

## WITNESSING THROUGH HASHTAGS: TRAUMA IN CONTEMPORARY INDIAN SOCIAL MEDIA SPACES

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### Abstract

This article investigates how hashtags function as contemporary modalities of witnessing trauma in Indian social media spaces. Drawing on classical trauma theory (Caruth; LaCapra), affect theory (Ahmed; Berlant), and digital memory frameworks (Erll; Hoskins; van Dijck), it explores how platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, and Facebook reconfigure practices of public testimony, memorialization, and collective action. Focusing on key Indian digital movements like #MeTooIndia, #JusticeForNirbhaya, #CAAProtests, and #FarmersProtest, this article analyses how hashtags mobilize affective publics, shape discourses of violence, and document traumatic events in real time. While such practices democratize visibility, they also interface with the algorithmic logic of platform capitalism, generating ethical tensions around exposure, commodification, and representational injustice. By analysing case studies, theoretical debates, and broader socio-political contexts, the article argues that hashtag witnessing constitutes a transformative yet fraught genre of trauma expression, reshaping how individuals and communities in India navigate memory, justice, and affect under digital conditions.

**Keywords:** digital trauma, hashtags, witnessing, social media activism, digital publics

### 1. Introduction

Over the last decade, India has witnessed unprecedented expansions in digital connectivity, smartphone penetration, and access to social media platforms. These shifts have fundamentally transformed how traumatic events are articulated, shared, and collectively processed. Once confined to courtrooms, journalistic reportage, or institutional archives, testimonies of violence and injustice now circulate instantly, often from the very site of the event, through personal devices and networked publics. Hashtags – concise, searchable markers of discourse – play a central role in this transformation. They gather fragments of experience into aggregate formations, producing what Andrew Hoskins terms “connective memory” (27): a fluid, co-participatory mode of digital memorialization.

In India, hashtags have become not merely tools for categorizing content but mechanisms for building affective solidarity, calling for justice, and documenting state or structural violence. Whether in the wake of gender-based harm (#MeTooIndia), communal tensions (#DelhiRiots2020), caste atrocities (#DalitLivesMatter), or political resistance (#CAAProtests; #FarmersProtest), hashtags act as digital witnesses. They assemble dispersed narratives, enabling users to participate in trauma discourse regardless of physical proximity to the event. Despite their prominence, hashtag-mediated witnessing is not a neutral or uncomplicated practice. It unfolds within environments shaped by algorithmic biases, political surveillance, platform capitalism, and digital inequalities. While hashtags amplify marginalized voices, they also risk simplifying complex events into trending spectacles or exposing survivors to harassment. Positioned at the intersection of trauma, politics, and technology, hashtag witnessing raises profound questions about ethics, representation, and memory.

This article expands existing scholarship by offering a comprehensive analysis of hashtag witnessing in India. It situates these digital practices within broader theoretical frameworks, examines key case studies, and reflects on the ambivalent nature of visibility in an era shaped by both participatory culture and algorithmic governance.

## **2. Theoretical Framework: Trauma, Mediation, and Digital Witnessing**

### **2.1 Classical trauma theory and its limitations in the digital age**

Traditional trauma theory, shaped by thinkers such as Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra, emphasizes belatedness, silence, and the difficulty of narrativization. For Caruth, trauma is an “unclaimed experience” – not fully grasped in the moment but returned to belatedly through flashbacks, repetitive narratives, or haunting imagery (4). LaCapra distinguishes between “acting out” (repetitive reliving) and “working through” (integration into consciousness and social discourse) (70). These frameworks, while foundational, were formulated before the rise of digital technology, and therefore grapple imperfectly with the immediacy and hypervisibility enabled by social media. Trauma expressed online may bypass the temporal gaps central to classical theory, emerging instead as live-streamed events, instantly uploaded testimonies, or viral hashtags.

Digital witnessing thus destabilizes the Caruthian emphasis on latency. Instead, it aligns more closely with what Lilie Chouliaraki calls “im-mediated witnessing” where, mediation is no longer secondary but coextensive with the event (121). The smartphone becomes both witness and archive, collapsing private experience and public circulation.

### **2.2 Affect theory and Digital Publics**

Hashtag witnessing is deeply affective. Sara Ahmed’s theory of “affective economies” suggests that emotions do not reside in individuals but circulate between them, binding communities into shared political formations (45). Online, hashtags mobilize feelings of anger, grief, fear, solidarity, in ways that generate what Zizi Papacharissi describes as “affective publics”: networked collectives organized by feeling as much as by ideology.

Lauren Berlant’s concept of “public feelings” (Cruel Optimism) further illuminates how digital publics respond to trauma. Hashtags allow users to articulate stuckness, disappointment, or hope in ways that transform private affect into public discourse.

### **2.3 Digital memory, Archives, and Visibility**

Astrid Erll’s work on “media of memory” foregrounds how technological change transforms remembrance practices (113). The shift to digital platforms has created living archives – constantly updated, mutable, and participatory. José van Dijck similarly argues that platforms curate memory through algorithmic logics, shaping which traumas are rendered visible (57). Hashtags function as mnemonic devices in this ecology. They gather posts into collective archives, each tag becoming a site where trauma narratives converge, overlap, and evolve. Yet these archives are fragile: posts may be deleted, accounts banned, or content obscured by algorithmic filters. Thus, digital archives are simultaneously enduring and precarious.

## **3. Hashtags as Affective and Political Publics in Contemporary India**

### **3.1 The Indian Digital Landscape**

India’s digital landscape is a rapidly expanding ecosystem shaped by government-led digital infrastructure, a booming private tech economy, and deep structural inequalities. While platforms like UPI, Aadhaar, and affordable data have enabled unprecedented connectivity, issues of gender, caste, privacy, and digital literacy continue to create uneven access. This landscape is as much about technological innovation as it is about socio-political power and exclusion.

India’s social media environment is marked by massive linguistic and cultural diversity, rapid digitization, high levels of state surveillance, and entrenched inequalities in caste, gender, and class. These factors shape how trauma is mediated online. Marginalized groups often turn to

digital spaces because institutional avenues for justice viz. courts, media, law enforcement, may be inaccessible or hostile.

### **3.2 The hashtag as Testimony**

Hashtags act as testimonies that authenticate experience (“I was there,” “this happened to me”), assemble collective memories, challenge dominant narratives, mobilize political action, and preserve otherwise erased voices. For instance, #DalitLivesMatter foregrounds caste-based violence often underreported in mainstream media. Hashtags become counter-archives, challenging official accounts.

The hashtag functions as a digital form of testimony by transforming personal experiences, especially trauma, into collective, public witness. It creates counter-archives of marginalized voices, challenges institutional silencing, and forms affective communities around shared experiences. However, hashtag testimony is vulnerable to co-option, harassment, and the volatility of digital platforms.

### **3.3 The hashtag as Solidarity**

Hashtags circulate affect, producing what Papacharissi calls “sentiment-driven collectivities.” These collectivities are flexible, emergent, and often ephemeral. Yet their political impact can be significant, as seen during the #CAAProtests when solidarity posts mobilized mass participation, bridging geographic divides.

The hashtag functions as a powerful digital mechanism of solidarity by bringing dispersed individuals into a shared, networked space of recognition and support. When users post under a common tag, they signal affiliation with a collective cause, transforming isolated experiences into visible, interconnected communities. This form of solidarity is affective as well as political: it allows people to express empathy, amplify marginalized voices, and participate in collective action without the barriers of geography, class, or institutional access. In movements such as #MeToo, #BlackLivesMatter, and #DalitLivesMatter, the hashtag becomes a rallying point through which millions articulate a common struggle, forging alliances and strengthening resistance. In this way, the hashtag operates not merely as a digital label but as a dynamic tool for building communal bonds and sustaining public movements.

### **3.4 The hashtag as Resistance**

The hashtag operates as a potent form of digital resistance by enabling individuals and communities to challenge dominant narratives, expose injustice, and mobilize dissent in real time. By clustering voices around a shared phrase, hashtags create decentralized publics that can circumvent traditional gatekeepers such as state institutions or mainstream media. Movements like #MeToo, #BlackLivesMatter, #ShaheenBagh, and #FarmersProtest demonstrate how hashtags can transform personal experiences and political grievances into collective refusal, disrupting systems of power through visibility, virality, and sustained public pressure. In this sense, the hashtag becomes not merely a tool of expression but an insurgent practice that reclaims agency, amplifies marginalized voices, and reconfigures the terrain of contemporary political struggle.

## **4. Ethical and Political Tensions**

### **4.1 The problem of algorithmic visibility**

Platforms prioritize content that generates engagement. As van Dijck notes, visibility is shaped by commercial rather than ethical logics (103). This can lead to sensationalization of trauma, overexposure of survivors, and selective amplification of certain narratives. For example, caste

atrocities in rural regions often fail to trend, while urban events gain traction quickly, reflecting structural biases.

#### **4.2 Vulnerability and exposure**

Trauma survivors who speak online may face trolling, doxxing, misogynistic abuse, casteist slurs, and surveillance by authorities. The #MeTooIndia movement revealed the dual nature of exposure: empowering but dangerous.

#### **4.3 Appropriative empathy and representational injustice**

LaCapra warns against the dangers of “vicarious trauma consumption,” where audiences empathize too easily or inappropriately with traumatic events (88). Some traumas become over-represented, while others – those of Adivasis, Dalit women, Kashmiris – remain underrepresented.

#### **4.4 Platform governance and political interference**

Indian digital spaces are subject to governmental fact-check units, legal notices, content takedown requests, and coordinated propaganda campaigns. Hashtag witnessing thus exists within contested political terrain.

### **5. Case Studies**

#### **5.1 #MeTooIndia: Gendered trauma and feminist digital witnessing**

The #MeTooIndia movement marked a watershed moment in Indian feminist activism. Thousands of women used the hashtag to narrate experiences of sexual harassment, assault, and gendered violence. These testimonies bypassed traditional institutions – police, courts, universities – that had historically failed survivors. They resonated with Ahmed’s idea of the “feminist killjoy,” refusing pressures to maintain silence in patriarchal environments.

Thus, Hashtag witnessing enabled naming of powerful perpetrators, solidarity networks among survivors, creation of informal archives of harassment, as well as public pressure on institutions. Yet survivors also faced backlash, defamation suits, and online misogyny, highlighting the risks of digital disclosure.

#### **5.2 #JusticeForNirbhaya: National mourning and collective outrage**

Following the 2012 Delhi gang rape, #JusticeForNirbhaya became a focal point for national grief. The hashtag mobilized protests, policy debates, and legal reforms. It functioned both as memorialization and a demand for justice.

Digital witnessing here involved emotional contagion, mass mobilization, transformation of private trauma into political discourse. The hashtag became a symbol of systemic failure.

#### **5.3 #CAAProtests and #ShaheenBagh: Bearing witness to state violence**

During the Citizenship Amendment Act protests, hashtags documented police brutality on students, peaceful sit-ins, and communal tensions. Women at Shaheen Bagh became icons of resistance, their images circulating widely. Digital witnessing here challenged state narratives and foregrounded minority voices.

#### **5.4 #FarmersProtest: Rural dissent in a digital ecosystem**

The farmers’ protest showed how rural citizens leveraged social media to counter mainstream media representations. Hashtags like #FarmersProtest and #StandWithFarmers created global solidarity. Key dynamics included live videos from protest sites, debunking of misinformation,

solidarity from diaspora communities. Thus, Hashtags functioned as counter-publics resisting state delegitimization.

## **6. The Ambivalent Future of Hashtag Witnessing in India**

Hashtag witnessing in India offers Possibilities, democratization of voice, participatory justice, creation of counter-archives, affective solidarity, Risks, surveillance and state repression, trauma commodification, selective visibility, digital violence against survivors.

Thus, the future of hashtag witnessing will depend on platform regulation, digital literacy, state policies, community-led ethical frameworks. Critically, scholars and activists must continue interrogating whose trauma is made visible and whose remains obscured.

## **7. Conclusion**

Hashtag witnessing represents a paradigm shift in how trauma is narrated and collectively processed in India. By enabling immediate, multimodal, and participatory testimony, hashtags challenge institutional silencing and reshape the politics of visibility. Yet they also introduce ethical dilemmas around exposure, sensationalism, and inequality.

Understanding hashtags as both affective and archival practices reveals the complexities of digital trauma culture. As India navigates its increasingly digitized socio-political landscape, hashtag witnessing will continue to play a crucial – if contested – role in shaping memory, justice, and public feeling.

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