

Off limits: The role of news and social media in developing sexual assault and harassment as a campaign issue during the Indian parliamentary elections of 2019

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Abstract

In September 2018, the second wave of #Metooindia resumed in India, opening up conversations on sexual assault. Surprisingly, this did not lead to the inclusion of sexual assault as a key campaign issue in the Indian parliamentary elections in early 2019. This study investigates the underlying role of news media and social media in building an anti-sexual assault agenda in the 2019 Indian Lok Sabha election campaign. It builds on past literature on rational choice decision-making theory, social media activism and rape as a political issue in campaigns. This mixed method study includes the analysis of political manifestos and Facebook posts during the campaign, news articles published in the two most circulated English newspapers in India and interviews with political journalists. The restrained mainstream media coverage of sexual assault and pan-Indian social media platforms helped to limit the issue from becoming a part of the campaign during the elections.

Keywords

India, Lok Sabha elections 2019, #MetooIndia, sexual violence

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Introduction

In October 2017, the #MeToo movement began garnering global attention on social media platforms after numerous women came forward alleging sexual abuse, harassment and rape by Harvey Weinstein. What began as a movement against Hollywood and the Hollywood entertainment mogul soon became a rallying cry for women across the globe, all of whom cited the horrors of sexual abuse and harassment at the workplace (Ohlheiser, 2019). However, it is essential to note that the movement was initiated in 2006 by Tarana Burke and only became part of the social media conversations in 2017 (Ohlheiser, 2019). This movement also made inroads in India, resulting in #MeTooIndia. India is the biggest democracy in the world and is notorious for the 2012 Delhi gang rape of Jyoti Singh Pandey/Nirbhaya and other incidents of sexual violence against women (Bhatnagar et al., 2019). Sexual assault and violence have been discussed and received prominence in the recent past owing to social media platforms, and this has culminated in more extensive social and political campaigns, especially during the US elections (Seitz-Waltz, 2018). In 2018, during the US mid-term elections, #MeToo and issues of sexual assault and violence became a part of the mainstream political campaign, including candidates sharing their personal experiences and prospective policy outcomes (Seitz-Wald, 2018). Between September and October 2018, there was a resurgence of #MeTooIndia and #MeToo in India, also known as the resurgence of Indian MeToo (Gajjala, 2018). The most recent wave of #MeToo in India resulted in a social media movement specifically focusing on the media and entertainment industries of Mumbai, also known as Bollywood, and the sexual harassment and predatory behaviours within it (Roy, 2019). According to Pain (2021), a total of over 35,000 tweets were shared on #MeToo and #MeTooIndia; based on Facebook Crowdtangle data, 9,98,7583 interactions and 60,646 posts were published or originated from India on Facebook in the 6 months between 1 September 2018 and 31 March 2019. A few months later, between March 2019 and May 2019, India had its parliamentary elections,¹ its biggest democratic elections, where many anticipated that #MeTooIndia, #MeToo and sexual assault and violence against women would be key campaign issues. Surprisingly, the #MeTooIndia and #MeToo conversations did not lead to the inclusion of sexual assault and rape as a key campaign issue, unlike in the 2014 elections. There was no mention of the #MeToo movement and #MeTooIndia during the campaign (Tewari, 2019) or in the crowdsourced election manifestos of the two leading national political parties² in India, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)³ and the Indian National Congress (INC).⁴ I decided to focus on the BJP and INC as they are, respectively, the party in power and its main opposition since 2014.

Journalism scholars, observers and journalists have suggested that 2014 was the first social media election in India (Guha, 2015a). Following from this, 2019 witnessed a more mature social media campaign by political parties in India, which began with at least two major national political parties crowdsourcing their manifestos (Choudhury, 2019; Tewari, 2019). This crowdsourcing coincided with the re-emergence of #MeTooIndia in 2018, which led to the establishment of a government working group to investigate sexual harassment and assault at the workplace in India. However, the government dismantled the working group, and the movement failed to find space during the election campaign of the most populous country in the world (Banerji, 2018). The failure

of the #MetooIndia movement in this regard in the Indian elections is intriguing for two reasons. First, #Metooindia reached momentum in the preceding months from September to December 2018 in India, coinciding with the campaigning and crowdsourcing. Second, in the previous parliamentary elections of 2014, the Indian political parties and the press had focused on the infamous Delhi gang rape of Jyoti Singh in 2012 in both their campaigns and their manifestos. Considering that the #Metooindia movement occurred much closer to the election campaign, it was surprising that it did not find place on a larger scale in the campaign material and the media narrative. Surprisingly, in the social media campaigns, videos and texts of sexual violence were shared by self-proclaimed supporters of the political parties (Murgia et al., 2019). However, in the broader news media conversations and election coverage, there was limited focus on sexual harassment and assault cases during the campaign. Thus, to understand this gap between a movement and it becoming a campaign issue, I focus on the role of social media and news media in developing sexual assault and harassment as a campaign issue during the Indian parliamentary elections of 2019. This study investigates and assesses the underlying reasons for the failures and successes of social media and news media to build an anti-sexual assault agenda in the political campaign.

The two research questions of this study are:

RQ1: What was the role of the news media in emphasizing issues of sexual assault and harassment during the Indian parliamentary election campaign in 2019?

RQ2: What was the role of the news media in developing sexual assault and harassment as a campaign issue during the Indian parliamentary election campaign of 2019?

Theoretical framework

In this study I draw from the existing literature of rational choice decision-making, social media activism, and sexual assault and rape as campaign issues. I further build on their intersection to focus on interdependent agenda-building to explain the gap.

Rational choice decision-making

Rational choice decision-making is based on the premise of maximizing individual interests by making a choice. Rationality of choice in decision-making also reveals conscious and unconscious preferences in individuals (Lau et al., 2018). Though the theory is largely used in economics and quantitative decision-making, in the recent past, rational choice decision-making has also been used to explain electoral choices, electoral campaigning, social movements and journalistic newsworthiness in an attempt to answer why people make certain choices over others in various fields. Recently, rational choice decision-making theory has been used to explain how electoral and journalistic choices provide context. The rational choice subjective expected utility approach need not and should not be applied as a behavioural description of how people (or organizations) actually make decisions (Boukes et al., 2020; Lau et al., 2018) where limited information

processing is a factor. Limited information processing impacts the concept of public newsworthiness of issues, which is different from the journalistic decision of newsworthiness (Boukes et al., 2020; Searles and Banda, 2019). Newsworthiness is an essential concept in journalism and is based on factors identified by Eilders (2006) as: the negative aspects of an event or issue; frequency; proximity (cultural, geographical and/or economic ‘nearness’); significance of an event and conflict or controversy. Journalists are most likely to choose an issue of worthiness which is cost-effective for them, lost cost and has the most impact on their audience. Issues of sexual harassment and abuse as newsworthy electoral campaign issues have the potential to open a Pandora’s box of sexual harassment and sexist attitudes in newsrooms in India (Chadha et al., 2016; Chaudhuri, 2017). Starting from the harassment case filed against former *Tehelka* magazine editor Tarun Tejpal to #MetooIndia, Indian newsrooms have been the focus of public and social media discourse on the existing culture in Indian society (Chadha et al., 2016; Pain, 2021). There is no denying that the reduced focus on issues concerning this culture in newsrooms is associated with journalistic bias in information flow. As Searles and Banda (2019) note:

Work on gatekeeping describes a process by which reporters and editors make decisions regarding a range of possible stories based on characteristics such as newsworthiness and expense. This selection process is shaped by news routines, economic incentives, and professional practices. When journalists are situated in the competitive contexts in which they operate, we can examine how institutional constraints explain trends in news coverage.

The extensive use of data, technology and audience engagement based on algorithms is part of the new gatekeeping in newsrooms – it regulates the information flow while negotiating audience needs and newsworthiness (Frizzera, 2018). The overwhelming amount of information forces the news audiences to select the news coverage and information based on their rational choice (Bozdog, 2013).

Based on the news coverage and electoral campaign, prospective voters engage with the candidates, finally choosing their candidates based on rational choice (Lau et al., 2018). Campaigns are carefully crafted and presented as a ‘rational choice’ through the media platforms to the electorate, masking ideology as the rational choice for the electorate. Rational choice decision-making is one such strategy whereby getting information about the candidates is as important as knowing the alternatives before making a decision. Biased information about candidates makes an impact on decision-making (Lau et al., 2018; Manata, 2019). Political parties are also known to make the same decision while choosing an issue (Klüver and Sagarzazu, 2016). Political parties and voters decide on issues based on the rational choice of utility, which is the focus of the theory. Electoral campaigns and choices are part of the rational choice that leaders and parties make. Social media platforms, which are disrupters, are not immune to rational choice decision-making, which explains why some incidents have more impact than others. This may be the reason why sexual harassment was not a big part of the campaign during the 2019 Lok Sabha elections in India, when #MetooIndia was part of both the social media and news media conversations months before the campaign and election started. The culmination of social media movements

and engagement and participation in the movements are also the rational choice of the individuals who strategically join the movement based on their utility and cost-and-benefit analysis. However, it is important to note that participation also includes social, political and personal reasons, thus not effectively taking into account the impact of external factors (Duarte, 2017; Spier, 2017).

Social media platforms and politics

Rational choice decision-making also impacts how social movements are amplified by both citizens and policymakers. The political agenda-building process is based on the decision-making of journalists, policymakers and the public, who are a key component of the social environment and fabric (Cobb and Elder, 1971). It is a mutually dependent process whereby policymakers are active participants in the agenda-building process with their constituents. This still holds true in the social media environment when election manifestos are crowdsourced such as in India and where the political agenda of political parties is shaped by the active participation of citizens through digital platforms. In the recent past, social media platforms have been an active space for policymakers, citizens and campaigning (Stier et al., 2018). Despite being a digitally developing country, there has been a tremendous growth and reach of digital platforms in India (Jha, 2020). This has forced Indian political candidates, policymakers and bureaucrats to actively participate on social media platforms (Chadha and Guha, 2015; Ninan, 2019; Pal and Panda, 2019; Sepaha, 2019). In their paper, Pal and Panda (2019) focused on the active engagement of the leading political leaders during the election in 2019. Compared with the online engagement and activities of 2014, Pal and Panda write that the 2019 elections ‘saw every single major political party create some form of a digital presence, with several shifting significant parts of their political campaign online, and cutting out the mainstream press as an intermediary in the process’. This has been the trend in India since 2012, with social media platforms having an impact on social movements, policy making and the executive and the judiciary (Pal and Panda, 2019; Sepaha, 2019). Access to smartphones has increased the use of social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Twitter and Facebook, which has, in turn, increased the participation of citizens in political and civic issues, encouraging political parties and leaders to communicate with the electorate directly (Ninan, 2019). Some of these also include issues related to women’s rights and empowerment, such as #Metoo, sanitary pads, menstruation hygiene, ‘Beti Bachao Beti Padhao’ (‘Save Your Daughters, Educate Your Daughters’) and others. Several social media movements have been successful based on amplification and connection with the middle class, such as #Nirbhaya. This has culminated in judicial orders such as the Indian Penal Code Section 354A-D, which defines stalking, voyeurism, unwanted sexual advances and touch as specific offences (Sepaha, 2019). This inclusion has ensured that such extremely dangerous behaviour can no longer be ignored or trivialized. However, this paper does not include the policy-making successes of other political parties, but focuses largely on the party currently in power, the BJP (Sepaha, 2019). The lack of comparison with other political parties (regional or national) fails to provide a concrete analysis. It also does not include failed attempts such as the dissolution of the sexual harassment committee in India. Discourses on sexual harassment and rape

creating a social movement has been part of social media conversations since 2012, after the infamous Delhi gang rape. The intersection of rape, sexual harassment and politics is evolved and it is largely based on the locational and political demands of the set-up.

Sexual harassment, rape and politics

In different contexts and locations, sexual harassment and rape have been part of election campaign discourse. Focusing on rape as a tool of post-election and pre-election violence in sub-Saharan African countries such as Kenya and Nigeria between 2008 and 2012 (Krause, 2020), the key theme of the study is the identification of rape and sexual violence as a tool of electoral violence and war by state-sponsored actors. Previous research on this theme has been negligible, other than communal conflicts in India and Indonesia. Rape and sexual violence can act as tools; the previous literature emphasizes that the inequality of gender norms and devaluation of femininity give rise to sexual violence. Ironically, rape as a tool for political and social ends is used as a bottom-up practice. Rape or sexual violence is committed by those in the rank and file of the political parties, who may be in cadres, and tolerated and instigated by those above in leadership. Sexual violence is used as a tool to incite violence and force constituents to make rational choices. The existing literature supports the finding that rape is used as a tool in states which are at war; however, it does not delve deeper into locating rape and sexual violence as an instrument of intimidation and submission in democracies which have had a history of elections (Krause, 2020)

More recent scholarship such as Hassan et al. (2019) and Taneja (2019) has separately focused on the computational reach of #MeToo, and the engagement of the previous feminist movements such as Pinjra Tod (Break the Cage) and Nirbhaya. Both articles briefly draw on the subject of the intersection between social and political movements, but do not develop the concept further in terms of how sexual assault and #MeToo could be or are part of the political movement or become part of a successful election campaign. Social media platforms provide visibility and amplification to social movement, but whether they are embraced by the public unilaterally across all classes and locations is disputable. Hassan et al. (2019) compare the success of the #MeToo movement by analysing the sentiments of the hashtags based on gender and age distribution, in which the top sentiments included the role of the harasser and the harassed, power struggle and the reasons for keeping quiet. The study also focuses on the issue of harassment in education, media and entertainment. One of the limitations of the study is the limited reach of Twitter in rural and subaltern India compared to Facebook and WhatsApp, which could perhaps explain whether the movement touched a chord with middle-class Indians or not. Taneja (2019) identifies that connecting with the public is an important aspect of the feminist movement, hence the impact of the Nirbhaya movement was much greater compared to the previous years' Pinjra Tod movement or even the SlutWalk movement. The middle-class population was able to identify themselves with the plight of Jyoti Singh/Nirbhaya due to her being framed as the perfect victim and the crime being associated with the honour of a daughter of India. Here was a regular girl trying to live her life and achieve her ambition in uncertain and unsafe public spaces. She could have been any one of 'us', thus making the movement relatable and influencing politicians to make it a part

of the policy-making and political discourse. Many journalists during the interviews conducted for this study also acknowledged that to make an issue a part of a political campaign, it is crucial that it is relatable to the public. Taneja (2019) provides an in-depth perspective on digital feminist movements in India through her ethnographic approach, combining this qualitative approach and the quantitative approach of Hassan et al. (2019) to digital feminist movements in India, and identifies that successful feminist movements need to connect with the masses.

The #MetooIndia, Pinjra Tod and SlutWalk movements mostly focused on urban young women and their right to work at public spaces, wear clothes of their choice and assert their freedom. They had few takers, both politically and socially. The movement also received negligible support from the media and fellow activists due to the following reasons:

1. The involvement of media professionals and fellow activists in sexual harassment and abuse.
2. The movements were considered and framed as elitist and in conflict with the cultural values of the country. There was limited acknowledgement and involvement of the intersectional population: women belonging to marginalized castes, classes and locations did not feel involved. News stories of the marginalized communities, especially rural women and their challenges, are gradually decreasing from urban newspapers, creating a gap between the different demographics of women (Chaudhuri, 2017).

Online movements and campaigns have the capacity to grow and increase their reach to be a part of policy making and political campaigns when they are supported by the mainstream media and offline support (Gajjala and Guha, 2019; Pain, 2021).

Method

For this study I chose the mixed method to analyse and triangulate the data. This included qualitative media analysis; thematic analysis of newspaper articles; election manifestos of the largest national political parties in India, the BJP and the INC and extensive interviews with journalists. Mixed method studies support and triangulate the data, leaving limited scope for error (Lindlof and Taylor, 2012). They also help to validate the data from different sources. In this study, I had the opportunity to interview journalists who covered the campaign or were associated in reporting, editing or writing features during the campaign (Lindlof and Taylor, 2012). Please refer to Table 1 for details on the demography of the interviewees.

Sample

I analysed the dominant themes which emerged in the news articles published during the election campaign in the two previous elections. I used NexisUni to download articles published in the most circulated English newspapers in India, *The Times of India*, *Hindustan Times*, *The Hindu* and *The Indian Express* (Statista, 2020). See Table 2 for a list of keyword search, timeline and publications.

Table 1. Interviewee sample description.

Location	Total	Male	Female
East	6	3	3
North-east	6	4	2
North	3	1	2
South	3	2	1
West	2	1	1
	20	11	9

Table 2. NexisUni search terms, timeline and publications.

Timeline	Keyword search	Publications
15 January–20 May 2014	Nirbhaya, election campaign, sexual assault, rape, sexual abuse, campaign	<i>The Times of India, Hindustan Times, The Hindu, The Indian Express</i>
15 January–20 May 2019	#MetooIndia, election campaign, sexual assault, rape, sexual abuse, campaign	<i>The Times of India, Hindustan Times, The Hindu, The Indian Express</i>

My search was extensive, but not exhaustive and exclusive. I chose articles which were at the intersection of sexual assault or rape, #MetooIndia and the election campaign. The search generated the following number of articles from the data banks.

Interview sample, recruitment and participant demography

The participants include political journalists in India who have worked for regional as well as national news media, including television, newspapers, online news portals and radio. After IRB approval from my institution, I used snowball and cold calls to reach out to journalists countrywide. I contacted 54 journalists through Twitter, WhatsApp and emails over the course of a week. Thirty-five journalists responded to the call to interview; finally, I was able to successfully conduct 20 interviews over 10 days. Initially, I had estimated the interviews would be approximately 30–45 minutes long, but all the interviews ranged between 50 and 75 minutes. They began as respondent interviews with semi-structured questions but changed course to become narrative interviews. Lindlof and Taylor (2012) differentiate between respondent and narrative interviews as not based on semi-structured questions but the sharing of their opinion and the expression of their emotions and thoughts. I did not control the narrative or the flow of talk, resulting in in-depth material for the study. Narrative interviews were a possibility because of the relationship between the participants and the interviewer (Lindlof and Taylor, 2012). However, the interviews were not without challenges: the vast differences in the time zones, and the locational and identity diversity of caste, religion and gender in the country. All the journalists who were interviewed have covered Indian political campaigns for

at least 7 years and some for 25 years, including both national and state elections. Thus, all the participants were able to speak to the research questions comparing the 2014 and 2019 Indian elections and focus on sexual assault as an election campaign.

Tools and method of analysis

To analysis the news media articles, I used evaluative assertion analysis (EAA) to map out the texts and focus on the key themes. EAA is based on the work of psycholinguist Charles Osgood in the 1950s and the method was used for interpreting and analysing statements and documents in media studies and communication. This method has been rarely used in media studies (Santana, 2000: 39–41), but has been rigorously used in the past to evaluate political statements and campaigns and policy making rummaging through newspaper articles (Bednarek, 2008; Osgood et al., 1956; Santana, 2000; Starr, 2014). In this study, I used EAA to evaluate, map and understand the relationship between political campaigns and the issue of rape and sexual harassment. In the recent past, EAA has been developed using Computer-Assisted Evaluative Text Analysis (CETA) through various tools. Thus, I decided to use an open-sourced tool, Voyant Tools, to conduct CETA. To map the relationship in the 2014 and 2019 manifestos of the leading political parties, the BJP and the INC, I used Voyant Tools to analyse the association of the issues. Later, I used the same tool to evaluate the news articles to understand whether rape and sexual assault were used in the context of the positive framework of policy making or the negative framework of scandal and protective issues.

Issues of reliability and validity

Mixed method studies are known to elicit higher reliability and validity (Zohrabi, 2013). Reliability in mixed method analysis is based on consistency and information sourcing and cross-checking, which also improves the validity of research (Hurmerinta-Peltomäki and Nummela, 2006) by decreasing the underlying bias of the researcher and systemic research (Arbnor and Bjerke, 1997).

Findings and analysis

I then analysed the findings of the two research questions in this study based on the newspaper article analysis and interviews with journalists.

RQ1: What was the role of the news media in developing sexual assault and harassment as a campaign issue during the Indian parliamentary election campaign of 2019?

Don't open Pandora's box

Irrespective of gender identification and location, the journalists agreed that most political parties steered clear of talking about sexual assault, sexual harassment and, in particular, #Metoo in 2019 to avoid opening a Pandora's box. Political parties were not clear if it would lead to one of their 'own' being accused of involvement in sexual assault and

harassment. A journalist with over 10 years of experience covering political campaigns in India explained, ‘The best bet in 2019 was to be away from any discussion of sexual harassment and rape, especially after MJ Akbar, a central government minister, had to resign after allegations of sexual harassment during the #MetooIndia campaign 2018’. Even in 2018, when #MetooIndia was at its peak, political parties quietly distanced themselves from the movement. It was not just MJ Akbar from the ruling BJP, but also Fairoz Khan, an INC student wing leader, who was accused of sexual misconduct and eventually stepped down from his position (Verma and Manoj, 2018). During the 2019 elections, based on the data from the website of the Election Commission of India, 10 candidates were accused of sexual harassment and 11 candidates were accused of rape across party lines in 2019. Being accused of sexual violence does not prevent political parties from giving candidates their ticket, neither does it prevent them from participating in public life.

Campaign worthiness

Eight of the nine female participants agreed that women’s issues are not considered campaign issues, and have never been. One of the participants, who has been covering politics since 1999, noted that even though women formed half the population, women’s issues have never been campaign issues. Women’s issues are not considered comparable to the basic necessities or needs of the population, such as poverty and unemployment. The participant acknowledged that Jyoti Singh’s rape and murder was a campaign issue in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections because it was a safety issue, not a women’s rights issue per se; it was all about protecting the women of the family/country and instilling patriarchal values. Having covered crime as well, she further explained how this situation plays out:

In jails there is a hierarchy: murderer/dacoits are top of the hierarchy. Rapists are the most hated in the incarcerated. It could be a political issue but not about women’s rights and equality. Thus, rape is an issue and the need to protect women as mothers, sisters, daughters for the honor of the family, not for the freedom of women. The masculine patriarchal chivalrous need to protect our women, not to prey on women is the key factor. Importance to keep women safe is a political need. Women outside the home: women’s right[s] cannot be a political issue but need to protect women can be a political issue.

Hence, in 2014, rape and sexual assault were part of the campaign narrative, but in 2019, it was not. Another woman journalist who has covered elections for close to two decades said:

Elections in India have always been male dominated election[s], so women or their issues don’t matter. Political parties use women for reserved seats. Even though there are political parties, which are led by women such as Mayawati, Mamata Banerjee, Sonia Gandhi. But women’s issues still do not concern anybody, because of the largely misogynist attitude. That’s not the focus of the parties.

Two male journalists, who have been covering elections for a decade, agreed that patriarchy keeps issues of sexual harassment and abuse away from political campaigns. One said, ‘Visibly, women’s issues don’t stand anywhere. It may be secondary to other

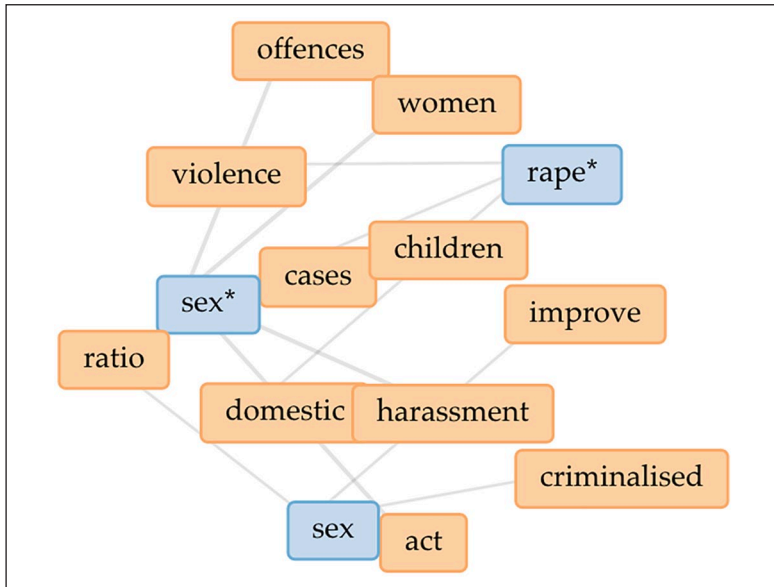


Figure 1. The INC 2014 election manifesto visualization of network connections between rape and sexual abuse.

issues, but never the core issue'. A thematic analysis of the issues covered in the political manifestos of both the BJP and the INC in 2014 and 2019 identifies the same trend. Rape and sexual violence are strongly correlated with the security and rehabilitation of women (Figures 1–4).

Newspaper articles on campaign issues have also identified how issues of women's safety and empowerment are important, but never a political issue (Yadav, 2019). Thus, the limited information processing of sexual assault and rape impacts the newsworthiness of the issue and its eventual erasure from campaign discourses (Searles and Banda, 2019).

In September 2018, #Metoindia became a prominent hashtag on Twitter and inspired many women to share their experiences of sexual harassment and assault. During October–December 2018, in the campaigns for the state assembly elections in the three Indian states of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh, sexual violence against women was not part of the election campaign, which identifies the gap between online sexual violence activism and electoral issues for political parties. Table 3 has the issues covered in the assembly election campaigns that were part of the Twitter conversation and the campaign narrative between October and December 2018 (LiveMint, 2018).

Postavists

There is no denying that social media platforms provide space for marginalized communities and help in amplifying issues (Gajjala and Guha, 2019). However, slacktivism and

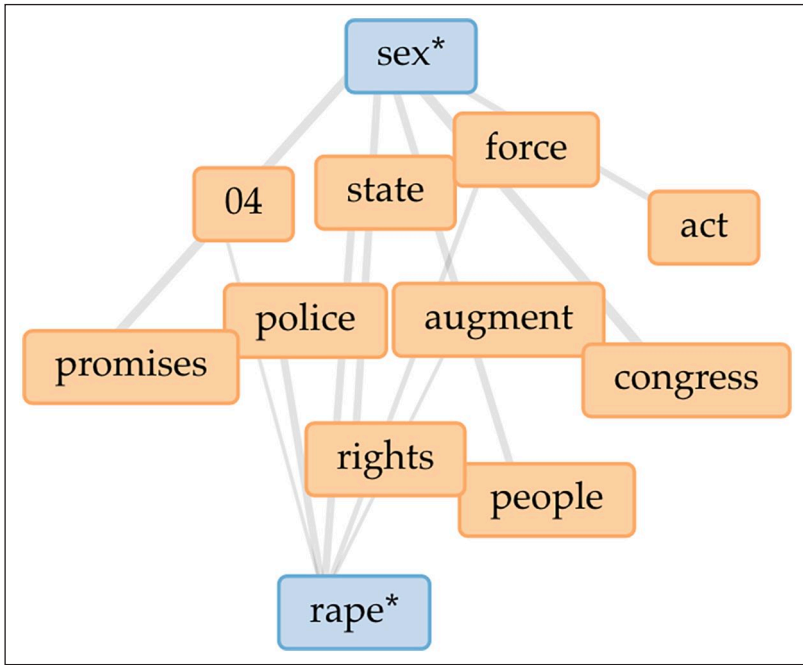


Figure 4. The INC 2019 election manifesto visualization of network connections between rape and sexual abuse.

Table 3. Issues discussed on social media platforms in the 2018 State elections: LiveMint, 2018.

	Chhattisgarh		Madhya Pradesh		Rajasthan	
	BJP (percent)	INC (percent)	BJP (percent)	INC (percent)	BJP (percent)	INC (percent)
Issues						
Agriculture	1	7	5	14	1	11
Development	17	12	22	9	17	7
Campaign rhetoric						
Campaign	38	49	35	27	45	17
Party leaders	13	6	11	18	17	21
Opposition leaders	0	10	0	17	1	28

concerns of social media platforms such as elite platforms often limit engagement with the issues and the success of any such movements. When social media platforms are used in congruence with the mainstream news media, they tend to be more effective; as Pain (2021) identifies, online actions need to be complemented by offline activities to strengthen any movement. A female journalist covering polls and campaign in eastern

Table 4. NexisUni search results.

Newspaper	Lok Sabha campaign, 2014	Number of articles which had #Nirbhaya, 2014	Lok Sabha campaign, 2019	Number of articles which had #Metoo, 2019
<i>The Times of India</i>	158	57	171	10
<i>Hindustan Times</i>	120	19	110	6
<i>The Indian Express</i>	53	8	85	3
<i>The Hindu</i>	1	0	9	2
Total	347	84	375	21

India shared her insight on the lack of action by the Postavists in the #Metooindia movement as compared to #Nirbhaya:

Students and middle-class women were involved in the physical protests during [the] Nirbhaya movement in late 2012 and early 2013. Although it gradually died down, but the social media protests were replicated on the streets. However, if a movement plays out only on social media platforms, for some young people in colleges and universities it becomes a fashion statement to walk in the rally, only a minuscule believe in the cause. The involvement is limited to the influence of their peers and to be on social media platforms. This involvement does not translate into action, I will only protest but not do anything concrete, provide solutions, and be involved. You have to take some action and not just post!

I analysed the poll manifestos of the two leading political parties in India, along with interviews and analysis of newspaper articles, to answer the second research question.

RQ2: What was the role of the news media in developing sexual assault and harassment as a campaign issue during the Indian parliamentary election campaign of 2019?

News media articles depended heavily on social media platforms in their news sourcing and framing. In 2019, of the 375 newspaper articles that I downloaded, 290 articles focused on various aspects of social media, including campaign selfies of candidates, first-time voter conversations and a couple of articles on #MetooIndia. As Table 4 shows, #MetooIndia was featured in less than 10 per cent of the articles. Through my interviews, journalists shared how social media engagement impacts campaign reporting.

The Hashtags and @: Manipulative measurement of success

Journalists across the board agreed that hashtags are becoming a measure of the success of social and political movements. Political campaigns have also embraced this new method of driving communication, influencing the influencers as part of political campaigns (*Times News Network*, 2019).

A journalist who has led digital engagement in the newsroom explained:

People realized the power of social media platforms, collectives like political parties; NGOs; etc. But not many are aware that it is not really a democratic platform, it is not reflective of marginalized participation. It can easily be manipulated. I will share an example, some years ago, a news organization-sponsored literary festival was trending on Twitter in India. It had a total of 200 people but in the backrooms, there was a team which was constantly tweeting about it every 20 seconds. No one else was tweeting but they were still trending all over India by artificially trending it! Now political parties have IT cells, which follow the same routine. Unfortunately, there is no research in newsroom, which hashtag trends on Twitter becomes news, alienating others. It is manipulated and used as a perception.

Sourcing news and information from social media platforms often leads to the dramatization of campaign news. One female journalist commented on the prominence of hashtags and how this leads to dramatic presentation, which eventually overshadows the cause:

The success or failure of [a] campaign is measured by the reach of tweets and hashtags. Hashtags have to be prominent, and media houses have been stories based on the hashtags which worked for #Nirbhaya but not for #MetooIndia. Either way audiences have to be part of the drama, and they have to identify with the cause.

Locating the movement

It is crucial to locate the movement. Hashtag movements happen in urban areas, and #Metoo didn't cut through to the masses. A male journalist explained that even now, rapes like that of Nirbhaya occur, but they do not always become '#Nirbhaya'. Describing a rape in a rural area in the eastern part of the country, he said, 'A young woman was raped by eight men, and her legs separated from her body, [but] this did not become a campaign'.

A woman journalist who was in the interior of the country on an election campaign trail shared her experience of how the fear of rape is ingrained in the system:

In 2019, sexual assault was not an issue on the grounds [that] rape and sexual assault is taken for granted in India, and the #MetooIndia movement was mostly confined to the upper classes and the urban areas. So, it never got focused. When you are on the ground you realize that economic issues such as GST, demonetization, and farmer suicides make bigger campaign issues. I interviewed Priyanka Gandhi in 2019 during her campaign in the rural areas – even she did not mention sexual harassment but mention[ed] *mahila ki suraksha* (safety of women) along with availability of cooking gas for women. Considering [a] lot of women came to listen to her, it was not part of [the] campaign discourse.

The importance of location in elections, and rape coverage, have been separately discussed in the literature (Guha, 2015b; Schwark (2017), Gajjala (2019)). However, it is not highlighted enough. I identify location as part of intersectional politics, which is even more applicable in India, a country where 65 per cent of the population lives in semi-rural and rural areas.

Scandal

Irrespective of geographical location and gender affiliation, the journalists agreed that sexual assault is frequently used during campaign to malign candidates, thus framing it as a scandal. A female television journalist explained:

People like to dig old graves during political campaign, and sexual orientation and relationship of opponent is considered a weakness. Anything about sex is used by opponents. Because of the hush-hush attitude around sex Indians like to gossip about it. Publicity on TV and social media, 20 secs it has to be on screen. Criminal background lawmakers, people are harsher to women but not care about rapists both in ruling party and opposition.

Another male journalist shared how a narrative is built to target the candidate and the victims during elections, thus shoving the real issue and incidents under the rug. While analysing the themes of the 2019 Lok Sabha election news, I observed that sexual assault was often framed as a sex scandal, like the Pollachi incident, in which a group of men of a particular political affiliation kidnapped and sexually assaulted women and collected explicit videos to blackmail them later.

There were 101 news articles on political candidates who were accused of rape, and all of them framed this as a scandal and as a ploy to frame the candidates: ‘Tussle continuing over Alwar accused’, ‘Gehlot: PM continuing to do politics over rape to win polls’.

Role of manifestos

The role of election manifestos has been debated by both scholars and practitioners of journalism (Pandey, 2019). Irrespective of gender and location identification, at least five interviewees shared their opinion that surveys and manifestos shared by political parties are ‘hogwash’ and that citizens don’t care about election manifestos, although in principle they are crowdsourced. Pandey (2019) points out that there are no legal or other repercussions for breaking manifesto promises because of which manifestos often include incomplete information and unkept promises. Despite the limitations associated with election manifestos, I decided to analyse the manifestos of 2014 and 2019 of the BJP and the INC to assess their stand on sexual abuse as a poll issue.

In 2014, the INC manifesto mentioned rape and sexual violence in the context of improving policy making on sexual violence. The following visualization in Figure 1, created on Voyant tools, shows the network connections between the words ‘rape’ and ‘sexual violence’ in the INC manifesto:

In 2014, the BJP manifesto committed to making the security of women a national priority. The following visualization in Figure 2, again created on Voyant tools, shows the network connections between the words ‘rape’ and ‘sexual violence’ in the BJP manifesto:

A comparison of the two 2014 manifestos shows that the BJP seemed more committed to policy making on sexual violence. Before the 2014 elections, the INC was in power and the BJP was the main opposition party, and some of the interview participants highlighted that the BJP used the safety and security of women post-Nirbhaya in a

multilayered way. A woman political journalist noted, 'BJP used *mahilaon ki suraksha* (women's safety) brilliantly. It was a major part of campaigning, and INC failed to focus on the issues'. Although Jyoti Singh was raped and killed in December 2012, the political campaign in 2014 embraced the cause and kept the focus on the incident.

In 2014, the BJP came to power, and was re-elected in 2019. However, in the 2019 election campaign, there was no mention of sexual violence in their manifesto. Rape was mentioned in the context of improving investigative facilities for the efficient disposal of cases. Surprisingly, #MetooIndia and sexual harassment and abuse, which became socio-political movements (Pain, 2021), did not appear in any manifesto in the context of policy making.

As the main opposition party, the INC was no different in its poll manifesto and campaign in 2019. It focused on rape and sexual violence only in terms of the need to improve the security of women.

In 2019, the BJP mentioned women 41 times in the context of empowerment, development and culture. Comparatively, the INC mentioned women 33 times in the context of women's and children's rights and development. As identified by the participants, the BJP categorized rape and sexual assault in terms of the security of women.

Discussion and conclusion

Social media platforms have influenced election campaigns, citizens' participation, social movements and news reporting. In the recent past, survivors and victims of sexual harassment and assault have used social media platforms globally to amplify the stories of their abuse and the structural issues related to sexual abuse. However, recent news reports have identified that anti-sexual assault political movements have always grappled with the issue of consistency (Pardy, 2019). For instance, the women's march, which started in January 2017, is struggling to survive 3 years later in the United States. It is not much different in other countries. For example, #MetooIndia re-emerged with force in 2018, which led to the establishment of a government working group. However, the working group was dismantled, and it is no longer a part of the extensive public conversation in the largest democracy in the world. Individual perpetrators such as Harvey Weinstein have been punished or, in some cases like MJ Akbar, are facing trial, but systemic changes have been largely overlooked. Many have returned to their workplaces, including Subhash Kapoor, Anu Malik and Sajid Khan. Systemic changes will take place only when sexual violence becomes a core issue in political campaigning and eventually in policy making.

However, it is challenging to incorporate sexual violence as a core issue in political campaigns when politicians across party lines have encouraged the idea that the responsibility of preventing sexual violence lies with women. During a political rally in 2014, Samajwadi Party chief Mulayam Singh Yadav referred to the amendments to the anti-rape law saying, 'First girls develop friendship with boys. Then when differences occur, they level rape charges. Boys commit mistakes. Will they be hanged for rape?' (Fareed, 2014). In yet another instance, in 2013, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) chief Mohan Bhagwat said, 'Crimes against women happening in urban India are shameful. It is a dangerous trend. But such crimes won't happen in Bharat or the rural areas of the country' (PTI, 2013).

Political campaigns, along with public opinion, depend on traditional media coverage to participate in the political agenda-building process. Social media sites have created their own space to build an agenda on important issues with the participation of citizens and activists, but they require the mainstream media to bridge this gap between online and offline participation. In early 2018, a young woman was raped and attacked by a state legislator from the ruling BJP, Kuldeep Singh Sengar, in Unnao in rural Uttar Pradesh. The woman became known as the Unnao victim in both social and news media; in one of her interviews with a local journalist, she said she had no idea of #MetooIndia, and it had not given her anything (Dhingra, 2018). All she wanted was punishment for her perpetrator, who was eventually given life imprisonment in 2019 (Sharma, 2019). She was not spoken about in any campaign or news article by any party during the 2019 election campaign. This is a glaring example of the existing gap between sexual violence activism and electoral issues.

The gap between online sexual violence activism and electoral issues for political parties continued in the Indian parliamentary elections of 2019 on social media platforms as well. According to official Twitter India metrics, there was 600 per cent growth in the volume of conversation during the election campaign in 2019, compared to the previous Indian parliamentary election of 2014, when 396 million tweets were shared on #LokSabhaElections 2019, but this did not focus on sexual assaults on women. The following were the top conversation topics, and top trends on #LokSabhaElections 2019 on Twitter during the campaign and the election period between 11 April and 19 May 2019 (Twitter India, 2019):

1. National security
2. Religion
3. Jobs
4. Agriculture
5. Demonetization.

The issues that received focus were not #Metooindia or sexual violence but security issues. Both sexual violence activism and political campaigns run parallel to each other in the same ecosystem of social media platforms, and mainstream media plays a role in converging both and building an interdependent agenda. Paradoxically, both sexual assault activism and political campaigns work in silos and have the same strengths and limitations.

In the past 6 years, the social media landscape in India has changed dramatically, and so has the relationship between social media platforms and electoral campaigns and their impact on mainstream media. Since 2014, the Indian government has bypassed the mainstream news media in public communication by focusing on direct communication with the citizens, carefully producing social media messages to engage and interact. The opposition parties are also embracing this shift to direct communication with citizens through social media engagement and interaction (Chaudhuri, 2017), thus leaving the mainstream media in a challenging situation (Ninan, 2019). Articles, news and stories with social media hashtags are a common sight in newspapers, news channels and even radio news. This trend works on the urge to satisfy media consumers in a hyper-visible and mediatized environment in India (Philipose, 2019). Despite only 30 per cent of the

population having access to the internet, in terms of numbers, India is one of the fastest-growing markets for Facebook, WhatsApp and other social media platforms (Agarwal, 2018). Considering this changing landscape of online platforms and the growing internet penetration, #MetooIndia had the potential to become an essential issue in the electoral campaign of the Indian general elections of 2019. Therefore, it is imperative to understand how issues of gendered violence become campaign issues. The following factors include the summaries of the findings of the two research questions on the role of news media in the non-inclusion of sexual assault, harassment and #Metooindia in the most recent election campaigns in India:

1. The 2012 Delhi gang-rape incident, also known as the #Nirbhaya campaign, first started as an offline, physical social movement and social media platforms were used to rally more people by disseminating information about the protests. #Nirbhaya included conversations about the safety of women in public spaces, which, for political rhetoric, is a stronger narrative as compared to #Metooindia. In the narrative of workplace sexual harassment compared to public space sexual harassment, the latter leads to stronger rhetoric for political campaigns, as 48.1 per cent of the total population in India are women and only 28.5 percent of women are in the Indian workforce (statistics from ILO and World Economic Forum, 2018).
2. As an organic movement, #Metooindia is based and originated in social media platforms, involving victims and survivors from urban areas, upper castes and classes and metro cities, with access to social media platforms. The nature of the movement has potentially isolated victims/survivors from a more rural background, which could be a potential reason why it failed to become a part of the political campaign.
3. Indian politicians reacted with restraint to #Metooindia, unlike in the Nirbhaya or similar unfortunate incidents. One reason for this was the accusations of sexual harassment made against their colleagues. When #MetooIndia began again in September 2017, one of the first contentions or assertions by some political and social observers was that the movement was politically motivated and orchestrated because a central minister was accused of harassment. This made the issue too controversial to be included in the election manifestos.

It is crucial to identify the study's limitations in the hope that there will be future scholarship on the subject which will address these limitations. This study focuses on news published in the most circulated English-language newspapers in India. It would close the research gap if other Indian language news on various platforms such as television and online were to be studied. According to India's most recent census, 96 per cent of the population speak 22 scheduled languages in India (Gulf News, 2018), which makes it complicated for any researcher to analyse all Indian language news media. Nonetheless, the diversity in languages and platforms would provide rich data on the issue.


In conclusion, there needs to be systemic changes in the focus of political campaigns and news media on issues of sexual violence. The interdependence of both news and social media centring round sexual violence will make it a part of political and public conversation.

Elections and election campaigns in India are an annual affair – either national elections or elections in one or several of the 28 states and eight Union territories. Thus, there is every opportunity to make sexual violence a core electoral issue if there is an interdependence of news and social media. This will only occur when sexual violence becomes a core issue in political campaigning and eventually in policy making.

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Notes

1. The Parliament in India consists of two houses, the Rajya Sabha or the Upper House and the Lok Sabha or the Lower or People's House. Parliamentary elections are held for the Lok Sabha.
2. According to the handbook of the Election Commission of India published before the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, there are seven national political parties in India, including the BJP and the INC. See here: <https://eci.gov.in/files/category/261-recognized-national-parties/>
3. The BJP has been in power since 2014.
4. The INC was in power for decades in India until 2014. Since then, it has been the primary opposition party.

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