



Studying Youth, Media and Gender in Post-Liberalisation India

Focus on and beyond the 'Delhi Gang Rape'

Nadja-Christina Schneider/
Fritzi-Marie Titzmann (eds.)

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Contents

Acknowledgements	5
NADJA-CHRISTINA SCHNEIDER	
Introduction	9
PART I	
THE ‘DELHI GANG RAPE’ AS A CRITICAL MEDIA EVENT: REPRESENTATIONS, NEW PRACTICES OF DEBATE AND MEDIA SOCIABILITY	
MAITRAYEE CHAUDHURI	
National and Global Media Discourse after the savage death of ‘Nirbhaya’: Instant Access and Unequal Knowledge	19
JESNA JAYACHANDRAN	
Outrage, debate or silence: An analysis of reader comments and online rape news	45
FRITZI-MARIE TITZMANN	
“The Voice of the Youth” – Locating a new public sphere between street protest and digital discussion	79
MAREN WILGER	
The Delhi Gang Rape Case – Dynamics of the Online Debate on the Social News Aggregator reddit.com.....	113
URMILA GOEL	
The Delhi rape case and international attention – An interview with Urvashi Butalia.....	133

PART II

**LINKING YOUTH, GENDER AND MEDIA STUDIES:
MEDIA PRACTICES, NEW IM/MOBILITIES AND
EVOLVING SEXUAL IDENTITIES**

THOMAS K. GUGLER

**New Media, Neosexual Activism and Diversifying Sex Worlds
in Post-Liberalization India 143**

NADJA-CHRISTINA SCHNEIDER

**Filming Urban Spaces and Entangled (Im)mobilities:
Experimental Documentaries by & about Young ‘Muslim Women’ in Delhi 167**

KABITA CHAKRABORTY

Young people’s mobile phone cultures in the urban slums of Kolkata 191

List of Authors 215

Introduction

The brutal gang rape and subsequent death of a young woman in Delhi in December 2012 led to an instant and unexpectedly huge media attention in India and almost everywhere in the world. Contrasting the intense 24x7 coverage this case received in the Indian media with the continued indifference to sexual violence against women from lower castes and classes or to rape cases in non-metropolitan regions, many critical observers saw it as yet another evidence for a very close interlocking of the urban middle class and metropolitan media companies in the political center of India. Media attention increased significantly when thousands of peaceful demonstrators endured the winter cold in order to protest against the discrimination and violence against women. Security forces reacted with disproportionate rigour, while some Indian politicians displayed the kind of machismo which made many citizens feel that the gap between the political class and the citizens, especially the younger generation, was widening even further.

Candle-light demonstrations, which had already increased in frequency and scope in India since the mid-2000s, exemplify the aesthetic rapprochement to new global urban protest forms. In addition to that, the clear interrelationship between the new digital spaces (especially the social media networks) and the physical places of protest made them look 'familiar' to media and audiences worldwide, hence the Delhi protests were quickly ranged in the new global wave of urban protests which were often labeled as 'middle class', 'youth' or 'middle class youth protests'. Sociologist Saskia Sassen, for instance, included the protests in Delhi – and in other cities in India – in the winter of 2012 and 2013 in a gradual global process in which the middle classes are increasingly disconnected from the liberal state because they don't feel represented by the state any longer. Even if the trigger and reason for the new kind of urban street protests may be very specific in every case, Sassen argued that it is always also about a larger mix of injustices, not least what she calls the "grand larceny" of tax revenues and state resources which are increasingly fed into the global corporate system:

“I think of it as grand larceny because it goes well beyond the privileges enjoyed by rich firms and rich families in all our countries. This partly explains why middle class people everywhere, from Chile to Egypt to India were taking to the streets to protest this in different ways. [I]n short, something is happening. But we don’t have a language that captures this mix of conditions. [O]ne very general reason is that the social contract with the liberal state is not working any more. The elites are not affected and the super poor never got any benefits. It is the middle class which got so many benefits [...], now there is a new geography of privilege and disempowerment that cuts across the old divide of rich and poor countries, or North and South. And the ones that are emerging as the contesting actors are young men and women of the middle classes. They are the ones losing the most, who feel the social contract with the state is broken.”¹

However, the widespread notion that it is above all the urban middle class youth which takes to the streets was put into perspective by Sanjay Kumar. He points out that it would be incorrect to assume that the participation in demonstrations and protests is limited only to the middle class and upper crust of society, but that it “cuts across youths with various levels of educational attainment and across economic class, though in varying proportions (Kumar, 2013:40)”. Besides the social composition of protest groups another issue which triggered very interesting debates was the question whether this new form of media-cum-urban street protests is a feature of a new kind of politics. Political scientist Zoya Hasan acknowledged in an interview in 2013 that it actually is a new kind of politics and she argued that it is “a reaction to the misdemeanors of politicians and misgovernance. The middle class which dominated these protests has become assertive”². But at the same time, she worries that the new urban street protests have a flip side and could turn dangerous too, as this movement “has delineated itself from organized politics. It has no agenda. It is leaderless, chaotic and lacks vision”³.

Like many other observers, Hasan fears that it could even lead to authoritarian solutions like the protesters demanding the death sentence for rapists in January 2013.⁴ Other observers also noticed that the wave of the Delhi protests in the winter of 2012/13 was not led by any political party, leader or individual, which was, for instance, the case during the widely covered anti-corruption protests in 2011 which were led by Anna Hazare and his team. This time, how-

ever, the street protests were rather spontaneous and coordinated as well as mobilized largely through social media networks. So while some saw the positive potential in current protests and in the new kind of sociopolitical awareness among youth which “could take democracy to a new level and redefine the role of the people in it”⁵, others felt that due to the lack of leadership and a clear ideological background, there is always the danger that the movement could be ‘hi-jacked’ by actors who have no concern for it.

In the German media, the coverage and discussion about the protests was much less differentiated. The impression one could get from many reports and articles was that India had never before witnessed widespread protests against the continued oppression and violence against women. Quite understandably, many Indian academics who specialize in the history of the Indian women’s movement and have themselves actively supported the movement for several decades, were annoyed by the level of ignorance in global news reports and even in many background articles about India. The same applies to the knowledge production in the field of jurisdiction where feminist activists and law experts have, for instance, also laid the groundwork which enabled the Justice Verma Committee to quickly produce a report in January 2013 which provided recommendations for amendments to the Criminal Law which would provide for quicker trial and enhanced punishment of criminals accused of committing sexual assault against women.

A common feature of many critical media events is the partial repetition or ‘recycling’ of a good deal of the original coverage in order to let audiences ‘remember’ what happened one, two or ten years ago. In the German media, a question which was typically asked in many headlines one year after the ‘Delhi Gang Rape’ and subsequent protests was what, if anything at all, had actually changed for women in India since then? Needless to say, many articles and reports found that, although there had been a lot of media coverage and activism in India in the wake of the crime, the situation for women in India had not changed or improved significantly. But can they actually substantiate such an assessment in a large and extremely diverse country like India? How do we define ‘change’ and is it at all possible to ‘measure’ it?

From a critical Indian Media Studies perspective, the editors of this volume feel that the emergence and fostering of an issue-based public debate among citizens is a very central precondition and element of any process of socio-cultural change, hence a lot more in-depth analysis of the form, content and

dynamics of these debates is required in order to develop a more nuanced understanding of the ongoing social processes in India's contemporary and increasingly media saturated society. In this context it is relevant to mention that Delhi may well be said to have become one of the important "nodes" and "switches", to cite two concepts established by Manuel Castells and Andreas Hepp, of the global network society and that without the intensified medialisation and 24x7 coverage of this critical event in India, international media would perhaps hardly have become aware of it. However, this aspect which is significant for the analysis and understanding of media-society dynamics has not really been taken into consideration so far.

This volume aims to look both at as well as *beyond* the 'Delhi Gang Rape' through the lens of Indian Media Studies. While a dominant media framing in the Eurocentric media represented the 'Delhi Gang Rape' as evidence that a highly paternalistic and misogynistic Indian culture and society remained essentially 'unchanged', we consider it a critical event, or rather critical media event, that needs to be contextualized within a rapidly changing, diversifying and globalizing society which is as much confronted with new ruptures, asymmetries and inequalities as it may still be shaped by the old-established structures of a patriarchal social order. Hence the question how the 'Delhi Gang Rape' is framed and represented by the media (in this volume: TV, digital as well as online print media) requires as much attention as the ways in which readers, users and viewers interpret, debate and contextualize it in their everyday lives, which may in turn lead to new social practices. At the same time, we are convinced that the study of this critical event should not be disconnected but rather placed in a growing research area which links the study of youth cultures, gender and media in contemporary Indian society. Accordingly, we have divided the volume in two parts.

PART I focuses on the 'Delhi Gang Rape' as a critical media event. It looks at the representations and framings in national as well as international media (Chap. 1 by MAITRAYEE CHAUDHURI and Chap. 5 by URMILA GOEL) and at the interface of new practices of debate, information sharing and media-specific sociability (Chap. 2 by JESNA JAYACHANDRAN, Chap. 3. by FRITZI-MARIE TITZMANN and Chap. 4. by MAREN WILGER).

MAITRAYEE CHAUDHURI argues that although there is a growing convergence between 'national' and 'global' media discourses, important differences still persist in the content and tenor between the two sets of discourses. She

finds that this observation holds true today in most key sites of knowledge production other than the academia, for instance international institutions (IIs), global think tanks, corporate research institutions and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). As CHAUDHURI establishes in her article, they also form key sources of information for contemporary media and for the emerging global public sphere. While the “asymmetry of knowledge” may not be new at all, as she argues, what is new indeed is the “potent convergence of ‘ignorance’ and ‘instant access’ that new technologies have made possible”. It is within this specific configuration that she analyzes both the content and form of the mediated discourse in the aftermath of the ‘Delhi Gang Rape’.

In her contribution, JESNA JAYACHANDRAN draws our attention to the problem that, despite the academic interest in participatory cultures opened up by digital and especially by social media, the study of reader comments in online print media remains an underexplored area. In view of the fact that the Indian newspaper market (online & print) is one of the largest in the world, and that commenting online in newspaper websites provides an “immediate, common mode of participation, interaction and expression of alternative views in degrees of anonymity for readers” in India, more research should be dedicated to this specific area. Based on her analysis of online comments about rape and sexual violence that were published on the *Times of India* website in 2013, JAYACHANDRAN argues that one of the major reasons why gender equality continues to be a challenge precisely lies in the problem that while some selected stories about sexual violence are made visible (and many more are underreported and hence rendered invisible), journalists rarely link them to larger social problems. Reader comments are hence as much reflective of this specific asymmetry of knowledge and information as they give us, according to JAYACHANDRAN, a very clear idea about the current “male moral panics over changing notions of legalities, gender and relationships”.

Based on the assumption that the physical places and digital spaces of protest were very closely connected in the context of the ‘Delhi Gang Rape’, FRITZI-MARIE TITZMANN looks at the web portal *Youth Ki Awaaz* (Voice of the Youth) which has emerged as a major English-language platform for youth-related issues in India over the last couple of years. In contrast to the media-specific sociability and practices of debate (or non-debate) in other online fora, TITZMANN’s analysis of posts on *Youth Ki Awaaz* shows that many of the young people who contributed to the debate and emergence of an issue-based public also actively engaged in the mobilization and participation in street protests in

the wake of the gang rape case. Contrary to the often-heard perception that especially the urban youth in India is not so interested or engaged in sociopolitical movements, TITZMANN finds that the “emerging discourses around gender, mobility, space, politics, and the media are far from trivial and contain serious critique of the existing system”.

Focusing on the role specific media and online communities play in the remediation of critical events, MAREN WILGER in her articles looks at the dynamics of discussions about the ‘Delhi Gang Rape’ and the media coverage it received on the U.S. based social news aggregator *reddit.com*, a very popular website which serves to collect and structure content that is exclusively uploaded and shared by registered users. Using multiple methods of online ethnography or *netnography*, a term coined by Robert Kozinets, WILGER gives a nuanced insight into what she considers an “ambiguous role” of a specific online community which on the one hand has the capacity to highlight hitherto invisible or neglected issues while it may on the other hand actively reproduce and even reinforce existing culturalist stereotypes and imaginations about India as a “rape culture or country”.

The problem of a continued culturalist stereotyping of India and now, more specifically, essentialising of the Indian capital Delhi as a ‘rape capital’ is also addressed in the interview URMILA GOEL conducted with renowned Indian writer, historian and publisher URVASHI BUTALIA about the ‘Gang Rape Case’ and the enormous attention it received worldwide. Like many other feminists and scholars of women’s studies in India, BUTALIA is very critical of the ignorance displayed in many media reports of the December 2012 protests in Delhi and other Indian cities which led Western audiences to assume that this was the first time in Indian history women and supporters of women’s rights stood up and fought for their rights.

PART II introduces three exemplary case studies which serve to illustrate the relevance, interconnectedness and methodological scope of India related Youth, Gender and Media Studies.

Access to new media technologies as well as the general rapid medialisation of society since the mid-1980s was crucial for the development of specific media practices which could spur the communication and recognition of distinct Lesbian, Gay, Trans(gender) and Queer (LGBTQ) sexual identities in India. At the same time, as THOMAS GUGLER argues in his article, the project of sexual liberation is increasingly shaped by the capitalist change, hence active

participants in pride parades are, in the eyes of ever growing advertising and pornographic industries, simultaneously becoming potential consumers. Notwithstanding the process of commodification and despite severe backlashes on the legal and on other levels, he thinks that the pluralization and diversification of “sex worlds” in India is “unstoppable”.

In her article on two young filmmakers based in Delhi, NADJA-CHRISTINA SCHNEIDER suggests not to look primarily at their documentary films about “young Muslim women in the city” as ‘alternative representations’ vis-à-vis the dominant stereotypical representations in Indian media. Instead, she uses the lens of entangled im/mobilities (i.e. technical, physical, communicative, emotional, imaginative etc.) in order to contextualize the two filmmakers’ exploration and understanding of documentary forms and filmmaking practices in the specific experiences of a generation who was born in the 1980s and 90s and who, besides the dramatic political and socioeconomic changes, has seen an accelerated transformation of many urban localities in Indian cities.

Based on a long-time ethnographic study on the impact of mobile phones on local youth cultures in two *bustees* (urban slums) in Kolkata, KABITA CHAKRABORTY argues in her article that for those young people who have access to this technology, mobile phones have become an ordinary feature of their everyday lives during the last decade, much like in many other parts of the world. Her analysis of emergent mobile phone practices shows how they intersect with gendered social, employment and educational changes and how mobile phone usage is also impacting on the “landscape of romantic relationships” in the two *bustees*. In view of ever decreasing ownership and maintenance costs, Chakraborty predicts a future *bustee* where the mobile or cell phone becomes “an ordinary part of local youth culture”.

While employing different angles and approaches, all eight contributions in this volume are driven by the motivation to render visible the interconnectedness of (new) media, gender, youth and its political implications.

As mentioned above, the exceptional densification of communication about the ‘Delhi Gang Rape’ served as a starting point to explore the diverse landscape of mediated discourses on gender in the contemporary Indian context. But the volume also looks beyond the critical media event and introduces other related thematic areas of this research field. We hope that this compilation contributes in a meaningful way to the growing research of Indian Media Studies.

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- 1 Fernandez, Milena. 2013. "Why the middle class is revolting". Interview with Saskia Sassen. *The Hindu* (12 January 2013) Online available at: <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/interview/why-the-middle-class-is-revolting/article4299097.ece> (last checked 31 Aug 2014).
 - 2 Agency Report. 2013. "Politics of street protests; its power, its danger". *Current News* (5 January 2013). Online available at: <http://currentnews.emsme.in/2013/01/05/politics-of-street-protests-its-power-dangers/> (last checked 31 August 2014).
 - 3 Ibid.
 - 4 Ibid.
 - 5 Ibid.

PART I
THE 'DELHI GANG RAPE' AS A CRITICAL MEDIA EVENT:
REPRESENTATIONS, NEW PRACTICES OF DEBATE
AND MEDIA SOCIABILITY

National and Global Media Discourse after the savage death of 'Nirbhaya': Instant Access and Unequal Knowledge

On December 16, 2012, a 23-year-old physiotherapy student was brutally gang-raped and assaulted by 6 people in New Delhi, the capital of India. The victim, who came to be known as 'Nirbhaya' (one without fear) died thirteen days later. The ghastly incident evoked widespread protests. The national and global media covered this extensively. It was the cover story in Indian media for a few weeks and never quite dropped out of national discourse unlike other issues. This was unprecedented. But given that it happened in the Indian capital and Indian media's own past in engaging with women's issues, it is more easily understandable. The widespread coverage of this incident in international media calls for greater explanation given India's traditionally low visibility in it. One possible explanation is that Delhi has emerged as one of the important nodes and switches, in Castells' language of the global network society and that without the massive mediatization of this critical event in Indian media, western media would hardly have become aware of it (Castells 1990, 2000).

While this is an undeniable fact, I would argue that any attempt to understand this has to also pay careful attention to the historically specific context within which the discourses were played out. The context I argue is new. Both globally and nationally, it is defined by neo-liberal globalization, India's own economic ascendancy within it¹, the rise of a host of international organizations fitting norms of global governance; new technology, media convergence and the unprecedented role of a mediatized public discourse. This paper argues that though there is a growing convergence between 'national' and 'global' discourse, important differences still persist in the content and tenor between the two sets of discourses. It is through a comparative study of the two on 'Nirbhaya', that this article seeks to examine how and why they differ.

This paper therefore argues that an imperative need exists to bring in history and political economy to have a better understanding of contexts, commonalities and differences between 'national' and 'global' discourse. Neither the

logic of media nor the mandate of proliferating project-based research would explain this. Yet it is evident that India's past bears heavily on the present 'national' discourse. And the history of orientalism cannot be wished away entirely from global discourse. The latter, one can argue stems from 'the inequality of ignorance' that Dipesh Chakrabarty pointed to many years ago that persist between first world and third world scholars (Chakravarti 1992). Academic centres of global excellence such as Harvard University too are not free of this bane of unequal ignorance' as Prabha Kotiswaran's remarks in the context of 'Nirbhaya' imply. She argues that "circuits of feminist scholarship and activism have become so inter-disciplinary and transnational that maintaining and policing turf is an utterly useless endeavour." The problem however lies in the fact that. "Some Western feminists ... barely care to become familiar with the context in which they are trying to intervene"² even as their "particular versions of American legal feminism"³ have been propelled out of their provincial contexts into international law and policy making"⁴ (Kotiswaran 2013, 1).

I would like to argue that the above observation holds true today in most key sites of knowledge production other than the academia such as international institutions (IIs), global think tanks, corporate research institutions and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). These institutions hold great influence in the contemporary global order and we shall see how they also form key sources of information for contemporary media and for the emerging global public sphere (Chaudhuri 2010b). While this asymmetry of knowledge perhaps has been long true, what is new is a potent convergence of 'ignorance' and 'instant access' that new technologies have made possible. It is within this configuration that I attempt to analyze both the content and form of the mediated discourse in the aftermath of the gang rape.

This article is based upon a thematic analysis of public discourse in the aftermath of the 'Nirbhaya' rape. I have followed discussions in newspapers, television and Internet on a daily basis in the immediate months after the event and have continued to follow them since. Television channels followed have been primarily English and Hindi, and occasionally Bengali, while my study of the Internet and print media has been in English.

The Argument and Approach

My emphasis on a historical and political economic perspective stem from a certain unease with the manner that media is often seen as a discrete entity that can be analyzed either in terms of its texts/images or their reception and resistance by people who too are treated as bounded empirical beings, rather than an ensemble of social relations. My argument is that it is important to distinguish between the concrete economic and legal structures of the global order from the logic of new media technologies and its almost magical possibilities. I make this claim, fully aware that the latter is played out within the ambit of the former. This section therefore first elaborates how my distinction between 'national' and 'global' discourse rests on a political economic understanding of contemporary capitalism. And second explicates the nature and consequences of new media technologies and the reason for my use of the term mediatization.

The political economic

The transformed relationship between the 'national' and the 'global' I argue has to be seen in the way states and markets have been recast in contemporary capitalism. I am not using 'national' and 'global' to refer to empirical regions or entities alone. But fundamental to this article is the idea that in the current stage of capitalism the state and nation as we have understood since Westphalia has been reconfigured to take on board the play of global capitalism and trans-national capitalists. My argument is that though distinctions between national and international media in the Nirbhaya case are apparent, it is equally true that significant processes of transformation are already underway. Important structural changes mark the relationship between Indian and international media. An example of collaboration between *India Real Time* and *Wall Street Journal*⁵.

My contention is that states have been major players in laying the terms of public discourse in modernity. In India, where civil society had not emerged in the way it had in western modernity, the state had an even more important role to set the agenda for public discourse (Kaviraj 1991). The media did play a significant role in the growth of Indian nationalism and later in projecting state policies. A greater role was however played by the engagement of political leaders and organizations with people through direct interaction at different