Gaali cultures: The politics of abusive exchange on social media

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Abstract

On the rapidly expanding social media in India, online users are witness to a routine exchange of abusive terms and accusations with the choicest swearwords hurled even for the seemingly non-inflammatory political debates. This paper draws upon anthropology of insult to uncover the distinctness, if at all, of online abuse as a means for political participation as well as for the encumbering it provokes and relations of domination it reproduces as a result. In so doing, the paper critiques the conception of ludic as anti-hegemonic in the Bakhtian tradition, and develops an emic term 'gaali' to signal the blurred boundaries between comedy, insult, shame and abuse emerging on online media which also incite gendered forms of intimidation. Gaali, it argues, is best conceptualized through the metaphor of 'sound' as distinct from what recent new media studies theorize as 'voice'.

Keywords

Online abuse, gender violence online, India, Bakhtin, Twitter, digital politics

Introduction

For Roshni Dalal,[1] a young female journalist in Mumbai city, the 'nightmare' started when she inadvertently stepped on a volatile terrain on Twitter in India. A technology journalist for a major English newspaper, Roshni had decided to be different on that day. A prominent political leader was scheduled to arrive in Mumbai, to address a massive public rally as a build-up for the national elections of 2014. The Twitter world in India on which the leader has considerable influence had made all preparations to shed the spotlight on the rally. A new hashtag was created for the event, and adulatory messages were flooded on the hashtag, as Mumbai city woke up to a huge crowd heading on foot, trucks and buses to the public ground (Bandra-Kurla Complex, BKC) where the leader was slated to arrive and address the gathering. Intrigued by the excitement built around the rally, Roshni decided to shun her technology beat for a day. She stepped on the streets, with an IPad in hand.

Excited with what she saw and captured on the IPad, and swept by the urge to tweet it as instantly as she could, Roshni posted an admittedly innocuous tweet: 'Lots of men peeing in the open at BKC'. She promptly tagged it to the event hashtag, suspecting nothing that the tweet could provoke. Much to her dismay, there was a deluge of tweets from the self-confessed online volunteers of the political party who had geared up for action. A Twitter handle bellowed: '*ucking bullshit paidmedia', followed by another tweet: 'r u collecting? Paidmedia can use that to get good brain power', and soon after, 'r u smelling men's pee and watching them? What a crook'. Despite twenty-five retweets of her original tweet and criticisms wedged through them, Roshni did not relent. As she tried to give the lighter side of the rally, capturing images of food supplies for rally participants and colorful cardboard portraits of the leaders – to tread the delicate path of 'balanced' reporting – the criticism for her original 'unflattering' tweet was only getting deeper. Her senior colleague came in defense, praising her multitalented personality, and so did a handful of tweets from personal friends who stood by her, but the tweets had started to swiftly drift to name calling – 'dud', 'lies, deceits', 'abominable', 'bluff', 'you are trying to be a bit too clever' or 'you can piss at... [opposition party leader's] rally, that is where you belong'.

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

> To show that I am not biased, that I am showing only the empty ground, I tweeted another image of crowds to balance it out. And, that did not get noticed. But the previous tweet was massively retweeted and I was abused. I was questioned. And it went on and on. I tried to reply to some of them. But after a point it really got to me.

This blitzkrieg of an online exchange confronting Roshni and numerous political commentators illustrates an important political practice emerging on social media in India and in the online world more broadly: the expanding form of abusive exchange which rides on another ubiquitous network practice of trolling. Trolling here refers to intentional aggression which grew initially with usenet groups and mailing lists, but transmuted as a user category to indicate persistent provocation through linguistic aggression within interactive quasi-public platforms such as Twitter (Hardaker, 2010).

How do we understand the emergent online practice of abuse as it interfaces the field of politics and mediates political participation for a new generation of net-savvy urban youth in India and the digitally mediated publics more generally? Based on ethnographic fieldwork among social media users in Mumbai and Bangalore between 2013 and 2014, I explore this question to analyze the nature and consequences of the intriguing practice of online abuse exchange among net users. My ethnographic research, including interviews, observations of offline events and online content analysis, focused on urban middle class users on Twitter, the quasi-public microblogging platform, which came to be perceived in Indian metros as a 'serious forum for political debates for serious people'.[2]

On the rapidly growing online media in India with more than 350 million users, several political ideologies are advanced, including the evolving alternative media for socially marginalized Dalit communities who are active in creating 'their own content' as a counter-hegemonic discourse (Chopra, 2014; Mitra, 2001: 29). Amidst its expansion for agendas as varied as development, governance and leisure (Rangaswamy and Arora, 2016), and an increasingly irreducible class base of online users because of affordable smart phones, social media have fostered a distinct middle class discourse which has gained prominence because urban middle class constitutes a major group of Internet users in India. In the city of Mumbai – illustrative of a large Indian city – over 58 per cent of the 6.8 million active Internet users came from the higher income brackets (Sec A and Sec B categories in the media market surveys) in 2013, and the percentage was as high as 65 for the sample comprising 'heavy Internet users' (with more than 31 hours of Internet use in a week). Political discourses among these privileged groups on social media gain further salience when television channels and newspapers gather online debates, especially Twitter hashtag trends, as newsfeed. The paper therefore approaches online abuse as part of the privileged social location of online users where the limited arena of political social media in urban India is ramped up for public discourse by 'traditional' media in a polymedia context (Udupa, 2015a).

The attempt here is not to capture the full range of abusive terms on social media or offer a content analysis of the tweets.[3] Instead, this paper inquires the intersection of what is recognized as abuse by social media users (most prominently urban women) with the broader aspiration for political participation. The analysis thus proceeds with an emic use of the term 'abuse', which is a commonly invoked term among social media users active in political debates in India. Abuse connotes malicious intent for these users, and affects their social media participation in significant ways. In using the term as an aspect of social media practice with a particular 'audience effect' (Irvine, 1993),[4] I stay clear of legal language of 'hate speech' and a blanket approach to abuse as gross violation of dignity deserving no further academic scrutiny. Methodologically, this analysis is rooted in ethnography and an approach to social media as practice and performance, including speech acts in a social context which require examination beyond purely linguistic analysis of textual features as well as assumptions around politeness, civility and abuse as universalist features with little cultural variation – a perspective common within a large crop of studies in political communication as well as concepts such as 'cyberbullying' (Marwick, 2011). Attentive to contextual specificity, I use the Hindi term '*gaali*' to capture the interlocking practices of insult, comedy, shame and abuse that unfold in a blurred arena of online speech. On this slippery ground of shifting practices, comedy stops and insult begins or insult morphs into abuse in mutually generative ways.

In examining the intersection between abuse (as *gaali* in the rest of the paper*)* and political participation, I forward two arguments: First, abuses open up new lines of political participation – at least as a discursive engagement – for net savvy actors, although this occurs in a highly volatile conversational context. While it is not true that abuses are the only means to participate in online political debates, they nevertheless constitute a key communicational context for online users who increasingly feel the need to develop the skills to hurl, dodge or otherwise criticize abuses to remain active within online discursive spaces. Second, online abuse has a deeply gendered structuring, in that the raking of 'the private' and sexual accusations represents the re-politicization of the 'domestic sphere' through the masculinist logic of shame with effects of intimidation. While these two aspects appear antagonistic and even irreconcilable, *gaali* captures precisely this contradiction inherent in the online media discourse. *Gaali* implies a continuum between democratizing participation and regressive silencing. It gestures towards complicating the prognosis of the online discourse in terms of the polar opposites of a normative order, and to those practices where the experience of participation through maverick tactics slides into abuse of more intimidating nature as they interface larger structures of hegemonic power as well as the online ambience to 'noise it out' on the web. The metaphor of sound allows one way to 'think sonically' through these contradictory moves of *gaali* (Sterne, 2012: 2). As Sterne (2012) argues, audition pries open the problem of perspective – the same sound may not even be recognized as such in different spaces. 'Hearing requires positionality' (2), and so do *gaali*. *Gaali*, through the metaphor of sound, signals repetition and reverberation as opposed to the veracity of content, the rationale of 'noising out' as opposed to dialogue, and positionality that defines who is affected negatively and who benefits from it rather than voice as a context-free capacity for participation.

In the rest of the paper, I will briefly discuss the literature on abuse within anthropological and cultural studies traditions, to locate social media abuse within this broader scholarship. I will then contextualize social media abuse in India within two broad domains which influence each other: wordplay in political discourse and global media institutional power. In the next two sections, I will elaborate the two arguments on the political consequences of social media abuse with particular attention to gendered forms of intimidation, and conclude with some reflections on considering abuse through the metaphor of sound, in contradistinction to the widely invoked concept of 'voice' within online communication research.

Abuse: Between control and heteroglossia

Classical anthropology has largely approached abuse in relation to its propensity to initiate, sustain or resolve conflicts within close-knit face-to-face groups. The theoretical focus is on the production of social control and social cohesion within bounded societies, amply elucidated by classic anthropological works by Edmund Leach offering a three layered categorization of abuse (1964), Evans-Pritchard's description of the Zande concept of *sanza* (oblique speech forms which are usually abusive), or Judith Irvine's (1993) analysis of insult poetry (*xaxaar*) among the Wolof villagers in Western Sudan. For scholars of linguistics, the textual features of insult and abuse in literary works and social events are the key concerns, although many studies are restricted by formalism lacking a theory of social power or by rational critical assumptions around abuses as intentional and tactical moves to cause insult (Conley, 2010). For the cultural studies tradition inspired by Mikhail Bakhtin, abuse is an important element of 'unofficial language' and 'heteroglossia', which subvert the dominant 'verbal-ideological life of the nation and the epoch' through play, ridicule and seeming obscenity (Bakhtin, 1980: 273). Aside from the Bakhtian carnival, a telling illustration is the irreverence of Lutherian *Flugschriften* or the talking statue of Pasquino in medieval Rome with paper epigrams stuck below to criticize local politicians, often anonymously. A more recent and widely cited instance is the unconventional dress code of the 1960s North America which subverted the semiotic codes of authoritative discourses by disrupting the standard of aesthetic excellence and social power coded in hegemonic aesthetics (Hebdige, 1979). Within subaltern studies, postcolonial scholars recognize a similar semiotic exercise when peasant insurgency in colonial India launched a rebel speech which effected a 'perspective reversal' by 'massive and systematic violation of...words, gestures and symbols, which had the relations of power in colonial society as their significanta' (Guha, 1983: 39).

Continuing the line of inquiry on verbal art's constitutive role in configuring social and political power and its potential disruptive challenge to established authorities, recent anthropological work has linked semiotic practices with emerging political cultures, to unravel new performative politics of satire such as 'stiob' and overidentifying parody as 'vulgar inversions of polite

society' which have expanded in reaction to growing neoliberal culture of market legitimacy in northern liberal democracies (Boyer, 2010: 282). Critical Internet studies theorize such verbal art and its seemingly most severe form of trolling as 'agonistic democracy' representing the 'tensions, dynamics, injuries and productivities of negativity and disputation' (Wilson et al., 2014). Implicit here is the celebration of online subcultures as oppositional politics with historical links to absurdist avant-gardes as well as Internet culture's formative countercultural ethos (Turner, 2011).

While the Internet culture of generative disputation analyzed by these studies and the earlier works on satire, parody and obscenity is no doubt important, this paper maintains that abuse should be understood as an interplay of Internet ecology and the specific political-economic changes unfolding within societies and the cultural framework of 'moral assumptions, conceptions of the person, and notions of responsibility' constituting them (Irvine, 1993: 107). This implies not only a challenge to the universalist discourse of net-enabled disruption (cultural studies) or local control (classical anthropology) but an analytical exercise to lay bare the infrastructure for online abuse in relation to historically defined political cultures and the current moment of globalization which together define what Clark et al. (2010) aptly term as 'protoagency' – heterogeneous preconditions for digital engagement.

For social media abuse in India, two contextual domains are particularly important. First is the growing popularity of creative wordplay in Indian politics in recent years. This builds on and alters the historical emphasis on language play as a key strategy for many political parties in India to 'semiotically dominate the opposition' (Bate, 2009). If many of these earlier strategies of language, especially the Dravidian parties in South India, privileged high literary prose to create an unreflective domain of the aesthetic for popular consumption (Bate, 2009), language play started to tilt more emphatically towards lighter, everyday speech forms at the turn of the millennium – a reflection of the popularity of colloquial language use on FM radio and private television which expanded rapidly after media deregulation in the 1990s. This brought to the mainstream the thriving verbal cultures of tabloid journalism, a section of the vernacular theater and underside novels in which words are not burdened with the obligations of polite (elite) society. This practice is partly traceable to satirical cultures of early modern and postcolonial India (Kumar, 2015).

Online media is by far the most vibrant site for such word plays in recent years of digital expansion. The instantaneous creativity of young online users are evident in the new websites such as 'Qtiyapa' which derive the name from what is often considered as an obscene reference to female vagina, but with a phonetic twist that masks the original root literally but alludes to it more intensely through this masking. The Qtiyapa team produces low-cost videos and posts them on YouTube, to ridicule and satirize political leaders, Bollywood figures, and prominent television news anchors. The premium on word play is starkly evident in their videos – the actors engage directly in coining new aphorisms and sobriquets. Across Qtiyapa, fakenews.com, theunrealtimes.com and the newly proliferating websites, political debates are rife with vivid imagery, pun, parody, allegory and close parallelisms, which turn 'the truth' upside down or in any angle, so skillfully that professional

journalists too are drawn to it as an awkward vantage point to reckon with. In recent studies, Aswin Punathambekar (2015) and Sangeet Kumar (2015) offer a rich analysis of the participatory cultures of television reality shows and online parody, to argue that they signal a newly emerging social and cultural critique.

It is little surprising that the vibrant field of social media verbal art is harnessed more systematically by political groups, most prominently the right-wing party BJP, which came to power in the national elections in 2014. The election campaigning leading to the victory of BJP witnessed bustling online media strategies, with several political marketing companies and common users alike parading a panoply of new phrases, slogan-words, slangs, curse-words, and praise words to deride, challenge or amplify the image of political leaders.

A master of verbal art on social media, Dr Subramanian Swamy, known to be a maverick politician, relies on verbal wrangling on social media as an important means to amass supporters and sustain popularity for his Hindu nationalist ideologies. A Harvard graduate who entered formal politics and increasingly espoused the vision of Hindu India, Swamy capitalized on the growing enthusiasm of social media users to advance his caustic style to condemn his opponents, in particular the hegemony of the Indian National Congress and the intellectual crowd representing 'secular liberalism' which is partly a gloss for the class privileges of the Nehruvian legacy. Such is the popularity of his private lexicon of accusatory acronyms that there is a regularly updated blogpost that lists all his choice abbreviations – Patriotic Tweeple, for example, are 'PT's as opposed to 'CRT's, Congi Reptile Tweeple, a term used for the Indian National Congress Party, 'Fibrals' are liberals who fib, and 'libtards' are 'liberal retards'. Similarly, tweeters sympathetic to the Congress regime or critical of BJP hurl accusatory acronyms and sobriquets, evidenced in hashtags such as 'ModiInsultsIndia' deriding the leader as 'liar', 'wife deserter' and 'selfie-driven'. Some of the Twitter heroes with the highest following are also those who are adept at coining or dodging such accusations, contributing to the growing creative inventory for name calling.

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

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

Implicit in the online political culture of name-calling is the second contextual domain of global media institutional power manifest in varied media technological affordances and communicative architectures which conditions the possibility for political participation and co-creates particular forms of political behavior online. If the premium placed on brief messages to

augment data aggregation for market analytics and display on small screens is a key communicative intervention of technology and market (Fuchs, 2013) – as with Twitter allowing 140 characters– the experiential salience of instantaneity, rapid reaction loops and message clutter has deepened the culture of quick retorts. An avid social media user in Mumbai said to me that messaging on Twitter is so real time that it 'has screwed our language. If you are in the political space it is very hostile.' Many others added that 'the really nasty fights are out on Twitter, because the comments and retorts are quick to pile up'. The culture of quick retorts is conditioned by the location of niche platforms such as Twitter within an expanding global subculture of self-declared transgressive spaces, from shock sites to hacker culture (Wilson et al., 2014). Trangression dovetails with aggression on many new media platforms in part due to the affordances for relative anonymity. In tension with anonymity runs the trail of hints and traces of individuals using online media. Ananda Mitra (2012) defines them as 'narbs' – narrative bits accumulating in social media systems. The shared material architecture of Twitter to allow for trolling with relatively anonymous IDs, the prospect to automate trolls and invite attention of interested bystanders through tags and retweets, and narrative bits in the online discursive space augment the conditions for confrontational encounters – a point I will discuss further in the sections to follow.

It is therefore important to understand abuse as performance – an embodied expressive practice (Féral, 1982; also Chow, 2012) – shaped by the mutually influencing domains of global cyber media and historically inflected national political cultures. To approach abuse as performance suggests that we take an agnostic approach to the 'Internet's City of Words', where the boundaries between the ludic, intimidating and disruptive absurdity intertwine in such a way that their political consequences cannot be traced in all aspects if the question is foreclosed with a predetermined normativity on abuse exchange. What has online abuse then done for political discourses in India?

Gaali culture: Lines of participation

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

- Imran Syed

Imran Syed is a budding graphic designer in Mumbai city, residing in a middle class housing colony with his wife. As a poet and writer in Urdu and Hindi, Syed described his online activities as a deliberate attempt to stop shying away from addressing vexing issues of communalism or dowry problems ailing Indian society. He said he made sure to write about them to 'create discussions' on social media even if it meant that some muck-racking or swearing was needed along the way.

For many social media users we interviewed in Mumbai across the ideological spectrum – from self-confessed Hindu nationalists and tech-moderns to secularists and liberals – *gaali* was the first assured way to draw others' attention, a way to 'gain some traction' in an otherwise dense flow

of verbal and video traffic. It indexed an effort to remain at the threshold of audibility – of techniques that could stand out in the clutter by (metaphorically) raising the decibels. As with this graphic designer, manifestly contentious interactions have opened up avenues of political engagement for net savvy users in a manner that tabloidization techniques of newspapers lowered the entry barrier for political debates in South America, as Silvio Waisbord (2010) argues, pointing to the potential democratic effects of colloquialism in media production (Udupa, 2015a). In some of these activities, abuses have revived a thriving culture of swear words at informal male hangouts and college campuses, where abuses are routinely detoxified with repetition and innuendo, in ways that words become 'not a term of abuse but of jocular familiarity' (Cloney, 2010: 21) and affective rebuke. The sharpness of the Hindi adage *'Goli maro parantu gali mat do'* [shoot me a bullet, but hurl not the words of abuse] is blunted somewhat during social media abuse exchange, as online users become increasingly aware of and participate in abuse culture and hurling swearwords gets distributed across net-literate groups through online mediation. A telling illustration is the online production group 'All India Bakchod' (senseless *ucker/gossip) which shot to fame with its online creations of 'insult comedy' around Bollywood actors and politicians, and its offline version modeled on 'Roast' events in the USA. Creating 'debris on Twitter' – as one tweeter worded it – lost some of its ominous edge during these staged acts of put-downs and affronts, in as much as paving way for avenues for arguments. The metaphor of sound captures this semantic thinning of abuse while guaranteeing a sense of participation.

More important, the ability to 'engage' debates on social media by tiding over abuses or returning them on the same platter brought many new voices into mainstream politics in urban India, some of whom ascended to high-posts within major political parties in quick time. Neena Trivedi, one of the official spokespersons for a major political party, was a political novice when she started confronting what she saw as biased comments on Twitter. From an affluent family living in an expensive locality of Andheri in Mumbai, and barely in her late 30s, she entered the world of Twitter much as customary literacy in new media among educated classes in urban India. Most of her initial tweets, she admits, were a result of her chance encounters with political commentators on Twitter she started to follow. Soon, she reduced her tweets on personal life and ventured to confront the debates with rebuttals, clarifications and counter-questions. The official position of a party spokesperson followed soon after. A significant aspect of her new media capability – the ability to 'engage' Twitter – was her proven success in tiding over abuses or responding to trolls in an impressive manner.

Although social media abuses are bald assertions with little or no semantic mitigations, it has sparked a range of practices to handle them, including, most commonly, blocking them. 'One look of it, I block. DPI box', described a Twitter user, revealing an embodied habitual response to abuse – a pile of garbage to be routinely thrown out of the door, as it were. Some budding political voices such as the *Aam Aadmi* Party and *Loksatta* also developed strategies to modify their stance, change the tonality or disallow official handles (of the organizations) to respond to abusive trolls directly. To

be forewarned then meant more than simple blocking. It involved inventing new ways to make oneself heard, advancing rhetorical and propositional techniques in improvised ways.

As effective as they are in creating ways for discursive participation in domestic politics – in all awkward angles as one may have it – abuses have also provided a means to respond to global debates for the tech-savvy middle class Indian youth restless to have their voice heard on a global forum and portray India as a global power. To challenge the gnawing stereotypes of India, disparate groups of tweeters, who are alert on news feeds, build on the existing online infrastructure to insert rebuttals, ridicule and abuses into prominent online media platforms. This was evident in several incidents of trending hashtags on Twitter, including the sudden rush of tweets against Maria Sharapova, the Russian tennis star, when she openly stated that she did not know who Sachin Tendulkar was, when the international cricket star from India went to watch her match in England. Such was the invective genius of a large number of tweets that Sharapova's ignorance was framed not just an assault on the cricket star but on a country that had staked claims in the world economy as an emerging power. Sharapova's ignorance was seen as a sign of stubbornness of the West to lock India in the stereotypes of the third world stricken by poverty and 'people shitting on the streets'. The hashtag 'whoismariasharapova' was a top trending topic worldwide on Twitter for a day in July 2014, with a swell of tweets belittling Sharapova for not knowing Tendulkar. Amidst the ever improvising tweets of ridicule, one of the tweeters claimed to nail it with a punch: 'Its ok that Maria Sharapova doesnt know Sachin Tendulkar. She might be an atheist [for Sachin is the God]'. This witticism was joined by a surge of abusive quotes invading Sharapova's Facebook profile and Twitter accounts.

The bluntness and possible detoxification of abuses is however just one part of the *gaali* culture. While opening up lines of participation, abuse − on the slippery ground of transmuting online practices − intersects with structures of political power to challenge and intimidate dissenting voices. In the next section, I use the case of troll attacks on women political commentators seen as hostile to right-wing politics to illustrate how abuse as a gendered discourse constricts digitally mediated political discourse.

'Internet lumpen': Shaming punishments and gendered moral communities

When this lot grows up they can come back to have a conversation. Till then, *mere se toh nahin hoga* [it's just not possible for me]. If you really want a label 'Internet Lumpen' is a good one – this is not ideology driven...This is insecurity. This is half information. This is the kind of behavior you will expect from Roadside Romeos outside colleges – courage in numbers to give *gaalis* and make people uncomfortable, but not to be relied on for a fight ...[5]

I read Harini Calamur's angry blog after meeting her at a plush café in the upscale locality of Andheri in Mumbai. Harini, one of the highest followed tweeters in the city, was sitting across a round table, busy keying away something briskly on her smart phone, when I walked into the backyard of the café. She was an avid tweeter, as I realized when she broke into checking the net on her smart phone at very short intervals throughout the course of our conversation. With a sharp wit and knack for crisp prose, she had amassed a huge following on Twitter, and attracted responses and retweets as she continuously commented on politics and culture, picking up threads from a wide range of resources from international news portals to local radio broadcasts. She taught students at a media school, wrote columns for newspapers, maintained a lively blog and ran a media company which produced short films. Passionate about social causes that 'cut party lines', she tweets regularly on gender violence, alongside regular commentaries on political developments in the country. Her vociferous voice in Twitter met with an unexpected affront when she commented on a corruption scandal involving a local political party. Interpreting this tweet as the 'pseudoliberal's unwanted rant', the online right-wing brigade jumped on to cease the tweet, to accuse Harini of 'sleeping' with the President of the opposition political party. Harini put the tweet on her blog, to express her anguish at what she squarely named as the 'Internet lumpen'.

As with Harini and her politically savvy friends in Mumbai, assertive women voices commenting on politics constantly confront abusive trolls when they disagree – implicitly, explicitly or even inadvertently – with what a section of tweeters understand as the agenda of Hindu nationalism which combines the pride of global India with the imagination of prosperous 'Bharat' (cultural India). Although many formal organizations for Hindu nationalism and key ideologues for various political parties including BJP condemn the practice, a growing number of tweeters claiming to represent nationalism online enthusiastically participate in abuse exchange. Social media users I met in Mumbai showed me abusive trolls which almost always invoked the image of vagina, illicit sex, and prostitution (pimps, guttersnipes, *randi*/prostitute, bitch) in proses and sexist epithets that sometimes revealed their preset formats. Far from the grounds of veracity, these abuses gain valence through repetition and reverberation characteristic of sound as 'echoes…of social orders' (Rath, 2012: 131). Allegations of sleeping with the party president, for instance, were not meant to compete on grounds of truth, but as reverberations that could exhaust the targets. Similarly, an active political tweeter critical of right-wing nationalism in Mumbai described to me vividly the daily abusive tweets she confronts, including rabid sexist remarks that she was not worth five rupees (for a night).

Judith Irvine recognizes this form of abuse as 'evaluative talk'. This talk is grounded in the 'specific cultural systems of moral judgment' (1993: 109) and invokes practices of 'verbal obscenity' that replays gender as 'a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint' (Butler, 2010). Although online cultures might not have any particular propensity for abusive exchange, growing number of studies suggest that relative anonymity in online interactions leads to deindividuation with reduced terms of self-evaluation (Siegel et al. 1986) while also increasing the chances of group identity (Postmes et al., 1998). In the Wolof village, Irvine reveals how 'speakers routinely create and exploit ambiguities as to whether they are being abusive or not… and whether they are the

persons who have responsibility for a particular insulting statement' (1993: 110-111). Online anonymity deepens the conditions of ambiguity necessary for insult exchange. However, of greater significance is what Irvine calls 'the hierarchical moral order where the 'responsibility for an action is...seen as emanating from outside the actor' (114). That this hierarchical moral order takes a gendered form is not merely an aspect of technological affordances of ambiguity, but of a longer historical formation.

The deeply gendered nature of evaluative talk is shaped in part by the history of gendered constructions of anti-colonial nationalisms in India which developed moral prescripts for proper Indian womanhood as 'grounds' to articulate the meaning of Indian tradition (Mani, 1987).[6] As Partha Chatterjee (1993) has famously argued, cultural nationalists of the late nineteenth century conceded inferiority in the outer/material domain of politics and technology while claiming autonomy and authenticity in the inner/spiritual domain. This 'resolution' of the epistemological challenge of colonialism involved the effort to assign the woman's question to the inner domain, which was co-elaborated with notions of autonomy, authenticity and the cultural essence of the nation.

The upper-caste, male nationalist thinkers' 'investment in the "privatized" domestic sphere' (Sinha, 1014) profoundly shaped Hindu nationalist movement in postcolonial India as it had done to many Congress nationalist ideologues, counter posing the imaginations of 'modern Indian woman' (*Bharatiyanari*) to 'westernized' women and their presumed moral debauchery expressed as illicit sexual relations and promiscuity. Thus, female tweeters with avowed 'liberal-secular' agendas or framed as 'pseudoseculars' and even those with no stated ideological purpose become targets when they relay anything less flattering of the nationalist agenda, however understood (Udupa, 2015b). While gendered constructions of nationalism were a subject of fierce debates among internet enabled South Asian feminists since the time of usenet groups and bulletin groups (Gajjala, 2002), on the web 2.0 platforms such as Twitter, regressive tropes gained momentum, extending the debate well and beyond the confines of interested usenet groups. Some of the tweets underwritten by gendered nationalism reveal the characteristics of automated trolls which also shoot piercing threats such as death, gang rape and sacking inside the companies (Vij, 2014). This form of abuse came out into the open, when many journalists tweeted about the daily harassment they faced (Vij, 2014). The dialectic of formatted tweets and improvized participation by real individuals is played out starkly when this form of abuse moves beyond mere insult remarks targeting intangible markers of self and personhood – respect, honor, reputation, legitimacy and authenticity – and embodies perlocutionary effects as threats with tangible consequences for social and personal security with more precise knowledge of target individuals' life routines and lifestyle. These tweets, for example, would name the child of the female tweeter and the time her child would go to the school on a particular route.

Such close knowledge of life routines reveals the local character of abuse groups. Despite the flux and fusions of networks characterizing social media, the exchange of abuse takes a more

'systematic' character in this gendered avatar at local levels, since groups are quickly allocated specific forms of speechmaking. Such intensely local struggles over political participation often create small moral communities in which persons are easily recognized, correctly guessed or, at the very least, intensely speculated. In Roshni's case, the attacking tweets declared themselves as males with many real names on the handles. Some of the tweeters referred to Roshni's primary opponent on Twitter as 'Dada' – a sign of brotherly affection and paternal care even as the primary opponent (a senior journalist) won the points on the publicity meter for taking the lead in the attack. The expansive networked worlds of social media are ironically brought down to their local levels in these instances, resembling the Wolof village or the caste panchayats (*biradari or jati*) to draw gendered moral communities.[7] In such abuses, the accusations of morally decrepit, ideologically debauched and politically discredited 'female' actors take a life of their own, claiming salience through the reiterative power of sound.

In this overlap of formatted and localized abuse, the seemingly disjunctive online economies – the 'A' economy of anonymity (Auerbach, 2012) relying on intentional disconnect between online and offline selves and the economy of self-publicity with enumerative publicity measures – become co-constitutive, one propelling the other. In some cases, abuse escalates to a full-blown shaming punishment, where online networks of swears and accusations create a bounded arena for shaming sanctions which fall 'most heavily on women in terms of governance of sexuality' (Baxi, 2009: 72). This gendered norm is captured in Lauren Berlant's (1997) re-reading of the 'intimate public sphere' to define a conservative politics focused exclusively on regulating sexuality.

If social consequences of shaming punishments were evident in several high-profile Twitter wars in recent years involving politicians, cinema stars and sports celebrities, abuse as shaming was emotionally taxing and tactically demanding for many 'ordinary' tweeters active in political debating. Yet, it also deepened their political conviction, especially for those with the privilege of political party protection or the (limited) support of the news organization. This was evident in the cases of political commentators and journalists I interviewed. However, the moral injuries of abuse impact everyday interactions among an increasing number of youth entering political debates on social media – forcing some to go mild, 'neutral' or completely silent. At times, women with political interests also participate in the cacophony of abuse exchange, when they, as Maitri in Mumbai described, '*dabhadabhakar gali detehe*' [hurl a mouthful of swear words, evoking relentless sounds], thus deepening the gendered norms of the debate as legitimate un-inhibition in abuse exchange.

This is then not to reproduce stereotypes about women in the third world as enslaved by patriarchy or tradition – a challenge at the universalizing discourse of western feminism now well established within postcolonial feminist scholarship. Rather, it is an argument about the gendered forms of verbal intimidation to command ideological loyalty, and how global cyber cultures of abuse, shame and comedy interlock with historically inflected notions of modern Indian woman to dismiss all that is viewed as anti-national, even though these have not gone uncontested (Subramaniam, 2015).[89]

Conclusions

This paper has discussed the Janus-faced status of *gaali* as performance – whereas its routine detoxification opens up new lines of participation for the educated middle class groups of online users, it takes a menacing edge when they instantiate gendered discursive relations of nationalism (as a section of tweeters understand it). The ambiguous position of *gaali* marks its distinction from the widely invoked regulatory discourse of "hate speech" (Pohjonen and Udupa, forthcoming). Yet, contrary to the celebratory discourses on Internet's disruptive mediation, the foregoing discussion signals the hegemonic impulse of the ludic and the obscene – a point that Mbembe (1992) grippingly forwards in his analysis of Cameroonian public spheres. For Mbembe, the mutual 'zombification' of the systems of domination and dominated subjects through the obscene and the grotesque is an anti-hegemonic force, in that the acts of the dominated fail to build into resistance because of the logic of familiarity and domesticity that entrench verbal play between the state and the ordinary public (1992: 5). He suggests that obscenity and vulgarity – limited not merely to words but all manner of signs – 'constitute one of the modalities of power in the postcolony' (1992: 29) which is not specific to the dominated alone as Bakhtin's carnivalesque praxis imagined. Instead, they provide arenas for the subalterns to deconstruct or ratify systems of domination, reproducing the very epistemological field set up by state power. As he argues, 'The practices of those who command and of those who are assumed to obey are so entangled as to render them powerless' (30). It is this intimacy of tyranny – the dominated not merely mirroring but willingly devouring the obscenity of the dominant – that empties the ludic of its subversive potential. No doubt, the realities in India are different from the authoritarian upheavals that Mbembe analyses, and the nature of relation between religious nationalism as a historical-political force and online users cannot be strictly marked as dominant and dominated. However, the important insight on the *intimacy of recognition* that evacuates the ludic from counter hegemonic narratives is helpful in bringing to the fore the mediation of abuse exchange and online hilarity in reproducing the ideologies of nationalism among a growing number of self-declared volunteers active online.

For new media literature, this case opens up another line of analysis – the importance of recognizing online abuse with the metaphor of sound. Such an emphasis would be generative since abuse drives online practice through the logic of 'creating a buzz' and 'noising out' adversarial tweets. The performative rationale then is to be the 'loudest' in the crowd through repeated and more effervescent (and purportedly creative) forms of tweets and messages. Moreover, the metaphor of sound allows us to distinguish online abuses from the evidentiary account of seeing. For online abuses, the problem is noising out adversarial tweets and not as much the veracity of content. The relentlessness, reverberation, repetition, and positionality captured by the metaphor of sound is distinct from digital 'voice' (Mitra and Watts, 2002). Sound allows and inhibits recognition at the same time. It is similar to voice in that it allows us to approach cyberspace as a 'discursive space that is occupied by the interface between humans and computers' (481). However, sound differs from

the conception of voice as the instantiation of individual agency (the speaking subject). This holds true even when we assume that individual agency is not a pre-given capacity but results from its exposure to the 'public'. Based on the conception of voice as public, dialogic and intersubjective which accrues reality not just by speaking but also by being heard, Mitra and Watts conclude that digital voice represents the 'self-correcting potential of the Internet discourse' (2002). To consider abuse as sound is to point exactly to the inverse of this liberal assumption of self-correction, and to the protoagentic structures that shape online action and its political consequences. The metaphor of sound, thus, emphasizes the reiteration and reverberation as opposed to the veracity of messages, protoagency as opposed to agency of autonomous individuals, and the performative rationale of 'creating a buzz' that emerge within situated contexts of digital use.

That the contradictory moves of *gaali* provide gendered ways to reproduce social dominance in India prompts a reconsideration of the dominant metaphors that define new media scholarship today. Although opening up new lines of participation, *gaali* cultures, as the foregoing discussion illustrates, intersect with structures of hegemonic power to embody the conservative effects of political traffic on new media, blunting in turn the subversive radicalism of the ludic as subcultures.

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[1] Names of online users are changed throughout the essay to protect anonymity.

[2] For a discussion of the social trajectory of Twitter in Mumbai city, see Author 2015b.

[3] For a detailed list of insult literature in the Western contexts, see Conley 2010; Schnakenberg 2004. For other works see Burkey 1987; Labov 1972.

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

[5] Available at: http://calamur.org/gargi/2011/04/26/internet-lumpen/ (accessed on 16 July, 2014)

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

[7] The comparison with gendered moral communities at the village level is to emphasize how social media abuse takes a *localized* character rather than as free floating cyberspace of anonymity. This is not to say that the consequences of village level sanctions are the same as online abuse in the urban contexts where the effects are more diffuse and depend on the position of the online user as described in the later part of the essay.

[8] Many protests organized through the channels of Facebook and Twitter reminded that youth mobilization has not always been complicit, but challenged the conservative agendas to culturally capture the idea of womanhood in India. The 'Kiss of Love' protest in 2014, for instance, called upon couples to kiss on the open street, to symbolically challenge 'moral policing' against inter-religious marriages and public display of affection. Similarly, South Asian activist groups such as 'girls at dhabas' use the very channels of social media to subvert dominant gender codes https://www.facebook.com/girlsatdhabas/ accessed 26 June 2016.

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