

ASIA PROGRAM

# IS #METOO DIFFERENT FROM TRADITIONAL WOMEN'S RIGHTS CAMPAIGNS? A POINT OF VIEW FROM INDIA

INTERVIEW WITH RITA BANERJI,  
INDIAN AUTHOR, POETESS AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS ACTIVIST

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*Marie Chartier has interviewed Rita Banerji in June 2021. This Indian feminist activist spoke about the #MeToo movement in India. Poetess, author but also women rights activist, she anchors #MeTooIndia in a more global context. She inserts #MeTooIndia within a context of systemic violence.*

**MARIE CHARTIER:** Do you remember when you started posting about #MeTooIndia? Were there a special event or a reason to start using this #?

**RITA BANERJI:** No, I don't remember the exact time. But it was around when #MeToo was trending on Twitter. Then there were tweets sent out as a part of the campaign on female genocide that I direct, the "50 million Missing Campaign". As part of the campaign advocacy, we have talked about sexual harassment at all levels of the Indian society. I started the campaign in 2006 and, I think, I started my personal Twitter account and also the Twitter account of the campaign in 2009. We had however used the hashtag from the start for the specific issues we were dealing with such as femicide, female infanticide, dowry murders and honor killings, because we found the hashtag was a good tool to draw public attention to the issues that we were addressing. Sexual harassment of women and systemic sexual harassment are not issues included in the Campaign goals. But we have talked about them often in the campaign, because they underlie the systemic femicidal violence we are campaigning against.

**MARIE CHARTIER:** But when you were started to use this #, you were thinking it was relevant for your cause? What does this # meant to you? And what do you put behind this #? Why did you endorse it?

**RITA BANERJI:** Because there are millions of tweets and people on Twitter, hashtags make it easier for people interested in our campaign issues to connect with us and support us. And conversely, hashtags make it easier for us to have our information read and our petitions supported by those interested in the issues we address. Like when we clicked on #MeToo, we could see what people around the world were saying about it. In India it was the #MeTooIndia, so I was particularly interested to support and engage with Indian

women who had come forward. So, I would say hashtags directly help me connect with women I may otherwise not be able to connect with.

**MARIE CHARTIER:** So this #MeToo helped you to connect with other women. Is it still the case?

**RITA BANERJI:** Currently it doesn't seem to be. There was a time when quite a few women on Twitter were talking about their personal experiences using #MeTooIndia. There were in fact two Indian women on Twitter who were encouraging women to come forward. I think they hoped that if many Indian women spoke out and fought together, they all may be able to get justice. But they also said they didn't have a campaign. They wanted women to just come together to collectively complain to The National Commission for Women (NCW) which is the only government office for women's rights we have. However, nothing here works the way it should. NCW does not work, the police does not work, the court does not work. From the start, that is why I was septic about that approach. The NCW told the 2 women organizers to tell other women to send their complaints to their office. Those of us who know the government system know they were just trying to silence and squash the issue. But they did nothing more. For years, public money has poured into this office, but nothing changes. Those two women who started the #MeTooIndia trend had put so many women together. It was a good starting point to start a women's movement and to demand accountability from the government, but unfortunately it has not happened. Also, after that some unfortunate things happened which made some of them very upset and some felt betrayed.

**MARIE CHARTIER:** Can you tell us more about that Twitter account?

**RITA BANERJI:** There were two main persons who encouraged women to come out publicly with their complaints. It was @MasalaBai and @TheRestlessQuil. They sent out a wake up call, and India took notice. But perhaps their strategy of handing over the cases

to the NCW, which is an innately corrupt office, was not right. While there was a lot of hope among women who went public, later most of the women who came out, felt let down and totally alone. There were other complaints I heard. One of the women who had gained prominence in the media via the #MeTooIndia platform then petitioned to collect money for her personal need. That got a lot of women very upset, because these women had had no help. They felt that she had used their stories to create her profile and presence on Twitter, and then helped herself while they got no help or Justice. So some of them said they feel like they had been used.

**MARIE CHARTIER:** There are a lot of feminist organizations in India, and we felt some kind of disconnection between #MeTooIndia and the institutional organization who were normally very active on women issue in India? Can you explain this disconnection?

**RITA BANERJI:** One of the problems is that most NGOs are affiliated with one or another political party. This often involves funding and other benefits. And the NGOs supports a #MeTooIndia complainant and fights the accused, or completely ignores the case depending on whether or not it suits the political party they support. If the accused is directly or indirectly connected to a political party or supports it, then the NGO will not support the victim or at times even challenge the veracity of their claims. And so I think the problem is NGO put their individual financial and political interest above any women's cause, not just #MeToo.

**MARIE CHARTIER:** Do you think that was the case for the Akbar Case?

**RITA BANERJI:** Yes. That is exactly what happened in the Akbar Case. But in this case, what was very interesting was the journalist who first accused him is from an influential circle. Her husband is also a major journalist. They come from a well-connected background and influential background. They are well connected with medias and

political parties. But when the accused took her to court for defamation, the husband said MJ Akbar has an army of lawyers and he said they (he and his wife) don't know anybody. Clearly Akbar was using an intimidating tactic. But that is not to say the journalist and her husband did not know anybody because they are obviously well-connected. That meant they needed support and help from other people who are of influence in their groups.

**MARIE CHARTIER: Is there any case who is really relevant for you?**

**RITA BANERJI:** The woman for who I feel really bad for is Bhanwari Devi. She was a village woman from Rajasthan and she had been gang raped by five upper cast men. When she was raped, some NGO filed a Public Interest Litigation case, for formulation of a workplace-related sexual harassment law. Their argument was that she was raped because she worked against forced child marriage, as she was working for an NGO that sent women from the villages to report any child marriage. Because she stopped a child marriage, men of that family gang raped her. It was very strange that such an extreme sexually violent criminal case was the basis of India's sexual harassment law. But incredibly Bhanwari Devi's gang rape case is still pending. It has been almost thirty years that this poor woman is going to court still trying to find justice. The reason she has not got justice is a lot of the men involved have connections with political parties. But Bhanwari Devi never got the kind of overwhelming, loud, visible support from feminists that the influential journalist who accused Akbar got because Bhanwari is poor, illiterate and has no political party connections.

**MARIE CHARTIER: You started reporting these stories on Twitter. Are you involved in other groups and how you reconnect Twitter with the outside activism?**

**RITA BANERJI:** The campaign is mostly focused on female genocide. We are mostly dealing with everything that has to do with genocidal violence on women. But we see sexual harassment as a part of the system. And this system encourages femicide. So, we

do use the Twitter handle to highlight a case. If somebody told us that “we need help” or “an injustice has been done to me”, then we will highlight the case. But in terms of sexual harassment, we have not been taking on any cases, and we are not active on the issue because it is not the goal of the campaign. Things we are focused on is femicide, violence on women. We are not an NGO, we are a campaign and we don’t accept donations and we do not have funds. We are a fund-free, volunteer-based campaign. So, when we get a case, say for regarding dowry violence we try to connect to NGOs that offer free legal advice, or medical help... But very often we have found that they are not able to help. We had a case of Dowry violence where a woman was force fed acid by her husband and in-laws. When I met her, she was close to death. She could not eat as her insides were burned. Her skin was hanging on her bones. That poor woman was in agony. We had to urgently get her surgery and medical help, but of all the NGOs that we approached, NGOs who said on their website than they can give women medical help, none of them could give help to this woman. So we organized a fund raising since we don't have funds. We created a system where people could directly donate to her parents who were taking care of her. And we verified the transactions to make sure the money went to the right place, to the hospital, treatment, medication, etc. In the end she had her operation and treatment and it saved her life. That is how we do it. Probably one of the differences we have with other campaigns on female gendercide is that the focus of other groups is on the need to change the social mindset. Our campaign's focus is on the immediate implementation of the law and safety and justice for women who suffered violence. We believe we cannot afford to wait for the social mindset to change.

**MARIE CHARTIER:** Do you have faced some censorship?

**RITA BANERJI:** Yes, on Twitter and Facebook. Certain tweets and Facebook posts were deleted. The censorship started with the Facebook algorithm. Things started slowly, we started to see some posts disappearing. They were changing the algorithm so people on our page could not see our posts. In my timeline, I couldn’t see some links I had posted on

Facebook. It started gradually. First, they started to remove people from the Facebook page between 2016-2018. We were so surprised, so we asked them by email, and they did not respond. We received messages from our campaign supporters “did you remove us from your page?” and we were like no, how can we remove anybody from out the page? You like the page, or you leave the page. But Facebook obviously had a system for removing people. Because they also removed some administrators from the page, they removed me also. So, I could not like/join the page or post under my name on the campaign page. We were around 20 000 and we went down to 10 000. But afterwards they removed my personal page also. They removed me and all the administers from the campaign page. But the “50 million missing” Facebook page is still there. We don’t know how, but it is still there. They destroyed the campaign but maintain the page. The same thing happened to the “Pink panties’s Campaign page”.

**MARIE CHARTIER:** Do you face similar things with Twitter? Because as we see a disruption of feminism in Twitter, do you think is the same?

**RITA BANERJI:** Yes, Twitter also doing the same things. Twitter has been deleting a lot of my tweets. Also hiding mentions and replies to my tweets. I had a pinned tweet, which had 2 600 retweets, that was on Gandhi. It was an article in which I said that what Gandhi did with the women and underage girls in this ashram, forcing them to sleep naked in his bed, was sexual harassment. Because he was using his power. For most people Gandhi was like God, and he used this position and power that he had on the women to sexually abuse them. It was sexual harassment. That tweet I had pinned, and Twitter deleted that tweet. And they don’t give any answer to why they deleted that tweet.

**MARIE CHARTIER:** We were analyzing the 400 000 tweets on #MeTooIndia, and that we discover was the majority of the tweets were in fact against the #MeToo movement and were led by a concurrent # that is #MenToo movement. Have you be

**facing this kind of very aggressive counter #Ing, because you were posting #MeTooIndia. Did you face this #tivism against #MeToo?**

**RITA BANERJI:** We have not faced that so much with #MeToo but we have faced that with the law of Dowry, we have tweeted about police inaction on Dowry murder cases. There is a law that requires an immediate arrest of a man in a case of a Dowry murder or even a dowry relevant suicide where a woman has been so abused for dowry by her husband and in-laws, that she feels forced to commit suicide. We have faced very aggressive counter tweets.

**MARIE CHARTIER:** **You were saying that #MeToo movement collapsed rapidly. Do you see any impact of the #MeToo movement?**

**RITA BANERJI:** I think what was really demoralizing was the Supreme Court. Are you aware the Chief Justice was involved in a sexual harassment case? Because it was really shocking. The issue here is the fact that the police and the courts don't work. In the sexual harassment case by the Chief Justice, the woman who complained about sexual harassment was a junior. She knew what she was against, so she wrote a letter and sent it to all the judges in the Supreme Court. Because I think she thought it was the only way she could protect herself. But only one of the judges said that it was wrong but didn't do anything to stop it. When the woman realized other judges will not do anything, she left Delhi and fled to her house in Rajasthan. The Chief Justice sent the police, to go charging her with false charges and arrest her. It was a false case, but the police took her back to Delhi and they put her in jail. In her absence the Chief Justice presided over a sexual harassment against himself and then he declared himself innocent and he called the media. He told the media she is a woman of very bad character and that she is a liar, that she is just making trouble in the court. After that he erased his name from the court record. The accused, which is him was declared innocent. The whole country watched this happen. Women come to protest, and they were arrested even if they were on the street. This happened and not a single newspaper published any article to criticize what



happened. Nobody wrote anything. When something like this happens how any woman can go to the police or court of justice in a sexual harassment case? ■

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**Interview with RITA BANERJI** / Author, poetess and women's rights activist from India. Her non-fiction book "Sex and Power: Defining History, Shaping Societies" was published in 2008. She is the founder of the 50 million Missing online campaign to raise awareness of female gendercide in India. She was one of the most active users on Twitter during #MeTooIndia.

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