

## The limits of Western-imported web culture

By Rega Jha

Firstly, just to situate myself in ‘Social Media and Society in India’: As of this spring, I’ve worked in digital media in India for a decade, and this decade has been split into two even halves. For most of the last five years, I’ve lived in Chennai, where I grew up, and have worked primarily as a writer—of essays, reportage, newsletters, a children’s book, and of course the occasional highly regrettable social media rant, all for thousands of strangers online. Standard 2023 freelance writer fare.

During the five years before these, though, I got to do something that only a handful of people have had the opportunity to do: set up a mammoth American digital media organisation’s India outlet. Through a large chunk of my 20s, I was the founding editor-in-chief of BuzzFeed India, charged with hiring and then leading a growing team of writers and creators out of an office in Bombay, as we collectively produced articles, videos, and every format of social media content for an audience of millions of 18- to 34-year-old Indians in first- and second-tier cities and towns.

In this process, the team I led wrote and created a lot of online objects I’m proud of. We reached a growing audience across India—the company’s mandate. And, most rewardingly, I believe we had a lot of fun. I look back on those years fondly. All that said, those years also gave me a couple of insights into the occasionally bizarre decision-making that unfolds when Western publications parachute into other countries—and I think those insights are worth sharing, for further prodding and expanding-upon by people examining digital cultures in India. Ranging from MTV to HBO, *The New York Times* to *Cosmo*, Western media have made hundreds of attempts to fold our billion potential unique users into their data reports, and for a few years, I was a soldier of that dubious mission, gathering South Asian consumers for White bosses. Consider these anecdotes dispatches from that strange front-line.

The first illustrative anecdote from that era in my career is the story of how I got the gig in the first place. I was 21, about to finish college, looking for a writing job, and newly obsessed with Twitter, Tumblr, Reddit, and the spread of sentiments via the viral web. I’d always wanted to work in media, but I now wanted to work at an organisation that, in particular, took the online spread of culture seriously. I was sending out applications frenziedly to publications and, through a combination of factors, ended up working as a writer for BuzzFeed. Every week, millions of readers validated the important literature I’d always dreamt of producing—like 27 memes every girl with curly hair can relate to. It was pure luck that at that point, in 2013, BuzzFeed already had something like a hundred million monthly unique viewers in America, and its U.S. audience growth was coming fairly easily. What BuzzFeed had become ambitious about, by the time I joined, was growing an audience in—and eventually profiting from delivering ads to—the rest of the global internet.

That year, in 2013, they tasked a handful of us entry-level writers who could speak to various cultures with creating content for a range of countries, to see how traffic picked up around the world’s regions when we spoke directly to them. We were testing the world’s appetite for BuzzFeed. It was in this process that I was tasked with doing India content, which obviously came easy to me because I’d actually grown up here. I could rattle off “22 things every Indian girl is sick of hearing at weddings” in 22 seconds, based entirely on personal trauma. And of course, unsurprisingly, when we did such posts, the audience spikes we saw, both in South Asia and in its diaspora, were significant. So it was decided that

BuzzFeed India would come into being, and I started looking for office space in Bombay and interviewing writers. It was that simple. BuzzFeed India launched in June 2014, one month after Narendra Modi was elected for the first time, two months after Facebook announced 100 million Indian users. Overall, as you can imagine, just a really relaxed, non-stressful time to be creating content for digital India.

Well, for a moment, weirdly, it actually was. Freedom of expression clampdowns—arrests, takedown notices, whole internet shutdowns—existed, but hadn't snowballed into the daily affair they are now. And there really was a profound and growing appetite, among young people on Indian social media, for the type of hyper-liberal, goofy but irreverent, feminist, queer-positive, sex-positive, mental health-aware content that BuzzFeed was doing then. To a great degree, this appetite was being built by evolutions in American pop culture. In America, 2014 was, for context, the year that Beyonce stood in front of a giant block-lettered 'FEMINIST' flashing in LED lights at the VMAs, while Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's voice played on millions of American TV screens, literally reading out a definition of feminism. That's where America was then. So that's where BuzzFeed was then. So that's where BuzzFeed India was then. And it worked here, too—as it did in Brazil and Japan and Mexico and all the other countries BuzzFeed expanded to rapidly through the mid-2010s.

The primarily everyday types of backlash we did receive for our work—a cyber-cell takedown notice for a very stupid Modi meme, my name and face included on those anti-national watchlists that would circulate on WhatsApp, the occasional evening of being the Twitter punching bag for Salman Khan fan clubs, or the IT Cell—was largely validating and, maybe reflecting the low stakes of our meme-based liberalism, it spiked my cortisol hourly, but never escalated to any *external* physical danger to anyone on our team.

We also occasionally got in trouble for things BuzzFeed teams in the West were doing, even when we had no hand in the offending content. An L.A.-based BuzzFeed recipe-video channel made a video about homemade gulab jamun, and they defined gulab jamun as 'Indian fried donuts in syrup'. Let's just say: you didn't want my Twitter notifications for that day. Another time, a team in New York made a video about how McDonald's cup sizes differ around the world. They had videographers from various BuzzFeed offices—in Japan, Brazil, Mexico, Australia, India, and more—go to local McDonald's outlets and record videos of the small, medium, and large soda cups. So benign. So innocuous. Except. When that team released the video, the outline map that they used to represent India through the 15 seconds they spent on India's McDonald's cups was a map with Kashmir cut off it. This video is still on YouTube. You can go look at it. I'll just say, again: You did *not* want to experience my Twitter mentions that day.

The third type of backlash was, to me, the most interesting, the most valid, and the most illustrative of the primary way that Western culture-creation companies erupting in India go wrong. This third type of backlash began in 2016, which may have had to do with BuzzFeed reaching critical mass in India, or with evolutions in digital accessibility at the time. This third type of backlash can be presented via three anecdotes, which I think of as turning points in my journey as an Indian digital media consumer and producer.

First: I was invited to be a guest on a new talk-show Twitter India was launching (back when they were still trying really hard to make live video shows on Twitter's feed a thing). It was hosted by a prominent Indian feminist NGO-founder, and each episode would feature two Indian women guests who, in some way, contribute to Indian feminist discourse. When the episode aired, a small cluster of Bahujan women tweeted about the season's lineup, noting that the host and all her guests were women with caste-privilege. I acknowledged their tweets with agreement and my best attempt at 140-character

repentance. My fellow guest called them ‘trolls’. I was astonished by that reaction but had no idea how to intervene. Our chats got awkward.

Second: Divya Kandukuri, a journalist and mental health facilitator, approached some women on BuzzFeed India’s team and, with inexplicable patience and gentleness, explained that some of the issues we held up as central Indian feminist issues—like the right to go out and work, or the need to resist beauty standards—weren’t *Indian* feminist issues, but were *Savarna* feminist issues. Her grandmothers had always left the home to work, she explained, and none of the women in her family had ever felt the need to wax.

Third: Social scientist and professor Ravikant Kisana pitched me an essay called ‘Progressive Millennial India’s Caste-Shaped Blind Spot’. In it, he more or less laid out BuzzFeed’s own behaviour in India, but, kindly, attributed it more generally to the ‘woke Indian privileged Millennial’. He described, with humour and sharpness (it’s still online, I recommend you all go read it), the type of ‘woke Millennial Indian’ whose political awareness is such an unexamined Western import that they somehow manage to care deeply about feminism, about ‘checking your privilege’, even about issues like police brutality—all while living in India, where all these phenomena are inextricably bound with caste oppression—but somehow never use ‘the c word’.

Bit by bit, intervention by kind intervention, my sociopolitical deracination was dawning on me (a rite of passage for every ‘woke privileged Millennial’). I began trying to be corrective, in BuzzFeed’s editorial offerings, about our ‘caste-shaped blind spot’. Simultaneously, I was becoming disillusioned with the model of Western media’s global expansion in the first place. What had dawned on me is that entirely by design, the kind of person who would get hired by White bosses to run a national outlet *would* be someone with enough privilege to have learned Western corporate cultural belonging. And if they’ve lived on that rung of privilege, as I did, they’re almost entirely likely to be completely untethered from the political and sociological realities of the place they’re from, and the regions they’re serving.

If you start looking closely at what American media organisations are creating and commissioning in India, you start to notice that they’re very regularly doing things they wouldn’t, in analog, do *in* America itself. Netflix in the West is making *13<sup>th</sup>* and *Sex Education*, while for Indians, they’re making *Indian Matchmaking* and *Big Day*—both of which are more or less ads for entirely heteronormative and caste-based marriage practices. Or take *Cosmo*: The same summer that Divya pointed out that Indian body positivity was a Savarna priority, I was nominated for *Cosmo India*’s ‘Feminist Voice of the Year’ award. All four nominees were caste–class privileged women, whose primary public feminist positions were self-love and body positivity—as if the magazine was attempting to wash off of its own guilt for profiting off those beauty standards yearlong. Can you imagine *Cosmo* in America getting away with, or even *trying* to get away with, nominating four White women for a ‘feminist voice of the year’ award? Or, can you imagine Twitter (ok, pre-Elon Twitter) launching a feminist talk-show whose host and every. single. guest. is White?

There are real stakes to these editorial blind spots. They have a real impact on readers’ and viewers’ political priorities. When abortion freedoms came under threat in America, the Savarna feminist web was more collectively enraged than it was about Hathras. When Will Smith slapped Chris Rock, we were more up-in-arms about being anti-violence than we are when open calls to genocide are made by our own politicians. Western media’s global audience is young, well-intentioned, and politically curious and engaged, like BuzzFeed India’s audience was, but their political relevance as a cohort is neutralised when they’re served content and ideas that ignore realities of the place they actually live, or force-fit, over

those realities, the vocabularies and frameworks of American sociopolitical discourse. These consumers emerge armed with the know-how of political participation for a place where they do not live, and with nearly criminally incomplete knowledge about what 'social justice' would actually constitute where they do live. They settle for cosplaying political participation relevant to nowhere, while their real value is reduced to purchasing power, sold to the advertisers these media organisations eventually run on.

Tanaya, aka Dr. Cuterus, told me the other night that a video I'd made at BuzzFeed, in which I'd vlogged my experience using a menstrual cup, opened her eyes to the potentials and possibilities for SRHR (sexual and reproductive health and rights) content in India, because of its nearly unprecedented—back then—candour, from a woman, about her own anatomy. There are freedoms, maybe, that we had at BuzzFeed India because our bosses were White uncles, rather than what the culture may permit at an Indian homegrown publication, i.e., where our bosses would likely have been Brahmin uncles. Maybe that menstrual cup video, and more of our best work, was only possible *because* of a certain degree of cultural deracination—a certain irreverence born of ignorance, on my own part and that of my bosses. Our blind spots weren't the only thing about us. That said, I do think they were one of the more significant things about us. I'm still at work trying to fill them.

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