



#PinjraTod 2.0: Digital Platforms and the Intersectional Evolution of Feminist Youth Movements in India

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Abstract

This paper examines the #PinjraTod movement as a case study in the intersectional evolution of feminist youth activism in contemporary India. Originating in 2015 as a student-led protest against discriminatory hostel curfews at Delhi University and Jawaharlal Nehru University, PinjraTod (Break the Cage) has since proliferated across digital platforms as a multimodal feminist discourse, negotiating the charged intersections of caste, class, gender, and sexuality. Drawing on Kimberlé Crenshaw's framework of intersectionality, Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, Tiziana Terranova's analysis of digital free labour, and Chandra Talpade Mohanty's postcolonial feminist critique, this paper argues that digital platforms have transformed feminist activism from site-specific protest into a fluid, networked praxis simultaneously enabling and constrained by the logic of platform capitalism. Through multimodal discourse analysis of #PinjraTod threads across Instagram and Twitter, I demonstrate how the movement constructs what I term a digital refusal of carceral patriarchy, mapping the spatial politics of confinement onto the architectures of online visibility. The paper further interrogates how algorithmic mediation and neoliberal influencer culture risk domesticating radical feminist demands into consumable content, raising the urgent question of whether platforms birth inclusive solidarities or produce tokenized performances of resistance.

Keywords

PinjraTod, digital feminism, intersectionality, India, hashtag activism, gender performativity, postcolonial feminism, platform capitalism, youth movements, caste, Instagram feminism

Introduction

On a winter evening in 2015, a small group of women students gathered outside the gates of Miranda House, one of the oldest women's colleges at the University of Delhi, to protest something that institutional authority had long naturalized: the curfew that mandated their return to dormitories before 8 PM. The hostel curfew was framed as protection. It functioned, in practice, as disciplinary confinement. PinjraTod, which translates as Break the Cage, was born of this contradiction, and its subsequent migration to digital platforms represents one of the more instructive developments in contemporary South Asian feminist politics.



To study #PinjraTod solely as a protest about hostel regulations would be to fundamentally misread what the movement has become. The hashtag, as it has evolved across Instagram, Twitter, and WhatsApp networks over nearly a decade, has accumulated a density of meaning that bears directly on the most charged questions in contemporary feminist theory: who speaks, for whom, under what conditions of visibility and which structures of erasure. These are questions that Indian feminism has inherited from a longer tradition of scholarly interrogation, stretching from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's foundational provocation about subaltern speech to Nivedita Menon's insistence on the plurality of feminist knowledges within the subcontinent (Spivak 271; Menon 12). What makes the #PinjraTod moment particularly urgent, and genuinely under-theorized, is its emergence at the convergence of three historical pressures. The first is the intensification of digital infrastructure in India following the liberalization of mobile internet access in 2016, which reshaped the geography of political participation in ways that disproportionately affected young, urban, educated women. The second is the crystallization of feminist anger in the aftermath of the 2012 Delhi gang rape, which forced questions of public space, bodily autonomy, and state complicity in gendered violence into mainstream discourse. The third is the consolidation of Hindutva nationalist politics, which has made women's bodies into contested terrain in a very literal and organizational sense, with hostels, campuses, and streets becoming sites of ideological battle. Against this convergence, #PinjraTod operates as something considerably more than a hashtag. It is, this paper argues, a site where the unfinished projects of Indian feminism encounter the affordances and the co-optive tendencies of platform capitalism.

The paper proceeds as follows. After situating the movement within relevant theoretical frameworks and existing scholarship, I turn to the methodological apparatus that governs the analysis. The analytical core of the paper is a multimodal reading of #PinjraTod's digital archive across two platforms, attending both to the linguistic content of posts and to the visual and affective registers of their presentation. A discussion of the movement's implications for feminist praxis in the Global South follows, before the conclusion draws together the paper's core claims.

Literature Review

The theoretical architecture of this paper draws from multiple and sometimes contentious genealogies of feminist thought. Kimberlé Crenshaw's landmark theorization of intersectionality



remains indispensable. Her argument that the lived experience of women of colour cannot be captured by any single-axis analysis of either race or gender applies, with modification, to the Indian context, where caste functions as a structuring force of comparable epistemic weight (Crenshaw 1244). The failure to account for caste in Indian feminist organizing has been documented by Dalit feminist scholars who have argued, with considerable force, that upper-caste women's organizations have historically reproduced the very hierarchies they claim to contest. #PinjraTod, which originated in elite university spaces, has not been immune to this critique. Judith Butler's theorization of gender performativity provides a second critical lens. Butler's claim that gender is not a stable interior fact but an effect produced through repeated citational acts has particular purchase in the context of digital activism, where self-presentation and repetition are the medium of political being (Butler 33). The selfie, the reel, the carefully curated grid of protest images: these are performative acts in a Butlerian sense, constructing and contesting gendered identities through their very staging. Online feminist visibility is, at minimum, a performance, and what is performed is always contested.

The postcolonial feminist tradition represented by Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Spivak introduces a further set of complications. Mohanty's critique of the tendency within Western feminist scholarship to construct a monolithic 'Third World Woman' as an object of rescue rather than a subject of politics carries direct implications for how we read digital feminist movements in India when they circulate globally (Mohanty 65). Instagram feminism produced in Mumbai or Delhi is consumed in London and New York under conditions that are never neutral, and the platforms themselves are owned by corporations headquartered in Silicon Valley. The gaze is not a neutral instrument. On the question of digital activism and networked social movements, Manuel Castells has argued that the internet enables a new form of what he calls mass self-communication, in which individuals can simultaneously be producers and distributors of political content, bypassing institutional gatekeepers (Castells 7). This model is attractive, and it captures something real about the horizontal architecture of hashtag campaigns. Hester Baer's more critical account, however, insists that digital feminist activism is always enmeshed in the logics of neoliberal self-branding, and that the visibility economy of social media tends to privilege those who conform to its aesthetic and affective norms (Baer 21). Rosemary Clark-Parsons's analysis of #MeToo as a networked performance of feminist solidarity offers a more nuanced reading, one that acknowledges both the genuine affective power of hashtag campaigns and the structural limits of



visibility as a political strategy (Clark-Parsons 366). Tiziana Terranova's concept of free labour, the idea that digital users generate value for platforms through their creative and communicative activity, complicates any easy celebration of digital activism as a form of empowerment (Terranova 35).

Within scholarship specifically on Indian feminism and digital culture, Nivedita Menon's work offers the most searching account of the contradictions internal to Indian feminist organizing. Ritty Lukose's anthropological study of gender, youth, and consumer citizenship in liberalizing India provides crucial context for understanding how young women navigate the twin pressures of market inclusion and social conservatism (Lukose 4). Sara Ahmed's phenomenology of feminist killjoys and the affective labour of political refusal is particularly generative for reading the performative dimensions of #PinjraTod, where the act of breaking institutional rules carries an affective charge that exceeds its immediate political demand (Ahmed 38).

Methodology

This paper employs a multimodal discourse analysis of #PinjraTod content circulated on Instagram and Twitter between 2018 and 2024, a period that encompasses the movement's intensification during the anti-Citizenship Amendment Act protests of 2019 to 2020, its partial demobilization during the COVID-19 pandemic, and its reactivation in the context of campus sexual harassment cases in 2022 and 2023. The corpus was assembled by collecting posts tagged with the primary hashtag as well as associated tags including #BreakTheCage, #MeTooIndia, #IWillGoOut, and #DalitWomenFight. The sample consists of approximately 300 posts across both platforms, selected through purposive sampling to ensure representation across the axes of platform, language, visual modality, and user profile. Multimodal discourse analysis, as developed by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, attends not only to textual content but to visual composition, colour, typographic choice, and the relational positioning of elements within a frame (Kress and van Leeuwen 2). In the context of Instagram feminism, this means reading a protest photograph not merely as documentation but as a composed communicative act, one that makes choices about who is centered and who is peripheral, which bodies are visible and in what postures, how the relationship between text and image is organized. The methodology thus bridges close reading practices from literary criticism with the analytical tools of media studies.



Theoretical saturation, rather than quantitative representativeness, governs the corpus selection. The analysis is accordingly interpretive rather than statistical, situating individual posts within the broader discursive ecology of the movement and the political context of their production.

Analysis and Findings

The most immediately striking feature of #PinjraTod's digital archive is its refusal of the victim narrative. Where earlier feminist campaigns in India, particularly those organized around rape and sexual violence in the aftermath of 2012, often reproduced a visual grammar of suffering, vulnerability, and the appeal for state protection, #PinjraTod posts are characterized by a different affective register: defiance, irony, and a studied occupation of public space that mirrors in digital form the spatial politics of the movement's street protests. This is feminism in Ahmed's sense, a willingness to be the killjoy who refuses to make everyone comfortable, who refuses, more specifically, to accept the terms on which safety is offered (Ahmed 38). A representative example is the cluster of posts that emerged during the 2019 protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act, when PinjraTod members were among the organizers of the Shaheen Bagh sit-in. Posts from this period layer protest imagery, Urdu and Hindi poetry, and English feminist theory in ways that consciously refuse the monolingualism that would make them legible only to one constituency. This multilingual layering is itself a political act, an insistence on the irreducibility of the movement to any single community or idiom. It also responds, implicitly, to Mohanty's critique: by refusing to present a unified, translatable feminist subject, the posts resist incorporation into a Western liberal framework that requires legibility on its own terms (Mohanty 72).

The question of caste, however, reveals a more complicated picture. While the hashtag has been used by Dalit feminist activists with considerable political intelligence, and while the movement has formally endorsed caste justice as a core demand, the algorithm does not treat all users equally. Posts by Dalit feminist accounts receive, on average across the corpus, significantly lower engagement metrics than posts by accounts associated with upper-caste urban women, even when the content is comparable in quality and urgency. This algorithmic stratification is not incidental. It reproduces, at the level of platform infrastructure, the very hierarchies of attention and recognition that Crenshaw's intersectional framework was designed to make visible (Crenshaw



1249). The platform, in other words, performs caste through engagement, regardless of the formally egalitarian architecture of the hashtag. Butler's framework of performativity illuminates a further dimension of the archive. Many #PinjraTod posts are explicitly theatrical: they stage feminist identity through costume, gesture, and direct address to the camera in ways that recall the performance traditions of street theatre and political cabaret. The reel format, which Instagram introduced in 2020 and which has since become the dominant mode of political content on the platform, is particularly hospitable to this theatrical mode. A reel in which students perform the act of breaking a hostel curfew, laughing as they cross an imaginary gate, is doing something more than documenting a protest: it is constituting a feminist community through shared performance, inviting others to cite and repeat the gesture. This is performativity in its most literal sense, and it is also, following Terranova, free labour that generates engagement value for a platform whose interests are not those of feminist activism (Terranova 48).

Discussion

The analysis above raises a question that digital feminism scholarship has not fully resolved: at what point does the platform's co-optive logic overwhelm the movement's radical ambitions? Baer's concern that digital feminist activism tends toward neoliberal self-branding finds some empirical support in the #PinjraTod corpus, particularly in the subset of posts produced by accounts with large followings that have acquired the characteristics of personal brands. These posts are better lit, more carefully composed, and more calibrated to platform aesthetics than the rawer protest documentation produced by smaller accounts. They are also, predictably, more visible. The visibility economy rewards the performance of feminism over its practice. Yet the movement has also demonstrated a persistent capacity to refuse this logic. The decision by PinjraTod members to participate in the Shaheen Bagh protests, which demanded enormous physical and personal risk, cannot be assimilated to the category of influencer activism. The arrest of movement members under draconian sedition charges during the Delhi Riots investigation of 2020, charges that were eventually dropped after sustained legal advocacy, is evidence that the movement's radicalism is not merely performed. Spivak's question about subaltern speech haunts this moment: those who were arrested lost their digital voice precisely at the moment when the stakes of their activism became undeniable (Spivak 306). The platform did not protect them. The movement's physical networks, its lawyers, its allies in civil society, did.



This suggests a more qualified account of digital platforms than either the celebratory literature on networked social movements or the dystopian literature on surveillance capitalism tends to offer. Digital platforms are neither emancipatory nor simply repressive. They are contested terrains whose affordances can be mobilized by feminist movements while simultaneously constraining and surveillance of those movements. Castells is right that mass self-communication creates new possibilities for political organizing (Castells 231). Clark-Parsons is also right that networked visibility is not a substitute for structural change (Clark-Parsons 376). What #PinjraTod reveals is that feminist movements in the Global South must navigate these contradictions while also negotiating the additional pressures of caste hierarchy, religious nationalism, and colonial epistemologies embedded in the very platforms they use. The movement's refusal of a single language, a single constituency, and a single demand is not confusion: it is a theoretical position, articulated in practice.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that #PinjraTod represents a significant and under-theorized development in the history of South Asian feminist activism. As a movement that originated in the specific spatial politics of hostel curfews and has expanded into a multimodal digital discourse negotiating the intersections of gender, caste, class, and religious nationalism, PinjraTod defies the categories that both mainstream media coverage and existing digital feminism scholarship tend to apply to hashtag campaigns. It is neither a spontaneous viral moment nor a coherently institutionalized organization. It is, more precisely, a discursive formation: a set of shared vocabularies, visual grammars, and affective dispositions that enable collective identification and political action without requiring organizational unity. The intersectional analysis pursued here reveals both the movement's achievements and its constitutive tensions. The achievement lies in its genuine expansion of feminist discourse to include voices and bodies that dominant feminist organizing in India has historically marginalized: Dalit women, queer women, Muslim women, migrant women. The tension lies in the degree to which the platforms that amplify these voices also selectively suppress them through algorithmic architectures that reproduce caste and class hierarchies without any explicit ideological intent. Digital platforms are not neutral instruments, and digital feminism that fails to account for these risks reproducing the very structures it contests.



What remains, and what this paper has attempted to make visible, is the movement's insistence on the inadequacy of any single framework. Intersectionality is necessary but not sufficient. Postcolonial critique is essential but must be supplemented by a concrete analysis of platform infrastructures. Performativity theory illuminates the theatrical dimensions of digital activism but must be held accountable to the material risks that activists assume when they perform in view of a surveillance state. The cage that PinjraTod seeks to break is not only the hostel gate. It is every institutional arrangement that disciplines women's movement through space, time, and the architectures of digital visibility. That the movement has made this visible, loudly and persistently, is the beginning of an argument that feminist scholarship in the twenty-first century cannot afford to ignore.

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