Why has #MeToo in India gone quiet?

Because it’s stifling a diversity of opinions.

By Rahul Jayaram | Jan 12, 2019

A possible reason things have quieted down with the #MeToo movement in India, is because liberal and feminist commentators – of a certain hue – have dominated its discourse. By and large their opinions, have blamed men, male culture and patriarchy – all valid criticisms. These commentators have said that men have behaved horribly with women because of a male culture that makes men ignorant (wilfully or otherwise) of sexual choice and consent – again a fair point. That men have to reflect hard on their behaviours and relations with women is indubitably obvious -- an argument this writer has made earlier (you can read some of it here, here and here). But this discourse has also dialled down some other arguments from full articulation.

As categories to analyse sexual crimes and harassment with, sexual choice and consent have had wide currency in #MeToo India. Both are rich areas of academic study in sociology, law, psychology, gender studies and the social and human sciences. Here, they have been argued, counter-argued, theorised and re-theorised over. Many feminist scholars and activists have taken up positions that depart from the popular strain of feminism. Consider just two instances. Famous American gender theorist and analytic philosopher Judith Butler has (in)famously written on consent questioning ideas earlier feminists agreed upon (check this link). The well-known Bombay-based lawyer and human rights activist Flavia Agnes has controversially argued for decriminalising marital rape asserting that it “is not just sexual violence.” (Check this link.) Both are pioneering feminists in discrete spheres who have dissented within their subject areas. By such disagreement, they have expanded the ken of feminism.
So: When there is so much differentiation inside feminist thought, why can’t there be opinion variation in a movement that aims to be about women’s assertion and liberation? In America, there was raucous questioning of some of the lodestars of #MeToo and how they may be derailing the movement. (The article ‘Can We Talk About Toxic Femininity?’ by Leah McSweeney published in Penthouse magazine questioned the role of Asia Argento and Rose McGowan as #MeToo’s leading lights. The link is unavailable in the magazine’s website but check this Twitter thread and this link where the piece is reproduced.

#MeToo is an extremely important moment in relations between the genders – and #MeToo India’s biggest shortcoming so far has been a paucity of analytical diversity.

For instance, the claim that Indian subcontinental men don’t ‘get’ consent and choice and so, some men become predators is true but partial: It only half explains their condition. Because men have become what they are as they’ve been reared in a climate of sexual frustration, gender inequality and a kind of gendered segregation. In any case, large social disruptions can rarely be explained away by one or two ‘causes’.

The popular feminist argument one saw three months ago on social media timelines about #MeToo India was valid. But it also reduced tectonic plate shifting phenomena to matters of ‘choice-consent-due-process-abuse-of-power’: It was correct but restricted, for it didn’t bring the big cause (sexual frustration) into the mix. This kind of reasoning affected even the most discerning of feminist intellectuals.

Let’s examine one example from one of India’s truly imaginative feminist minds, the Bombay filmmaker and social activist Paromita Vohra. In this well-regarded piece in The Economic Times, she brought great insight into the current gender war. Here, she conveyed the horrors of the victims, but in an audacious rhetorical-political move she went on to question sexual choice and consent as feminists and non-feminists have usually understood it. She did all this in the space of
an op-ed (clearly, a writer of outrageous skill and talent to make such nuanced observations in 900 words!).

She also talked about the notion of sex as “experience” vs “outcome”. The former was the general “female” view on it, while the latter the “male” view. She thus complicated “choice” and “consent” in a most romantic and disarming way, while underlining their import. However, even in the case of an otherwise balanced essay, only women came across as multi-dimensional human beings. Even if they were humanised to some degree, the men in her essay, by and large, looked like being sexually illiterate or semi-literate or abusive or misogynistic: All this is partially true, and so the argument needed to go further. (One understands that one cannot say everything in the space of an op-ed.) In some ways, an argument like this writer’s here is the very point of her article – to make a real conversation between women and men to take place, where people “really, really, talk about sex”.

In the spirit of that intention, I’d say that Paromita Vohra’s article had only one anomaly but a major one at that: How did the men she described, arrive at the point where they reduced and objectified women? How did they get socialised? What was their sexual-emotional-psychological journey that made them become effortless sexists? Vohra ably analysed the life arcs of the women at the receiving end of sexism, abuse and harassment: It was impressive and needed, but what about the men? How did they arrive to this point as upholders of toxicity? It was too important a question to be missed. So, for all her astuteness and fair-mindedness as a feminist, Vohra produced an argument with a telling blind spot.

To be fair, these are things Vohra and her organisation, Agents of Ishq, creatively address by generating the space for conversing about love, lust, romance, sex. In some of her later pieces like this she addressed these points coming across as much more sensitive towards the evolution of women and men. In many ways, her writing transcended the binary (either-you-are-with-us-or-against-us) feminist frameworks
one saw at play during the #MeToo India uproar three months ago. To a good extent, she was able to avoid demonising men (one reason they’ve kept quiet), while powerfully criticising them. Vohra's writing displayed an inventive, creative feminism at work that was willing to take risks and differ from other feminists.

Sadly, feminists (journalists, academics, activists supporting #MeToo India) – outside of Vohra – have somewhat forgotten that feminism includes studying women and men. It’s about the creation of the genders, the making of women as women and men as men and other genders as other genders. It’s crucial in the time to come that #MeToo India’s conversations become ongoing, constructive and collaborative between women and men. Is addressing each other’s blind spots too much to ask for?