Introduction

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In a post 2012 era of South Asian hashtag publics we see that digital activists – trans, queer, feminist and Dalit - have taken it upon themselves to talk truth to power to correct disinformation and misrepresentation or lack of representation in mainstream media and on social media. These movements occur in an environment of instant interaction where the activists face various kinds of push back. They populate social media spaces in an effort to express themselves on the one hand and to educate the rest of the world on issues of gender and caste oppression in India. Emerging political subjects through social media space. Such hashtag publics often brought into being by online protest movements from the geographical region of South Asia highlight gender, caste, religion and queer identities as they voice their anger and protest against social oppression (contemporary and historical) through social media. This commentary and criticism section selected submissions that engage the emergence of political subjectivities from the geographical region of south Asia through these modes of interaction. Platforms where political subjects emerge and push against matrices of domination might include Instagram, Twitter, WhatsApp, Tiktok, Snapchat and so on.

The struggle for democracy begins in highly gendered spaces – where sexuality, caste, religion and race (among others) hierarchies are deeply implicated in how political subjectivities are formed. In this Commentary and Critique section we see the expression and description of several feminist political subjectivities that emerge through Indian digital publics. The contributors were recruited based on their visible socio-political participation in social media space. All the contributors to this section were part of a pool of young scholars

and activists who connected with Radhika over the last six or so years as she was working towards the publication of the book "Digital Diasporas" (2019), and some were co-authors of sections in that book.

Discursive digital publics merge collide and (re)orient gendered Indian political subjectivities through protest movements both geographically within the region and the more transnational, diasporic formations of feminists that connect and identify as Indian/South Asians (and who, in global north contexts, also identify as women of color). In producing gendered digital socio-political subjects along a continuum of gender, race, sexuality, caste, class and region these discursive publics also orient physical bodies towards the physical locations of activisms in turn producing activist publics in such geo-locations. There is thus a strategic interplay of the online and offline in contemporary activism and advocacy contexts. As social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and now Instagram and TikTok emerged as leisure, marketing, advocacy and protest spaces – significantly in a post Arab Spring era and in the case of India a post "pink chaddi" era – we see these how these different modes of campaigning and the mobilizing of social movements through these platforms (trans)form publics around a diverse range of social, political, economic, cultural and religious issues. The emergence of such overlapping and intertwining publics occurs through the formation of both localized social media interactions and global facing publics. Common affective characteristics of such publics include ideological clashes, interpersonal disputes, feelings of being "left out" and so on but they also include affects leading to self-affirmation, validation, friendship and collaboration. Affective bonds and filter bubbles of people who share similar political views or social ideals form but also encounters with people who have opposing views occur and all the while individual in these spaces are fully aware of the surveillance, stalking and trolling as they negotiate these digital publics everyday. Various

local/global and open as well as privatized publics emerge through shifting ontologies of the corporeal and subjective.

Emejulu and Bassel (2020) talk about in their article on exhaustion and identification crucial to organising solidarity and activism by Black feminists in Europe: they claim that, "exhaustion plays an important discursive and temporal role of women of colour activists looking for and finding recognition in like-minded activists". This is not to say that within the potentially radical collective being constructed around these affects power is equally or fairly distributed. Vijeta's commentary on the affective labour, potentials but also problems associated with rage expressed on online platforms by Dalit women is a good reminder of this. The psychological burden of collective expression of discontent with existing hierarchies of power is borne by trans, queer and gendered subjects at the same negotiating religious, geographic, linguistic, class and caste marginalization and oppressions. This can be seen in Maitrayee's commentary on protests against Citizenship Amendment Act as well, where rage fomented as a direct result of police brutality against a religious group starts to be representative of a wider radical struggle against violent and misogynistic protectionist logic of Hindu Rashtra. As subsequent arrests and prosecution of mostly Muslim and educated women protestors and organisers under UAPA suggests, Although the counter public sphere requires the affective energies of the oppressed as collective glue around which counter public subjectivities can form around, these very affects are also coded as 'violent', 'subversive' and 'dangerous'. Dalit women's humiliation and punishment in the public sphere (Chatterjee, 2014) makes it doubly dangerous for them to participate within the sphere of public opinion and political action. The unequal distribution of consequences and cost of participation within these publics needs deeper analysis. If the political is a discursive space formed around various affects with transformative potential, like rage, or intimacy, or exhaustion, then what happens to those subjects whose visibility is dependent on their

emotional labour in these spaces, and whose participation within the political is based on how far their subjectivity can become subsumed within the hegemonizing discourse within that particular formation of power relations. This raises complex questions about assumptions we make regarding gendered political subjects

Riddhima's paper points out the ways in which caste loyalties hamper feminist collective action against sexual harassment and misogyny when the complainant is a Dalit woman. She also maps the struggle for legitimacy of such voices stifled by institutionalised logic of 'due process' which effectively demands that such women's call for justice and equal treatment wait in line until issues faced by upper caste women to be represented in economic and political spheres are addressed. Diti's paper on the 'apolitical' nature of trans movements in India also speak to this normative logic of gaining social equality by suppression of certain inter-group differences resulting in the privileging of elite members within these movements. This is one of the shortcomings of the universality of political representation on the basis of gender or sexual specificity that many democratic feminist movements are faced with. Chakrabarti and Bagchi (2014) in a chapter profess that "several minority political parties…rejected the Euro-centric notion of 'common sisterhood' by the architects of the [Women's Reservation Bill in 1997], who belonged to the upper echelons of the social pyramid". Digital spaces are being leveraged in efforts to speak out against exclusionary politics, but as papers in this issue contend, they also end up reproducing the exploitative and gendered affective and symbolic labour relations within civil and public spheres. Dhanashree's paper points to the capitalisation of the postcolonial vocabulary and the rhetoric of its liberatory potential by Indian financial elites who have emerged as key players within our datafied society. This speaks to some of the paradoxical issues the essays in this issue raise.

The term 'hashtag publics' within a highly stratified society has provided many people who have been marginalised on the basis of class, caste, sexuality, religion and ethnic origin within India a 'safe space' to find each other around common affective expressions and experiences, as Diti details in her paper. Yet the relationship between this precarious space and civil society and the political sphere is dictated by flows of capital, its gatekeepers often being global elites who are indifferent or antagonistic to projects of increasing equal participation in global democracies. The discursive space occupied by these 'hashtag publics' are furthermore subject to hierarchies of power which renders certain issues and categories as more visible than others. A strategic alliance between interest groups often comes about, especially as affective mobilisations around certain issues, but issues of racism, sexism, classism and casteism still pose a challenge for everyone to gain an equal share of voice. Issues that come into focus in the public sphere are those that are espoused by dominant members in the social group, located in urban areas, even if the people at the centre of the issue are poor or traditionally deprived.

Diti's essay looks at some ways in which the trans activism on the internet constructs the idea of queer citizenship in India being based around ideals of patriotism and respectability, Tarishi and Sujatha detail ways in which Dalit women and rural and lower class people on TikTok are subverting gendered norms around Bollywood dances and slogans, songs mobilising around caste pride and their daily lifestyles. Citizenship values remain a point of contention even as those at the margins try to challenge existing ones based on upper caste Hindu heteronormativity, using digital tools 'against 'Brahmanical patriarchy'. As the recent mass protests of this year has shown clearly, the only logic that can shatter a conservative religious fascist state is one that is simultaneously based on challenging essentialist logic whilst also centralising the rights of those who are oppressed within the particular formation of power that has attained authoritarian hegemony.

'Hashtag Publics' do this by allowing participants to collectivise around multiple normative discourses mainly as a response to violences and oppressions of hegemonic formations. Vulnerabilities as a result of these oppressive regimes however find it difficult to remain either formless or soft in such spaces, as Vijeta's essay reminds us. Whereas those affected most might seek therapeutic retelling of their experiences and memories of agony, humiliation and pain, as well as transformation, these spaces where identity politics claims an affective knowledge centred on certain bodies and subjectivities tend to impede the process of detachment from these that those bearing the emotional brunt of these movements might seek.

References

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