"Dented, Painted, and Proud": Satire on Indian Social Media after the 2012 Delhi Gang Rape

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1. Introduction

The horrific gang rape and subsequent death of Jyoti Singh Pandey in New Delhi, India on December 16, 2012 has served as an orienting moment through which a proliferation of discourses about rape in India have been circulating through mass and social media. Since the Delhi gang rape, "cultural" explanations for such crimes have been dominant in much Western media reportage, a familiar narrative that has been repeatedly critiqued by postcolonial feminists for its orientalist and essentialist qualities. Scholars have variously engaged with the fallout of the Delhi gang rape, particularly the implications of class inequality in the rates and representations of rape in urban spaces (Baxi, 2014; Amrute, 2015), but no studies have yet addressed the creative and critical discourses that young Indians have constructed in response to the Delhi gang rape and its aftermath in recent years.

Indian youth, particularly university students, have been prominent both in organizing grassroots level anti-violence protests in various cities across India as well as engaging in digital protest on Twitter and other social media sites (cf. Bonilla and Rosa 2015). Losh (2014) describes a form of "hashtag feminism" that emerged as users commented on unfolding events by marking their tweets with the pound symbol, which makes them searchable, such as #DelhiGangRape and #JusticeforJyoti. While the 2012 rape has become iconic of the contemporary anti-violence campaign in the mainstream Indian and international media, further high-profile assaults since then have fueled ongoing critiques on social media of structural violence against women and dominant victim blaming narratives in Indian society. In this paper, I analyze a particular discursive phenomenon on social media platforms, especially YouTube, that has proliferated since the 2012 attack in which youth deploy a highly satirical performative register to highlight and undermine the dominant discourses about rape in India. I argue that while this phenomenon does not

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constitute a unified form of resistance to patriarchal hegemony in the classic Marxian sense, it nevertheless affords Indian youth a mechanism for challenging the dominance of mainstream political rhetoric that has consistently blamed victims for their own assaults.

2. Anthropological Approaches to Rape in the Mass Media

Since the infamous 2012 attack, international media discourses about rape in India have used a familiar set of orientalist tropes that attribute violence to an essentialized "Indian culture." Western news outlets ran headlines like "Gang-rape Shame Could Drag India into 21st century,"[1] "India Tries to Move Beyond its Rape Culture,"[2] and "India's Culture of Gang Rape and the Failure to Stop It."[3] Uma Narayan has shown that there is a longstanding history of providing "cultural explanations" for the deaths of Third World women, whereas violence against women in the West is often attributed to individual aberrations in character or psychology (1997: 62). Narayan analyzes a pattern in which dowry murders in India are represented by the American media and academy as fundamentally different from the broader, more familiar phenomenon of domestic violence. This elision of dowry murders as a form of domestic violence contributes to the portrayal of Indian culture as exceptionally violent due to its culture, despite the similarities in the rates of fatal partner violence in the U.S. and India. As a result, she argues, when news of dowry murders reaches the West, the lack of contextual understanding causes it to be characterized as a "bizarre Indian ritual… that must be caused by Indian culture," or what she calls, "death by culture" (Narayan, 1997: 103).

More recently, Indian feminist activists have taken to the blogosphere to deconstruct Western representations of the Delhi gang rape for being sensationalist, reductive, and often deliberately maligning. Indian journalist, Noopur Tiwari, wrote on the blog *NewsLaundry* that excessively graphic reporting of the details of various gang rapes feeds into the "Western media's dangerous obsession" in which:

> The focus remains on gruesomeness and the emphasis is on evoking fear – turning the coverage into little more than an exercise in titillation. For an audience with little or no first-hand knowledge of India, the country is demonised and reduced to one single horrific, regressive reality – its rape culture.[4]

Poulami Roychowdhury (2013) has demonstrated the implications of Western representations of the Delhi gang rape, particularly the way in which Jyoti Singh Pandey was depicted as a modern, aspiring young woman representing the "new India" whereas the assailants were seen as epitomizing the backwardness of rural, working class migrant laborers (284). She says that these caricatures contribute to two fundamental erasures: first, the fact that Jyoti's friend, Awrinda Pandey, was also brutally assaulted and dumped

[1] Retrieved from: http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/world/gang-rape-shame-could-drag-india-into-21st-century/story-fnb64oi6-1226545829569
[2] Retrieved from: http://blogs.reuters.com/john-lloyd/2012/12/28/india-tries-to-move-beyond-its-rape-culture/
[3] This headline from the *Washington Post* was subsequently altered to simply "India's Gang Rapes and the Failure to Stop Them" but the URL on the website reflects the original title. Retrieved from: http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2014/05/30/indias-culture-of-gang-rape-and-the-failure-to-stop-it/
[4] Retrieved from: http://www.newslaundry.com/2014/07/01/western-medias-dangerous-obsession/

naked on the streets of New Delhi. Second, the public's demands for the death, castration, and mutilation of the accused rapists contribute to the normalization of structural violence against the bodies of the rural poor, who are treated as dispensable by the state (Roychowdhury, 2013: 288). Ultimately, it is only the modern, "rights-bearing" subject who is deemed worthy of state intervention and international care, as the deaths of low class, low caste women continue to go unpublicized.

While critiques of Western representations of violence in the Third World are key to understanding the power dynamics inherent to media representations, scholars have remained unilaterally focused on reproduction of the First World gaze on India, leaving us with little understanding of the internal dynamics of politicized discourses about rape in India. This elides the fact that the focus on the disparate class statuses was very prominent within the Indian media as well, despite the fact that the victim and the accused were from similar class and caste backgrounds (Amrute, 2015: 337-338). Rather than concentrating on disparaging portrayals of India in Western media, Indian youth on social media have instead placed import on delegitimizing the voices of India's political elite – those who espouse ideologies about gender and violence that consistently blame victims for their own assaults. As a result, youth circumvent the discourse of "culture" in favor of specific critiques of attitudes that normalize and propagate rape on a structural level within Indian society.

2.1 Dark Humor and Power Relations

Since 2012, social media platforms have allowed for the formation of mediatized publics (Agha, 2011) in which young Indians have creatively engaged in discussion about the issue of violence against women and voiced counter narratives that systematically question the validity of dominant discourses. Although the vast majority of online engagement has been overtly critical in its effort to challenge victim blaming, there has also been a proliferation of humor as a strategy to expose the absurdity of certain statements made by prominent male Indian politicians since the Delhi gang rape. A patterned genre of humor that has emerged in recent years involves satirical performances of *pro*-rape and *pro*-victim blaming sentiments, particularly in video form on YouTube, but also in the form of political cartoons, memes, and other 2D visual formats.

Satirical performances of victim blaming narratives on social media constitute a counterdiscourse (Hill, 1998a; Limón, 1989) vis-à-vis a dominant discourses about rape in India in which women are routinely blamed for their own assaults. Humorous critiques of victim blaming narratives have proliferated in post-2012 online activism in YouTube videos, political cartoons, memes, and personal comments made by users on Twitter and Facebook. The type of satire that has proliferated on social media has grown in response to specific statements made by elite politicians that have normalized sexual violence and delegitimized the voices of protesters. These humorous critiques are mostly constructed in English and Hindi, as well a hybridized repertoire of both, in which the two codes are not clearly distinguishable. In another performative genre—Mock registers (Hill, 1998b; Bucholtz, 1999; Chun, 2013)—humor is achieved through the appropriation of a set of linguistic features associated with a marginalized group other than one's own. The satirical YouTube videos I analyze below are starkly different from one another linguistically, being uttered in English, Hinglish, and Hindi respectively. Instead of appropriating an enregistered set of linguistic features (Agha 2003), performances of pro-rape stances

achieve a mocking effect by voicing a hyper-patriarchal masculinity in the content of their discourses.

It is tempting to see young Indians who both perform and consume satirical YouTube videos as successfully challenging power structures such that victims of gender violence will no longer be blamed for their own assaults. While humor is efficacious in undermining dominant discourses, satirical videos about rape are more similar to genre of humor Bakhtin (1984) analyzed in the literature of the Middle Ages known as the "carnivalesque" This form of humor involved jokes that were profoundly violent, gory, and scatological, subverting the norms and values of the ruling class and thereby accomplishing a temporary inversion of the social order. This temporariness is inherent to satirical YouTube videos as well, in that while humor allows speakers to upending power hierarchies between dominant and oppressed groups, it is important to recognize the contextual nature of joking within certain social environments. YouTube videos are a unique context for interaction in which speakers are able to push the boundaries of appropriate social behavior, but these are also limited in their consumption and impact. Ultimately, joking is neither entirely transformative nor conservative of structures of power, but "allows for critique and subversion of dominant ideals within the constraints of particular social situations" (Black, 2012: 89)

3. Satire on Social Media in India

The proliferation of satirical humor on social media has not emerged in response to the assaults themselves, but instead in response to statements made by prominent individuals, especially politicians and religious leaders, about the assaults. These take the form of political cartoons, memes, tweets, and YouTube videos. During the initial protests after the Delhi rape, Indian National Congress politician Abhijit Mukherjee, son of the president of India Pranab Mukherjee, gave an interview in which he remarked about the Delhi protesters:

> Those who claim to be students—I can see many beautiful women among them—highly dented-painted—they're giving interviews on TV, they've brought their children to show them the scenes. I have grave doubts whether they're students, because women of that age are generally not students.[5]

This comment, which both insinuated that female protesters were dilettantish and delegitimized their political voice by sexualizing them as "dented-painted," created immediate backlash online as the hashtag #DentedPainted trended on Twitter and was incorporated into ongoing protests in Delhi (see Figures 1 and 2).

Satirical performances online are saturated with references to comments made by Indian politicians that variously attributed rape to aspects of women's behavior. A Hindu spiritual leader, Asaram Bapu, claimed that if the Delhi victim had taken God's name and begged for mercy from her attackers, calling them "*bhaiyya*" (brother), she would not have

[5] Bhadoria, Sonal. December 27, 2012. "Delhi Protests Are by 'Dented and Painted' Women: President Pranab's Son." *India Times*. Retrieved from http://www.indiatimes.com/india/dentedpainted-women-abhijit-mukherjees-dumb-sexist-remark-51899.html

been harmed.[6] A leader from a Harayana village government, or *panchayat*, Jitender Chhatar, was quoted saying that the Chinese dish chowmein causes rape because it "leads to hormonal imbalance evoking an urge to indulge in such acts."[7] References to Chhatar's statement appear in the YouTube videos reproduced in Transcripts (1) and (2) in the following section, along with Asaram Bapu's "*bhaiyya* technique," which is mentioned in Transcript (1). Several other references to prominent political statements are embedded within the videos, along with other commonly heard statements that blame women for their own assaults, which are all summarily satirized in the form of videos that take a pro-rape, pro-victim blaming stance. This process of recontextualization is a noted affordance of social media platforms like YouTube, in which discourses that originate in the online sphere get taken up and imbued with new meanings in speakers' "mass-mediated communicative repertoires" (Rymes, 2012: 214). In this mediatized space, popular phrases take on new semiotic meanings with multiple indexicalities, in which the figure of the hyper-patriarchal Indian male is simultaneously voiced as hegemonic and absurd. This type of scathing critique, while not solely confined to new media, has proliferated due to its ability to unite young people in their collective desire to challenge political authority figures in concrete ways.

Figure (1)

Figure (2)

3.2 "Rape, It's Your Fault"

The most prominent example of the satirical performance of pro-rape rhetoric that has flourished online since 2012 is a YouTube video entitled, "Rape, It's Your Fault,"[8] which was published on September 19, 2013 by the Indian comedy group All India Bakchod and features two prominent female celebrities: Bollywood actress Kalki Koechlin and video

[6] Singh, Mahim Pratap. January 7, 2013. "Asaram: Rape Victim Should've Pleaded for Mercy." *The Hindu*. Retrieved from http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/asaram-rape-victim-shouldve-pleaded-for-mercy/article4283466.ece

[7] Saini, Manveer. October 16, 2012. "Harayana Khap Blames Consumption of Chowmein for Rapes." *The Times of India*. Retrieved from http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Haryana-khap-blames-consumption-of-chowmein-for-rapes/articleshow/16829882.cms

[8] Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8hC0Ng_ajpY

jockey Juhi Pande. As of 2015, the video has 4.8 million views, and was publicized widely on both mainstream news sites and social media sites. The video contains extensive imagery that is inseparable from the spoken performance. The extensive non-verbal embodied performances placed in double parentheses:

Transcript (1)

Kalki: Ladies, do you think rape is something men do out of a desire for control?
Empowered by years of patriarchy?
(hh) You've clearly been misled by the notion that women (.) are *people* too
Because let's face it ladies. Rape? It's your fault. ((pointing toward screen))
It all begins with what you wear
Scientific studies suggest that women who wear skirts are the leading cause of rape. Do you know why? Because men have eyes. ((smiling))
In fact, here are some examples of provocative clothing that may cause rape.
((Juhi appears smiling, wearing tank top and shorts. A red X appears over her body while a harsh buzzer sounds. The same pattern continues as she appears in several outfits, including two dresses, followed by a burqa, a yellow hazmat suit, and an astronaut uniform))
((several lines omitted))
Kalki: Indian culture provides for several progressive methods to counter rape
For example, the *govment* prescribed ((gestures air quotations)) *bhaiyya* technique, wherein you just refer to your attacker as *bhaiyya* and voila!
Rape cancelled. ((two hooded men appear, grab her, cover her mouth))
Bhaiyya! Bhaiyya! ((They disappear. She coughs twice and smiles))
Ladies, this works every time!
((several lines omitted))
((Kalki appears with blackened eye))
Kalki: Powerful people have been spreading rumors that things apart from you can cause rape
((Writing appears: "Chowmein leads to hormonal imbalance evoking an urge to indulge in such acts"))
(hh) For example, chowmein. Chowmein is made in the kitchen.
((diminutive voice)) And who is in the kitchen? ((smiles and nods head))
((Juhi appears with bruises on her face))
((Writing appears: Bollywood encourages women to abandon more demure clothing for 'net (stockings) and miniskirt'"))
Juhi: Movies. And who titillates men on screen? ((gestures toward the screen))
((Onscreen: "Mobiles are spoiling girls"))
Kalki: A:nd cell phones. Cell phones are made for talking. And who talks a lot?
((smiles, points at self)

This video deploys a form of carnivalesque humor that uses not only language, but also the body to represent violence as a happy and deserved action taken against women. Writing about the folk culture of the Middle Ages, Bakhtin describes a popular type of "grotesque realism" in which humor derives its power through the degradation of the body, as blood, sex, and defecation were the major sources of "low" comedy (Goldstein, 2003: 11). In "Rape, It's Your Fault," humor derives not only from the statements that the speakers make, including reference to the "*bhaiyya* technique" and Jitender Chhatar's chowmein conspiracy theory, but also from the gradual depiction of violence and

accumulation of blood and bruises on the speakers' bodies. The video achieves a strong critique through the deployment of a spoken pro-victim blaming stance, alongside Kalki and Juhi's smiling faces, covered in blood, progressively becoming more bruised by hooded attackers (see Figure 3). The juxtaposition of grotesque violence with the speakers' happy tone is what truly makes this video a powerful critique of victim blaming discourses in India.

Figure (3)

3.3 "Let's Ban Women"

The second example of a recent satirical video is entitled "Let's Ban Women" and was published on March 5, 2015 on the YouTube channel Fame Fashion, which features videos on Indian pop culture, fashion, and comedy.[9] This particular video was posted for the occasion of International Women's Day on March 8, 2015, and has nearly 100,000 views. The video contains a single speaker, Harman Singha, who recites a love poem about a beautiful woman in Hindi, followed by the question: "*Kya Indian men actually aaurton ke bare mein romantically sochte hain?"* (Do Indian mean actually think romantically about women?) Several male Indian voices are then heard uttering threatening sexual advances in Hindi while images of women from protests are shown. The title of the video is in reference to controversy over censorship that occurred in India in early 2015 when the government decided to ban the documentary *India's Daughter* from airing on television. The documentary, made by British filmmaker Leslee Udwin, centers on the story of the Delhi gang rape and its aftermath and contains an extended interview of one of the convicted rapists, in which he expressed remorselessness for his actions. The film was thus seen as contributing to what one politician, M. Venkaiah Naidu, described as "an international conspiracy to defame India."[10]

In the video, Harman consistently code switches between Hindi and English. There is a high degree of bivalency in his speech, as English lexical items incorporated into and

[9] Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i2juNXTCK1I
[10] Available at: http://www.theguardian.com/media/2015/mar/04/indias-daughter-bbc-delhi-rape-documentary-uk-india-ban

take on Hindi morphology, and vice versa. For example, in line (14) below, the word *kamizes* appears in the middle of an otherwise English sentence, and is the Hindi word for shirt, "*kamiz*" with English plural morphology, "-es."

Transcript (2)

1 ***Aaurton ki itni baaton se problems hain na?***
"There are so many problems with women, aren't there?"
2 **So let's just ban those creatures**
3 ***Kyun? Dar gayi ladies?***
"What? Are you scared ladies?"
4 **Don't wanna be banned do you?**
5 ***Chalo, main sikhata hoon acche se behave karne ke***
"Okay, I'll teach you some methods for how to behave well"
6 ***Kayde mein rehne ke kuch taur-tarike***
"and stay in the norm"
7 ***Sab se pehle, apna dressing sense badlo, yaar***
"First of all, change your dressing sense, friend"
8 **Don't wear skirts, socks, saris, sexy *kamizes*** (shirts)**, school uniforms**
9 **In fact you know what, just f-((bleep))-ing wrap a bedsheet around your head**
10 **And so- put some pillowcases**
11 **Okay? You got that?**
12 **Secondly, don't ever eat chowmein**
13 ***Chowmein khana aapki sehat ke liye hanikarak ho sakta hai***
"Eating chowmein can be dangerous for your health"
14 **So never, cause it instantly turns you into a raving slut**
15 **And third and most important**
16 ***Kabhi aise savaal mat puchna***
"Never ask questions like these"
17 ***Kabhi yeh sab mat kehna***
"Never say any of this"
18 **In fact, you can't even say things like**
19 ((woman's voice dubbed over Harman's lips)) ***Kyun? Main kyun nahin kar sakti?***
"Why? Why can't I do it?"
20 ***Tum kar sakte toh main kyun nahin kar sakti?***
"You can do it so why can't I?"
21 **I'm also equal**
22 ((in his own voice)) **Equal… is a bad word**
23 **We're banning it**
30 **In fact, *baat karne chod do na?***
"just stop talking okay?"
31 **How about you communicate with sign language?**

In this performance of "ironic masculinity" (Chun, 2013), Harman Singh parodies a hyper-patriarchal Indian male whom he voices throughout the majority of the video, with the exception of the poem in the beginning and one moment early on in which there are a few seconds that have been inserted into the ongoing video in which Harman breaks the "fourth wall" of the screen to assure his audience that the views he espouses are not his own, but belong to an unnamed "they." This attempt to carefully balance the voices of the other he criticizes alongside his own voice results in an awkward break in the performative

register. In contemplating why the filmmakers decided to insert this clip, I was reminded of Keith Basso's (1979) analysis of Apache joking performances of "the Whiteman," a jocular register in which speakers take on the behavioral characteristics of their historical Anglo oppressors Basso, drawing on Goffman's frame analysis (1974), notes in Apache performances that if the "butts of jokes do not play along" then "secondary texts are read as primary ones and the joking frame 'breaks'" (Basso, 1979: 43). Joking can thus be "dangerous" for the speaker, who runs the risk of being taken seriously and thereby damaging his own face in the act of performance. Here, Harman breaks the satirical register of speech to ensure the viewer that it is not actually he who believes these things, thereby mitigating the possibility that viewers will take him seriously as a hyper-patriarchal male.

3.4 "Rape Me!"

The final video is entitled "Rape Karo!" (Rape Me!) and was published on YouTube on January 5, 2015.[11] It has 729,000 views, and is entirely in Hindi without subtitles. The speaker here is Madhuri Desai, who recites a poem written by Manish Gupta, in which she begs a variety of men to come and rape her.

Transcript (3)[12]

1 *Tumhari taxi mein bethi hoon, mera rape karo*
I'm sitting in your taxi, why don't you rape me
2 (hh) *Tumse music seekhne aati hoon, mera rape karo*
I come to learn music from you, why don't you rape me
3 *Tumhari davah-khane mein tonsils dikhane aayi hoon,*
I've come to your clinic to get my tonsils checked
4 *Tumhare aashram mein maa ko saath layi hoon,*
I've brought my mother along with me to your ashram
5 *Mera karo, maa ka bhi karo!*
Rape me, rape my mother too!
6 *Hamare tadapti jawani shaant karo*
Come satisfy our sexual yearning
7 *(*hh) *Aur yeh goree chamdee? Yeh toh hoti hee randiya hai!*
And these white-skinned girls? They are whores by nature
8 *Aadamkhor aauraten, Bhartiya sanskriti ke bilkul vipreet aurate*
Man-eaters, with completely opposite values from those of our Indian culture
9 *Unke desh mein mard nahi bacche, isliye tumhe kharaab karne aayi hain,*
They don't have any real men left in their countries, and so they've come here to seduce you.
10 *Mere Bharat Mata ke putro, ek chhoti-si social service nahi karoge*?
Sons of my Mother India, won't you perform this small social service?

Since it is exclusively accessible to a Hindi-speaking audience, this video is markedly different from the previous two, which presume an audience with at least partial competency in English. The discursive strategies deployed in "Rape Karo" are nonetheless similar to the pervious examples, as the speaker continually smiles and laughs as she

[11] Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G7F9njIJQ_w
[12] I am grateful to Krishna Vij for his help with this translation.

incites a number of men in positions of power (a taxi driver, a music teacher, a dentist, a priest) to rape her, her mother, and white-skinned girls.

4. Conclusion

Satirical YouTube videos about rape in India are a creative form of political commentary that challenge dominant ideals about rape and victim blaming. It also is a form of protest that only certain socioeconomically privileged Indians enjoy, particularly those who have some fluency in English, access to computers, and knowledge of the political dynamics. The internal dynamics of the women's movement in India are extremely complex and fractured by differences in generation, education, class and caste, and as such satirical YouTube videos represent only a partial, if pervasive, form of resistance against patriarchal hegemony (Ortner, 1995).

In his analysis of counterhegemonic discourses among working-class Mexican-American in Texas, José Limón (1989) argues that just as carnivalesque humor allows these speakers to reject their marginalization by elite, upper-class American and Mexican men, this form of resistance is also predicated on the exclusion of women from such male-dominated contexts and thereby re-entrenches certain deeply patriarchal values (481). Similarly, satirical performances of pro-rape stances by young Indians on YouTube are widespread and encompass a variety of audiences, including English monolingual and Hindi monolingual, but the viewership of these videos is limited to socioeconomically privileged Internet users, as well as speakers of at least one of the two hegemonic languages in India, English and Hindi. It is unclear how widespread similar performative registers are in rural contexts, where other methods may be more useful in challenging dominant discourses. Finally, these videos do not mention the politics of caste-based rape in India, particularly the fact that low-caste (Dalit) and indigenous women experience higher rates of violence. While satirical videos effectively critique dominant attitudes toward rape, they do not mention the role of class and caste in perpetuating structural violence against poor, Dalit women, which has elsewhere been termed, "the violence of normal times" (Kannabiran, 2005: 5-6).

Since 2012, social media has served as a primary mechanism for young Indians to challenge concrete statements made by elite politicians and leaders that have routinely blamed women for their own assaults. While overt criticism of these statements has been abundant, the use of humor online to dispel stigma attached to rape victims has been increasingly salient in the post-2012 context. By performing pro-rape stances in their satirical performances, these speakers effectively construct such stances as absurd and illogical and in doing so construct critical counterdiscourses that reject victim-blaming narratives and challenge patriarchal attitudes toward gender roles in Indian society.

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