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India

'I Am a Troll' by Swati Chaturvedi

India, cyber bullies and how social media is used to attack political opponents

Amy Kazmin



Men in Mumbai on smartphones. Narendra Modi's BJP was the first Indian party to understand how social media can mobilise public opinion © Bloomberg

FEBRUARY 20, 2017 by: Review by **Amy Kazmin**

Two years ago I wrote an article about Indian immigration authorities barring a local [Greenpeace activist \(http://next.ft.com/content/66d33f58-9a1c-11e4-9602-00144feabdco\)](http://next.ft.com/content/66d33f58-9a1c-11e4-9602-00144feabdco) from flying to London, where she was booked to talk about coal mining in India. Coming less than a year after Prime Minister [Narendra Modi's \(https://www.ft.com/topics/people/Narendra_Modi\)](https://www.ft.com/topics/people/Narendra_Modi) election, it seemed a noteworthy event: India had sometimes banned foreign activists from entering India but had rarely, if ever, prevented its citizens from going abroad.

I tweeted the link to the story, then, ill-advisedly, added a provocative hashtag, *#acchedin*, Hindi words meaning the “good days” that Mr Modi had promised to usher in.

Next morning, I found 150 tweets to, or about, me. Most called for my deportation or worse; it was obscenity-laden verbal violence from strangers that made me queasy.



The onslaught began when an Indian Twitter personality with tens of thousands of followers, including hardcore Modi supporters, critiqued my tweet and story. Her followers, like a swarm of angry bees, took that as a signal to go for me.

My sense of being subjected to an organised attack might not have been misplaced. In her new book, *I am a Troll: Inside the Secret World of the BJP's Digital Army*, broadcast journalist Swati Chaturvedi contends that Mr Modi's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party is orchestrating online campaigns to intimidate perceived government critics through its social media cell.

The author's claim is backed by the account of Sadhavi Khosla, an entrepreneur and erstwhile Modi supporter, who says she was a BJP cyber-volunteer for two years until late 2015. She wearied of the barrage of misogyny, Islamophobia and hatred she was asked to disseminate. Ms Khosla says the BJP has a network of volunteers who take instructions from the social media cell, and two affiliated organisations, to troll critical voices. The targets include journalists and Bollywood stars.

The most visible of these campaigns attacked Bollywood star Aamir Khan — who had expressed concern about [rising intolerance \(http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/entertainment/hindi/bollywood/news/Aamir-Khan-trolled-on-Twitter-for-intolerance-remarks/articleshow/49904095.cms\)](http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/entertainment/hindi/bollywood/news/Aamir-Khan-trolled-on-Twitter-for-intolerance-remarks/articleshow/49904095.cms) in India — and Snapdeal, the ecommerce company he advertised.

Snapdeal dropped Mr Khan as its spokesman after irate Modi supporters bombarded the company with orders that they later cancelled — a [campaign \(http://next.ft.com/content/247f1934-9411-11e5-9e3e-eb48769cecab\)](http://next.ft.com/content/247f1934-9411-11e5-9e3e-eb48769cecab) that Ms Khosla claims was spearheaded by the BJP.

The BJP was the first Indian political party to recognise the power of social media to mobilise public opinion. Mr Modi set up his Twitter account in 2009, while Congress party scion Rahul Gandhi waited until 2015.

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In fact Twitter is Mr Modi's favourite mode of communication: since his election, the Indian premier has not held a single press conference but he tweets regularly, and his comments, or silences, on the platform are closely analysed.

Chaturvedi's slim volume offers no clinching proof that the BJP orchestrates online harassment or cyberbullying, nor any firm evidence that the premier has, as she suggests, given his blessing to this effort.

For its part, the BJP has denied that Ms Khosla was an official part of its social media cell. The author, however, does outline what she considers to be links between the party and online harassers, noting that Mr Modi personally follows a clutch of Twitter accounts that regularly sends out abusive tweets.

Some of his cabinet members have openly endorsed some Twitter trolls.

This book is a quick read for an Indian audience but may, perhaps, prove tough going for those outside. It is, though, making waves in its home market. Last week, Derek O'Brien, a member of India's upper house in parliament from West Bengal, raised Ms Chaturvedi's claims in the legislature, questioning why Mr Modi followed cyber-bullies. "We are mainstreaming hate," he said. Mr O'Brien asked whether Mr Modi's administration would advise senior officials to stop following Twitter accounts that regularly tweet abusive language or obscenities — a question that has not yet been answered.

Chaturvedi has taken an interesting look at a topic of growing relevance to India and other democracies. But the authoritative account of the BJP's use of social media — and a deeper assessment of the impact of cyberbullying on political culture — is still to be written.

The reviewer is the FT's South Asia bureau chief