

India's right-wing trolls incite communal tension, and abuse and sexually harass journalist, opposition politicians and anyone who questions them.

But who are they? Why do they do what they do? And how are they organized?

In this explosive investigation, conducted over two years and including interviews with top-ranking politicians, bureaucrats, marketeers and trolls, Swati Chaturvedi finally lifts the veil over this subject.

## Praise for the Book

‘Reveals the dark side of BJP’s social media unit’ *Mumbai Mirror*

‘[It] is brave of Chaturvedi to unveil some of these issues which are indeed scary and chilling to read’ *Free Press Journal*

‘[A] worthy venture into the deep, dark world of Indian cyber-terrorism’ HelterSkelter.in

‘A much-needed conversation starter’ Catchnews

‘Confirms our worst fears’ Youth Ki Awaaz

‘The book makes you very uncomfortable’ T.C.A. Srinvasa Raghavan

‘The PM should not cuddle up to loathsome trolls’ *Business Standard*

# I Am a Troll

Inside the Secret World of the BJP's  
Digital Army

Swati Chaturvedi

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*To my parents, Nisha and Gopal Chaturvedi,  
with love and gratitude*



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# Introduction



I am an investigative journalist. Freedom of expression is my bread and butter. Over the years I have had several cases filed against me by the Government of India (GOI), as have other Indian journalists, under the Official Secrets Act. I've proudly fought them all, as have the publications I worked with.

On 10 June 2015, I filed an FIR at south Delhi's Vasant Vihar police station against an anonymous Twitter handle, @lutyensinsider. @lutyensinsider had over 40,000 followers and had systematically targeted me over a period of six months in a vicious campaign that insinuated I had a sexual relationship with a politician.

Each day I would wake up to hundreds of notifications discussing my 'rate', 'last night's amazing anal sex' and the fictitious trysts where I 'the nymphomaniac could not get enough and

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was begging for more'. Yes, that was me being described on a public medium for posterity, my twenty-year-old professional career – which I take huge pride in – reduced to slander.

There was a base quality to these attacks, a hateful sexism that I had never encountered in all my years of being a reporter. My mornings were filled with rage and a sick, slightly nauseous feeling. The attacks were personal and after six months I had had enough.

My criminal complaint was the first of its kind filed by an Indian journalist under the sections of the Indian Penal Code that dealt with stalking, sexual harassment, transmitting obscene material over the Internet and outraging the modesty of a woman. Response was swift. Amid widespread media coverage, both national and international, Twitter suspended the handle for slander and harassment. It also gave the Delhi Police the IP address and email address of the anonymous slanderer. Unfortunately, there has been no arrest till date as the accused allegedly has powerful backers in the government.

@lutyensinsider hasn't been my only attacker. The threats of 'Nirbhaya-style' rape or 'an AK-

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47 bullet' to get me to shut up about the pellet gun blindings in Kashmir after young militant Burhan Wani's death in July 2016 are my daily lot on Twitter. And I am not alone. Several other journalists, especially women, who have liberal political opinions and question government policies are routinely at the receiving end of violent, often sexually loaded, abuse from right-wing trolls.

Internet trolls are persons who sow discord on the Internet by starting arguments or upsetting people by posting inflammatory comments and images. They are the goons of the online world. In the case of India, online trolls usually have Hindu right-wing views and are highly nationalist. They tend to attack anyone who appears to be against the government, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) or the nation. Some have a large number of followers. They usually have Hindu gods or the Twitter egg as their display pictures. Others have put up display pictures of beautiful women to increase their follower count. So you might see a user called 'Sonam' in a bikini tweeting hatred against Muslims. These trolls are mostly anonymous. Some, however, aren't and they are

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occasionally followed by high-profile members of the BJP, including Prime Minister Narendra Modi (see Chapter 1).

The latter tend to lead the charge, and as soon as they abuse you a swarm of anonymous trolls follow in their wake, either repeating the original abuse or adding to it. The anonymous swarm tweet extremely sexually explicit messages to women, sending images of pubic hair along with vulgar messages. The more famous the victims, the worse the abuse is. Well-known TV journalists like Barkha Dutt and Rajdeep Sardesai are among the most targeted by this group. Sometimes mobile numbers are shared on WhatsApp to get more feral trolls to join in the blood sport through another medium. Slurs such as ‘sickular presstitute’ are now par for the course.

Recently, playback singer Abhijeet, better known for leading a campaign to ban Pakistani singers from Bollywood, claimed on his verified Twitter account that the murder of Infosys techie Swathi in Chennai was an instance of ‘love jihad’. Swathi had in fact been killed by a spurned admirer and a Hindu, who later committed suicide.

A verified Twitter handle is a much coveted

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stamp given by Twitter to official government accounts, celebrities, world leaders and journalists. It essentially implies that your identity is not in doubt – you don't have a fake handle, you have been vetted by Twitter and you are an influencer within your world. Typically, Twitter verifies government issue identity documents as part of the process. It can also take away the blue verification tick in case of bad online behaviour.

The use of lies by verified Twitter users to generate communal hatred has always troubled me deeply. It's akin to giving them the equivalent of a megaphone and primetime TV slot. So I called out Abhijeet's lie and said it had the potential to cause riots. He retorted with a volley of abuses and unprintable expletives. This was followed by vicious trolling by a mob hiding behind anonymous Twitter handles. I filed another police case and Women and Child Development Minister Maneka Gandhi intervened to say she had decided to establish a special helpline: #IAmTrolledHelp.

But I'm not holding out for things to change. After all, no action has been taken against the Twitter users who shared fake images designed to fan communal passions after the September 2015

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lynching of Mohammad Akhlaq in Dadri, Uttar Pradesh, for allegedly possessing beef.

In the United States, which is a beacon for free speech laws, thousands are arrested each year – and the courts uphold these allegations as ‘actionable’ – based on complaints from people who have received violent threats on social media. Hate speech, targeted harassment, threats of rape with graphic details of assault, incitement to violence – all this is ‘actionable’ too but our police does not act. Abhijeet openly issued a threat, ‘main sabko dekh loonga [I will deal with everyone]’, on national television in response to the story. The police did nothing other than registering a case.

My experiences, and those of my fellow citizens, have inspired this investigation. I had many questions and I wanted answers. Who are these trolls with their false names and fake photographs? Where do they come from? Why do they do what they do? Do they act as an organized whole or work spontaneously? Are they just fans of the BJP and Prime Minister Modi or is there a more formal link with the party?

The questions feel more urgent than ever. For one, the culture of online hate speech has spread



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to the real world. Union Minister of State for External Affairs and former army chief V.K. Singh used the phrase ‘sickular presstitute’ to describe leading journalists who have questioned him and the term has gone viral among BJP ministers and online right-wing trolls. After this, BJP Vice-President Dayashankar Singh called four-time Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Mayawati ‘worse than a prostitute’. Electoral exigencies and a collective howl of outrage from Parliament forced the party to suspend him for six years.

Words are never mere words. They can amplify actions, riots, violence. Take the case of the murder of Dr Pankaj Narang in Delhi on Holi in 2016. Rahul Raj (who tweets under the handle @bhak\_sala and has 77,900 followers, including PM Modi) tweeted that the doctor was murdered by Muslims and that the media was hiding this information. Before any riots could break out, the Delhi Police had to issue a quick clarification that this was an outright lie. But they did not act against the handle for incitement or even register a case against the individual. I tracked the handle down. Its owner is a Bangalore-based manager who works at the multinational

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●●● Vodafone IN 7:08 PM


< Tweet 🔍 ✍️

**Ankit Lal @AnkitLal**  
BJP SM supporters like @bhak\_sala tried to communalize tragic death of Dr Narang.  
Will action b taken against him?

**Rahul Raj @Bhak\_sala**  
A 40-year-old dentist is beaten to death with iron rods in Delhi road rage. There is a reason why media is not using the word 'Lynch'.  
9:24 AM - 25 Mar 16  
512 RETWEETS 179 LIKES

**Rahul Raj @Bhak\_sala**  
The doctor's son threw Holi color on some Muslim kids. This was so insulting to the tolerant Delhi people that they lynched the doctor.  
9:30 AM - 25 Mar 16

👤 186 ❤️ 112 ✉️

 **Khushi (#BJPoison)** @khushi3424 

@AnkitLal @bhak\_sala @Novartis He should be sacked by his employers for bringing it to disrepute. @MediaVsIndia @anshBx

Reply to Khushi (#BJPoison), Ankit Lal, The Pa...

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*Response to Rabul Raj's (bhak\_sala) tweets on Dr Narang's murder*

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pharma company Novartis and runs a right-wing propaganda website called OpIndia. Novartis has not responded to my questions or to questions on social media by other users. Raj has also deleted the tweets. There are screenshots (*page 10*) of them taken from handles who retweeted his messages and criticized them at the time.

Earlier this year, BJP MP Hukum Singh claimed that an exodus of Hindus was taking place from Kairana in western Uttar Pradesh because they had been targeted by Muslims. Singh's claim was proved false but it nonetheless trended daily for two weeks until the National Human Rights Commission intervened. It's worth noting that subjects don't naturally trend on Twitter continuously for days and weeks. In the hotbed of Uttar Pradesh politics, especially before an election, such Chinese whispers can lead to lasting damage.

These are the things that inspired me to conduct such an extensive investigation. After PM Modi's government was sworn in nearly two and a half years ago, I've been watching in horrified fascination as the leader of the world's largest democracy follows and felicitates trolls. In

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the meantime, the online culture of right-wing harassment and attacks has grown steadily.

This investigation took me nearly two years and involved meeting actual trolls, BJP and RSS leaders, opposition leaders, and bureaucrats and officials working in government ministries. It has created a picture that leaves me extremely worried about our careless use of lies and hate online – and more importantly the ways in which some key ruling party leaders have used this as a political tool. For if you peddle lies and violence online, what does it say about your behaviour in the real world? I have never tracked such troubling faultlines in India's conversations with itself.