

CHUDI (bangles), BINDI, AUR HIJAB WILL BRING ALONG INQUILAB (revolution): ANTI-PATRIARCHY WITHIN ANTI-FASCIST MOVEMENTS AND THE DESIRE FOR A NEW POLITICAL IN INDIA

*aya zanana ka zamana, hai zanana ka zamana,
khub pakaya ghar mai khana, inquilab ko hai pakana*

*The age of women has arrived, it is the age of women,
Long have we cooked in kitchens at home, it is time to cook up the revolution*

Aim and Scope

The lines above are from slogans performed by Zanana Ensemble, a women's group of performing-protestors in Delhi (personal video, Jan 2020). It illustrates the centrality in reportage and social media representations of both urban and rural women in the protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act in India (e.g. The Suno India Show, 2020, Mar 8). This paper looks at discursive interventions online and protests against political and social injustices against women in India within the wider protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act which erupted in December 2019 and continues to evolve at the time of writing. In attempting to classify some modes of publicness on digital media platforms that are prevalent amongst women resisting the oppressions of living under an authoritarian regime that overlaps with traditional patriarchal structures, this paper explores the radical potential of spheres of affect which challenges representative authority and questions "who" has the right to construct the political.

Theoretical Approaches

The main aim of this research is to explore the potential that these publics in affective spheres present as a political force. Theoretically, this paper builds links between ambient citizenship and desire for the political from Berlant (2011), and Fraser's (2007, 2020) work on the possibilities of 'post-Westphalian' transnational public spheres, to contemplate some possibilities of transnational solidarities solidifying in networks of effective social justice and action. Combining these two theoretical approaches, I enquire what are the radical potentials stemming from intimate public spheres (Berlant, 2008, 2011), and how can these be scaled up beyond these spheres to construct a transnational public sphere. Berlant (2008) premises the origins and conventions mass-culture mediated intimate public sphere in the United States within the assumption that women have experiences that are shared by others, no matter how different their lives are. For example, in the lines by Zanana Ensemble quoted above, the assumption that Indian women are leaving their traditional unpaid domestic roles to start protests strategically forward the view that these women are first-time protestors with very little experience as political (as well as economic) actors. Whilst these lines interpellate women to step outside their traditional roles, which is assumed to be shared, it also strategically distances them from the corrupt influences associated with the public sphere. In this research I will discuss different discourses emerging around women's experiences through this lens whilst attempting to theorise the potential that feminist movements might possess to forge transnational solidarity.

Methodology

This paper employs digital ethnography on Twitter, where I as the researcher act as a participant observer. Instead of utilising the more popular hashtag-analysis or keyword search methods used to study social movements and online protest cultures, this paper does a qualitative longitudinal analysis of manually-collected tweets from user-timelines (similar methods explored in Gerrard, 2018, and Brooker et al., 2018) of twelve Indian feminist activists, researchers and journalists. The data is analysed using discourse analysis and close reading methods. My own closeness to the issues these users tweet about, for, and against, is based on my own personal and professional experience of being a user with an interest in Indian feminism and left wing politics on the platform. In order to maintain critical distance as an ethnographer, I have only selected users whom I have never met in real life. All tweets collected are from public profiles; moreover, the data I have collected for my study exclude tweets that are obviously conversational, and not public, although the difference is blurred on a platform like Twitter. As some topics these users discuss are intimate (although public) like self-harm or rape, in my paper I anonymise the users, as well as paraphrase the tweets.

In my analysis, I am especially interested in the strategic ways in which 'events' that publics mobilise around might be constructed out of an accurate prediction or 'intuition' (Pedwell, 2019) regarding the 'other' - not just by actors on the right of the political spectrum, but also increasingly by those on the left. These 'events' might rely on the deployment of a mode of crisis, interpellating certain others to react in a visceral way very quickly. For example, a Twitter thread by a feminist activist containing details of her own experience of being raped by a friend was posted as an anecdotal evidence of the disbelief certain women face when subjected to a patriarchal legal and social system. The intensely abusive responses to this thread then became further evidence in her write-up of this issue, positing it as a shared concern for women, for an online publication. This strategy seems to pose a challenge to the mainstream media industries' control over mediating public opinion and mobilisation around certain 'events'.

Conclusion and contribution

One of the main contributions of this research is that it moves away from the tendency of cultural studies, discourse analysis and textual analysis studies, that focus on discourses around 'events', to discursively constructed environments. It also adds to past research on digital publics in social movements by extolling the impassiveness of intimate publics. In contrast to studies that would measure the impact or effectiveness of digitally mediated activism, this paper highlights the work involved in constructing these imaginary spaces of relations through an accurate prediction or 'knowing' of others within affective public spaces, as well as in more or less strategic performances of belonging and citizenship. Finally, with empirical focus on publics from the global south in building a framework to understand transnational social movements, this paper attempts to dislodge some of the Euro-American assumptions about the nature of public spheres and its relationship to activist networks, civic society, media industries, etc. that are not homogenous across the globe.

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