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# License to rape: examining digital activism around marital rape in India

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## ABSTRACT

An analysis of 60,000 tweets surrounding the #MarriageStrike hashtag that trended as a reaction to marital rape laws in India showed that in certain situations, activists can appropriate a misogynistic hashtag for feminist activism. But while this certainly helped facilitate conversations around women's rights, its ability to fight gender discrimination was limited. This study also marks the presence of Men's Rights movements in the Indian digital activism space. Tweets displayed circumscribed awareness about minority and caste-related assault in traditionally marginalized groups, emphasizing critical characteristics of digital activism around sexual assault in India. Conversations noted the generational trauma of assault and highlighted a narrow public understanding regarding issues of consent. Relentless trolling and extreme misogyny, led by organizations protecting men's rights, operated as a type of citizen vigilantism and cruelly delegitimized crucial conversations regarding sexual assault in marriage.

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## Introduction

Globally, India is deemed one of the strongest emerging economies, set to reach a USD 5 trillion fiscal target in the next two years (Press Trust of India 2022). But for women, the reality of growth and development in the country is bleak. As the BBC recently reported, nearly half of women in urban India stay home because of rampant sexual harassment and violent physical abuse in spaces like public transportation, educational and professional institutes (Soutik Biswas 2023). In recent times, dialogues about physical assault have moved beyond public and professional spaces into private areas like marriage as the country grappled with the horror of marital rape. India may have enacted strict laws after the 2012 Nirbhaya rape case in Delhi (Nehal Johri 2019) that garnered international attention on the situation of women's safety in the country, but it was only on September 29 2022, in a landmark judgment (Manveena Suri and Jessie Yeung 2022) did the courts declare marital rape a crime punishable by law. Deemed "most progressive legal reforms in the realm of gender equality and sexual violence to come out of the country since the 2013 Anti-rape Law Amendment Bill following the infamous 'Nirbhaya' rape case" (Sumona Bose 2022), the case for criminalizing marital rape saw wide ranging

reactions on social media varying from applause from women's rights activists, acknowledging the importance and urgency of this litigation, to various factions declaring a boycott against marriage claiming that such a law would render men vulnerable to baseless persecution (Astha Rajvanshi 2022). Creating a lobby under the hashtag #MarriageStrike, initiated by the men's rights organization Save Indian Family (Madhurima Ghosh 2022), groups of men stated online that they would reject and refrain from marriage since this law was a way to criminalize men for sex with their wives which they assumed was an unassailable right (Seerat Chabba 2022). Activists appropriated this hashtag to tweet against misogyny and fight for women's rights. This hashtag was used in nearly 68,000 tweets since it first trended on Twitter within days of its appearance (Nikhil Rampal 2022).

Coming right after the Tarun Tejpal case, the December 2012 gangrape and murder in Delhi and the #MeTooIndia movement in 2018 (Paromita Pain 2021), the #MarriageStrike issue provides a unique opportunity to examine how "digital activism constitutes a paradigm shift within feminist protest culture" (Hester Baer 2016, 18) in the developing world and a nonwestern context where few studies center on activism around marital rape. This study investigates communication around the #MarriageStrike hashtag, participants and cyber activists' engagement on social media, challenges proffered to rape culture around marriage, men's movements in India and communicative dynamics between activists and the opposition online. The #MeTooIndia and the Tarun Tejpal case, where an influential media editor raped a young intern, saw important discussions regarding sexual assault and feminist rights, but both were mostly silent on the issue of marital rape (Pain 2022). Building on prior research that focused on similar issues in the professional sphere like the #MeTooIndia movement and the controversial #TarunTejpal controversy, this study maps the progress and development of the Twitter space in India, and its ability to be an arena for feminist activism and the rights of women in the country. Existing literature on digital feminist activism focuses primarily on feminist-initiated hashtags and this study adds to our understanding of gendered violence and related dialogue on Twitter in India by focusing attention on an emergent men's rights hashtag and the feminist engagement and responses within it.

## Setting the context

### *Rape and society in India*

India's assault statistics are grim, lodging an average 86 rapes daily in 2021 (Press Trust of India 2022). Media reporting on rape has often been deeply flawed with coverage influenced by patriarchal values, caste and media polarization that have led to shaming and silencing of survivors (Gowri Niranjana 2022). As Sowjanya Tamalapakula (2020) has emphasized, "Caste is the most pertinent and compelling factor in understanding sexual violence in India," where survivors from deemed lower castes and lower economic classes are portrayed negatively with language that encourage victim blaming (Aditi Bhandari 2021) and ignores the generational trauma in such situations (Priyanka Singh 2020) where rape is often weaponized (Vidya Krishnan 2023). India's caste hierarchies ensure that women are not a "monolithic" category (Tamalapakula 2020), and studies have conclusively shown that social attitudes towards women and caste are the strongest predictors

of assault (Sharanya Basu Roy and Sayantan Ghosh Dastidar 2018). For example, Dalit women, belonging to so-called low castes, found little space in movements like #MeTooIndia movement (Rupali Bansode 2020) and their missing testimonies, “which is not similar to violence on ‘every woman’s’ experience” (Jyoti Diwakar 2022) are an important lacuna in such mainstream digital feminist movements.

Survivors are proffered little legal or social support and lawyers, arguing the marital rape case, had warned that, “. . . laws designed to restrict the rights of women continue to do harm due to patriarchal courts” (Nik Popli 2022). While the September 2022 marital rape verdict was lauded as landmark, it took the courts seven years to reach a split consensus (Priyali Prakash and Dhriti Mankatalia 2023).

### ***Marital rape and the issue of consent***

Among India’s earliest documented marital rape cases, in 1889, is the Phulmoni Das case where a 10-year child died of her injuries (Himani Bannerji 2001). In 2022, surveys of 724,115 women by the Indian government’s National Family Health show that women in India are over 10 times more vulnerable to spousal sexual assault than from others (Lauren Frayer 2022). Reasons for not criminalizing this earlier in 2019 were justified as “. . . it will create absolute anarchy in families and our country is sustaining itself because of the family platform which upholds family values” (Shweta Sengar 2022). Indian attitudes towards marriage are extremely traditional (Indira Sharma, B Pandit, A Pathak and R Sharma 2013) but as activists agree the issue of consent was paramount (Nita Bhalla 2017). In 2017, a court ruled that, “a feeble ‘no’” could still signal willingness on the part of an alleged victim. . . (and) mean a “yes”” (Huizhong Wu 2017). Studies have shown that courts would rather ignore the concept of consent rather than challenge marital and family structures (K. Mayukha Chihnitha 2021). Sexual assault in the Indian scenario is still considered a woman’s fault and conventional gender roles are preferred in families (Travis Mitchell 2022). Therefore, in response to the marital rape law, there arose a backlash coordinated by organizations like the Save Indian Family Foundation (SIFF), a men’s rights advocacy group founded in 2005 devoted to protecting men’s rights that created the hashtag #MarriageStrike to challenge the court order citing the harassment of men that would follow (Chabba 2022).

### ***Rise of men’s rights movements***

Once considered a predominantly western phenomenon, increasingly men’s rights activism can be seen in nonwestern contexts especially in India (Alexis de Coning 2020). SIFF claims it is not against feminists, but it does not hesitate to describe feminists as “intellectually challenged individuals, with very less academic grounding.”<sup>1</sup> They produce posters that portray women lawyers and activists as “power-hungry bullies who have turned the tables on innocent men with the assent of the state” (Srimati Basu 2016). In January 2022, when the court turned attention on marital rape, SIFF spokespersons tweeted that: “Lawyers and Delhi High Court judges can stop treating men as 2nd class citizens and meet our basic demands, then they can call for any number of laws for women. Till then, it is #MarriageStrike & #MGTOW.”<sup>2</sup> Deriving much of their identity from the challenges thrown by feminism, their discourses are fundamentally grounded in

misogyny and it is important to study them as “contestations of gender and the formation of subjectivities” (Basu 2016).

### ***Policing feminist conversations***

With the rise and convergence of men’s rights activism with right wing supported trolling of feminism related issues online, journalist and activists are at the receiving end of extreme mob suppression that has the characteristics of citizen vigilantism and is essentially aimed at repressing activists and journalists (Prashanth Bhat and Kalyani Chadha 2022) with women particularly targeted through gendered insults, deep fake pornography as well as explicit threats of physical harm (Gina Masullo Chen, Paromita Pain, Victoria Y Chen, Madlin Mekelburg, Nina Springer and Franziska Troger 2020). Silvio Waisbord (2020) defines such online harassment as “mob censorship” which acts “as bottom-up, citizen vigilantism” that aims to deauthorize and silence voices. Les Johnston (1996) describes the characteristics of such vigilantism as planned and prepared action, involving the voluntary participation of citizens, often as part of a social movement which is a reaction to perceived violations of established social orders and is aimed at displacing such infractions. Such vigilantism is facilitated by easy access to activists through online platforms and a culture of trolling that expresses disagreement steeped in hate (Waisbord 2020).

Such circumstances have not deterred women from constructively fighting back. For example, in the Tarun Tejpal case, women met trolls with reasoned responses that in some cases helped change the negative turn of conversation into exchanges where deliberately, concerns could be explained and understood (Pain 2022). But such examples are few also because gender inequalities that exist socially are strongly emphasized online. Journalists, feminist activists, students, and generally urban, high caste, young middle-class men and women are among the most active users (Dilip Mandal 2020) of Twitter in India but, in general, mostly one in three women in India has ever used the internet (Tanushree Basuroy, 2023). Twitter aims to increase participation by incorporating various local languages (Megha Mandavia and Raghu Krishnan 2019), yet the platform reflects mostly elite perspectives (Elizabeth Losh 2019) where 28% of urban and rural poor women that make up nearly 94% of the unorganized work sector in the country find little representation (Kelly Souza Marron 2019).

### ***Hashtag activism in India***

Yet in spite of these disadvantages, India has rich examples of digital hashtag activism that have covered various aspects of feminist issues like sexual assault, politics, and human rights. Besides examples like the #MeTooIndia and Tarun Tejpal case, hashtags like the #WomenofShaheenBagh have emerged as strong gendered protest against the Indian government’s Citizenship Amendment Act (Edwards et al. 2021). Theoretically, as Diana Zulli (2020), argues by their very nature hashtags are often related to single incidents and are episodic in nature, depending on incidents that threaten the sustainability of such activism and makes them susceptible to opposition. But Twitter, in India, has provided a new avenue to broadcast rape as “human rights abuse” (Losh 2019, 1). It has emerged as a repository of “digitized narratives” of sexual violence, no matter how curated (Bianca Fileborn 2019), that support disclosures and create online support

systems that encourage the evolution of a different kind of narrative around sexual assault where hashtags encourage the sharing of narratives and create connections via these accounts to grow and sustain conversations that can evolve into movements (Rosemary Clark 2016). It has provided an arena for feminist expression of anger and outrage which has epistemic value since it demonstrates a “felt, reflective awareness of injustice” (Theresa A. Kulbaga and Leland G. Spencer 2022). As Jiyoun Suk, Yini Zhang, Zhiying Yue, Rui Wang, Xinxia Dong, Dongyang Yang and Ruobing Lian (2023) show personal expression, calls to action demanding change, and feminist contention can help project marginalized voices and advocate for social justice, but social media movements are not uniform in their development and outcomes and unfold through nuances of place, case, and context (Zizi Papacharissi 2016) which, in developing countries, like India play an important role. It is in this light that this study examines:

**RQ1:** What are the defining themes and discourses of Twitter conversations centered on the #MarriageStrike hashtag?

**RQ2:** How did Twitter generate online spaces of communication for the expression of dissent around the #MarriageStrike hashtag?

### **Methods**

The courts began hearing the case from January 7 2022 (Press Trust of India 2022) and the hashtag #MarriageStrike started trending online from January 15 to January 17 2022 (Rampal 2022) three days after the first hearings commenced. Tweets with the hashtag #MarriageStrike were collected using the Google Twitter Archiver function from January 7 2022, to December 2022 to ensure as wide a collection of relevant material as possible and used for the analysis. As the first set of tweets showed, the hashtag #MarriageStrike used other hashtags like #StopCrimeAgainstMen #right2selfdefense #MarriageStrike #GenderBiasedLaws #BoycottMarriage #MenAreNotSaferFromBiasedLaws to highlight their sentiments. Like Shreya Agarwal, Urvashi Patel and Joyojeet Pal (2022), this dataset also found that tweets with #MarriageStrike hashtags were extremely prominent during the period January 15 to January 27 when court deliberations saw a trending of views related to the issue online. The #MarriageStrike hashtag used with new hashtags like #WomenIsABurden and #FalseCaseDay trended around International Women’s Day around March 7 to March 8 2022 (Agarwal, Patel, and Pal 2022).

The Google Twitter archiver downloaded a random sample of 95,789 tweets. This data set had no pictures or photographs since the Archiver does not collect images. This was examined by three graduate students and the researcher to rule out redundancies and examine the conversation threads to count tweets that were retweeted and ensure that responses to those retweets were also examined for content. For example, a tweet (dated Jan 23) stated, “... marriage is not for women alone .men are also involved. What about their rights?#MarriageStrike #MRA#ProtectMen.” had 550 retweets and 1324 responses. This was counted as one Tweet and each response was counted as an individual tweet that was analyzed as part of the entire conversation thread. A curated dataset of 60,000 tweets were finally read and reread for “the long preliminary soak” (Stuart Hall 1975, 15),

by the research team to respond to the research questions. To answer RQ1 (defining themes and discourses) and RQ2 (social media as communicative arenas for opposition), individual tweets were manually textually analyzed to generate analysis.

Textual and qualitative analysis of the dataset was done as such evaluations allow “scholars to investigate the practices of a particular user group, as it can go beyond tracking follower counts or hashtag use” (Alice E Marwick 2014, 109), and encourage a nuanced investigation of “underlying ideological and cultural assumptions of the text” (Elfriede Fürsich 2009) that helps researchers view such dialogue as a creation of different influences that reflect the social structures of power (J. M. Hawkins 2017). In the spirit of Paromita Pain and Gina Masullo Chen (2019) where 30,386 tweets by President Trump were manually analyzed to ensure that the distinct implication of each word and phrase tweeted was examined, this study abstains from computational analysis and analyzes the collection of tweets manually in its entirety and context. Textual analysis generates themes by grouping together interrelated ideas. For example, tweets with words related to the justice system like “laws,” “justice,” “rights” and “legal” were categorized under tweets dealing with justice and legal issues. The content of the tweet was then analyzed contextually. For example, a tweet that said “Every single day, every single minute, a woman is misusing the laws meant to protect women—just to harass the husband and destroy the childhood of her children” with no information as to the recorded numbers of women misusing laws to destroy lives were categorized as tweets with incorrect information and tweets without credible sources. Another tweet, “Britishers didn’t make our men’s as second-class citizen, but GOI (Government of India) made us second class citizens!” was categorized under tweets that used misinformation to point out a justice system that was supposedly against men.

Tweets also used different Indian languages. For example, a tweet protesting gender biased laws and calling them legal terrorism used a combination of Hindi and English (सच को देखो #Genderbiaslaws बनाने वालो और #LegalTerrorism: watch for truth; make more gender biased laws) which because of the multilingual abilities of the researchers, was clearly understood and categorized. Combining different languages in tweets is very common in India since the country has over a 100 recorded languages and different dialects (Pain 2022) and software can rarely be trained effectively to detect these differences. For example, one tweet used the Bengali word “shoitān” meaning “villain” for rapists. Each cited tweet has had all identifying data including metadata removed for even though the tweets were posted publicly, users are often not aware that their word might be used for analysis such as this study.

## **Findings**

The two primary research questions that this study considered include RQ1 that examines themes and discourses and RQ2 that examines the nature of the dissent around the #MarriageStrike hashtag. At the outset, it must be clear that while #MarriageStrike #MRA# was a hashtag created by men rights groups to oppose marital rape laws in the country, activists adapted the hashtag to voice feminist rights and raise concerns against prejudice and sexism. Activists and women used the hashtag to not just protest misogynistic opposition against women’s marriage rights but also to highlighting why the law was so necessary and important. Thus, while the hashtag was

a created to establish masculine backlash, the personal narratives and connections it created among activists and survivors saw it emerge as a powerful feminist call or justice. A common theme (35% of the tweets) was the victimization of men and how the courts had let them down. Feminism was ridiculed and stories that were shared by survivors of this crime were retweeted with the hashtags #MarriageStrike #MRA#ProtectMen and others and denigrated. Caste found negligible mention as did women of lower socioeconomic status. What stood out was the urgent call by men's rights groups to discipline women both within and outside marriage in larger society. This was done by citing false studies and spreading misinformation and nasty trolling. The notion of consent was discussed but with little prominence, with a majority of tweets being disparaging in nature. Women and activists tried to encounter the bigotry with tweets explaining the importance of the law, but such tweets received overwhelmingly negative responses and with participants supportive of the law generally leaving the conversation thread. This ensured little variation in discussions that then followed.

### ***Analysis of themes and discourses (RQ1)***

#### ***Skewed legal systems and "anti-marriage" laws***

Conversations around the hashtag predominantly (75%) used words like "laws," "justice," "rights" and "legal." Tweets with the hashtag #Right2SelfDefence #GenderBiasedLaws #SaveMenFromSuicide #MarriageStrike pointed out to a "staggering" legal bias where men were forced to be victims. While women tweeted about a "woke judiciary" that finally listened to their complains, for men and men's rights organizations the matter was clearly one where "Every single day, every single minute, a woman is misusing the laws meant to protect women—just to harass the husband and destroy the childhood of her children." Women tweeted about how in spite of legal sanctions, the judiciary could be biased. Responses to such tweets usually included, for example, "Family Courts have become like Game shows where FACTS FAVORING MEN DONT MATTER. Game Winner is decided before even the game begins. #StopMisuseOfLaw #MarriageStrike# WomensBurden #MarriageStrike." Men felt unimportant and without rights, tweeting, "Britishers didn't make our men's as second-class citizen, but GOI (govt of India) made us second class citizens! #MarriageStrike." Tweets from Save Indian Family Foundation forcefully underlined how, "Thanks to current biased matrimonial laws, Men in India will soon #BoycottMarriage completely. Most Women don't want marriage & union, they just marry to exercise their legal rights." The tweet, "Marriage & wives are not a must to have a family. We have community, brothers, sisters & elders. That is more than enough for our health & wellbeing" had about 145 retweets. Tweets retweeted such reactions with hashtags #WomensABurden #MaleGenocide. The call to strike against marriage was deemed necessary to protect men ("How to prevent heart attack? 1) Eat #HealthyFood 2) Do #Exercise 3) Follow #MarriageStrike"). Tweets emphasized how this would destroy the institution of marriage and how this law would ensure that "I hope the women who are filing false cases for money adultery or vendetta are doing spoiling the relationship because many men and their families have already started approaching marriage with this yardstick. #MarriageStrike."



### ***Rampant misinformation***

Tweets from Save Indian Family Foundation with the hashtag @realsiff cited various false reports to affirm the dysfunctionality of the law. Tweets like, “Women Have More Sex Partners Than Men In 11 StatesUTs In India NFHS Survey Marriage may be #Sologamy but what is this proving? Decline of the institution of marriage, rise in live-in relationship & #MarriageStrike. #MensLivesMatter” had many “likes,” and retweets. Misinformation about the status of women and how much wealth they accrue by cheating men were discussed in many tweets. Tweets with notions like “Studies show for a happy marriage, marry a virgin. #redpill #mensrights #MRA” found eager audiences that added to the conversation and retweeted responses. Tweets like “Really well-educated women becomes burden without working even after professional degree. #GenderBiasedLaws #WomensaParasite” linked to websites with broken links and reports that could not be verified. Activists for a few of the tweets tried to counter this but were met with angry trolling and their tweet threads declined after a few responses.

### ***Issue of consent***

In the entire dataset of 60,000 tweets, the word, consent, was mentioned 486 times. The issue of consent was ridiculed ([https://twitter.com/kavita\\_krishnan/status/1484055711521062912](https://twitter.com/kavita_krishnan/status/1484055711521062912)) and posited as an unimportant matter. Tweets like “Right to say no Consent as human rights: Fakeness of consent in marriage” led to conversations like, “Our Legal Agencies talk a lot about CONSENT. Did they take consent of the couple before getting into their bedrooms?” This topic amassed personal stories and responses from both men and women. As one woman shared her story of how her lack of consent was continually violated in her marriage, responses with the hashtag @siff, saw responses like, “She was invited to the space. First she said no. Then she changed her consent” and how “The entire debate was about this, how consent gets misused, No becomes a Yes and No becomes Yes ? Read SS #MarriageStrike #Maritallaws@\_FamilyMan\_berl: Meh!” Tweets often had the tags “Men’s rights activist #FakeCases winner.” Much of the content here focused on how “Consent in BED can be withdrawn In Court. Because mere word is enough for rape conviction.” The “SIFF Video about ‘Consent’ #marriagestrike #malegenocide” was retweeted and generated much conversation. A tweet “Consent Matters. BUT ONLY FOR WOMEN.” Some tweets likened consent in marriage to consent in sex work (Consenting sex work helps #MarriageStrike as a profession and is a checkmate to legally extorting #MarriageStrike.) Consent was an issue that was deemed “silly” especially since a couple was married. The need for consent especially for women in marriage was negated to explaining marriage as a transaction where sex was necessary. Tweets like “MARRIAGE & MUTUAL FUNDS ARE SUBJECT TO MARKET RISK.” received over 300 likes.

### ***Little space for marginalized voices***

There were few mentions of Dalits and Muslim and women from lower socio-economic categories. Dalits were mentioned in about 10 tweets while the word Muslim was mentioned about 31 times. Tweets mentioning minorities were generally about perpetuating stereotypes. For example, “A simple guy, ex secular of <http://Bharat.Now> promoting saffron dressing January 19 1990 openly from mosques they told convert, or leave, send your women to us Muslims.” Dalits were mentioned mostly in context of why former

politicians from their community were not speaking up for their rights. The conversations did not get much attention, in terms of shares, retweets, or likes.

### *Generational trauma and violence in family settings*

Tweets from various participants overwhelmingly pointed out the culture of violence within intimate relations and the domestic sphere. One tweet (“I was raped on my wedding night and then for seven years”) captured the essence of violence within private spheres. Tweets pointed out to how generational marital rape was and how little women understood knew about rights. One Tweet (“My mother says its normal. Men will be men. I weep for her and myself.”). Profiles identifying as women with photos and details of education and professional markers tweeted horrific stories of violence and the biased legal treatment their complaint received. For example, one tweet stated clearly that her rape and regular beatings were sanctioned by husbands’ parents and her own parents did nothing to stop it. Another applauded the law because now she could speak up for her sister-in-law. Tweets pointed out the fears that such violence caused when one woman said she finally spoke up after years of silence, “. . . is it too late for me? For my daughter?” Responses to such shared stories included tweets like, “A tiny percentage of frustrated husbands have been told anything like that. Most husbands aren’t getting it several times per week. They’re lucky if they get it several times per month. #Marriage #MarriageStrike.”

**RQ2:** Online spaces of communication and resistance.

In examining the nature of communication generated by Twitter in this case, certain important characteristics were noted. While misogyny and extreme policing of women’s views, opinions and participation was done, women too pushed back using sarcasm, humor, and personal narratives to make clear their support of survivors and the law. In return, their feminism was questioned, and the modern woman was deemed unfit to be a wife. Conversations were hijacked with regressive silencing of women’s voices and opinions registering a strong negation of marriage which would then affect women negatively and this ensured that little deliberation could happen on the issue of sexual assault in such intimate settings and in general. Exchanges, which were generally contentious in nature, depicted the following characteristics.

### *Fake feminism*

Tweets with #MarriageStrike #FakeCase #StopLegalExtortion #GenderBiasedLaws used hashtags like #FakeFeminism#FeminismIsCancer and other similar hashtags emphasized that feminism that focused on making spaces safer for women was “fake.” Such sentiments were retweeted with hashtags like #FeminismIsCancer #hypergammy #GoldDigger #MarriageStrike #divorcerape #financialrape.

Tweets like “Do you think girls/women are overrated in India? #FeminismIsCancer #MarriageStrike saw conversations that talked about how such feminist demands encouraged the filing of fake cases (“Wife though employed filed fake affidavit #340IPC delayed by courts for 4+ years #ChildAlienation”) and propagated legal discrimination against men. Referring to how this would destroy the social fabric in India, feminist ideology was blamed for encouraging women to lie and use marriage as “ATM” machines (Marriage has become a “bank” with judiciary working as an ATM

machine for one gender and husbands being the debit cards.) This feminist stance was seen as a direct challenge to the right-wing atmosphere in the country (#Hindutva has been a target for a long time in India) and considered “anti-national, anti-Hindu fundamentalist forces.” Feminists were referred to by various derogatory terms including, “femishit,” and “gold digger.”

### *Discipling participation*

Besides calling feminism fake, participants supporting the marital rape laws were strongly and repeatedly disciplined by intense misogyny and trolling. Using words like “bitch,” “shut up” and other terms like “prostitute” to indicate disrespect, tweets pointed out that sex was something that women brought to marriage and that “... there is no clear Biblical command against it.” Tweets promoted polygamy for men (“... so the church ladies will be more likely to have a hubby...”) and noted that men were gravely disadvantaged with the enactment of such laws.

Tweets from women bravely shared how such violence distorted their views of relationships urging them to question why so little was done when they spoke up. This was immediately countered by tweets like “Woman filed False Cases & now she got support of her family members for money... This is good for her that she got her family back due to her husband after filing cases on him #MarriageStrike #.” Twitter was referred to as the new age LinkedIn where “... man-bashing is glorified on LinkedIn as if some paid PR is behind it #MarriageStrike #MaleGenocide.” There was little understanding of the trauma of domestic abuse with tweets like “Why Women don’t just Walk Away From Abusive Relationship Why Men are on #MarriageStrike/GenderNeutral Laws Mistakes happen, Sort It Smooth Why Legal Extortion.” Survivor stories were mocked, and marital rape was viewed as cases where only men were victims and women were referred to as “buttholes” who “hadn’t and would never find husbands” which is why they were supporting marriage strike.

Tweets from women bravely shared how such violence distorted their views of relationships urging them to question why so little was done when they spoke up. One tweet by a woman described how she had taken photos of the bruises on her arm and neck to underscore the brutality. This had a response that read: “I would rather be alone than being controlled by a wife who doesn’t have sex with me.” Women who dared to raise their voices needed “strict punishment for these women.” When specific cases were raised, they were heavily countered by tweets like, “He’s a reputed doctor stuck in a molestation case by serial molestation case filer in Delhi. CCTV footage available where it’s visible she tore her own clothes.” Feminists who lauded the law and spoke about being trolled were deemed liars, “Feminists are excellent liars. They also lie abt rape threats by their opponents. #MarriageStrike.”

### *Organized attacks*

The Save Indian Family Foundation (SIFF) organized both offline and online activities (The Legends of Vizag Chapter gearing up for war to achieve #MensCommission @swarup1972 @MyNation\_net #MarriageStrike) to counter what they viewed as threats to men and their rights in India in the light of the marital rape law. Different chapters arranged activities that offered a space for men to discuss and understand their rights in the light of the new laws. They were encouraged to retweet such meetings and other content with the hashtag #MarriageStrike. There were no tweets of responses to such meetings by feminist participants.

### *Countering misogyny with humor and demands for justice*

While women participants and activists strongly denounced the bigotry and discrimination, they also used humor and reflection in their tweets to emphasize their appreciation of the laws and applaud the strengthening of women's rights in the country. Tweets mentioned, "#MarriageStrike is the most hilarious trend of all on twitter. Feeling sad for every incel who thinks women are waiting to marry them." They encouraged men "... who are going on #MaritalStrike remain on strike for ever ... Anyone who thinks consent has no place in a marriage, should never marry." Considering "Men deciding to opt out of marriage if marital rape is criminalised is a huge win-win for the feminist movement," supporters even encountered trolling with banter, suggesting that, "You are right sir, this will apt way to teach us ice cream eating b\*tches a lesson. Please continue #MarriageStrike. Don't break resolve under any circumstances." They bravely dissected the nature of marriage and encouraged women to "... skip the marriage and procreation nonsense and read some books, travel etc. It'll make a generation of women free, happy, adventurous, dreamers, doers. Less marriage, less responsibilities, and more fun please." Challenging, the "... ridiculousness of their arguments," participants shared personal narratives and reached out to other participants offering support and clearly stating that, "Indian men would prefer to not get married if they can't legally rape their wives. You all belong in jail. #MarriageStrike." They boldly called out such behavior as "rapist apologists" and tweeted, "Men tweeting in favour of #marriagestrike are potential rapists. Possible rapists. Previous rapists." There was reflection on personal experiences and support offered to survivors stating that legal and social help must be made available on priority basis. Women tweeted using the #marriagestrike hashtag but did not create new hashtags or connect to the #MeTooIndia or Tarun Tejpal issue. Few tweets asked to understand the issue better ("Hi, can someone explain this marriage strike thing to me?"), and participants reached out with resources to credible media resources and news videos.

### **Discussion**

Analyzing public digital conversations around the #MarriageStrike hashtag, this is among the earliest studies marking the strong presence of men rights movements, no longer a western idea (de Coning 2020), in the digital space, which was nearly not as prominent in the #MeTooIndia and the TarunTejpal protests. The #MarriageStrike hashtag created by Save Indian family Foundation (SIFF), a men's rights organization, was adapted and used by feminists, and activists, to protest the limited understanding of marriage and in the process, helped provoke pivotal conversations around the institution of marriage, changing needs of partners and views of men and women towards physical intimacy in marriage and deepening communication and activism around intimate partner physical violence. While the law criminalizing marital rape may have been hailed as "most progressive legal reforms" (Bose 2022), men with their high demands of chastity and assumptions of marriage evidently did not agree. While the #MeTooIndia and the tweets around the Tarun Tejpal case centrally accented the violence women face publicly, the impact of #MarriageStrike lay in its highlighting that even within so-called safe family spaces India's women were battling the burden of assault. As a predominantly misogynistic hashtag (Basu 2016) centered around legal reform related to marital sexual abuse, it

served as vital means to examine concepts of marital rape in a nonwestern developing context and analyze how such activism can establish urgent shifts in feminist protest cultures (Baer 2016) and add critical dimension to discussions around gendered sexual assault on digital platforms.

In recent times, India has seen two important digital social media movement, the #MeTooIndia and the #TarunTejpal case. While the #MeTooIndia showed activists facing vitriol and trolling for sharing stories and naming abusers online, the #TarunTejpal (Pain 2022) case had elements of deliberation that showed the potential of Twitter in India to become a space of considered discussion that can promote greater understanding of sexual assault but the #MarriageStrike that came right after showed that the evolution of such spaces is unpredictable and very contextual (Papacharissi 2016) and be very vulnerable to hostility and resistance (Zulli 2020).

As RQ 1 analyzing the themes and communication show, for the first time, there is an acknowledgement in social media conversations in the country that the trauma of rape is often generational (Singh 2020) and family sanctioned. But such conversations did not get much traction because of the overwhelming number of tweets that pointed to how the legal system had let men down. While the #MeTooIndia and the #Traun Tejpal instances did not mark the presence of men's movements and originations in India, the #MarrigeStrike saw them not only initiate this hashtag but also use it to spread rampant misinformation. Many hashtags (some insulting and others empowering) were used but few linked to the #MeTooIndia or the Tarun Tejpal cases. Besides denying India's bleak rape statistics (Press Trust of India 2022), tweets with disingenuous views spoke about how men have always been cheated by politicians and that different credible surveys pointing out how women were being affected by rape within marriage were actually false and promoting live in relationships that would prove detrimental to the institution of marriage. In all this, the issue of consent, of paramount importance (Bhalla 2017), got little leverage. Organizations like SIFF produced information that assumed that sexual consent within marriage was a given (Sharma et al. 2013) thus emphasizing that even in this century India's views on marriage were extremely archaic (Mitchell 2022). Survivors speaking up on the issue were shamed, reflecting general media biases towards such groups even though the right of consent sustained important conversations that was an important characteristic of the movement (Clark 2016). Considering that till about recent times even the courts had assumed that consent that was not given emphatically could indicate willingness for sex (Wu 2017) this is not surprising. Consent was narrowly understood and given little importance like caste and the travails of minority women.

Caste, paramount to comprehending the nature of sexual violence in India (Tamalapakula 2020), found little to no mention. While the word "Dalit" was mentioned in a few tweets, content mentioning minorities was mostly about extending stereotypes where Muslims were accused of "keeping many wives" and that Dalit communities "had a lot to learn from those better." Thus, even though tweets used local languages like Hindi, Tamil, Bengali, and Marathi (Mandavia and Krishnan 2019) this did not indicate wide participation. Women were generally viewed as a uniform whole and blamed for demanding rights (Bhandari 2021). Even feminists standing up to this online bullying did not mention caste hierarchies and those from India's unorganized sector (Marron 2019). Thus, like prior feminist movements, here as well, Dalit and other minority women whose

experiences are further complicated by issues of caste and economics found poor representation (Bansode 2020; Diwakar 2022) and Twitter continues to reflect elite views (Losh 2019).

Analyzing the nature of online spaces of communication surrounding the #MarriageStrike hashtag (RQ2) show that men were not only unwilling to understand the trauma of marital rape as shared by many personal stories, but also they gathered together in acts of “mob censorship” (Waisbord 2020) to still voices that disagreed with their open and virulent misogyny, acting as citizen vigilante groups to delegitimize feminist concern and protest. While women shared thoughts online, men’s groups organized offline events as well. Their attacks on women were planned, done as groups and they used their access to activists tweeting publicly (Johnston 1996; Waisbord 2020), to successfully stall conversations that often were appeals for understanding of trauma that women were subjected to and explanations of why the law was so necessary. Resorting to tactics that likened such demands to fake feminism, they called activists terms like “feminishit,” “Feminism is a cancer.” Such actions have not deterred women from determinedly contending back as various digital movements like the #WomenofShaheenBagh (Edwards et al. 2021) show. Here too women used humor, personal stories, and sarcasm to publicly denounce marital rape as “human rights abuse” (Losh 2019, 1) that welcomed legal reform. In the process they shared online narratives (Fileborn 2019) detailing abuse and how that impacted their idea of their own space within social structures like the family. These often led to discussions around feminist rights in the country which reflected their anger and consciousness of injustice (Kulbaga and Spencer 2022). In the process, they encouraged the sharing of incidents, offering care and support even while conversations were often being stalled by misogynistic vitriol. Thus, while Twitter provided some though not a completely constructive space for feminist outrage, the prominent calls demanding change and offering support proved to be important advocates for social change (Suk et al. 2023) in a very contentious milieu.

## Limitations

While this study captures certain key complexities and tensions surrounding feminist digital activism around marital rape in India, it does not quite capture the intersectional specificities in the evolving social and legal environments in Southeast Asia where the issue is still factious. An acknowledged weakness is its lack of greater engagement with the crucial question of caste and what being a Dalit woman means in terms of digital feminist activism in India. While the study emphasizes the paucity of consistently deprecated voices but does move the conversation forward to reflect the offline efforts of women from such sections to address their rights violations. Thus, while this study provides a generalized understanding of certain practices and trends around concepts of sexual violence in the digital sphere, ensuring greater inclusivity in such studies is the need of the hour.

## Notes

1. <https://www.saveindianfamily.org/faqs/>.
2. <https://twitter.com/realsiff/status/1484011327383552007/photo/1>.

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