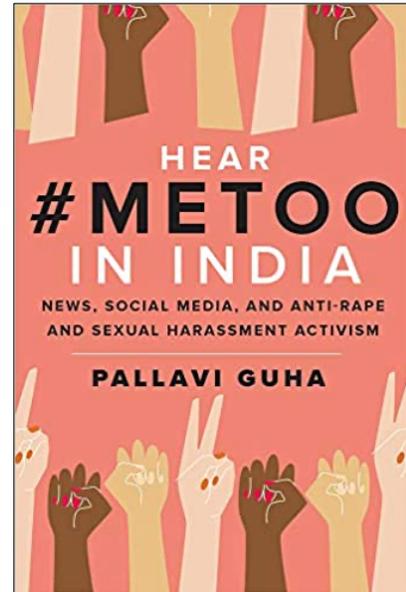


Pallavi Guha, **Hear #MeToo in India: News, Social Media, and Anti-Rape and Sexual Harassment Activism**, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2021, 155 pp., \$78.00 (hardcover), \$28.95 (paperback).

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In recent years, especially with the rise of the global #MeToo movement, sexual harassment has increased prominence in public discourse. Rape and sexual harassment (an imprecise legal term) have certain important and nuanced differences, but fundamentally, they are aspects of power plays where the aim is to violate personal autonomy. Unfortunately, women in India are often well acquainted with both. Though the #MeTooIndia movement has thrown up issues of sexual harassment and rape in all their ugliness through the frank and brave public testimonies of survivors, its impact and influence on digital feminist activism and how sexual assault and rape is treated both legally and socially remains to be explored in depth. This is why **Hear #MeToo in India: News, Social Media, and Anti-Rape and Sexual Harassment Activism**, by Pallavi Guha, is so important.



The book addresses certain important questions related to sexual harassment and rape in India and, in the process, critically investigates the role of digital platforms and the participation of suburban women in antirape and antiharassment activism in India. Intersecting journalism, activism, and transnational feminism, the author's research examines the role that digital platforms and media play in antirape and sexual harassment activism in India and produces a scheme of agenda building and a framework to examine media coverage of such issues in the Indian context. Conversations with over 75 activists and journalists working across India guide this study, and the book analyzes news about rape and physical harassment up to July 2019.

India is no stranger to feminist activism, both digital and offline. Campaigns like the SlutWalk, Pink Chaddi (Pink Underwear), Hollaback, and more recent crusades such as the #IwillGoOut, Pinjra Tod (Break the Cage), #LoSHA, and #MeToo are all a part of a rich online and offline tradition. The first chapter ("Introduction and Historical Background") establishes the social and legal backdrop of the culture of women's safety in the country through a detailed exploration of India's long and cruel history of atrocities against women. Clearly, this is work deeply inspired by the author's experiences as a woman and a journalist. Growing up, and later as a practicing journalist in India, Guha was no stranger to harassment. From rapes in police custody to assault during riots, this chapter introduces readers to the country's precarious state of women's rights and safety. From Bhanwari Devi's rape in 1992 to Jyoti Singh's rape and murder that brought international attention to sexual assault in India, and the #MeToo movement in India

that were heralded as turning points for the feminist movement in India, the author shines a spotlight on different feminist developments but says the lack of inclusivity is galling.

The #MeToo movement globally and in India may have thrown into sharp relief the role digital platforms can play in enhancing the voices of survivors and activists. However, recent research has shown that, in India, such movements often exclude suburban, rural, and semirural voices and experiences, while ignoring the onerous and taxing nature of digital labors that activists put in, which is often compounded by the sexual nature of trolling. Social media may be lauded as the modern town criers and amplifiers of marginalized voices, but sexual assault and harassment show that this amplification can be quite selective. The crux of the chapter lies in understanding that "some rapes, sexual abuse, and sexual harassment incidents find space in the news media, some are discussed only on social media, and many do not reach the public at all" (p. 12), which also connects to the next chapter and theme of the book, "Framing of Rape in the News Media and Its Impact on Feminist Activism and Journalists" (chapter 2).

This chapter makes for interesting reading because it examines how activism and activist growth around women's issues have been extremely organic in India, developing without strategic plans and being intrinsically controlled by the early feminist activists, and later nongovernmental organizations, which, in certain ways, almost hijacked feminism and what we understand as feminism in India. For the longest time, these entities controlled who got to be an activist and participant, as well as what constituted feminist movements. Social media disrupted this control, but it would be a while before patriarchal structures in the media, an essential instrument of amplification, especially in the pre-social media era, were breached. To underscore these changes and their impact, Guha, whose interviews started in 2016, revisited conversations with some activists and journalists later in 2018, asking them similar questions about the roles they played in the antirape and sexual harassment agenda building in India, which, in 2018, following the #MeToo and #MeTooIndia era, was uniquely mediated by digital platforms. As her conversations and analysis show, there were differences in the way rural and urban feminist activists and journalists experienced and saw the impact of the movement.

This difference also impacts the agenda-building capacity of the media, which has been shifting due to the presence of social media platforms along with the disruption of mainstream media gatekeeping. Discussion of rape and sexual assault in certain communication practices in some cultures focus on the "status" of women and the power hierarchy in the society, particularly in the context of India. As Guha underlines, rarely is the intersectional identity of the woman vis-à-vis her position in society, her economic status, and the way she views herself considered. This is exemplified in the third chapter, which looks at how, despite new spaces for participation and expressing outrage, "The Heart Does Not Bleed for Everyone: Selective Outrage and Activism."

Social media may help keep up pressure until cases are brought to court (not necessarily justice), but coverage of women's safety issues, especially those related to rape and harassment, remain low in quality and lack depth. Ultimately, it is about location (whether the rape is an urban or rural one) intersected with issues of class and caste. However, the digital platforms stand, especially the resurgent #MeTooIndia movement in 2018, which also brought about a blurring of the roles of journalism and activism, where many journalists shared their stories in a bid to draw attention and support survivors. How did this impact media

agendas, especially intermedia agenda-setting between social media platforms and mainstream media? In the next chapter, "The Successes and Failures of Transnational Hashtag Movements," Guha maps the transnational anti-rape and sexual harassment movements worldwide and focuses on how not all anti-rape transnational feminist movements influence, interact, or build public and private agendas in a uniform pattern. Hashtag movements may have made conversations around these issues more measurable, but access and visibility of marginalized feminist activists and especially how they are reported on and characterized remain areas of contention. Rapes in rural areas are usually never the focus of media attention, and in India, especially, where caste and politics intersect to cause further polarization.

Yet, we have much to learn from these digital movements and their effects on activists, activism, and influence on media agendas. As Guha discusses in the concluding chapter, "Moving Forward: Learning from Anti-rape Feminist Movements," it is not about what these movements have achieved or not, but rather their impact on survivors that matters. As she says, it is not about the platform being ineffective, but rather about audiences not knowing how to use them that has proven to be its biggest weakness, compounded by the algorithmic focus of social media platforms and, of course, the polarizing effects of misinformation.

The book's strengths lie in its contextualization of the feminist movement in India in a scenario that is being speedily digitized. Guha does not shy away from talking about gatekeeping within organizations working in women's rights and how it impeded her access to activists. Her frank delving, in designing this research, and self-reflexivity makes this an excellent text not just for those interested in digital feminist activism in India but also for global scholars of qualitative research methodology.

Throughout the different chapters, the author situates the study in a context that is at once personal and collaborative, where interview participants are considered collaborators who guide the project. Guha identifies as an emerging feminist scholar of media who has deliberately not focused this research on analyzing the scholarly gaps guided by Anglo-Western norms of knowledge production. This study needs more iterations that can address issues related to the inherently sexist nature of the algorithms that impact information dispersal on these platforms and increase the scope of analysis.