

## India's Gender Digital Divide: Women and Politics on Twitter

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**ABSTRACT** This study explores the spatial politics of Othering and whether women are marginalized in political conversations online in India. It's methodology consists of an analysis of 23,350 tweets over an eight-day period. It shows a significant underrepresentation of women in Twitter's political conversations, which mirrors a real-world marginalization of women in India's political processes.

### INTRODUCTION

The participation of women plays a fundamental role in the health and efficacy of any political society. This involvement is defined not only by the levels with which women share electoral representation with men, but also in terms of the space available for them to engage with and contribute to political conversations. While online communication has been lauded for the empowering potential it has for women and civil society, in reality, the “democratic” space of the Internet and social media often replicate and even amplify real-world inequalities. Through analyzing 23,250 tweets under political trending topics over an eight-day period, this study seeks to explore whether or not the typically male-dominated nature of politics in India is mirrored in political conversations online.

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

#### *The Female as Other*

The Self/Other binary, a sociological concept first coined by Emmanuel Levin as and developed further by numerous theorists, is a useful sociological tool for unpacking the nuances of gender relations. In psychoanalytic theory, the “self” is a social product formed in relation to a “symbolic ideal.” This symbolic ideal is the embodiment of white, heteronormative, maleness, and exists in opposition to all other identities that are rejected as “Other”.<sup>1</sup> Oppression is inter sectional, which means the formation of a gendered female Other, always intersects with race, sexuality, class, and ability, with increasing

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levels of disenfranchisement the further one falls from the symbolic ideal. For those who resemble the symbolic ideal, clear, rigid boundaries are established between the self and the Other, while the self seeks to establish as much distance from Otherness as possible. The Other, internalizing this hierarchy, moves through life avoiding the material consequences of not falling into the categories of idealized subjectivity.

Ideas about the gendered Other are more than an inheritance of attitudes, they are the construction of imaginations that treat maleness as normative. Countless works have explored subject formation of the Other and its causes. Simone de Beauvoir argued, "The category of Other is as original as consciousness itself. The duality between Self and Other can be found in most primitive societies, in the most ancient mythologies... Varuna-Mitra... Sun-Moon, Day-Night... Good-Evil... alterity is the fundamental category of human thought. No group ever defines itself as One without immediately setting up the Other opposite itself".<sup>2</sup> In our male-dominated societies "Humanity is male, and man defines woman, not in herself, but in relation to himself... He is the subject, he is the Absolute. She is the Other".<sup>3</sup>

How subjects and Others relate to one another shows us narratives of power at work. Some of Michael Foucault's most profound theoretical contributions explore discursive framing and the way power functions through the creation of organized systems of knowledge to achieve political agendas.<sup>4</sup> The knowledge systems around gender frame what is expected of and what is allowed for women and men insofar as it will maintain power relationships between the sexes. Discourse around gender and sexuality continues to be constructed for the empowerment of men and as a means to determine the social scripts the female Other is to perform.

### *The Politics of Space*

Part of embodying Otherness and performing gendered scripts within a socially constructed

world means learning to negotiate space. Categories like gender, race, sexuality and class act as orientations, determining what bodies can and cannot do in terms of motility and mobility and the ease in which they can move through space and cross borders. According to Iris Marion Young's seminal work, "Throwing like a Girl," the way women carry their bodies and position themselves in space is not inherent; rather, it is the social formation of a particular epoch. As feminine subjects within male-dominated society, young girls learn to contain and limit their bodies in passive, non-threatening ways, as not only subjects but as objects.<sup>5</sup> This occurs through learned, unconscious and repetitious gestures that become natural. The way women are contained in space can be physically observed in many everyday movements, in the way women walk, sit, lift weights or boxes, throw balls, or open jars. Perceived female inability or smallness is not rooted in biological limitations, but the social, political and aesthetic history of how females come to learn to "be" in their bodies in space and time.

The ways in which women learn to position themselves in space are not just limited to corporeality. Pressure to minimize the female self exists on multiple levels that include psychology, personality, speech and behavior. Learned female behaviors and the consequences of not adhering to them preserve "a space [around women] in imagination that [they] are not free to move beyond".<sup>6</sup> This influences a woman's interests, which topics she is welcome to engage with and her comfort engaging with them. Despite increasing female political representation, politics, like many other areas in the Indian social landscape, is aparently male space. The study outlined in the following section explores if and to what extent the democratic nature of cyberspace allows women to be more free and vocal about politics in this traditionally male domain.

### **RESEARCH QUESTION**

Is there an underrepresentation of Indian women's political views on Twitter?

## METHODOLOGY

For the purposes of this study, Twitter was identified as the most useful social media site for analysis. Twitter is categorized as a microblogging platform where users are encouraged to express themselves textually in tweets of 140 characters or less by sharing opinions, humor, current events, and live status updates. It is an almost entirely public forum where a tweet can be seen by anyone who follows a user or searches a topic or hashtag, allowing users to interact with both niche and broad audiences. In a recent study, market research developers *We Are Social* showed Facebook as the most popular social media platform in India with 52% of social media users claiming to have logged on in the last month, followed by Google+ and Twitter at 35% and 30%, respectively.<sup>7</sup> Twitter was chosen for this study because it is an open platform, whereas the two more popular sites have a range of privacy settings that limit outside access to most profiles. Another reason is that sites like Facebook and Google+ are largely dedicated to connecting people with friends, family members, and other social connections, while Twitter is designed to allow users to follow important topics, people and conversations that are relevant or interesting to them. Put simply, Facebook and many other social media sites network people; Twitter networks ideas and topics. This made Twitter the most useful social media network when studying the ways people are engaging with political issues online.

Two four day periods were selected, June 17-21 and July 18-22, to offer a time span in which social media data in India would capture a broad variety of political topics. Over these eight days, 792 topics trended and were archived using the twitter analytics website *Trendinalia*. Most topics were in English, although ones in Hindi were also included and translated using reliable references. Of these trends, 222 were classified as political in nature. Political trends that were not specific to India were omitted as to prevent a significant amount of tweets from international twitter

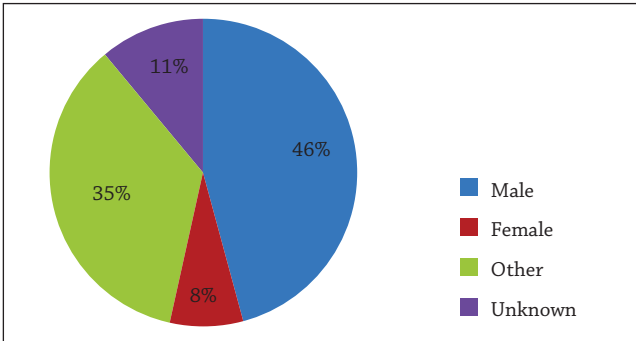
users influencing the data sample. Each trend was assigned a number and the Research Randomizer application was applied to randomly select 10 trends.<sup>8</sup> Qualitative data analysis software NVIVO 10 and its extension NCapture were then used to collect all the tweets of each trending topic on the day it first trended. In total, 23,250 tweets were collected for analysis.

To keep the sample as reliable as possible, tweets in both Hindi and English were included. Any tweet made by a user whose profile geotagged them in a country other than India were omitted. Each tweet was viewed as an individual contribution to a larger dialogue, meaning multiple tweets by the same user were included. Retweets were also included, as they were viewed as a means for users to make use of their own platform to amplify the voices of other users. Accounts tweeting spam under the trending topic, or any tweet including the trend in a way unrelated to the topic itself were omitted.

Each tweet was placed into a category based on the individual user's gender identity. As Twitter profiles, names and avatars are self-chosen and do not necessarily represent the tweeter's biological gender, determining whether a twitter user was male or female was based on presentation. Decisions about the probable gender of the writer were drawn from information within the tweet, the image used as an avatar, the tweeter's name, the content of the person's public Twitter timeline, and information provided by the person's profile page. Each tweet's user was placed into one of the categories: Male, Female, or Non-identifying/Unknown. The category Other accounted for any tweets put out by news outlets, organizations, brands, political parties, or accounts representing a group rather than an individual. A fifth category was initially created to capture any persons identifying outside traditional gender binaries, however this could only be counted if a user disclosed this gender identity somewhere in their profile. As this did not occur in the study, only binary gender categories appear in the findings. Finally, retweets were categorized twice: once for the

gender of the individual being retweeted, and once for the gender of the individual doing the retweeting.

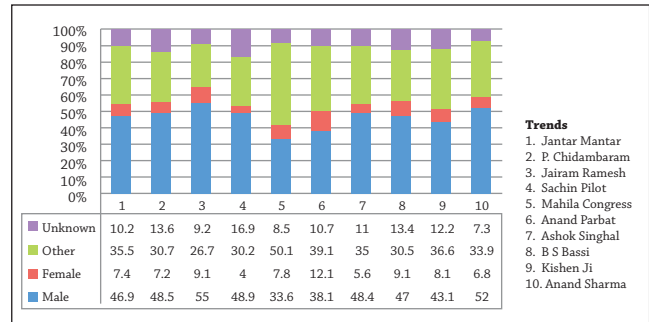
**FIGURE 1: USER BREAKDOWN**



**FINDINGS**

Figure 1 shows that of the 23,250 tweets sampled under political trending topics, 7.72% of tweets were by women, 46.15% by men, 34.83% by organizations, news outlets and other groups, and 11.30% by users who did not indicate their gender. These numbers were relatively consistent under each trend, as is illustrated in Figure 2. The percent of females participating under each trend ranged from 4% (under the Sachin Pilot trend) to 12.1% (Anand Parbat). The three trends with the highest female participation were Jairam Ramesh, BS Bassi and Anand Parbat. The Anand Parbat (12.1%) and BS Bassi (9.1%) trends were about the murder of a young girl in Delhi and were related to significant public outcry about violence against women and the lack of safety for women in the streets. Despite this, the percentage of women tweeting under these trends was not much higher than many of the other trends. The trend about Jairam Ramesh (9.1%), the male politician, was also quite high. The findings showed there was not a substantial difference in the number of women tweeting, even when the trends involved the issue of violence against women. Tweets by men ranged between 33% (Mahila Congress) and 55%(Jairam Ramesh), however this disparity was largely influenced by the amount of tweets sent out by news outlets and organizations and the amount they were retweeted, rather than a difference in the number of women tweeting.

**FIGURE 2: USER BREAKDOWN BY TREND**



While a descriptive study of this nature gives a snapshot of political conversations on Twitter and who is involved in them, there are some limitations to the conclusions that can be drawn. Firstly, the random selection of ten trends, while covering over twenty thousand tweets, was small enough that it may have excluded some more “female-friendly” trends, particularly viral ones. For example, on June 8th Modi applauded the Bangladesh Prime Minister for her work to combat terrorism “despite being a woman,” which triggered the trend #Despite Being A Woman and a storm of backlash and outrage from women online. However, this type of individual, viral trend is not as common and is less likely to be picked up by a random sample. It is also very important to note that in this random sample of ten trends, seven of them were specifically about male politicians or leaders, which speaks to the male-dominated nature of politics in India, and perhaps why women are less inclined to be tweeting under political trends.

A 2015 study conducted by Google, titled “Women & Technology,” concluded that around 40% of Internet users in India are women, putting the male to female ratio at roughly 60:40.<sup>9</sup> However, there is no conclusive data available at this time about the gender breakdown of men and women on Twitter specifically, which is another limitation of the study. While Twitter use in India continues to grow at a double digit pace only 19% of India's population has Internet access, and of those only 10% use social media.<sup>10</sup> This means the demographic is decidedly more urban, young, and affluent than India's population as a whole, with 85% of students in urban India claiming they use

social networks and of those, 44% claiming to use Twitter.<sup>11</sup> One study by eMarketer shows only 1.8% of Indians are Twitter users.<sup>12</sup> This is largely due to India's low Internet and social media penetration. It is important however, to keep the comparative size of India's Twitter user base in perspective, as India is the sixth largest Twitter user base in the world and is the fastest growing, up 30.4% from last year.<sup>13</sup> By 2018, it is predicted that the current Twitter user base of 22.2 million will climb to 39.5 million.<sup>14</sup> While the number of Twitter users in India is tiny in relation to its enormous population, the number becomes extremely significant in a global context.

**TABLE 1: TWITTER USERS AND PENETRATION IN INDIA, 2013-2018**

	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
<b>Twitter Users (Millions)</b>	<b>11.5</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>22.2</b>	<b>28.4</b>	<b>33.9</b>	<b>39.5</b>
<b>% Change</b>	68.8	47.6	30.4	27.8	19.4	16.5
<b>% of Social Network Users</b>	13.6	15.7	17	18	18.5	18.8
<b>% of Internet Users</b>	6.9	7.9	8.8	10	10.8	11.4
<b>% of Population</b>	0.90	1.40	1.80	2.20	2.60	3.00

While there is not much data on demographics of Twitter's user base, it should be acknowledged that Twitter users represent a very narrow and highly skewed sample of Indian society. Gender inequality becomes more prominent as we move down the social strata, but this phenomenon and others like it, are not visible on Twitter, which is another limitation of the study. A descriptive study of this nature cannot and does not seek to infer anything about the status of women in Indian society through an analysis of Twitter. It does however, examine cyber space in India, an increasingly important and understudied area, and the ways online social spaces designated as political are being utilized and engaged with by Indian women. If we can observe that this popular social media network dedicated to networking thoughts and ideas is a space where Indian women are marginalized in political conversations, it is likely that they are

marginalized in other political spaces online. This means that while Twitter may not be a microcosm of Indian society, it is perhaps a microcosm of Indian social media, and broadly speaking, Indian cyber space. While this cannot be generalized to similar processes in the real world, it can be compared to them to see if any similarities can be drawn.

## DISCUSSION

The theoretical framework of this paper outlines the way women are discouraged from taking up certain spaces through the politics of Othering. The study of Twitter found that much like Indian political processes in the real world, women are marginalized in political conversations online, highlighting the spatial politics of Othering at work. Not only were significantly less individual women tweeting about issues, tweets by prominent female journalists, politicians and personalities were shared much less than those by their male counterparts. If knowledge systems around gender define women's social scripts, it can be observed that using the Internet to engage in political dialogue is not one of the social scripts women are encouraged to perform.

**TABLE 2: FEMALE PARTICIPATION IN LOWER HOUSE OF INDIAN PARLIAMENT**

\*Including one nominated member

<b>Lok Sabha (Lower House)</b>	<b>Total Seats</b>	<b>Seats Won By Women</b>	<b>% of Total</b>
First (1952)	489	22	4.4
Second (1957)	494	27	5.4
Third (1962)	523	31	5.9
Fourth (1967)	523	31	5.9
Fifth (1971)	521	22	4.2
Sixth (1977)	544	19	3.4
Seventh (1980)	544	28	5.1
Eighth (1984)	544	44	8.1
Ninth (1989)	529	28	5.3
Tenth (1991)	509	36	7
Eleventh (1996)	541	40*	7.4
Twelfth (1998)	545	44*	8
Thirteenth (1999)	543	48*	8.8
Fourteenth (2004)	543	45*	8.1
Fifteenth (2009)	543	59	10.9
Sixteenth (2014)	543	61	11.2

The findings here mirror an under representation of women in actual processes of

electoral politics in India. While in recent years women have achieved parity with men in voter turnout, there continues to be a significant under representation of women in the lower house (Lok Sabha) of Parliament, state assemblies, and in the highest levels of electoral competition for decision-making positions. As can be seen in Table 2,<sup>15</sup> female representation in the Lok Sabha has remained considerably low since the first general elections. In 1952, women constituted 4.4% of the total members in the lower house, which has increased to 11.2% in 2014, but it is still well below the world average of 20%.<sup>16</sup> Likewise, female representation in legislative bodies in most of the states in India is below the 20% mark. Praveen Rai argues that as the number of prominent female politicians and party leaders increases, female representation within the rank and file of political parties remains insignificant, as most are generally relegated to “women's issues” and rarely formulate policies.<sup>17</sup> While female participation at the higher levels of government remains fairly low, the reservation of seats for women at the local (Panchayati Raj) level following India's 73rd Amendment in 1993, has seen that 30-50% of elected representation is made up of women. While Panchayati Raj reforms have allowed for a sharp increase in the number of female elected representatives, concerns have been raised about the genuine participation of women under these quotas due to men ruling by proxy.

As observed in this study, the male-dominated nature of Indian political sex tends to the cyber world, despite the demographic studied being a younger, more urban, tech-savvy population. In recent years, various news stories and reports have cited high levels of harassment and abuse as factors that may prevent many women from using and engaging with social media in India. A 2013 report put out by Internet and Democracy interviewed various active female social media users in India to better understand the ways abuse and harassment are used to silence the speech of women online. The report draws attention to the “huge number of rape threats, calls for violence, misuse of images, and sexuality

based attacks” directed at women online.<sup>18</sup> In particular, the report emphasized the way vocal (and often liberal) women are “seen as a threat to a male dominated Internet structure in a manner similar to the way in which the visible, loitering woman is seen as a threat to a male dominated public [street].”

The report highlights how women who take up space online, particularly when it involves politically charged issues, are often treated as trespassers in a male space. In response to gender-based abuse and harassment, some prominent female bloggers and activists have chosen to delete their accounts.<sup>19</sup> For others, online anonymity has been the strategy of choice to engage in freedom of expression without gender-based reprisal, which may account for the significant percentage of individuals in the political trends analyzed that did not disclose their gender. Respondents “watering down” content, self-censoring, or changing the ways they expressed themselves online were other common strategies employed to avoid online abuse. One prominent female blogger claimed “On the whole I've managed to avoid the worst threats and misogyny that other women writers endure but I don't think that's luck or because my opinions are well-argued. I think it's because, very early on, I became conscious of how my opinions would be received and began watering them down, or not expressing them at all. I noticed that making feminist arguments led to more abuse and, as a result, I rarely wrote about feminism at all”.<sup>20</sup>

Another major reason for the lack of female participation on social media in India is tied to a general trend of lagging female participation in information and communication technologies (ICTs) as a whole. In “The Gender Digital Divide in Developing Countries,” Antonio and Tuffley point to various socio-cultural attitudes about women as the main contributor to their low technology participation rate.<sup>21</sup> While individuals are increasingly likely to have access to the internet in developing countries, high rates of access have not led to high rates of usage, particularly among

women, which indicates other socio-cultural factors are at play. The most obvious reason for this, according to Vinitha Johnson, is that even in educated Indian families, a woman's existence and social role emphasizes supporting the family over pursuing her own interests.<sup>22</sup> Google's "Women and Technology" report underlines this argument, showing that while 40% of Internet users in India are women, another 49% of women claim they do not see any reason to access the Internet, many viewing it as a "leisure activity".<sup>23</sup> Another 2013 report by Intel showed that one in five women in India and Egypt believe that the Internet is not appropriate for them, their families would disapprove, or that engaging online would be useless to them.<sup>24</sup>

Gillet al. identify the four major barriers that hinder women's access to the internet as: Exclusion from technology education and design, limited free time, social norms favoring men, and financial or institutional constraints.<sup>25</sup> More specifically, Hafkin et al. explain that "for many women, ICTS remain inaccessible due to affordability issues associated with poverty, lack of basic technological skills, low levels of literacy and numeracy, geographic isolation, and poor technology infrastructure...as well as the cultural

expectations, norms and mores that influence the ability of women to own and/or access ICTs in public places".<sup>26</sup>

While these issues of online harassment and low Internet and social media penetration heavily influence the demonstrated lack of participation by women in online political conversations, the fundamental problem lies in the sociocultural beliefs and assumptions about women's roles and the spaces they are welcome to take up in society. Even in the advent of a "free and open" Internet, narratives about the spaces women belong reproduce themselves and continue to frame what is expected and allowed for them as an Other. Initiatives to bridge the gender digital divide and the development of a legal framework to better combat online harassment are essential steps; however, it is ultimately education and increased female political participation at the national, state, and community levels that will affect the most meaningful change. Emphasis on education and initiatives that encourage women to become more active and engaged in the political process will be necessary to dismantle the narrative of politics as a male space and women as an Other, a narrative that continues to prevail both online and in the real world.

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sydney Anderson is a research intern with the Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi.

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