

The Political of the Personal Blogs through Discussion of Women and Homes¹

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Abstract

This is a study of a cluster of personal diary-type blogs written by urban, English-speaking, heterosexual Indian women bloggers. Through interviews with them about their motivations to blog, a critique of family structures and middle class conception of 'home' emerged. This article discusses how diary-type blogs written by the women in my study were far from just trivial, day-to-day logs of everyday activities, as all personal blogs are considered to be. Instead writing blogs was a political exercise for the bloggers. The article focuses on their discussions about homes in the blog-entries they posted and in the explanations they offered about those entries in their interviews. Not all bloggers proclaimed their practice as feminist but their blogs are certainly indicative of it. This article seeks to unravel the 'political' in these personal diary-type blogs and suggests that there might be room to consider personal blogs among other online platforms of personal dissent and resistance politics along with more acknowledged ones such as Facebook, YouTube channels, and Twitter.

Keywords: Women's blogs, Urban India, Online dissent

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As internet-based communication is gaining growing interest in social movements, civil society activism, and collective action literature (Castells 2012; Van Laer and Van Aelst 2010; Postmes and Brunsting 2002; Diani 2000), internet is also being discussed as a crucial medium of communication in social mobilization processes, protests, and also social change through the route of development in India (Rao and Dutta 2016; Poell and Rajagopalan 2015; Rangaswami and Cutrell 2012; Pal and Dutta 2012; DeSouza and Dutta 2008). A large portion of the literature on internet usage in India has concentrated on specific groups of users, primarily students, academics, medical professionals etc. (Sampath Kumar and Kumar 2010; Madhusudhan 2007; Malhotra, Ahuja, and Ingle 2006; Kumar and Kaur 2005), but only aiming to understand the use of the internet for seeking information. A more engaged, networked individual, actively accessing the internet for mobilization is found in the literature on cyberculture (Biju and Gayathri 2013). Yet, some authors suggest that this literature mainly focuses on individual lifestyle dissent as an entry point for engaging with protests; and wonder whether personal resistance on social media platforms has the same effect as actual resistance on the ground. However, overall there is relatively less attention given to online resistance and political engagement in the literature as compared to online information seeking even when there is growing interest among internet users in utilizing channels of personal expression for personal dissent and resistance through platforms such as blogs, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, as seen in the case of Anna Hazare's anti-corruption movement that commenced in 2011 and effectively used Facebook to gain support base², Shaheen Dhada's arrest because of a Facebook post, and Aseem Trivedi's Cartoons Against Corruption (Biju and Gayatri 2013). The everyday production of media by the public in the form of satirical videos that made commentaries on Arvind Kejriwal, Rahul Gandhi, and Narendra Modi during the 2014 election season is also a part of this repertoire where entertainment, politics, and public participation has been seen to go hand in hand (Punathambekar 2015). The author sees these artefacts of media production, such as AIB videos (All India Bakchod), videos circulated by The Viral Fever etc., in conjunction with commentaries made on Twitter, jokes circulated on SMSs, and such other parodies.

In the last decade in India, there have been innovative gender based movements that included online media as an important component. The Pink Chaddi Campaign of 2009 was a landmark in this regard and recurs frequently in discussions about new campaigns ever since. It was

² See The Hindu (2011) "Anna Hazare Rules Indian Cyberspace", 28 August. *thehindu.com*. Available from: <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/anna-hazare-rules-indian-cyberspace/article2406506.ece> [Accessed on 10th March 2017]

organized via a Facebook group in protest of slapping and beating of women in a pub in Mangalore by Right Wing groups (Mackey 2009). Some later efforts of campaigning in India were also inspired by the Pink Chaddi Campaign, for example the ‘Red Alert: You’ve got a napkin’ campaign³ and the ‘Kiss of Love’ campaign⁴. Another example of civic participation was seen in case of a university student from the US who came to India on a study abroad program in 2013. On August 18, 2013, she shared her experience of repeated sexual harassment she faced as a woman traveller in India, on the citizen journalism forum of CNN—CNN iReport⁵. The essay she wrote went viral and responses came in huge numbers. While digital platforms seem to be encouraging public participation in democratic politics and matters of civic engagement among technology-enabled population, these have received relatively less attention in the available literature.

Personal-political nature of blogs

Personal diary-type blogs studied in this essay have the personal-political nature, which is laid bare through interviews with the bloggers. Studies focused on blogs primarily see blogging as an exercise of identity formation on the part of young bloggers (Chittenden 2009; Blinka and Smahel 2009). Fashion bloggers are a section of this literature where bloggers are seen as breaking out of the stereotype of publishing just personal-nothing-of-consequence on the web to bringing first-hand accounts of fashion industry from fashion shows and owning up their fashion (Corcoran 2006). Tourist bloggers who construct and deconstruct the idea of the country they visit including India (Enoch and Grossman 2010), are nevertheless seen as active and agentic subjects. In the scholarship relating to blogs, Herring et al. (2004) have suggested that personal diary-type blogs, often associated with women, are neglected and considered trivial,

³ Based on the ‘Pink Chaddi Campaign’, the organizers of the ‘Red Alert: You’ve Got a Napkin’ campaign started a Facebook page calling people to send sanitary napkins to the Managing Director of a factory in Kochi that force-strip-searched women factory workers because a used sanitary napkin was found in the toilet. See Firstpost, (2015) “This is no Pink Chaddi’: ‘You’ve Got a Napkin’ Protest Against Kochi Strip Search Runs Cold”, 5 January. *firstpost.com* Available from: <http://www.firstpost.com/life/this-is-no-pink-chaddi-youve-got-a-napkin-protest-against-kochi-strip-search-runs-cold-2030105.html> [Accessed on 10th March 2017]

⁴ ‘Kiss of Love’ was a campaign started in Kochi against attacks on a coffee shop by a youth activist wing of Bhartiya Janata Party. See Firstpost, (2014) “Kiss of Love: Kochi’s Version of Pink Chaddi Campaign to Fight Moral Policing”, 30 October, 2014. *firstpost.com* Available from: <http://www.firstpost.com/india/kiss-of-love-kochis-version-of-pink-chaddi-campaign-to-fight-moral-policing-1778187.html> [Accessed on 10th March 2017]

⁵ See CNN iReport (2013) “India: the Story You Never Wanted to Hear”, 18 August. *ireport.cnn.com* Available from: <http://ireport.cnn.com/docs/DOC-1023053> [Accessed on 3rd February 2014]

emotional, and less important as compared to filter type blogs – the blogs that classify and annotate information available on the Web – or the ‘newsworthy’ blogs, mainly associated with male writers. Several studies relating to personal blogs have focused on analysing blogs as a media genre (Herring and Paolillo 2006; McNeill 2005; Miller and Shepherd 2004) or have empirically studied the socio-demographics of bloggers, their motivations and habits (Schmidt 2007). In this study, I attempt to unravel what could be the personal and political for the women bloggers in my study who write diary type blogs. Out of the few studies that have attempted to understand the personal and the political in blogging are those focused on the ‘mommy blogging’ phenomenon. For example, Morrison (2011) talking about the phenomenon of mommy blogging suggests that mommy bloggers are the intimate public. Often writing about the personal experiences while keeping largely silent about the topics that are public, Morrison (2011: 40) says mommy bloggers “balance personal vulnerability against the benefits of disclosure and publication. They describe transmutation of personal feeling and experience into communal identity and practice, and possibilities of collective social action that can arise from this identification”. In these intimate communities, Morrison says, the social taboos about what can be said about the condition and experience of motherhood are broken. Few studies though have made a direct connection between blogging by women users as their participation in feminist political activism, with the exception of a few (Keller 2011; Schuster 2013).

In the Indian context food blogs have been studied (Sarkar n.d.) to suggest that new meanings of regional cultures are constructed as women write recipes on their blogs. New roles for women in households are constructed as they go from being cooks in the kitchens to becoming story/recipe-writers. And histories, or as the author calls them, ‘her-stories’ refashioned as recipes are altered according to new household and family contexts. However, here blogs are only a part of the other outlets of recipe writing such as cook-books. In the personalised narratives in diary writing studied by Sreekumar (2009), women’s diary writing tells significant stories that cut through the dominant and official discourse of the state of Kerala. While the official indices portray Kerala as progressive state with high literacy rate among women as well as men, the personal narratives of women show the underbelly of the state where there is high sex crime and domestic violence. In Sreekumar’s book the gender paradox is laid bare through the personal narratives of women.

Method

The human interactions that are possible on blogs often give rise to an online community. However, the studies of virtual communities have shown that some of the criteria to define a

virtual community are that, firstly, public interactions need to take place among the members, which is a permanent feature of blogs I studied; there needs to be sustained membership of a minimal number, a criterion that was fulfilled by the bloggers' group in my study, most of whom have been blogging for over four years. And finally, in a virtual community social relationships develop among the members (Jones 1997 cited in Blanchard 2004). There is a difference in opinions regarding what constitutes an online community and an online group. What differentiates these groups from an online community is stronger ties among the members characterised by stronger interpersonal trust even in absence of direct ties (Putnam 1995 cited in Diani 2000). Identities of group members and solidarities among them are an integral part for the online communities geared towards mobilization that may then result in collective action and direct participation in activism (Diani 2000). It is then possible to identify and study such a community through cyber-ethnographic methods. The bloggers in this study indexed each other's entries on their own blogs and commented on each other's posts, but were mainly involved in writing their individual blogs. The blogger's group studied in this essay operated more as an online group. The blogs studied for the purpose of this article belonged to urban, middle class or upper middle class women, and the politics articulated by them is associated with their experiences within that context.

This article is based on interviews with ten bloggers, each lasting one hour on an average, coupled with reading of blog entries made by the bloggers for three months. All the bloggers involved in this study have spent a considerable amount of time living in some major city in India and are now stationed either in India or abroad but have maintained a large readership with Indian bloggers and readers. It was a simultaneous process of reading the blogs and talking to the bloggers about them. When, in the initial interviews, a critique of home was mentioned by a blogger, it became a key to probe further about the same notion in successive interviews. That the construct of home was central to the bloggers in my cluster became apparent to me during an interview with a blogger whose blogging name itself consists of the word 'homemaker'. Home and homemaker reappeared when the second blogger referred to the first blogger in her interview. It was similarly spoken about by other bloggers, who pointed me to the entries they had written about home, or just spoke about home spontaneously in their interviews. Home was therefore not only a word in the blog posts, but it was a construct with shared meaning among the bloggers, with many agreements and disagreements of course.

As each blogger led me to the next blogger, a cluster of bloggers was discovered without 'participating' in their group. Therefore, for the purpose of this study I was more a reader of

these blogs, not a participant in their cluster. Blogs are among those online platforms where it is possible to be a completely unobtrusive observer, and there are disagreements about whether this approach can be called ethnographic (Garcia, Standlee, Bechkoff and Cui 2009). But at the same time, the interpretive method of understanding blogs as media texts does not entirely capture how the blogs were engaged with. Karlsson (2007) has suggested that the blogs can also be 'read' in the same way as post-structuralist reader response theories suggest how media texts are 'read'. According to her, the hyperlinked texts and interactive capacity of blogs – that allows readers to even contribute to writing of the actual texts – renders the reading of blogs to be similar to the reading of (media) texts, which is idiosyncratic and non-linear. In this study, the construct of home emerged first as a theme during some of the initial interviews with bloggers; it then became the interpretive frame by which to understand their blog-posts and to ask questions to the rest of the bloggers in order to explore it further.

The Home metaphor

In what may seem to be a simple articulation of a perspective of any homemaker, a blogger, H, says, “What is a good homemaker?... I find I am generally content as someone who enjoys the company of her family, is reasonably organized, also has some time and interests of her own, and is willing to accept that her family does not always agree with everything she says”⁶. Here, in light of the negative judgements that women homemakers have to face about being ‘non working’ members of a family or the expectations of them to be exceptional women with skills to keep a house well organized, H owns up to the title of homemaker and gives it a positive meaning. While the title of ‘homemaker’ could denote lack of independence to spend money, being a ‘good homemaker’ is related to looking after all the household tasks, maintaining a clean, organized home, looking after the meals for family members, and doing a good job of it all. For blogger H, the label of a good homemaker is connotative of the burden that upper class respectable femininity bears. Not wanting to uphold such an ideal of a good homemaker, she says, “I am glad I am born today, when a homemaker need not, necessarily, even be a woman”. Here she breaks down the stereotype that homemaker is a woman and household responsibilities are woman’s responsibilities.

⁶ The blogger is cited to have said this in an interview she gave to an online discussion site, blogadda. See blogadda (2014) “Interview With Indian Homemaker”, 14 May. *blogadda.com*. Available from <http://blog.blogadda.com/2009/05/14/interview-with-indian-homemaker> [Accessed on 6th February 2014]

The place of a house-help is a contested one in middle class homes; however, bloggers address this in their blogs, articulating their understanding and importance of house-helps. Blogger B says on her blog, "...having a house-help is not necessarily demeaning or lazy on the part of parents...". Wanting to be a working parent, women have to rely on house-helps and in this context, B writes, "...I see my helper as a skilled individual who can take over tasks that she does better... Yelling at helpers is symptomatic of a mindset that does not respect this kind of work". B's discussion suggests an awareness of her privilege as a middle-class woman, but also a reflection on what needs to change.

Blogger H says in her interview, "...people think that divorce is something filthy, dirty, shameful". Giving examples of her friends who continue to remain married despite irreconcilable differences, H adds, "I don't know why staying married is so important". H says having honest discussions about taboo topics is the purpose of her blog, which she says we often avoid doing.

"I blog about the everyday life of an urban Indian homemaker and her reactions to what's happening in the world around her. So, I blog against violence and intolerance, and against our use of tradition, culture and religion to justify anything that common sense might refuse to accept; I write against gender bias, a lot of this, and our biases against girl children even in educated families; against all stifling stereotypes; about my kids.

H's blog receives very large number of comments, sometimes even exceeding a hundred for a post, where men and women share their experiences of divorce, maternity, abuse, matrimony, etc. Discussing the issues that remain 'off limits' for middle class households is therefore the form that H's blog has taken over the years. She says,

"I used to call [my blog] my online home, for a long time. Now sometimes I don't even feel it's my blog. It belongs to a whole lot of other people who bring more through the comments. Sometimes some people have written such long and such sensible, strong comments, they could have been blog posts themselves. Many have started their blogs and that's wonderful. But right now I feel I am part of the people who are there and who are on the blog. It is sometimes not so nice, but I am happy with that, at least the issues that are discussed are definitely the issues I strongly feel for.

With several bloggers populating her blog, H's blog is no more her 'home', but the metaphor captured the imagination of another blogger, N, who is a regular visitor of H's blog. Inspired by H, N put the metaphor to further use when she started a blog calling it her 'nest'. N's description of her own blogging in fact explains how difficult breaking some of the silences in the middle-

class household could be, particularly when a blog has several readers. N talks about the backlash she receives through comments for speaking about matters that she has felt strongly about, such as abuse in marital homes, child abuse, and others. She says other bloggers have told her not to say anything unless she has something good to say about the posts. N says, “We are always taught, we should never wash our dirty linen in public, that is why you never open your mouth. But that is how women are being controlled also. So unless we talk, how can I expect others to open up?”. N says she is a survivor of harassment and abuse at the hands of her mother in law. However, having survived and fought through it, she says it was necessary for her to break the silence and her blog is a place where she has found supportive community that helped her overcome the challenges.

The topics that bloggers discuss on their blogs are often the familial matters expected to be kept private, the matters that N refers to as ‘dirty linen’. The silences around them protect the power structures in families, that are also constituted partly by women, that work against women in households. Breaking the silence becomes a political articulation that threatens the traditional hierarchies. Bloggers in the cluster of blogs were acutely aware of the power that these articulations could wield and spoke about the risks they must negotiate in order to continue this exercise of speaking up and building solidarity through their blogs, with other bloggers.

Blogger B, started blogging several years ago, in the run up to her wedding. She says,

“I had a lot of angst related to my wedding. And blogging was a way to deal with that. So I blogged about some of the things that happened during the planning of my wedding, and my fiancé got upset, ‘coz I was quite bitchy in those posts. So I promised that I won’t blog about that, but actually I created another anonymous blog, where I blogged only about my wedding.”

She has clarified in an interview for a women’s e-zine that it was the privileges that groom’s family gets that go unquestioned had upset her about her wedding.

However, some of the risks that bloggers take lead to a backlash that forces them to close down dialogue on the blogs. B recounts the case of a particular post where debate turned into personal attacks. She wrote a post titled ‘Why I wanted payment for labour and associated work’. Summing it up in a sentence she says, “Ideally I would have liked to get paid money, but I got a substantial gift from my husband, after both my pregnancies and labor/after I gave birth. And people [readers of her blog] were just not happy with that idea”. The debate that followed got abrasive, and B had to close down comments for that section. H mentions that sometimes the same blogger writes harassing comments under various blogging names. The harasser brings

down an army consisting of his/her own replicas upon bloggers. H says, “Sometimes there is the same IP (Internet Protocol), sometimes the same person writing from different IPs, but their style of writing is the same. So, you immediately know”. N says,

Some of them we just ignore and they move away, because they get bored after some time. But one particular guy keeps coming back after every few months. He will go to H’s blog, then my blog and then a few others’ whose comments he doesn’t like. And then back again to my blog.

Trolling⁷ is directed against creation of a space where bloggers sound each other out regarding their ideas of home, family, women’s place in the family etc. in the given context. For the bloggers who have faced certain resistance from their families to their blogging, online attacks from trolls pose further barrier to continuing to blog. As H suggests, other bloggers often come together to protect their blogs in case of attacks from trolls. Bloggers share IP addresses of trolls with each other and warn each other. They are also able to gang-up against a troll, spread the word against him/her fast via other means, such as through private Facebook groups.

Blogger D explains why she prefers the metaphor of ‘safe space’ for her blog, a variation of the home metaphor. Being a survivor of an abusive relationship that had rendered her homeless in a foreign country, she wanted to start a blog where she could create a space for others who could share their experiences of abusive relationships. In absence of in-person connections, she has blogged at length about her experiences. She says that it is her responsibility to create a safe space for her audience on her blog. Blogging, she says,

“is generating knowledge, breaking isolation and empowering people. In order for these, you have to have a safe space, you cannot create knowledge under threat, under unsafe conditions; you cannot create empowerment under unsafe conditions, and break isolation under unsafe conditions. To have a safe space, where you can come and say, I am suffering, that is very important. [If] you are suffering, the first reason of your suffering is you are unsafe... So having a safe space is important.

H’s blog and D’s blogs have grown in readership to the extent that they are not personal diary-type blogs as they used to be. Nevertheless, the content on the blogs still articulates the politics of ‘the personal as political’. B’s blog on the other hand continues to be a diary-type blog, which she likes to call ‘her space’. However, she says, “for me, in terms of space to air my views, I don’t necessarily feel restricted as a woman in doing so otherwise”. Fine-tuning the idea of her blog as her space, she suggest that it is a space for discussions that otherwise don’t take place.

⁷ Harassing the writer by responding in an offensive fashion to show disregard and disagreement with the writer’s views is termed as trolling

Discussion and conclusion

Blogs studied in this essay are publicly available for readers who may stumble upon them, to read. However, first person narratives, self-exposure, personal information, and ‘taboo’ topics discussed on these blogs complicate their nature, making it difficult to clearly mark them as either personal or public. The distinction between public and private spheres as separate political and social categories has been challenged by the notions that the personal is political, e.g. Gal (2002: 78) reminds us that the distinction between public and private arose from the nineteenth century social analysts in Europe and United States, who assumed that “social world is organized around separate and incompatible moral principles that are linked to either public or private, such as community vs. individual, rationality vs. sentiment, money vs. love, solidarity vs. self interest”. However, far from being incompatible, the principles associated with public and private spheres coexist in complex combinations (Gal 2002). As women bloggers share their stories of domestic violence, marital abuse, reflections on reproduction, the power structures that guard and enable these acts are threatened as the personal and private is brought into the public realm.

The complicated relationship between home and women is dwelt upon in feminist scholarship; for example, Narayan (1997: 7), speaks about the silencing of mother, wife and daughter that occurs in family settings, a phenomenon she calls the “politics of home”. However, how women came to be thrust upon with specific roles within households has a historical context of nationalist movement. Partha Chatterjee’s (1989) critical review of the nationalist project has elucidated ‘women’s question in nationalism’. Women became part of the nationalist project when the tradition of *suttee*⁸ became the prime example of why there was a need to ‘civilize’ Indian people. For the Indian nationalists, though, this civilizing mission had to ensure that India imitates the West only in material aspects and retains its spiritual aspects, since, according to them, the spiritual domain of the East was far superior to the West. This nationalist discourse, that India would adapt itself to the requirements of the modern material world without losing its true identity, condensed into separating the inner world from the outer world – the distinction between *ghar* and *bābir*, i.e. the home and the world. The responsibility of adjusting to the material activities outside of homes came to be borne by men, while women had to take the responsibility of protecting the spiritual quality of the national culture, no matter how their external conditions of life changed. In other words, they must not become Westernized. In

⁸ A tradition of burning a widowed woman on her deceased husband’s pyre, prevalent mainly among upper caste Hindus in colonial India (see Chatterjee 1989; Mani 1987)

Chatterjee's writing there is evidence to show how this distinction came about from the 19th century writing of men and women both. In one of the excerpt that he cites, there is an explicit emphasis on the housework that women in middle class homes must learn in order to have a "feminine virtue" (Chatterjee 1989: 630). This particular historical context has governed the relationship between household and women. However more recently the idea of the 'new Indian woman' has emerged who is a professional, independent, glamorous woman, consumer of goods, who partakes in the imagination of modern India in the globalized world. The 'new Indian woman' is an upper/middle class English-speaking urban woman who transcends her location in the domestic world. She is a part of the 'modern' imagination of India. Her 'respectability', though, now rests in the virtuous deed of not giving her job priority over her family (Thapan 2004; Munshi 1998).

In the cluster of blogs considered in this essay bloggers think aloud about how they see themselves in the new contexts and reflect on what changes they wish to see in the set-up of homes. The discussions often border on contagious and controversial when the re-imaginings of families and homes don't sit well with the readers who resort to trolling on the grounds of protecting morality. The personal diary-type blogs I studied are far from being trivial and unimportant. This study suggests that there is room for further focused investigation on personal blogs, which may have potential to be considered among the range of other means of online public participation platforms along with Facebook, YouTube channels, Twitter etc. in the matters of protests, and processes of social change.

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