# The 'Nirbhaya' Movement: An Indian Feminist Revolution

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In December 2012, New Delhi witnessed a horrific crime – a female medical student was violently gang-raped on a moving bus and then dumped onto the highway, injured and unconscious. While she didn't survive the attack, Nirbhaya, as she was named by the media, sparked a revolution in India and its neighboring countries. This paper delves into the many aspects of the movement, examining it as a whole by drawing on the theories of Castells, Jenkins, Papacharissi, and Sundaram. It examines the protests that took place on digital forums which then transcended onto the streets, the affective nature of the movement, and international responses it elicited.

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On the night of December 16, 2012, medical student Jyoti Singh and her friend Avanindra Pandey, looking for transportation home, boarded a private bus in South Delhi. Immediately after the four other men in the bus turned off the lights and snatched Singh's and Pandey's phones. They beat them up with iron rods, leaving Pandey half-unconscious ("Delhi Gangrape Victims Friend Relives the Horrifying 84 Minutes of December 16 Night", 2017). They brutally gang-raped Singh, inserting an iron rod into her genitals, and then threw both of them off of the bus onto the main road ("Delhi Gangrape Victims Friend Relives the Horrifying 84 Minutes of December 16 Night", 2017). A highway patrol van picked them up and took them to a hospital; Avanindra Pandey survived, but Jyoti Singh died on December 29 in a hospital in Singapore, where she was flown for treatment ("Delhi Gangrape Victims Friend Relives the Horrifying 84 Minutes of December 16 Night", 2017). After news of the crime broke, it sparked anger, disgust, shame, and horror across the world. The media named Jyoti Singh 'Nirbhaya', meaning 'the fearless one'; the movement that followed also came to be known by the same moniker. This paper aims to analyze the December 16 Delhi gang-rape case as a movement, by examining three of its aspects- first, its comparison it to the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street; second, its affective side as a digital media movement; and lastly, the international coverage of the movement.

This case, in many ways, was the tipping point for an urban population in the capital that had been dealing with rising crimes, corruption, and inadequate security for more than a decade (Sundaram, 2009). It incited raw emotions of anger and dissent at the State and Central governments, and the police forces. Thousands of civilian protestors took to candlelight vigils and peaceful demonstrations at India Gate, eventually leading to a change in criminal laws, and the setting up of a fast track court to prosecute the attackers (Harris and Kumar, 2015).

The outrage that followed the attack opened up a previously nonexistent space for victims and those close to them to speak out against sexual violence. Following the protests, there was a remarkable increase in the number of rapes being reported annually, indicating that survivors of sexual assault were more willing to report it than before ("'Frightening and heartening', Rape Cases Skyrocket in Post-December 16 Delhi,", 2013). In 2011, there were 572 rape cases reported in Delhi. The number rose to 706 in 2012, more than doubled to 1,441 in 2013, and increased to 1,813 in 2014 (Pandey et all, 2013) ("Delhi is Now India's Rape Capital, Show NCRB Data", 2015). "What was novel about Nirbhaya was the nation-wide as well as international attention it received in the new age of social media, compelling politicians and civil society alike to deliberate over a previously underreported issue", writes Heba Adawy in *The Spark Of 'Nirbhaya': Indian Feminist Interventions, Common Challenges And Prospects* (2014). The heinous nature of Singh's rape, its urban and supposedly safe setting, and the indifferent attitudes of the authorities held responsible led to the voicing of demands for a structural change in the way that rape is perceived. The movement demanded that sexual violence be seen as an affront to a woman's autonomy, and as stripping her of her rightful agency, in opposition to the commonly held patriarchal perception of rape as a dishonor to the victim's family.

Nivedita Menon in her book *Seeing Like a Feminist* points out the distinction between how rape is viewed by patriarchal forces and

feminists. "For patriarchal forces, rape is evil because it is a crime against the honor of the family, whereas feminists denounce rape because it is a crime against the autonomy and bodily integrity of a woman. This difference in understanding rape naturally leads to diametrically opposite proposals for fighting rape" (Menon, 2012). In the patriarchal framework, the victim is responsible for her rape, because either she stepped outside the prescribed female bounds of the private into the public or she didn't dress like a traditional woman should, hence tempting the rapist. In such environments, where rape is seen to be the fault of the victim rather than the rapist, women often choose not to report the crime, and stay silent instead (Menon, 2012).

## India's Arab Spring

Often hailed as India's Arab Spring, the 'Nirbhaya' case was marked by unprecedented public outrage on social media as well as on the ground ("Is This the Start of India's 'Arab spring'?,", 2013). The protesters had several demands that battled against insufficient and incompetent security; inadequate and unreliable public transport; an insensitive police force that often blamed rape victims for the crime inflicted upon them; and bureaucracy and red tape surrounding sexual assault and rape cases. The intensity of these protests led an otherwise lackadaisical government to implement certain changes. Justice Verma was appointed chairperson of a committee tasked with the reformation of the anti-rape law. More female officers were added to Delhi's police force; security was tightened and night patrolling was increased; the police now had to undergo gender sensitization courses; six fast track courts were set up to specifically deal with rape cases; laws against sexual assault were made stricter; and, since one of the accused was seventeen years old at the time of the

crime, a debate for changing juvenile laws had opened up. Most importantly, a space for public discussion of sexual violence that had not existed before was created.

Similar to USA's 2011 movement Occupy Wall Street the Nirbhaya movement in Delhi was also a leaderless movement with a decentralized structure, comprising of a networked community (Castells, 2012). While the Occupy movement targeted unfair capitalist practices and "set out to occupy Wall Street, the key node of the global networks of financial domination of the world", the Delhi movement mainly targeted a deep seated cultural acceptance of sexual violence against women (Castells, 2012). Manuel Castells, in *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age*, explores the roles that social media platforms like Twitter, and Tumblr played in organizing and planning protests and the occupation of public spaces in the Occupy movement. He describes the advent of social media as leading to a participatory culture, since the public visibility of tweets and Tumblr posts enable a many-to-many model, increasing visibility and contribution. Since these networks are horizontal in structure, they are also more independent from state regimes than traditional media like television and radio, providing spaces for criticizing political powers and governmental authorities. Hence, for Castells, social media plays a crucial role in mobilizing the masses, cultivating enhanced levels of participation. It also helps in the dissemination of information that traditional news media wouldn't report, like, for example, the police tear gassing peaceful protesters. Like in the Delhi December 2012 protests, "Communication networks were the blood vessels of the Occupy movement" (Castells, 2012). Both movements united people across political ideologies and classes, and both faced "violence against a non-violent

movement" at the hands of the police and other state security forces (Castells, 2012).

But, as Castells writes, the Occupy movement's "fundamental achievement has been to rekindle hope that another life is possible" (Castells, 2012). Bad weather conditions and clashes with the police resulted in many abandoning the movement altogether, raising the question of whether the movement was built to last. While the achievements of the anti-sexual violence protests in Delhi still leave a lot to be desired in terms of a cultural change, they did translate to tangible legal changes. As Anthony Alessandrini points out in *Revolutionary Egypt: Connecting Domestic and International Struggles*, unlike the Arab Spring movements, the Occupy movement had neither the temporality nor the physical labor required for it to sustain itself and result in actual change (Alessandrini, 2015). The Delhi movement had both the temporality and the physicality required; smaller and less publicized rape cases had been in public visibility for years, brewing public dissent. Numerous scams by the government, as well as high crime rates and poor infrastructure had given rise to several smaller protests in the months preceding 2012. So, while the most publicized and remarkable feature of the Occupy movement was the role of the middle class in activating a powerful civil society, the Delhi movement saw not just the networked middle class communities, but also the poor lower classes and slum dwellers, who were all fighting a battle in the war against sexual violence.

Castells' approach towards the importance of social media tends to overemphasize the role of the Internet, and subvert the long years of social and political unrest, and state corruption that the public tolerated. However, Castells doesn't get swept away by a technologically deterministic approach;

he concedes that social media alone isn't enough, and that "a hybrid networked movement that links cyberspace and urban space in multiple forms of communication." is required (Castells, 2012). The use of online spaces to channel energies onto physical spaces is what distinguishes new 'social media movements' from the traditional form of protest.

## A Digital Movement

Like in Occupy Wall Street, online spaces were used to channel potentials onto public spaces. Historical spaces like India Gate and Jantar Mantar were occupied by demonstrators, and protests were also held outside then Chief Minister Sheila Dixit's residence, and the police headquarters ("Delhi Gang Rape: India Gate Turns into a Battleground", 2016). At first mass text messages were sent, asking people to collect for candlelight vigils and peaceful marches. As the situation worsened due to both the state government and the Delhi Police (which is not under the purview of the Delhi Government) refusing to accept blame, as well as the then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's delay in issuing a statement about the incident, the State and Central governments attempted to curb the protests. Metro stations were closed to hamper the mobility of the protesters. However, the government, clearly not in touch with social media platforms like Twitter, misjudged the mood of the city. Since text messages were blocked, people began using WhatsApp, a messaging application that uses the internet instead of cellular networks. Twitter was also widely used, to mobilize as well as to make the public aware of the violent tactics that the police were resorting to.

The internet played an important role in mobilizing the urban Delhi middle class; however, that is not to say that there were

no politics of visibility involved. According to Jodi Dean, instead of contributing to democratic politics, communicative exchanges are the basic elements of capitalist production (Dean, 2005). For Dean, the content of these exchanges is irrelevant, as is the sender and the receiver. What matters is its circulation, its "addition to the pool" and hence how visible it is (Dean, 2005). Thus, these exchanges are valuable as long as they are visible, and any other contribution is secondary to its circulation. Per Dean, top-level actors circumvent the obligation to respond directly by adding to the pool their own contributions, in the hope "that sufficient volume (whether in terms of number of contributions or the spectacular nature of a contribution) will give their contributions dominance or stickiness" (Dean, 2005).

Following the Nirbhaya rape case, WhatsApp users began to change their display pictures to an image of a black dot on a white background. The dot symbolized a blot on society, a collective shame that was the fault of an entire culture that was unsafe for women. By making it their display picture, users felt they were contributing their bit towards the larger movement. They established a pattern of behavior and circulation, eliminating the message behind the image in favor of its circulation. Dean describes this 'slacktivism' as people thinking that "they are active, maybe even making a difference simply by clicking on a button, adding their name to a petition, or commenting on a blog" (Dean, 2005).

On the other hand, in Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green's introduction to *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture*, the circulation of media often expands active audience participation (2013). They distinguish between spreadable media,

which engages with audiences to add value in different contexts, and sticky media, the older model of media distribution that emphasizes centralization and controlled distribution processes. The sticky model focuses on pre-structured interaction that shapes audience experiences, but spreadable media focuses on content; it uses a participatory framework in which the audiences are motivated and engage with the content. Online movements using Twitter hashtags fit this participatory model of spreadable media, but cannot be restricted to it alone.

Dean's 'slacktivism' argument connects with Zizi Papacharissi's analysis of Twitter as a platform for online political expression (2015). Papacharissi's *Affective Publics* also discusses ideas of participatory culture that are similar to Jenkins'. She states in an interview conducted by Jenkins at University of Southern California: "forms of affective involvement can be key in connecting energies and helping reflexively drive movements forward. But they can also entangle publics in ongoing loops of engaged passivity" (2015). Instead of focusing on the physical outcome of hashtag movements, Papacharissi explores Twitter as a framework that enables connective action, uniting people with similar interests from different parts of the world. Her analysis focuses on affect, or the intensity created by emotion and expressed in tweets. It is through the affective that Twitter enables notions of collective identity and solidarity to be expressed.

In Ravi Sundaram's *Pirate Modernity: Delhi's Media Urbanism*, Delhi's population already exemplified notions of collective identity, participatory design, and going toe-to-toe with a government that turned a deaf ear to the demands of its people; the same physicality translated onto online

movements after Singh's rape (2009). The protests that followed the rape were intensified due to the government's lack of response towards an agitated middle class. Proof that the government was overwhelmed and fearful of its energized electorate lies in the fact that the peaceful protests were dispersed using baton charges, water cannons, and tear gas (BBC, 2014). While police brutality was reported by the media, it was also reported live by Twitter users to generate more support for the movement.

Papacharissi uses the word 'produser' to refer to the blurring of lines between the journalist and the audience, since, on Twitter, and especially in countries where the media is censored or biased, anyone can become a reporter. In fact, since December 2012, Twitter users in India use Twitter to express their exasperation at traditional news media, accusing news anchors of sexism, and news corporations of being bought out by political parties. Hashtags that have amassed wide usage recently are #ShameOnTimesNow and #Presstitutes.

The embrace of new media technologies for political participation fits within the framework of the rise of a young middle-class population, whose activism was also visible in the India Against Corruption movement, which also relied on social media enabled citizen journalism (Denyer, 2011). This intermixing of storytelling and journalism is exemplified by tweets tweeted on December 25 2012 by nineteen-year-old Sambhavi Saxena, one of the protestors at Jantar Mantar.



**Shāmbhavi** @Shamwoo — Follow

Just got word, police is picking up women protesters from Jantar Mantar, detaing em. This is insane.

6:05 AM - 25 Dec 2012

↩ ⟲ 211 ♥ 11

**Shāmbhavi** @Shamwoo — Follow

All of us women were just brutally attacked by police at Parliament Street PS, PLS RT

6:28 AM - 25 Dec 2012

↩ ⟲ 555 ♥ 18

**Shāmbhavi** @Shamwoo — Follow

Woman constable beat me up, pulled my hair and slammed me into a wall #ParliamentStreet Police Station

6:38 AM - 25 Dec 2012

↩ ⟲ 623 ♥ 15

{Shambhavi's tweets on December 25, 2012}

The following tweet, the claims of which were contested by the police, got retweeted more than 1,700 times, and according to social media analytics firm Favstar, reached an audience of more than 200,000 Twitter users (Barn, 2013).



**Shāmbhavi** @Shamwoo — Follow

Illegally being held here at Parliament St Police Station Delhi w/ 15 other women. Terrified, pls RT

6:32 AM - 25 Dec 2012

↩ ⟲ 1,635 ♥ 40

Referring to the phenomenon of world populations experiencing physical space through technological space, Papacharissi calls the Internet, and specifically Twitter, an Electronic Elsewhere (2015). Saxena's tweets are just a few examples of how Twitter galvanizes civil society, turning it into an Electronic Elsewhere; within hours of her tweet, lawyers and journalists reached the police station, celebrities personally reached out to the police officers in charge, and hundreds of students gathered outside the police station in protest ("No Santas at This Police Station,", 2012). Bollywood actors in Mumbai and Indian diaspora across the

world also responded to her tweet, calling their contacts in Delhi to try and contribute.

Similar to the distinction made by Jenkins et al. between spreadable media and sticky media, Papacharissi discusses how Twitter enables connective action, in which communication is the primary form of organizing, as opposed to the hierarchical and more traditional model of collective action(Papa. Connective action favors individuality and a sense of solidarity and inclusivity based on common connective strands of interest. The hashtag #theekhai, the Hindi phrase meaning 'all is well', was used to mock the then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's silence on the protests, and his government's inaction towards the issues being protested (Anand, 2012). The use of other hashtags like #StopThisShame, #death4rape, and #inhumanebastards provided a broader connective framework within which people expressed their own personal opinions (2013). These hashtags also amassed a collective that connected on shared emotions of public anger at the government.

Since Indian law does not permit the names of sexual assault victims to be released publicly, Twitter offered an alternative channel through which her name could be revealed ("What the Law Says on a Rape Victim's Identity" , 2013). By concealing Jyoti Singh's name and using pseudonyms like #Nirbhaya, #Damini, and #Amanat, tweets discussing the rape were getting clubbed with tweets directed at conversations surrounding movies by the same names ("Hashtag Feminism and Twitter Activism in India", 2014). Several journalists felt that hiding her real name under the pretext of protecting her reputation and identity did not empower the cause, but instead perpetuated the existing gender power

relations ("Hashtag Feminism and Twitter Activism in India", 2014).

On the other hand, revealing her name granted the victim agency, and served as an umbrella term under which the student protestors, activists, and participants of the movement across the country could unite. In this way, Twitter became a medium of political collective action. Jyoti Singh's parents supported the revelation of her name, saying that they were not ashamed of her name and the country as a whole should be ashamed of the perpetrators instead of the victims (Safi, 2017).

## The Subaltern

'Subaltern' is defined as "the groups that are excluded from a society's established structures for political representation and therefore denied the means by which people have a voice in their society" (2007). Going by this definition of the subaltern within the context of women's rights in India, the middle class, and not just the economically oppressed lower classes comprised the subaltern. Groups and classes that were, for years, rendered voiceless by the government and the police, decided to make their voices heard. The subaltern decided to speak for itself. In her essay Can the Subaltern Speak?, Gayatri Spivak's argument is that the subaltern, due to an inbuilt structural inability, cannot speak, and it is the responsibility of those that are in more powerful positions to represent them (1988). On the other hand, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, in Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses, writes that the oppressed should be able to speak for themselves (Mohanty, 2017). While both Spivak and Mohanty base their arguments in a postcolonial framework, targeting the monolithic and singular description that universalizes

by a conservative society as bringing shame upon the family of the victim. Several factors, like colonial Victorian influences upon Indian tradition, notions of womanhood, and religious identities played a role in the taboo surrounding the public discourse of sexual violence. Even among the educated urban population, people felt it was better to stay silent on the matter of a rape or assault, rather than have their reputations damaged. These matters belonged to the private realm, not the public world of governance. So, when these 'private' issues finally began to be discussed in the public world of social media, the conversations connected with thousands of voices who were striving to be heard. In this way, Twitter not only connected the personal with the political and the private with the public, but it also provided a platform for millions of voices to speak. The thousands of middle class, elite protestors that filled Jantar Mantar and India Gate spoke not only for the more oppressed classes, but also for themselves.

In their respective arguments, Menon, Spivak and Mohanty critique the tendency of Western discourses of post-colonialism to create homogenous, reductionist representations of the subaltern ("The Conundrum of Agency", 2014). Even while writing about the postcolonial subject, the Western subject is still a cultural referent. In these discourses, the Western subject is the self, and the Eastern postcolonial subject is the other; the third world is relevant only as long as it follows Western narratives.

International media only reported on the movement when the protests amplified; however, once there was widespread coverage of the protests, international coverage increased drastically. Anthony Alessandrini, in *The Egyptian Revolution and the Problem of International Solidarity*, gives the example of Occupy Wall Street

sending representatives to monitor the elections in Egypt, and characterizes it as patronizing and condescending (2015). Misguided attempts at solidarity were also replicated after extensive media coverage of the Nirbhaya movement. In London and Paris, groups marched to the respective Indian embassies with petitions to make India a safer place for women, furthering the portrayal of rape as an Indian problem, as opposed to a global structural inequality ("London Protests Against Delhi Gangrape, Demands Justice for Women,", 2013) (Tiwari, 2013). Movements like the anti-sexual violence movement in India have a transnational relevance, and hence call for deeper levels of international solidarity.

In March 2015, British filmmaker Leslee Udwin released a documentary titled *India's Daughter*. Based on Jyoti Singh's rape, the International Movie Database (IMDB) describes it an examination of "the society and values of India after a 23-year-old medical student is raped and murdered on a bus." The documentary included an interview with one of the accused rapists ("Silencing India's Daughter: Why Has the Indian Government Banned the Delhi Rape Film?,", 2015). Conducted inside Tihar Jail in New Delhi, the police obtained a court order against the release of the documentary in India, since Udwin had entered the prison under the pretext of conducting research work, and had not told them that she would use the content in a film that would be released globally ("Silencing India's Daughter: Why Has the Indian Government Banned the Delhi Rape Film?,", 2015). The police also filed a First Information Report against the filmmakers, and demanded the ban of the film due to its content being offensive enough to create an atmosphere of tension and fear among women in society. The report also stated that Udwin had paid the accused for his

The ban was widely condemned by celebrities, film actors, and activists in India, and, Indian news channel NDTV broadcasted a black screen with a flickering lamp during the time-slot that had been allotted to the documentary before the ban ("NDTV Runs Blank Screen for One Hour to Protest the Ban on 'India's Daughter,'", 2015). However, BBC UK refused to comply with the Indian Government's order, and it was screened in the UK ("UK Screens Delhi Gang-Rape Film as India Calls for Worldwide Ban,", 2015). It was also uploaded on YouTube, from where Indian audiences accessed it. However, it was quickly taken down when the Indian government ordered YouTube to delete it. Arguably, the documentary was a much needed reflection of a fractured, unsafe, and patriarchal society, but it also exemplified the kind of Western discourse that Spivak's critique is directed against. Udwin, in interview conducted by npr.org, stated: "It was the protests. It was the fact that I was absolutely awestruck by the ordinary men and women of India who poured out onto the streets in response to this horrific gang rape and who demanded change for women's rights. And I thought the least I could do was amplify their voices" ("'India's daughter' Opens in U.S. After Being Banned in India,", 2015).

Several activists, including feminist activist Kavita Krishna, while resisting the documentary ban itself, have pointed out the inherent 'white-savior complex' in the film (DenHoed, 2015). By depicting such extreme negativity, Udwin makes sweeping generalizations about Indian men, which paint all of them as rapists. For a film that claims to be inspired by the protests following the rape, it fails to represent men who condemn sexual violence. In attempting to "amplify their voices", Udwin created a narrative that generalized Indian men and women. The interviewed rapist, Mukesh

Singh, was shown saying that Jyoti Singh should have allowed the rape, and should not have fought back. If she hadn't fought back, they would have dropped her off after raping her, and would only have beaten up Avanindra Pandey. A defense lawyer in the case, A.P. Singh, was shown saying that if his daughter or sister "engaged in pre-marital activities and disgraced herself and allowed herself to lose face and character by doing such things, I would most certainly take this sort of sister or daughter to my farmhouse, and in front of my entire family, I would put petrol on her and set her alight."

Western discussions surrounding the documentary also display similar biases. In an interview conducted by Fox News, one of the questions posed to Udwin was "when you think of rape as a culture, how do we address this? Because as you said, this is not just a problem in India this is an international epidemic, so how do we stop rape?" (Falzone, 2015) The next question states: "But like you said, the way you think of a rapist is a deranged, mentally disturbed person, but in these cultures, like you said, it comes down to a mentality, and a woman is not just a potential victim of being raped but it can be a child as young as three or five." The first question presents rape as an international problem, but the next question, with the use of the term "these cultures" exposes the construction of Indian culture as the other to the self of Western American culture.

Several Hollywood actors, including Meryl Streep and Sean Penn supported the documentary, and Streep has even said that it should receive an Oscar (Falzone, 2015). While Udwin has claimed that the documentary intends to depict a global rape epidemic, her statements in various interviews prove otherwise, pointing to Alessandrini's question in his essay; when do

## Conclusion

The significance of the movement goes beyond the incident itself, since it also opened up conversations surrounding similar incidents that had preceded it and those that came afterward. Now that a coherent space for conversation about sexual violence had been created, activists and journalists addressed issues that were mostly neglected by mainstream narratives, caste based sexual violence in rural areas, and marital rape. Twitter and Facebook conversations regarding sexual politics and violence also gravitated towards the 'unknown Nirbhayas'. The word 'survivor' started being used in public discourse instead of the term 'victim', since activists stressed the importance of rape being understood as another form of violence, as opposed to its construction as the worst form of violence that can be inflicted upon someone. It was also acknowledged that men and transgender individuals are also raped, and sexual violence isn't only a women's issue. The impact of the movement was felt across South Asian countries like Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal, where marches and demonstrations against sexual violence were held, and the movement was hailed as the rebirth of the fight for gender equality in South Asia ("Nirbhaya Case: The Incident That Shook the Nation,", 2017).

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