

Psyche of Online Trolls

The New Indian Express - 10th September 2017

Why so venomous, India? Nationalism the new shield of trolls

By [Dia Rekhi](#) | Express News Service | Published: 10th September 2017 02:11



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CHENNAI: The barrage of hate that followed veteran journalist Gauri Lankesh's cold-blooded murder was vile, venomous and vitriolic. There were a number of tweets that celebrated her death and even went to the extent of saying she 'had it coming.' That makes one wonder if we have lost our ability to empathise or have basic courtesy.

"The first thing I noticed is how insensitive people can be," says Gurmehar Kaur, a student who had been targeted after she posted a video that propagated peace. "This is particularly true of celebrities and intellectuals who I regarded highly. It just made me realise that we have lost the ability to empathise. I was subject to sexist remarks and threats of rape and death, some veiled by patronising overtones."

Women, in particular, are subjected to the worst kind of abuse online. "I was a victim of intense character assassination," Kaur says. "People are so scared of opinions today. They just could not digest that a young woman, who is of the legal age to vote, can make her own decisions. If my thoughts which speak of non-violence, make me anti-national, then Nelson Mandela and Gandhi too were anti-national. So I wear that as a badge of honour today."

One of the biggest consequences of such attacks is that it makes one self-censor. Even Kaur admitted that there are times when the thought of the backlash did play on her mind before she posted something. This is what the trolls hope for.

"Those who troll display narcissistic tendencies and derive pleasure by causing pain to others," says Mumbai-based cyber psychologist Nirali Bhatia. "Their sole aim is to create



unrest which makes them feel entitled and important. The most effective way to do that is to put out a negative response to something as that garners 10 more negative responses. With the absence of a proper law, they are fearless as they feel there will be no legal repercussions.”

In his book, Patriots and Partisans, Ramachandra Guha writes he had encountered “a certain kind of Indian who gets up before dawn, has a glass of cow’s milk, prays to the sun god, and begins scanning cyberspace for the day’s secular heresies (to target them).” While this may be exaggerated, it is interesting to note that a vast majority of those who trolled Kaur described themselves as a ‘Proud Hindu,’ ‘Patriot,’ ‘Nationalist,’ ‘Bharatiya,’ and the like.

“On the internet, the notion of ‘nationalism’ becomes a misnomer since it morphs collective progress with certain separatist ideology,” says Viren Aul, group director of Cyber Council. “The concern here is the exponential impact of such actions online, which can get out of control quickly. Where and why the action originates, and where it has a resulting impact can actually be poles apart.”

So were we always like this or has something snapped, one wonders. Experts feel the only difference is the vast platform we have. “We have always been an angry society,” says Bhatia. “There is a lot of suppressed aggression that finds an effective outlet on such sites.”

While many believe the anonymity the internet provides makes it a great place to spew venom, Aul believes this is a skewed perception. “The perception of anonymity online, is one of the main reasons people have far less inhibition on the internet,” he said. “This leads to comments and commentary online without concern of reprisal. Others take to the medium as a means to gain recognition, even if under alternative identity, and perceived power. Most often they are completely unaware of the consequences that their actions have.”

Experts believe it is imperative now to review the existing cyber laws to take into account recent trends of hate speech which need to be clearly defined, especially for the online space. “This issue has assumed greater significance in the era of internet, since the accessibility of internet allows offensive speeches to affect a larger audience in a short span of time,” said Salman Waris, Partner Head of TMT & IP Practice at TechLegis Advocates. “Hate speech as such has not been defined in any law in India. However, legal provisions in certain legislations prohibit select forms of speech as an exception to freedom of speech.”

However, to what extent this applies to the online space is the looming question.

What the law says..

A Human Rights Council Report has stated that freedom of expression can be restricted on grounds of child pornography, hate speech, defamation, direct and public incitement to commit genocide and the advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence.



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