



From #Sexual Assault to #Political Campaign Issue: Understanding Sexual Assault Narratives on Social Media Platforms During Political Campaigns in India

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, online election campaigns in India have evolved beyond using only Twitter and Facebook to take advantage of the population's continuing interest in other social media platforms. Hashtag campaigns are now found on other platforms, such as Instagram, WhatsApp, and YouTube. With this development, online discourses on political campaigns have matured and become diverse. Several social movement issues in India, such as the anti-corruption movement, anti-caste movement, citizenship movement, and the #MeToo movement, have developed and been sustained on social media platforms in the past eight years. Since 2014, some of these movements have coexisted and intersected with election campaigns in India. This qualitative mixed-method study is an analysis of the influence of sexual assault narratives on online political campaigns in India. This study concerns the intersection of the theoretical frameworks of hashtag activism and locational identity, and it is based on the extensive interviews of eight citizen political volunteers and the thematic analysis of 60,195 Facebook posts during the election campaigns in Bihar and West Bengal elections in 2020 and 2021. The study finds that the political campaigns integrate sexual assault narratives into their online discourses if those narratives promote scandal frames and/or revenge frames. The campaign discourses on social media platforms seldom focus on the policy-related issue of sexual assault.

KEYWORDS

Bihar; Facebook; India; MeToo; political campaign; sexual assault; West Bengal

Journalism scholars, journalists, and observers have indicated that 2014 was the first social media election in India. In 2019 India witnessed an increase in social media campaigning by political parties in central and state elections (Pal, 2019), where more organized political activity is seen (Pal, 2019; Rao, 2019). On Twitter, self-proclaimed supporters of the political parties shared sexual violence content, but this content was not formally integrated with the campaigns (Murgia, Findlay, & Schipani, 2019). In the past six years, the social media landscape in India has changed tremendously despite only 30% 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 globally (Kugelman, 2021). Therefore, it is imperative to understand how

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issues of gendered violence play a role in social media platforms during political campaigns.

This study analyzes the digital discourse based on access and location to assess sexual assault and harassment content on social media platforms during election campaigns in India from 2019 to 2021, focusing on the Lok Sabha elections of 2019 and the State Assembly elections of 2020 and 2021. The Bihar State Assembly elections in 2020 and West Bengal State Assembly elections in 2021 had more coverage and focus compared to the other State Assembly elections held at the same time. I focused on the state elections in 2020 and 2021 to understand whether sexual assault was a bigger issue in political campaigns after #MeTooIndia happened in 2018. It was also crucial to investigate if the gang rape and murder of a 19-year-old Dalit in Hathras had any impact during the state election campaigns, similar to the way Jyoti Singh Pandey's gang rape and murder in Delhi in December 2012 was used during state election campaigns in 2013.

Citizens are increasingly employing political hashtags during election campaigns (Udupa, Venkatraman, & Khan, 2020). Social media space has moved from a forum for activism and civic issues to active political campaigning during elections (Foos, Kostadinov, Marinov, & Schimmelfennig, 2021). It is important to note that it is not only paid staffers and social media strategists who campaign for political parties (Chadha & Guha, 2016) but also unpaid citizen volunteers (Penney, 2017). This structure is based on the concept of the citizen marketer in political spaces, when citizens and volunteers engage in posting promotional content through their participation (Penney, 2017). Civic media creation and participation quickly change to political discourse. This study is based on the following research questions:

RQ1: How was sexual assault and harassment content used on social media platforms during election campaigns between 2020 and 2021 in India?

RQ2: What are the themes around sexual assault and harassment content on social media platforms during election campaigns between 2020 and 2021 in India?

Significance of location and framing in hashtag campaigns

To answer the research questions, I relied on the intersection of strategic hashtag campaigning (George & Britto, 2018) and interdependent agenda-building theories (Guha, 2015, 2021). This article evaluates these concepts to understand whether social media discourses, hashtagging, and trending on social media sites lead to the inclusion of sexual harassment in campaigns. Social media platforms are often described as tactical media (Hestres, 2017) to achieve advocacy, marketing, or political goals. Based on this theoretical framework, I assess whether sexual violence discourse on social media platforms was tactically used to integrate or deflect attention from the issues.

Since the advent of digital media, there has been a surge in the use of hashtags as innovations in current political communication (Panagiotopoulos, Klievink, & Cordella 2019). Hashtags work everywhere, as Rho and Mazmanian (2020) put it, including political discourse. As political leaders and parties move from campaign slogans to online platforms, hashtags become an integral part of political campaigns and discourse (Panagiotopoulos et al., 2019; Heyd & Puschmann, 2017). Thus, hashtags become a functional and pragmatic part of speech, supporting the connection with citizens and

amplifying the message. In addition, hashtags are amplified through dissemination on various platforms through collective sharing of the beliefs of the participants in the campaign. According to Hossain, Dwivedi, Chan, Standing, and Olanrewaju (2018), collective opinion of political content on online platforms is based on the shared behaviors, actions, user beliefs, participant network, and algorithm. This innovation, and its dependence on social media platforms, also influences the quality of political campaign discourses, including the simplistic framing of many issues, particularly sexual violence conversations (Panagiotopoulos et al., 2019; Scott, 2015).

Sexual assault and rape activism through online platforms can have a positive impact, but typically this impact is only for the privileged, which has proven true globally (Khamis & Mili, 2018). Access to digital devices, connectivity, digital literacy, algorithm biases, and social and economic disadvantages create a gap in social media platforms for individuals from marginalized communities (Guha, 2021). Therefore, the simplistic framing of sexual violence discourses creates and amplifies a negative bias on the issue (Rho & Mazmanian, 2020), leading to the elimination of the subject as a campaign issue in online discourses. The framing an issue on social and news media has been defined as “the process by which people develop a particular conceptualization of an issue or reorient their thinking about an issue” (Chong & Druckman, 2007, p. 104). Sexual violence in political campaign discourses is often presented in the scandal frame as sex crimes and affairs, which has been a global phenomenon (Schneider & Hannem, 2019; Lee & Chen, 2021). This framing tendency impacts both voters and users in the conversation, but the voters choose issues related to the economy over sexual assault allegations (Stark & Collignon, 2021). Users of social media networks who actively participate in political discussions are not always voters of the state elections that take place in India. To make that differentiation, I distinguish voters and users as separate categories.

Other studies have similarly identified that the responses of voters and users to sexual assault content in political campaigns is polarized (Bruch & Feinberg, 2017; Hossain et al., 2018). Because all campaign discourses on social media platforms are planned, sexual violence conversations do not become part of these planned conversations and behaviors unless they are used to polarize the voters or users (Hossain et al., 2018). This creates a gap in digital feminist activism on social media platforms.

The inclination to define feminist anti-rape and anti-sexual assault digital activism as a homogenous movement is detrimental to activists and advocates. As Mendes, Ringrose, and Keller (2019) have identified, it is much more complex, nuanced, and intersectional. In addition, digital activism and campaigns on sexual assault are also emotionally intensive and laborious, a fact which is often overlooked (Gajjala, 2018; Pain, 2021). Thus, feminist activists have to spearhead their advocacy while also with keeping themselves safe. Trolling and doxing add issues of backlash and affect the well-being of the participants (Pain, 2021). Digital access, the ability to participate constantly in online platforms at the cost of earning a living, and physical and mental well-being often inhibit survivors, victims, and citizen influencers from marginalized communities and locations from focusing on sexual assault hashtags during campaigns. Guha (2021) focuses on the social identity of location and the reasons some individuals are left behind in online political campaigns. Locational identity contributes largely to the success of a hashtag campaign due to structural inequities, leading to the decision-making

strategies of how sexual assault and harassment become part of the electoral campaign. Locational identity often takes a backseat in social media discourses. Access to digital devices, languages, and other issues also impact how political discourses revolve around sexual assault in political campaigns. The difficulty of negotiating online networked movements and locational access directly impacts the inclusion of sexual assault in online campaign narratives.

Methodology

To understand and analyze the online campaign narrative, I used social network analysis (SNA), which is the mapping and measuring of relationships and flow among people, groups, organizations, and other connected information/knowledge entities on social media platforms. SNA of participatory spaces for an anti-sexual assault campaign is a popular feminist media research method to understand how citizens and policymakers connect on issues of gendered violence (Ekal & Eldén, 2019). Some researchers have established that SNA provides an organic evaluation of qualitative data by incorporating traditional methods, particularly with Facebook (Andreotta, Nugroho, & Hurlstone, 2019). Therefore, this qualitative study is built on the thematic analysis of SNA and in-depth interviews to understand the discourse around sexual assault content and issues in political campaigning. These two types of qualitative study helped in triangulating and understanding the issue more deeply. Triangulation also has been viewed as a qualitative research strategy to test validity through the convergence of information from different sources (Hasebrink & Hepp, 2017).

I collected data for this study in two parts: the first was Facebook posts; the second part involved interviews of citizen political advocates who had been active on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram during political campaigning and shared anti-sexual assault posts. Some participants belonged to Facebook groups with political hashtags, while others shared original content. I also triangulated data sources by doing additional interviews.

For the first part of the study, I collected data from Facebook, as Facebook has 410 million users in India and Twitter has 15 million users (Chakravarti, 2021). I decided to gather data during the campaign periods in 2020 and 2021 from Facebook through CrowdTangle, which is “a public insights tool from Meta (formerly Facebook) that makes it easy to follow, analyze, and report on what’s happening with public content on social media” (Meta, 2021). I focused on the data that had the most total interactions in English, Hindi, and Bengali. I also decided to remove any branded content; however, that did not prevent the inclusion of fan clubs, which are fan pages of various political leaders and parties. These fan clubs were not branded, but there was no way to determine whether these were paid Facebook pages.

The content I downloaded used the hashtags #BiharElections2020, #NoVoteToBJP, and #AarNoiGonotrerHotya. The platform allows the user to download only 10,000 posts, but it shows the projection for the entire time period. The timeframe used was during the political campaigning for each of the elections in the following time periods: September through October 2020 for the Bihar Assembly elections and February through April 2021 for the West Bengal Assembly elections.

Recruitment

I used Twitter hashtags #LokSabha 2019, #BiharElections2020, #NoVoteToBJP, and #AarNoiGonototrerHotya to search for social media volunteers who engage in political campaigns as civic volunteers and are not paid by any political parties. I used the top search function on Twitter to look for social media civic volunteers. I did not include anyone with a verified handle; instead, I included handles whose tweets were featured in the top tweet function. I reached out to 20 individuals on Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp with a recruitment invitation. Out of the 20 individuals, I received responses from 15 individuals. In the end, eight participants shared confirmation and completed interviews; the seven others either stopped responding to my follow-ups or did not join the interview call.

I was thus able to interview eight social media volunteers who actively post on politics and sexual assault on Twitter and Instagram. The participants were equally distributed in terms of gender, with four male and four female participants from the northern and eastern part of the country. The participants also actively posted during the Assembly elections, and they were not officially connected with any political party and did not have any paid position with the political parties contesting the elections; neither were they part of any Information Technology (IT) cell. The recruited participants were citizen influencers who actively posted during the Assembly elections.

Interviews

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was necessary to conduct interviews over a period of eleven months. I did the first two in-depth interviews in June 2020, focusing on the 2019 Parliamentary elections and the lack of sexual assault as an online discourse and campaign issue. I conducted interviews with these same individuals again after the Assembly elections in 2020 and 2021. Due to recruitment challenges posed by the ongoing pandemic, I paused the interviews and completed them after the second wave of COVID-19 subsided in India. In the second phase, I was able to complete the remaining six interviews and focus on the elections between 2020 and 2021. Each in-depth interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. The questions from the semistructured interviews were based on the thematic analysis of the Facebook posts that I had downloaded. After doing six interviews and analyzing them, no new information was shared by my participants, leading to data saturation. However, I completed two additional interviews to confirm data saturation, which is a common practice in qualitative research (Saunders et al., 2018). As noted, the interviews were semistructured, and some of the questions included the experiences of the participants regarding the incidence of sexual assault, how the subject became part of the political campaign, and the reasons why sexual assault was a bigger campaign issue in 2014 compared to 2019, even though #MeToo and #MeTooIndia started a global conversation around it.

Results analysis and discussion: What were the themes around sexual assault and harassment content on social media platforms during election campaigns in 2020 and 2021?

For the Bihar Assembly elections between September 1 and October 31, 2020, I gathered 50,105 conversations and posts from Facebook. Similarly, for the West Bengal Assembly

elections, between February 1 and March 31, 2021, I gathered 10,090 conversations and posts from Facebook. In the Bihar election hashtags, rape was the central focus of the conversations 29 times out of 50,105, which is 0.0005%, much less than 0.1%. Similarly, in the West Bengal election hashtags, rape was the central focus of the conversations and posts 73 times out of 10,090, which is 0.007%, less than 0.1%. Even though rape as a topic was used in both instances much less than expected, the themes from both the political hashtags were common.

Specific incidents of rapes from locations

In both the Bihar Assembly elections and the West Bengal Assembly elections, there were references in Facebook and Twitter posts about rape and lack of punishment for the perpetrators in the narrative, as shown in some of the following posts:

1. जिसने दलित लड़की का रेप किया था। #BiharElections और जातीय समीकरण पर Anand Kumar का लेख (The one who raped a Dalit girl. Anand Kumar's article on #BiharElections and caste equation.)
2. "रेप के आरोपियों को ना दें वोट" एनडीए और नीतीश कुमार पर हमलावर होते हुए अलका ने कहा कि नीतीश कुमार अब जाने वाले कल है और जाने वाले कल को आप समेट कर न... (Don't vote for the accused of rape. While attacking the NDA and Nitish Kumar, Alka said that Nitish Kumar is a tomorrow and you can't cover the tomorrow...)
3. लेकिन पच्चीस साल बीतने पर भी एक दूसरा अपराधी फरार ही.... #BiharElections और जातीय समीकरण पर Anand Kumar का लेख (But even after twenty-five years, another criminal is still absconding.... Anand Kumar's article on #BiharElections and caste equation)

These posts were shared by party sympathizers and local office bearers. In both the Bihar and West Bengal Assembly elections, rapes that happened in Uttar Pradesh were the focus in the narrative. The rape and murder of a 19-year-old Dalit girl from Hathras was the focus of the discourse. Surprisingly, the intersectional identity of the victim and discussion on structural inequalities for victims from marginalized communities, along with robust conversations on caste, class, religion, and rural locations, were missing from the posts. Dalit women have historically faced sexual violence due to the societal discrimination and "culturally sanctioned violence" from the upper-caste men (Diwakar, 2020). The word "Dalit" was used to identify the victim, but there was no discussion on this structural violence and the impediments and roadblocks for the Dalit victims of rape and murder in receiving justice. Sexual violence against Dalit women has long been a tool of their oppression to crush movements and any social or political dissent. Current and previous studies (Human Rights Watch, 1999; Kumar, 2021) have identified the societal assumption that Dalit women can be sexually assaulted and raped without any consequences, creating challenges and obstacles in getting justice. The gang rape and murder of the Dalit girl from Hathras created a discourse on news and social media, which helped garner attention to the atrocities and injustice. However, there was a lack of continued focus and discourses on the structural issues. These included the

safety of the victim's family or the pressure on the family to suppress news of the rape and murder of the victim, as well as the continued sexual assaults on Dalit girls (Pandey, 2021; Newslaundry, 2021).

Posts on candidates accused of rape

During both the Bihar Assembly elections and the West Bengal Assembly elections, in 102 Facebook posts, a minority of 19% of posts identified a couple of candidates as perpetrators of sexual assault. These were campaign and candidate specific; there were no discussions on policies related to sexual assault. The social media posts questioned the parties about providing support to individuals who were accused of rape and sexual violence. While there were conversations around the rationalization of providing support to candidates charged with rape, the discourses in the comments posted focused on accusing the other parties of doing the same in the past. In these online discussions, the structural issues of sexual violence and inequality are lost, thus restricting the issue to a scandal frame. The sex scandal or scandal frame in media often results in victim blaming when perpetrators are not held accountable for their actions (Egen et al., 2020).

Controversial remarks from political leaders

Patriarchal remarks from Mohan Bhagwat, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), and Mulayam Singh Yadav, Samajwadi Party, prior to 2014 came up in 10 posts in the Bihar election campaign, which focused on disparaging comments toward women by the leaders. These remarks were tied to campaign hashtags, but there were no comments or acknowledgments of sexual assault as an issue in the pre-poll campaign content. There was no discussion that the normalization of patriarchal comments encourages sexual violence against women, as women's agency is repeatedly questioned and women, in general, are commodified.

Interview analysis: How was sexual assault and harassment content used on social media platforms during election campaigns in 2020 and 2021?

Hashtag pragmatism

During the in-depth interviews, all participants acknowledged that the issue of sexual harassment and assault is used differently by various political parties on social media platforms. One of the male interviewees from the eastern part of the country shared that the hashtag pragmatism or practical use during political campaign is based on the location of the election, the power of the political parties involved, and the political inclination of news media. He elaborated further: "A lot depends on the relationship between the political party, and it is this political equation with the news media in any state has the impact to make sexual assault a campaign issue or create a sensation." A female participant agreed: "Sexual violence issues are hushed up, especially cases in India. It becomes a scandal in the election campaign and not a policy-related issue. The conversation focuses on stigmatizing and the honor of the victim."

Scandal frame

All the participants I interviewed agreed that increasingly there is an inclination toward scandal in online political campaign. One of the participants who had been actively participating and following politics on social media since 2011 said, “The idea is any PR [public relations] will work for the campaign, negative or positive. So, there is a tendency toward using the scandal frame in sexual assault issues.” A female participant stated: “When a member of any party is involved in sexual assault, the narrative becomes that they are targeted for their position. On social platforms, there is trolling of the victim, and the real issue of sexual assault and safety becomes secondary.” The scandal frame of sexual violence issues during political campaigns also reframes sexual violence issues as a campaign ploy to malign the candidate and the political party involved. Sexual violence victims and survivors are reluctant to endure the stigmatizing and politicization of their assault. All political parties in India seem to frame sexual violence issues this way during political campaigns. Another political volunteer who participated in the online campaign added: “The political parties look out for opportunities to highlight sexual assault incidents during the campaign. They will follow up on sexual assault incidents and highlight [them] during the campaign but not share any concrete steps or redressal methods. During election campaigns, fake propaganda on sexual assault has also come up, especially in the recently concluded West Bengal elections.”

Another female political volunteer, who was very active on social media platforms during political campaigns, shared that female volunteers and supporters are subjected to trolling when they share sexual violence issues during campaigns and elections. She said, “It is irrespective of political affiliation. I believe in calling a spade a spade, whoever is involved in sexual assault. I am trolled either for not supporting my party enough or trolled by opposing parties that I get paid to spread sexual assault information.” This claim leads directly to the next theme—harassment of women on digital platforms—which several scholars have pointed to in cross-cultural scholarship (Chen, Pain, Chen, et al., 2018; Kumar, 2021). Trolling, doxing, and rape threats are increasingly targeted toward women and women from marginalized communities to throttle their voices on social media platforms. When women from opposing political affiliations support one another against online trolling, they are met with harassment and abuse. At least five out of the eight interviewees acknowledged this treatment meted out to women.

Harassment of women on digital platforms

The same participant who was quoted in the previous section indicates that because of her political affiliation she received rape and sexual violence threats. She said, “There were sexist harassments, too—that I have an ulterior motive to support or focus on the issues I am passionate for a political position. But I am in this for my belief, as a volunteer.” Similarly, another political volunteer said: “I saw how women were trolled on the social platforms, after the recently concluded elections in West Bengal. Particularly, women who supported the opposition parties. There were sexist harassments, sexual violence threats. Volunteering on social media platforms takes a toll. There were callout posts on social media platforms, but nothing really happened. There were no

outcomes.” There was awareness about the situation and social media discourses on the sexist harassments, but no one was reported; nor were formal complaints lodged. There were no consequences for the harassment meted out to women on social media platforms.

Location

A social media user who volunteered his time on social media platforms during political campaigns said location is very important for the inclusion of sexual violence and media coverage. He said, “Rape and sexual violence that happen in the interiors of the country or which are further away from the capital of Delhi never see intense reporting and social media outrage. The newsrooms are in Delhi, so the ability to be able to travel to UP [Uttar Pradesh] or Haryana is convenient for the journalists, since these states are bordering Delhi, location becomes important. The focus from the political parties and leaders also helps in creating a sensation, but once everyone leaves, there are no follow-up stories.”

Another participant added, “The relationship between the location and the newsroom makes a lot of difference. For instance, the relationship between national and local media in the southern part of the country speaks volumes of how the national media keeps othering the issues in the southern part of the country. And it’s the local media there that brings the information. Jisha’s rape and murder in Kerala in 2016 did not make the national headlines consistently.” The location of a sexual assault is instrumental in that sexual assault becoming part of the political campaign as a scandal or as a policy issue.

Sexual violence is framed as political revenge

All interview participants agreed that sexual violence is most often framed as a revenge narrative with hashtags on social media platforms. Casting doubt on the accounts of the victims and survivors and sharing their personal details makes it difficult for the survivors to come forward and eventually a sexual violence frame becomes a campaign mechanism, far removed from the policy aspect. A male participant said:

Unfortunately, the modus operandi works like a business model, where the identity of the victim and perpetrators become important, since the candidate is the perpetrator. The narrative becomes how the victim has been trying to malign the perpetrator. The news media framing does not help in making sexual assault a campaign issue. Recently, a tribal girl was raped, there was some outrage on social media platforms, but there was no outcome. The news media did not even cover the rape in depth. During elections, sexual violence is framed as political revenge, but there are limited investigations and focus.

Another participant said it was tiring to volunteer in periods of online mudslinging after any rape or sexual assault was reported during the campaign:

Reports of sexual violence, getting raped in religious places, and mudslinging is a vicious circle. There are political fights revolving the rape and sexual assault, and some people even condone it. It becomes very disturbing at some point. I try to share my part by digital campaigning and making a difference. Just doing my part by volunteering and not

differentiating between parties. Everybody is the same when it comes to sexual violence. It becomes a political issue. I think in the recent years the one-sidedness has gone up due to the accessibility of extremist ideas and limited digital literacy. The online medium becomes polluted and fails the survivors.

Relationship between local media and the ruling party

The participants agreed that despite the reliance on social media platforms for political campaigning, news media still plays a very important role in India. Seven out of eight participants agreed that the relationship between the local media and the ruling party is a deciding factor on the focus of rape and sexual assault as campaign issues. One participant said:

Just like the news media takes cues from social media, social media users also take cues from the news media. So the news media builds an agenda around sexual assault when it should become a part of campaign narrative. Several times the social media users have just followed the trend. When #Nirbhaya happened in 2013, after Jyoti Singh's rape and murder in New Delhi in 2012, the news media created a corresponding hashtag, and the social media conversations focused on the safety of the country capital. If the capital of the country is not safe, what will happen to the rest of the country?

Another candidate said the dwindling trust in social media platforms impacts political discourses on sexual harassment and assault:

A large part of political discourses in the country is what the mainstream mass media promotes, which is based on social media conversations. In the recent past, the news organizations have been accused of setting a narrative in political campaigns and conversations. Due to the decreasing confidence of the news media, selectively choosing to focus on sexual assault and rape, the issue does not get sustained attention in the online platforms. From discussing the issue, on social media the conversation gets deflected to the motive of the newsroom on creating a campaign agenda. Political candidates don't help either, by not continuing conversations on sexual assault during their campaigns.

Victims/survivors are never the focus of policies

All interviewees agreed that victims and survivors are never the focus of political policies or campaign issues before any elections, despite the #MeToo and #MeTooIndia movements. One of the interviewees said, "*Vishwas bohot kam hain,*" meaning "There is limited trust in the system to get justice for the victims/survivors." To demonstrate, in 2013, journalist Tarun Tejpal was accused of sexually assaulting a female journalist who worked in the same newsroom. In 2021, Tejpal was acquitted by an Indian court of the sexual assault of his colleague. Citing the acquittal of Tarun Tejpal in 2021, the interviewee said, "How can the survivors seek justice? When with so much evidence and even the survivor with some resources couldn't get justice, how will victims from marginalized communities think about getting justice?" The interviewee's remarks on the limited trust in the system resonate with the article published on Quartz that explains, "A recent judgment in a seven-year-old rape case is a triggering reminder to Indian women about the way the country sees rape" (Kapur, 2021). Speaking along the same lines, another

interviewee added: “Can you imagine—if the sexual harassment survivor of Tarun Tejpal with some financial and other resources did not get justice and he was acquitted—what hope do victims from marginalized communities have?”

While focusing on sexual assault victims from marginalized communities, five interview participants shared that #MeToo and #MeTooIndia are social movements, not political movements, and hence they did not impact policymaking or even the inclusion of sexual assault in political campaigns. This creates a gap, leaving behind victims from marginalized communities. As one participant said:

We often don't talk or share on social media platforms that poverty makes a lot of difference. How long will the victims and survivors fight? The tribal girls who were raped and killed—who will fight for them? When there is an outrage, and activists work for them, then there is some justice. Otherwise, sustaining consistently on social media platforms impacts economically and mentally. When #Nirbhaya happened, it stayed around for a long time, it became part of the assembly election campaign and later the national campaign, because social media was newer, and there were less platforms.

The participants agreed there is huge gap between the government and the opposition when it comes to sexual assault. They seldom work together to respond to the issue of sexual assault. One participant explained that Asifa, an eight-year-old who was raped and murdered inside a temple in 2018, did not receive justice despite social media outrage and uproar. The participant added:

Responsible citizens and the policymakers don't work together, the conversations digress, and it becomes slacktivism for many. During the West Bengal elections, I was privy and part of multiple groups and conversations. Sexual assault and harassment were part of conversations, but it cropped up differently, and reactions to sexual assault were reactionary from both sides, the ruling party and the opposition parties. The gravity of the crime on the individual was lost in the chaotic online narrative. On one hand, right-wing opposition party were pushing for the Anti-Romeo squad. And on the other hand, the ruling party was not acknowledging any sexual assault incident, including the post-poll violence. No one talks about the victims. Remember the Park Street rape of 2012?¹

Including sexual assault in online political campaigns often entails manipulation of the narrative to support or vilify a party or candidate. The context of campaigns can, thus, lead to exploitative or extractive use of sexual assault narratives.

Slacktivism

Chou, Hsu, and Hernon (2020) define slacktivism as “feel-good online activism with little meaningful social or political impact,” despite the rapid growth of social media campaigns. On the other hand, sometimes, slacktivism also allows users to reach audiences effectively (Glenn, 2015). Findings from the interviews conducted for this study identify this nature of slacktivism and reveal that slacktivism enables storytelling, which was necessary for victims and survivors of sexual abuse. Their intention may not be always to seek justice through activism but only to share with the larger community.

A participant who leads and manages a feminist online account shared that through slacktivism some victims and survivors feel safe to come out:

There are several victims and survivors who don't want to lodge a formal complaint, they don't want to go through the procedure and suffer gatekeeping and trauma again. But they

do want others to know of their ordeal. Social media gives them that opportunity, and the election hashtags help in amplification. A young woman was raped by her boyfriend and his friends, but she couldn't complain because of legal hassles and family and societal pressure. But [she] shared on Instagram through a fictitious handle. Nothing happened other than the survivor being able to share with a larger online community for emotional support.

At least six of the eight participants agreed that political dialogue during campaigns on rape and sexual assault on Twitter is used to gain attention, while the same content circulating on WhatsApp and Facebook is for amplification. One participant shared that sexual assault and harassment is a bigger issue in the campaigns, but the online narrative does not consistently focus on the structural issues and justice. The participant said, "In 2019 and 2021 the nation was up in arms in Hathras to bring out national and global focus to get justice for the victim, but now there is radio silence. No political party or activist is talking about it. In the news media too, there has been a complete absence on following up. The initial outrage on social media is huge, but it is not sustained, so it misses from the online campaign discourses."

Another participant shared: "Callout posts on sexual assault and violence on social media platforms during political campaigns become viral by resharing, liking, and commenting, but no justice is served. One post got over four hundred likes in a few hours, but there was no tangible outcome, no consequences. People just moved on from there." The dual role of hashtags within slacktivism and advocacy is relevant in feminist advocacy (Chen, Pain, & Barner, 2018), but it is difficult to assess the impact and engagement on the sexual assault narrative with the limited hashtag intersections between the campaign hashtags and the sexual assault advocacy narrative.

Implications of the study and conclusion

Data collected from both the social media posts and the participant interviews point to one overarching theme: that rape and sexual assault during a political campaign are largely overlooked unless the electorate identifies with the survivors, as in the case of Jyoti Singh (Nirbhaya) (Guha, 2021). Similarly, the List of Sexual Harassers in Academia (LoSHA) addressed the concerns of the middle and upper class, creating an online space for feminist debate (Chakraborty, 2019). The sexual assault and rape of women from marginalized communities do not become part of political campaign conversations because they do not align with the collective action plan of the majority class and religion's shared belief. As one participant said during the interview, rape and sexual assault in marginalized communities are often framed as the work of *goonda-badmash* (miscreants) in campaign narratives. This framing creates a gap, and the conversation does not become part of the larger middle- and upper-class narrative on social media platforms.

Several political parties have crowdsourced campaign issues to include in their manifesto and campaign materials through online platforms (Chauhan, 2019). Rape and sexual assault come under the safety measures for women in urban areas and rarely feature as a prominent issue. The only time rape and sexual assault became prominent issues was in 2014, after Jyoti Singh's gang rape and murder when the news media was instrumental in creating a strong agenda around the issue. Relegating rape and sexual

violence to safety and women's issues leads to dismissing the discourses on sexual violence against women as a structural issue. This is also reflected in social media conversations. Even when there are campaign conversations on rape and sexual assault, they are much less focused on class, caste, religion, and location intersections. Because middle-class and urban elites are known to steer the conversation around campaign themes because it is primarily based on access and gatekeeping, crowdsourced campaign discourses are hardly any different. While discussion about sexual assault and rape are online campaign issues, we need to recognize that the power to set campaign agendas rests with access to online platforms, where issues of intersectional identities are either not identified or dismissed from the conversations.

When it comes to integrating sexual harassment and assault as campaign issues, the political parties seek to use rape and sexual violence as isolated incidents but not as an ongoing fundamental issue. Thus, in the long run, they are not inclined in the larger conversation in sustaining the pursuit to address rape and sexual assault as a policy issue through the political campaign. For example, in 2020 the party in power in Uttar Pradesh used the state machinery to stop protests by the opposition parties in Hathras following the gang rape and murder of a 19-year-old Dalit girl. In 2021, this party was the main opponent in the West Bengal elections and focused on the rape and sexual assault of the lower-caste and -class women in rural West Bengal and was met with similar resistance from the party in power. Political affiliations and identifying with candidates' work for the community supersedes their positions on sexual violence and assault. Thus, the party in power incorporates sexual violence as a safety, honor, and women's campaign issue. The implication of this gap consistently keeps sexual assault as an issue outside of political campaigns—even when women lead these campaigns. In the recent past, #Nirbhaya became a part of online political discourse after Jyoti Singh's rape and murder in 2012. In this particular case, the inclusion of Singh's rape and murder in the campaign led to the institution of new laws. Until sexual assault and violence become a part of online political discourse as an issue during the political campaigns, it will continue to be framed as a political scandal and "one of the many women's issues."

When hashtag campaigning and digital activism (Khamis & Mili, 2018) are integrated with hashtag pragmatism (Scott, 2015), they become applicable to successful political campaigns. The engagement of volunteer influencers in political campaigns and online discourses from Facebook emphasizes the collective use (Posch, Wagner, Singer, & Strohmaier, 2013) of sexual assault if it serves the campaign narrative.

Within online campaign narratives, the absence of attention to structural inequities in whether victims and survivors get justice after sexual assault in demonstrates that it is not the priority of the political parties or the candidates. The idea is to use the power of social media platforms to include the sexual assault framework in campaign rhetoric. But most often, it becomes exploitative. Unsurprisingly, online campaign narratives and news narratives behave similarly in collectively disowning sexual assaults during political campaigns. Embracing and integrating sexual assaults in political campaigns will reveal women's impediments and structural inequalities, especially for women in marginalized communities, in getting justice. Justice for rape and sexual assault victims from marginalized communities does not depend on the virality of social media posts. But social media platforms could influence campaign discourses to include sexual violence as a

campaign conversation, leading to political inclusivity and agenda building addressing the structural issues of rape and sexual assault.

Note

1. In February 2012, Suzette Jordan, a woman in Kolkata, was gang-raped by five men, on the pretext of giving her a ride home. In 2013, she marched against rape and sexual assault in West Bengal and disclosed her identity. Jordan died of meningitis in 2015. See <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/park-street-rape-case-after-four-year-manhunt-main-accused-arrested-in-greater-noida-305895/>.

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