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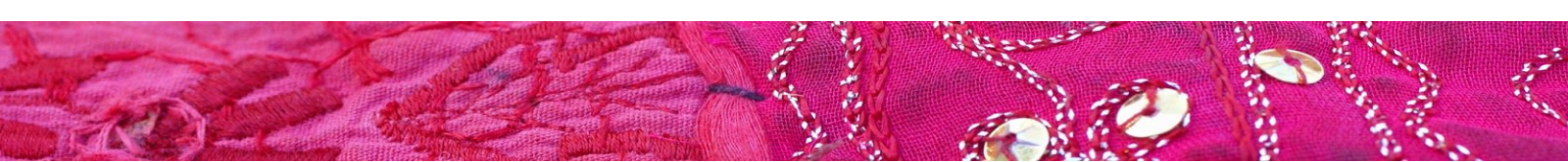
Nationalism and the rise of online trolls in India

By: Anuradha Bhasin Jamwal

The trolling of 16-year-old actress Zaira Wasim and 20-year-old college student Gurmehar Kaur on social media are two of the most recent examples of the growing intolerance to dissent in India with extreme right-wing nationalism now dominating the country's political landscape. The women were vilified, subjected to online sexual and psychological harassment, their voices appropriated by a dominant patriarchal discourse, and their gendered analysis rendered completely worthless.

The demonisation young Gurmehar Kaur, who joined the campaign for free speech and against the hooliganism of the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), a nationalist student group at Delhi University affiliated with the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), is a reflection of the dangerous trends of clamping down on freedom of expression by invoking nationalism. At the altar of this dangerous brand of ultra-nationalism, everything else was forsaken – tolerance, respect, and gender sensitivity. While the police failed to keep the violence under control, resulting in injuries to several students and teachers, celebrities like cricketer Virendra Sehwag and Bollywood actor Randeep Hooda as well as ministers like Kiren Rijiju and Venkaiah Naidu endorsed the trolls and supported their attack against Kaur for speaking out against hooliganism and campaigning against war. Instead of condemning the open death and rape threats on social media, union minister of state for home, Rijiju invoked a conspiracy theory and wondered who had polluted her mind. Far from upholding her right to exercise her freedom of speech guaranteed by the Indian constitution, there was an attempt by people in power to tarnish her image and trivialize her concerns .

Contrast this to the Zaira Wasim story. The sixteen-year-old Kashmiri actress, of 'Dangal' fame was caught in the midst of controversy about a month ago when trolls similarly admonished her for meeting the current Chief Minister of Jammu and Kashmir, Mehbooba Mufti. In fact, beyond



that universal support to her in the name of gender rights and child rights, her victimhood was excessively milched to demonise Kashmiris. The media projection equated handful of trolls with Kashmir's brush with religious radicalization and conveniently embellished this with the discourse of anti-nationalism. That is typical of any Kashmir story, where everything else including gender is reduced to a blur to magnify the culpability of Kashmiris as seditious, anti-national, and rabidly illiberal. Every gender story in Kashmir including that of sexual violence has been seen from a prism of ultra-nationalism. Unlike the outrage that reports of rapes and molestation of urban middle-class women elsewhere in India generate, rapes in Kashmir assume a different narrative in the mainstream imagination or are completely silenced. Zaira Wasim case followed a similar pattern with a visible appetite for appropriating her victimhood to Indianize her achievements as opposed to the wrongly projected closeted society of Kashmir. Her acting in an Indian film was used to dilute the political legitimacy of the Kashmir dispute, just as the trolls held her responsible for the misery of the blinded pellet gun victims like 14-year-old Insha Malik.

Both Zaira Wasim and Gurmehar Kaur are young women with their own agency. But by pressurizing them to become flag-bearers of nationalism, Indian or Kashmiri, the discourse robbed them of the independence they enjoy as individuals. Wasim, being a minor, would have to suffer the huge psychological consequences of both the trolls and how the narrative was distorted. In the case of Kaur, patronage to lumpen elements emboldened the misplaced tirade against her even as she had neither broken any laws, nor crossed limits of civilized debate, much less threatened the sovereignty of the state as is being projected. Far from condemning the slew of intimidations, some union ministers while comparing her to terrorists have harmed the interests of gender with respect to recognition of an individual woman's agency and free speech and idea of India. Moreover, they have given legitimacy to hooliganism and vandalism in the name of misplaced nationalism and this will set tones for a dangerous polity in the country. These two girls eventually will be rendered as footnotes in this dangerous narrative that is unfolding.

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