt to control the narrative and protect cultural identity from external scrutiny, thus acknowledging that the interviewee's identity is shaped not only by gender but also by cultural, linguistic, and regional factors.

The veteran journalist, with several decades of experience and the oldest participant in my sample, navigates multiple identities that intersect to present unique challenges. For instance, her position as a woman in a matrilineal yet inherently patriarchal society underscores the nuanced and complex nature of empowerment. Although matrilineal societies are often considered progressive, the journalist's experience reveals that power dynamics can still restrict women's voices. The testimony suggests that external expressions of dissent are viewed as threats to cultural integrity, which may lead to social ostracism.

Moreover, the emphasis, here, on using the local language highlights the intersection of language and power; thus, positioning English language as a tool of external influence that could undermine local traditions and authority. While harassment is a universal issue that transcends

geographic boundaries, the narratives surrounding it are shaped distinctly by local cultural, social, and political contexts (as demonstrated in this research). This variation is evident in the experiences of women journalists in North-east India, (as discussed in the testimony above) where the dynamics of a matrilineal society influence their challenges, while in Kashmir, political instability and conflict give rise to an entirely different set of obstacles.

During the NWMI conference [discussed in Chapter 4], I observed that all the women journalists from Kashmir⁵³ appeared to display signs of anxiety and consistently declined to discuss their experiences for my research purposes (although some shared their insights off-the-record). This reluctance to engage in discussions about harassment and violence reflects not only the intense psychological toll but also the socio-political realities unique to regions like Kashmir⁴⁹. The combination of entrenched political conflict and heightened surveillance has created an environment where journalists, particularly women, must constantly navigate threats to their personal safety alongside the demands of their profession.

The uniform refusal of these journalists to speak further underscores the pervasive climate of fear, wherein they perceive that even discussing their experiences could invite further retaliation. It can, therefore, be concluded that regional disparities profoundly highlight the broader issue of how geographical and political contexts in India influence the experiences of

⁴⁹ Kashmir has long been a politically sensitive region due to the ongoing conflict between India and Pakistan, alongside internal demands for autonomy or independence. Journalists in Kashmir face significant challenges due to the region's political volatility, marked by the conflict between India and Pakistan and internal demands for autonomy. These conditions result in frequent insurgency, military operations, and media restrictions. Reporters are often subject to harassment, detention, and surveillance by both state and non-state actors. The psychological toll is severe, with journalists experiencing trauma from covering violence and human rights abuses. Furthermore, the region's difficult terrain and infrastructural limitations hinder access to information, making comprehensive reporting even more challenging (Bhat, 2019; Boga, 2024; Hassan, 2022).

women journalists. Variations in local dynamics – such as socio-political stability, cultural attitudes, and institutional support – significantly affect their reporting practices and the challenges they face in different regions.

In politically sensitive areas like Kashmir, the risk of violence and repression is amplified, silencing voices that would otherwise have contributed to the discourse on media freedom and gendered violence. Notably, several journalists from Kashmir expressed their desire to leave the profession of journalism altogether, citing the constant fear, harassment, and violence they face. This collective sentiment further illustrates how region-specific political tensions, particularly in conflict zones like Kashmir, exacerbate the already precarious position of women journalists.

I have received death threats after reporting a rape that happened in Kashmir. And it was a very very sensitive issue [...] I was being physically threatened. We will kill you. we know where you live, because, as a journalist, all of your information is online. You can be contacted easily ...that is the nature of your job - it is hard to psychologically deal with it

(Respondent Ananya, 45-49, Independent journalist, Tamil Nadu)

The environment for women journalists in Kashmir has become increasingly hostile, particularly following significant political changes in the region. As highlighted by Quratulain Rehbar (a journalist from Kashmir) the closure of safe spaces like the Kashmir Press Club⁵⁰ has intensified

⁵⁰ The Kashmir Press Club (KPC), the largest independent media body in Indian-administered Kashmir, was forcibly closed following a raid by armed police. The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) and the Indian Journalists Union (IJU) condemned the closure, calling it an undemocratic attempt to stifle press freedom. On January 15, 2022 a group of pro-BJP journalists, aided by police and paramilitary forces, took control of the KPC offices in Srinagar, locking out other journalists. The regional administration declared the club had failed to register under the Societies Registration Act and ceased to exist. Both the IJU and IFJ demanded the restoration of the club's registration and the holding of elections for a new managing body (IFJ-Asia.org, 2022).

feelings of isolation and fear among journalists (Naqash, 2022). The club, once a crucial refuge, provided journalists with a space to gather, share experiences, and seek support amidst the challenges of their work. Its closure has significantly undermined the sense of security that many relied on, leaving them exposed to threats without the solidarity of a united community (IFJ-Asia.org, 2022). I further argue, even after experiencing complete mental and physical withdrawal, many journalists, such as Rana Ayyub, Meena Kotwal, Jyoti Yadav and several other journalists at *Khabar Lahariya*, discover independent avenues to navigate and surmount these persistent challenges, ultimately demonstrating their ability to rebound.

Another impactful account was shared by Chandrika, a highly regarded journalist and the owner of an independent media enterprise. While Mridula hails from an upper-caste background owing to which she faced unique challenges in Tamil Nadu, Chandrika belongs to a historically marginalized caste group in India. Her journey is yet another powerful testament to resilience and activism in the face of adversity.

As a *Dalit* journalist and founder of her own independent media organization, Chandrika has emerged as a significant voice for marginalized communities in India, particularly the Dalit population, which has historically faced systemic discrimination and violence. For some journalists, the frequency of abuse is tied to specific news coverage, but for others, harassment is constant based on their social position, compounded by caste and religion factors.

From the theoretical perspective, Standpoint theory emphasizes the importance of social location. However, it has been criticized for not adequately addressing intersectionality—the principle that individuals have multiple, overlapping identities that influence their experiences

and knowledge. Critics also argue that standpoint theory can sometimes neglect the ways in which different axes of identity intersect and affect one's standpoint (Lund, 2023).

'If it's my pain, I can express it most authentically', asserts Chandrika underscoring this critique. She argues that the marginalization of women in literature, history, and intellectual discourse is a deliberate strategy to reinforce gender hierarchy, which continues to shape contemporary perceptions of power and agency. She further contends that historically male-dominated authorship has often sidelined women's narratives, placing men in the foreground instead. By controlling the narrative, men have reinforced their authority and power, relegating women to supporting roles and silencing their contributions.

This aligns with critiques of standpoint theory, as Chandrika's argument illustrates how gender, in conjunction with other axes of identity, interacts to silence marginalized voices. It reinforces the importance of incorporating intersectionality to fully understand an individual's social location and standpoint. The exclusion, she argues, was not incidental but instrumental in maintaining male privilege, and historical accounts were often crafted to uphold the status quo, ensuring women remained in subservient positions while men occupied the spotlight.

Although notable instances of online harassment often manifest as explicit violence or abuse, there are also more nuanced and poignant variations that, despite their less overt characteristics, can result in comparable harm and distress. These forms of harassment may not necessarily involve explicit threats or vitriolic language; rather, they often manifest as microaggressions, condescension, antagonism, dismissive attitudes, intimidation or insidious forms of sexism, casteism, or religious discrimination as in the case of the testimonies examined

in this chapter. The cumulative impact of these subtle acts of harassment can be profoundly harmful, as they often erode the target's confidence, self-worth, and professional credibility over time.

The insidious nature of these forms of harassment lies in their capacity to be dismissed or downplayed as mere inconveniences, rather than being recognized for the harm they inflict. Victims of online harassment are often advised that intervention is warranted only in cases of severe misconduct, thereby contributing to the normalization of toxic online behaviors. For instance, a woman journalist may encounter condescending comments about her competence, backhanded compliments, or tone policing that subtly undermine/erode her authority. While these actions may not seem overtly egregious initially, their cumulative effect, when repeated, fosters an environment of persistent scrutiny and critique. Over time, this leaves the individual feeling disempowered, marginalized, and undervalued.

Moreover, these subtle manifestations of harassment can be difficult to identify or quantify, making it harder for the targets to seek recourse or institutional support. These incidents may not meet the legal threshold for formal action, nor may they be perceived as deviating from the normative dynamics of online engagement. However, their impact remains substantial and far from negligible. Psychologically, these persistent forms of harassment can induce self-doubt, anxiety, and stress, undermining the journalist's well-being and fostering a hostile environment that impedes their capacity to perform their professional duties effectively.

The threat just assumes different proportions when it comes to a woman. So, what I think bothers me the most is the familiarity that people assume while talking to me on social media. I'm not comfortable even with compliments for example...you're looking good in yellow, I saw you today on TV! That's not what you're supposed to be looking at or watching or whatever, because, that is a subtle way of stalking.

(Gauri, 40-44, private TV news anchor, India Today Tv, Delhi-NCR)

The reference to 'familiarity' in interactions on social media reveals a discomfort with unsolicited attention, particularly when it crosses boundaries into what the journalist perceives as stalking. This sense of familiarity creates a feeling of unwanted intimacy and reflects a broader pattern of gendered boundary violations and privacy invasion. The discomfort highlights the pervasive nature of gendered harassment, where even seemingly benign and innocuous comments can carry undertones of objectification and control. The interviewee's discomfort, even with seemingly innocuous compliments such as 'You're looking good in yellow', underscores how what might appear to be a harmless statement can become a mechanism of scrutiny when expressed repeatedly.

Compliments that focus on appearance are gendered, reinforcing the idea that women, particularly in public-facing roles, are subject to constant scrutiny and judgment based on their looks rather than their professional abilities. This creates a pervasive sense of being constantly observed, which can be deeply unsettling and intrusive. The gendered nature of this surveillance is tied to the male gaze, a concept developed in feminist theory to describe how women are often viewed and represented as objects of male desire and scrutiny.

For the journalist, the awareness that strangers consistently feel entitled to make personal remarks about her public appearance on social media fosters a sense of surveillance and control, even in the absence of explicit threats. Moreover, the subtlety of such comments makes it difficult for women to legitimize their discomfort. Because these interactions are not overtly threatening, women may find it challenging to articulate why such comments feel intrusive. This often leads to gaslighting, wherein women's concerns are minimized or dismissed as overreactions, thereby further exacerbating their disempowerment within the context of gender-based harassment.

Gauri's testimony, therefore, highlights how microaggressions—seemingly small and harmless acts – can accumulate and create an environment where women feel unsafe, anxious, and constantly scrutinized. The journalist's discomfort with such comments underscores the pervasive double standard encountered by women in the public sphere. While their male counterparts are typically evaluated based on their professional competence and expertise, women are frequently reduced to their physical appearance or perceived attractiveness. This gendered double standard is particularly evident in media-related professions, where women's visibility often becomes a source of vulnerability rather than empowerment.

Addressing these subtle forms of harassment is just as critical as addressing the more extreme manifestations. It requires a broader understanding of what constitutes harmful behavior and a recognition that online harassment exists as a spectrum. Even when the abuse is not overtly violent, it is crucial to acknowledge and address it through both institutional interventions and cultural reforms that prioritize the dignity and safety of all journalists. By

recognizing and confronting these more subtle forms of harassment, we can more effectively challenge the pervasive culture of hostility that women, particularly those from marginalized groups, face in digital spaces.

8.1.2 Resilience and agency: Persistence and agency despite systemic barriers

The theme of *Resilience and Agency* emphasizes the unwavering commitment and adaptability of women journalists as they confront systemic obstacles in both their professional and personal spheres. In the face of widespread issues such as online harassment, institutional indifference, and deep-rooted gender biases, numerous respondents exhibited extraordinary resolve to persist in their careers. Their narratives expose acts of defiance, strategies for self-preservation, and a continued commitment to their profession despite adverse circumstances.

This segment aims to shed light on how women journalists assert their agency, maintain their careers, and confront the systemic challenges that threaten to diminish their presence in the media industry.

I am called 'vishkanya', 'vidhwa vilaap karne waali', 'kutti'⁵¹...these are the kind of horrible abuses I on a daily basis. I should not be saying this on record, but this is the state of affairs unfortunately. At one point I was getting impacted by all this. I even used to fall into a state of depression. But now I have learnt to handle this. I know I am hitting at the right point. I am doing the right thing.

(Respondent Chandrika, 35-39, Independent media enterprise owner, Delhi-NCR)

⁵¹ These are all filthy and derogatory abuses in Hindi, used to ridicule women. The words loosely translate as follows: "vishkanya = a women with venom, vidhwa vilaap karne waali = a 'scoundrel' wailing widow, kutti = bitch"

Chandrika's persistent concerns about her family's safety are unmistakable, as she seeks to achieve a careful balance between her work obligations and the crucial task of ensuring their protection. She dismisses the concept of self-sacrifice, emphasizing the importance of her own survival and the continuation of her professional endeavors in a potentially hazardous environment for both herself and her family. The threats and ongoing scrutiny she encounters serve as substantial obstacles to her primary objectives at the media organization she co-founded with her husband, also a journalist. Their venture began with limited resources, starting with a single camera in a rented space.

Chandrika's reporting involves documenting the experiences of marginalized groups and addressing social issues, particularly those affecting *Dalit* communities. Nevertheless, the challenge of ensuring personal safety while fulfilling her professional responsibilities often presents a significant obstacle. Chandrika exhibits resilience in navigating the emotional and psychological consequences of sustained online harassment. Utilizing her platform, she reports on caste-based issues and the challenges faced by marginalized communities, thereby transforming her personal adversities into a broader discourse. Her work has been featured in international media outlets, and she has been invited to speak at universities worldwide.

Another young and awarded journalist, Indrani, who has also earned several accolades for her contribution to the field states, 'I am neither a Muslim nor a Dalit woman. I am from Other Backward Caste (OBC) group who comes from rural India so my journey and my experience with online harassment is similar yet very different'.

Indrani offers a personal and intersectional reflection on the challenges faced by women from OBCs, particularly the *Yadav* community, in entering professions like journalism. Several key themes emerge in this narrative, which can be analyzed from the perspectives of caste-based discrimination, gender oppression, and social exclusion. The interviewee highlights the lack of representation of individuals from marginalized backgrounds in the field of journalism, particularly those hailing from agrarian, rural, and OBC communities.

This sense of isolation is exacerbated by the fact that even minority groups, such as Muslims in the field of journalism, predominantly originate from urban areas, further alienating those from rural, OBC backgrounds as herself. This observation underscores the urban-rural divide in professional opportunities, suggesting that individuals from urban backgrounds, including those from minority groups, benefit from greater representation in fields such as journalism.

'My surname, Yadav, was associated with cattle-herders', laments Indrani. She reflects on how her identity has been used to undermine her credibility as a journalist. Despite her qualifications and professional achievements, she frequently encountered reminders of her caste background through derogatory comments and sarcastic remarks, reinforcing negative stereotypes and social stigma. These attacks sought to reduce her identity to that of a member of a 'backward caste.' As a result, this association with her caste became a convenient tool for trolls and critics to discredit her voice and dismiss her work as lacking credibility or authority.

It is crucial to acknowledge that the caste dimension carries profound historical significance, linking the abuse to centuries of marginalization and exclusion, as discussed in Chapter 6. While overt forms of racism and sexism are more readily recognized and condemned,

caste discrimination often remains overlooked in both public discourse and institutional responses.

Indrani's experiences with threats of sexual violence and objectification, shaped by her caste and physical appearance, intensify her psychological and emotional distress. The continuous threat of violence, combined with sexualization and degradation, creates a harmful environment in which she endures significant psychological burdens, including fear, anxiety (Barão et al., 2022), and trauma.

I felt as if I were a terrorist who has attacked Mumbai and I am being scrutinized [...] they wrote an article on me, and the title of that article was, 'The Print turns their reporter's fantasy into an article'. They accused me of stating that I consider Narendra Modi a sex symbol... My trolling continued after that intermittently. And it never stopped because once you are in the limelight, people know about it, and then there are several compartments. You have loyal trolls; one from the ruling party... that is a compartment, and another one from your own media fraternity. There is a complete ecosystem here[...] My editor said a few words to me, taunted a bit... but thankfully Shekhar Gupta held my back [...] I have five editors fighting for me. I take immense pride in my work!

(Respondent Indrani, 25-29, digital journalist at The Print, Delhi-NCR)

The hyperbolic analogy employed by the journalist here conveys the intense examination and public judgment she experiences. Additionally, the trolling directed at her regarding her article on Prime Minister Modi underscores a significant issue in media representation: how misinterpretations or sensationalized headlines can intensify personal assaults, resulting in long-lasting damage to an individual's reputation. In this instance, the media appears complicit in perpetuating harassment, either through negligence or a deliberate effort to provoke controversy.

I argue that once an individual is thrust into the limelight, online harassers are often emboldened to sustain their abuse over an extended period, underscoring the persistent nature of trolling. Indrani acknowledges the support of her editor, suggesting the crucial role of institutional backing in addressing online harassment. Evidently, the support from her organization played a significant role in mitigating the effects of online trolling, reinforcing the notion that institutional backing can serve as a critical buffer against the psychological and professional harm caused by sustained online harassment.

She reflects on the inadequate support from fellow women journalists and underscores the isolation many women face in an already demanding profession. Despite the significant psychological and emotional challenges, Indrani's story stands as a powerful example of resilience. Her ability to transcend the constraints of caste stereotypes and build a career in journalism serves as a defiant act against both caste and gender norms. By challenging the restrictive roles imposed by societal expectations and pursuing a career in a field where women from OBC backgrounds are significantly underrepresented, the journalist asserts her autonomy, demonstrating a conscious rejection of structural inequalities and systemic barriers.

In conclusion, this testimony illustrates the extensive repercussions of online harassment, which transcend the individual journalist to affect their personal relationships and the mental well-being of those in their immediate circle. The interconnectedness of these effects calls for a more holistic approach to mental health support, one that encompasses not only the direct targets/victims but also their families and communities, who share in the emotional and psychological burden.

And then it was hard when I went to the police. For three months, I was in police protection for three months in 2018, and they were like right-wing groups which were like trying to attack my house [...] I was being protected for 3 months and then cybercrime also. They would say you go home...to your home for one month, one week, but they don't take any action [...] they all operate as men only [...] I never stopped!! I am scared. I limited myself. I am thinking a lot about what I'm writing, but I never stopped. I will never stop.

(Shaina, 40-44, Independent journalist, Chennai, Tamil Nadu)

In this testimony, the recommendation that women withdraw from public life rather than confront their aggressors underscores the deeply ingrained gendered dynamics within law enforcement responses. Such advice implicitly conveys that women ought to limit their participation in public spheres, rather than expecting the state to protect them from political or ideological violence. The interviewee further observes that the authorities 'operate entirely as men', emphasizing the patriarchal structure of the police force.

This observation highlights both the systemic gender bias within male-dominated institutions, which often lack the understanding and commitment to fully address the threats faced by women journalists, and the broader structural barriers that impede their safety and empowerment. Overall, her viewpoint suggests that the police force, characterized by its predominantly male structure, lacks the necessary understanding of the gender-specific challenges that women face in both public and professional environments. Furthermore, it highlights the deficiency of gender-sensitive policies, wherein instances of harassment, whether physical or digital, are often regarded as less critical or urgent, thereby fostering the normalization of such threats.

The testimony further elucidates the psychological effects of harassment. The journalist's admission of feeling 'scared' and having 'limited' herself underscores the profound emotional impact of enduring threats and harassment. The apprehension is evident in her reflection: 'what [I am] writing' suggesting self-censorship driven by the constant threat of violence. Although she underscores her resolve 'never to stop', the conflict between her professional obligations and the psychological burden is conspicuous in her narrative.

Nevertheless, the interviewee's statement, 'I never stopped! I will never stop,' underscores her determination to continue despite personal fear and external forces attempting to suppress her. Shaina's determination to persist despite the risks she faces constitutes an act of defiance against those who seek to intimidate and control women in public spaces. This narrative exposes a complex struggle, intertwining fear, personal apprehension, professional commitment, and institutional failings. In unison, standpoint theory and intersectionality furnish a comprehensive framework for discovering the intricate layers of the journalist's experiences, thereby facilitating a more profound critique of the systemic obstacles encountered by women within the realms of media and law enforcement.

In conclusion, Shaina's testimony reveals the intersection of gender, power, and institutional apathy, underscoring the critical need for systemic reform in addressing and comprehending harassment. I contend that the concept of resilience in the face of adversity extends beyond simply surviving hardships; it involves the capacity to adapt, develop coping strategies, and continue to function effectively despite challenging circumstances. While online harassment of women journalists presents profound challenges, many exhibit resilience by

developing coping mechanisms and utilizing available resources to confront the underlying systemic issues.

It is crucial to recognize that resilience ought not to be perceived solely as a personal responsibility, as the ongoing prevalence of online abuse highlights a systemic issue that demands comprehensive, structural solutions. In addition to collective efforts addressing the root causes of harassment, resilience is reinforced through institutional reforms, protective measures, and collaboration to establish safer, more equitable conditions for journalists, allowing them to work without fear of harassment or retaliation.

The collective experience of these 181 women journalists highlights the pervasive nature of online harassment and its profound impact on their personal and professional lives. It is, therefore, crucial to recognize and acknowledge the ways gender, caste, class, state (regional identity) or cultural and ethnic background, sexual orientation, political affiliation, and religious affiliation distinctly shape these encounters for journalists in the Indian mediascape. While a substantial number of women journalists face misogynistic abuse online, as documented in various studies, the intersection of these identities often serves as a compounding factor. For those at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities, the psychological toll of such harassment manifests in particularly severe and debilitating ways, intensifying the emotional and professional challenges they endure.

Furthermore, a recurring pattern noted among journalists who have faced negative impacts is the disruption of essential physiological functions, including eating disorders. Some individuals indicated a reduced appetite, which is a typical reaction to stress and signifies the

body's impaired capacity to maintain homeostasis during extended periods of psychological strain. Many others reported excessive hunger as a stress-induced coping mechanism. These disruptions in eating patterns indicate the body's impaired capacity to manage the emotional strain caused by ongoing online harassment, ultimately eroding their motivation and limiting their capacity to engage in their professional obligations.

Moreover, many journalists report experiencing a pervasive and intense sense of fear associated with harassment. This fear often stems from the threatening and hateful comments directed at them, which remain etched in their minds long after the initial occurrence. These written attacks do not dissipate easily; rather, they are internalized, leading to chronic anxiety and a persistent feeling of vulnerability. Several journalists frequently report sleeplessness as a direct consequence of these mental intrusions, with many recounting how the abusive messages replay in their thoughts during the night, preventing them from achieving restorative sleep.

Over time, the cumulative stress of sleeplessness exacerbates their emotional fragility, contributing to a cycle of psychological distress (Lo Martire et al., 2020). The psychological effects of such harassment are significant (as discussed in the initial chapters). Many targets develop severe health conditions, including anxiety disorders, depression, and stress-related illnesses such as hypertension or gastrointestinal disorders. These conditions arise from the continuous psychological pressure of being a target of online abuse, particularly when the harassment involves threats of physical violence or sexual assault (Huber, 2022). The body's prolonged

exposure to stress hormones like cortisol can have debilitating effects, further undermining the individual's capacity to cope with their professional responsibilities.

One of the most concerning outcomes of these health issues is the erosion of the journalist's ability or desire to work. Many journalists describe a gradual loss of motivation and enthusiasm for their profession, as harassment makes it increasingly difficult to perform their duties without fear or emotional exhaustion. This phenomenon, often referred to as burnout (MacDonald et al., 2016; Bossio and Holton, 2019), is particularly damaging in the context of women journalists, as it risks silencing critical voices in the media landscape. In extreme cases, the psychological becomes overwhelming, driving journalists to leave the profession (Monteiro *et. al.*, 2015; Hallsten, 2017), which represents a significant loss for both journalism and the broader sphere of public discourse.

In conclusion, the physical and psychological repercussions of online harassment are profound, manifesting in dangerous health consequences as discussed above. These effects ultimately hinder the professional lives of women journalists, pushing them toward burnout or even career abandonment. The systemic inadequacies in addressing online harassment highlight the urgent need for comprehensive strategies to protect and support those targeted by such abuse.

8.2 Collective Resilience and Solidarity?

Most research studies conducted in the recent years have shown a broader pattern of solidarity networks and collective resilience, with many women finding mutual support among other

women journalists. Several women journalists' organizations use Twitter to foster solidarity and combat online harassment, promoting gender equality and collective action within the journalism community (Cabrera & Gozávez, 2021; Kasianenko, 2019). In contrast, my findings suggest otherwise and challenge this narrative.

The absence of solidarity challenges the notion that these networks are universally available or effective, particularly among marginalized groups like OBC women, where distinct experiences related to caste, regional affiliation and social backgrounds create additional barriers to forming cohesive support networks. Interestingly, many journalists in my study have relied on personal resilience, cognitive reframing, and a sense of purpose to manage the psychological impacts of harassment.

My empirical findings demonstrate that such entrenched social hierarchies, regional distinctions, and structural exclusion continue to create formidable barriers to solidarity within the contemporary mediascape, particularly amid the current politically charged atmosphere that is characterized by orchestrated targeting of journalists (as discussed in the Literature review chapters). I further contend that fragmented solidarity or the lack of collective support contributes to the heightened challenges women journalists face in overcoming online harassment. This critique highlights that the resilience demonstrated by women journalists in my sample is primarily driven by personal agency rather than a broader network of solidarity.

I recently published a scholarly article in *Media Asia* that demonstrates the variation in human behavior within collective environments in pursuit of social validation, in contrast to individual or

solitary behavioral patterns. My paper sheds light on the dichotomy between public discourse and private agreement, thus highlighting ‘the complexities of online communication dynamics, where public forums can become arenas for resentment and posturing, while private communications reveal solidarity and support’ (Chandel, 2024).

A significant finding during my in-depth interviews concerns the Network of Women in Media, India (NWMI), a prominent not-for-profit media forum. Several participants vehemently acknowledged and lauded the organization for the crucial support it has provided them during challenging times. As elaborated in the introductory chapter of this dissertation, NWMI has persistently issued official statements to defend and advocate for women journalists. For instance, the organization vehemently condemned the derogatory remarks targeted at Haseena Shaik, a Telugu television journalist.

Furthermore, the organization has been consistent in its advocacy for creating safe online spaces for women in media (Chapter 1). NWMI has supported numerous journalists within its network, many of whom are part of this involuntary forum that stands against harassment. This advocacy extends beyond individual cases, encompassing a broader commitment to defending women journalists across India. Most recently, in 2024, NWMI played a pivotal role in a high-profile case by urging the Human Rights and Religious Freedom Awards (HRRF) to investigate allegations against freelance journalist Umar Altaf Para, who had been awarded the prize for photojournalism (NWMI, 2024).

Following NWMI's statement, Jamia Journalism Alum Network and Women in Journalism, HRRF withdrew Para's award in light of the allegations, demonstrating the increasing demand for accountability.

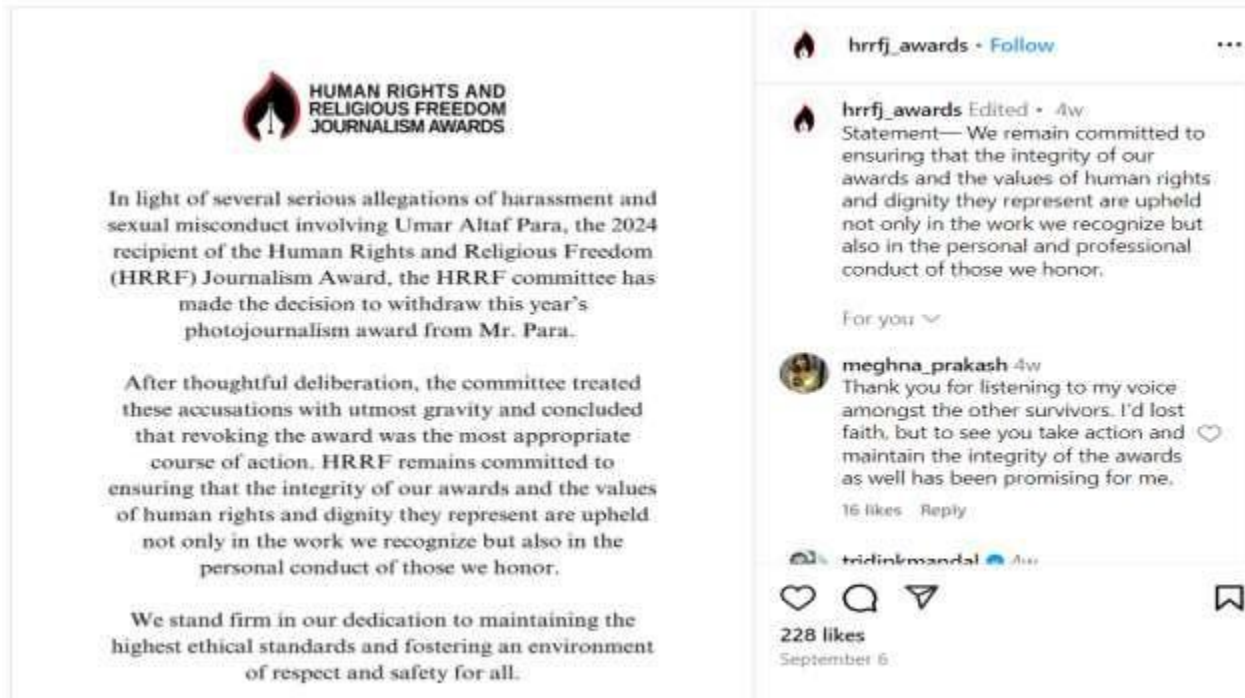


Fig. 33: Accountability in Journalism: Allegations of Harassment Lead to Withdrawal of Award from Umar Altaf Para https://www.instagram.com/p/C_la74HP996/?igsh=Ymt1ejM1d3RjYjQ3

This development marks a considerable triumph for numerous women in the media who have encountered harassment from their peers, underscoring the importance of collective advocacy in the pursuit of safer professional environments within journalism. Although this progress can be viewed as a success for women in the media sector, it is crucial to acknowledge that

experiences and viewpoints regarding harassment and advocacy can vary significantly among women.

It is noteworthy that professional organizations, such as the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) and other media unions, often play a critical role in advocating for safer working environments and holding platforms accountable for the proliferation of harassment. This form of institutional solidarity amplifies the voices of individual journalists and applies pressure on both media organizations and digital platforms to take stronger actions against online abuse. Collective action helps shift the burden from individuals to the systems that enable harassment, thereby alleviating some of the psychological strain, for example the case of Rana Ayub (discussed in Chapter 1).

This concluding analysis of this chapter illustrates the profound psychological and emotional toll that online harassment imposes on women journalists, intersecting with broader issues of gender-based violence, professional marginalization, and social exclusion. The gendered dimension of online harassment is evident in how women experience and perceive its harm. 2022 research by IM *et.al.* highlights that women, across 14 countries, perceive greater harm from online harassment, particularly non-consensual Fig. sharing, when compared with men (IM *et.al.*,2022).

This is in accordance with my research conclusions, wherein women journalists report heightened vulnerability due to their gender. In agreement with all the 11 authors of this study, I argue that the predominance of male leadership in tech companies profoundly contributes to inadequate responses to online abuse, as policies often fail to address the full extent of harm

women experience. This corresponds with more extensive critiques of the current digital platforms, where policies may not fully account for the severity of harm women experience, as evident in the case studies discussed in this chapter. Quantifying the harm caused by online harassment remains difficult (*Ibid.*), yet, given women's lifelong exposure to various forms of gender-based violence, banning users may be driven by an urgent need to address and minimize the potential for future harm.

This chapter has shed light not only on the individual traumas experienced by these women but also on the systemic deficiencies in responding to such harassment, particularly within male-dominated institutions such as law enforcement and the media. Notwithstanding their positions of authority and acknowledgment, numerous women continue to be subjected to relentless gendered assaults, further intensified by their caste, religion, or political affiliations.

Senior journalists are particularly susceptible to harassment due to their involvement in investigative reporting, and participation in high-stakes assignments, which often correlates with greater risks of intimidation as in the case of journalists mentioned in this chapter. In my research, younger journalists did not overtly disclose instances of online harassment or being specifically targeted. Many indicated that their inexperience may have contributed to this lack of attention, as they are still in the early stages of their careers.

A recurring theme throughout this chapter is the resilience displayed by these women journalists. Despite the psychological strain, many demonstrate an unwavering commitment to their profession, underpinned by both personal fortitude and solidarity networks. Ultimately, the

chapter underscores the need for systemic change to dismantle the social and institutional barriers that enable harassment and stifle the voices of marginalized women in journalism. Addressing both extreme and subtle forms of harassment is crucial for fostering a more equitable and supportive environment for all journalists.

Signe Ivask et al.(2023) make a significant advancement to the current body of research pertaining to the adaptive/mitigation strategies by journalists in response to aggressive and hostile online harassment. The study categorizes Estonian journalists into three distinct groups based on their responses to online hostility: (1) thick-skinned journalists, who do not perceive hostility as a significant problem and view it as an inevitable part of their work; (2) pragmatically conformist journalists, who focus on cultivating personal resilience to withstand attacks; and (3) journalists who actively seek protection or assistance in response to threats. However, the authors categorically acknowledge the fluidity of these categories, as journalists may shift between them depending on the situation.

Although this paper significantly informs my findings, I argue that the situation in India is far more complicated, shaped by numerous socio-political factors, as discussed in Chapters 6 and 7. Notably, 19 out of the 20 journalists in my sample attributed the exacerbation of online harassment to the current government, the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP). Additionally, I concur that ignoring hostility or pressuring journalists to adopt an industry-wide norm of having a 'thick skin' may seem pragmatic in the short term, but several studies have demonstrated its significant negative effects on journalists' mental health, professional integrity, and overall journalistic practice. Prolonged exposure to hostility and the expectation to suppress emotional responses

has been shown to result in burnout, compromised ethical standards, and self-censorship.

In countries like Estonia, legal regulations empower individuals to initiate legal action against both offenders and platforms that disseminate abusive material, thereby establishing formal channels to mitigate the harms incurred. Conversely, in India, although legal mechanisms are in place to redress the actions of individual offenders of online harassment, there exists a lack of an overarching framework that imposes direct accountability on platforms, thereby leaving a significant gap in the fight against online hostility. This regulatory disparity highlights the challenges journalists face in environments where institutional protections are inadequate or ineffective.

Ultimately, the notion of ‘thick skin’ as an individual coping mechanism (Chen et al., 2018; Martin & Murrell, 2021) warrants rigorous scrutiny, particularly given the structural nature of online hostility and aggression. While personal resilience is certainly commendable, I argue that it is inadequate to address the systemic problems journalists face in hostile environments. Although many women journalists exhibit personal determination and solidarity, these qualities should not be the primary expectation in the face of adversity. Focusing on individual coping strategies diverts attention from the structural barriers that perpetuate harassment and intimidation within the media landscape.

In synthesizing the experiences of women journalists in this study, it is essential to recognize that while identities such as gender, caste, and regional affiliation are integral to shaping individual experiences, these women are primarily situated within the professional domain of the journalistic field. This field, governed by distinct power dynamics—such as editorial

independence, media ownership, and the tension between journalistic ethics and commercial Imperatives – imposes specific pressures on participants. Women journalists, in particular, must navigate both external forces, including harassment, gendered expectations, and broader social inequities, as well as internal pressures related to the accumulation of professional capital, reputation, and legitimacy within the field.

8.3 Strategic Adaptation and Empowerment

In tandem with the existing research, my findings highlight that journalists employ strategic adaptation to mitigate the risks associated with online harassment. Scholars have similarly identified the use of digital safety strategies and curation of online presence as essential components of resilience for journalists operating in hostile environments (e.g., Jane, 2017; Posetti et al., 2021). My findings align with this body of work, confirming that many journalists, while altering their online behaviors, remain actively engaged in the digital spaces vital to their profession.

These adaptive measures not only reflect efforts toward personal safety but also resonate with broader trends in resilience research, emphasizing the importance of strategic responses to systemic threats. Many journalists in my sample have adopted measures such as limiting online interactions and carefully curating their social media presence to minimize exposure to harassment (Shah & Shah, 2024). These adjustments allow them to maintain a degree of safety without entirely withdrawing from the digital spaces imperative to their occupational functions.

Notably, only a small minority of journalists in my sample have sought recourse through legal

channels, reflecting broader research that suggests legal action is pursued rarely due to the complexities of enforcement and the slow pace of legal proceedings (Bagenda & Carbonilla, 2023; Bhat, 2023; Bhat & Chadha, 2022; Sohal, 2021). The data I collected corroborate the prevailing scholarly consensus, indicating that while legal mechanisms are available, they are not the primary method of response, with most journalists relying instead on personal safety strategies and adaptation to the digital environment.

My dissertation underscores that digital harassment is not solely confined to overt attacks; rather, it often manifests through innuendo and insinuations, making it challenging for journalists to address or respond to these veiled criticisms. Beyond direct threats, respondents frequently encountered sexist humor questioning their authority and professionalism. These seemingly 'light-hearted' remarks carry insidious undertones that reinforce gender-based biases, subtly diminishing the standing of women journalists in digital spaces.

Another person who stalks me comments, and makes positive comments about me stating, 'No, you can't say that about her...she's such a beautiful girl'. Then the first person comments again stating, who cares for your comment. She is fat and I need to lose weight. I realized the first one was not a bot and they were having a conversation. So, the other person, who defended me is an old man, and he's one of those type of those stalker profiles who so *positively stalks* me, but he's stalker profile. So, it was the whole conversation when he made that comment about me, 'You should lose weight'. And then the whole conversation. Why are people having this whole debate about my appearance?

(Gauri, 40-44, news anchor, India Today Tv, Delhi-NCR)

This testimony presents a complex instance of online harassment, which involves the intersection of appearance-based objectification, unsolicited commentary, and gendered surveillance. The journalist's experience reveals how seemingly benign or "positive" comments can still contribute

to a toxic, intrusive atmosphere, especially when intertwined with negative commentary about her physical appearance. The initial comment, which praises her looks, may superficially appear to be a compliment; however, it functions as a means of asserting ownership or control over her body. This is compounded by the second comment, which shifts to body shaming, focusing on her weight and suggesting that she needs to change.

In essence, this testimony underscores the harmful intersection of harassment and body shaming in online spaces, particularly for women. It also highlights the dual burden women face: being both the subject of unsolicited admiration and the target of criticism, thus reinforcing the ways in which women's bodies are continually surveilled and subjected to scrutiny in digital environments.

Therefore, I propose that the definition of online harassment should be broadened to encompass not only overtly malicious intent but also unwanted, objectifying attention and commentary, which can inflict significant distress and foster a profound sense of personal violation for the target.

As this study concludes, a key contribution is the redefined understanding of online harassment. Through an in-depth examination of women journalists' experiences in India, this Ph.D. highlights the limitations of current definitions and offers a new, comprehensive definition that captures the nuanced nature of digital abuse, accounting for the intersecting influences of gender, caste, and political power.

8.4 Redefining Gendered Online Harassment

Current definitions of online harassment frequently fail to consider significant cultural and socio-political elements that affect marginalized communities, particularly in intricate environments such as India. In light of this oversight, I advocate for a revised definition of gendered online harassment.

'Online harassment, particularly gender-based, is a multifaceted phenomenon that encompasses the non-consensual creation, distribution, or threat of sexual Fig.s, (e.g., revenge porn and sexting), as well as cyberstalking, gender-based hate speech, and virtual rape. A critical element of this harassment is 'stalking through compliments', where persistent, unsolicited comments on personal attributes like appearance or clothing—though seemingly positive—intrusively violate the target's privacy. While subtle, this form of harassment exerts control, undermines boundaries, and often induces a pervasive sense of being surveilled, leading to emotional distress and vulnerability.'

This definition encapsulates the complexity and breadth of online harassment, emphasizing that it is not limited to overt acts of violence but also includes more insidious forms of abuse that can have profound psychological impacts. Even in the absence of overt malice, such behaviors can foster a persistent and intrusive sense of surveillance, where the target feels as though their every action is being scrutinized. Such continuous feeling of being watched, despite its seemingly benign nature, can erode an individual's sense of autonomy and personal space (as evident in respondent Gauri's narrative above).

The subtle, repetitive nature of these compliments creates a psychological environment in which the target may become hyper-aware of their own appearance or actions, leading to

heightened anxiety and discomfort. Over time, this chronic state of vigilance can have a profound emotional impact, contributing to feelings of powerlessness, disempowerment, and distress. The ongoing psychological toll of such harassment is compounded by the difficulty in addressing or categorizing the behavior, as it may not fit within conventional definitions of more overt forms of harassment. The implications of this definition extend to both academic research and policy formulation. By framing online harassment within this broader context, stakeholders can better advocate for protective measures that ensure safer online environments for all users, particularly marginalized groups who are disproportionately affected by these forms of violence.

This conclusion aligns with the understanding that online harassment is not solely defined by the severity of actions but also by their impact on victims. For instance, behaviors that may appear benign or unintentional – such as persistent compliments or seemingly innocuous comments about a person's appearance – can contribute to a cumulative experience of harassment. Traditionally, definitions of online violence primarily concentrated on the actions of perpetrators, often neglecting the critical aspect of how these actions are perceived by victims or targets. This definition rectifies that oversight by recognizing that the experience of harassment is profoundly shaped by the victim's perception of the behavior directed towards them.

Chapter 9

The Conclusion

This research aimed to investigate the lived experiences of women journalists as they navigate and confront online harassment in India, with the aim of exploring the compounded ways in which gendered abuse manifests in both the personal and professional lives of women journalists, in addition to examining the repercussions of this harassment on their journalistic careers and the media landscape at large. Grounded in Standpoint Theory and Intersectionality, my study aimed to comprehend the ways in which these women maneuver through indirect sexual overtures, threats, frauds, biases, and deliberate assaults in the digital space within a highly polarized sociopolitical climate.

My Ph.D. began in 2020, a time when the topic of online harassment of journalists was gaining traction, particularly owing to the rise of far-right subcultures globally. Since then, several global studies have been conducted and numerous articles written on the level of vitriol spewed against journalists online, women in particular. This, in addition to the mitigation strategies adopted by journalists, has been widely covered in recent studies with some focus on the Global South. It is my understanding that no research has yet investigated the subtle and traumatic ways such harassment manifests and affects the personal and professional lives of women journalists in India, under the BJP regime.

This study endeavors to fill that void by integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to offer comprehensive insights. The research analyzed the narratives and

perspectives of a cohort of women journalists spanning various age demographics, extending from their twenties to fifties and beyond. This dissertation presents several notable findings, which are outlined as follows:

- a) This research reveals that while merely a fraction of women encounter severe instances of online harassment, those who are affected endure it in an exceptionally intense manner that significantly influences their psychological and emotional health. This diminutive yet profoundly impacted group in my sample has faced considerable personal adversities, including challenges pertaining to psycho-emotional health. Yet, the leitmotif of resilience permeates their narratives, reflecting their capacity to adapt and overcome these hardships.
- b) In contrast to a vast majority of global studies (Posetti & Shabbir, 2022; UNESCO, 2020; IWMF, 2021), which frequently indicate a high prevalence of online violence, this study underscores a more nuanced reality, i.e., while a considerably lesser fraction of female journalists encounters extreme forms of harassment, the consequences for those affected are profoundly detrimental.
- c) An unexpected yet insightful conclusion from the in-depth interviews was the sustained presence of *Brahmanical Patriarchy* as a source of harassment for women journalists. Recent research has emphasized that the prevalence of upper-caste *Brahmins* in Indian media reflects the systemic obstacles faced by marginalized communities (Kureel, 2021; Oxfam India, 2019). However, in a nation characterized by multilingualism and cultural plurality such as India, caste-based discrimination impacts not solely the *Dalit* community but also various sub-caste factions. These factions manifest subtly yet profoundly across micro, meso, and macro levels

of social interaction, shaping everyday exchanges and broader media dynamics, inclusive of those occurring in the digital environments. These discriminatory practices, although often subtly pervasive, shape access to opportunities and reinforce social hierarchies, making it difficult for lower-caste journalists to gain entry or establish credibility in the field. This intricate understanding of caste dynamics clarifies how the digital realm reflects, and at times intensifies (as discussed in Chapter 1) the deeply entrenched social biases, thereby further complicating the professional landscape for journalists.

- d) Another major finding across both the in-depth interviews and survey data revealed that a significant majority of the journalists identified increased repression under the current BJP regime (led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi) as a critical factor contributing to online harassment. These results align closely with existing studies, adding further validity to the conclusions drawn by earlier scholars. Nineteen out of the 20 journalists strongly supported this argument, and the same sentiment was echoed in the survey, where a significant majority attributed political parties and government supporters as primary sources of harassment.

This finding highlights the intertwined nature of political power and media freedom, where the current political landscape not only influences but exacerbates the online harassment faced by journalists, especially women. Such state-sponsored harassment (Roberts & Voskuhl, 2018) amplifies the risks these journalists encounter daily, undermining their professional autonomy and stifling dissenting voices within the media. The results point to a troubling pattern in which political partisanship and digital harassment intersect, effectively reshaping the boundaries of press freedom in contemporary India.

Overall, the data analysis showcases that *questioning of professionalism* and *gender-based negativity* are the most prevalent forms of harassment encountered by Indian women journalists, highlighting a gendered aspect to these experiences. These findings underscore how online harassment often targets both the professional integrity and gender identity of the respondents, indicating that the harassment is not only frequent but also highly personal.

Notably, 45% of respondents reported being personally affected by online harassment, while a smaller yet massive portion, 29%, acknowledged its impact on their professional lives. This distinction suggests that while online harassment affects women journalists at a personal level, it also crosses over into their professional spheres, undermining their roles as credible and objective reporters.

9.1 Significance of this research

The significance of this dissertation lies in its ability to shed light on the complexities surrounding online harassment faced by women journalists in India. By detailing the gravity of experiences faced by a cohort and the resilience displayed in their professional realm, the results accentuate the critical need for supportive systems, policy adjustments, and cultural evolutions within digital contexts to safeguard vulnerable users and enhance constructive online engagements. This aspect emphasizes the resilience of individuals in facing challenges while also underscoring the necessity for supportive environments that empower those affected rather than marginalize them.

My research findings reveal that *Brahmanical* patriarchy remains a persistent source of harassment for women journalists, uncovering a complex and layered reality within the

Indian media landscape. While much has been documented about the marginalization of *Dalits* within the caste system, there is a notable gap in research on the marginalization of other sub-caste groups, particularly those that do not fit neatly within the traditional *Indian Varna* system. This research addresses this gap by revealing how caste-based discrimination extends beyond *Dalit* exclusion, affecting a range of sub-castes and contributing to an intricate hierarchy that influences women's professional experiences in journalism.

This discovery is significant in revealing how caste dynamics are not monolithic but rather vary regionally, with distinct differences in caste classifications between states. These regional disparities, particularly between North and South India, introduce a complex set of caste-based obstacles that are specific to particular geographic contexts, further complicating the experiences of journalists.

The significant majority of journalists identifying political parties and government supporters as primary sources of online harassment (as identified through the survey results) reveal how political partisanship plays a direct role in shaping the harassment landscape. This insight highlights how the erosion of press freedom and democratic discourse in India not only manifests through traditional means of repression but is amplified in digital spaces, where political actors and their supporters actively work to silence dissenting voices.

The implications of this finding are twofold: a) *Impact on Press Freedom*: In line with the existing research (Jain, 2023), my research reveals a stark and troubling landscape for press freedom in India, where journalists encounter both overt and covert forms of repression linked to their coverage of sensitive issues. This climate of fear encourages self-censorship,

as journalists opt to withhold reports on politically sensitive topics to shield themselves from harassment, thereby diminishing the media's critical role in upholding democracy. b) *Need for Policy Interventions*: My research outcomes resonate with established studies, affirming the conclusions drawn by earlier scholars regarding the necessity for targeted interventions that protect journalists from politically motivated harassment (UNESCO, 2019, 2020). Such measures include policy changes within social media platforms to address targeted harassment by government-aligned actors, as well as legislative reforms that uphold freedom of expression in digital spaces.

This research contributes to a growing body of literature examining the decline of press freedom under populist and authoritarian-leaning governments worldwide (TheHindu Bureau, 2023). In India, scholars such as Prashanth Bhat & Kalyani Chadha (2020), Cherian George (2016) have documented the BJP regime's efforts to control media narratives, often through tacit endorsement of online harassment and legal actions against dissenting journalists.

In concluding this study, it is imperative to recognize the broader framework of repression that shapes the experiences of women journalists facing online harassment in India. This dissertation demonstrates how coercive mechanisms are systematically deployed in digital spaces to suppress opposing voices, as illustrated by the experiences of the journalists involved. For example, respondent Indrani (35-39), a young journalist whose exceptional journalism has earned her multiple awards and industry recognition, described facing a legal defamation case for her reportage 'because BJP thought that I was trying to malign the party's

image and were offended [...] while the Left thought that I am trying to glorify Modi, nobody even read that article'. Such reactions, based on preemptive judgment, illustrate the deeply challenging environment for journalists and scholars attempting to critically engage with political figures or complex issues. Journalists, regardless of gender, must traverse a field marked by assumptions and polarized opinions, often detached from the substance or intent of their work.

Scholars like Khaitan (2020) and Abhishek (2022) detail how coercive mechanisms have been used in India to suppress dissent by capturing institutions, including the media, and altering laws, as seen in the case of the IT Rules 2021, to deny dissenters access to recourse. They further illustrate how state machinery has been manipulated to delay or fabricate evidence against dissenters, pressuring the judiciary – even those not aligned with right-wing principles – into compliance. This analysis underscores a systematic effort to undermine democratic institutions and limit independent opposition. However, examining how the Modi government has sought to weaken state institutions like the judiciary and tweak laws is beyond the scope of this thesis.

Internationally, similar patterns have been observed in other countries with strong populist leaders, such as Brazil under Jair Bolsonaro and the Philippines under Rodrigo Duterte, where journalists face heightened hostility from politically motivated actors. Recent research on digital authoritarianism and media repression suggests that online harassment has become a key strategy for silencing journalists in environments where overt government censorship may draw criticism. This finding thus situates itself within the broader discourse

on digital harassment as a tool of state-influenced repression, expanding on the literature by highlighting how political actors and supporters use harassment to extend control over media narratives in ostensibly open digital spaces.

In the light of these findings, it is crucial to examine the broader implications for journalism as a profession, as targeted harassment has significantly fostered a culture of silencing, self-censorship, and diminished engagement among female journalists. Furthermore, the emphasis on professionalism reveals how gender-based critiques are frequently used to undermine the legitimacy of women's voices, underscoring the power imbalances embedded within the narratives of digital harassment.

9.2 Theoretical Implications

Expansion of Intersectionality and Standpoint Theory: This research contributes to the application of Standpoint Theory and Intersectionality within media and gender studies, offering insight into how digital harassment uniquely affects women journalists, influenced by India's socio-political and caste dynamics. This research broadens the scope of intersectionality, illustrating how online harassment is intricately tied to caste, gender, and political identity. It further extends Standpoint Theory by revealing the distinct ways in which marginalized groups, particularly women journalists, confront both overt and subtle forms of harassment.

By examining these dimensions together, the findings highlight how these biases intersect to create layered experiences of harassment, where marginalized identities such as lower-caste women or those critical of dominant political ideologies face amplified forms of online abuse.

Challenging Traditional Definitions of Online Harassment: The Role of Perception in Identifying Harassment: This research challenges traditional frameworks that define harassment primarily through the actions of perpetrators, underscoring the significance of victims' perceptions in identifying harassment. By demonstrating that even superficially positive comments can be perceived as harassment, the study advocates for a more nuanced understanding that includes both subtle and explicit forms of objectification. This perception-based approach provides a new lens for examining digital harassment within theoretical constructs of media and communication studies.

Power Dynamics and Digital Misogyny: By applying Van Dijk's critical discourse analysis, my research unfolds nuances on how digital spaces reinforce traditional power structures, with state-supported and politically motivated harassment amplifying the challenges for women journalists. As explored throughout this dissertation, online harassment transcends being a social issue, functioning instead as a tool for controlling media narratives. This highlights the necessity for theoretical models that integrate the influence of the state in shaping and perpetuating digital harassment.

Impact on Press Freedom: This study contributes to the theoretical understanding of media autonomy by showcasing the explicit and implicit ways in which online harassment operates as a form of indirect censorship. In contexts where freedom of the press is compromised by

digital harassment, especially under authoritarian regimes, journalists frequently engage in self-censorship, leading to diminished press freedom. This finding situates online harassment within broader theoretical discussions on authoritarianism, populism, and media suppression, demonstrating how harassment operates as a mechanism of repression in digital spaces.

9.3 Policy Implications

Broadening the legal definition of online harassment: My Ph.D. highlights the need for a broader legal understanding of online harassment, which, as it currently stands, often focuses on explicit threats or overtly hostile actions. In my proposed definition, I argue that harassment can also manifest through more subtle behaviors, such as persistent objectifying compliments or discussions of personal appearance. I recommend that legal frameworks incorporate both the intent behind such actions and the perceptions of those targeted. By amending existing laws to encompass both direct and indirect forms of harassment, a more comprehensive structure can be created to address the complex nature of online abuse.

Caste and Gender-Sensitive Reporting Mechanisms on Digital Platforms: Given that caste and gender biases often underlie online harassment in the Indian context, I recommend that digital platforms establish reporting mechanisms that are attuned to these cultural nuances. Additionally, algorithms should be developed in collaboration with local experts to effectively identify and respond to caste-based slurs, misogynistic language, and politically motivated abuse.

Policies targeting politically motivated harassment: This research highlights the role of politically motivated harassment in intensifying the online abuse of journalists, particularly in the context of the current political climate. To address this issue, I propose policy interventions that specifically target harassment driven by political agendas, including more severe penalties for organized campaigns of harassment orchestrated by state-affiliated or politically aligned groups.

International Collaboration for Digital Safety Standards: Given the global prevalence of politically motivated harassment, particularly targeting journalists, I propose that policymakers in India collaborate with international human rights and media organizations to develop unified digital safety standards. Such standards would encompass protections against gendered and politically motivated harassment, ultimately fostering a safer online environment.

This research has highlighted how the grotesque harassment directed at women journalists strips them of dignity and agency, turning their professional and personal lives into battlegrounds marred by dehumanizing abuse. Against this backdrop, Elon Musk's recent alterations to the platform, now X (formerly Twitter), further amplify these concerns, introducing significant risks to user privacy and safety, particularly for women journalists, who remain prime targets of harassment.

By forcing users to choose between making their tweets visible only to selected followers or to everyone, including those they have blocked, the platform potentially exposes vulnerable users to further harassment.

Such platform-level shifts can exacerbate the vulnerabilities of marginalized voices, reinforcing the need for structural interventions to safeguard user security and uphold freedom of expression.

Additional research is essential to analyze the consequences of platform policy changes on harassment, focusing on marginalized groups, especially women journalists. Longitudinal studies examining the effects of social media policy shifts on user safety, harassment prevalence, and the psychological well-being of targets would be invaluable in tracking these evolving impacts over time. Additionally, interdisciplinary research could explore the interplay between platform governance, regulatory frameworks, and user advocacy to develop evidence-based recommendations that enhance user safety and accountability.

Notes:

- 1) While foundational works by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1991) and Patricia Hill Collins (2000) inform my broader understanding of intersectionality, this study draws primarily on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's postcolonial feminist framing, which attends more closely to the caste-based, linguistically embedded, and historically layered structures of power within the Indian context. Spivak (1988, 2000) encourages a critical rethinking of voice, marginality, and representation, emphasizing that intersectionality in postcolonial societies must be attuned not only to gender and race, but also to caste, religious hierarchy, and geopolitical unevenness. Her conceptualization of the subaltern was

particularly generative in analysing how epistemic violence silences women situated at the intersection of multiple oppressions.

In applying this framework, categories such as caste, religion, language, and socioeconomic background were treated as analytically significant but were not included as discrete variables in the quantitative survey instrument, since participants were not asked to disclose such information. Instead, these dimensions emerged organically during in-depth interviews and were examined using feminist critical discourse analysis. The quantitative survey focused solely on variables directly reported by participants, such as the types and frequency of harassment, sources of abuse, and perceived impacts on mental health and professional efficacy.

Although I initially used the terms 'independent' and 'dependent' variables to describe key elements of the survey analysis, this study does not follow a hypothesis-testing design. Rather, it is a research question-driven inquiry rooted in feminist and postcolonial epistemologies, with an exploratory, mixed-methods orientation. The aim is to understand how online harassment affects the personal and professional lives of women journalists in India, particularly in light of caste, gender, political dynamics, and threats to press freedom, without seeking to quantify or generalize causation.

Intersectionality, in this context, is not a predictive model; rather, it serves as a critical-analytical perspective that guides the formulation of research questions and the interpretive methods utilized in the analysis. Spivak's conceptualization lays the groundwork for

comprehending how structural power functions at the convergence of various identity dimensions, influencing vulnerability, access, and voice. Thus, the mention of the variables should be viewed primarily as an organizational instrument to elucidate the relationships examined in the study, instead of being perceived as a catalyst for causal inference.

In the quantitative strand, only the following variables were analysed:

Independent Variables (used descriptively):

- Types of digital harassment (e.g. verbal abuse, doxxing, trolling, stalking, misogynistic slurs)
- Source of harassment (e.g. political actors, government entities, anonymous individuals)
- Professional role and media platform (e.g. freelance, TV, print)

Dependent Variables:

- Impact on personal life (e.g. stress, anxiety, depression, relationship strain)
- Impact on professional life (e.g. role withdrawal, reduced opportunities, job insecurity)
- Psycho-emotional well-being (e.g. emotional exhaustion, PTSD symptoms)
- Professional efficacy (e.g. self-reported confidence, productivity)
- Frequency of harassment (reported within a given timeframe)

In contrast, the qualitative strand drew on participants' self-disclosures regarding caste, religion, language, and regional context. These were not quantified but interpreted discursively to uncover how intersecting systems of marginalization shaped participants' lived experiences of online harassment. This approach is consistent with intersectional feminist inquiry, where social categories are viewed as mutually constitutive rather than additive or isolatable.

This framework facilitated a comprehensive mixed-methods approach. The quantitative results offered a wide perspective on patterns and perceived trends, whereas the interviews produced detailed, intersectionally informed insights. Notably, I did not merely referenced Spivak's contributions but significantly integrated them into the critical discourse analysis—especially in the interpretation of silences, evasions, and emotional testimonies from women journalists situated at the intersections of caste, region, and political ideology.

To illustrate the alignment with the research questions:

- RQ 2.1 explores how psycho-emotional impacts vary across different social locations
- RQ 2.2 examines how harassment in India compares with global patterns, highlighting intersectionality in transnational and national frames
- RQ 2.3 investigates intra-caste hierarchies and the specific challenges faced by women journalists from marginalized sub-castes

In sum, intersectional narratives in my study are not employed as a static descriptor but as an epistemological stance and analytical strategy that shapes the research design, guides the interpretation of narratives, and centers the situated knowledge of marginalized women journalists as both legitimate and critical to understanding structural power.

Appendix A: Survey Questionnaire

Survey Questionnaire for my Ph.D. research on the lived experiences of women journalists navigating online harassment in India

Informed Consent

Consent Form I consent, begin the survey

You are invited to participate in a research study. **This Ph.D. project is being conducted by Pragyaa Chandel (pragyaa.chandel3@mail.dcu.ie) at Dublin City University and has received approval from the DCU Research Ethics Committee.**

Research Topic: Online harassment of women journalists and its repercussions on journalism in India

Your responses will help us understand the magnitude of online harassment in India and develop potential strategies to mitigate the negative effects of harassment through various intervention techniques.

You will be requested to participate in an 8–9 minute survey. All data will be handled in compliance with GDPR (general data protection regulation). The survey is anonymous, and no identifying information can be linked to you.

If you agree to participate in a follow-up interview, you are asked to supply an e-mail address.

Interviews will be conducted via video-conferencing or in-person, as feasible. All recordings will be destroyed (after transcription) and interview transcripts will be anonymized unless the interviewee wishes to be identified. If you have any questions, please contact the Principal Investigator (Pragyaa Chandel) for clarification at any stage.

Please note the following:

- I am 18 or more than 18 years of age
- My participation in the study is voluntary
- I am aware that I may choose to terminate my participation at any time for any reason
- I have read the aforementioned Plain Language Statement
- I understand the information provided in relation to data protection
- I have had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study
- I have received satisfactory answers to all my questions
- I understand I may withdraw from the research study at any point
- I understand that confidentiality can only be protected within the limitations of the law - i.e., it is possible for data to be subject to subpoena, freedom of information claim, or mandated reporting by some professions

By pressing the YES button, I consent to participate in this study

Q 1) What is your age?

20-24

25-29

30-34

35-39

40-44

45-49

50+

Q 2) How do you define your gender?

Woman

Trans

woman

Non-binary

Gender-fluid

Q 3) For how many years have you worked as a journalist? (Please round to the nearest whole year) 0-4 years

Between 5-9 years

Between 10-14 years

15 years and above

Q 4) Are you

A freelancer/independent journalist/stringer –

YES/NO Skip to Q 5 (a) if No is selected.,

Q4(a)(If yes) How long have you been working as a freelancer/independent journalist/stringer?
[If you have answered this question, please DO NOT answer Q5 (a) and Q5 (b) and MOVE to Q6 instead

1-2 years

3-5 years

6-10 years

More than 10 years

N/A

Q 5 (a) Which media organization are you associated with? **[Please answer this question if you are not a freelancer]**

Public

Private

e

Other

N/A

Q5 (b) How long have you been working in your current organization? **[Please answer this question if you are not a freelancer]**

0-1 years

1-2 years

3-5 years

6-10 years

More than 10

Q6) Please indicate your beat/area of expertise as a journalist or the beats you have covered in the past. **(Check as many as applicable)**

Politics

Entertainment

Technology

Education

Business

Science and Health

Lifestyle

Other (Please specify)

Q 7) How would you define online incivility?

Q8) How would you differentiate between online harassment and online

hate? Q9) Have you ever experienced any of these in your professional

career?

(4-5 times a week) (1-2 times a week) (2-3 times a year) (in a year)

Incivility -	Frequently	Sometimes	Rarely	Once	Never
Harassment -	Frequently	Sometimes	Rarely	Once	Never
Violence -	Frequently	Sometimes	Rarely	Once	Never

Q9 (a) If Yes, on which platform did it occur (Choose all that apply)?

Facebook

Twitter

Telegram

Instagram

Reddit

LinkedIn

Other: please specify

N/A

Q10 Have you ever experienced somebody

Commenting negatively on your religious identity Frequently Sometimes Rarely Once Never

Commenting negatively on your caste- Frequently Sometimes Rarely Once Never

Questioning your professionalism-	Frequently	Sometimes	Rarely	Once	Never
Commenting negatively on your appearance -	Frequently	Sometimes	Rarely	Once	Never
Commenting negatively on your gender-	Frequently	Sometimes	Rarely	Once	Never
Other (please specify)					

Q10 (a) If yes, on which platforms did it occur? (Choose all that apply)?

Facebook

Twitter

Telegram

Instagram

Reddit

LinkedIn

Other: please specify

N/A

Q11) Does reporting on certain topics draw more incivility/harassment/abuse in India (**Choose all that apply**)?

Politics

Entertainment

Technology

Education

Business

Science and Health

Lifestyle

Other (Please specify)

No, it is not specific to topics

Q12) As a journalist or media worker, have you, personally, experienced any of the following in the past year? **(Select all that apply)**

had your phone or recorded calls

tapped had your emails intercepted

had your identity exposed against your wish

had data stolen, including data stored on the

cloud had a virus planted in your computer that

harms data had your social media account

attacked

had sexually explicit photographs of you posted

online been sent physically threatening messages

been doxxed: (sharing private or identifiable information online, for example, your phone

number etc.) been left threatening messages online or notes/symbols in a personal place:

location car, desk, home had your personal website attacked/hacked

been the subject of a phishing attack

other

None of the above

Q13) Did you report the online abuse you experienced? (Choose all that apply) **[If you have never experienced any form of online incivility, harassment or violent behavior, please choose Not**

Applicable in the following questions]

To

Facebook

To Twitter

To

Instagram

To Law Enforcement

I did not report the online
abuse To an editor/newsroom
manager

I reported it to a journalism
association Other:

Not applicable

Q14) How did you respond to the online abuse? [Choose as many that
apply] I stopped using all social media platforms

I did not take the threats seriously/ Online threats or comments do not
affect me I became more cautious

I stopped using the social media platform on which the online abuse occurred

I stopped using all social media platforms I stopped posting about certain issues

I did not change my usage or the content I posted I reported the user

I blocked the user

I tried to interact with the user

I used social media to republish the threats trolls are making

Other: Please specify

N/A

Q 15) What do you think is the main purpose of getting targeted, abused, and harassed? [Please choose all that apply)

To distort reporting

To silence female journalists

Personal attack

To discourage reporting of particular topics To discourage critical reporting

To silence the reporters

Other:

Q16) Has online harassment affected you personally and professionally?

Yes

No

Personally

Professionally

Q17(a) If yes, to what degree have you consciously or unconsciously censored yourself, and why (Please enter your response to "why" in the relevant text box)?

Significantly

Moderately

Not at all/Not applicable

Q18) Where do you think hate, harassment, and threats against you mainly come from?
[Choose all that apply]

Government/ govt. supporters

Political parties

Criminals

Corporations

Faith

organizations

Individual(s)

Foreign

government None

of the above

Men's rights activists / anti-feminist

groups Other (Specify):

Q 19) Do you think that online hate, harassment, or threats is part of an organized campaign?

Yes

No

I don't know

Maybe

Q 20) Have you ever been confronted
physically? Yes

No

Q 21) How do you think the question of hate, harassment and threats against journalists should be dealt with **(Choose all that apply)**

Stricter regulation of social media companies

Stricter penalties against political instigators

Stricter penalties against individuals

Increased self-regulation of social media

Prohibit personalized online political

advertising Take no action

I do not know

Other

Introduce new legislation on hate speech / online harm

Q 22) What kind of support have you received from **[Please enter details in the relevant text box]**

The employer

The police

service The law

Journalists'

union No

support at all

Other

Q23) Are you willing to participate in an in-depth interview (15-20 minutes) either face to face, by phone or via Zoom? If yes, please provide your e-mail/contact details. I would really appreciate your help

Appendix B: In-depth Interview Questionnaire

Thank you for completing this questionnaire. This study will help us comprehend the ramifications of online harassment on the personal and professional lives of women journalists in the course of their career.

Your participation is voluntary and your responses shall be kept confidential. No

personally identifiable information will be associated with your responses in any reports of the data. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact the Principal

Investigator Ms. Pragya Chandel, by e-mail at pragya.chandel3@mail.dcu.ie or by phone at (+353899796854).



Section A (To be filled-up by the Principal Investigator)

Name –

1) If the participant wants to keep her name anonymous, the same will be stated Answer:

2) Age (To be filled-up by the PI)

- a) 18-25
- b) 25-30
- c) 30-35
- d) 35-40
- e) 40-45
- f) 45-50
- g) 50+

Answer:

Educational background (To be filled-up by the PI)

Answer:

Number of years in Journalism (To be filled-up by the PI)

Answer:

Q 5) Is the participant

- a) A freelancer
- b) Associated with a media organisation?

Answer: (To be filled-up by the PI)

Q 5) If the answer for Q4 is (b), then, what type of media organization does the participant work for? (multiple choice)

Type of structure (Public/Private/Other)

Answer: (To be filled-up by the PI)

Q 6) Please indicate your beat/area of expertise as a journalist? (name as many as applicable)

Answer: (To be filled-up by the PI)

Section B (To be filled by the participant)

Q1) Why did you choose journalism as a profession? What kinds of issues have you been interested in?

Answer:

Q2) What are your thoughts on the prevalence of online harassment in India. Please share the rationale behind your thoughts

Answer:

Q4) What are your thoughts regarding press freedom in India?

Q5) Do you think there are particular kind of threats that only women journalists in India receive?

Answer:

Q6) Do you see patriarchal norms impinging on a woman's career in the field of journalism if she is married and/or a mother?

Answer:

Q7) How does a women's career in journalism gets affected by cycles of marriage, motherhood, and ageism?

Answer:

Q 9) In what way have you changed your online behaviour based on the experiences of your peers and fellow journalists?

Answer:

- a) Are you cautious in posting your work or thoughts/opinion on digital platforms based on any external factor for e.g. govt. in power, the issue/topic in question (Please describe in detail)

Answer:

- b) Please mention the frequency of abuse on the platform/platforms you have received the abuse

Answer:

- c) Were there repeated incidences of harassment by one or more individuals?

Answer:

Q 11) Were these attacks based on your gender identity? (eg. threat of sexual violence, sexism)

Answer:

Q12) What was the nature of online insults? (Choose as many as apply)

- a) Insults about your character
- b) Devaluation of your work because of your gender identity
- c) Sexist insults
- d) Obscene Fig.s

- e) Impersonation (someone opens an account in your name)
- f) Threats to you or your family
- g) Threats of violence
- h) Threats of rape

Answer:

Q 12(a) How has online harassment affected your personal life? **Choose as many as apply**

- a) Psychological effects
- b) Self-censorship
- c) Losing your assignment
- d) Losing your job
- e) Fear, anxiety
- f) Not at all
- g) I have chosen not to take these threats seriously

Answer:

Q 12 (b) Please describe in detail in what way has your personal life been affected

Answer:

Q 13) If you think online violence has not impacted you in any way, what reasons would you give for the same?

Answer:

Q 14 a) Has online harassment affected your professional life? If yes, how? (Please describe in detail)

Answer:

b) If you think online violence has not impacted your professional life in any way, what reasons would you give for the same?

Answer:

Have you based (on the harassment received by one or more of your colleagues or others on the social media platforms) changed your behavior?

If yes, what reasons would you give?

If no, please describe in detail your opinion/reflections/thoughts

Answer:

Q15: Please respond to the following statements:

How often have you been bothered by any of the following problems due to online harassment ?

Feeling nervous, anxious, or on edge?

- Not at all
- Several days
- More than half the days**
- Nearly every day

Not being able to stop or control worrying?	Not at all Several days More than half the days Nearly every day
Worrying too much about different things?	Not at all Several days More than half the days Nearly every day
Trouble relaxing?	Not at all Several days More than half the days Nearly every day
Being so restless that it is hard to sit still?	Not at all Several days More than half the days Nearly every day
Becoming easily annoyed or irritable?	Not at all Several days More than half the days Nearly every day
Feeling afraid as if something awful might happen?	Not at all Several days More than half the days Nearly every day

Q16) If any of the above problems were identified, how difficult have these made it for you to do your work, take care of things at home, or get along with other people?

Not Difficult at All Somewhat Difficult Very Difficult Extremely Difficult

Q 17) a) Please if there was ever a time when you were unable to ditch negative, and fearful thoughts owing to a story/stories you had reported

Answer:

Q 17 b) And if you did face online harassment owing to that story, in what way did it affect your thoughts and mental health share (please describe in a few lines or a paragraph)

Answer:

Q 18) In what way does your family gets affected by the trolls?

Answer:

Q 19) Have you ever chosen to respond to the trolls

a) If yes, how would you describe the nature of that response (please describe in detail)?

b) If no, what reasons would you give for the same?

Answer:

Q 20) What was the response of your organization and other colleagues in this regard?

Answer:

Q 21) Have you avoided covering hot button issues out of fear of feeling denigrated and violated?

If your answer is No, what did you think could have happened if your answer is Yes, what were those issues?

Answer:

Q 22) Have you refrained from promoting or sharing your stories on social media due to the severity of trolling?

Answer:

Q 23) Have you been asked/chosen not to cover certain stories and beats to avoid harassment?
[If YES, by who?]

Answer:

Q24) If you do not feel intimidated or threatened by online comments/threats what are the reasons for the same?

Answer:

Q25) Did you report any incident related to cyber harassment to your media management, police or your union?

Answer:

a) If you did not report it, why not?

1. Did not feel safe to bring it up to my supervisor

2. Did not think it would make a difference
3. Did not want it to affect my work (ex. having supervisor remove you from a project for your safety)
- Other _____

b) If you did report it, what happened when you reported the harassment?

1. Nothing
2. The police took the case and investigated
3. The media provided support
4. The harasser was identified
5. The harasser was brought to justice
6. Don't know
7. Other _____

Q26) Do you know any other women journalist/journalists who have faced online harassment?
Did the person discuss the matter with you?

Answer:

Q27) Do you know any of your male colleagues who have faced harassment online?

Answer:

Q28) How do you think threats between male and females differ and what do you think is the reason for this difference?

Answer:

Q 29) What do you think can be further included in laws to protect journalists?

Answer:

Q 30) What are the mitigation strategies that you follow to counter the online harassment?

- a) What are the obstacles that you face in adoption of the mitigation strategies?
- b) What efforts are required by 1) the platform b) legal authorities

Answer:

Q 31) What is your understanding of an “ideal Indian woman”? What kind of expectations does society have from Indian women? Has your profession changed the way your family and society perceive you?

Answer:

Q 32) Youtube, emerging as a new alternative media is also not bereft of online threats and intimidation from the viewers. Moreover, the past few years have seen an increasing trend of state governments prosecuting YouTubers critical of the ruling party. What are your thoughts?

Answer:

Q33) Do you have any final comments or thoughts that you want to share with us?

Answer:

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Prof Colleen Murrell
School of Communications

Ms Pragya Chandel
School of Communications

1st November 2022

REC Reference: DCUREC/2022/163

Proposal Title: Digital harassment of women journalists: Exploring lived experience and repercussions on journalism [An Indian Case Study]

Applicant(s): Ms Pragya Chandel, Prof Colleen Murrell

Dear Colleagues,

Thank you for your application to DCU Research Ethics Committee (REC). Further to expedited review, DCU REC is pleased to issue approval for this research proposal.

DCU REC's consideration of all ethics applications is dependent upon the information supplied by the researcher. This information is expected to be truthful and accurate. Researchers are responsible for ensuring that their research is carried out in accordance with the information provided in their ethics application.

Materials used to recruit participants should note that ethical approval for this project has been obtained from the Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee. Should substantial modifications to the research protocol be required at a later stage, a further amendment submission should be made to the REC.

Yours sincerely,



Dr. Melrona Kirrane
Chairperson
DCU Research Ethics Committee



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Note: Please retain this approval letter for future publication purposes (for research students, this includes incorporating the letter within their thesis appendices).

Appendix – C

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