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## **#ProudRa\*\*i Digital Campaign: Gendered Slurs, Cultural Misogyny, and the Politics of Reappropriation**

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### **Abstract**

The latter part of 2025 witnessed an intense discourse on India's social media around a campaign dubbed #ProudRandi, which rapidly swept across platforms, drawing significant attention to the politics of appropriation and the effectiveness of reclamation. This movement, started by a female psychologist, influencer and content creator, Divija Bhasin, stirred an intense debate around gendered slurs and reignited the discourse on the deep-rooted cultural misogyny ingrained in the Indian popular cultural psyche. The campaign made a valiant attempt to reappropriate one of the deeply misogynistic Hindi slurs, Randi, literally meaning prostitute, a derogatory term historically used to shame prostitutes, often casually used to sexualise, and insult women in general, and those who are nonconforming in particular. The campaign once again exposed the usual tension between women's empowerment narratives and the resistance they face from multifarious quarters, historically conditioned and often emboldened by the dominant narratives of the times. It also became a site of conflict between digital feminist narratives and the opposition they face from the old-age and new-age self-proclaimed custodians of morality and culture, reinforcing the idea that online spaces provide platforms for both challenging and fortifying gendered power dynamics, albeit with varying degrees of overall impact. Not surprisingly, the engagement it drew from the underage female community, who overwhelmingly expressed solidarity with the campaign, led to the filing of cases against the instigator under various sections, including POCSO. Ironically, this campaign was even accused of reinforcing the very misogynistic structures that it intended to challenge and dismantle. Combining the approaches of critical discourse analysis, social media content analysis, and public sentiment mapping, this research investigates how the aforementioned hashtag circulated, negotiated its connotations, and navigated backlashes. It examines why this movement generated significant support and how certain undercurrents in neo-liberal times propel such 'mini-revolutions'. The study maps this campaign onto broader debates on linguistic reclamation to understand how online gender politics, digital activism, and the reappropriation of gendered slurs play out in the current socio-political landscape. It presents

# The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 8 & Issue 1 (January-March 2026)

a critical interpretation of the new-age dynamics of feminist politics in contemporary India, which is constrained by the structural and narratological paradigms of social media-driven discourse.

**Keywords:** *randi*, gendered slurs, empowerment narratives, cultural misogyny, politics of appropriation

## Introduction

"Social practices, power relations, ideologies, and hegemonic struggles are reproduced, challenged, or restructured through discourse" - **Norman Fairclough.**

There is a seven-year-old parody video<sup>[1]</sup> of two Bollywood actors, Manoj Bajpai and Vijay Raaz, jokingly discussing the most favourite *gaali* (swear word) that can be rated as the one that gives the best satisfaction of having used it. Both, with seemingly uncanny agreement, zero in on one of the most offensive expletives that is rampantly used in the Hindi belt, i.e. *Maadarch\*\*d*. This word, popularly shortened to MC, has its English counterpart in the equally 'popular' slur, Motherf\*\*\*er. Without any speck of hesitation, they passionately indulge in a kind of poetic dissection of this word, presenting the reason and rhyme behind the selection. Apparently oblivious of the starkly objectionable purport of this word, they give a detailed description of the psychic satisfaction of using it, showing how each of its syllables works in symphony to produce a profound effect and thorough satisfaction of having slandered somebody. The entire conversation is made to look like a very 'cool' act of being a sport, not over-sensitive or moralising, and just being jestful. In performing this, they both, perhaps inadvertently, betray the downright normalisation of using gendered and sexist slurs at the expense of women's identity. The apparent diabolical satisfaction in shaming and humiliating a person for his act of indulging in illegitimate sex masks the underlying dehumanisation of women and the hypocritical contempt towards forced sexual intercourse. However, what actually goes beyond this normalisation is the legitimisation of the blatant acts of sexual violation through trivialisation and colloquialisation. Moreover, in this whole phenomenon, women are given just the status of an object, just a body at the disposal of masculine lust, mere 'sites designated for violation'. This video clip is a sharp indicator of the level of normalisation that has happened to many misogynistic and gendered slurs in Indian society, which are not confined to any one geographical area but spread throughout the country through its vernacular versions. Slurs like the above no longer provoke objection; instead, they symbolise a chill attitude and a get-go culture. A culture in which using objectionable and offensive slurs, especially over a particular gender, is not just ok but an essential ingredient to make the conversations honest, friendly, candid, spicy, natural and unaffected.

## A Mini-Revolution in Hyper-Masculine Settings

This socio-cultural phenomenon has undergone an upgrade in the last decade or so, and has become increasingly unapologetic in its aggression, offensiveness, and self-righteousness.

# The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 8 & Issue 1 (January-March 2026)

All these are clear indications of a highly emboldened and arrogant masculinity inspired by the hyper-masculine nationalist narratives. It is now a dominant notion that being masculine means being capable and worthy; otherwise, one is not. This has effectively led to the absolving of the inherent immorality associated with the usage of sexist and gendered expletives. Hence, it is now very normal to see the political class openly using provocative slurs, news channel anchors and panellists indulging in the exchange of abusive words, movies and web series filled with expletives. The ultra-normalisation of this culture on social media platforms needs no mention, indicative of the level of insensitivity and inevitable, helpless acceptance of this new trend.

In this toxic atmosphere, what we witnessed, coincidentally in the month of November, is nothing short of a revolt, a rebellion, and a mini-revolution. This was led by a social media feminist crusader, who dared to challenge and give a jolt to the hegemonic patriarchal constructs. Divija Bhasin, an Indian female psychologist and content creator, became the 'talk of the internet' after calling herself a proud *randi* and running a campaign on her social media platforms, primarily Instagram. Bhasin is also a social media influencer and a self-proclaimed feminist who posts regularly about feminist-centric issues, often covering the associated mental health concerns, while boldly exposing toxic patriarchal trends in the present society. The #ProudRandi movement she started ignited a national digital firestorm by engaging various audience groups in intense, often polarising discourses around feminist causes, agendas, and campaigns.

The Hindi word "*randi*" is a highly derogatory term traditionally used against women sex workers. Moreso, it is used unscrupulously by all and sundry against any woman just to put them down, shame and show their alleged inherent inferior place. This expletive is not just rampantly used; it is all-pervasive, present in everyday conversations, both online and offline, inside and outside homes, on public transportation, in schools, offices, and in almost every other instance of gossip about women. It is there everywhere as a constant reminder of the power that patriarchy holds over women.

Bhasin attempted to transform this slur into an identity of defiance rather than shame, and tried to disarm and neutralise it. Also known as 'Awkward Goat', she encouraged her followers to use the above hashtag in their bios and posts as a symbolic act against misogynistic language that polices women's behaviour. She argued that this highly offensive slur, often used to demean women in general, is particularly used against those perceived as independent, outspoken, and nonconforming. In fact, Bhasin makes a similar observation of encountering that very word regularly in her comments, used to shame her for being outspoken, independent, and confident. Over time, she felt its sting fading, and she thought of flipping the script: instead of letting others define her, she chose to own the label herself and deny the word of its malevolent intent.

## **The Opposition and the Fight Back**

This campaign ruffled many feathers across digital platforms, both for and against, and was successful in drawing the attention of the mainstream media, making it to prime time on few occasions. The movement eventually led to the filing of over a dozen FIRs (First

# The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 8 & Issue 1 (January-March 2026)

Information Reports) against the instigator, allegedly for inciting minors to adopt abusive language and potentially influencing them towards sex work.

However, this movement created an atmosphere similar to that generated during the SlutWalks campaign of the 2010s and the "PussyHat" movement of 2017. The reclamation of sexually violent and highly gendered words is a part of known feminist practice, although not very familiar in the Indian context. The contemporary digital space, dominated by hyper-nationalistic, religious and communal narratives, remains largely unengaged with any major feminist or sociological issues. The last one being the #MeToo movement of the early 2000s. However, this mainstream discourse had to take a brief detour and make a pit stop at this campaign point due to social media dynamics and the democratisation of influence they have led to. The influencer was indeed successful in drawing the attention of the keyboard warriors, who were otherwise busy reclaiming the past glory damaged by various Western thought processes, viz, Marxism, Feminism, Modernism, Postmodernism, Rationalism, etc. However, as expected, the outrage was mainly directed against the influencer, reminding her of the limits of being a woman, and once again, we witnessed the same expletive used against her, ironically, in outrage over the use of the same word. Nevertheless, the campaign was successful in engaging in a great deal of serious and purposeful discourse, revealing the undercurrents of contemporary feminist politics in India. In a scenario where critical discourses on sociological topics are often sidelined and dismissed as 'wokeism,' this campaign succeeded in creating substantial engagement.

## Exposing the Masculine Hypocrisy

"Social structures set broad limits on what is possible, while social practices filter which possibilities become actual events"- Norman Fairclough.

Bhasin brought a highly critical dimension to the discourse throughout this campaign. While acknowledging the word's history of being used against prostitutes who provide sexual service to men, she rightly questioned why only the service providers are blamed for this supposed illegitimate indulgence, and the clients, who are mostly men, are let go without any blemish on their character. She exposed the stark politics behind this ploy to absolve the men of their so-called inappropriate indulgences, while shaming and blaming the women for entertaining those indulgences. She argued that it is the men who should be shamed and stigmatised, not the women who are pushed to provide such services. She further dissected the issue and showed how the forced prostitute is questioned about her character while the men, for whom it is sheerly their discretion, are given absolute immunity from all criticism. This patently unfair and immoral trait is so deeply normalised in society that the men who indulge in prostitution do not suffer from any strand of shame; instead, it is often projected as a manly display of their manhood. On the one hand, the female prostitutes are shamed, mocked, and ostracised for sleeping with multiple men outside marriage. On the other hand, the clients of such lustful indulgences are exonerated fully from the very acts of sleeping with multiple women outside marriage.

# The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 8 & Issue 1 (January-March 2026)

This angle of attack from Bhasin made the patriarchal power centres nervous enough to concede some ground by letting the discourse have its run. This nervousness of the hegemonic voices of being caught in their own patriarchal construct was visible in their inability to give a counter-reasoning. To save some face, the opposition shrewdly picked the battle on the grounds that the campaign was having a negative influence on minors and the naive.

This cultural construct of holding the women responsible for prostitution and acquitting men of their 'crimes' is so deeply ingrained in the social psyche that even the women have internalised it. Hence, we see in the general conversations that women's promiscuity is a more critical point of concern for society than men's. This construct is so intimate to our outlook that the very idea of prostitution generates the picture of women sleeping with many men, while the licentious men remain inconspicuous. For Bhasin, reclaiming the word "*randi*" was not about glorifying sex work; it was about resisting the shame historically attached to it, and using it as a weapon against the helpless prostitutes. She argued that calling women through such terms has always been a way to control them, to silence them, to legitimise them, and to demoralise them. By embracing it, she took away the power that abusers want to wield so haughtily. She says, "We did not give ourselves the title of *Randi*. We were already given it by society. We just took away its power. And that is why my video is uncomfortable to see."

## Criticism From the Sympathisers

While many women celebrated the movement as empowering and stood against online abuse, it drew criticism from certain progressive feminist circles, too. They argued that such acts and campaigns, at times, could risk normalising harmful language and erasing the associated generational trauma. Some even blamed the campaign for its alleged tokenism and trivialisation of its seriousness. They argued that Bhasin's reclamation erases the very real trauma of those who have faced the wrath of it, the sex workers' community. Some say she does not have the right to repurpose the insult because it carries a legacy of exploitation and marginalisation. Voices that identified with the cause of fighting caste-based discrimination also expressed differences with Bhasin's campaign. They say that this kind of campaign, far from constituting an act of empowerment, only exemplifies a recurring pattern wherein *savarna* (upper-caste and privileged) feminists appropriate marginalised women's histories, vocabularies, and experiences while positioning themselves as the universal referent of feminist struggle. Through this move, Bhasin not only detaches the slur from its historical grounding but also reframes it through her urban upper-caste gaze, which neglects the larger structural oppression of the working-class *Bahujan* women. This flattening is what enables *savarna* feminism to claim universality while erasing the structured caste-specific mechanisms of violence that make the term un-reclaimable for many women. *Savarna* feminist discourse routinely sidesteps the structural coercions, particularly caste location, that push lower-caste and denotified community women into intergenerational sex work. Some sections argue that we can't ignore the social aspect of the campaign, which commodified the trauma for content, transforming the actual tears into a viral moment without meaningfully addressing the issue.

## Conclusion

# The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 8 & Issue 1 (January-March 2026)

"My mom has always told us to use protection", these are the words of a female celebrity embedded in the video<sup>[2]</sup> hosted on a digital platform named Hauterfly.

This campaign, its emergence and engagement, is a clear indication of the consistent strengthening of feminist voices in the given Indian context, despite facing adverse socio-political circumstances. Though the nationalistic and religious narratives have reached a level of shrillness, the feminist exploration has remained active as an undercurrent, propelled by millions of micro engagements and, more specifically, nonconforming indulgences across platforms, particularly those boosted by the internet and things. This phenomenon has benefited tremendously from the gradual weakening of socio-cultural norms and the de-tabooing of those associated with sex and sexuality. There were times when any conversation about sex and sexuality was done in silence or, at best, in confident groups. This social trait had become a convention and had survived this long mainly because of the perceived immorality associated with carnal indulgence. This normalised secrecy had bred a profound sense of guilt around the aspects of physical intimacy, the weight of which was mainly carried by, perhaps dumped on, the fairer sex. Over a decade and a half, the socio-cultural changes in the Indian context have led to a fundamental shift in the way we used to perceive and engage with matters of sex and sexuality. We are witnessing a greater frankness and earnestness in recognising and respecting traits of intimacy driven primarily by instinct. This changing pattern is reflected in the drastically altered trends in the fields of entertainment, including the new-age digital, internet-based forums, OTT Platforms, Podcasts, etc., which have played a very significant role in challenging and redefining cultural norms and flagging the early signs of the changes the Indian society was yearning to see. The reduced taboo around sex and sexuality has empowered the feminist voices to look at the practice of prostitution from a vantage point freed of the burden of the civilisational shame and exclusively criticise the exploitative power relations embedded in the "sexual politics". The shift from the position of carrying the burden and the contingent shame of being accused as the chief instigators of sexual indulgences, that are traditionally considered as immoral, to a position of asserting one's sense of entitlement in indulging in any such indulgences, which are now largely freer from the traditional moralistic notions, is fundamental to this new-age courage to challenge misogynistic practices. The quote above is a very clear indication of this new, perhaps not completely new, trend.

Despite the absence of such conversations in the dominant national discourse, conversations around women's rights, subjugation, and reclaiming have been flowing quietly as a strong undercurrent, exploring, consolidating, and giving rise to revolts and mini-revolutions.

As Norman Fairclough opined in his book, *Discourse and Social Change* (1992), "Discourse is a domain of struggle, and discourse practices can be seen as ways of contesting and restructuring power relations." The discourse around reappropriation, led by Divija Bhasin, has made one such attempt at restructuring power relations and has arguably weakened patriarchy's sense of entitlement and strengthened feminist voices.

# The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 8 & Issue 1 (January-March 2026)

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