

**FINDING VOICE THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA? A
CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF WOMEN'S
PARTICIPATION IN THE ONLINE PUBLIC
SPHERE IN INDIA**

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by Sumaiya Nasir

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ABSTRACT

This thesis assesses the effectiveness of social media platforms, specifically Facebook and blogs, in facilitating women's participation in the online public sphere in India. Discussion provides a literature review of the internet as a new public sphere and its impact and influence in enriching the existing public sphere in India. The study also reviews the relationship between the online public sphere and the role women play in this sphere through social media in India. The research is supplemented by a review study of the 'India Against Corruption' movement in order to demonstrate the case for the online public sphere. Moreover, the present study also provides a snap shot of how some blogs and Facebook pages are used by women.

Taking as a case study the 2012 'Delhi gang rape' incident, through a topical network analysis of the Facebook pages and blog articles, this research attempts to understand the role of these media in allowing women to discuss social issues and participate in the public sphere. Drawing from the analysis of blog contents and examining Facebook pages I demonstrate how the women's voices inhabiting the online sphere are limited to a certain class and region. In the cases studied here respondents appeared to be predominantly urban and middle class. While the scope of the research is small, this is one of the first studies in the area, and the findings suggest that social media are becoming a significant communicative tool in India and that women are increasingly appropriating these technologies. The study also demonstrates that women are discussing issues which were previously considered as taboo like rape and sexual violence, albeit in small numbers. Lastly, I identify challenges limiting women's participation in the emerging online public sphere in India.

Keywords: Online public sphere; Social Media; Cyberfeminism; Social movements; Rape; Delhi

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Overview

As more people are engaging with the social media in the developing world every day, the ‘networked population’s’ (Shirky, 2010) ‘enhanced’ abilities to participate in public speech, mobilise support, and undertake collective action is much debated. There is also an extensive discussion on the impact and the effectiveness of the social media as a tool of empowerment for marginalised and suppressed groups (Taylor, 2011; Eltantawy and Wiest, 2011) in these countries. In particular, the implication of social media in the lives of women has become a subject of several researches. For example, studies have explored the role of social media in empowering women during Arab Spring and in their day to day life (Newsom and Lengel, 2012a; Strong & Hareb, 2012; Dubai School of Government, 2011); ways female professionals navigate social media for their work (Wang, 2013); social media as a tool to disseminate an alternative message of female sexuality (Shade, 2008). In line with the research on social media’s relevance in the lives of women, this study analyses their effectiveness in facilitating women’s participation in the online public sphere in India.

Until recently the internet users in India were predominantly male, however, according to a report by the Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry of India, ASSOCHAM (2012) it has been observed that the present user growth is contributed by both males and females. The study reports that females constitute around 40 % of the online population and the numbers are constantly on the rise. Another report by the Internet and Mobile Association of India (2013a) found a similar increase in the growth of social media users as well as an increase in female social media users. The growing numbers of female users in India warrant researches on different aspects of their internet usage. This thesis is one such attempt to examine how far women in

India have come in terms of their social media usage particularly for activism and awareness.

Studies on the impact of social media in India have concentrated on analysing the role that these media have played during social movements. Most researches on mass movements propelled by the social media have explored the ways a particular social media platform was utilised during the protests, or their overall impact on a movement. For example, Ahmed & Jaidka (2013) probed the use of Twitter for organising protests during the ‘Delhi gang rape social movement’. Parashar (2012) examined ‘new media’s’ role during ‘India Against Corruption’ movement of 2011 including in his study both Facebook pages and Twitter. Little attention has been paid in evaluating the gendered aspects of the usage of these media.

The present study will endeavour to understand the role of social media in the lives of women, particularly after the 2012 ‘Delhi gang rape’. In particular, this study explores the appropriation of Facebook and blogs by women in India, and how they enable participation in the online public sphere. This is evaluated by establishing an online public sphere framework and its replication in these two Web 2.0 enabled platforms. By analysing Facebook and blogs, this thesis explores the manner of women’s online participation, and also asks to what extent these platforms appear to be contributing to a new “public sphere” online. In order to answer these questions a case study on Facebook pages and Blogs discussing the implications of the 2012 ‘Delhi gang rape’ is conducted. But before that the literature on public sphere is reviewed, explaining the relationship between the online and offline spheres in India and their significance.

1.1.1 An introduction to social media and the public sphere in India

Social media rose in prominence during and after a series of revolutions in the Arab world, or what is now termed the ‘Arab Spring’. Egypt’s 2011 revolution which culminated in the overthrowing of its authoritarian regime has been called “Revolution 2.0” by an online activist and marketing manager of Google (Lim, 2012). Similarly, Iran’s ‘revolution’ too invited a flurry of attention in its use of social media

with several western media outlets describing it as the “Twitter Revolution” (Ali and Fahmy, 2013). Though, the enthusiasm for social media platforms’ capacity to usher change is not shared by everyone. For instance, questioning the perception of a successful Twitter fueled movement, Esfandiari (2010) posits that social networks managed to complicate the Iranian people’s struggle and calls the Iranian uprising as the “Twitter devolution”. Likewise, speaking in the Egyptian context Rich (2011) argues that the role of social media has been hyped and revolution was inevitable given the political climate of Egypt.

Offering a more balanced argument, Lim (2012) in a detailed appraisal of the events leading to the movement in Egypt concludes that the social media helped in expansion of networks which the ruling government was unable to control. Subsequently, social media acted as a catalyst by fostering new connections between the general populace, disseminating grievances of communities beyond their immediate surroundings, and widening the appeal of the movement to reach a global audience. Lim (2012: 244) further adds that a complex ‘sociotechnical’ network was created to encompass not only social media and mainstream traditional media, but also involving mediated and face-to-face networks.

In India it was the events during the 2008 terrorist attacks in the city of Mumbai that first brought to the forefront the role of new media technologies (Schwittay, 2011). Through Twitter messages were sent asking for blood donors to donate blood in a Mumbai hospital. Others used the social networking site to inform friends and family of their whereabouts as land line phones went dead.

A group of Mumbai based bloggers used their blog as a news wire service informing its reader news of the incident as it unfolded. Someone created a Google Map showing the spots of the terror attacks along with related links of the incident and eyewitness accounts. One citizen using their camera took a series of photos of the places where the incidents occurred and uploaded them on Flickr, a photo sharing site (Beaumont, 2008). Although, the Mumbai attacks highlighted the role of social media it was mostly in relation to citizen journalism and not civic participation per se.

However, it was in 2011 that the rhetoric of ‘new’ media technologies as a tool for citizen empowerment started to develop coinciding with the growth of an online population in India. The year 2011 witnessed the emergence of ‘India Against Corruption’ (IAC), a social movement comprising a series of protests led by a group of mainly civil rights activists. The movement purported to be apolitical, however, soon after it ended some of its leaders went on to form a political party. The increasing importance of social media in the life of an average Indian citizen gained further momentum after the gang rape incident in Delhi. The 2012 gang rape incident ignited several protests fueled by extensive online campaigns that mobilised people into action in the Indian capital as well as other parts of the country. Taken together both these incidents played a significant role in bringing social media to the larger public sphere of India.

Analysing the role of social media after the 2012 gang rape in Delhi, Belair-Gagnon et al. (2013a) believe that the social media are not only enriching the networked public sphere in India, but are also providing a space in which previously taboo subjects can be discussed. It is acknowledged that supposedly social media led events are usually accompanied by a host of offline complementing factors (Lim, 2012). Yet, by giving impetus to traditional activist or political pursuits these media have changed the trajectory of political communication and helped in creating and expanding alternative public spheres.

1.1.2 Research Background- the emergence of online public debate in context

Globally, there has been a proliferation of studies on the internet’s role as a tool capable of fostering political deliberations, hosting political space, and generally encouraging civic culture in the Western context. However, studies on Asian countries regarding the same are relatively fewer, the obvious reason being the late diffusion of the internet in these countries.

Even among the Asian countries, there is a disparity in the internet penetration with Singapore, South Korea, and Japan overtaking not only countries like

Bangladesh, and Laos but also some countries in the west (Banerjee, 2003a). Then there are countries like China and India that are emerging as the leading internet nations with some of the fastest growing internet population in the world. These developments have made the study of the internet's effect inevitable, which is increasingly considered critical not only for social, economic, or technological development, but also for human development. Banerjee (2003a) observes that any talk on human development in Asia needs to include good governance, political freedom, and civil rights which constitute an important factor for social and economic development.

Political rights and freedom are essential because they empower citizens by giving them a chance to take part in crucial decisions relating to their lives as well as the public affairs. These rights also enhance the governance process by contributing towards a greater transparency, honesty, accountability, and competence in the system as well as curb corruption. Banerjee (2003a) adds that the internet in these countries can play a significant role, especially with regard to politics and media. The internet can act as an alternative mode of communication that can bypass the traditional strictures imposed on the mainstream mass media forms. He notes that although the internet cannot be seen in isolation and considered a sole decisive factor in the socio-political climate in Asia, its role in promoting civil and political liberties cannot be undermined.

India has been quick to adopt ICTs for governance purposes: the Ministry of IT in India defines e-governance as using IT to enable simple, moral, accountable, responsive and transparent governance, also known by the acronym SMART. D.A. Singh (2007) states that electronic governance promotes better governance as it makes clear government processes, gives more access to information, and changes the relationship between the citizen and the state. E-governance is more than an application of information technology to the processes of government services, thereby, not just providing efficient government services but also an efficient and transparent government.

Successful cases of e-governance projects implemented in India include Self-employed women's association (SEWA) training programme which focuses on empowering women from the poorest strata of society; the automated milk collection (AMC) system in Gujarat, Electronic land record systems (Karnataka, Punjab and Andhra Pradesh) which register real estate transactions (D.A. Singh, 2007: 130-131). Though, India has implemented measures to boost the IT industry, which is accorded a prominent status in a bid to make the country a software superpower, there hasn't been much attempt to encourage democracy online (Duggal, 2003). Regardless, Indian citizens have started employing the internet for diverse purposes other than its communicative function; a fact attested by the organisation of several major online campaigns initiated by the citizens in recent times.

Since, 2009 India has witnessed a huge explosion in the number of internet users. A report released by the Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMA) (2013b) divulges that by October 2013 India would have 205 million internet users. The report also states that the numbers will further increase and by June 2014 the country is poised to overtake the US as world's second largest internet base after China.

In a discussion on the steady rise of the internet users in India, the chairman of IAMAI enthused that while it took more than a decade to move from 10 million to 100 million it took only 3 years to reach 200 from 100 million. He further added that the country can now hope to develop a "robust Internet ecosystem" and a thriving internet economy as the internet is now clearly "mainstream in India" (IAMAI, 2013b). India's internet penetration is significantly aided by a growing mobile industry. By March 2013, 12.2% of total active mobile subscribers had used the internet through their mobile (Avendus, 2013). The report by Avendus (2013) also found that 40% of Google searches are conducted through mobile phones and 30% of Facebook users access the site only by mobile phone.

In spite of the rapid internet diffusion accelerated because of economic growth, India remains a country of deep contrasts. In 2013 the Human Development

Report released by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) ranked India at 136 among 186 countries on its human development index, which is a measure of life expectancy, educational access, and income levels. The country was placed at the bottom on the list of countries that have reached medium development. Notwithstanding the third highest number of the internet users in the world, India stands at 145th position in the list of the countries with the percentage of individuals using the internet (Ramachandran, 2013). Only 12.6% of the total population accesses the internet, making it one of the lowest penetration rates globally. According to the census data only 3% of Indian households had the internet connection with many users accessing the internet through cybercafés (Freedom House, 2012a).

There is a pronounced urban-rural divide as only a very small percentage of the rural population used the internet though there are several successful ICT development projects for the poor and marginal classes led by both the government and several NGOs (Schwittay, 2011). This divide is alarming considering the fact that almost 72% of the population resides in rural India.

Nonetheless, the relatively low internet penetration does not mean that the lower classes are completely bereft of the internet technologies. The lower classes in India are increasingly becoming more open towards ICTs. A study by Pal (2012) in rural south India found that most of the residents of agrarian villages believed that their children needed to learn computers to achieve success. They believe that learning computer is an important skill which will facilitate progress, and also ease their transition to an affluent life. For them gaining technological skills means a way to improve their status and fulfill their aspirations. Furthermore, learning computers, which have become a compulsory subject in Indian schools, has increased the pressure to own a home computer, especially in families where children attend schools with poor ICT facilities (Rangaswamy, cited in Schwittay, 2011).

Duggal (2003) observes that initially the pace of the internet growth was slow but changes started to occur in the late 1990s and early 2000 when cybercafés mushroomed throughout the country, resulting in an increase of the internet users. In

urban areas with lower-middle class concentration the internet cafes have also played a crucial role in initiating first timers into technology and making it commonplace (Rangaswamy, 2009). Haseloff and Ghadially (2007) observed that while a strong gender divide persists even in the upper and middle classes of urban India, cybercafés have the potential to bridge this divide.

In their study on gender divide and the internet access amongst the urban classes in India, Haseloff and Ghadially (2007: 283) concluded that the cybercafés can be seen as ‘gender-neutral places’. They said that while women were under-represented in the general internet usage, the ratio in cybercafé is quite narrow. They further noted that not only cybercafés offer a place where both men and women can use the ICTs ‘equally’, but they can also help in alleviating digital divide, especially for the economically disadvantaged who cannot afford the hardware required to access the internet.

While the problems of the digital divide and the gender divide persists, the Indian government has undertaken several measures to include women in its development agenda. ICT related projects targeting women have been introduced in several states with varying degree of success. These projects have not only brought women to IT related industry, but have also positively impacted their progress in various fields ranging from domestic to local governance (Prathibha, Rajesh & Parimal, 2011).

One such venture is ‘Sreesakthi’ [women power], a bilingual web portal which is described as an important social media tool of Gender Self Learning Programme initiated by the Government of the south Indian state of Kerala. It provides a forum for ‘discussing issues, developing modules, collating program reports, clearing difficulties, and more importantly helping women become computer and technology savvy’ (Venniyoor, 2013). SEWA (Self-Employed Women's Association) is another very successful programme where women are trained to use ICTs to run their business and is based in Gujarat, a western Indian state. Moreover, their children also receive computer knowledge and training (Karan & Mathur, 2009).

There have been positive outcomes of these initiatives, but studies on the role of ICTs have also revealed that even though women have entered into IT related industries the traditional gender roles remain largely unchanged. Consequently, women are placed at the margin of employing organisations (R. Patel, 2005). For instance, Arun & Arun (2002) found that while ICTs create opportunities for women they do not do much to mitigate the gender disparities present in the society. However, Goyal (2007) argues that even if women prioritise others' needs, the internet has the potential to give them more time, educational, and financial opportunities. There is a thriving body of literature on the gendered aspect of IT related technologies and their relationship in women's lives in India. However, studies on the women's actual internet practices regarding their roles in the online public sphere are few: a gap that this research intends to fulfill.

1.2 Research Problems and Objectives

On 16th December 2012 a 23 year old woman was raped and severely beaten by six men in a moving bus in New Delhi, India. The rape and subsequent death of the girl generated widespread national and international media coverage and went on to become a watershed incident because of the amount of criticism and reaction it sparked. The victim became a symbol of courage and was posthumously presented with several awards, including the bravery award by the US state department ('US bravery award', 2013). She was also bestowed with a bravery award from the Indian president ('Delhi gang-rape victim honoured', 2013). Social media technologies were extensively employed by the disconcerted populace, and emerged as rallying points for the ordinary citizens who used them to coordinate and organise protests, invoking parallels to social media-led revolts in other countries.

This galvanisation of the social media by the Indian citizens did not go unnoticed by the mainstream media as it initiated another debate on the use of social media as a tool for awareness and action. All the major Indian newspapers carried out news describing the role of these media in encouraging protests and mass participation (P. Singh, 2012). The technology led protests by the common citizens

after the rape invoked comparison to the Arab spring with journalists terming it as an Indian version of the Arab Spring (Zakaria, 2013; Gayathri, 2013).

Incidents of sexual violence such as this incident reported here are common occurrences in the country: according to the National Crime Records Bureau, there has been a ten-fold increase in rape cases from 1971 ('tenfold increase', 2014). In fact, rape is becoming the fastest growing crime in India (Suri and Sanjeeda, 2013). But this particular episode of December 2012 evoked an unprecedented response from the people; there were pan-India protests condemning the incident, accounting the Delhi government and the Delhi police for its failure to protect women in the capital. This incident, for the first time evoked a response from the men. A large number of the protestors were men addressing what is regarded as 'women's issues' (Arora, 2012).

The anger and frustration of Delhi's public was perhaps nowhere more palpable than during the 2013 Delhi Assembly elections in which the candidate for the one-year-old Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) or the Common Man party unseated the longest serving Chief Minister of Delhi, Sheila Dikshit of the ruling Indian National Congress (INC party). Dikshit had led INC to victory in the previous three consecutive elections in Delhi but in 2013 her party incurred heavy losses. It was only able to retain less than 10 of Delhi's 70 seats, thereby, effectively ending Congress' uninterrupted 15 year old long run. AAP's win is historic mainly due to the fact that in spite of being a new party with lesser known faces it managed to attain victory against several veteran politicians, a rare feat in the Indian political scene where dynasty politics and nepotism are a norm.

The protests after Delhi rape, the loss of the Congress party, and the eventual electoral victory of AAP all demonstrate the strength of new media technologies not only as an emerging tool for political engagement, but also in motivating political participation by previously disengaged groups. Interestingly, AAP itself is a party which came into prominence in large parts due to its judicious use of social media through the 'India Against Corruption' movement. AAP's scathing take on the state's

handling of the Delhi gang rape case found a resonance among the middle class as well, who also happen to be its most ardent supporters.

In this light, the fundamental objective of the present thesis is to examine the effectiveness of social media in enabling and reshaping the participation of women in the online public sphere. It studies the development of the online sphere in the context of the protests arising out of 'India Against Corruption' movement. Moreover, by conducting a case study on the 'Delhi rape' incident of 2012, this study focuses on the roles and implications of the social media by examining online engagement of women and the scope and extent of such engagement. The present study argues that the Delhi bus gang rape protests and India Against Corruption (IAC) movement are two significant issues having an extensive online presence; the 2013 Delhi Assembly election result confirms that these remain central in Delhi politics.

Among all of the existing user-generated new media this thesis examines Facebook and blogs. Facebook was selected over other social networking sites because of its immense popularity amongst the Indians who form its second largest user base in the world (Socialbakers, 2013). Blogs were chosen because of their ability to generate public debate and offer avenues for the development of alternative public spheres (Poell, 2009). Lampa (2004) believes that the process of self-expression via blogs is empowering for the individual user as blogging makes them visible to the wider community instilling a sense of agency. Blogs are a powerful medium of self-expression and the appeal of blogging is greater in women who are more likely to create and use blogs than men (Stavrositu and Sundar, 2012). Stavrositu and Sundar (2012: 370) argue that by the virtue of their 'publicness' thoughts and emotions of bloggers become visible to others and 'can attract attention, sharing, and participation'. On the part of the blogger this impact of self-expression can not only lead to greater psychological well-being but also instill a deep sense of empowerment.

In regard to blogs, discussion considers whether they create platforms for women to break the traditional hierarchy present offline. Also, if women can initiate

discussions on issues and topics which may not always be culturally appropriate or taboo thereby gaining agency. Drawing from Mitra and Watt's (2002a) argument on minority communities, this thesis asks, can women create their 'ethos or dwelling space' in cyberspace from where they can participate in the public sphere? Lastly, this study examines whether traditional gender roles can be ruptured in the spaces provided by blogs and Facebook to an extent that it may have the potential to provide equal opportunities for both men and women to participate in an online public sphere.

In sum, analysing blog articles and the accompanying comment section supplements the findings of Facebook and helps present a holistic argument especially when assessing women's roles. While many women are online in India and are using social media, the extent to which they are using these media platforms for political and activist purposes is not always clear. Yet, the fact that these media are fast serving as a means for women to participate in a public domain and give them voice cannot be ignored.

This study argues that social media such as Facebook and blogs offer a platform to women to collaborate, disseminate information, and deliberate on issues of common interests albeit in limited ways. These platforms also function as a tool for activism through which individuals can promote their cause and mobilise support for offline actions. It also examines the contention that new media technologies serve as a space where women can comparatively negotiate power relations on their own terms, especially with regard to their offline environment.

1.3 Research Questions

The central questions guiding the research are:

RQ1. How useful and effective are social media in facilitating and reshaping the participation of women in online public sphere in India?

RQ2. In what ways were Facebook and blogs appropriated after the 'Delhi gang rape' incident of 2012 by women in India to engage in the online public sphere?

1.4 Chapters Overview

This research begins with a literature review on the public sphere, and then sets out the methodology. This is followed by two chapters detailing the development of the online public sphere and the women's role in that sphere respectively: The attempt is made to provide a historical overview of the public sphere in India by drawing a parallel with Habermas' (1962) description of the same in the Western European context. It is then followed by an attempt to locate the women's space in that sphere over the years. The next chapter provides a case study of the 2012 'Delhi gang rape' incident followed by an evaluation of women's role in the online public sphere. The thesis concludes with a discussion on the current scenario, findings and the possible limitations of the study.

Chapter two constitutes a literature review outlining a critique of the public sphere as a concept with Habermas (1962) serving as a point of departure. Next, there is a discussion on the emergence of an online public sphere and how aspects of social media contribute towards the growth of that sphere in India. In the following section, I draw a theoretical framework of an online public sphere which will serve as a unit of analysis to assess the online sphere for this thesis. Lastly, I document the growth of the online public sphere in India linking it to women's participation with an emphasis on social media tools. Chapter three provides a detailed appraisal of the methodology by laying out the different methods used and the overall process of the research. It gives reasons concerning the use of different methods applied, including case study as well as the process of data collection and data analysis.

Chapter four sets up a historiography of the Indian public sphere tracing the development of the mass media from the pre-colonial era to the present period of social media. It includes the challenges facing the internet penetration as well as impediments that threaten to dismantle the democratic character of the internet in India. The chapter historically contextualises from the post-liberalisation era in India to the present time in order to understand the increasing pulls towards the online technologies for political endeavours by middle class. The example of 'India Against Corruption' (IAC) movement exemplifies this interest of the middle class, and their

role in the online public sphere. The study of IAC substantiates the role of social media as well as helps in establishing the argument of social media's capacity in sustaining the online public sphere in India.

Chapter five extends the description of the online public sphere focusing specifically on the role of women and their contribution to that sphere. This chapter gives a general outline of women's participation in the public sphere in India as well as the impact of ICTs in overall development of women in India.

In chapter six, the Delhi gang rape incident of 2012 is discussed through a case study. This case study seeks to answer the inquiries established in the thesis. It looks into the questions of the ways Indian women are contributing to the development of online public sphere and how they are appropriating the online space. This is understood not only through various Facebook pages, but also through the blog posts authored by Indian women, specifically dealing with the Delhi rape incident. The overarching answer to these questions is discussed through a feminist lens on women's role in the public sphere.

Chapter seven will present the final conclusions of the research. This chapter will discuss and analyse the research findings and implications. It will also seek to understand how this study has contributed to the existing body of literature on the online Indian public sphere and the possible limitations.

CHAPTER TWO

PUBLIC SPHERE- A LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

With the advent of web 2.0 enabled platforms the locus of scholarly attention is drawn towards the democratic potential of the internet leading to a reconfiguration of the definition of civil society, participatory democracy, public sphere and various other democratic institutions. This study focuses on the public sphere, a vital component for the development of democratic societies. Public spheres are defined as arenas that ‘allow citizens to discuss collectively relevant issues and allow citizens to inform themselves about societal developments and to observe and control the political, economic and other elites’ (Gerhards and Schäfer, 2009).

The concept of public sphere is often associated with a western paradigm of modern democracy with Habermas serving as a point of departure in most cases. Habermas’ now almost canonical *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962) traces the rise and fall of bourgeois public sphere in Western Europe and is a starting point for many works. Compared to the west, the hypothesis of public sphere has evolved quite differently in post-colonial nations like India because of the socio-political and historical differences. In spite of different paradigms in which the social institutions function in different societies, the common thread of the public sphere is present in almost all of the democratic nations.

I will begin the first part of the chapter with a comprehensive discussion on the theoretical implications of the public sphere concept with reference to India. Next, I intend to expound on the emergence of the online public sphere, and will go on to explain how it is shaped and influenced by the social media platforms like Facebook and blogs. In the next section of the chapter I will develop the concept of public sphere reconceptualising it in the view of different theories. I am also going to take into account Dahlberg’s (2004a) normative conditions for an online public sphere. His conditions will serve as a unit of analysis later in the thesis when I analyse the discourse happening on the blogs. Lastly, by extending the argument that social media

enriches the online public sphere, I will discuss their role in facilitating Indian women's participation in particular.

2.2 Theoretical Implications for Public Sphere

Amongst the several theoretical implications underpinning the public sphere concept, the two major approaches are empirical-descriptive and ideal-normative (Nieminen, 2006). A descriptive approach considers the public sphere as an abstract category with no specific point of origin, but a product of empirically observable instances derived from the 'historical development process of political society' (Kocan, 2008). A normative concept of public sphere premises itself on the idea of what a public sphere ought to be and is constructed around the notions of principles and values (Kocan, 2008; Nieminen, 2006).

The two approaches have been adopted by several researchers in their attempt to locate the public sphere within the internet. The descriptive approach analyses the presumed limitations of public sphere in the face of private interests (Nieminen, 2006). According to this the institutions that best accommodate public spheres are those independent of private interests. For example, the public service broadcasting or the systems of public subsidies supporting non-commercial media (Curran, cited in Nieminen, 2006). Using the descriptive approach towards public sphere Keane (2000) proposes three forms of public sphere: micro (sub-cultural), meso (national) and macro (global). He believes that the internet 'stimulates the growth of macro-public spheres' (p. 83).

The normative theory of public sphere revolves around the notions of what an ideal public sphere ought to be that can produce the best overall political and social system (Kocan, 2008). The normative principles are forwarded by Dahlberg (2004a) and Poster (2001) who have specified the ways the internet facilitates participation in the creation of a public sphere (Nieminen, 2006). Perhaps the earliest normative analysis was presented by Habermas (1962) who conceptualised the public sphere as a space for public discourse requiring three major preconditions.

In his seminal work, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962) Habermas has detailed the rise and transformation of the modern state in the

eighteenth and nineteenth century Germany, France, and Britain. He wrote that the second half of the seventeenth century was a critical period as during this time the development of the modern press began to take shape though the readership was limited to the intellectual elite. He argues that by the early eighteenth century, the press became more widespread and started to include well- reasoned and critically argued articles apart from economic news, and state propaganda of the previous years. Moreover, the separation of the state and the church led to a loosening of the political hold over the everyday sphere aiding the growth of 'publics'. However, by the nineteenth century the bourgeoisie public sphere started to change eventually becoming a shadow of its previous self.

Habermas (1962) locates this collapse of the public sphere in the circumstances following the increased commercialisation of mass media in the nineteenth century. He argues that as a result of this commercialisation the universal concerns dissolved paving way for competing interest groups, and the resultant dumbing down of the public. Habermas posits that by the 20th century, mass media with its opinion polls and other media operated activities purporting to gauge public opinion actually managed to create a homogenous environment with little room for the vigorous debates of the past. For Habermas (1962) mediated communication systems with their vertical communication flow delimit the notion of an egalitarian discursive space. Subsequently, the public sphere degenerated from a 'reading public' that indulged in active and critical argumentation only to be replaced by the 'mass public of culture consumers'.

Habermas (1962) sets out three pre-conditions for the existence of a public sphere: the first is the disregard of status, which is a rejection of social hierarchy, such that the public sphere came to be equated with a space where individual worth was measured through the quality of discourse instead of rank or status. Second is the emphasis on common concern; this entails the ability of the citizenry to postulate and discuss on issues concerning all and not just the domain of the state or any representative authorities.

Habermas says that the topics of art and literature were initially monopolised by the church and the royalty, and gradually started to interest the commoners as well.

Subsequently, these areas of interests became more accessible to the common citizenry and begin to feature in their lives mainly due to the changing market economy. Later these areas extended to include economics, politics, and philosophy as well, making these hitherto exclusive subjects common and interesting for the general public. The third and final precondition is inclusivity; these forums of conversations for common concerns were considered inherently inclusive by the participants themselves. Habermas reasons that any space purporting to be public can never be truly exclusive in its entirety as the participants could avail themselves through the issues that were discussed. Thus, any issue discussed in that space becomes general, not only in significance, but in accessibility as well.

Habermas (1962) claims that two distinctive public spheres emerged: the political public sphere revolving around the issues of civil society and public policy, and the literary public sphere related to matters of general social behaviour and taste (Gunaratne, 2006).

Over the years the Habermasian model has been critiqued, analysed, and revised by several scholars (Fraser, 1990; Negt and Kluge, 1993; Dahlgren, 2005a). Sassi (2000: 93) points out that Habermas not only idealises the liberal public sphere, but also fails to take into account other ‘competing, non-liberal, non-bourgeois, public spheres.’

Contesting Habermas’ claim that the bourgeois public sphere was formed independently of the individual status, Negt and Kluge (1993) note that he disregards the fact that its members were predominantly male and propertied, thus rendering it an exclusive space. Questioning the plurality of the Habermasian sphere and the apparent exclusion of the working class and other minorities, they propose the recognition of ‘counterpublics’ as a threat to the bourgeois public sphere.

Dahlgren (2001b) proposes a similar concept when he talks about “issue publics” where publics are organised around a common topic. Problematizing the claim that debates on ‘common concerns’ were carried out by all, Fraser (1990) says that women, marginal groups, and the lower class are absent thus negating the idea of the public sphere participants being a democratic group. Similar criticism is leveled

by Landes (1998a:143) who argues that Habermas' exclusion of women from the public sphere was deliberate and not an accidental or marginal feature. She says inclusion of women in the public realm presented a threat to the natural order of the society which placed them in the private sphere. By overlooking women's discourses he conveniently places them under a universalised construct which predominantly leaned towards a male-centric worldview. In doing so Habermas fails to achieve inclusivity in his concept which for him is a vital criterion.

Speaking in the Indian context, A. Ali (2001) argues that the public sphere as defined by Habermas if applied to India shows a presence of dominant voices and religions. Habermas' conception necessitates the inclusion of a private sphere without which public sphere cannot be defined and the concept of the public itself remains meaningless. Drawing from this relation between public and private, A. Ali (2001) concludes that the colonial policies had a direct bearing on the private spheres which manifested in the public sphere in India. Thus, any discussion ensuing out of a domain privileging the majority remains exclusive and not representative of all segments of the society.

Fraser (1990) makes a somewhat similar argument when she argues that in stratified societies there are limited shared interests, and the notion that one public sphere will suffice for multiple views and interests is nullified because the idea of what is good for one may not hold true for another group.

Applying the Habermasian concept in the Indian scenario, Chandhoke (2009) demonstrates that it fails to satisfy the demands of a multi-lingual society like India. She argues that his concept centers heavily around linguistic interactions as he believes in an ideal of a language common to all for a successful manifestation of a public sphere. Chandhoke (2009: 346) asserts that in multi-lingual societies when two languages meet in the public sphere, the dominant of the two sets the norms for exchange, further excluding those at the periphery of the society. Citing the example of India, she adds someone from the north may not be able to participate in the south and vice versa.

Bhargava (2005: 44) believes that a lack of theory in postcolonial nations makes it pertinent to look at western theories. He effectively points out that the modern public sphere in India does not replicate any version of the western public sphere let alone Habermas' theory. Adding to that the colonial past of India makes its public sphere more complex and non-linear compared with the west. Assuming that there are no commonalities between Habermas' theory and the public domain in India does not on the whole make the category of public sphere redundant. Its absence from the Indian context shows the shortcomings of Habermas' public sphere as an analytical and descriptive category, but this does not mean that this category per se has no normative relevance. Habermas eventually reconstructed his concept in the face of criticism, the outcome of which is the theory of "communicative action", but critics continue to argue that his views of the public sphere make it difficult for alternative voices to be heard in public debate (see for example Iris Young, 1990a).

The overview of public sphere suggests that there is little consensus about its definition but as Garnham (1992) argues that the concept of public sphere is central to the debate on the role of mediated communication in a democratic polity. Susen (2011: 59) aptly remarks that while it may not always be feasible to study modern public spheres without referring to Habermas, but it is 'impossible to understand the transformation of late modern public spheres without going beyond his conceptual framework'. Baynes (cited in Sassi, 2000: 93) defines the public sphere as 'a vast array of institutions in which a wide variety of practical discourses overlap'.

Borrowing from Baynes, Sassi (2000: 94) defines public sphere as accommodating of multiple institutions where solidarities are formed in a civil society. These can be a result of informal movements and associations or through institutions of 'the public mass media, and to the more formal institutions of parliamentary debate and legal argument' and in the recent times also includes the internet.

2.3 Emergence of Online Public Sphere

The discussion on the internet's capacity to further the goals of democracy encompasses its ability to provide space for political processes (Stanyer, 2005) as well as empower people and strengthen institutions of representative governance (Norris,

2002). One of the earliest proponents of the internet's communicative structure, Rheingold (2000) celebrates its ability to provide a space to exchange ideas, debate issues, and mobilise opinion. In a similar vein, Slevin (2000) argues that the dialogic trait which has diminished because of the vertical information flow of traditional media will see resurgence in the internet. In addition to that the internet is considered to offer avenues for alternative and marginalised voices to flourish (Sussman, 2000).

Mitra and Watts (2002a) argue that by providing tools for enhanced civic participation and giving 'voice' to minorities, the internet helps promote public spheres that can be empowering to the ordinary citizen. Concurring with them Dahlgren (2005a) says that the internet's capacity to favour a varied discourse, and accommodate multiple voices potentially invigorating democracy can lead to an enhanced political participation. Habermas on the other hand, acknowledges the internet's communicative potential, but believes that it is significant only in the authoritarian countries where it can possibly rupture the state imposed censorship laws. In democratic countries, he believes that the internet fragments the audiences into a multitude of single issue publics (Habermas cited in Rasmussen, 2008).

The internet is based in large part on information and communication from its users, a characteristic that is favoured by some theorists of deliberation. Rasmussen (2008) believes that the theories of deliberation addressed precisely what the internet seemed to offer' which includes the possibility of formation of public opinion on a very large scale. However, McChesney (1999) differs, arguing that the internet's supposedly democratic features are under threat in the face of state and economic interests that are curtailing the autonomy of online discourse.

Acknowledging both sides of the argument on the democratising potential of the internet, Loo (2007) believes that technology on its own does not encourage or hinder democratic processes. It is the users who determine the potential of any technology, but even that is contingent upon 'the country's communication, legal and institutional structures, the public discursive culture, and the people's readiness to actively engage in the political process using the internet as the medium for this engagement' (2007:19).

The concept of the public sphere is constantly being redefined and delineated in response to digital networked communications which are supposedly eroding the conventional norms of political participation and civic engagement in postindustrial societies, and providing ways that enable new and minority voices to participate. Monberg (1998) argues that the internet's fluid boundaries blur the fixed distinctions characteristic of traditional media, and the creation of these new media space is as much a creation of social space. He adds that in order to analyse these spaces it is essential to apply the category of public sphere in itself, so that these spaces remain 'depoliticized'. He says that by using the analytical lens of the public sphere, issues of political consequences are identified and highlighted which otherwise would remain 'submerged and depoliticized' (1998: 435).

Sassi (2000) argues that the internet's ability to accommodate a plurality of competing interest leading to a creation of new publics make it an appealing institution of the public sphere. Similarly Dahlgren (2005a: 160) argues that the internet is 'at the forefront of the evolving public sphere' and by accommodating the growth of counter public spheres, it allows citizens 'to play a role in the development of new democratic politics'. Furthermore, with the affordances provided by Web 2.0 technologies the inclusion of social media seemed inevitable in strengthening the argument of the internet as a facilitator of the public sphere.

The advent of Web 2.0 affordances has further intensified the debate on the internet's democratic features. "Web 2.0" is characterised by its user friendly approach and ability to circulate and create data by users. Blogs and social networking sites are some of the popular web 2.0 platforms.

On the description of web 2.0 as a user generated platform, Baym (2011a:384) argues that the term "user generated" can be misleading as it signifies a presence of an internet which was not user generated, a fallacy as the content on the internet since its inception has always been created by its users. She adds that the only difference is the presence of 'professional content providers' by virtue of which Web 2.0 has become synonymous with user generated content. These professional content providers provide domains for people to generate their content. Unlike the internet of the 1990s, where also users created their content and shared them and were the sole

beneficiaries, the professional content providers of Web 2.0 are for-profit enterprises and benefit along with the people.

The domination of the web by these content providers has been a source of contention for some who question the euphoria surrounding the democratisation of media. For example, Lovink (2008) considers the user-generated techno culture as yet another example of corporate hegemony. Yet, the fact that the social aspects of web 2.0 have affected the discourse surrounding public sphere or online public sphere cannot be undermined.

Benkler (2006) notes that the emergence of the networked public sphere relies not on the tools, but on social, information and cultural production practices that these tools enable. He also adds that these production activities emerge from the “nonmarket actors” comprising of individuals working alone, and formal organisations like NGOs that have a direct impact on the mainstream media. Thus, by allowing the actors to see themselves as potential contributors instead of just passive recipients of information, the networked sphere shifts the disproportionate balance from the mainstream media.

Being one of the fastest growing technologies to permeate Indian society, the internet then may be seen to play a vital role in forging alternative media spaces, and providing an additional outlet for a national public arena. Public spheres are traditionally arenas accessible to all (Habermas, 1962) and the fact that the internet has not diffused uniformly in India subverts to a degree the notion of the existence of the online public sphere. Yet, by 2014 India will have the second largest number of internet users in the world (IAMAI, 2013b) which actively appropriates social media signifying the development of an emerging online public sphere.

2.3.1 Social Media Compatible to Public Sphere?: a study of Facebook and Blogs

Social media encompasses a multitude of content sharing sites through which the online activities of a user is not restricted to any single website or mailing list. In

recent times social networking sites have become one of the most popular social media platforms. Perhaps the most employed definition of social networking sites comes from Boyd and Ellison (2007), who defines these networking sites as a web enabled service which allows individuals to create a public or a semi-public profile within a particular system. It also allows the user to create a list of users already known to them within that system, and to navigate through a list of connections of both the known users and the unknown users within that system. These sites can be specialised offering avenues for the like-minded to mingle or they can be broad in nature and cater to a wide audience.

Boyd and Ellison (2007) claim that while traditional websites with their email groups and web boards allowed their users to interact with other users, the present social networking sites differ from them. Instead of merely functioning as a platform to meet strangers Web 2.0 sites reinforce and strengthen people's existing online and offline ties. Mazali (2011: 290) argues that social network spaces are not just 'representational spaces' rather they are 'performance spaces' where 'identity is created' and where one can 'act'.

A user can simultaneously maintain a presence on several social networking sites at once; videos uploaded on YouTube can be shared on Facebook or postings on Twitter can also be shared through Facebook status thus creating a link of the network. Sharing images or videos on sites like Pinterest can be announced via personal blog which again can host various social media links. Offering spaces for niche as well as mainstream interests (Boyd and Ellison, 2007) to shaping social movements, social networking sites have successfully opened up the debate on the capability to enhance political participation, strengthen civil society and even throw long established autocratic regimes.

In recent times, US president Obama's 2008 presidential campaign garnered a lot of attention for its innovative use of social media and has highlighted their role in political discourse. In practice, President Obama's innovative use of the internet assisted him to do traditional style of campaigning for much of the money raised online was spent on face-to-face campaigning and television advertisements (Iosifidis, 2011).

A prominent feature of mainstream media, social networks is routinely used by Indian news channels who maintain a strong presence on Twitter and Facebook as well. Indian politicians too are employing these sites, for instance the Indian Finance Minister went online to take questions from the citizens on his budget in 2013. Students, analysts and farmers participated in this video-conferencing, which was conducted through the Google+ social network (Kannan, 2013).

Mazali (2011) argues that the social networking sites structure themselves around the individual who forms the center of their own communities. In this sense it differs from the earlier online public communities which were structured around a specific topic or according to topical hierarchies. By enabling a greater participation from the user these sites encourage a participatory culture in which members believe their contribution matter, and harbour some level of social connection with one another.

While recognition of social networking sites as a site of public sphere is a fairly recent phenomenon, social media platforms like blogs have been around for a longer period and are also credited with reviving public sphere (Barlow, 2008). Barton (2005) compares blogs to the seventeenth century bourgeois diaries and first-person narratives arguing that such seemingly private documents are always oriented towards a reading public. Similarly, blogs which are more personal than other online spaces offer writers 'an intimate atmosphere similar to that of the bourgeois patriarchal conjugal family' (2005: 184). Barton (2005) further adds that blogs may be seen as the equivalent of the diaries that played an important part in the development of the old bourgeois public sphere as they help bloggers in acquiring 'subjectivity' and 'attaining clarity' required for engaging in rational-critical participation.

Blogs are similar to other social networking sites like Facebook in the sense that they are open medium which anyone can join serving as egalitarian platforms for discussion of diverse opinions. But at the same time the sheer number of people contributing to platforms like Facebook is often quite high, making it difficult to understand the flow of conversation. In contrast blogs can be seen as a more

homogenous medium in the sense participants are few and on which specific groups debate public issues, hence, serving as a platform for individual expression (Poell, 2009).

One of the earliest instances of online activism in India was triggered by an incident on 29th April 1999. Jessica Lall, a model and waitress was shot dead at a night club in New Delhi, in front of three hundred people, allegedly by the son of an Indian minister. The trial continued in the lower court for seven years in which due to the lack of incriminating evidences and witnesses turning hostile, Manu Sharma, the accused was acquitted. His acquittal led to a mass protest and outrage in the public and media, forcing the Delhi High court to conduct a fast track proceeding with daily hearings. Apart from the immense pressure mounted by the mainstream news media to overturn the acquittal SMS campaigns, and candle light vigils were held by the people. Email campaigns were conducted: bloggers from different parts of the country campaigned for the cause, providing information about protests and encouraging people to participate in demonstrations and thus contributing to the expansion of the public sphere (Dilip, 2008). As a result of which Manu Sharma was sentenced to life imprisonment in 2006 and the witnesses faced charges of perjury.

Akin to the conceptualisation of a public sphere that remains heavily contested, a social media propelled public sphere too will be limited in scope and will always be an approximation of an idealised notion. At the same time being a user generated platform social media sites do provide avenues to disseminate varied ideas and opinions, allowing for the creation of spaces favourable for the emergence of multi-spheres. Aslama & Erikson (2009: 24) point out that web 2.0 platforms form a part of ‘an original, highly dynamic, likely mobile public sphere’ that continues ‘to blur networks as spatial, social and instrumental’.

2.4 Assessing the Conditions for an Effective Online Public Sphere

The above discussions highlight how various political, social, cultural, and economic shifts occurring in different parts of the world over the course of time has necessitated multiple revisions in the concept of the public sphere. It has engendered a multi-disciplinary approach and definitions of which the internet forms a substantial part. In this part of the chapter I propose a set of institutional criteria for assessing

social media platforms, in particular Facebook and blogs as a public sphere site drawn from different researches. In summary, the literature on the public sphere indicates three major criteria for establishing a space purporting to be a public sphere. These three points include- communicative infrastructure, organisational infrastructure and deliberation. These criteria are derived from the extant literature on the public sphere and offer grounding to the conceptualisation of a public sphere rooted in the online realm.

Communicative Infrastructure: Public spheres are defined as spaces generated in communicative action. Communication forms the root of all public sphere theories (Habermas 1962; Calhoun; 1992; Negt and Kluge, 1993; Fraser, 1990). To be effective as a public sphere, social media should provide a realm where disparate groups of people can freely exchange opinions, debate on ideas and be heard in general unconstrained by any external factors. Also, public sphere allows a flow of information that is unrestricted. Thus, any arena that offers these provisions can act as a public sphere. This suggests that the constitutive element of any effective public sphere is that it is decentralised beyond the control of any representative authority including the state.

Rheingold (2000) posits that a public sphere functions effectively only when it is independent of the state and commercial forces, and where different media can thrive, thus giving a chance to present differing viewpoints. Media provides a space for public participation and the ability and effectiveness of this participation defines the functioning of democracy. And failing to do the same results in an ill-informed and disenfranchised public (Rheingold, 2000).

Any kind of information and matters of political concern can be shared or exchanged by the participating actors. Civil society actors can gain and thereby exert influence over official authorities with the aid of public opinions appropriated through public sphere. Making a similar argument Papacharissi (2010: 114) says that the value of any public sphere lies in its ability to facilitate discussions on a range of public issues ‘enabling citizens to interact within a representative political system.’ Failure of the public sphere to reproduce such interactions would lead to a feeling of ‘detachment, apathy and cynicism’ within citizens.

In terms of blogs and Facebook, both provide a platform to exchange, share and discuss ideas. Blogs offer a space for discussion in the form of comment sections, while Facebook provides multiple communicative affordances like timeline, groups, pages, community pages and so forth. However, even though both of them provide a discursive place they are not always independent and autonomous. Admittedly, Facebook does not qualify to be a completely autonomous platform as it has clear policies on censorship and often removes object which it deems objectionable (Gates, 2013).

Yet, in countries with strict censorship laws and state controlled media, social media sites like Facebook can be a source of expression for the ordinary citizens who are largely marginalised in the traditional media discourse. In spite of strict laws monitoring the online content of citizen, studies have observed that with a little effort from the part of citizen these laws can be bypassed.

Bitso et al. (2012) found that it is possible to gain access to censored content through circumvention software and sharing files through peer-to-peer (P2P) networks or overseas file transfer protocol (FTP) sites. Thus, although countries with strict laws restrict their citizens' online mobility there is evidence that citizens have successfully bypassed them. For example, Bitso et al. (2012) also observed that people in China used myths and imagery when critiquing government policies instead of using real names. On the other end blogs in many cases have moderators who have control over the discussions conducted and can delete or ban any person from commenting if it does not match with that blog's policy.

Organisational Infrastructure: The second criterion for assessing the effectiveness of the public sphere is organisational infrastructure. Early theories viewed the internet as a 'recruitment tool' having the potential to invigorate traditional political organisations as well as sustaining new political forms (Ward and Gibson, 2009). The internet was also seen as a tool to recruit members and supporters for activism and for 'administrative gains and increased marketing potential' (Ward and Gibson, 2009: 28). Additionally, organisations could also use the internet to appeal to a broader global audience thereby facilitating global protest networks.

In a similar vein, the theories of public sphere have expounded its ability to not only facilitate communication, but also act as a space where citizens can exchange information (Habermas, 1962). Thus, public sphere become organisational arenas where citizens can spread information and mobilise support for issues of common concerns. Facebook could then act as an organisational infrastructure by generating awareness and spreading information. For example, after a destructive earthquake in Christchurch, New Zealand many voluntary associations were created on Facebook pages. ‘*Accommodation for Earthquake Stricken Cantabrians*’ is one such page which assists in finding housing for the affected people (Facebook, 2010a).

Facebook was also successfully employed during the revolution in Egypt in 2011 (Storck, 2011). An incident pivotal to the 2011 Egypt uprising originated from Facebook when in 2008 a 27-year old human resources coordinator Esraa Abdel Fattah, also known as “Facebook Girl” set up a group on the social networking website calling for participation in a worker strike planned for a textile mill. The group was joined by over 70,000 members and acted as a starting point for the mobilisation of activists against the Mubarak regime (Storck, 2011).

Similarly, blogs too are an important tool of resource and function as an organisational infrastructure in many ways. In Russia in 2009 Marina Litvinovitch, one of the leaders of the opposition party Civic United Front (CUF), posted on her blog an article objecting the impunity enjoyed by a government officer’s daughter who had caused a fatal car accident. She launched an appeal to other bloggers urging them to pass the information by creating a link to her article or by reposting it. This initiative made the public aware of the incident which the blogger believed courts could not ignore (Reporters without Borders, 2010). In another instance of providing information via blogs, a young Egyptian blogger, Khaled Said posted an incriminating video of police officers. As a result, he was brutally beaten and killed, an incident which prompted widespread protests, including a Facebook page by Wael Ghonim, the Middle East marketing director for Google titled “*We Are All Khaled Said*”. The page attracted 500,000 members and became a platform for online discussion to talk about grievances against the political regime of the time of the incident (Storck, 2011).

Deliberation: The third and final criterion for assessing any space purporting to be a public sphere is its ability to facilitate deliberation. Any model of the public sphere is underpinned by communicative action, which constitutes its primary part. The participating actors are encouraged to come together and take part in the discourse and deliberate. Habermas (1962) believes that the situation is reached primarily through indulging in rational-critical discussion enabling homogeneity in the overall discussion. Many others argue that inclusive deliberation is better achieved by ensuring that a variety of voices and ways of communication are generated and heard (Fraser, 1990; Young, 1990a).

Facebook and blogs may meet this criterion in terms of deliberative affordances they provide: discussion boards, timelines, and provision to create pages, groups, events on Facebook and the comment section on the blogs may serve as a platform for deliberation. For example, there are several Facebook pages/groups dedicated to issues of war, environmental changes, and political situation of particular countries, human rights and so forth. One such interest based Facebook page is '*I'm Against Genetically Modified Food*' where people can discuss and debate on matters related to GM foods.

Blogs, on the other hand offer a space for discourse chiefly through comment sections. Myers (2010) argues that while attention is given to the bloggers, it is the comment section in the blogs where much of the public discussion takes place. He adds, that comments on blogs deserve as much attention as the blogs themselves and exhibit a wider range of participation as anyone can post except of course where moderation policy is enforced. Similar to Facebook pages/groups there are several issue based blogs discussing particular topics or interests, and opinion blogs discussing any number of disparate issues.

2.4.1 Analysing Online Discourse- A Framework

To measure the actual discourse occurring in the online public sphere Dahlberg's (2004a) six normative conditions were used. Dahlberg (2004a) posits that a large amount of attention has been accorded to outline the general outlines of the public sphere. Attempts to actualise the early theory of the Habermasian public sphere

has been limited to general conceptions of public sphere informed by critical communication as opposed to more specific criteria examining the actual interaction between participants.

Dahlberg (2004a) adds that most researchers have refrained from formulating any conditions for critical analysis of the public sphere that are grounded empirically. He notes that in cases where researchers have made any attempt to apply conceptions of deliberative action by merging works of different democratic theorists, they have ignored 'points of disagreement fundamental to the makeup of the particular theories involved' (2004a). Consequently, any model developing out of this is overtly general and lacks a strong empirical basis for critical analysis.

In order to fill that gap Dahlberg proposes a set of public sphere conditions to critically analyse the democratic traits of everyday communication: these are autonomy; reasoned critique of problematic validity claims; sincerity; ideal role taking; reflexivity; discursive inclusion and equality. His criteria are derived from the Habermasian ideal of communicative rationality in which Habermas is dealing with an idealised form of public reasoning.

Dahlberg (2004a) states that for any group or site purporting to be a public sphere, it should meet the primary requisite of autonomy; this means the communication occurring between the actors should be free from state and economic control. This entails discourse conducted should be independent of any sort of state or corporate interests and the flow of communication should be directed from the public sphere towards the state and economic systems instead of the other way around.

Activities of state and economic systems are 'largely apparatuses of purposive rationality (e.g. the capitalist economy constitutes subjects as consumers rather than citizens)'. In a democratic communication setup the exertion of influence and force should be from the public sphere to these systems and not the other way around. Hence, any interaction should be driven by concerns and issues of public and not interests or propaganda fuelled by monies or power of any of the two systems.

The second condition is reasoned critique of problematic validity claims which involves systematically and rationally engaging in a reciprocal critique of normative problematic validity claims. These should be couched in reason and not asserted forcefully whilst being open to critique. It also implies that the arguments should be oriented towards a ‘universal audience’ that is all those potentially involved or affected, albeit indirectly with the claims discussed and not just those present in the conversation. The arguments in consideration should be addressed to the ‘larger’ or ‘ideal’ community of participants thus universalising the claim and setting the basic structure of argumentation and the public sphere.

The third condition is reflexivity, which entails that discussants should take into account the cultural values, assumptions, interests, and the larger social context. Participants should be open to question their own claim and restructure it in accord with the relevant claims and reasons of other members. They should ‘transcend’ their original preference or belief in lieu of a reasoned claim from any other actor. By being reflexive the participants take the position of others and in doing so they presuppose ideal role taking, which is the fourth criteria for the public sphere. Ideal role taking involves being mindful of others’ perspective and appreciative of differing points of view.

Fair and rational discourse necessitates the feeling of empathy, the discussants should be able to place themselves in the position of the other and look at the situation from their perspectives. This also includes listening both impartially and respectfully and approaching any communicative situation with an understanding and not through contentious attitude.

The fifth requirement is sincerity, which calls for an honest demeanour in the sense that participants should make their intention clear in regard to the topic being discussed. It is expected of participants to be honest and open in demeanour by trying to make a sincere effort to make known all information in terms of their intention, thoughts, and needs in any given claim under consideration.

The sixth and last criterion is discursive inclusion and equality, which means that every participating actor should get an equal opportunity to get their voices heard

and to question or introduce any statement they want. There are two conditions circumscribing the inclusion operating both within inside and outside the discourse.

Participants do not automatically assume formal inclusion that is all relevant claims would be in principle included. Inclusion may also be restricted by asymmetrical relations between the participants even in a formal setting; informal restrictions resulting from social and cultural inequalities may hinder the democratic flow of discourse. Within the discourse, inclusion may be limited for some are able to dominate the discourse while others struggle to present their views. On the other hand inequalities from outside of discourse like lack of possession of material wealth or education may hinder the chance to take part in the proceedings.

2.5 Role of Women in the Online Public Sphere in India: A review of the literature

Studies on the role of ICTs in the lives of women in India have largely concentrated on their perceived advantages, or impediments preventing women from accessing them. Few studies have paid attention to the actual internet practices of women in India. Google India's (2013) study provides some contemporary information on the internet practices by women in India. The Google India (2013) study found that approximately 60 million women in India are online with over 24 million accessing the internet daily. Defining the profile of the women online the study also stated that these women are relatively more affluent and younger and are from the urban parts of India. The Google study also found that in terms of the most searched items by women on Google India, apparel and accessories were the biggest followed by food and drink.

On the online activities of women email, search and social networking were the biggest drivers. Downloading music, looking for educational content, job search, watching videos, and consuming news were the other top activities. Although, Google's study (2013) is largely market driven and focuses more on the consumer behaviour in terms of what brands women searched most for and the kind of information they searched for, it is valuable as it provides an insight into the patterns of Indian women's internet usage.

In contrast to this consumer focus, research into the ways women use the internet for political participation is still developing. Early research suggests that the internet can provide a vital tool aiding women's voices. However, the military roots of the internet, and potential for surveillance and the difficulty of getting online may undermine the power of the internet for this purpose (Tadros, 2005). In India the paucity of studies on women's political or activist tendencies online makes it difficult to identify the role they play in an online public sphere, but a perusal of the internet will show a strong presence of Indian women in different platforms.

One of the earliest examples of usage of these platforms was the 'Pink Chaddi Campaign' in 2009 against a right wing Hindu group. A group of young women and men were assaulted in a pub in a south Indian city by a group of forty activists from a right wing Hindu group Sri Ram Sene. The women were accused of being immoral and disrespectful of Indian culture and values for socialising with men and drinking alcohol. Protesting against the physical assault a journalist, Nisha Susan created a Facebook page '*The Consortium of Pubgoing, Loose, and Forward Women*' urging women to gift pink chaddis (underwear) to the leader of Shri Ram Sene.

The campaign gained momentum and became popular with men and women from India as well as other countries. The story was also noticed by the mainstream media outlets that had earlier ignored it. It generated debates around the roles of women in modern Indian society and helped women gain voice not only in the online sphere but traditional public spheres as well. In an interview, Nisha says that what gratifies her most about the campaign was that "there was a stimulus to bring people together around something, but what was really great was that it was then stimulating new discussions and networking was happening for all sorts of things once people were connected" (cited from Intel, 2013).

What began on a frivolous note turned into a successful example of a social media fueled movement and became an inspiring example of the usage of the internet by women to empower women in their 'communities, countries, and beyond' (Intel, 2013). In another incident a 19 year old girl illegally detained during a protest in Delhi captured the nation's interest by tweeting her plight. On her way to and at the

police station, she posted a series of tweets describing the situation around her. Her tweets were retweeted several times, eventually leading to her release (Pandey, 2012).

In addition to the social networking sites, blogs are also popular among women in India, at 51% more women in India create and use blogs compared to their male counterparts, with most of the blogs created being opinion blogs as opposed to theme blogs (M. Mitra, 2007). On the rise of opinion blogs MSN head of digital marketing Rajnish R believes that more opinion blogs indicate the presence of higher numbers of women bloggers. He adds, that girls in the present generation are “venting their anger through blogs” (M. Mitra, 2007). Chen (2011) believes that women with a high need to ‘self-disclose’ see blogging as a means to express their voice while women wanting to interact socially regard blogging as a way to connect with other people.

The opening up of the internet in Indian languages has further boosted the number of female bloggers who were restricted by the dominance of English language earlier (Roy, 2011). While the female bloggers writing in English focused on issues of city life, dating, and workplaces, the women coming from small towns discussed about changing social mores. Interestingly, women writing in English tend to be in their teens and 20s while those using regional languages belong to older age groups (Roy, 2011). The present thesis identified the need for blogs to be studied specifically to understand the women’s perspective in the online public sphere.

Women’s roles may not be discerned easily on a platform like Facebook where there are several people commenting and contributing to a discussion at one time. Often these commenters remain unidentified and it becomes difficult to identify their gender merely by looking at their profile which in many cases is not accessible to all. Blogs generally have a smaller audience and in some cases, members are familiar with each other. Thus, the data on blogs help enrich the Facebook analysis as blogs also serve as a public sphere to an extent (Poell, 2009; Barlow, 2008).

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

The present study seeks to examine the effectiveness of social media in enabling participation of women in the online public sphere. Mazur (2010) observes that social networkers and bloggers regularly create narratives which reveal information about themselves that would usually be a part of a slower and more private process of acquaintanceship offline but are posted frequently online and often in full public view. Identifying the reasons for documenting and studying web behaviour Ackland (2013) posits that behaviour on the web is a unique cultural phenomenon that deserves to be analysed. The early internet research has employed various traditional research methodologies deriving from multiple disciplines, including both quantitative and qualitative to understand certain online behaviour. For example, Herring et al. (2004) in their research on the extent of women's participation in online discussion platforms employed content analysis as well as quantitative methods.

Baym (2000b) in her book on an internet soap opera fan group takes an ethnographic approach to study the communicative behaviour and practices of its members. Baym (2009c: 180) argues that in the face of constantly changing characteristics of the internet it would be easy to assume that old methods and theories do not have anything novel to offer which is a naïve assumption. According to her, connecting with the historical precedent of the phenomenon under study can aid in enhancing the ways in which a topic is understood. Also, it can enrich the context in which the work is situated and can generally provide insights to the reader helping them integrate what the researcher offers into their own understanding of the phenomenon.

For the present study a multi-method approach is taken comprising of a combination of standard and innovative approaches in which quantitative method is supported by qualitative methodologies. In recent years, the rapid growth of Web 2.0 with its interactive features blurring the distinction between webmasters and users, and provisions for greater user interface, has created new frontiers in the internet research. Web 2.0 applications like blogs, social networking sites and microblog services all are seen as important communication platforms, and are vital components of studies on attitude and behaviour in online interactions. Consequently, these have engendered studies focusing solely in the online domain. This study too makes use of only online resources; the need for using online and offline components depends upon various factors including the context being studied and the requirements of the particular research questions (Orgad, 2009).

During the course of the research Facebook and blogs are the two online resources which will be used and analysed by utilising a ‘new’ approach by the way of Topical Network Method. Social media sites like Facebook are websites that allow people to create profiles and interact with other people who also have profiles on the sites. This can be done through ‘friending’ someone whereby friend requests are sent and confirmed, or by posting and commenting on images, videos and web links on one’s own and other people’s timeline which is the main page where activities are made public.

Blogs are information or discussion based websites consisting of posts in a reverse chronological order. These websites can be on specialised topics or can serve as online diaries and be general in nature providing information on anything that interests the author. Blogs are typically owned by a single author but there has been an increase in multi-author blogs as well in which several writers contribute. For example, *women’s web* is an Indian website which hosts a blog section where women writers are encouraged to share their experiences or write on any issue they want.

This chapter outlines a detailed description of the research process, beginning with the case study method, and also sets up the overall methodological design of the

study. In the next step data collection sources are specified along with some key concepts which make vivid the terms used in research. Finally, the data analysis methods are elucidated upon, demonstrating how they complement the research process on the whole.

3.2 Research Methods Outline

Table 1: Steps taken to complete the research

STEP 1: Topical Network Analysis Method
STEP 2: Data Collection A. Facebook pages (using pre-selected key words). B. Blogs (selected using criterion sampling).
STEP 3: Case Study of the 2012 Delhi gang rape
STEP 4: Data Analysis Using Topical Network Analysis A. Facebook (classifying data into relevant categories using systematic analysis) B. Blogs (examining the blog articles and comment section; textual analysis of the blog content)

3.3 Explication of Research Method Used- Topical Network Analysis

Topical research method as outlined by Highfield (2014) was used for this study. Highfield (2014) defines the topical network analysis method as a means to study the online phenomenon using a combination of quantitative and qualitative analytical methods. Topical networks are grounded in several concepts related to the shape of public debate, some of which are connected to online media while others

shape out independently. These connections may not necessarily be permanent associations and the discussions ensuing out of them may develop and decline quickly.

The debates and connections appearing within the topical networks are situated under the larger scope of public sphere(s). These connections or ‘assemblages’ may overlap with one another with people contributing to more than one debate leading to the creation of something akin to an ‘issue public’. Each issue public revolves around a particular subject that can change over time, and even the context around it is open to change. The topical network analysis is useful in studying the issue publics as debates published online can be traced through the interconnected collections of status updates, blog posts and so forth.

One of the aims of this research is to study the development of an online public sphere in India through Facebook and blogs. These sites provide a platform for discussion of various topics acting as micro-public spheres in which there are dozens, hundreds or thousands of participants interacting at the sub-nation state level (Keane, 2000). The topical network method then proves helpful to document and study the nature of these micro-public spheres in relation to the larger context of the online Indian public sphere.

Tracing the development of the topical network methods, Highfield (2014) says topical networks were initially identified within blogospheres specifically within a research project comparing political blogging in Australia and France. These aimed to cover particular themes and their linking to other web sources including blogs. He adds that despite the origin of topical networks in the blogosphere they are not exclusive to that and can be expanded to include multiple social media platforms or activities occurring on a single website.

Topical networks particularly aim to study conversations online around specific topics of interest and examine a particular event or issues on various sites or a

single website. For example, topical network analysis of a platform like Twitter would entail studying the different users' behaviour or characteristics of the conversation on a particular issue through a central hashtag. This method enables researchers to determine the time and reason certain online connections were made and the context for the discussions on that particular connection.

Highfield (2014: 65) argues that 'the websites involved will vary between studies, adapting the method in the process as topical networks are examined within a range of contexts' encompassing any field. The resulting topical network will be oriented around a specific thematic discussion pertaining to the focus of the research. He says the basis for topical networks can be provided by hyperlinks or by implied connections to demonstrate the links between users. Implied links can be the replies to other users in any discursive platform like discussion boards which might not have a hyperlink to signify the connection.

The topical network analysis takes a multi-process, mixed method approach to understand the reasons behind online behaviour, like 'what topics were discussed during a spike or lull in activity or the context for links to external websites' (Highfield, 2014:66). In the first step relevant keywords on the topic to be studied are identified and sifted from the wider data set on the specific topic from the chosen online platforms. The selected data revolving around a particular thematic discussion then forms the basis of topical network analysis.

In the present study it was decided that amongst all the existing online data Facebook and blogs will be studied. In the next step, a series of quantitative and qualitative processes may be used together or in isolation to examine the discussion and activity occurring within the identified topical network. Depending on the data types within the topical network, which can be blog posts, tweets, Facebook posts and so on different methods can be applied to further gain an in-depth understanding of the chosen topic. For example, in the present study, 'delhi gang rape' was identified as the keywords and data was selected from the resulting Facebook pages and Indian blogosphere.

In conjunction with Highfield's (2014) method that allows for the inclusion of multi-methods as per the requirement of the topical network, a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods was used as explicated below in the chapter.

3.4 Data Collection

The first step in the data collection process was to select relevant Facebook pages for the case study. Facebook was preferred over other social media platforms as the primary data source because Facebook is the most popular social networking portal in India. It has the third largest user base in India after the US and Brazil. By 2016 India is poised to overtake the US and become the largest market for Facebook ('India to have world's largest', 2013). For the Delhi rape 2012 an in-depth analysis of several Facebook pages was conducted as there is not any one single official Facebook page dedicated exclusively to it. The incident had generated massive protests across the nations, but these were not an effort of any singular party rather a collective initiative by several disparate groups of people.

As Facebook was a vital data source for this thesis it is essential to elaborate on a few key concepts peculiar to Facebook and which occur repeatedly in the course of the study. Facebook is structured around the concept of profiles created by any person in their individual capacity or as representative of a specific person, issue, organisation, or idea. A personal profile is an account that anyone joining Facebook has to make and through which they can connect with friends, post status, share photographs, upload videos, links and so forth. Facebook does not allow the users to conduct any business or monetary activity through personal profiles. A more formal of the profile is the public profiles also known as pages and these are created for businesses, public figures, organisations, causes or brands with the intent of publicity.

Pages are similar to the general personal profile in the sense that the owners can update statuses, photos, videos or any information they would like to share. Unlike regular personal profiles public profiles do not gain 'friends', but fans or supporters who choose to 'like' a page, and all content is visible to anyone who chooses to visit. The pages can only be created by an official representative of the

celebrity, brand, or organisation that the page is going to represent. They can even be kept private requiring an invitation or administrator approval in order to join, or can be made public. Facebook pages can be customised according to the preference of their creator by adding apps, hosting stories etc. Apps enhance the functionality of the Facebook page as they allow connections with other relevant links.

Groups are a more informal way of registering a presence on Facebook by anyone representing any idea or topic of interest. They act as a platform for people to come together for a common cause, disseminating information, organising activities, sharing photos, discussing issues, and events.

Groups have more control over their members than a general page as owners can restrict people from joining the page. There are three privacy options for a group: open, closed and secret. Open groups are visible to everyone with a Facebook profile and anyone can join or invite members. There is no restriction as all the content is public. Closed groups are invitation only groups and only the members can view the content though any one can ask to join the group. Secret groups are those in which anyone can join but they have to be invited by a member and they are not visible to the non-members. Only members can find the group or view its content (Facebook, 2013b).

A Facebook community page is similar to normal Facebook group pages but with one fundamental difference which makes them ‘community’ pages; they are not run by a single author and a user has to ‘like’ them in order to connect with them.

Events on the other hand are a date-based application through which any reminder or invitation for any occasion can be created. An event can be open or private and the creator can invite anyone on Facebook to join it. It is like an invitation and even has a RSVP list displaying the names of the invitees along with their responses. The list is created on the basis of response that is based on the options like “going”, “not going”, and “maybe” going. An event can be created by any individual

Facebook member or by pages and groups. It also has a wall for communication but it does not have a dedicated forum for deliberation. A Discussion board is an application in the Facebook page that allows supporters of a page to initiate any discussion or share information with other supporters. The freedom for the members to participate in the discussion or post on the discussion board depends on the settings of that particular page which in turn depends on the discretion of its host or creator.

These Facebook features are used in the present study to organise data; the Facebook data is classified on the basis of the category which it falls into. For example, pages on Delhi Rape 2012 are divided into community pages, group pages and so forth, in order to determine whether the type of page influence the amount of public sphere-like discussion that happens there.

Furthermore, data was also collected from different blogs, the selection of which was a fairly straightforward process. These blogs were studied to supplement the findings on the Facebook pages so as to present a holistic picture of women's' issue-based participation online and was also an important research strategy that helped enhance the findings.

Blogs were selected through the purposive sampling strategy which is a common sampling technique that relies on the most productive sample to answer the research questions (Given, 2008). This involves selecting samples in conjunction with preselected research questions. Purposive sampling relies in large part on the researcher's insight into the research area, availability of the resources and the objectives of study as well. It is highly useful if a researcher is sure of the questions they want to ask and are looking at specific characteristics in their sample.

Of the different types of purposive samplings for the purpose of this study criterion sampling was selected as it was thought to be most relevant to the objectives of the research. Criterion sampling is defined as a kind of sampling in which cases are selected according to a particular criterion predetermined by the researcher (Given, 2008).

During the research criterion sampling method was employed in regard to the study of blogs. As the objective was to identify the ways in which women bloggers in India are shaping the digital public sphere criterion sampling was deemed as the most relevant method. Moreover, I was specifically looking for women bloggers of Indian ethnicity preferably residing in India and writing on some specific subjects. Therefore, criterion sampling was adjudged as the most suitable form of research inquiry.

3.5 Case Study Approach

Case study was the first method used; this method can serve as a useful starting point due to the intensive analysis of a single case and of the attitudes of smaller groups and also can provide an insight into a larger class of (a population) (Gerring, 2007). This study deals with one of the most prominent instances of social movements that occurred in India and case study is the most suitable approach to examine the uniqueness and particularity of that. Simons (2009) adds that case study aids in documenting participant and stakeholder's perceptions and represent varied interests. Stake (1995) sums up case study as the study of particularity and complexity of a single case in regard to its circumstances.

Since social movements resulting out of Web 2.0 are the focus of this study. Snow and Trom's (2002) conceptualisation of the case study is highly relevant in this context. In their analysis of case study method for social movements Snow and Trom (2002) propose a triangulation of multiple methods encompassing qualitative methods, data sources and even multiple theories in order to develop an in-depth elaborations of the case studied. According to them case study is not just a method, rather a research strategy that accommodates a combination of methods, including but not limiting to qualitative procedures. They theorise that case study research is open ended and flexible in its approach mainly due to its capacity to include multiple data sources.

Furthermore, the case study method is not restricted to any specific rules or method, and compared to others is more open to new data and innovative data sources and methodologies. Thus, the case study of ‘Delhi Gang Rape’ incident was conducted during the research which is a highly complex incident demanding a careful and contextualised analysis. A 23 year old woman was raped and assaulted by six men in a moving bus in New Delhi, India on 16 December 2012. In response to the incident, protestors gathered in different parts of the country shouting slogans, holding marches, and braving water cannons and arrests. The protesters not only condemned the incident but also the state and the police for failing to provide security to females.

3.6 Process for Analysing Blogs

In conjunction with Highfield’s (2014) method that allows for the inclusion of multi-methods as per the requirement of the topical network analysis, textual analysis was used. Highfield (2014: 66) says that the topical network analysis utilises qualitative methods like textual analysis to ‘determine the context for the studied discussions’. Especially in the context of social media this method makes it possible to examine its various aspects that may not be evident through automated data processing, such as differentiating between link types- like links in blog posts or comments on posts. Textual analysis also helps in analysing individual posts. He says, instead of paying equal attention to all the posts and treating the network in its uniformity this method helps in analysing the intricacies of individual posts and their related contexts so as to provide a qualitative view of the data. The examining of the text of individual posts aids in gaining an insight in not only that post but also the different responses to it at different points in the data thereby contextualising overall patterns and giving a holistic picture of the topic on whole.

3.7 Process for Analysing Facebook

After selecting a relevant sample of Facebook pages on the 2012 ‘delhi gang rape’ incident, a quantitative method was used to analyse the data. Highfield (2014) observes that during the topical network analysis, quantitative methods can assist in providing the overall patterns of data sets. These may include patterns of activity, like

the number of contributions per week or day, the total number of contributions per user or any noticeable figure of variations pertaining to the discussion. Of the quantitative methods Systematic analysis was applied during the course of the case study in order to determine patterns of activity. Specifically, the method was drawn from Irving and English's (2011) study of 100 feminist organisation websites. They analysed the currency of the postings on the website by classifying data into relevant categories. The method is applied in order to determine the recurrence of particular criteria which were set according to the central themes of the study. Because over 90 Facebook pages were studied for the Delhi 2012 case study systematic analysis of the data was considered most suitable so as to glean the relevant data meeting the objectives of the study.

3.8 Conclusion

This study takes a mixed method approach using primarily qualitative methods, and a supporting quantitative analysis. In the course of the research a case study is conducted with its own set of data collection and analysis methods. The case study probes through a cyberfeminist lens the ways in which Facebook was utilised after the Delhi Gang rape incident in 2012, especially in regard to women related issues. Thus, Facebook pages and blog posts authored by Indian women were studied to gauge the overall contribution of Indian women in the online public sphere.

The topical network analysis was employed encompassing both quantitative and qualitative methods to analyse Facebook pages and blogs respectively. Systematic analysis of the Facebook pages helped in classifying these pages according to the relevant category and identifying what keywords were prevalent on the pages. These keywords helped in forming the key questions which in turn were grouped under the main thematic criteria outlining Facebook as a public sphere. In the second stage of the case study, criterion sampling assisted in selecting the relevant blogs to be studied using the textual analysis method. Taken together blogs and Facebook pages helped provide a wider perspective on the feminist implications of the online public sphere.

This study is in accordance with the UC human ethics low risk application as all the blogs and Facebook pages examined in this study were in the public domain and published publically. I did not interview or engage with the participants, but read the content of their blogs and did not assign identities to the reporting of the comments.

CHAPTER FOUR

CHANGING FACE OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE IN INDIA: FROM PRE-COLONIAL TO THE ONLINE PUBLIC SPHERE

4.1 Introduction

The discourse on the public sphere in India grew out of a diverse set of conditions. The pre-colonial history, the nationalist movement against British colonialism, and the economic reforms and on-going globalisation process inaugurated in the early 1990s contributed in defining the contour of the Indian public sphere. Bhargava (2005) notes that the “democratic politics and public discourse rarely conform to norms of rational debate”. Modern Indian public sphere too is not always guided by rationality alone but is “usually dominated by social movements that foreground issues with a mix of rhetoric, emotion and direct action” (Bhargava, 2005).

In this chapter, historiography of the Indian public sphere from the pre-colonial to present time will be drawn. Next, the modern Indian public sphere is defined and in the course of which online public sphere in Indian context is delineated. This section also includes an overview on various impediments threatening the diffusion of the internet in India. Next a historical approach from the post-liberalisation era is taken to understand the increasing pull towards the internet based communicative technologies especially by the middle class. It is noticed that the middle class in India is actively appropriating these technologies because of which online public sphere is increasingly being dominated by this class. By using the example of ‘India Against Corruption’ movement driven primarily by social media, the case for the online public sphere as a middle class space is detailed.

4.2 Evolution of Public Sphere in India: a historiography

The traditional framework of the public sphere relies heavily on mass media and the articulatory powers of a rational public ready to leave aside emotions in favour of reason and practicality (Habermas, 1962). Habermas in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962) formulated a model of public sphere corresponding to the development of a vibrant media environment. In line with the traditional rationale the following section presents a reflection of the media experiences and the resultant public sphere before exploring the public sphere in the digital realm in India. The press as developed in the western sense arrived late in India because the rulers in pre-colonial era feared it would undermine their power. Newsletters were written from the courts of rulers the content of which were heavily monitored and were copied by hand in relatively small numbers. These newsletters were then read to large groups of people in the bazaars (Bayly, 2009: 61).

In the absence of the basic requisites for a thriving public sphere it would be easy to ascribe pre-independence India as having a virtually non-existent public sphere. But Bayly (2009: 49) asserts that India was “a literacy-aware society, if not yet a society of mass literacy”. He adds that dense networks of social communication had the potential of bringing flower sellers, bazaar merchants, and people from various walks of life into political debates and demonstrations. Guha (2009) says that it is in the market place that people assembled regularly and en masse for trade and entertainment. Additionally, the market place is traditionally identified as a place for the origin and dissemination of rumour making it a public sphere in many ways. Furthermore, the elites and the general populace employed written media in complex ways to reinforce oral culture and debate.

The rulers of pre-colonial India dominated the public space through the display of their authority in the form of exaggerated display of rituals, etiquettes etc. in public places; a behaviour common to the Hindu kingdom of pre-British period and the Muslim rulers of Mughal era. Hasan (2005) argues that the domination by the ruling authority does not mean that the public arena excluded the ordinary people; on

the contrary, it became a sort of contested space with both the rulers and the ruled vying to claim it as their own. The authorities employed rituals to display their domination while the subordinate groups had their own rituals and ways to resist it, thereby, contributing to the formation of an active public sphere. Sites that contributed to an active public sphere were the popular festivals during the celebration of which people indulged in political satire lampooning the ruling elites. The Hindu festival of Holi was one such event while in the Muslim communities, the congregational prayers on Fridays posed as an outlet for political communication. The sermon after the Friday prayers was an important tool of communication by the state, and the community at times prohibited its recitation as a mark of protest against what they deemed as the unjust machinery of the state. Hence, the public mobilised opinions on matters of faith and morals.

Hasan (2005) further argues that the public spheres manifested itself in diverse locations like houses of worship, streets, markets and so forth with several markets having reserved spaces for speeches by the ordinary populace. Females too formed a part of it but they had a very limited stake. Furthermore, the public spheres included literary spaces which again had a space for the ordinary populace and in which the discussion extended from literature and arts to topics of political interests. The aforementioned public spheres were an intrinsic part of the Indian social and political fabric. Submerged with multiple hues of culture and religion, they were more like a cultural space where different publics came together. In fact, in the eighteenth century during the British rule, one of the major tasks set out for the British was to confront and manage this extremely pluralistic space (Hasan, 2005: 90-105).

These public spheres were not always governed by the Habermasian ideal of rational-critical debate but included displays of power and strength as well. Bayly (2009) describes the networks of communication and patterns of debate within the Indian population as “*ecumene*”. Bayly (2009:51-52), says that the term in a classical sense means “a godly civilization embodied in a community of affection and constantly renovated through a discourse of worship, rights, and obligations.” He applies the term to the forms of cultural and political debate before the emergence of

newspapers and public associations. The thriving handwritten media culture of the north India was plural in nature with both Hindus and Islamic notables being a part of it and represented the views of the common populace overcoming the boundaries of religion and caste.

The ecumene was dynamic and received information from central and west Asia whilst retaining its patriotic character, thereby, being closer in “spirit to the groupings of philosophers, urban notables, and officials in the world of late antiquity—the Christian-Greek ecumene” than to the Habermasian public sphere. The public sphere of Habermas is devoid of the intimate social relations and people’s opinion is represented in almost a mechanical manner through print media, a distinct cry from the predominant social character of the Indian ecumene. But Bayly claims that the Indian ecumene with all its “discontinuities and breaks” is closer to the modern European public in terms of its leaders who were able to “mount critical surveillance of government and society” (2009: 52).

The eighteenth century marks the beginning of the British rule in India; the period witnessed major upheavals in almost all aspects of the social, political, and economic life of Indian society. The rebellion against the colonial authority provided an outlet for the formation of public sphere using non-conventional forms of communication by the pre-industrial society. Guha (2009) posits that in a pre-literate and a largely agrarian society the public sphere is driven by communicative means rather than written. Aural and symbolic forms of communication may thrive and used which could be seen as symbols of opposition by the ruling power. For instance, during the British rule the buffalo horn and drum came to be regarded as objects of hostility in some parts of rural India. Local peasants were imprisoned on the charge of forming illegal assemblies in which horns were blown to make a demonstration. The local administration there sought to ban the use of musical instruments for the purpose of invoking any gathering in order to demonstrate or cause terror.

Another non- verbal signifier were signs that were both iconic and symbolic. For example, arrow of war was a symbol of mobilisation and a declaration of war for

certain communities of rural India. An arrow was passed from village to village as a sign of declaration of war by the locals against the colonial authority. Rajagopal (2009) concurs: symbols were successfully employed by Gandhi too; the Salt March of 1930 made a mundane commodity like salt a nationalist symbol of mobilisation against the unsuspecting British who could not deduce that the demand to make salt locally would take political overtones and will be utilised as a sign of an insurgency. Thus, the public sphere became an arena of tussle between the colonialist government and their colonised subjects. The former tried to show their authority through the public sphere whilst the latter sought to undermine the same sphere by trying to forge their identities and contest the British rule through it (Bhattacharya, 2005: 154-156).

The colonial public sphere may be fraught with tension and somewhat restrictive but at the same time it is a precursor to the modern Indian public sphere. The colonial rulers monitored the public sphere by keeping an eye on newspapers and tried to legitimise its authority through education and propaganda and by couching its arguments in rationality. The natives tried to subvert these arguments through the very same tools of education and reason. At the same time these tools brought implicit changes in the Indian society.

The development of post-independence public sphere is succinctly chartered by Alam (2005: 351-352) who outlines the birth of modern Indian public and its role in the formation of the modern public sphere. Alam (2005) argues that modern education, adoption of capitalist-style trade and commerce, the shift from agrarian practices to urban are some of the causes that led to a structural change in the Indian society. These shifts resulted in the creation of the modern classes, including professional groups, merchants and so forth. He posits that the increased urbanisation also led to a loosening from the community and regional bonds on various levels and gave birth to the ‘process of individuation’.

The emphasis on the process of individuation is crucial because the traditional Indian society was rooted in communities and regions. The sense of being an individual gives rise to a “sense of difference from others and therefore also a sense of

distance” but may not necessarily lead to a separation from the community. This awareness of being ‘distant’ creates a sense of ‘private’ which is vital in the process of being an individual. Consequently, this led to the beginning of the process of being a modern Indian citizen privileging the ‘private’ as opposed to their community bound largely rural counterparts. Alam (2005) further says that the need for ‘rights’ is the next logical step of this individuation process, a need which had little place in the community minded societies. Thus, in these settings the birth of ‘public’ in the modern sense took place. These changes do not imply that the rural communities have disintegrated as they are very much a part of the Indian social fabric and form an intrinsic component of the civil society and the public sphere.

The above historiography is necessary because it helps to underscore the fact that the present public sphere is as much influenced by the colonial past as the responses towards it in the form of nationalist movement. Consequently, it is a mosaic of multiple experiences instead of a homogenous entity.

4.3 Modern Indian Public Sphere; from mass media to social media

The relationship between the Indian public sphere and mediated mass communication is fairly recent; the reasons being the continuation of dated policies of the colonial government, puritanical traits of the national movement and the fear of communal and social strife validated by the 1947 partition (Jeffrey, 2009a). As a result of the continuation of the colonial policies Indian public was seen as a “deficient entity” to be improved and contained rather than one to be meaningfully engaged with by the state, which also accounted for the hesitation on the part of the Indian state towards mass communication (Rajagopal, 2009: 8).

Prior to 1990s India’s broadcasting industry was under national control with highly restrictive policies enforced by the government. Initially there was just one television channel run by the state with the objective of education and development; radio too was state controlled and purported to educate. The radio broadcasting began on a regular basis in 1927 but remained under state control for forty years while television arrived in 1959 as experimental service and changed only in 1965 to a

regular service (Bhatt, 1994). Economic reforms leading to the privatisation of the airwaves after 1990s allowed broadcasting of satellite television by private and foreign companies and altered the media landscape.

All India Radio (AIR) station which started out with six channels has become one of the largest radio network in the world with 195 radio stations and covering 99.2% of the total population. Indian television too was inundated with channels post changes in the policies gearing the public sphere towards a new direction. However, Rajagopal (2009: 4) cautions that the increase in channels and therefore the domestically owned content did little to improve the programme content. Unlike the government controlled programming which aimed to reach wider audiences the privatised media presented an upper-middle class ethos and a glamorous aspirational lifestyle to a majority of Indians. He concludes that alternative views and perceptions are often sidelined and an increased consumer choice does not mean increased people's power.

On the other hand, Reddy (2009) notes that increased privatisation has opened up the possibilities for a more democratic public sphere as opposed to an approachable but highly restrictive public sphere of the colonial past. He contends that the local issues have taken precedence over national issues with the rise of 'local movements rendering it unavoidable for media to not to include it.

Reddy (2009) further reasons that increased commercialisation of the media industry paradoxically led to sidelining of the marginalised voices who are increasingly taking part in the political process of the country. The media conglomerates' private interests take precedence over the interests of rising social groups. Not only is the media losing objectivity but it has displaced the possibilities for an open and free public sphere. He partly blames the nexus between the media industries and political parties, both of which are driven by their need to reach audiences and supporters respectively but have an intense competition to face; television channels against newspapers and a closed competition between various

political parties. Thus, their mutual need to gain maximum audiences have made them combine forces and has contributed to an 'increasingly market like' politics.

Electronic media may have arrived late in India, but the print media has always been a part of the Indian public sphere, though not heavily diffused among the masses chiefly because of the extremely low level of literacy in pre-independence India (Rajagopal, 2009). Friedlander, Jeffrey et al. (2009: 188) claim that the print media industry underwent a change in the 1980s as newspaper industry grew, leading to creation of newspapers in major Indian languages and scripts. Cheaper technology led to the growth of print media, resulting in the expansion and publication of the vernacular language press. The circulation of newspapers in Hindi surpassed that of in English in 1979. Prior to that newspaper readership was mostly confined to the English educated people and there were very few newspapers in vernacular languages.

Friedlander, Jeffrey et al. (2009) argue that there is no definite period but the national public sphere began to take ascendancy sometime in the 1980s with the growth of the newspaper industry. The proliferation of newspapers led to the creation of a public sphere in which millions of Indians could participate. These newspapers concentrated on local issues to draw readership, thus creating a local public sphere in the process.

Ninan (2009) concedes arguing that the growth of print media, particularly the vernacular language press not only created a possibility of a national public sphere but also aided in the growth of local public spheres. These newspapers concentrated on local issues to draw readership, thus creating a multitude of local public spheres in the process. Ninan (2009) claims that vernacular language newspapers carried local news items which did not appear in the English language press thereby increasing its appeal for the local populace not versed in English and also increasing the reader base for newspapers. Moreover, with the urban and rural local self-governance taking shape the local communities became more aware of their rights with the publication of these newspapers providing the space for the growth of local sphere.

In their effort to publish local news these newspapers started hiring local citizens or stringers as they were called who did not necessarily had the conventional journalistic training but had a firm grasp on local issues (Ninan, 2009: 260). The local public sphere started to thrive with the creation of local pages for districts and subdivisions. The drive to create more local news was partially driven by the newspaper management to expand their reader base. The downfall of which was the increase in false news or planted stories. Soon the professionalisation of the newspapers began which led to the halt in creation of separate pages for areas which did not generate much news. The professionalism on the part of newspaper management also had a positive effect in the rural areas as it brought transparency in the local politics with their reporting thus invigorating the local public sphere.

However, Friedlander et al. (2009: 206) claim that the public sphere created by the print media does not approximate the idealised public sphere of Habermas and neither are they a site of the “bleakest elements of refeudalization” of which Habermas laments about the commercialised mass media. Jeffrey (2000b) concludes that India’s newspaper revolution has helped create a new set of circumstances in which the influential newspaper owners try to make the concerns and interests of the ordinary citizens widely known something unheard of previously. Though, in the process the newspaper expansion managed to play a vital role in creating the conditions for an ‘expanded public sphere’ (2000b: 216).

The expansion of media landscape, especially with the advent of ‘new’ media technologies pushed the debate on mediated public sphere further inevitably including the internet. In a marked contrast from the earlier reluctance of the Indian government to adopt media technologies for the masses (Jeffrey, 2009a) the internet has been quickly adopted for information technology and for its e-governance project and has diffused faster as well (D.A. Singh, 2007). Being one of the fastest growing technologies to permeate Indian society the internet then may be seen to play a vital role in forging alternative media spaces and providing additional outlets for a national public arena.

4.3.1 Internet in India; Issues and Challenges

The internet use in India is growing at a significant pace alongside newspaper, television and radio all of which are growing equally fast. This is a unique trend at a time when traditional media subscriptions are dwindling in many parts of the world (Vaidyanathan, 2011; N. Mehta, 2008). The implications of these developments looks promising but there are several socio-economic factors which threaten to debilitate the growth of the internet thereby exacerbating the material disparities and worsening the existing inequalities in the Indian society. Inadequate infrastructure, low literacy levels, lack of funds, and lack of purchasing power of the bottom half of the Indian population are some of the factors contributing to the lack of internet access (Banerjee, 2007b).

Even in the cases when access is not an issue the problem of the internet penetration is compounded due to the dearth of Indian content; expensive internet connection; the limited presence of Indian languages on the web; lack of Indian connectivity amongst 'hinterland' instead of only with metropolitan centers of the outside world (Gopinath, 2009: 303).

In effect to that, Gopinath (2009) observes that since the internet is a largely English centric medium, the language barrier is also a major setback. As a result of which a large number of Indians are unable to access the internet. The percentage of people familiar with the English language is low and the absence of effective search engine for most of the Indian languages further compounds the problem. Indic languages differ from English in several ways, thus posing a challenge for the development of their translation system (Google, 2011). Moreover, the scripts of Indian languages have a richer and non-linear structure that makes it difficult to be keyboards (Gopinath, 2009).

A report on factors responsible for the low internet penetration in India found that language remains a major factor inhibiting the growth of the internet users who do not feel comfortable with the English language (Nadhe, 2013). The report observed that around 64% of the rural internet users have used the internet in local languages

compared to only 25% of the urban internet users. In fact the availability of content in local languages is the prime driver for many people to access the internet in the first place. Consequently, Gopinath (2009) says there is a huge disparity in the internet access; the dominance of the affluent classes and non-resident Indians shapes the Indian internet experience leaving out the majority comprising the rural populace, the non-literates, the women and the socially disadvantaged. This is reflected in the content available on the internet, as there are schedules for airlines and railways, but little information on the schedules of bus facilities, the most used form of transportation by the urban poor in major cities (Gopinath, 2009: 306).

Banerjee (2007b: 7) observes that in developing economies a large proportion of the population resides in rural areas in abject poverty with often limited infrastructure, uncertain employment conditions, exacerbated by a lack of information and knowledge. These rural societies are characterised as much by political hierarchy as by information hierarchy which in turn leads to subjugation. The internet can be a major source of help for these citizens to transcend those traditional limits.

Gopinath (2009: 291-311) suggests that cellular phones rather than traditional computer devices can enhance the internet penetration in India where the internet has evolved more in depth than in spread. Rural India has higher numbers of cell phone users than people with standard computers. Cellular phones are gaining currency in India primarily because of their support for vernacular languages for services like SMS and the requirement of less technical skills compared to computer devices. Gopinath (2009: 291-311) further adds that the low costing internet supported by cellular devices with a well-functioning voice applications for vernacular languages have the potential to induce participatory decision making in developing countries like India. Just as the internet has lowered the cost of locating information, countries such as India require low cost coordinating mechanisms for organising effective decision making and the mobile internet is one of the successful ways to do the same.

When local communities are bereft of technological advances then globalisation can make globally well connected entities benefit at the expense of

others. A UNICEF (2013) report found positive implications of mobile usage in India in terms of gender as well. The report found that there were 225 million subscribers of mobile among women, a 40% increase from 2009. Given the increase in female mobile users the report noted that mobile phones have the potential to empower women as around 40% of mobile subscribers found employment opportunities through their mobile phones.

In spite of the challenges stymieing the potential of the internet from being fully tapped its functions as a resourceful tool in the developing countries are many. For now the access to the internet through cellular or other non-traditional devices by the disadvantaged factions of the society remains low as evidenced through the virtual movements which remain urban centric. In line with these patterns a study on the Indian internet level (Aggarwal, 2013) shows when compared to the overall internet penetration level, the numbers are extremely poor. This in spite of India having 150 million internet users which makes India the third largest internet populated country after China and USA. The majority of the users are from urban areas as compared to the rural areas, which comprises 61.35% of the population out of which only 3.24% uses the internet (A. Kumar, 2013).

In sum less than 10 percent of the country is connected to the internet (Manzar, 2013), one of the lowest figures among the top fifteen connected countries. Therefore, the internet is primarily a domain of the relatively affluent and educated classes. For the time being at least the profile of an average Indian internet user may be middle class, affluent, and educated. The appropriation of the internet technologies mainly by the middle class has brought forth the charges that any scope of public sphere in the digital milieu remains exclusive (Belair-Gagnon et al., 2013a) and has parochial attributes.

India has been progressive in implanting the IT laws and has enacted its first cyber law in 2001 making it the 12th country worldwide do so. The law aims to address the issues of e-commerce, e-governance, and cybercrime (D.A. Singh, 2007: 126). But the laws have promoted electronic commerce activities more than

complementing democracy (Duggal, 2003). Critics argue that India's IT laws are curtailing individual freedom and the egalitarian potential of the public sphere online and call it 'unconstitutional' (Kodabagi and Kameri, 2013). India is accused of following in the steps of its neighbour China which is infamous for its strict law and authoritarian regime and administration (Saini, 2012). The internet law of India is said to be vague and deficient and in need of urgent reform (Kodabagi and Kameri, 2013). Other criticisms are a lack of awareness among law enforcement about the internet and an inadequate understanding of the medium by those who seek to censor it.

In 2012 two young women were arrested in Mumbai for ostensibly posting incriminating content on Facebook (Mandhana, 2012). One of the accused had criticised the city's shut down after the death of the leader of a right wing Hindu party. She wrote on her Facebook page "With all respect, every day, thousands of people die, but still the world moves on," her post was liked by one of her friends. Both women were arrested and charged under Section 66A of Indian penal code, which deems it a crime to digitally send "any information that is grossly offensive or has menacing character" (Mandhana, 2012).

In a similar instance of curtailing speech online, an Indian cartoonist was arrested on the charges of sedition under 124A of the Indian Penal Code for posting seditious content on his website, *Cartoons Against Corruption*. Aseem Trivedi was implicated for posting anti-corruption cartoons in which he allegedly insulted Indian sensibilities by mocking Indian constitution (Burke, 2012). In yet another incident a university professor was arrested for circulating a spoof of a prominent woman politician of his state on the internet. He was charged with defamation (Section 500 of the IPC), humiliating a woman (Section 114 of the IPC), and causing offence using a computer (Section 66 A (b) of the IT Act) amongst other charges (Banerjee, 2012). The curtailing of the internet freedom poses a severe threat to the Indian democracy and subverts the notion of the internet as a democratic medium.

A report by Freedom House, an independent monitoring group which rates the level of online censorship of a country and how open the access to the internet is for

its citizens confirms the concerns about the increasing directives and laws to restrict online freedom in India. The Freedom House (2013b) report gave India a score of 47 down from 39 in 2012 making it a country with the largest decline in the internet freedom. Regardless, the internet users in India are claiming a stake in the online space by conducting activism, engaging in political speech leading to an expansion and development of the networked public sphere.

4.4 Online Public Sphere a Middle Class Space ?: Analysing India Against Corruption Movement

Emerging after reformation policies of 1991, the Indian middle class is defined less by the traditional markers of caste and religion and has come to identify itself more with the 'secular', 'non-traditional', and 'modern' credentials. Bêteille (1996) in his study on the urban Indian middle class notes that its members accord status to each other on the basis of class rather than caste. This emphasis laid by the middle class on distinctions of class has led to the development of a whole body of literature on the apparent materialism of this group initiated by the liberalisation process of the 1990s.

Jaffrelot and van der veer (2008a) opine that the opening of the economy in India and a shift from the socialist Gandhian-Nehru values towards a more materialistic ethos legitimised by state policies led to a culture of uninhibited consumption. The resultant lifestyle and patterns of consumption was aspirational and valued equally by all segments of the middle class. The parallel growth of Indian mediascape accompanied by the proliferation of channels and the commercialisation of media organisation further boosted the trend.

Chaudhari (2010) supports the claim, and adds that the Indian media has played a crucial role in legitimising neo-liberal capitalism and it would not be an exaggeration to state that the contemporary Indian nation state is being appropriated by the middle class. Echoing Chaudhari's thoughts, Rajagopal (2009) says that the electronic media almost always propagates middle class sensibilities. In a similar vein Jaffrelot and van der veer (2008a) add that in spite of representing one-fifth of the

society, middle class sets the precedent for the Indian society. The reason behind this is partly attributed to an increasing development of the class and partly to its perennial inclusion in the official discourse of policy makers.

The apparent domination of middle class imageries in the mediated public sphere and the larger political structure may imply a politically robust class engaged with the workings of the democratic process. On the contrary the scenario is rather bleak and the middle class is described variously as depoliticised and detached from political participation. This political disfranchisement of the Indian middle class as Alam (2005) points out is reverse in other countries especially west where the trend is opposite and often it is the lesser educated and lower classes that refrain from political activities.

Jaffrelot (2008b) too believes that poorer people are more politically active than their rich counterparts in India especially in big cities. Ambrose (2011) ascribes this disinterest to a lack of trust in traditional politics and politicians. He claims that the middle class firmly believes that political leaders indulge in corrupt practices. This includes laundering with the tax payers' money and practices such as a lack of transparency in answers from the state which deepens this mistrust. Jaffrelot (2008b) on the other hand believes that there are deeper issues of casteism and classism that have generated apathy amongst the middle class who hardly identify themselves with the political class.

In his study on the Indian middle class's voting patterns Jaffrelot (2008b) investigates several hypotheses. He says the 'materiality of the voting process' is a frequently cited reason of the absenteeism as many believe that the long queues and waiting for hours make the voting process cumbersome for the rich. He posits that this reasoning is not entirely valid especially with the introduction of Electronic Voting Machines which have significantly reduced the voting time. Instead Jaffrelot (2008b) believes that a rise in 'plebeian brand of politics' (p.50) is an underlying cause of low voter turnouts.

Caste is firmly entrenched in the fabric of Indian society and to separate the categories of class and caste in India would be naivety. Jaffrelot (2008b) reasons that there have been changes in the political system post-independence. The introduction of reservation quotas for backward classes has altered the Indian politics. The increased presence of the lower castes and other marginalised groups marked a shift from the earlier predominant representation of upper caste political figures. Subsequently, the rise to power of the lower classes affiliated parties and MPs led to outnumbering of the upper caste parliamentarians.

This plebeianisation estranged the urban middle class, most of whom do not identify with the lower class candidates who, they believe, do not represent their cause. As a result the urban middle classes have started to believe that given their small numbers their vote cannot affect much change and thus they refrain from voting. While the lower classes share no such concerns and have no apparent disillusion with politics and continue to exercise their voting rights. In the absence of credible platforms with which urban classes identify, it is supposed that the middle class are gravitating towards non-traditional sources to voice their concerns; social media being one of them.

The increasing clout of the social media sites like Facebook has been documented by the study conducted by the IRIS Knowledge Foundation (2013) which found that Facebook can potentially affect the election outcomes in constituencies where its members constitute over 10 per cent of the voting population. The increasing television coverage on the middle class issues coupled with the social media has had a powerful impact in recent times thereby without having the requisite number to constitute the majority or the median category of the population it is able to impact the political class (D. Bhattacharya, 2013b). Effectively, social media propelled movements have captured the middle class's interest which now employs these tools to voice their discontent, share their views, thereby, creating a public sphere.

However, the political awakening of the middle class is received with a certain degree of cynicism. Varma (2013) notes that the participation of the middle classes in political and activist process does not completely make it a political entity as it remains disorganised and lacks a pan-Indian leadership. He also adds that even though the concerns are legitimate they are largely of a myopic vision, because the middle class does not go beyond its class interest and is apathetic to the issues affecting the classes beyond its own. Wherefore, any movement stemming out through the use of digital technologies touch upon urban issues and on the whole are a middle class phenomenon.

Belair, et al (2013a) agree that the social media is limited to a certain segment, arguing that it caters to specific demographic groups namely the middle and upper classes, the intellectuals, activists, and journalists. They further add that it is only middle class issues that merit a place in social media and that the discontentment of the marginalised groups finds little mention. Even the participation from the marginalised and subaltern groups in discussion on social media remains limited.

Empirical evidence (Kakoti, 2013) supports the proclamation that the internet use is confined to the metropolitan cities and gives birth to middle class movements. Anja Kovacs, project director at the Internet Democracy Project in India, says that social media may give a platform to the previously unheard voices but it is not accessible to all as only a small segment of the Indian population has access to the internet (Boruah, 2013). A case in point is 'India Against Corruption' movement in 2011, and the protests that happened in the aftermath of the Delhi gang rape on December 16th 2012, both pre-dominantly driven by the middle class and illustrate the growing affinity towards online communication technologies (Kundu, 2013; Ahmed & Jaidka, 2013; Parashar, 2012). In both the cases, social media were heavily employed by the middle class who had gathered in huge numbers garnering considerable attention from the mainstream media.

4.4.1 India Against Corruption a Middle Class Movement and Online Public Sphere

The 'India Against Corruption' (IAC) movement is a social movement that aimed to pass an anti-corruption bill, also called the 'Citizen's Ombudsman Bill' or 'Jan Lokpal bill' in the parliament. The movement sought to lessen the corruption prevalent in the Indian bureaucracy by challenging the Citizen's Ombudsman Bill in the parliament and proposing a redraft of the Bill by its own members. The movement proposed for the creation of a Jan-Lokpal or a Citizen's ombudsman vested with power to charge any government official accused of corruption and would create an autonomous agency responsible for an effective enactment of the laws. Compared with the government's initial version, the bill drafted by the civil society activists gave more power to the Lokyukta or the citizen's ombudsman. Of the IAC core members Anna Hazare became the most recognisable face of the movement, being compared to Gandhi chiefly because of his adoption of Gandhian principles of protest.

A social reformer with a large support base, Anna had previously led successful campaigns on various social causes in his native village. With the Gandhian image and a vocal discontent for the politicians Anna came to represent the ordinary Indian deeply dissatisfied and mistrusting of the political class (Yadav, 2012). In accord with the Gandhian belief of non-violence, Hazare went on an indefinite fast after the proposed bill was rejected by the Indian Prime Minister. He broke the fast only after the Prime Minister assured him through a letter that his government will consider the version of the bill drafted by his team. Another member of the IAC movement who came into prominence is Arvind Kejriwal who later went on to win a seat in the Delhi Assembly elections of 2013 by winning over the then Chief Minister of Delhi.

The popularity and success of the IAC movement is attributed to its innovative uses of social media technologies. The IAC used SMS campaigns as well as social networking sites like Twitter and Facebook (Bidwai, 2012; U. Mehta, 2012). Mehta (2012) says being a people's movement anchored by largely lesser known faces IAC made use of social media to promote itself and recruit supporters. The extensive usage of 'new' digital technologies to target young people and mobilise their support made it novel in the recent history of India. The organisers managed to mobilise mostly

middle class citizens who became the movement's core support group with the call for a 'corruption free India'.

The movement organised all the major protests via social media; Hazare launched a personal blog which received one million hits. Hazare's name became the most searched item on Google India. He was a trending topic on Twitter and also enjoyed a large support on Facebook (Freedom House, 2013b). Details of the campaign and the workings of the movement were specified through Facebook and Twitter by its organising members. These include news on the arrest of its leaders being tweeted in real time or its negotiations with the government. In doing so the organisation became one of the first groups in India to employ social media affordances on such a large scale.

One of their campaigns was a 'missed call' campaign in which people were invited to join the movement by making missed calls to a local number provided by the IAC group. People were asked to give a call to a particular number that were not answered but was supposed to show solidarity with the cause of anti-corruption movement. The number was provided by the IAC group and was on the group's website to express their support for the campaign. The missed call campaign proved very successful with supporters placing over 35 million calls.

Mumbai's Netcore Company offered its service to the movement which had used IBM technology to send bulk SMSs to several people at once. The company also did not charge for the phone calls from people who responded to the missed calls. The innovative methods of conducting the campaign helped in mobilising people from different parts of the country. Protests were staged in more than 300 cities in which the middle classes actively participated. The IAC team organised a protest on 30th January 2011 and the online response to this mobilised further action around the country (Ashutosh, 2012: 22-3).

A member of the media team of IAC explained that he posted anti-corruption messages on the Facebook page of the movement, which asked and motivated people to join the movement. For example on the movement's page some of the postings were posed to people of a particular state or city such as, "is there anyone in Pune who will fight against corruption?", and invited reactions. Those who responded were later contacted by phone and were encouraged to join the campaign as volunteers. Also, a conscious effort was made to focus on the quality and not quantity. So those invited went through a screening first as the movement wanted to avoid unscrupulous people. However, the member noted that not everyone who replied was willing to contribute offline, some preferring to be active only on social media portals. The responses on Facebook prompted the team to join other networks like Twitter as a result of which a strong social media community formed, consisting mainly of young people and professionals (Ashutosh, 2012: 33).

Ashutosh (2012) observes that in an attempt to expand the online activism the movements' members tried to connect with people who were already running anti-corruption and anti-graft campaigns on the web in their individual capacity. Organisers of the websites like *Youth for Better India* in Hyderabad were invited to join the campaign. Integration of these websites further boosted the popularity of the India Against Corruption movement, strengthening the argument that social media acted as an interactive and integrating tool in the whole campaign.

In a qualitative study on the employment of new media technologies during the IAC movement, Parashar (2012) found that the more than 50% of the respondents commenting on the updates on social media sites actually participated in the protest held at Ramlila Grounds in New Delhi. He also found that social media acted as a participatory media in the sense that several respondents not only participated in discussions in online platforms but also uploaded self-made videos, bytes of leaders and so forth.

Parashar (2012) also says that the movement managed to overcome the problem of the digital divide. By including the mobile phone services to advocate its

cause the movement was able to reach those members of the society who are unfamiliar with computer related technologies. U. Mehta (2012: 66) asserts that the IAC movement was able to “fire the idealism of 21st century India’s burgeoning middle class”.

In summary, since IAC was a social movement concerning and involving the general populace it becomes difficult to analyse the role played by women during the movement both online and offline. Though many women participated in the movement there is no specific study detailing their role. While ‘India Against Corruption’ movement establishes the presence of an online public sphere in India it does not help distinguish the role played by women. By comparison, the gendered nature of the Delhi rape incident makes it easier to study the role women play in the online public sphere. The next chapter looks specifically at the use of this online space by women in India and their appropriation of Web 2.0 affordances in order to advance their agendas.

CHAPTER FIVE

REINFORCING OR RESHAPING GENDER ROLES?-

WOMEN IN ONLINE PUBLIC SPHERE IN INDIA

5.1 Introduction

The public-private distinction in the early feminist theory stems from studies on traditional gender roles for men and women. Traditional norms subsume women's place in private or familial spheres associating women with the institution of domesticity, family, and home. Men on the other hand are identified with the public spheres, which are usually a space located outside the domestic sphere and their role mainly associated with economic aspects and commercial institutions. In feminist writings, the private sphere is usually identified as a place of 'sexual inequality, unremunerated work, and seething discontent' instead of a site of personal fulfilment (Landes, 1998:1). This distinction is visible in the lives of women in India to an extent as well, who historically had a very limited role in the public sphere.

Indian women's identity is strongly defined by familial and community roles, and historically they have been isolated from public spaces. These spaces have been dominated by a deeply rooted patriarchal tradition which also explains the absence of women's voices in the early periods of Indian history. Indian Nationalist Movement, which began in the 19th century against the British rule and continued till 1947 when India gained independence is 'credited for bringing women out into the public domain for the first time in the history of India' (Thapar- Bjorkert, 1997: 493). Ever since then due to women friendly measures by the government the status of women in Indian society is continually improving with a large presence of women in the public life.

However, despite their enhanced participation in the work sector and public life, the Indian women face systematic discrimination and neglect in terms of

‘inadequate nutrition, denial or limited access to education, health and property rights, child labour, and domestic violence’ (Purnima, 2011). The Indian government is routinely trying to introduce measures to improve the quality of women’s lives. These measures include constitutional provisions, legislative provisions, and women friendly policies in health and education sectors (Purnima, 2011) and recently, introduction of ICT based programmes for women (Suresh, 2011). Consequently, more women are engaging with these technologies and getting online using the internet based affordances like social media as well. In fact, women in India are emerging as some of the heaviest internet users with social media capturing the majority of the online time (comScore, 2013).

The growth of the women internet users and their employment of social media have engendered questions on their participation in the online public sphere. After tracing the growth of the public sphere and establishing the development of online public sphere in India in the previous chapter, I set out to examine women’s role in this sphere in the present chapter. It will be done by borrowing from the cyberfeminist framework, especially in the context of women in developing countries.

Following the trajectory of the previous chapter, which defined the online public sphere by revisiting its history, the present chapter provides a background to women’s role in the Indian public sphere, encapsulating the pre-independence era to the current internet environs. The role of ICT enabled communication systems for women’s empowerment in India will also be assessed. Finally, I will outline the implications of the online public sphere in India and the ways Indian women are engaging in that sphere.

5.2 Changing Role of Women in the Indian Public Sphere

Women’s movement in India has its beginnings in the 19th century social reform movements led by Indian reformists and European colonists. Predominantly male, the Indian reformers tried to push for female education and abolish social malpractices like sati, child marriages and widow remarriages in pre-colonial India. By the late nineteenth century the campaign was joined by the female relatives of the

reformers and other Indian women affected by the movement (R. Kumar, 1993). The next important phase in the women's movement was during the nationalist movement against colonial rule in the early 1900s during which several autonomous women's organisations were formed. Incidentally, during this period women came to the forefront joining the country's struggle for independence. Perhaps one of the earliest examples of formal participation of women in public life in India is associated with Gandhi who encouraged women to join in public activities during the Nationalist movement.

Participating in the nationalist struggle proved to be a major impetus for women as it gave agency and voice as well as made them conscious of their rights. Thapar- Bjorkert (1997) agrees that the Nationalist movement served as an important vehicle for women to participate in the public sphere. She argues that women's subordinate position in the Indian society provided one of the justifications for the British rule. Thus, the nationalist leaders required the participation of women as the movement's success depended in women's contribution and involvement in it. Regardless, the movement proved to be an important stepping stone in elevating women's position in the Indian society.

Post- independence, pro-women legislations were implemented; as a result of which women did not have to struggle for basic rights like suffrage which was granted to both Indian men and women at the same time. Mazumdar (1985) argues pro-women legislations guaranteeing equality to all satisfied the women's movement who believed that their demands would be met and so for over twenty years women's agendas 'disappeared from the public arena'. Ghadially (1988) believes that though the constitution drafted after independence was remarkably pro-women it has a poor record of implementation. The 1960s witnessed a resurgence in interest on women's issues, what is now known as the beginning of the contemporary women's movement.

The earliest documentation of the concerns of the contemporary women's movement was sanctioned by the Indian government in 1972 which was propelled by the U.N. declaration of 1975 as Women's Year and the period from 1975 to 1985 as

women's decade (Ghadially, 1988). The report revealed the existence of gender disparities as well as the fact that track record of implementation of pro-women laws was extremely poor.

A concentrated effort by the government and non-governmental organisations are underway, with public-private partnership in taking measures towards development of women's status (Karan and Mathur, 2009). As a result of this joint partnership, there is an increase in the literacy rate and a greater participation in the work sector. As more women enter the formal work force, their increasing visibility in the public sphere is reshaping these spaces.

Of the several factors influencing this change, ICTs have played an important part. ICTs are providing opportunities for women to reorganise economic activities to their advantage. Suresh (2011) says ICTs have benefitted women in different ways as a viable tool of 'information and communication, [to] enable health education and information dissemination, [and] deliver education content to the doorstep, which, for women with constraints on mobility and access to public places can prove to be a significant starting point' (2011: 21). He further argues that the efficient use of information technology like the internet can offer opportunities to women to empower themselves (2011: 22).

5.3 Information Technologies a Double Edged Sword? Role of ICTs for women in India and their presumed effect on the public sphere

The capacity of ICTs to act as a catalyst for change in the lives of women in India has been documented both in the urban sectors and rural areas. Evidence has repeatedly shown that promoting economic advancement of women through technology is critical for reducing poverty and produces positive outcomes leading to empowerment (Suresh, 2011; Arun and Arun, 2002). Mahiti Manthana, launched in 2005 by the Indian NGO IT For Change is one amongst the several successful examples of projects that seeks to empower rural women through ICT. The radio and video based activities help women to learn more about subjects necessary for economic activities. The project also permitted women to assemble their voices

through ICT based organisation, and increased their legitimacy within rural communities (von Lautz-Cauzanet, 2013). ICT was successfully adopted as a technology for micro-enterprises in a southern Indian state for poverty eradication. The project was a deviation from the usual self-employment schemes for women in the state which were dominated by traditional employment opportunities like tailoring, dairying, poultry farming and so forth (Prasad and Sreedevi, 2007). Such projects not only empower women, but also aid in dispelling the belief that computers are for educated classes only. Although, studies demonstrating the positive impacts of ICTs are promising, it is also noticed that ICTs are not being widely adopted by all women.

Both the digital divide and the gender divide are two major impediments for women accessing ICTs (Prasad and Sreedevi, 2007), which is a result of limited access and low levels of access by women and girls to technology respectively. These divisions are due to a lack of access to technology, but factors like limited access to roads and transportation, poverty, and illiteracy worsen the problem. Also, cultural and social barriers prevent women from availing facilities provided by ICTs, who often remain unaware of its benefits. In cases where women do access such facilities a lack of a supportive environment in the centres offering ICT training deters them from making maximum use of those facilities (Sandys, 2005).

While there have been positive impact of these technologies, scholars like Ghadially (1988) believe that modern technologies have not always augured well in women's empowerment process and have created a new set of problems. She reasons there is a male bias in the development planning and that any changes that have occurred have been 'superimposed on the pre-existing system with social structures severely in disfavour of women' (Ghadially, 1998: 14).

Therefore, any changes that are implemented are superficial with little improvement in the ideological and institutional structures. For example, on the negative effect of technological advancement V. Patel (1988) in her study on sex determination and sex pre selection writes that scientific techniques like

amniocentesis are regularly misused in India. The amniocentesis test which is conducted for sex determination gained popularity not only in major Indian metros but even in rural parts. The preference of Indians for a male child led to abortion of female foetuses and a dwindling female to male ratio.

Progress in women's status has mostly been couched in the traditional paradigm of woman as mother figure 'evoking deep, often atavistic, images through the use of metaphor and symbol' (R. Kumar, 1993:2). One of the earliest proponents of women's rights in India, Gandhi also exemplifies this paternalist approach. His feminisation of politics has earned him the label of the 'parent of the Indian women's movement' but even his views on women's role are restrictive.

While Gandhi's involvement of women in his movement broke deep rooted gender barriers, but, to an extent he himself operated within the traditional sensibility of Hindu patriarchal norms. Gandhi's emphasis and exaltation of the feminine roles of woman as a nurturer and caregiver whilst lauding the spirit of endurance and suffering embodied in the mother figure is restrictive at its best.

Kumar (1993) accepts that Gandhi was a pioneer in the woman's movement in the country but says his views on the equality between sexes in terms of property rights, suffrage, education are ambivalent. For instance, on women's participation in the nationalist movement Gandhi assured the male guardians of the participating women that they would not rebel against the family (Shukla, 2012). Thapar- Bjorkert (1997) makes a somewhat similar argument and says while women actively participated in the nationalist movement, their roles were outlined in reference to mythology, literature, and history defined by men and even women. For instance, popular mythical figures of Hindu goddesses Sita and Savitri were invoked while defining the idea of a modern woman. Both these figures exemplify steadfastness, courage, and determination and were representative of an ideal Indian womanhood.

The woman was supposed to possess the virtues of benevolence and self-sacrifice, and was expected to be her husband's complementary half and helpmate 'capable of taking on the burden of raising a family in her husband's absence' (Thapar- Bjorkert, 1997: 496). In the context of the Indian state, 'the construct was identified with the "motherland," where women were seen as agents of national progress and esteem, in the same way as their mythical counterparts' (1997: 496). She further argues that the qualities of 'self-sacrifice, benevolence, and patience' (1997: 501) in women were considered essential not only in the private sphere but expected in the public sphere as well.

These kinds of reinforcement of gender stereotypes function even in present times when women have marked a strong presence in the formal sector, and it is hoped that their economic empowerment will rupture the traditional stereotypes. Studies on women's participation in the workforce have revealed that enhanced presence in the work force does not necessarily translate to a better status for women overall who continue to be vulnerable to patriarchal control.

A study of female representation in the Indian parliament found that women were underrepresented (Rai, 2002). Moreover, female politicians holding important ministerial positions were very low. The study also found that the female politicians in most cases belonged to affluent class and came into public life by the virtue of their family, while the presence of women from minority groups was almost negligible.

Another study on women engineers in India shows that even after earning the degree women engineers were sidelined in preference to male graduates (Bindu et al., 2002). The study found that hiring organisations believed females have higher chances of leaving the workplace because of marriage and childbirth, and that even if they continue to work they will place family before career. Corroborating these findings, Kelkar et al. (2005) in their study found that women often have less choice compared to men in advancing their careers because unlike men they take factors like household responsibilities, childcare, and distance from home into consideration.

Kelkar et al. (2005) claim that contrary to the notion that IT led economic empowerment of women can lead to the breakdown of gender barriers studies show that women's general workload has actually increased. The gender-based division of work at home has remained the same or even been exacerbated as women have more work now in addition to the work in the formal sector. Kelkar et al. (2005) further note that societal barriers and stereotypes have found their way into the work place as well. It has been noticed that certain sectors prefer women employees as they are supposedly seen as more willing to stay in a 'boring job' and not leave the company even if they get better opportunities.

While there have been several negative impacts but the study by Kelkar et al. (2005) revealed positive implications of these technologies as well. Many women reported an increase in autonomy in household issues and in financial matters. Several women also claimed that their earning power accorded them greater independence and negotiating power within the societal structures thereby increasing their agency.

As the above literature demonstrates, the relationship of women with technology remains ambiguous much like their changing position in the public sphere. The advancement remains rooted in the traditional framework even in the lives of urban women. The above literature concentrated broadly on the ICTs outlining their significance in the lives of women in India. While ICTs are employed by both urban and rural women, the active appropriation of information technology such as the internet remains confined to urban women. Even in the case of the internet, women's position mirrors the ambiguity exhibited in their relationship with general information technologies.

5.3.1 Role of the Internet in the Lives of Women in India

The Intel (2013) study on the internet use among women in developing countries reports that the internet access for women leads to enhanced political participation and social inclusion. It also increases economic opportunities leading to economic freedom as well as enhanced mobility and greater access to services. Of the total number of the internet users in India around 40 percent are women, a far lower

sex ratio than the global average. The numbers are even lower in the rural areas which accounts for total 4 percent of the internet population (Intel, 2013) and where the number of female users is even lesser.

The Intel (2013) report on women's usage of the internet found that a woman in India is 27 percent less likely to have the internet access than a man and only 8.4 percent of women are online. Illiteracy, unease with the technology, lack of access, time, and even confidence and the belief that the internet is for business only deter women from going online in India (Johnson, 2010). Studies by the World Bank, and UNESCO, found that women in India think that the internet is not worth spending money on, and one in five women in India believes that the internet is immoral and not right for them (Intel, 2013).

Gurumurthy and Menon (2009) posit that cyber harassment has emerged as a disturbing factor preventing women from venturing into cyberspace. The easy availability of technology has enabled the construction of fake or morphed images of women taken from the internet or through mobile phones. They say that the images are posted on pornographic sites and in some cases women who are raped are re-victimised when the images of their rape or abuse are recorded and posted online.

The cycle of violence that routinely denigrates and threatens women has also led to several women taking their own lives. Incidents such as these have prompted women to view the internet as a masculine space where the traditional paradigms of honour, modesty, womanhood are undermined. Cyber harassment is, in fact, an increasing problem which is compounded due to a lack of appropriate laws to curb it (Kurup, 2013).

Johnson (2010) observed that in middle class families there was no evidence that subordinate status was holding women back from accessing the internet. In fact men were quite supportive of their wives going online; it is the women themselves who believe that the internet is not for them. The prime reason being that the internet

has been advertised as a tool for students and businessmen, so that women think it is of no use to them. Johnson (2010) argues that incentive for many women to use technology grows out of family roles. Her study revealed that women used the internet mainly to keep in touch with family members through e-mails or to help their children with their homework. She argues that there is a need for change in the way a product is advertised in the media because when the role of woman is portrayed differently from the stereotypical norms it could result in attitudinal change. Thus, advertising the internet as a tool for personal development and commerce as opposed to just information resource could lead to a higher motivation among women to use it for their 'own development and pleasure' (2010: 162).

The numbers of female internet users may sound dismally low, but when compared to the overall growth rate, they are on the rise. At present, there are 60 million women online in India with over 24 million accessing the internet daily. Rajan Anandan, vice-president of Google India, said that their report on Indian women found that women user base is increasing rapidly. He claims that the 'internet is empowering Indian women with easy access to information and helping them to make more informed decisions in their day-to-day life' (M. Sen, 2013). The Intel (2013) report stresses that an effective use of the internet technology by women in developing countries is contingent on factors like class, location, and education. Perhaps this may partly explain why a majority of the women internet users reside in urban India. Also, for the same reason any exploration of women's role in the online public sphere remains confined to urban areas at least presently.

Most of the studies investigate the reasons for the low numbers of the internet users or concentrate on the commercial aspects of women's internet use (For example Google), economic aspects (Suresh, 2011) and so forth. Earlier studies on social aspects also remain limited to IT sectors in terms of exploring the persistence of gender stereotypes (R., Patel, 2005); sustainability of ICT based development in terms of gender inequality (Arun & Arun, 2002); and the implications of agency at a personal front in women working in IT based sectors (Kelkar et al., 2005).

Speaking specifically in the context of women's relation with these technologies Gajjala (1999a) argues that there is an almost implicit assumption that (western) communication technologies lead to progress and empowerment for women. She argues that there is an implication that the internet has the potential to resolve the issues faced by third world women without actually addressing the 'complexities of the lived contexts of women in the South Asia'. She adds that such reasoning circumscribes the larger issues to just a problem of 'material access and technical training' (1999a: 121). She further explicates that the implicit connection that most cyber feminists draw between 'modernity, machines, and the liberation of women' is problematic. It inevitably adopts a very westernised and urban bourgeois terminology that may be benevolent in tone but is 'nonetheless hierarchical in that it allows or disallows Others' speech' (1999a: 121).

Gajjala concludes that it is important to identify that material access is just a part of the problem since there are larger issues of 'global and local cultural contexts' that needs to be assessed. There are few studies exploring the social or political implications of the women's internet use or enhanced presence of women in the online public sphere in India. In the next section, I will discuss the gendered nature of the online public sphere and what implications do these online spaces have for women in India.

5.4 Reconstructing public-private boundaries: Is the Online Public Sphere a Viable Space for Women in India?

Scholarship on the relationship between gender and the internet is characteristic of the dichotomies present in the early internet studies. The cyber-optimist (Negroponte, 1995; Tapscott, 1997) and the cyber-pessimist strains (Shapiro, A. & Leone, R. 1999) inherent in the internet discourse can be discerned in the studies pertaining to cyber feminism as exemplified by the gender-essentialist and technological-determinist theories (van Doorn & Zoonen, 2009a).

Plant (1997) describes cyberspace as a gender neutral territory where social hierarchies entrenched firmly in the offline world are rendered meaningless.

According to Plant (1997) masculine norms have always been prevalent in society, thus creating hegemony of sorts where women are left with little choice to exercise agency. However, with the advent of the internet the traditional hegemony is ruptured as cyberspace provides a space which is more conducive to feminine principles. Plant's proclamation that the web provides a space for superseding patriarchal bonds broke the traditional view of technology as a masculine domain, but it is now seen as a part of the initial euphoria surrounding the internet discourse. Wajcman (2004) repudiates Plant's claim and offers a more balanced view by arguing that it is feminist notions and politics rather than the technologies themselves that are responsible for changes in the lives of women. Additionally, Wajcman (2004) also criticises cyberfeminism's preoccupation with the construction of the cyborg and multiple identities online whilst paying scant attention to the material and cultural realities.

While the narratives surrounding the internet have come a long way from its utopian origins, debates still persist about whether the internet can offer an alternative public sphere (Papacharissi, 2002a) especially for marginalised groups (A. Mitra, 2005). Traditional public sphere theories usually begin from Habermas (1962) who has been severely criticised for excluding women. One such critic is Fraser (1990) who terms Habermas' model as a highly restrictive and an exclusionary sphere that fails to take into account women's experiences and that of other marginal groups. The subordinate role of women in Habermas' public sphere is also pointed out by Benhabib (1998) who believes this exclusion is deliberate. She argues that the persistence of traditional binary of public vs. private in contemporary theory is a part of an effort to continue to delegitimise women's interests in the private sphere.

On the other hand, an understanding of the online public sphere is relatively free of the gender baggage that comes with the traditional theories of public sphere. One of the earliest feminist proponents of the internet, Plant (1997) believes that stereotypical gender relations are challenged online. She argues that since the internet follows a non-linear pathway where traditional laws of control and order are not easy to replicate, it threatens to dismantle the masculine hegemonic power structure.

Though her conception of the internet's inherent gender neutral characteristic is now dismissed as utopian (Wilding, 1998; van Doorn, 2010b), Plant is one of the earliest to recognise its feminist implications. van Zoonen (2002:6) argues that the internet has its roots in the 'military-industrial' complex and is borne out of a collaboration of American universities and the Pentagon, the traditionally male bastion, which led feminist critics to term it as a medium 'embedded in masculine codes and values'. Compared to the deep rooted patriarchal history associated with traditional institutions, the internet has been relatively independent of gender biases given its masculinised past.

Women in India are increasingly going online and making use of social affordances that the internet provides and in the process are making themselves visible in the public domain. Young (1998b: 440) argues that 'expression is public when third parties witness it within institutions that give these others opportunity to respond to the expression and enter a discussion, and through media that allow anyone....to enter the discussion'. In the Indian context, Omvedt (2005) says that a major hurdle to women's public participation is the deeply entrenched patriarchal norms in social and cultural life.

The systematic cycle of violence against women in India, which usually begins in the womb with female foeticide and continues throughout life is intensified by caste, class, and religious framework. Adding to that is the apparent absence of gender justice which contributes towards the lack of women's participation in the political/public sphere (Niner, Parashar & George, 2012). Consequently, there are few avenues for women to map out their identities, but the internet offers a possible space in which to form alternative public spheres, or what Fraser (1990) conceives as a 'counterpublic'.

Fraser (1990) postulates that in stratified societies the idea of any singular and unified public sphere exemplified best by Habermas remains redundant as participatory parity cannot be achieved. When social inequality persists, deliberative processes operating in the public sphere almost always tilts in the favour of dominant

groups inevitably posing a disadvantage to the marginal groups. The members of subordinate groups would have no independent medium to indulge in communicative processes and would always remain under the scrutiny of the majority. Thus, under an overarching singular public sphere, marginalised groups would be unable to voice their discontent and 'defend their interests'. To counter the inequality, Fraser (1990) proposes the idea of a 'multiplicity of publics' which she believes fits more than any one comprehensive notion of the public. According to her 'arrangements' that allow for 'contestation' amongst a multitude of publics help circulate alternative and diverse views, which apart from helping minority groups to formulate their interests also aid in strengthening democracy. Public sphere for Fraser (1990) is not solely for deliberation, but a means for the 'formation and enactment of social identities' whereby actors have the right to speak in the way they deem fit. Also, they are able to present and form their distinct identity instead of meshing into a single homogenous entity.

Mitra and Watts (2002a) argue that while the boundaries of traditional media may be hard to penetrate given its structure, it is assumed that the internet helps rupture them and provide new ways for alternative voices to have access to the public sphere. They add, that the internet also offers an opportunity for the creation of a 'discursive space' in which relationships between power and spatial location have shifted, allowing for openings for traditionally marginalised groups to engage with and reach a global audience. Even when women are present in the mainstream media it does not necessarily mean that their issues or interests are well represented as the distinction between private and public comes into play.

Furthermore, any distinction between public and private can lead 'to delegitimize some interests, views, and topics and to valorize others' (Fraser, 1990). The idea finds a resonance in Benhabib (1998) who argues that such distinctions are responsible for restricting women and confining activities predominantly associated with women to private spheres. Framing interests of any group as private is not only a means of marginalising them, but also disempowers them. The internet has the

potential to bridge the gap between public and private which is not always possible through mainstream media.

Papacharissi (2010b) posits that while online media enable democratisation and offers a space akin to the public sphere, they have also forced a reevaluation of the notion as to what constitutes as public and private. Papacharissi (2010b) borrows the idea from Meyrowitz who had said that television has reconfigured the dichotomy of public and private conversations effecting amongst others politics and gender discourses. Papacharissi (2010b) believes that the internet too has further blurred the boundaries between public and private spaces. For instance, diary-form introspection by bloggers or YouTube videos broadcasting deeply idiosyncratic experiences by individual exhibit the confluence of public and private spaces. Furthermore, these experiences have reorganised the form of family and work and given birth to a new set of socio-political habits.

In such a scenario, the traditional formats of democracy may not be able to hold newer political developments and movements. On the other hand online media may serve as one such new platform because they allow newer civic practices to flourish. Also, they are networked and are a product of individual potentialities thereby creating a democratising effect.

However, it is not made vivid exactly how women's online activities lead to the constitution of a public sphere as presence on the internet does not necessarily mean their presence is recognised. Despite being a public platform, there is disagreement as to what constitutes public/private on the internet and what is visible/seen or invisible/unseen.

Newsom & Lengel (2003b) say that marginalised voices often remain confined to the spaces created for them. Hence, the presence of women's voice on the internet may be a way for them to create an alternative public sphere or participate in the existing one but that does not automatically signify empowerment. Gajjala and Oh

(2012b) agree, claiming that merely having female voices on the internet is not a reason to celebrate. Instead, the focus should be on the extent, and the effectiveness of women's participation online and hailing women's voices on the virtue of being women's voices should be avoided.

Empowerment can be subjective and emancipation through the internet hinges on many contextual and socio-cultural factors with experiences of every woman being different. Mehra, Merkel et al. (2004) concede that empowerment through the internet use differs for any marginalised group and relies on their notion of what is meaningful. In a similar vein Daniels (2009: 101) adds that it is not the internet in itself that can subvert gender and racial relations. It is the 'lived experience and actual internet practices' of females that reveals ways that 'both resist and reinforce hierarchies of gender and race'.

While the internet can offer avenues for women to express themselves, the internet in itself is not a gender neutral territory. A study by 'Internet Democracy Project' (IDP) on online abuse in India says that "to be a woman online — just like to be a woman walking the streets of an Indian city, town or village - is to transgress an unwritten law of patriarchy; to cross over into a space that isn't meant to be yours" (Kurup, 2013). The report also states that the threat is increasing as more women are getting online, and the nature of these threats is mostly sexual in nature. Even when males face online abuse, it is directed towards the females in their family (Kurup, 2013). The director of the IDP says that the idea is to silence women's voices, while Padte (2013a) argues that this comes from a deep seated patriarchal culture.

Padte (2013a) says that 'notion of morality vis-à-vis female bodies and sexualities is deeply entrenched' within the Indian social culture and even legal culture. These cultural norms find a way even in the IT Act which contains 'many morality-driven provisions' and 'preceded by offline laws that came into existence long before the cyber era.' Padte & Shora (2013b) who have worked with the IDP project on online abuse faced by women in India say that the findings of the report suggests, that women's online abuse can be linked to the way in which society

perceives women in public spaces. Also, it does not always have to be a result of an expressed opinion. She says it is like a public space where woman occupying these spaces don't need to do anything to face sexual harassment, their mere presence is enough to provoke a reaction. Likewise, if the internet 'is seen as a virtual street, the main reason for gender based abuse is just that: gender.' Like all abuse the abuse of women in these spaces is a way to silence women and force them to leave.

Padte & Shora (2013b) further say that while it may be difficult to silence abusers in the offline world it is comparatively easier to silence them online. She cites an example where women fought back the abusive online behaviour on Twitter; a group of Twitter users after learning of the research findings decided to create #MisognyAlert, a hashtag, to report sexism and misogyny wherever they saw it, by extension creating awareness about such incidents. The initiative received criticism but is an innovative example of the ways in which online abuse can be countered. SV (2013) observes that the only solution to stop this abuse is an increased presence of women in these spaces. More stories of women and diversity in the point of views within these voices in the virtual sphere can act as a leveler to the online threats faced by them.

Furthering the notion of having a 'voice', A. Mitra (2005b) reasons that regardless of the medium just the possibility of having a voice is empowering in itself. Possessing 'voice' in any space empowers the individual and assigns them with the role of an 'agent' as they can now present a point of view (Watts cited from A. Mitra, 2005b). Silencing alternative voices or absorbing them into dominant discourse has been a way to suppress the 'restive potential' of the voices of marginalised groups (A. Mitra, 2005b).

Alternatively, in cases where marginalised voices are not suppressed they have been spoken for by institutions, which bring forth the argument of the authenticity of what is being said. Thus, the inability of subaltern groups to speak for themselves and be represented by dominant forces can be a source of tension and also incredibly frustrating. Mitra (2005b) argues that before the internet the ability to speak depended

on cultural, technological, and economic capital. Thus, groups who did not have the required capital remained at the periphery. The internet has altered the communication landscape as it does not require a large amount of financial or technological support, and it is relatively easy to maintain a presence in the cyberspace. A. Mitra (2005b) further argues that the internet has the potential to offer a 'discursive location' where the traditionally marginalised can manifest their presence. For her, the internet can empower in ways unmatched by any other media technology.

Mitra (2005b) acknowledges the fact that virtual presence does not always mean the voice is being heard on the internet. She says there lays a potential online for the voice to be heard, which in itself is vital for marginalised factions. She sums up by saying 'the determinate moment in the process of voicing on the Internet is the moment of creating the utterance rather than the moment at which the utterance is heard' (2005b: 379). From this perspective women in India can challenge long established discriminatory practices just by the mere action of utterance. While the internet may not provide a safe or neutral territory but it does give women an equal footing when it comes to taking a stand against abusive behaviour which may not always be possible in the offline world.

To further explore the implications of the online public sphere with respect to women's role a case study of the 2012 Delhi Gang rape is conducted in the next chapter.

CHAPTER SIX

ANALYSING WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN THE ONLINE PUBLIC SPHERE: A CASE STUDY OF 2012 DELHI GANG RAPE

6.1 Introduction

The gang rape and subsequent death of a 23 year old student in Delhi caused a widespread debate on sexual violence in India and ignited protests throughout the country as well as internationally. In addition to highlighting issues faced by women the incident provoked a debate on social media activism in India. The incident is a prime example of a movement that gained momentum online as much as it did offline and became a national movement in large part due to an active online campaign. It established the role of social media as an activist tool; by aiding in generating public opinion, mobilising people, coordinating, and organising protests through a gamut of social media tools like Twitter, Facebook, and individual opinion blogs amongst others.

The present chapter examines how social media such as Facebook and Blogs were harnessed by women after the Delhi gang rape incident. Here, I also analyse how these communicative tools effect and shape the participation of women in the online public sphere. The protests against the incident and the social media generated activism were not conducted with any 'feminist' intention even though the incident focused on women's issues. Doing a feminist reading of the data, especially with respect to Facebook complicates the process as most of the pages do not promote or overtly identify themselves with feminist praxis. For example, a majority of the Facebook pages are created as a sign of protest and displeasure towards the incident and are not necessarily created by women nor do they have any feminist agenda per se. The nature of the data is such that it offers a rich source of material to comprehend the overall role of women in the public sphere.

6.2 Case Study

On 16th December 2012 a twenty three years old female student was raped by six men when she was on her way back home after a night out with a friend. She was accompanied by a male friend and had boarded an off-duty bus plying illegally, something that was not known by the couple. The driver, along with the cleaner of the bus, had taken four of their friends on a joy ride when one amongst them called for passengers telling them that the bus was going towards their destination. Sometime after the victims boarded the bus other passengers started to pass nasty remarks on the girl resulting in an argument between them and the couple.

Consequently, the boy was gagged and beaten unconscious and the girl dragged into the driver's cabin where they forced themselves on her and abused her with an iron rod. Post the assault the perpetrators threw the victims off the moving bus where they were later found by some passer-by who informed the police. The police took the victims to the nearby hospital where the girl was given emergency treatment and placed on ventilator. Later, under a decision made by a cabinet meeting chaired by the Prime Minister of India the girl was flown to a hospital in Singapore for further treatment. She eventually succumbed to her injuries after thirteen days in a Singapore hospital, while her friend who was beaten survived.

The incident provoked widespread protests in which social media was largely employed by both activists and the general public (Ahmed & Jaidka, 2013). Hota (2013) argues that these protest publics exerted enough pressure leading to the creation of Justice Verma Committee by the Indian government. It was a committee formed after the rape incident which intended to reform the rape laws of India and also proposed to 'widening definitions of rape and assault as well as changes in police and legal process that would improve the documentation and prosecution of sexual assaults' (Hota, 2013).

The Delhi rape incident is typified by individual instances of activism, unlike the 'India Against Corruption Movement' (IAC) which maintained a formal presence on various social media sites along with a blog managed by the organisational

members. The apolitical nature and lack of any particular organisational support makes the protests arising after the Delhi rape incident more of a people's movement and explains the reason behind the presence of several Facebook pages on the incident. R. Sen (2013) states that the protestors participating against the gang rape did so out of a sense of outrage at the incident. By contrast, IAC was a well-funded and an organised campaign that managed to attract people to its agenda. Thus, the protests arising after the Delhi incident were more spontaneous on protestor's part. In fact, Facebook pages and even blogs on Delhi rape incident outnumber those of India Against Corruption movement.

For the purpose of the research, I intend to analyse various Facebook pages created in response to the incident. Analysing Facebook posts helps in understanding how they have contributed in creating a space for women both in terms of content and in providing a space for participation in the public sphere. Blogs were also included primarily because the analysis of the Facebook pages alone was not enough to gain a holistic insight into the online public sphere.

Blog articles dealing specifically with the incident were studied including the comments sections, as that is where most of the discussion takes place. Similar to Facebook pages most of the blogs do not purport to advance any feminist agenda nor do they explicitly promote women's interest, but their presence demonstrates women's participation in the public arena. The analysis, thus, is divided into two parts; the first part examines Facebook pages on the Delhi rape incident and the second part looks at the blog articles authored by women bloggers dealing exclusively with the incident.

6.3 Topical Network Analysis- a study of 2012 Delhi rape

6.3.1 Facebook as public sphere- discussion of women oriented issues in the pages created after Delhi rape:

To harvest relevant Facebook pages, a combination of event and selective strategy was employed to gather data. The method entails searching for relevant online data, as well as required posts, images, links, and conversations. The words 'delhi gang rape' was entered into the site's search function, and the result included dedicated community pages on the incident, Facebook groups, Events pages etc. Several more results turned up when 'nirbhaya', 'damini' and 'amanat' were typed into the Facebook search function. The Indian media gave these names to the victim as Indian law prohibits revealing the identity of rape victim. These results were discounted from the study, and so were the results in vernacular languages to get consistency in the results. An effort was made to form uniformity in the results, so the focus was on the pages in English, which constituted a sizable majority. Data collection occurred over a 2 months period and archived till 11 June 2013 and was then compiled into Excel charts for analysis. To confirm the data attempts were then made after a 3-month period to revisit each page. In four cases, the pages no longer existed.

A total of 92 results were classified, after a Facebook search, on the basis of their Facebook page category. The results were then organised with regard to their distinction of being a community page, group, events page and so forth. Of the 92 pages 36 were identified as community pages; 48 were group pages, which were further divided into open and closed groups numbering 35 and 13 respectively; 3 pages belonged to the category of event and 5 were classified as Miscellaneous due to the lack of clear description accompanying it. For example, miscellaneous pages contained one page labeled as 'cause' while two pages based on the Delhi rape victim were described as 'fictional character' and 'public figure'. There was no clear description accompanying the miscellaneous pages.

Only the pages which were publicly accessible were studied, hence, the closed groups were excluded from analysis because of ethical considerations. Thus, only the material that could be found by any institution searching Facebook was used. Similarly, event pages were not included because they are primarily information giving site with no possibility of interaction amongst members.

Table 2: Classification of Facebook Pages

TYPE OF FACEBOOK PAGES	TOTAL NUMBER OF PAGES
All	92
Community	36
Event	3
Miscellaneous	5
Total number of groups	48
Open Group	35
Closed Group	13

The analysis of Facebook pages was a result of a combination of methods including searching for relevant keywords, counting external links, or activities. It also entailed doing a textual analysis of individual postings, and matching each post corresponding to its theme. Since, analysing every conversation taking place in every post was not deemed feasible for the present project due to time constraints, the posts having the most comments and responses to the comments were selected from each page for detailed analysis. The figures given and explained later in the chapter refers to the overall tone of all of the posts in each page.

In the next step, each page was hand-coded according to the questions which were generated and grouped under the three main thematic criteria for assessing the effect of the public sphere: communicative infrastructure, organisational infrastructure, and deliberation. (For detailed explications of these categories refer to chapter two). These questions were not selected a priori but emerged from the analysis of all the pages and used collectively to measure adherence to that criterion.

Communicative Infrastructure: whether the pages allow free exchange of ideas in terms of awareness, not only about the incident but also about general issues of women at large? Pages were studied for topics like role of the state in protecting women, efficacy of the judicial system, laws, and whether the page's mission and programs are women-oriented.

The understanding of Facebook as a communicative infrastructure is reached in terms of its identification with female speech and participation patterns in the communicative space. Fraser (1990:64) points out that feminist research has often observed that in a mixed assemblage deliberation can serve as a tool for domination. She says it's been predominantly noticed that 'men tend to interrupt women more than women interrupt men...and women's interventions are more often ignored or not responded to than men's'. She argues even if everyone is legally entitled to participate in public discourse, informal impediments such as these can hinder participatory parity.

The analysis focuses on Facebook's deliberative context by testing whether cultural norms that minimise women's speech in public space were reinforced online as well. Furthermore, the concerns pertaining to the incident were identified, and the most recurring issues were then selected to better understand the role of Facebook as a facilitator of information and ideas with respect to gender violence in a much more nuanced manner. These issues can be broadly categorised as the role of the state, which includes police handling, legislative efficacy and women's safety.

These categories do not cover all of the issues pertaining to sexual violence, which is a much larger concern, but they do represent an effort to provide expansive coverage of the issues common to all the pages studied.

Table 3: Communicative Infrastructure

	All=76	C=36	OG=35	Misc.=5
Equal participation	100	36 (100%)	35 (100%)	5 (100%)
Role of State (Police-handling)	20	16 (44%)	3 (8%)	1 (2%)
Legislative efficacy	12	7 (19%)	5 (14%)	0
Women's safety	14	13 (36%)	1 (2%)	0

C= Community pages; OG= Open Groups; Misc. = Miscellaneous pages

Overall community pages contained the most information on all the issues, followed by open groups, while miscellaneous pages had the least amount of information. As demonstrated in Table 3, all the pages accorded equal participatory rights to their members according to which there was no moderation policy enforced or mentioned in the ‘about’ section of the pages. Conversations were analysed for mutual respect amongst members for examining the communicative practice between genders; the pages were scrutinised for instances of misbehaviour in terms of abusive language, sexist remarks, or any behaviour out of the normal pattern was specifically looked for.

Even though, none of the pages had any explicit moderation policy stated on the behaviour expected of members there were no outright examples of abusive behaviour. While explicit comments were absent, there were a few instances of statements perpetuating victim blaming. For example, in a community page *Woman Gang-raped in Delhi Bus, Battles for Life*, in response to an image of a protestor holding a placard with the words, “Don’t teach me what to wear, teach your sons not to rape”, a commenter disagrees with the caption. They wrote that women too are responsible in some ways for their own condition and need to think about their

behaviour. This comment is supported by another commenter who agrees and writes that the caption is not entirely true. In response to the two comments, a third person wrote that they feel 'sorry' for their opinions and rationale like these is the reason which makes rape a tolerable crime. Although, statements blaming or putting the onus on the victim abound, in most cases the contributor is presenting their point of view. None of the comments analysed had any conversation where people attacked one another or made personal remarks to a dissenting contributor. All in all, the contributors maintained civility and refrained from indulging in quarrelsome behaviour.

The role of the state, especially the police, in protecting victims of sexual violence is almost always highlighted when talking about gender violence. In their study on print media coverage of 'Delhi gang rape', Drache and Velagic (2013) found out that major publications gave priority to news items focusing on the role of Delhi police and their perceived ineptitude in handling the crime. They report that misogynist attitudes supporting rape myths are common in the police force and act as a deterrent in filing complaints, and 'inhibit the possibility for change'.

In the Facebook pages studied the ineffectiveness of the state, especially the police, in enforcing rules and regulations too was a recurring theme. Almost all of the pages, with the exception of two, condemned the behaviour of the police. On 44% of the Community pages there was discussion on the role of the police in the comments section selected for the analysis. On the other hand only 8% of the Group pages had any such discussion. Only 1 out of 5 Miscellaneous pages contained any sort of discussion or posts about the role of police. This result was arrived at by taking into consideration the discussions on the police and state's role. For instance, in one of the pages there were several postings about the alleged atrocities committed by the police towards those gathered for peaceful protests.

In one of the pages, *Gang-Rape Horror in Delhi: Girl fights for life*, an album titled "How Delhi policemen attacked gang rape protestors" depicts images of the protests site in which police is seen in a clash with the protestors. While on the same

page, a supporter of the page wrote that he “hates” Delhi police as they trouble innocent people. On a different page there are posts condemning the Delhi police force, in which a commenter states that ‘it [the police] allows rape’. Similar messages were posted about the Delhi police’s inability to contain crimes in the city and their alleged mistreatment of the protestors, who were mostly students and ordinary citizens, condemning the incident.

On yet another page, *Woman gang-raped in Delhi Bus, Battles for Life*, an image from a protest is shared in which an elderly woman is seen protecting another protestor from attack by police personnel. Such pictures do not always convey the true circumstances nevertheless the photo invited a flurry of responses from the members who accused Delhi police of being insensitive and apathetic. However, one page stood out in this regard, *Delhi Gang Rape: Spare a Thought for Our Police*, which was created after a policeman died in the clash between the police and protestors.

Legislative inadequacy was another topic that received a lot of attention: discussions on the same included the issues of inefficient rape laws of the country, and the need to overhaul the system as well as make changes in the laws themselves. Drache and Velagic (2013) state that the Delhi rape incident prompted a discussion on rape legislation, underscoring a judicial and legislative crisis in India. Pages were studied for discussion on the laws, and posts adhering to the same were quantified accordingly.

A popular theme resonating in almost every one of these pages was the comparison of Indian rape laws with stricter laws in other countries. On one of the miscellaneous pages, *Delhi Gang Rape Hit 1 like, 1 Bullet to Rapist*, a commenter bemoaned the fact that India does not prescribe capital punishment to rapists and that the country should take a lesson from those that practice it. In a similar vein, on a community page, *Delhi Gang-Rape Incident 23 December 2012*, a member posted “Government to consider death penalty in rarest of rare rape cases, what the hell? Every rape case is heinous, whats [sic] with the selective punishment Is the government just mocking us?”

On the Indian government's decision to send the victim to Singapore, a supporter wrote if the Government can send the victim there for treatment then it should also send the rapists there because of Singapore's stringent rape laws. On the other hand, going against the populist demand of capital punishment, chemical castration etc. some of the pages like, *Swift Justice in Delhi gang-rape Case* argued that Indian laws are already strict, and what is required is a change in people's mentality not the laws.

Given the nature of the incident women's safety emerged as another major topic that entails talking generally about the need for safety measures taken by women. This also includes talking about larger issues like female infanticide, the humiliating test which a rape victim undergoes and so forth. On a community page called, *Protests Against Delhi Gang Rape. We Want Justice*, a post by the page administrator read, "I am AGAINST.....Rapes...Dowry...any type of Girls Abuse..". Linking rape to a larger issue of women's status, a member posted that the root cause of increasing crime against women is the socio-cultural norms prevalent in the society. These traditional norms regard women as a commodity which results in the continuation of social evils like dowry, female infanticide, and foeticide which continue to be practiced.

Overall 14 pages contained discussions on various facets of sexual violence as well as the larger issues of society and legalities pertaining to that in India. Out of these 14 pages 36% were Community pages, 2% Open groups while none of the miscellaneous pages had any such information.

Organisational Infrastructure: This entails disseminating information on the various protests about the Delhi gang rape case occurring in the city as well as information pertaining to sexual violence in general. In terms of advocacy, the extent to which these Facebook pages promote activism, encourage involvement towards activism, promote links to offline organisations affiliated to women's programme or volunteerism within the organisation.

Habermas (1962) envisions the public sphere as an information diffusing arena where participants can share information for any cause they require, a criterion that Facebook fulfills to an extent. In regard to that, I have analysed Facebook pages in terms of the information they spread for advocacy purposes especially with respect to women's movements. This includes promoting activism, encouraging involvement in activist endeavours, maintenance of links to offline organisations, and promotion of activities or volunteerism linked to women's programmes and organisations.

Posts related to the promotion of activism were identified with respect to information on protest sites, dates and locations of activities related to protests. The results (Table 4) show that both community and group pages promoted activism extensively, but overall the community pages put in more effort by maintaining links (36%) as compared to open groups at 5%. For instance, on a community page *Gang-rape horror in Delhi: Girl Fights for Life* information on candle light vigils and protests occurring in different Indian cities were posted. For example, Mumbai: Marine Drive, 5 PM, Kolkata: City Centre, Salt Lake, 12:00 PM, Bangalore: CANDLE LIGHT MARCH at FREEDOM PARK Sunday 23rd 6 PM.

In one of the open groups, an administrator had posted information about a march giving details about its venue, date, and timings. They wrote, "we are organising a candle march at West Patel Nagar, Delhi, DATE AND DAY: 23rd DEC, SUNDAY, TIMINGS: 4:15 PM onwards." Pages were studied for similar information and quantified accordingly. Next, in order to gauge the number of pages encouraging involvement in activism keywords like 'join the protest' were identified. 41% of the community pages had appeals and postings encouraging involvement to take part in activism while 8% of group pages had any such exhortations; none of the five miscellaneous pages had any such appeal. Overall Community pages demonstrate a much greater level of participation and political awareness compared to other pages.

Table 4: Organisational Infrastructure

	All=76	C=36	OG=35	Misc.=5
Activism promoted	45	28 (77%)	16 (45%)	1 (20%)
Involvement encouraged	18	15 (41%)	3(8%)	0
Links maintained	15	13 (36%)	2 (5%)	0
Information on activities	22	15 (41%)	6 (17%)	1 (20%)

The web is characterised by hypertext and provides information in terms of links, which is crucial especially for women’s organisations, as it is a way to create community and share resources thereby creating a network for activism and lobbying (Irving, C. and English, L., 2009). 13 out of 36 community pages contained links to external information, while at 5% only 2 open groups had any sort of reliable links. These were judged according to the reliability and functionality of the external links provided. On community page *Gang-rape Horror in Delhi: Girl Fights for Life*, a link to an article suggesting ‘steps’ for change is posted.

Links to different pages, websites giving information on promotional activities, support groups or any news based sites were also counted. The underlying selection criterion was that the information should be relevant and current. ‘Promoting activities’ refers to the posts encouraging activist endeavours, like information on workshops or classes on self-defense for women. For instance, *Swift Justice in Delhi Gang-Rape Case* posted that ‘precaution is a must’ and also shared information about an educational institute conducting a self-defense camp for free with full details of the time, location and other logistics.

Deliberation: The degree to which the Facebook pages promote equal participation among members, whether they promote women’s perceptions of gendered roles in political and public life. This also includes measuring women's capacities and opportunities to participate and influence the participation amongst members.

An ‘ideal speech’ situation in any discursive platform requires discourse and deliberation amongst its participants informed by balanced and rational claims. Deliberation is central to the concept of public sphere (Habermas, 1962) and in the present context it was measured in terms of the interaction occurring between the supporters of the Facebook pages. Markers like rational critical debate, reciprocity, empathy were identified as units of analysis to measure deliberation.

Table 5: Deliberation

	All=76	C=36	OG=35	Misc.=5
Reciprocity	24	20 (55%)	2 (5%)	2 (40%)
Rational-critical debate	22	14 (38%)	5 (14%)	1 (2%)
Empathy	24	20 (55%)	2 (5%)	2 (40%)
Opinion homogeneity	26	18 (50%)	6 (17%)	2 (40%)

Rational- critical claims occurring in the conversations were identified; this category forms the kernel of deliberation and in this case was arrived at by studying interactions between the members. The conversations were analysed on the basis of logic, reasoned validity claims, and reflexivity (Dahlberg, 2004b).

Emotionally charged responses to posts were discounted, and an effort was made to include responses which present a more balanced point of view. Example of

emotionally charged posts include a discussion where one of the participants while discussing the death of the victim wrote that since the government was not able to save the women of the country, people should stop voting. Posts in which members talked to each other without resorting to emotional talks were counted. Reciprocity requires that actors respond to and listen to each other. 55% of the Community pages displayed reciprocity followed by miscellaneous pages at 40%. The open groups lagged behind with only 2 out of 35 displaying least comments.

Conversations in which members actually addressed each other instead of just posting their views were included. Only 2% of the open groups had any such conversations while miscellaneous pages came second at 40%, and the community pages with 55% came first. Empathic conversations were those in which participants tried to think on behalf of others or responded by keeping themselves in the place of another. For instance, when a photo claiming to be of the victim was published in one of the pages, many respondents felt it was wrong and raised objections.

Implications of Facebook as a public sphere in terms of women related issues: Upon reviewing Facebook pages, it was proposed that though social media pages function as a platform for ordinary citizens to share their thoughts and pursue activism they are largely underutilised for this. Facebook pages mainly functioned as an arena to express opinions or share platitudes rather than serving as a site for serious debates.

1. Resource Tool: Facebook functioned as a source of information for protestors about the protest venue, dates and other logistics pertaining to the protest activities. It also provided the general public with information about the events that unfolded at the protest site. In addition to that, it also acted as a viable platform for people to create awareness and disseminate knowledge. In this case information was spread on social issues, such as sexual violence and abuse, and various other problems pertaining to women. In order to promote awareness traditional tools of images, cartoons, or at times posts and statuses of Bollywood celebrities were used.

2. Discursive Tool: Facebook is seldom used as a discursive medium, mostly it is a place where members usually vent their own feelings or opine on issues limited to their interest and beliefs. A notable feature of almost all the pages was that there were no overt instances of sexism or a conscious effort to repress women's voices. In general, Facebook pages provided an equal opportunity for both women and men to present their views even though in comparison female voices were less than male voices. The reason for less female presence was mainly because overall men use the internet more than women in India. Facebook may not always fit into a particular public sphere framework, but they do offer a platform for women to speak out publicly which may not be always possible in a traditional setup. Social media sites may help rupture the public vs. private dichotomy defining the Indian women but to assume that the traditional, cultural and societal norms are not reinforced in the online environment would be naïve.

6.3.2 Analysing blogs for women's participation in the online public sphere:

This part of the research focuses on how Indian women achieve agency and gain a voice through blogs, thereby contributing towards a public sphere. Focussing on the discussion about women's role in the online public sphere as discussed above in this chapter, the blog articles and their respective comments section dealing with the incident were analysed.

Blogs relevant to the theme of the analysis were searched and selected according to the principles of criterion sampling. The laws of criterion sampling state that the samples should be taken on the basis of a set of pre-decided conditions set by the researcher. In this study, the blogs were selected on the basis of two criteria; firstly, the blog article must be written by an Indian woman preferably residing in India, and secondly, the blog article must concern itself with the Delhi 2012 gang rape incident.

Although, I have tried to select samples without any prejudice there may be an inadvertent personal bias towards the sample selected in some cases. The samples

cover not only the articles, but the comments section below them as that is where the discussion takes place. Most of these blogs were published in the month of December 2012 itself just after the incident, i.e.: post December 16th.

As specified in the methods chapter topical network analysis was utilised in analysing the blog content. Since topical network analysis encompasses both quantitative and qualitative methods, in this case qualitative analysis was employed to analyse posts. The blog posts were analysed using the normative conditions for the public sphere as explicated by Dahlberg (2004b). The six conditions specified by Dahlberg to measure the discourse in the online public sphere and as outlined in chapter three are: autonomy; sincerity; reflexivity; discursive inclusion and equality; reasoned critique of problematic validity claims and ideal role taking.

Autonomy: It is the first criterion specified by Dahlberg (2001b) in his analysis of an online public sphere and refers to space independent of the state or commercial control. He believes that state censorship has been targeted by the proponents of online civil liberty group, but it is the commercialisation and privatisation forces that are difficult to resist (2001b). He argues that the increased commercialisation is threatening the democratic character of the internet which can lead to a marginalisation of the online public discourses. Alternatively, it can be incorporated within more privatised and individualised forms of interaction like online commerce, entertainment and so forth. He says that despite the increasing commercialisation, there still are spaces that are independent of these forces in the form of web-forums, web-publishing, e-mails etc. through which people manage to take part in discussion freely.

For example, in his study of Minnesota E-Democracy project Dahlberg (2001b) found it to be independent of state and economic interests and an example of semi-autonomous public discourse space. For any space to be truly autonomous it has to be free of commercial advertising or promotions. It is an example of a space that utilises the commercial and state controlled infrastructure and technologies of the internet and yet is able to secure significant independence.

With respect to this definition, all eleven of the blogs studied in this research appear to be autonomous. There was no explicit indication of the blogs being sponsored by any corporate or media house fulfilling the assumption of public sphere as an autonomous entity. In all the blogs that were analysed, the blog owner had described themselves and explicitly stated that opinions presented in the blogs are their own personal worldview. The creator of *The Life and Times of an Indian Homemaker* wrote in the ‘about me’ section of the blog,

I blog about the everyday life of an urban Indian homemaker and her reactions to what’s happening in the world around her. So I blog against violence and intolerance, and against our use of tradition, culture and religion to justify anything that common sense might refuse to accept; I write against gender bias, (a lot of this), and our biases against girl children even in educated families; against all stifling stereotypes (*The Life and Times of an Indian Homemaker*, 2009).

Another blogger from *Shades for Dusky Women* wrote,

“it (the blog) has included various facets of my life and now all-together has a different meaning to it..... This blog will contain posts on whatever than [sic] impresses and intrigues me, makes me think and whatever that makes me crazy.”

Similar expressions of independence were found on all of the blogs where the authors made it clear that the blog was an outlet of their personal views and not accountable to any third party. Thus, all of the blogs analysed for the present study fulfilled the requirement of autonomy as mentioned by Dahlberg (2004a).

Reasoned critique of problematic validity claims: This is the second criterion mentioned by Dahlberg (2004a; 2001b) and involves systematically and rationally engaging in a reciprocal critique of normative problematic validity claims.

In the context of the Minnesota E-Democracy project, Dahlberg (2001b) observed that it aimed to build an online forum where reasoned claims relating to the concerns of those living in Minnesota were put forward, and a variety of topics are discussed reflecting critical thought processes. In doing so, care is taken that a particular dialogic structure is sought and critically assessed by others which in turn lead to a well-formulated discussion.

The comments section of the blogs studied did not contain discussions on a wide variety of topics, the reason being that most blog articles were focused on a particular subject of rape. As a result, conversation ensuing out of them dealt with issue of rape though discussions at times developed from rape to other issues of sexual violence faced by women.

Problematizing the measurement of rational discussion, Graham (2009) argues that it is difficult to identify ‘critical’ in a rational-critical debate. He adds that researchers usually consider those postings that supply arguments for the validity of a particular position which the poster takes. This does not gauge the critical reflection in that post directly as a discussion thread could have ‘a high level of ‘validate’ postings with a very low level of critical reflection’ (p.23). He adds that even in cases where there is a high level of disagreement assessing posts of a similar nature would be inadequate as disagreement is not always accompanied by reflection. While analysing rational-critical posts in the comment section of the blogs effort were made to include posts with a balance of justification for a particular view along with a critical reflection accompanying that justification.

In this study, there were only 3 blogs having posts that exemplified both these traits to an extent. For example in the blog *The Life and Times of an Indian Homemaker* (2013) a person had mentioned how she has a paranoia about her daughter’s safety in India especially after reading about the gang rape incident. So much so that she is contemplating a move abroad and does not want to send her daughter out. The comment generated a widespread reaction where different commenters shared their experiences and justified their views regarding the situation.

For instance, one person wrote that the mother should teach her daughter about her own body and make her understand about the ‘appropriate’ and inappropriate’ touch. They also believed that sex should not be made a taboo topic. They reasoned that since sex education is not a part of the school curriculum in India, so the mother must take that task upon herself and teach her daughter.

Another person wrote that though the fear of the mother is understandable but her paranoia can be dangerous to her child. The mother should accept the fact that she cannot monitor her child’s environment all the time. She should realise that though these incidents occur and are reported in the media, but there are ‘plenty of women living free and happy life in India’. Thus, instead of restricting her daughter’s freedom she should learn to find a balance between her own fear and the reality. These discussions are not random ramblings and exhibit critical reflections and justifications of what is being said.

Dahlberg (2004a) adds that a forceful assertion of statements and views are discouraged, and participants should be open to critique. The assertions put forth should be couched in reason and also strive to aim to address a universal audience. This implies that instead of being parochial or contextualised they should be more encompassing of the broader vision. Since, all the blogs studied are personal in nature and mostly personal musings of the individuals it is not always expected from them to hold generalise discussions aimed towards a universal audience. In the blog *The Life and Times of an Indian Homemaker* (TLTIH) the author wrote about the implications of rape and the stigmatisation of the victim in the Indian society. In the comments section, a person wrote that,

I know I sound crude and cruel, and it is contrary to my feminist beliefs, but your neighbours deserve to have rape happen to somebody they love. That’s the only way to make them comprehend the barbarity of the Delhi rape (TLTIH, 2012).

The statement is strongly contested by several other commenters who believe it is a flawed way of thinking. One of the respondents to the comment wrote that he is a corporate lawyer in a firm and has seen several instances of unfair practices in his own office. He adds that the point of his analogy is, that for any sensitive person it is difficult to come to terms with the fact that many people are apathetic and usually have reasons to be so which are often compelling and valid enough according to them, to be so. He feels sorry for the writer of the comment and believes that the answer to such ‘morally reprehensible act’ is not anger but compassion. He points out, that ‘it is not anger that will destroy rape. It is the compassion that all humans must feel towards another which will render it unacceptable’ (TLTIH, 2013).

The comments sections of only three blogs resonated with such claims where respondents contested each other in a respectful way and were mindful of others’ perspective and appreciative of differing viewpoints. The quality of discussion in the comments section of the blogs was much more developed and nuanced compared to Facebook discussions which were usually one-sided and opinionated.

Reflexivity: This is the third criterion, according to which participating actors should not be rigid in their views. They should, however be open to questions and be welcoming to alter their own views in the face of a more reasoned and balanced claims. In the context of Minnesota E-Democracy project, Dahlberg (2001b) observed that reflexivity was fostered both by the forum management and participating actors. Participants were encouraged to consider their claims and take time before posting anything on the forum. This consideration on the part of the participants led to a rethink of their position and made them understand each other better.

Dahlberg (2004a) also believes that reflexivity could be attained only after achieving a certain level of ‘communicative competence’. Graham (2009) argues that reflexivity is an elusive concept which measures ‘an internal process which takes place over time’. However, he says that it is an essential requisite to reach a mutual agreement and thus should not be overlooked. Dahlberg (2004a) observed that reflexivity was obtained not just as a result of joint effort by the management and the

participants themselves but also by the rules and guidelines of the forum. Out of the total blogs studied 3 blogs had instances where participants agreed or showed openness towards others' viewpoints.

In this regard, it can be said of blogs that being an outlet for personal musings they are generally expected to be idiosyncratic and individualistic accounts of various topics. Unlike a discussion forum, the blogs studied were operated by a single individual and does not always have strict guidelines that the members are expected to follow. Blogs are more informal and expect their participants to adhere to the basic rules of language instead of hoping to follow a particular method. Participating actors did not always rethink their positions in the light of another view but they were not always rigid either.

In the blog, *Lassi with Lavinia*, the author wrote on the apparent rape crisis in India linking the various incidents of sexual harassments to Indian cinema, specifically Bollywood. In response to the article a reader wrote that blaming Bollywood for the moral bankruptcy of Indian society is an unfair generalisation. She added that Bollywood “has a reputation for always challenging social mores” citing the names of a few Bollywood movies which according to her broke the conventional social mores inherent in the Indian society. The writer of the blog responded back by saying that the crimes in India have escalated rapidly in the past few years. The author also agreed that it would be unfair to blame only Bollywood for the attitudes towards women but she thought it was fair to talk about some of the movies and create awareness. She believed that Bollywood predominantly have a theme of harassment which necessitates a discussion (*Lassi with Lavinia*, 2013).

In another blog *The Life and Times of an Indian Homemaker*, participants discussed the status of woman in India, many wrote how they do not want to live in India and are planning a move abroad. They wrote that they feel scared for not only themselves but also for their family, children as the issue no longer is only about women. In response to these statements several respondents wrote how people were getting hyper paranoid, a commenter wrote that, ‘I agree as a mother it’s important

not to give in to hyper-paranoia. Maybe it's the hardest part. Maybe hyper-paranoia is the beginning of clipping the wings of your child, limiting her independence'. Furthermore, they also wrote that abuse can happen anywhere and leaving a place is not the solution. To which several respondents agreed and said that yes 'institutionalized sexism and racism [exists] in the US as well just as there is everywhere in the world. And they would live in India because they want to or they do not want to and not because 'of fear, then those spreading the fear have won...'. Overall only a few blogs had instances of conversation where the participants showed a willingness to accept differing views.

Ideal role taking: In a public sphere this implies to not only taking into account differing perspectives and being appreciative of other views but also showing empathy towards opposing worldviews. Dahlberg (2004a) through the example of Minnesota project demonstrates that ideal role taking achieved was a result of mutual respect fostered by the management and participants. He adds that while explicit abuse can be blocked by forum moderators, but it is only self- management that is responsible for development of respectful behaviour.

While the blogs studied did not have any overt instance of participants taking an interest in encouraging each other's views there were examples when they tried to take note of a differing view. In the comments section of the blog, *TLTIH* a commenter wrote that they feel those who rape deserve to have someone rape their loved ones. In response to this statement a respondent wrote that, "I can certainly see where biwo's statement comes from, and I can empathize with her (and you), but I find the ultimate sentiment expressed therein disagreeable, repugnant and unacceptable all the same" (TLTIH, 2012).

Echoing similar sentiments another participants replies, "I understand – to an extent – your anger, but I'd personally take people not understanding over people (and their relatives) being raped any day of the week. It's not even a contest to me" (TLTIH, 2012). This example illustrates that participating actors fulfilled the demands

of ideal role taking and tried to think of others' views as well. Admittedly, the examples illustrating the criterion of ideal role taking were very few.

Dahlberg (2004a) also argues that an ideal role taking can be achieved by discussing 'real' problems faced by people sharing a particular physical, cultural, and social reality. In the case of the Minnesota E-Democracy project it was a 'geographically bounded political jurisdiction'. These participants discussed issues that are common to all as this helps in encouraging meaningful and sustained discussions as well as active listening. In this case civic groups joined the forums and publicised their activities, thereby gaining the attention of politicians and the media as well. Unlike specific forums or Facebook pages which are dedicated to specific issues or agendas blogs, especially opinion blogs are more varied in their content.

The blogs studied in the present research were individually operated blogs and contained topics on different themes. Since, the focus was Delhi rape all the blog articles covered that issue, while it may not be possible to know if the participating members shared a similar reality. But the articles from the selected lot were specifically dedicated to the Delhi gang rape incident, and it can be deduced that most participants joining the discussion were interested in the issue. Four blogs had instances where participants tried to think about others' views.

Sincerity: It is the fifth criterion for a public sphere, which implies that participants should make their intention clear in regard to the topic that is being discussed. It is expected of participants to be honest and open in demeanour by trying to adopt a sincere effort to make known all information in terms of their intention, thoughts, needs in any given claim under consideration.

It would be difficult to measure sincerity in online forums, especially when the participants may be anonymous contributors. In the case of the Minnesota E-Democracy project, a 'signing post' rule is used, where every member who posts a message is expected to post their full name, email address, and the name of the city.

Though, many a times participants do not comply, once reminded they are generally compliant. Anonymous postings are occasional and participants do tend to use pseudonyms. Dahlberg (2004a) cites an example where a participant posted provocative messages which prompted other members to challenge him to verify his identity. This is not always true of blogs as in many cases anyone is allowed to comment and it is not necessary to register.

In the blogs studied the writers did not expect members to provide full details about themselves. In many cases blog writers do not enforce any strict policy in the first place as they want to increase their readership and members. In one of the blogs it is mentioned that anonymous posts are welcome but interestingly that also came with a stipulated disclaimer of sorts that “this is a personal blog, and my posts are my opinions, I can only write what I believe in, although your suggestions are welcome, please understand that I cannot write something I am not convinced about, so maybe sometimes we will just have to agree to disagree” (TLTIH, 2013). But such disclaimer was explicitly posted in only one of the blogs studied.

Sincerity also extends to the message posted and the source used in that particular post. Graham (2009) argues that sincerity will always be a difficult condition to operationalise and it is only the ‘perceived sincerity’ that can be gauged. He adds that the perceived sincerity can be gauged by examining the examples where participants question or challenge the claim of other participants in combination with a questionnaire or interview. It is hard to judge sincerity in online posts, but efforts were made to include posts where participants seemed to make an effort to make known their information and interests.

For instance, in the blog, *The Shooting Star*, the author wrote that labeling Delhi as an unsafe city for women is misleading and a prejudiced assumption. The author also gave tips to women on how to protect themselves from harassment. She mentioned the need to carry pepper spray and other safety measures. In response to the article someone wrote, “To be honest Delhi is not safe at all, in fact it never had been safe for women. Its [sic] a rough city with too many vultures waiting round the

corner. Sorry if I feel that way. Thanks for the tips” (*The Shooting Star*, 2013). The author responded to the comment and said that she believes every city has their share of safe and unsafe places and the onus falls on women to some extent to protect themselves. She added, “my point is that every city has its unsafe places and vultures. We need to start equipping ourselves to stay safe rather than playing victim, pointing blame, and preaching” (*The Shooting Star*, 2013).

In another blog article on the Delhi rape a commentator on *Shail’s Nest* wrote, “I am speechless other than I wish I was born not a man...it is shameful to be a man in our nation” (2012). Another blogger from the blog *Beauty with brains* (2012) wrote a poem expressing her anguish on the incident. In a response to the poem a respondent wrote that “this poem made me cry....my body is numb” (*Shail’s Nest*, 2012). These examples may not be an outright expression of sincerity but they do illustrate that both authors and contributors appeared forthcoming and honest in terms of their intention about the topics discussed. As mentioned before sincerity is a difficult criterion to measure especially in online environment where there is an absence of other cues like gesture, facial expressions etc.

Discursive inclusion and equality: This is the sixth and the last condition outlined by Dahlberg (2004b) and alludes to the belief that every actor in a space purporting to be a public sphere should get an equal opportunity to voice their notions and beliefs. In an online forum it also signifies that no particular member can monopolise the conversation. In the Minnesota democracy project, there was a 'two-message-per-day' rule enforced. This rule was instituted because of the early experiences in the forum where some posters were more prolific and dominated the list as a result of which the not so active voices were drowned.

In none of the blogs analysed there were any rules restricting the number of post any participant could contribute. It was apparent that a few people posted more as some of the user names appeared more frequently on the comments section. Though, overall there was no domination by any particular commenter.

Discursive equality also includes that anyone can participate and there should not be any inequalities stemming from social and cultural reasons. This can also include limitations posed by inequalities from outside of discourse, such as when a certain level of material wealth or education is required to take part in proceedings (Dahlberg, 2004a).

In the case of the blogs studied no particular member dominated the discourse, but there as some of the blog owners prefer to moderate comments. About the need to moderate comments the owner of *The Delhi Fashion Blogger* wrote to a commenter;

Comments come after approval because some people start and finish a sentence with bc and mc (abusive language). I am not a fascist!! I am an educated girl born and raised in Delhi who will not take bullshit given to another woman or to me about how we should live our life to "prevent" being raped (The Delhi Fashion Blogger).

Although, readers can question or introduce any issue they want many blogs mention that inappropriate comments will be removed. In general, everyone is free to introduce any topic they wish or present their opinion. According to the bloggers themselves, blogs provide a platform through which they can share their personal experiences and opinions. However, this freedom is not always accorded to others in the comments section, where the discussion is moderated by the bloggers. There is usually an explicit warning that offensive comments will be deleted, and that, what constitutes as offensive is upon the discretion of the blog owner.

Overall, all the blogs are public and can be accessed by anyone on the internet and there is no domination by any particular member, but this could also be due to few readers or members posting. In addition to that inequalities present outside of the discourse has been discussed in the previous chapters and it is acknowledged that there are several factors that disable people from accessing the internet in the first place.

Table 6: Blog Analysis

Autonomy	Reasoned critique of problematic validity claims	Reflexivity	Ideal role taking	Sincerity	Discursive inclusion and equality
100%	3/11	3/11	4/11	4/11	100%

Implications of blog as an online public sphere: First thing that was noted during the analysis of the blog was that the number of female Indian bloggers commenting on the issues of Delhi rape was miniscule. Admittedly, this could be due to the small number of Indian female bloggers as well as the way the result was arrived which was through Google search.

Yet it was noticed that the overall percentage of female bloggers writing on the Indian rape case were small. It was also observed that none of the blogs studied, discussed the claims or participated in a discussion on other blogs. In this respect they did not really formed the topical network as established by Highfield (2013).

The blogs did not fulfill the criteria of organisational infrastructure and only partially accomplished the criteria of communicative infrastructure and deliberation. None of the blogs provided any information on any protest or activity regarding the Delhi gang rape protests thus failing to satisfy the condition of an organisational infrastructure. By providing a space to exchange ideas the blogs fulfilled the role of a communicative infrastructure albeit partially. None of the blogs were commercialised or sponsored by any venture, but most of them had a moderation policy in force whereby comments were moderated before getting posting or at times could be removed at the discretion of the moderator. By acting as a communicative platform it by extension, also entails deliberation.

Poell (2009) in his analysis of blogs found that at first sight they are seen fit to offer an alternative public sphere as they seem to propose a platform where individuals can discuss public issues in their own circle. Poell also notes that it is this characteristic of blog that allows specific groups to discuss their chosen topic but also delimits it at the same time. He argues that it imparts a hierarchal character to blogs where the discussion is often characterised by participants conforming to blog owner's opinions.

This is true of the blogs examined for this study as well, as in most of the blogs there was a sense of homogeneity with participants concurring with one another too often which is often not the case in online spaces with large number of members. Though, unlike Facebook pages the comments on blogs were more serious and constructive, and there were not many instances of trolling or flaming. The reasons for which could be that the blogs have fewer readers making comments that are not only easier to manage, but also can be moderated more closely. Perhaps this could also be the reason for a greater participation from female readers. Though, it should be noted that in the study the gender of the participants was constructed through counting the female-sounding names. Keeping this distinction in mind it was concluded that overall women's participation was strong on the blogosphere.

The most noticeable factor to be drawn from the analysis of blogs is that they are a more egalitarian and personalised medium as compared to other social media. Also, blogs provide women a better and greater opportunity to speak. In doing so they are illustrative of the contribution of women in the online public sphere.

Blogs may not fit into the category of the traditional public sphere conceptualisation. As often they do not have a large readership and thus, have relatively fewer people commenting on them. However, on their own blogs act as an alternative public sphere as they provide a platform for individuals to exchange their ideas or even just publish their thoughts. In this case it was noted that the blogs studied may not always fit into Dahlberg's (2001b) criterion and offer discursive examples similar to the Minnesota democracy project or any other organised online

forum. But blogs empower individuals with voice. The comments section of the blogs analysed may be lacking the traditional criteria, but the blog articles themselves were lively, presenting strong and highly individualised views constructed in a space outside of the traditional private realm.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSION

7.1 Introduction

The present study was conducted to understand the role of social media platforms such as Facebook and blogs, in effectively facilitating women's participation in the online public sphere. This research contributes to the existing knowledge of social media in India and its role in creating an online public sphere, a topic that is still under researched. Furthermore, by including the discourse on the internet this study also enriches the understanding of the Indian public sphere in general. During the course of the research, I reviewed the literature of the public sphere, and drew a historiography of the Indian public sphere. Next, I established the premise of the online public sphere with regards to social media and supplemented it with the example of the 'India Against Corruption' movement.

India Against Corruption (IAC) is one of the first social movements in India that brought social media to the forefront. By employing the example of the IAC movement, I aimed to not only strengthen the case for the online public sphere in India but was also able to demonstrate how that sphere is represented by and confined to the middle and upper classes. Gendered evaluation of the online public sphere also showed that women's voices inhabiting the online sphere are limited to a certain class and region. In the next part of the study, I conducted a case study on the 'Delhi gang rape' incident of 2012. This method aided me in examining women's voice and agency, post 16th December 2012. By applying Dahlberg's (2004a) normative model of the public sphere to analyse the online discourses specifically on blogs, I explored the role of social media in facilitating women's participation. Additionally, I also pointed out the perceived challenges in Dahlberg's (2004a) conditions for a public sphere.

7.2 Research Findings: A Reflection

Indians are increasingly adopting the social media to engage in political processes, promote activism, and mobilise opinion. The research reported here is a small case study and a snap shot of how some blogs and Facebook pages are being used by women. However, this particular study is one of the few in the area, and the findings suggest that social media are catching up gradually and becoming a significant communicative tool in India. During the course of this project, it was steadily becoming clearer that the social media is forming an integral part of the public sphere. While the popularity of the social media is on the rise, there is no singular way of identifying absolute numbers of men and women participating on these platforms. The examination of the blogs and the Facebook pages for this research suggests a number of issues regarding the ways women in particular might be using social media. In this chapter, I will now review these points in light of my earlier discussion about the role of social media.

Online public sphere a niche space for women:

Reports show that women in India may be joining the internet in large numbers, but the development of an online public sphere is largely shaped by middle class educated women residing in urban India (Intel, 2013). Due to various societal conventions, Indian women often remain bereft of the internet technologies. This is true not only in the cases of conservative states but also in states that have a reputation for high gender equality (Intel, 2013). The online public sphere is not particularly inclusive; a large percentage of women in India accessing the internet belong to a particular class. In this study my observations support these findings. For example, all the blogs analysed were created by women residing in cities.

Facebook facilitating public sphere but a challenge to gain gender specific information:

Secondly, the research also looked into how there was a shift in the usage of Facebook in particular by Indian women post ‘Delhi gang rape’ in 2012. There were several Facebook pages dedicated to the incident which acted as a source of mobilisation in bringing together people for activist purpose. These pages were

identified as offering a platform for women to voice their opinions. In identifying women's voices my analysis pointed out that in reality there are fairly limited ways to verify the gender on Facebook pages and even to know the identity of the owner/administrator of the pages. The administrators of any page are visible only if the page owner has featured them. In cases where the contact information about the owners is not made public then it can be known only by sending a message to them.

However, the scope of the study did not allow for interviewing each administrator of every page owing to time constraint and other logistics. Moreover, the number of female participants on a page can be determined only by individually counting the profiles of those identifying themselves as women in each page. This task is deemed not only unfeasible but there can be other issues of veracity and prevalence of fake profiles which are impossible to know. By analysing each page it was noticed that overall men participated more than women but this could be due to the fact that more men are online than women.

Facebook became a source for networking, a place where ordinary citizens could connect with other individuals for a common goal. The present study concentrated on cases and instances concerning with the anger against increasing rapes and lack of safety for women. Individual pages were created to mobilise support; event pages were employed to disseminate information on protests; groups were created to discuss the issues relating to sexual violence as well as general issues pertaining to women.

In the observations reported here, it does appear that Facebook has at least partially fulfilled all three criteria for a public sphere by acting as an organisational infrastructure, communicative infrastructure and by providing a space for deliberation. However, as mentioned previously Facebook pages are not completely autonomous and are subject to advertising, editorial control, and surveillance. Since, it was not feasible to single out female participants on Facebook pages and analyse their activities per se, I was unable to conclude that Dahlberg's (2004a) conditions for a normative sphere applies to the way Facebook was used by the participants. It was

also observed that even though Facebook provides a platform to engage in discussions not many choose to do so. Even when issues are discussed it fails to reach a complexity required for a serious conversation and mostly remains one-sided with participating actors writing their opinions and not always indulging in critical discussion. Overall, the limitations of the Facebook study reported here warrant further analysis, maybe a different social media platform could be used which might be more effective to assess efficacy in facilitating women's participation.

On the other hand, blogs were easier to study especially when looking for a particular topic of discussion. They make a better platform for people to participate and present their views. The blog samples studied for this research contained much more instances of meaningful conversation with participating actors often responding and engaging in a healthy discussion. The difference in participatory pattern in blogs and Facebook may be because of the size of members. On social networking sites like Facebook, at times, hundreds of people take part in a conversation at once. This results in a disjointed conversation as it is only the most recent comments that are visible. Consequently, older comments get hidden underneath the newer ones thus making it difficult for a participating actor to search and answer old comments. In comparison blogs often have a limited audience, thus, any conversation ensuing out of them is easier to manage.

Blogs limited in scope but a viable site for deliberation:

In my observation, the samples that I studied suggest that blogs do not always fulfil the role of organisational or communicative infrastructure. This is due to the fact that not all blogs have a vast readership with some having less than a dozen readers. Unlike social networking sites like Facebook which are commercialised and attract large participation, blogs usually see relatively less participation and can be created by anyone with an internet connection. Blogs, which on one hand, provide a valuable site for deliberation, however, fail to act as a space for mobilising support and are not always a viable place to disseminate information or promote causes. Though it was observed that the conversations on many blogs are more personal, nuanced, and balanced mainly because they usually have a set of dedicated readers. This makes

blog a more feasible space for rational-critical conversation unlike popular networking sites in which thousands of people hold conversations simultaneously which in turn can not only be fragmented and emotionally charged but also difficult to follow. As demonstrated in the present study, while Facebook pages on the 2012 'Delhi gang rape' incident contained more instances of posts and comments with sentimental overtones. Blogs, on the contrary, had relatively more balanced conversations where even if someone did post emotionally charged comments they were quickly checked by others.

Lack of content on sexual violence on blogs as well as Facebook:

The study on blogs found that there are a significant number of blogs owned by women in India focusing on topics of beauty, health, relationships, and travel, but there is a marked absence of blogs or even blog articles related to issues on sexual violence.

While my study identified that there is a lack of blogs on issues of sexual violence, it is understood that there could be shortcomings in the research method itself. All the blogs analysed for this research were discovered through the Google search engine as it is one of the most employed search engine in India. Google personalises the search result of each individual (Google, 2009) regardless of their preference or if they have made use of the personalise settings. Thus, the results are not same for everyone despite using the same key words. On the other hand everyone using the search engine would face a similar issue.

Issue of Measuring sincerity and the need to revise the conception of online public sphere:

Sincerity for Dahlberg (2004a) is one of the requisites for a thriving public sphere. Upon analysing the blogs the study found that there were instances where participants indulge in seemingly sincere conversation, however limitations regarding sincerity were noticed as well. Sincerity is a subjective category and can be difficult to measure. Dahlberg (2001b) studies the Minnesota democracy project, which is an

example of an advanced online public sphere where participants' activities are closely monitored, as opposed to blogs which were analysed for this research. Although, it is difficult to judge a trait like sincerity online, I was able to locate examples of the posts exhibiting sincerity. Graham (2009) rightly points out that sincerity will always be a difficult criterion to measure because of the anonymous nature of online forums. Even when the user is not anonymous it would still be challenging to know their intentions or even identity because verifying the authenticity of an online account can be a difficult task.

Dahlberg's (2004a) conditions for the online public sphere are quite subjective in nature which increases the margin of error when applied in informal spaces. Dahlberg (2004a; 2001b) himself applied his conditions on an online forum which was highly regulated with strict policies which is not always true of online forums especially embedded in the web 2.0 platforms. While analysing a discourse online, the factors which make it difficult to measure subjective conditions are; the ease of anonymity which the online forums accord coupled with a lack of social and behavioural cues. The methodological shortcomings to analyse discourse occurring in the online public sphere warrants a more exhaustive and multiple method approach.

Blogs empowering women:

The relationship of women with the internet is marked with ambiguities; the Google (2013) study of women online in India found that there are approximately 60 million women online. On the other hand another study by Intel (2013) found that one in five women in India consider the internet to be immoral and thus refrain from using it. While there is a section of women online in India, who are likely to use the internet to search for a job and other activities, there is also a large percentage that have never accessed the internet. In a society where social and cultural norms keep a large number of women at the margin of public spheres the fact that there are women who are ready to speak about issues on a public platform is noteworthy in itself.

Women who choose to speak online often face harassment and bullying. Two cases stand out in this regard: a prominent female journalist said that she stopped

posting personal views including personal posts about her teenage daughter, on her Twitter account after being routinely threatened with gang rape and sexual abuse. In an interview she was quoted as saying that "targeting me for my journalism is fine. But when it is sexist and foul-mouthed abuse which insults my gender identity I get incredibly angry. In the beginning I used to retaliate, but that would lead to more abuse" (Arya, 2013).

In another instance a well-known Delhi-based women's activist had to face vicious attack on an online chat on violence against women conducted by one of the leading Indian news websites. She had to leave the chat room after receiving a number of abusive comments (Arya, 2013). These incidents indicate that the harassers specifically attack the victim's gender and sexuality and are not just some random case of disgruntled people presenting their views. The internet then evidently becomes a contested space for women wanting to participate in it.

Both the cases provide examples of women who are not only highly educated, but also well-known and yet at times face personal threats and feel unsafe. If there is a huge vulnerability amongst women who are public figures and exert some amount of power one can only imagine the threat an average woman who is online faces. The threat can not only be potentially enormous but also extremely intimidating, especially since the cyber-harassment laws in India are inadequate.

Padte and Shora, (2013b) said that the research shows that it is not always high profile women who are subject to online abuse. In fact a person who is not a public face is subjected to more online abuse despite having few readers or followers mainly because they do not have as much online support as their well-known counterparts. Thus, in such a scenario for a woman to be online and make herself visible in the public sphere by writing, commenting and speaking in general is not only brave but can be immensely empowering as well. In this case the blogs acted as an important tool through which several women chose to make their thoughts and themselves visible. Making a case for the act of public expression, Stavrositu and

Sundar (2012) argue that the very act of making their self-expression public can instill a sense of empowerment in the bloggers.

In their study on Arab women's presence in the public sphere, Newsom and Lengel (2012a) maintain that the power in these spaces may not always be free from patriarchy but they are not wholly patriarchal either. They say that these spaces become a sort of contested place which can potentially impact the hegemonic structures albeit partially. For many Indian women who may not always get to be in an environment conducive to participating in the mainstream public spheres, the internet can then provide an alternative space.

Online spaces may not always be gender-neutral or free from the conventional norms of the offline world. Yet it is easier to negotiate these spaces because of the relatively relaxing conditions as opposed to those prevalent in the offline environment. For example, journalist Nisha Susan's rather unconventional 'pink chaddi' campaign received tremendous support online from women in India which may not have been possible otherwise. Breaking conventional norms online are easier, as the internet imparts a sense of anonymity which is not usually possible offline. Noticeably, in this study all the women had identified themselves in their blogs and did not let their identity come in the way of their content.

7.3 Conclusion

The present study is focused on women's participation in the online public sphere and is limited to Facebook and blogs, especially in the context of a particular incident. Hence, the results cannot be applied to draw broad conclusions. Furthermore, the problem of a glaring lack of literature on the online public sphere in India came out during the course of the research. There is a severe dearth of studies on the internet practices of Indians in general and women in particular.

Although, studies abound on ICTs effects in women's empowerment and the gender and digital divide in India. There are very few of them focusing on the online

activities of women in India especially in regard to their role in the online public sphere. The gap between haves and have not in terms of ICTs too has received a lot of attention but over the years there has been an increase in the diffusion of the internet which begs more questions on the internet practices of Indian people.

The increasing internet penetration has also given rise to a thriving online public sphere offering a previously disengaged group a means to participate and present their voice. This research tries to be inclusive and does not negate the realities of gender, digital, social, and economic inequality prevalent in the Indian society. It realises that the empowerment and development of any kind does not hinge solely on ICTs but relies on a host of material and cultural artifacts. Furthermore, it is argued that while online spaces offer a platform where traditional gender roles can be ruptured to an extent but these spaces are niche and is represented just by a certain class in India. Though it is observed that at present online spaces predominantly reflect the voices of urban women from middle and upper-middle classes the situation is going to change soon as the internet is gaining popularity even in small towns mainly due to the advent of the mobile internet.

The online public sphere in India is in flux because the number of the internet users including women is on the rise as well as the users from smaller towns. This in the future has the potential to impart a more diverse and inclusive character to it. For now, it is important to note that the presence of women's voices online in itself is a sign of change and empowerment especially considering the historical isolation of women and more of those belonging to minority communities from public spheres in India.

It would not be entirely misplaced to utilise Newsom and Lengel's (2012a) argument in the context of Indian women who posit that the social media for the marginalised voices are a primary way through which they can gain support. Drawing from Newsom and Lengel's (2012a) study on Arab women it can be argued that for Indian women, online spaces are a site of 'contained empowerment'. These spaces are not always free from hegemonic power structures especially in the face of the rising

online abuse and harassment. Yet by offering a platform where traditional rules can be suspended albeit briefly, the online spaces give women an opportunity to build identities and instill a sense of agency.

The research on the online public sphere in India with respect to women and other marginal sections of society is limited and needs to be explored from multi-dimensional perspectives. This study is only a small pilot sample and results cannot be more widely interpreted. However, the intent was to select cases to study for the purpose of examining the debates in the literature and pointing to the issues and tensions that may need wider research by larger studies in the future.

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