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Graduate School of Development Studies

**Beyond the Digital:
Understanding Contemporary Forms of Youth Activism
- The Case of Blank Noise in Urban India**

A Research Paper presented by:

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Indonesia

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for obtaining the degree of
MASTERS OF ARTS IN DEVELOPMENT STUDIES

Specialization:

Children and Youth Studies

CYS

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The Hague, The Netherlands
December, 2010

Disclaimer:

This document represents part of the author's study programme while at the Institute of Social Studies. The views stated therein are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Institute.

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Acknowledgements

'Beyond the Digital' goes beyond a final MA research project and has become an exciting personal journey. It has been an opportunity to explore a curiosity that has been occupying my mind for years and it has allowed me to grow along with the development of the research. For that, I am grateful for many people who have facilitated my learning process.

My supervisor, Linda Herrera, and my second reader Loes Keyser have supported this process by equally challenging and encouraging me to think deeper and re-question my assumptions. Thank you for being genuinely interested in my research.

The research, especially the field work, would not have been possible without the interest, support, and facilitation given to me by Hivos in The Hague and the Centre for Internet and Society in Bangalore. I am especially grateful to Nishant Shah of CIS, who introduced me to Blank Noise and supervised my field work, and Fieke Jansen and Josine Stremmelaar of Hivos, who welcomed me as a part of the 'Digital Natives with a Cause?' knowledge programme.

I am very lucky to have Rashmi Thapa, Ana Victoria Portocarrero Lacayo, and Ana Maria Soto Blanco with me in this process. You were extraordinary discussants, but more than that, you are the reason why my life for the past year has been incredible. Together with David Venn, Diatyka Widya, Felicia Yuwono, Leon Hatumena, and Maria de Vargas, you all have been my family away from home.

Speaking of families, I am blessed with unconditional support from home: Mama, Papa, Marco, Marcel, and Teddy. Yes Teddy, you are family.

But most of all, I am indebted to the people in Blank Noise, especially Hemangini Gupta and Jasmeen Patheja. Thank you for your enthusiasm and engagement with my research. You were open, warm, honest, and the inspiration I gained from your work and our conversations will definitely stay with me for a very long time.

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List of Acronyms

BN	Blank Noise
ICTs	Information and Communication Technologies
NSMs	New Social Movements
SSH	Street Sexual Harassment
WYR 2005	United Nations World Youth Report 2005

Abstract

The new forms of youth activism in the 21st century, due to the global societies' shift into a 'network society' (Castells, 2009) have been an emerging topic in both academic and policy-making circles. Debates around the benefits and limitations of these new forms, usually associated with new media technologies and transnationalism, have risen, but the paper argues that they are premature given the gaps in the existing perspectives used to study the phenomena. The paper seeks to gain a better understanding of contemporary youth movements in the Global South by focusing on a youth standpoint and anchoring the research on the case study of Blank Noise, a collective addressing street sexual harassment in urban India. The analysis delved into the way youth approach social change and organize themselves as a movement, guided by the four elements of social movements (Offe, 2008): issue, mode of action, values, and actors. While there are definitely similarities with pre-existing social movements, the paper argues that the key newness of the case lies in the interconnection between the cyber and physical spheres, the highly individualized approach in its approach to creating social change and internal organizing, the interactivity in producing and sharing content and activities and the facilitating rather than directing role of the leaders. This shows that activism and social movements are not fixed concepts, but rather one that should be de-framed and re-framed to include the contemporary movements consisting everyday activist youths. The research concludes with an acknowledgement of the challenges faced by the contemporary youth movement, which needs to be revisited in the future as the new movements evolve with time.

Relevance to Development Studies

The research emphasizes that youth are not only passive social becomings, but also actors in their own right who are actively shaping their societies and hence their perspectives must be taken into account by any policy or practice that is made on their behalf. It specifically contributes to the new ways youth actors organize themselves and imagine social change in the Global South network society. The research also responds to the emerging trend of funding development projects related to youth and new media technology (Yael, 2010) by contributing a nuanced understanding on the relationship between youth, technology, and social change.

Keywords

Activism, Bangalore, Cyberactivism, Digital Activism, Digital Natives, Eve-teasing, Everyday Activism, Everyday Politics, India, Internet, Network Society, New Media, New Social Movements, Street Sexual Harassment, Urban India, Youth, Youth Activism, Youth Movements, Youth Studies

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Background

1.1.1. The New Forms of Contemporary Youth Activism

My first encounter with the idea of new forms of youth activism was when I read the United Nations World Youth Report 2005 (WYR 2005) three years ago. The report contended that the availability of Internet and new media technologies have contributed to the birth of alternative forms of young people's political participation and activism. Specifically, the report pinpointed increasing involvement of young people in transnational activism and the ways of organizing, communicating, and campaigning via new media technologies as the new forms of activism (UN DESA, 2005: 125). As a young woman who was involved in transnational feminist activism and heavily influenced by young feminist bloggers, I recognized the forms posited by the report. But, at the same time I was wondering whether new media technologies and transnationalism are the only "new" elements of youth activism in the contemporary society.

The question resurfaced during my tenure at the International Institute of Social Studies, where I learned that there has been an escalating interest among academics, policy makers, and other practitioners on the intersection between youth, activism, and new media technologies in the past decade. Other than echoing WYR 2005 in identifying the new elements of current youth activism, there are also emerging discussions on youth digital activism triggered by the youth-led Twitter revolution during the tumultuous 2009 presidential election in Iran. These discussions are accompanied by two narratives related to the impact of these emerging forms, one of "hope" and the other of "doubt".

The "hope" narrative hinges on the plethora of new avenues for activism at young people's disposal and the bulge of the youth population who are assumed to be technologically fluent. Furthermore, this narrative claims that the contemporary forms of youth activism represent new ways of conceiving and doing activism in the present and the future (as explained in Shah and Abraham, 2009). On the other hand, the "doubt" narrative questions the extent to which Internet activism can contribute to social change (Collin, 2008; Kovacs, 2010). Some proponents of this view came up with the term 'slacktivism', stating that digital activism is only effective if accompanied with real life activism (Morozov, 2009; Gladwell, 2010).

While the two narratives jumped into assessing the potentials of youth's digital activism, I found it difficult to do without having a comprehensive understanding about these emerging forms of youth activism. After a brief review of existing literatures on the topic, I found that most of the analyses are centered on three main perspectives, each with its own approaches, strengths, and

weaknesses: the technology-centred, the newer-social-movements¹-centred, and the youth-centred perspectives.

1.1.2 The Three Perspectives and Their Shortcomings

The technology-centred perspective places a great emphasis on the instrumental role of the Internet and new media technologies (see, for instance, Kassimir, 2006; Brooks and Hodkinson, 2008; Shirky, 2008). It discusses how Internet-savvy youngsters are able to exercise their activism differently because the new technologies can remove obstacles to organizing, provide a new platform for visibility, and make transnational networking easier. In this perspective, Internet and new media technologies are seen as an enabling tool and the web is viewed as a new space to promote activism. However, this perspective mainly stipulates that there is already a formulaic form of activism, mostly the ‘new social movements’ that emerged circa 1960s, that can be transferred from the actual, physical sphere to the virtual arena. It does not consider that the changes caused by the way the youth are using technologies in their daily lives may also create new meanings and forms of activism. This perspective is the most dominant in literatures on the topic, being the lens used by the pioneering studies on youth, activism and the Internet.

The newer-social-movements-centred perspective goes beyond that and looks at the emergence of new actors and new forms of politics and activism in the contemporary era. This perspective is leading the recently emerging literature on the topic and emphasizes on the trend of being concerned on issues related to everyday democracy and the favour towards self organized, autonomous, horizontal networks (for examples, see Bennett, 2003; Martin, 2004; Collin, 2008). However, this perspective treats young people merely as vessels of the movements and neglect to examine how their lives have been shaped by the use of new media technologies and the Internet.

The youth-centred-perspective can be located in the emerging studies on youth civic engagement. They argue that the definition of politics and engagement for young people today have gone beyond traditional notions, such as voting, and that the Internet and new media technologies are integral in shaping and expressing these new understanding (see, for example, Younis et al., 2002). However, the studies on civic engagement mostly analyze youth as individuals and only a small percentage focuses on activism as a form of engagement in which youth organize themselves for collective action. This type of researches (for instance, Juris and Pleyers, 2009) was mostly done with youth activists in existing transnational social justice movements, such as the global anti-capitalism or environmental movements. Nevertheless, this perspective mainly views youth activists as *becomings* by defining them as the younger layer

¹ ‘Newer-social-movements’ refers to the novel forms of social movements emerging in the Internet age and should not be confused with ‘new social movements’, which is a term used to describe social movements that started to emerge in the post-industrial Western societies (Touraine, 2008).

of actors in a multi-generational group that will be future leaders of the movement. There are very few researches on autonomous youth movements that are created and consist of young people themselves and look at the youth as *being* political actors in its own right.

In addition to the shortcomings of each perspective, I am also disturbed by a number of common gaps in the current body of knowledge on the intersections of youth, activism, and Internet technologies.

Firstly, existing researches tend to only discuss the concrete and action aspects of activism, such as protests and campaigns. This is done in the expense of analyzing whether there are other “newness” in the intangible aspects that also define activism as a concept and practice: the underlying ideology, articulation of issue, and the profile of actors behind the activism (Sherrod, 2006; Kasimir, 2006). Consequently, the popular identification of new media technologies and transnationalism as the “new” elements of youth activism presents only a partial, instrumentalist point of view.

Secondly, the majority of studies zoomed into the novelty of Internet and new media technologies and how they are being used as a point of departure to investigate the topic. This arguably stems from an adult-centric, pre-digital point of view, which overlooks the fact that the Internet and new media has always been “technology” for most young people just as how the radio and television have always been “technology” for the previous generation (Shah and Abraham, 2009). This way of thinking overlooks the ‘activism’ in digital activism; thus, it ignores all the other factors that are causing and shaping youth activism.

Thirdly, also in the vein of the adult-centric viewpoint, there are very few studies that attempted to articulate their arguments based on the standpoint of the young people researched. Hence, they also fail to capture how young people themselves are viewing or giving meaning to these forms activism as active political actors.

Finally, researches on the issue skew excessively on the Global North. It must be acknowledged that the ‘digital divide’, or the unequal access to and familiarity with technology based on gender, class, caste, education, economic status or geographical location, is deeper in the Global South. Nevertheless, it has been widely acknowledged that to some extent all of the current generation of youth are a part of the ‘network society’ (Nilan and Feixa, 2006). It must also be acknowledged that most digitally active young people in the Global South are a privileged minority; yet, a neglect to understand their activism also means a failure to understand why and how the elite who are often perceived to be politically apathetic are engaging with their community to create social change.

The gaps identified above demonstrate that our understanding on the new forms of youth activism is currently obscured. Thus, the two narratives of “hope” and “doubt” lose their relevance given that the subject of assessment is not yet clearly understood.

1.1.3 The Need for a New Approach

As I mentioned earlier, my initial question on whether new media technologies and transnationalism are the only “new” forms of youth activism in the contemporary society resurfaced after I learned more about the state of the current body of knowledge and its shortcomings. Other questions also emerged during this process: how do young people themselves give meaning to these new forms? More importantly, while ‘activism’ is a term repeatedly used by scholars, is it the correct approach to capture youth’s engagement with social and political causes? ‘Activism’ is a working term I use in formulating this research because it seems to be the most appropriate² to represent youth’s collective organizing in addressing social issues, but I would also like to put it under scrutiny during my research journey.

I argue that we need a new approach to attempt at addressing these questions and obtain a better understanding on the new forms of youth activism in the contemporary society. Based on the identified gaps above, I propose for a new approach that consists of three elements.

Firstly, the approach shall be based on the standpoint of the youth actors themselves, considering that one of the key limitations in the current ways of understanding new forms of contemporary youth activism lies on the adult-centric perspective that are dominating literatures on this topic.

Secondly, in order to investigate the aforementioned overlooked elements of youth activism and also due to the varied manifestations of activism, the approach shall be anchored on a case study that will allow in-depth exploration into and a nuanced analysis of the ideologies, actors, values, and articulation of issues within a form of activism.

This research selected Blank Noise (hereafter, BN), an initiative to address ‘eve-teasing’ or sexual harassment against women in public places in urban India³, as a case study for youth activism in the contemporary era. BN started in 2003 as a final year art project of Jasmeen Patheja, then a student in Bangalore’s Srishti’s School of Design, Arts, and Technology (henceforth, Srishti). Together with nine of her friends, Jasmeen started a series of workshop that combined reflection on eve-teasing and art. The workshops’ results were taken to the streets through community art event, such as a street gallery of clothes donated by women who were harassed while wearing them. What distinguishes BN from similar initiatives is that in addition to activities in the physical sphere, it also has a very prominent campaign on the web. Using new media tools such as blogs and social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter, BN created an online community where stories of women and men who experience or witness street sexual harassment (SSH) are shared and transformed into online campaigns in various audio visual forms. These mediums are also

² Instead of civic engagement, for instance, which has mostly been used to describe an individual’s involvement in political causes.

³ More explanations on ‘eve-teasing’, Blank Noise, and the context of urban India are provided in Chapter 3.

used to solicit participation in online and offline activities and invite people to form their own BN initiatives in their local area. The online element of BN soon became a very central element in their activism and by 2010, the project has expanded to nine cities in India and includes over 2,000 women and men volunteer members, a majority of whom are within the age range of 16-35 years old of various professions (Patheja, 2010). It has received various media coverage for its activism and is named as one of the most outstanding autonomous citizen activism in India (Mishra, 2010).

As a feminist, I am immediately attracted to BN, but it was chosen as a case study for a number of other reasons. For one, BN defies the stereotypes of new forms of contemporary youth activism. It is not an activism that originated on the web (as opposed to most youth digital activism) nor does it only use Internet and new media technologies as tool for organizing. It is not directly a part of a transnational movement against SSH, although it has links with similar groups in other parts of the globe. Thus, it is fair to assume that BN represents new forms of youth activism overlooked by current researches. For another, the choice of India is not only important because of its location in the South, but also due to its rising highly influential youth-led digital activism that started in 2002 (Kovacs, 2010) and gained wider prominence after youth online campaigners were credited for the highest turn-out of first-time voters in the country's history of elections in 2009 (Shah and Abraham, 2009). Among the various campaigns, BN's growth and sustainability over the past seven years is unique and is a testament to its legitimacy for youth in urban India, making it a relevant choice for case study.

Thirdly, given that BN (at least at the start of the research) can be stipulated as activism manifested in the form of social movement, it shall be approached by using the elements that consist of social movement, which is elaborated in Chapter 2. Instead of immediately trying to pinpoint what is "new" about BN, going through each element of a social movement allows me to identify the "newness" by understanding the way young actors in the BN articulate their issue, action, how they organize themselves, and how they reflect on their practices.

Therefore, the research is essentially an attempt to gain a better understanding of youth activism in the contemporary era by using the aforementioned set of approach to explore the phenomenon, based on the premises that the contemporary society is distinctly different from the previous ones and that new forms of youth activism are also emerging as a consequence.

1.2 Research Relevance, Objectives and Questions

The relevance of this research rests on its starting point in identifying the gaps in the current debates on the intersections of youth, activism, and new media technologies and its aim to contribute to the aforementioned debates with empirical research based on two central objectives:

- to explore new forms of youth activism, and
- to reflect on its consequences for the existing ways of understanding youth, activism, and social change.

In correspondence with the objectives, the main research question is hence: *What are the “new” forms or elements of contemporary youth activism?*

The sub-questions, specific to the case of BN, include:

- How do youth imagine and approach social change?
- How do youth organize themselves as a movement?

1.3 Research Scope and Limitations

This research is limited in several manners. Despite previously acknowledging the “hope versus doubt” narratives around the ability of new forms of youth activism to generate social change, I do not intend to assess the impact created by BN. I am also very aware of the highly diverse context of India and the particularity of my case study; therefore, I do not claim my analysis of BN to be representative for all youth activism in urban India. Instead, the research will delve into the particular context of BN’s activism as an effort to gain insight on what new forms of youth activism it may represent. Lastly, while an effort of identifying “newness” can also take the course of an intergenerational comparison, this is not the lens embraced by the research. Although at first glance BN might be considered as the next generation of the Indian women movement, it is futile to make that assumption at this point since it will defeat the purpose of the research to gain a genuine understanding of the activism from the perspectives of the youth themselves. Ultimately, the research is not meant to produce the “truth” about new forms of youth activism. Rather, it aims to gain preliminary insights of the phenomenon through a new approach and identify whether a new conceptual lens is needed to understand it.

1.4 Position of the Researcher and Ethical Considerations

For me, questions raised in this research are not merely an intellectual curiosity but they are also personal ones. Given my own trajectory of involvement with youth activism, the research paper is an opportunity to take a step back and reflect on my own way of understanding what youth activism is. Thus, I adopt a reflexive position in engaging with this research.

Since the beginning of the research, I have been struggling with an ethical concern because I am researching an Indian experience while being an outsider to the Indian culture and society and constructing my research with concepts developed by Global North scholars. This position may limit my knowledge and understanding of the particular context I am researching. I attempt to resolve this struggle in two ways. Firstly, I have constantly been critical of my own assumptions and probed further into the social and cultural context of the statements made by the research participants. Secondly, the research is in itself a process of questioning and re-engaging with the concepts used instead of treating them as an established fact.

1.5 Methodology and Data

As previously explained, I approach the research questions through the standpoint of the youth actors, anchoring it on the case study of BN to allow a nuanced analysis, and structuring the exploration through the elements of social movements that will further be elaborated in Chapter 2. The methods I considered most appropriate for this approach are qualitative ones, consisting of a combination between primary and secondary data collections.

Primary Data

As mentioned before, BN has currently spread to nine cities in India with over 2,000 volunteers mostly within the age range of 17 – 35 years old, but it originated in Bangalore with only nine university students in 2003. Hence, I decided to base my field work where BN first started while also attempting conversations with members based outside of Bangalore through the Internet.

During my first discussion about my research and my intention to take up BN as a case study with one of its coordinators, I discovered that BN has a wide variety of interventions and possible roles for its members. Hence, I decided to conduct semi-structured interviews with 13 people involved with BN under various roles with diverse intensities who started their involvement at different times. The composition of research participants also represented the varied age range and gender of the majority of youth active BN. Each of them was asked to discuss at length their involvement in and opinion of BN guided by the elements of social movements.

Specifically, I interviewed ten women and three men, the youngest being 19 and the oldest being 34 years old. Other than Jasmeen Patheja, the founder and main coordinator of BN, the research participants comprised of two other coordinators, four members who have been mostly involved in organizing street interventions, four women who were only involved in creating online campaigns with BN, one woman who used to be active in street interventions but then involved mostly in online aspects of BN after leaving India, and a woman who considers herself not a member but contributed a blog post on her experience with SSH and frequently comments on BN blogs. Eight of them were interviewed in Bangalore and the rest were interviewed via Google chat and e-mail since they were based in New Delhi, Mumbai, Massachusetts, and Stuttgart at the time of my fieldwork.

Secondary data

In order to triangulate the findings from the interviews, I also studied BN's online presence and selected the main blog⁴ out of the four BN blogs and the Facebook group⁵. I selected the main blog because it is the main archive that

⁴ <http://blog.blanknoise.org>

⁵ <http://www.facebook.com/home.php?#!/group.php?gid=2703755288>

records the evolution of BN in the past seven years, while the Facebook group was chosen because of the online campaigns launched in the social networking site. In addition, I also consulted a variety of books, journals, and newspaper articles on SSH and youth in India in an attempt to better contextualize BN.

1.6 Research Structure

The research journey is structured in the paper in the following sections. Chapter 2 clarifies the concepts used within the research and translate it into a framework for analysis in subsequent chapters. It critically discusses the evolution of youth's involvement in social movements to cement the validity of the premises used in the research, namely that it is justifiable to assume that there are new forms of youth activism in the changing contemporary society. It also creates a reference point as to how youth and activism have been understood and studied before. Chapter 3 begins the presentation and analysis of BN as a case study. It also addresses the first sub-question and identify whether BN has a new approach to social change. The case study will be continued in Chapter 4, in which I address the second sub-question regarding BN's internal mode of organizing. Finally, I revisit my methodology in Chapter 5 and reflect on what it has allowed me to discover regarding the ways youth are engaging with social and political causes in the contemporary era.

Chapter 2

Analytical Framework

In this section, I attempt to deal with two issues. Firstly, I intend to build my analytical framework by clarifying the concept of activism. Despite being a popular term used by myself and scholars I referred to in formulating the research, very little clarification is available on what activism means. Hence, I decided to conceptualize activism as being a part of social movements as a specific form of collective action and refer to social movement theories as a guideline to build my framework.

While the theories are helpful, I consider social movement and activism not as fixed categories but rather as concepts I can question and critically engage with throughout the paper. Secondly, I intend to confront the two underlying premises of this research: that our society is changing and that the change gives birth to new forms of youth activism. These premises are substantiated by examining the evolution of youth's engagement in social movements as the society changes that also serves as reference points in future chapters.

However, I must note that the theories and studies referred to in this Chapter are based on the context of Western societies, which excludes the colonial and postcolonial contexts of most of the Global South. Acknowledging this limitation, I wish to clarify that the evolution of youth's involvement in social movements described here is not meant to represent a holistic history of the world nor do I claim it is representative of urban India, the context that BN deals with. Rather, it is meant to argue that changes in the structure of a society also give birth to changing forms of social movements and youth actors.

2.1 Conceptualizing Activism and Social Movements

Activism is a difficult concept to pin down because it has been used in many different ways by many different actors, but broadly it has been meant to refer to collective action for social change as one of the forms of civic and political engagement. Although this understanding centres on *action*, activism as a concept also includes the ideology, knowledge, experience, actors, resources, and vision that enabled the action to take place (Kassimir, 2006 and Sherrod, 2006).

The concept is by no means homogenous. Activism has mainly been associated with non-violent, 'progressive' efforts around the topic of social justice and human rights (UN DESA, 2005: 119), which is also how the term is used in this research. Nevertheless, I recognize that activism also comes in violent forms based on right-wing ideologies such as anti-immigrant movements, but will not be able to discuss these forms given the limitations of this research.

Other than being diverse on the type of desired social change, activism also has a wide variety of manifestations. Lonnie Sherrod (2005) offered a working definition of the various actions that falls under activism, which include protest events and direct actions, advocacy to change policies of power-

ful institutions, consumer boycotts, and efforts to raise public awareness on the issue of concern. Among these forms, I choose to focus on social movements as one of the manifestation of activism as it appears to be the most appropriate representation for BN's collective action to address eve-teasing.

Alain Touraine (2008:212), a French sociologist and one of the leading theorists on social movements, argued that only collective behaviours that address a 'social conflict' can be considered as social movements. Social conflict denotes the idea of a struggle over a 'stake', meaning resources or issues deemed valuable by a group of agents that represent a specific social category and an identified opponent. Touraine identified eight types of social conflict, but claimed that social movements only refer to one type, 'the social control of main cultural patterns' (2008: 213). Actors in this type of social conflict struggle to redefine or expand upon existing cultural patterns, namely a model of knowledge, principles, and beliefs that governs the relationship of individuals and their societies which are manifested through the idea of norms and morality within a society.

Touraine further argued that a study of social movements is essentially a study of social action taken in response to a social conflict (*Ibid*); but, parallel to the concept of activism, action is only one of the many components that consists social movements. Claus Offe (2008:207) contends that understanding social movements can be done through four components: *the issue, values, modes of action, and actors*; he further used these components to guide his analysis on identifying the 'newness' in 'new social movements'.

Taking the lead from Offe, also because I intend to identify "newness", these components are the basis of my approach to studying BN as a social movement. *The issue*, or 'social conflict' in Touraine's term, is explored by studying the way it is articulated, including the identification of opponent, the kind of social change aimed for, and the underlying ideology. *Modes of action* are both *internal* and *external*; the internal refers to how individuals come together to form a collectivity and how they organize themselves to act, while the external is about 'the methods by which they confront the external world and their political opponents' (Offe, 2008: 210). *Values* are the guiding principles for their internal and external modes of action. Lastly, *actors* are examined in terms of their social base, or which members of the society they represent, and how they associate themselves with the movement (*Ibid*).

2.2 Youth and Social Movements

2.2.1 Conceptualizing Youth

A crucial first step to take in discussing youth and social movements is to unpack the concept of youth itself. There is generally an accepted notion that youth is a period in between childhood and adulthood, but the complexity of defining youth has largely been acknowledged by scholars and practitioners alike given the diversity in the way it is defined. For instance, while the United Nations defined youth as those between 15-24 years of age (UN DESA, 2005), India's National Youth Policy consider youth as those within the age bracket 15-35 years old (Sinha-Kerkhoff, 2006). The difference extends further to how

youth is experienced by the young people themselves and how it is perceived within and across societies due to gender, class, ethnicity, and other factors. Thus, while age remains an important element in defining youth, it is clear that youth should be conceptualized beyond a biological category.

Addressing the limitations of age, Wyn and White (1997) argued that youth must be understood as a social construction and hence as a social category, meaning that the definition and experience of youth are shaped by the broader social, economic, and political conditions in a particular setting. Who or what constitutes as youth as well as how they are perceived differs within and across time and space. Consequently attempts to conceptualize youth must also locate the particular context they are embedded in.

This does not imply that young people are completely passive in their social positioning process. Rather, they are also shaping this process by exercising their agency, although it must be acknowledged that not all young people are in the position to do this. They are not only social *becomings* but also *beings* that are active in their own right, as can be seen from the impact of youth cultures and activism (Wyn and White). In this research, I am interested specifically in *how* young people act as collective social *beings* in the contemporary era through social movements initiated and sustained by themselves.

The changing way youth is defined and perceived due to changing contexts can also be traced in the evolution of social movements and the involvement of young people in them. Yet, I must underline once again that I acknowledge that the following account is based on studies in the Western context and is not intended as a generalized account of the world. Rather, it is meant to illustrate that changes in society also changes the forms of social movements and the participation of youth actors in them.

2.2.2 Three Waves of Societies, Youth and Social Movements

Drawing on the analysis of Feixa, Pereira, and Juris (2009: 425), the evolution of youth activism can be depicted in three waves: the ‘old’, ‘new’, and ‘new new’ social movements. None of the “newer” social movements are considered to replace the “older” forms, they rather add to the plurality of social movements that co-exist. The waves are elaborated based on Offe’s (2008) four elements of social movements explained previously.

2.2.2.1 ‘Old’ Social Movements and the Adolescent

‘Old’ social movements, represented by the labour and Leftist movements, emerged in the nineteenth century Western Europe together with the rise of the industrial society, which depended largely on the organized labour as a mechanism for continuous economic growth and social security (Offe, 2008). In this society the relevant *issue* for the social movement is thus economic and political ones, responding to the deepened chasm between the bourgeoisie and the working class. The primary claims can be both material, such as the demands of labour movements, or related to emancipatory politics such as the right to vote. The ‘opponent’, or the entity where the demands are demanded to, is the state and the goal sought are legislation changes or parliamentary

seats. In terms of *mode of action*, externally the strategies take the form of strike or demonstrations at the local level and occasionally at the national and international levels. The tools for voicing demands or gaining visibility are the print media, such as newspapers and brochures, which is the main channel of mass communication in the era. Internally, 'old' social movements are based in local groups with a clear sense of membership and identity, creating clear distinctions between insiders and outsiders. The modes of action are organized by the *values* of cohesion and solidarity among *actors* in the movement, whose social base is mostly defined by class, nation, and social status.

This type of social movements is mostly conceived as adult struggles; however, most of the actors are young people such as students and young workers. The recognition of these youth taking up adult issues led to the emergence of a new social actor at this time: the adolescent, or the youth who are becoming an adult (Feixa et al, 2009).

2.2.2.2 'New Social Movements' and 'Emerging Adulthood'

Another type of social movements that were later theorized as 'new social movements' (hereafter: NSM) started to emerge in the 1960s Europe and North America. Sociologists have marked the period as a shift from industrial to post-industrial society. Touraine first spoke of the post-industrial society in 1971, characterizing it with the move from the production of material into symbolic goods that alters values, needs, and representations of the society (Touraine, 2008). Technology plays an important role in aiding the four main components of this society: research and development, information processes, biomedical science and techniques, and mass media. The symbolic goods produced then extend to all areas of life, including language, body, sexuality, and mental life; thus, the line between public and private becomes blurred (*Ibid*).

NSMs were born as a response to the post-industrial society and consequently deals with social-cultural *issues* or life politics that brought private issues to the public fore. The opponents are no longer only the state, but also major corporations. The central aim is to defend minority rights, but there is a shift from aiming for 'freedom from' of the emancipatory politics to 'freedom to' in life politics. Instead of being a class based struggle like the 'old', the 'new' *actors* came from various class backgrounds, especially the new middle class, and identify themselves and their issues by identity. Women, environment, and ethnicity or race based movements are examples of the NSMs (*Ibid*).

This is also when the term youth movements surfaced for the first time, referring mostly to the student's movement against the Vietnam War in the 1960s U.S. that expressed a generational difference on values (Jones, 2009). When people remained involved in the movement after graduation, the term 'extended adolescence' was used to name these youngsters who have pushed the boundaries of youth to mid 20s or even later (Feixa et al, 2009:423) However, it must be noted that there were many more young people who chose to align themselves in other issue-based movements (Jones, 2009), but their activism have been severely under-researched due to the preoccupation with students movements as the epitome of youth activism (Jayaram, 2000).

The *values* upheld by these actors are autonomy and opposition to control, manipulation, and dependence. This can be seen in their *internal mode of action* that is more ad-hoc, informal, issue-based, and egalitarian. Instead of strict distinction of leadership roles, the lines are blurred and the movements are managed by spokespeople, volunteers, participants, and helpers. *Externally*, the scope of the movements expands to the regional and international and they employ a combination of “old” strategies like demonstrations with playful theatrics aimed to garner the attention of broadcast media, such as television and radio (Offe, 2008).

2.2.2.3 ‘Network Society’ and ‘Digital Natives’

In the dawn of the 21st century, Manuel Castells (1996) posited that the contemporary society has shifted into a ‘network society, one in which technology is deeply embedded in social structures and activities are processed and managed using electronic-based ICTs. While ICTs have been a part of human lives for the past century in the forms of radio and telephones, the prominence of the Internet and new media in the 1990s created new forms of communication that went beyond the departure from analogue to digital technologies. New media refers to the interactive way of communicating contents (texts, sounds, images) through Internet technologies often called Web 2.0, such as social networking sites, video-sharing websites, and blogs (Lievrow and Livingstone, 2006). Whereas in the past there was a clear distinction between the producer of content and the consumers of information, this boundary is being challenged by the ability of new media users to create, contribute, or alter the content of communication. This signifies a change in thinking who is in control of information, power, and resources. Moreover, as the world becomes increasingly connected, territorial borders become less significant and the network society exists beyond the Global North (Castells, 2009).

As the society is changing, the ones who are considered to be the best in adapting are those who are born into it. They are often called ‘Generation Y’, ‘Net-generation’ (Tapscott, 2009), or even ‘Digital Natives’ (Prensky, 2001): young people whose lives are significantly shaped by the rise of new media technologies. While Internet technologies have become the ubiquitous form of communications, there are differences between the ‘Digital Natives’ and the older generation often called ‘Digital Immigrants’ (Prensky, 2001). The immigrants mostly switch to Internet technologies to speed up their correspondence via e-mails and mailing lists and use new media technologies such as blogs as a one-way visibility platform, but the natives go beyond this and actually thrive on the interactivity of Web 2.0. This idea of youth as technologically savvy youngsters is the one behind all the interest on the intersections of youth, technology, and activism mapped earlier in Chapter 1, although critiques have highlighted the exclusion of young people affected by the digital divide in this construction of youth.

Youth activism in this era has been discussed in two ways. The first is along the line of digital activism, or activism that are created and based on the web, which is considered as a form of contemporary youth movements. Mostly these are ad-hoc mobilization of masses to respond to particular events; for

example the Facebook and blog-led Pink Chaddi Campaign in India, an effort to collect and send pink underwear to the leader of a religious extremist group that violently attacked pub-going women in India during Valentine's Day 2009, that have been dubbed as a youth activism (Mishra, 2010). The second one is about youth's participation in the contemporary transnational social movements.

Youth are important and most recognized *actors* in the contemporary social movements given their proficiency with new media technologies, but the social base of the actors in general have transcended boundaries of generations, gender, ethnicity, and territories (Castells, 2009; Feixa et al, 2009). In terms of *issue*, the social cultural is as important as the economic but the issues are no longer related to the personal interest of the actors; rather, the actors often act in solidarity with the marginalized that may not be in their immediate context, thus making global concerns their issue. The state remains as an opponent, but it has become less significant since its power was challenged by globalization, market pressure towards deregulation, and political crises that weakens its influence over its citizens. International financial institutions, major corporations, and the mass media have also become opponents (Castells, 2009).

The *modes of action* are organized around a composite of space of flows, or the communication models mediated by Internet technologies, and the space of places (Castells, 2007). In other words, both the virtual and physical are considered as the public space by social movements in the network society, or the 'space of societal, meaningful interaction where ideas and values are formed, conveyed, supported, and resisted; space that ultimately becomes the training ground for action and reaction' (Castells, 2009: 301). *Externally*, the strategies employed combine the theatrics of NSMs with the trend of mass self communication in the network society. Through the new media, actors created 'content that are self-generated, self-directed in emission, and self-selected in reception by many that communicate with many' (Castells, 2009: 70). Digital campaigns becomes as important as street actions and young people are considered to be at the forefront of it due to their skills with new media, while older actors mainly use Internet technologies to enhance their *internal* organization through e-mails, discussion groups and mailing lists to reach informal networks and loose decentralized groups that transcends geographical borders. All are based on the same *values* with 'new social movements': autonomy and egalitarianism (*Ibid*).

The account above demonstrates that there are more grey areas between the social movements in the network society and the NSMs compared to the 'new' and 'old' movements. Some authors stated that it is only an addition of the role of technology in 'new social movements' (the technology-centred perspective), some discussed how it gives birth to newer ideas of politics and activism (the newer-social-movements-centred perspective), and some highlighted the role of youth but only limiting it to their participation in multi-generational transnational movements (the youth-centred perspective).

In terms of naming of the social movements in the contemporary era, there are scholars who choose to remain with 'new social movements' but recognizing the expansion that technology brings (for example, Castells, 2009)

while others decided to give it a new name to mark its distinction, as is the case with Feixa, Pereira, and Juris (2009) who proposed ‘new new’ social movements. It is too early in the debates to see which ‘naming’ prevails or even to see other viewpoints, but the question of whether we have understood all the “newness” of the contemporary movement and how we can best make sense of these changes remain relevant.

Concluding Remarks

In this Chapter, I have clarified my analytical framework by defining activism as collective engagement in social movements and elaborated the elements of social movement that guides my approach. I have substantiated the validity of the two premises of this research: social movements and youth’s involvement have changed with the transformation of societies and our society has recently entered a new context as a network society, thus there are likely to be new forms of youth activism.

Emerging studies on youth and social movements in the contemporary era serve as preliminary insights to these new forms, but it has mainly concentrated in youth as budding actors in multi-generational transnational social movements due to their proficient Internet skills. Much less is known about how youth are leading and building their own social movements, a reiteration of the gap I identified in the way we currently understand the intersections of youth, new media technologies, and activism. This is the question I will explore in the next section, using the reference points from the elements of social movements as my anchor.

Chapter 3

A “New” Approach to Social Change?

The chapter presents the findings and analysis of my field work in Bangalore to address the first sub-question, “*How do youth imagine and approach social change?*” By focusing on the issue, actors, and external mode of action elements of BN as a social movement (Offe, 2008), this chapter intends to understand how the collective frames its actions: naming the issue, identifying the causes, proposing a solution for the issue, and defining its strategies and actions accordingly, as well as the consequent challenges.

3.1 Blank Noise: Denouncing Eve-teasing

“Blank Noise seeks to recognize eve-teasing as street sexual harassment and establish it as an issue.” (Blank Noise Facebook Group)

3.1.1 The Naming of the Issue

‘Eve-teasing’, BN’s *raison d’être*, is an Indian-English euphemism for the various forms of sexual harassment experienced by women in public places, be it parks, streets, or buses. It takes different forms that span from being an obvious harassment, like groping, to more ambiguous ones like staring, verbal lampooning, and “accidental” jostling.

Although public sexual harassment occurs in almost every place across the globe, the term eve-teasing is particular to South Asia, especially India (Puri, 1999). The term first emerged in the 1960s, but the magnitude of the incidence peaked a few decades later when more unaccompanied women were present in public spaces due to the increased opportunity for education and work accompanying India’s economic liberalization in the 1990s (Natarajan, 2008). Eve-teasing is not formally recognized in the Indian Penal Code, but women could file a report under Section 298 that criminalizes any men that made women target of obscene gestures and remarks or Section 509 that criminalizes any actions that violates the modesty of women (Baxi, 2001). However, due to the prevalent normalizing of eve-teasing reiterated by Bollywood films, public sexual harassment still happens on a daily basis and the authorities largely ignore it unless it leads to violent death (Natarajan, 2008).

The frequency and ignorance on eve-teasing is so severe that it is regarded as a rite of passage for women (*Ibid*). All of the women I interviewed in BN have experienced SSH. Their first experience is mostly after arriving at puberty, around the age of 13, and it becomes more frequent and intense as they grow older. Many of the research participants became more aware and disturbed by it when they entered university, which means that they live a less sheltered life, start taking more public transportation, and sometimes move to another city. In other words, eve-teasing becomes a day-to-day problem experienced most intensively after childhood ends and youth begins.

The intensity of this daily harassment is described by Annie Zaidi, a Mumbai-based BN coordinator who is also a journalist and recently published a book with a chapter dedicated to her experience with BN.

Suddenly, there would be men's crotches pressing up into my face, my knees, and my shoulders... I would lose count of how many hands felt me up. I cried tears of rage the first day... over the years, I got used to this rage... Ears would be whispered into, my bottom will be touched, songs would be suggestively sung: I learnt to expect it all.

(Zaidi, 2010: 271)

Eve-teasing is popularly perceived to happen only to young women dressed in Western clothes, but actually all women irrespective of age, class, body type, or dress undergo SSH on a daily basis. BN further argues that men also experience harassment although to a much lesser extent. However, their victimhood is denied by the norms of masculinity and a typical reaction would be 'yes, I got felt up but I pity the bugger because he's gay' (Blank Noise, 2005).

Thus, most women coped by remaining silent and steeling themselves with various strategies to avoid the harassment. The strategies include letting crowded buses pass by if they cannot afford auto or taxi, walking faster, always looking over their shoulders, showing as little skin as possible, and avoid being alone in public places more than ten minutes – all limiting their freedom in the public space.

Many people further normalize eve-teasing by ignoring it completely and regard it as a part of daily life. Laura Neuhaus, a 27 year old North American woman who was active in BN when she worked in Bangalore for a few years, was shocked to find that the PhD educated senior women in her department ignore the daily harassment they go through and advised her to do the same. Victims also often keep silent; they are further deterred from speaking up because protective parents or spouses frequently react by increasing restrictions like curfews or not allowing their daughters to go out alone.

The normalization of harassment, both by men and women, is the root of the problem for BN. Victims also perpetuate the mindset by deeming themselves responsible for the harassment, perhaps by 'asking for it' through the way they dress. "*Even by thinking that way I am validating eve-teasing, so this needs to stop.*" (Tanvee Nabar, female, 19). While not all men are perpetrators, many men have "*...failed to see women's point of view in the matter, launching into a macho "let's beat up the guy" bravado and not solving the problem*" (Kunal Ashok, male, 29).

For BN, ultimately, the root of the problem is the term eve-teasing. It refers to the biblical Eve that is considered as a temptress, playing on the dichotomy between "good" and "bad" women and placing the blame on women for enticing men to tease them. The word "tease" itself also downplays the severity of the action and making it trivial, funny, and non-issue (Baxi, 2001; Gandhi and Shah, 1992; and Natarajan, 2008). Thus, it seeks to denounce the term eve-teasing and call it by its real name: SSH.

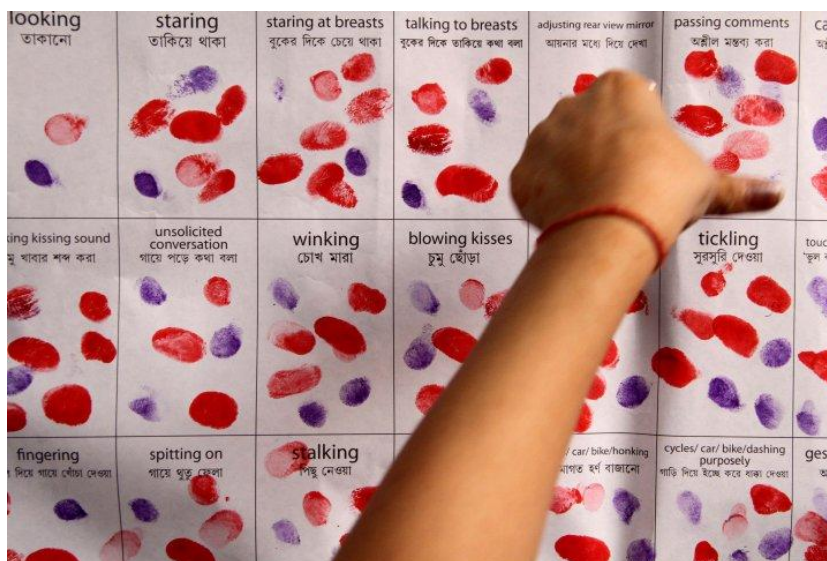
3.1.2 A New Kind of Articulation

Up to this point, BN appears to be similar to the women's movements that focus on violence against women. Both identify the internalization of patriarchal mindset as the root cause and struggles to, in Touraine's lingo, redefine cultural patterns regarding women's presence and engagement with the public space. Indeed, the Indian women groups of the 1970s laid the ground for BN's work by raising public awareness on the many forms of violence against women (Kumar, 1993). Although they acknowledge eve-teasing as a form of violence, the Indian women's movement has only done occasional, sporadic interventions, perhaps due to the choice of dedicating their limited resources to the more serious forms of violence, such as rape, bride burning, or dowry murder (Gandhi and Shah, 1992).

BN is the first one to systematically address SSH, but it differs from the usual women's movement in other respects as well. Most women's movements do identify patriarchal mindset as the source of violence, but they also make structural, tangible demands and identify opponents to make the demands to (Taylor and Whittier, 1995). New legislation criminalizing domestic violence or service provision by the state are often advocated for an indication of concrete progress towards their overarching goal. The battle is for women; men are welcomed mostly only as far as signing petitions or joining the protests (Gandhi and Shah, 2002).

The participants all named spreading public's awareness on SSH as BN's overarching goal, but there are no intermediary tangible demands articulated. BN does not even offer a rigid guideline of what constitutes SSH. Instead, it opens up the space for a collective vocabulary building through polls in its blog and the streets to explore, question, and trigger debates around the ambiguous forms of eve-teasing, like staring.

Figure 3.1.2
A STREET POLL ON THE DEFINITION OF EVE-TEASING IN CALCUTTA



Source: <http://www.facebook.com/home.php?#!/group.php?gid=2703755288>

Furthermore, they unanimously refused to identify an opponent because all members of the society are deemed equally responsible. While many scholars might read this as a sign of youth's faltering trust to the state, it is actually more based on the grey nature of the issue itself.

"Should we be allowing the state to legislate an issue where there is so much grey even with how it is understood and defined - from "looking" to physical violence? I don't think the state is an 'enemy' because it does not have a clear stand on this issue that we object to. And the man on the street is not an 'enemy' because we are talking about processes, interactions and fluid contexts here." (Hemangini Gupta, 29, female, a coordinator of BN)

I would argue, however, that BN has a conceptual, intangible opponent: the mindset that normalizes SSH. This is reflected in their strategy to create public dialogue, both in the physical and virtual public spaces. The expectation is to make the collective as inclusive as possible, including for men because this is also an issue of their concern. BN also has a significant number of men volunteers and a specific intervention for men called BN Guys that asks for men's perspective and experiences on the issue (Blank Noise, 2009). Jasmeen Patheja, BN's founder, further explained that *"... there is no specific target group; everyone is a participant and a co-creator. There are many kinds of public and they are invited to participate (in the public dialogue)."*

3.1.3 The Strategies: Public Dialogue and Culture Jamming

BN started as a final project of an art student; thus, art and design are the main elements in its interventions. For them, art is not an application to solve an issue. BN itself is a form of public art meant to provoke thoughts on a deeply normalized issue in a society that is already de-sensitized with the more established forms of protest, like street marches and petitions. *"... maybe they don't have the same effects anymore and we need to look for new ways. Perhaps the more direct, playful ones will make people think and want to be a part of your movement"* (Aarthi Ajit, 25, female).

Art interventions to provoke thoughts on SSH can be exemplified by a poster made by Rhea Daniel, a Mumbai based self-employed design consultant. Rhea, who has been following and commenting on BN blogs and Facebook group since 2008, was tired of the representation of women only as victims of SSH and one day got the inspiration to draw a different image: women who are not afraid to take action, or in BN's vocabulary, "Action Heroes". One of the posters is presented below.

Figure 3.1.3
AN ACTION HERO POSTER BY RHEA DANIEL



Source:

<http://www.facebook.com/home.php?#!event.php?eid=130518013647915&ref=ts>

She explained to me that the poster was influenced by the 1950s pin-up and Indian calendar art. *“I deliberately wanted to attract attention with established art forms, however kitsch or sexist, and turn it into an instrument for empowerment... I know sexist imagery influences people and I was trying to reverse it, using the same instrument for my purpose.”*

What Rhea described is called culture jamming, a technique of awareness raising by subverting an element of a well-known cultural object and causing people to think critically about the message behind the twisted object (Cox, n.d.). The poster was provocative because it subverts the internalized popular notion of women in eve-teasing. She is dressed in *salwar kameez*⁶ and a *dupatta*⁷, not Western clothes; she is feisty and winks as she smacks the hand that groped her belly, not looking afraid or humiliated by the harassment. This re-appropriation of mainstream cultural symbols is currently used by many con-

⁶ Loose shirt and pants popular in South Asia.

⁷ A scarf women wear with *salwar kameez*.

sumer-based social movements and is especially popular among urban youth who distributes their work virally through the Internet (*Ibid*). Although BN does not explicitly claim culture jamming to be its strategy, this is indeed its entry point to open up the space for dialogue in public spaces.

At this point, several critical questions can be raised. What kind of change can BN generate through a public dialogue? Are there really no target groups? How can BN then identify the impact of its work? These questions will be explored in the next section that delves into BN's intervention methods in the physical and virtual public spaces.

3.2 Intervening in Diverse Public Spaces

3.2.1 Street Interventions

The first public space BN identified when it was formed in 2003 is the physical sphere (streets, parks, anywhere outside the home) and it remains an integral part of its interventions. One of the most cited street interventions is called 'Y Are U Looking at Me'⁸, described as:

...groups of people (sometimes joining the group spontaneously moments before it begins) wear one letter each of the provocative phrase Y R U LOOKING AT ME on their breasts in shiny red reflective tape. The group appears and disappears at traffic lights and at major public crossings and is completely silent, maintaining eye contact with the stream of traffic lined up at the signal. Often when challenged by a frank and fearless female gaze, onlookers tend to look away or feel embarrassed; thus the ubiquitous male gaze is countered and an interest is generated which allows for dialogue to open up. When the light turns green, volunteers disappear into the sidewalk, distributing pamphlets and answering questions.

(Blank Noise, 2007)

Figure 3.2.1
'Y ARE U LOOKING AT ME' IN BANGALORE



Photo courtesy of Jasmeen Patheja

The twist of gender dynamics in this intervention is a form of culture jamming. While commonly culture jammers leave the viewers to think about

⁸ A list of BN interventions is presented in Appendix 3.

the message, BN helps them process the message by taking the space opened by this thought-provocation and having volunteers engage passers-by on a conversation about SSH. Going back to the issue articulation, BN embarks on a dialogue in the streets without defining SSH or prescribing solutions. The people engaged are diverse in gender and class, a sign of ‘everyone’ being included.

What kind of impact is created by such an intervention? It is fair to assume that not many passers-by will change their behaviours after only witnessing only one event and BN does not have the means to contact and check with them. The members admitted that they do not know how to measure tangible impacts BN generates for the people who saw the intervention, but this is not their main concern. *“This is an issue nobody talks about, so the very act of doing something about it seems to be enough right now,”* said Apurva Mathad (28, male). This indicates that BN’s most significant impact is not external (the public), but rather internal (the activists). This is echoed by all the other interviewees, all of whom felt that they were changed by their experience with the BN regardless of the length and intensity of their involvement. Some people realized how much their bodies have been disconnected from the public space; others felt empowered to deal with SSH. Annie Zaidi blogged about the latter:

Something has changed. This time, my reaction is different from what it would have been two years ago... I was surprised, felt contempt and anger – but I did not feel fear. This, I realize now, is because of Blank Noise, partly. .. It is as much about dealing with women’s fear of public spaces as it is about dealing with intimidating strangers.

(Zaidi, 2006)

This is when I understood the other, more central objective of BN that was verified later only by the founder and coordinators: to empower people through their experience with the collective. The discussion and debates raised through the public dialogue help the BN volunteers themselves to learn more about the issue, reflect on their experiences and opinions, as well as to give meaning to their involvement. This is when I also understood the point of “no target group”: people in BN also learn and become affected by the interventions they performed. Influencing ‘others’ is not the main goal although it is a desired effect, the main one is to allow personal empowerment of those within the collective.

In this sense, BN is again very similar with grass-root feminist collectives whose main objective is to empower its members and do artistic interventions on the streets. When they raise public’s awareness, there are usually clear verbal messages through protests or street theatres and the main intention is to attract media attention – a clear separation between the activists as content providers and the public as the target audience. This separation is not as clear in BN, where the performers and the audience are mutually dependent for them to create meanings from the intervention.

3.2.2 The Digital Tipping Point

BN is well known through its prominent Internet presence⁹, so much it has been dubbed one of the best digital activism in India (Mishra, 2010). However, it started in 2003 with only one blog meant as an archive and announcement platform. BN encountered what I call the 'digital tipping point', the point where one-way communication in the web changes into an interactive, joint content-production with other Internet users, after two unintended events.

The first was when Jasmeen started uploading pictures of her harasser, taken by her mobile phone, to the blog in 2005¹⁰. Immediately comments flooded, questioning the nature of the violation, whether such reaction is warranted, and the ethics around her action as a middle class woman confronting a man from the lower class who had no access to the blog; it leads into a discussion that ends with BN blurring the photos of perpetrators uploaded to its site to maintain its approach for dialogue. That's when the potential of the cyber sphere to become a space for dialogue and give shape to the public conversation desired by BN.

The second was one of BN volunteers proposed an idea of a blogathon, asking bloggers around India to jointly write about their experience with public sexual harassment and linking them to BN's blog to commemorate the International Women's Day in 2006. Perhaps due to frustration on the silence on eve-teasing and also because blogging became a major trend in India around 2004, the blogathon received immense responses and eve-teasing became a booming topic in the web. The success triggered the creation of BN's community blogs that consist of contributions from web-users.

BN's experience deviates from other forms of youth digital activism that are often generated on the Internet. The nature of its web presence changed when it shifted from one-way communication using Web 2.0 tools, as what older activists mostly do¹¹. The change was not by design, but unintentional as a consequence of interacting with other Internet users through new media. It took place when BN jumped into actions that are entirely dependent on the public response to be successful; for example the blogathon. This digital tipping point is when BN identified its second public space: the virtual.

3.2.3 Interventions and Engagement with the Virtual Public

Through interviews and web-observations, I identified three ways in which BN and the virtual public engage with each other.

The first is by responding to the content provided by BN, such as commenting in posts or participating in polls or Facebook campaigns. There are cases where the comments turned the post into a space for intense discussion

⁹ See Appendix 2 for the full list.

¹⁰ <http://blog.blanknoise.org/2005/03/stalker-no.html>

¹¹ Based on an interview with Anja Kovacs, a researcher on the Centre for Internet and Society in Bangalore who is documenting forms of digital activism in India.

that raises interesting issues around SSH that are as significant for BN as it is for the viewers, such as Jasmine's aforementioned post of a harasser's picture.

Yet, in other cases the comments ended up as a one-way communication that ignores the possibility of turning into a public conversation. An example for this is BN's recent 'What does it take to be an Action Hero?' event that I participated in. The event was hosted on Facebook from 25 June to 31 July 2010 and asked people to contribute a definition or a characteristic of an Action Hero, 'a woman who faces threat and experiences fear on the streets of her city, but can devise unique ways to confront it' (Blank Noise, 2010a). BN raised a potential conversation by asking questions for statements that tread on grey lines. A person who contributed 'anyone who acts/protests against any form of behaviour which tends to outrage his/her sense of modesty' (*Ibid*) was questioned on what modesty is and why it becomes a parameter, but it was not further responded. Furthermore, none of the other contributors attempted to raise or engage in such conversation.

I wondered what kind of meaning one could create from this limited way of participation and received several answers. It is a way to stay in touch and contribute to BN when one is not able to engage physically, as is the case for Laura Neuhaus after she left to continue her studies in the U.S. For others, it is a way to familiarize herself with the collective before deciding whether she wants to engage further. For the coordinators, it is to keep the momentum alive in between major interventions when they are committed to other priorities.

The second type of engagement is by actively producing content, like Rhea's aforementioned poster contribution or by sharing testimonials for the community blogs. Nandita Chaudury¹², a 29 year old researcher, wrote a story on her experience with SSH for BN's Action Heroes community blog to show her support for BN but, more importantly, also to share experiences she wouldn't share with anyone in real life.

"No one would want to share their most traumatic stories in public. I wouldn't do it on my own blog, because I don't want to come out yet, but I appreciate the space Blank Noise provides. After commenting in the posts and see how the discussion goes, I felt that it is a supportive space. Online contribution allowed me to stay anonymous while sharing my story to a wider public, so I felt confident in doing that."

She further explained to me that reading others' stories and receiving comments for hers made her feel less isolated and helped her healing process. BN's cyber presence functions as a virtual support group for women affected by SSH, who relish a space where it is considered as a real issue and found more freedom to share given the anonymity granted by the Internet. Through their public testimonials, women demonstrate their agency in resisting harassments and undergo the transformation from victims into Action Heroes. Kelly

¹² A pseudonym, as the person wishes to remain anonymous.

Oliver (in Mitra-Kahn, unpublished: 17¹³) argued that writing experiences of a trauma, in this case SSH, helps the self heal by using speech and text to counter their emotions and exercise their agency; the process of empowerment that occurs hence establishes BN as a (cyber)feminist praxis. This is also a form of culture jamming: breaking the existing silence on SSH in the virtual public space.

Being a part of the virtual group helped Nandita to better cope with SSH in the physical public space, a sign that the virtual and the physical spheres mesh as reality for many of youth today. Nevertheless, this not the case for every youth. “*Without real world activism, I would not have been able to deal with street sexual harassment in any real way,*” said Annie, who found BN through the blogathon and has since become a coordinator.

3.2.4 A Contextual Empowerment?

My first click to BN’s main blog was a surprise. Having read so many media coverage about them, I expected to see a professional, minimalist looking website like other women’s organizations¹⁴ where the menu is immediately visible. Instead, I have arrived at the most common and basic form of blogging: the personal blog.

I was greeted by entries on their latest thoughts and activities with photos and text with red font against a black background. I scrolled down a long list of permanent links on the right side of the site and arrived only at its Frequently Asked Questions link on the 28th item while it would be one of the easiest to spot in other websites. For me, this discovery said, “we would like to share our thoughts and activities with you” rather than “we are an established organization and this is what we do”. It is not the space of professionals, but passionate people. As a blogger myself, I recognize the space as being one of my peer’s and immediately felt more attracted to it.

Reflecting on my own position, my familiarity with the space is due to my background as a young, urban, educated, English-speaking woman for whom the Internet is a key part of life. My ‘peers’ who are also attracted to this place apparently share the same background with me. The main demography of BN’s volunteers, almost equally men and women, are those between 16-35 years, urban, and English speaking (Patheja, 2010). My interviewees were all at least university educated, some in the U.S. Ivy league, and are proficient users of social media, most of them being bloggers or Twitter and Facebook users.

This dominant base reflects the discourse on the ‘youth of India’, which represents only a fragment of India’s vast population of young people. The two narratives on the youth of India are described by Sinha-Kerkhoff (2005) as ‘the

¹³ Mitra-Kahn, Trishima (unpublished) *Holler back, Girl!: Cyberfeminist praxis and emergent cultures of online feminist organizing in urban India*. Quoted with permission.

¹⁴ For example: <http://www.jagori.org/>, one of the most established women organizations in India.

haves' and 'have-nots', a reflection on the broader discourse on the deep social economic inequities in India. 'The have-nots' are the majority of Indian youth who are struggling with the basic issues of livelihood, health, and education, while 'the haves' are painted as the children of liberalization: the mostly urban, middle class, technologically savvy, and highly educated students and young professionals up who maintain a youthful lifestyle up to their 30s.

Although 'the haves' only consist 10% of the total youth population, they are the ones identified as *the* youth of India by popular discourses. Lukose (2008) explained this by stating that youth as a social category in India is linked to the larger sense of India's transformation into an emerging global economic powerhouse together with Brazil, Russia, and China (popular as BRIC) after its liberal economic reform in the 1990s. India's information and technology industry is spearheading this transformation, thus it feeds into the discourse of youth as Digital Natives.

Although there are exceptions to this dominant demography, they are far fewer. Does this then mean that Blank Noise is 'contextually empowering' (Gajjala, 2004), given that it reaches only 'the haves' due to the digital divide and their sites of participation?

The classed nature of the virtual public space is something BN fully acknowledges. Some interviewees stated that this is why street interventions are so important; they reach people who may not be Internet users. However, people who have been involved in BN for more than two years acknowledged that class issues are also present in the physical public space.

Dev Sukumar, one of BN's male volunteers, explained to me that the British colonial legacy still shape the way public spaces in Bangalore are organized. The commercial areas in the city centre where BN interventions were initially organized, such as M.G. Road and Brigade Road, are dominantly inhabited by English speaking people, but in other parts of the city there are many who can only speak the local language, Kannada. After recognizing this, BN organized street interventions in such places, like the Majestic bus stand, and making flyers and stencils in Kannada. In order to do this, BN specifically called for volunteers who knew the local language.

The interventions might be in a non-elite space, but the main actors remain those from the middle class. Hemangini articulated the class issue in BN, saying *"Like it or not, a lot of the people in Blank Noise are from the middle class and a lot of the people we have been talking to on the streets are of a certain class. What is the ethics in a middle class woman asking 'why are you looking at me?' to lower class men? It is if we already assumed that most perpetrators are lower class men while it is definitely not true."*

Considering that the main aim and impact of BN are at the personal level, this does mean that the empowerment BN facilitates is contextual to the privileged youth of urban India. Digital divide is an injustice that needs to be taken into account, but the case of BN also demonstrates that all public spaces, virtual and physical, have a classed nature. Thus, I would argue that the class issue is more related to methods of engagement than the sphere of action per se.

This is a challenge that BN has yet to resolve in both its street and web interventions, but the reflexivity shown by Hemangini and echoed by others show that middle class youth movement take this as a serious concern.

3.3 The Wider Impacts

As established in previous sections, BN's main goal and impact are at the personal, individual level of people who are a part of the collective facilitated through performance-based interventions on the streets and collaborative projects as well as discussions on the web. Having empowerment as an aim likens BN to feminist collectives, both having the ideology of personal changes being political changes.

Yet, as a social movement, it is necessary for BN to generate impacts that extend to more than a limited number of people, especially given the previously demonstrated contextualized empowerment it facilitates. Despite not wanting to assess BN's contribution to social change, I found it inevitable to discuss this aspect to understand BN. The interviewees admitted that it is challenging for them to measure BN's impacts and had no methods to do so, but through interviews and web research I found that BN does reach more people than those immediately involved in the collective.

The first impact is the increased media coverage on SSH, which barely existed before 2003 (Patheja, 2010). BN's interventions have been featured in numerous mainstream national and international media, ranging from *The Times of India* to *The New York Times*, as well as popular alternative publications like the feminist magazines *Ms.* and *Bitch!* in the U.S. A majority of them covers BN's street interventions, although their web presence is always mentioned. Through the media, BN's efforts to denounce eve-teasing are brought to a wider audience. Even so, this was a rather unintentional impact since BN does not design its interventions to attract media attention.

Street interventions may have more "staging power" to attract media attention, but BN attributes its growth of volunteers and expansion of its chapters to nine cities in India to the web. In Jasmeen's words, "*I am unable to imagine whether BN would exist in public if it wasn't for social media.*" After the aforementioned digital tipping point, BN started to receive more responses from the virtual public. Other than giving shape to the public conversation by commenting or participating in online events, volunteer applications and registration to its e-group also increased and led into the initiation of BN interventions in other cities in India. Today, there are more than 2,000 people registered in BN's e-group as volunteers and the collective has spread to nine cities in India.

Almost all of the people I interviewed found BN through the web. Some found BN via popular mailing lists or blogs and others through their friends' status update in Facebook or Twitter. They then visited the BN blog, which archives all the interventions, hosts online activities, and announces upcoming street interventions. BN's online presence is more than being a virtual support group; it is also a vehicle for BN to attract and mobilize participation from the public. This occurs through the unintentional viral spread of BN by the virtual public's use of social media, which turns to be more effective in garnering the attention of digitally savvy youth than the mainstream media.

BN's online presence has also led Internet users outside of India to the collective. In its blog, BN list the websites of other initiatives to address SSH in

other parts of the world, such as *Hollaback* in New York. In October 2010, Jasmeen travelled to Tokyo to conduct workshops and street interventions on SSH with the invitation of students in Keizai University (Blank Noise, 2010b). While in India Jasmeen discussed eve-teasing, in Tokyo the workshop discussed *chikan*, a term used for SSH.

BN's engagement with these other initiatives does not necessarily mean it is transnational. According to Ron Kassimir (2006), transnational activism requires coordination and joint action across borders, but BN's links with these groups have yet to turn into formal internationally oriented and organized activities. BN's only collaboration with feminist initiatives was with Indian women's organizations during the Fearless Karnataka campaign in 2009 that was a joint response to the attacks towards pub-going women in Mangalore and Bangalore, two states in Karnataka; it contributed by organizing a street intervention.

I would instead argue that BN is *glocally* oriented. The issue it takes up has a global resonance and the culture jamming approach is also a global youth trend; but the responses are rooted in the local context and experience.

The impacts above demonstrate that BN does reach a wider public than those in their immediate group of active volunteers. There are now more initiatives to address SSH in India, like Jagori's SafeDelhi campaign¹⁵. The media, both mainstream and the Internet-based social media, are key to this spread although with different roles. The mainstream media that uses one-way communication was effective in making SSH a visible issue in the eye of the general public, cutting across class. However, the viral spread of the message questioning eve-teasing made SSH an urgent issue in among the virtual public and the interactive communication enabled by Web 2.0 created the BN community and facilitated its expansion.

3.4 A New Approach to Social Change

The analysis above established BN as a social movement because it addresses social conflict, especially those regarding cultural patterns in the society (Touraine, 2008). It is also a feminist collective because it shares the ideology and the 'personal is political' approach to making change; hence, the women's movement becomes a reference point to identify what is "new" about BN's approach.

According to Castells (2009), the *issue* may be a form of solidarity with the marginalized in other places and not necessarily related to the actors' personal interests, but BN shows that it remains a personal interest of actors, but the issue is socially relevant beyond their immediate context. Rather than transnational, the issue is glocal because the movement acknowledged that it resonates with other societies, but the response is locally oriented.

¹⁵ <http://safedelhi.jagori.org/>

BN shares most feminists' analysis of harassment, naming normalization, internalization, and patriarchal mindset as the root causes. Their standpoint of SSH being a societal issue that concerns women and men are the same, but they parted ways when BN does not identify an opponent or propose a concrete structural solution.

Its aims to raise public awareness and enable people's empowerment through involvement with the collective are not new; neither is their use of art and performances. It is new in the translation of the objectives. Instead of having clearly articulated messages, BN explores the ambiguity through public conversation and culture jamming. Instead of having clear distinction of content producer and audience, both performers and audience are interdependent in creating the meaning for the interventions.

The most striking difference is that the efforts take place not only on the streets, but also in the virtual sphere. The support group for victims of SSH takes place virtually instead of through physical meetings and the street events do not offer testimonials of harassment. The physical and virtual public spaces mesh, but there are also recognition that there are points of disconnection given the digital divide and the space where SSH actually happens. This is the newness in its *external mode of action*.

Youth are recognized as important *actors* due to their proficiency with the Internet, but they are not the primary leaders in the multi-generational social movements (Feixa et al, 2009). The case shows that the movements are indeed multi-generational, but youth are the ones who initiate, facilitate, and define the movement. They are the elites of Southern societies: urban, educated, English-speaking, middle-class, and Internet savvy. However, they recognize their position and attempt to include others from various backgrounds. Although they are the dominant actors, they are not the only ones. Middle-aged women have also played important roles in supporting and contributing to the movement. The issue taken up may be more of middle class youth concern, but it resonates with other groups in the society and the way it is taken up is similar to the way the violence against women's movement in 1970s India were led by the middle class (Kumar, 1993).

BN wants to create societal change by facilitating individual changes and encouraging them to engage others. Since the changes are experienced through involvement with the collective, its success is signified by the number of people who are actually engaging with BN. New media and social technologies enabled them to do so, but it is BN's openness and interactivity with the virtual public that propelled its success in reaching a wider public. The mainstream media, national and international, helped to make the issue a public concern; but instead of being a conscious strategy like in other movements, BN concentrates on individuals in its collective and appreciate the media support as an unintended impact. Most of the most important changes in the collective occurred unintentionally, showing that for them change does not come from linear planned top-down processes but rather from facilitating ideas and engagements from many people within the collective.

Concluding Remarks

This chapter contextualized BN as a feminist collective and established a reference point to identify its newness. The analysis demonstrates that it is similar in ideology, problem analysis, and broad goals. However, it differs in further articulation of the issue and how it is translated into actual interventions - strategies, methods, and public spaces. After arguing here that BN approaches social change differently, I will analyze whether the “newness” extend to its internal dynamics in the next chapter.

Chapter 4

A “New” Way of Organizing?

The Chapter addressed the second research sub-question, “*How do youth organize themselves internally as a movement?*” by concentrating on the *internal mode of action* (Offe, 2008). The aspects I focus on to identify BN’s internal dynamics include the structure of the collective, its decision making process, and the meaning given by the actors to their involvement.

4.1 The Collective’s Structure

“The relationships within Blank Noise have been built on an understanding that it might be difficult to articulate formally to someone seeking to understand the project.”

(Hemangini Gupta, 29)

BN announces itself as a volunteer-led collective (Patheja, 2010), something affirmed by all interviewees who also call themselves BN volunteers. However, through our conversations I discovered that there are many different degrees of engagement in the collective, which I classified below.

4.1.1 The Casual Participants

As a collective with more than 2,000 members, most of the people in BN are casual participants. They are the ones who follow BN’s activities, mostly through online means, and made the leap from being observers by commenting on blog posts, voting on online polls, signing up for the volunteer newsletter, and participating on online campaigns. In the physical sphere, they might come to one of the street interventions and help distribute flyers for a short while.

Nandita is one of such participants. Despite finding support from BN’s online presence to overcome her trauma over harassment, she did not engage with BN more intensely than by participating in online campaign or putting up BN’s posters in her office. Her crowded schedule for juggling two jobs is a reason, but her main reason was “*I was not comfortable in the theatrics involved in BN’s street interventions.*” For her, and many other casual participants, this form of engagement allows them to show support for BN’s efforts to address an issue they are concerned about in their given capacity and interest.

Their participation might seem arbitrary, like clicking the ‘Like’ button on a Facebook wall post or re-tweeting BN’s update, but the roles casual participants play is actually important for the collective. They engage with BN by providing feedback for the interventions and ideas of the collective, sometimes leading to an evolution in BN’s mode of action, as the discussion on the digital tipping point in the previous section demonstrated. Their engagement has also enabled BN to become a virtual support group for women affected by SSH. Most possibly are those who spread the word about BN and the issue it takes

up by word of mouth (facilitated by the social networking sites), therefore helping BN to grow as a collective.

Like the main demography in BN, they are mostly young men and women who are Internet-savvy, English speaking urban dwellers. Nonetheless, casual participants also consist of the exceptions to the demography. Interviewees mentioned that some older women showed up in street interventions. Although the anonymity granted by the Internet does not reveal the age of the virtual public, it can be assumed that the casual participants also consists of middle-aged women who are the fastest growing social media users in India, especially those between 35-40 years old (Chandok, 2010).

4.1.2 The Volunteers

One of the important features in BN's blog is its 'I Volunteer' button, which leads to a form that potential volunteers could fill in to indicate their interest. Most of the casual participants jumped to being volunteers by clicking this button and getting involved after receiving a response. From the interviewees, I identified two kinds of volunteers within BN.

The first is *one-off-project-volunteers, casual participants* who increased their engagement with the collective by proposing a particular intervention. An example of this is Tanvee Nabar and Pooja Gupta, 19 year old design students in Srithi, who proposed and implemented the 'I Never Ask for It'¹⁶ Facebook campaign. Tanvee and Pooja were introduced to BN when Jasmeen, a Srithi alumnus, came as a guest lecturer and shared what the collective is about. Inspired by BN, the two students decided to make a design project about SSH for their public spaces and pedagogy class and contacted Jasmeen to see whether they could make the assignment a BN campaign. Jasmeen responded positively and provided feedback for the posters and campaign design. The campaign, which lasted for 15 days in September 2009, asked people to change their profile picture, update their status, and tag their friends in the posters and notes provided. This is the first BN campaign that really used the features provided by Facebook, an idea that was continued by other volunteers afterwards.

They returned to being *casual participants* afterwards, because they spend more than 10 hours in school everyday, but the way they articulate SSH is the same as other interviewees who have been a part of BN much longer. This indicates that *one-off-project-volunteers* do not necessarily have less understanding of the issue than others who may seem more committed.

I call the more committed ones as *long-term-volunteers*, whose engagement with BN spans over multiple events and years. Most of the ones I interviewed are involved in street interventions. They performed many functions: preparing the logistics, distributing flyers, performing the intervention, organizing volunteers, or starting new BN chapters in other cities. These functions were not assigned to them by BN coordinators, but based on their own interest and

¹⁶ <http://www.facebook.com/home.php?#!/event.php?eid=126779079489&index=1>

schedule. Although their participation is long term, they all have active and dormant periods depending on their schedule and the frequency of BN street interventions. Although BN's online events are more than ever before, during the period of my field work all the *long-term-volunteers* said that they are not as active as they used to due to the decreased street interventions although they take part in BN's online events. Although they are in touch with BN online, via e-groups, blogs, and online campaigns, for them the "real" participation occurs in the physical space because "... *that is where SSH happens every day*" (Aarthi Ajit, 25, female).

My further inquiry revealed that their motivation to become *long-term-volunteers* is more than a shared concern for SSH. Some of them are attracted to the exciting methods of BN, others liked being able to work with other young people. The male members are involved because they want to underscore that SSH is not only a problem that concerns women. Those who have been with BN for the longest (5 years in the interviewee's case) shared another reason. "*We just keep in touch... it has become a personal thing now, we have become friends*" (Dev Sukumar, 34, male).

Both types of volunteers, one-off and long-term, are instrumental for BN. Considering that BN's main objective is to facilitate personal empowerment through engagement with the collective, they are the ones in which BN's main impact could be found. They have also assisted BN's expansion to other cities in India, enabling interventions to be conducted simultaneously in other areas and gaining more media attention. BN views volunteers as stakeholders or 'Action Heroes'; they are agents who 'has a local network that he/she can influence and interact with, initiating conversations, events and ideas about SSH' (Patheja, 2010). However, the volunteers' engagement is made possible by the facilitation of another type of role: The Core Team.

4.1.3 The Core Team

Jasmeen might be named by most interviewees as the only leadership figure, but any social movement would require a set of highly committed and hard-working individuals among its participants to manage it (Shirky, 2010). Although less visible, there is a small group who dedicate time and resources to facilitate the volunteers as well as think about the collective's future: the Core Team.

Members of the Core Team, about ten people, are credited in BN's Frequently Asked Question page and are part of a separate e-group than the volunteers. In its seven years, the Core Team only went for a retreat once and mostly connected through the e-group. In this space, they raise questions, ideas, and debates around BN's interventions, posters, and blog posts. Consequently, for them the issue is not only SSH but also related to masculinities, citizenship, class, stereotyping, gender, and public space. However, there are also layers in the intensity of the Team members' engagement.

The most intense is Jasmeen, the founder and the only one who has been with BN since its inception until today. Jasmeen is an artist and considers BN to be a part of her practice; she has received funds to work for BN as an artist.

Thus, she is the only one who dedicates herself to BN full time and becomes the most visible among the volunteers and the public eye.

According to Jasmeen, she is not alone in managing the whole process within BN. Since Hemangini came on board in 2006, she has slowly become the other main BN facilitator. *“It is a fact that every discussion goes through her. I may be the face of it, but I see Hemangini and me working together. We rely on each other for BN work.”*

Hemangini, a former journalist who is now pursuing a PhD in the U.S., explains her lack of visibility. *“BN could never be my number one priority because it doesn’t pay my bills, so I can only do it when I have free time and my other work is done.”* The same is true for others in the Core Team: students, journalists, writers, artists. Unlike Hemangini who still managed to be intensively involved, they have dormant and active periods like the volunteers.

The Core Team’s functions as coordinators that facilitate the volunteers’ involvement in BN and ensure that the interventions stay with the values BN upholds: confronting the issue but not aggravating the people, creating public dialogue instead of one-way preaching. This role emerged in 2006 when the volunteer applications mounted as the result of the aforementioned blogathon. They have also initiated or made BN chapters in other cities grow. Although some of them have also moved to another city due to work, they remain active touch through online means. Together, the Core Team forms the de-facto leadership in BN.

4.1.4 The Structure’s Shape

The analysis above has shown that BN is not horizontal in structure, but it also does not consist of clear-cut top-down leadership like a pyramid either. The shape of BN’s structure is unique and in the effort to describe I turn to one of M.C. Escher’s, the famous Dutch painter, creation below.

Figure 4.1.4
A METAPHOR FOR BLANK NOISE’S STRUCTURE



Source: ‘Fish and Scales’ by M.C. Escher,
http://www.mathacademy.com/pr/minitext/escher/big.asp?IMAGE=fish_and_scales

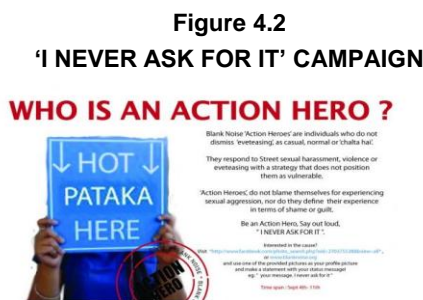
The painting illustrates fishes in various sizes, a metaphor for the many roles within BN. Not all are visible; there are some visibly bigger fishes but on a closer look their scales are actually smaller ones. It symbolizes the *de-facto* leadership within BN, the Core Team that functions as facilitators for volunteers and casual participants who participate with less intensity. It also captures the non-fixed roles and the ability of a person to shift between roles. The fishes are of different colours and swim to different directions, showing the various motivations and meanings people give to their involvement with the collective. Despite the differences, they share the fact that they are all fishes: people concerned about SSH. The painting is cohesive while consisting of so many different elements; the same is true for BN. Most of all, like the structure of BN, the painting could not be understood only with a glance. It defies accepted norms and takes an adjustment of existing perspectives to understand.

4.2 A New Way of Organizing

The collective consists not only of “... *people who volunteer or come to meetings, but anyone that have contributed in any way they can and identified with the issue. The issue is more important than the group*” (Kunal Ashok, 28, male). With this idea of a collective, BN’s *internal mode of action* is organized in several manners.

It applies very little requirement for people to identify themselves with the collective. The main bond that unites them is their shared concern with SSH. BN’s analysis of the issue is sharp, but it also accommodates diverse perspectives by exploring the fine lines of SSH and not prescribing any concrete solution, while the latter is rarely found in existing social movements. The absence of indoctrination or concrete agenda reiterated through the public dialogue approach gives room for people to share different opinions and still respect others in the collective.

An example of this is the aforementioned ‘I Never Ask for It’ Facebook campaign. The campaign included posters of a girl with a provocative sign covering her face, like “Hot Pataka¹⁷”, to flaunt her “hotness” and twist the norm that women should repress their sexuality.



Source: <http://www.facebook.com/home.php?#!/group.php?gid=2703755288>

¹⁷ “Pataka” means firecrackers in Hindi.

While many praised the campaign, some found it too radical because it assumes all women will be harassed by any men she encounters in public space. However, those who think the campaign carried a presumption of guilty before proven innocent also said that it is a personal opinion and they still appreciate the campaign's message.

BN is open to all who shares its concern and values, but its volunteers "*...must be committed to more than articulating an opinion... able to reflect and take collective action*" (Blank Noise, 2005). Other than these requirements, they are able to decide exactly how and when they want to be involved. They can join existing activities or initiate new ones; they can continuously participate or have on-and-off periods. This is reflected in the previously described variety of volunteers' motivations, activities, and the meaning they give to their involvement. The ability to personalize volunteerism is also what makes BN appealing, compared to the stricter templates for volunteering in other social movements.

There is *de-facto* leadership, but it functions more as facilitators for the collective's dynamics instead of the power-holders to direct the change in BN. The hierarchy is less of a rank, but an acknowledgement to the intensity of one's engagement and presence. It is not static; the Core Team members have its active and dormant periods due to work and migration, but they remain in touch through online means. Almost all of those in this position were involved in street events, but the actual discussions and debates that shape the development of BN occurs through the e-group due to the absence of a physical office and diverse locations. Although Internet-mediated communications are ubiquitous, the core members in other movements meet and coordinate physically as well. This is not the case with BN, in which some of the Core Team had never met each other face-to-face.

This way of organizing has enabled BN to bring up SSH as an issue to the public fora and garner many volunteers, but it comes with several challenges. The collective strives through the lack of concrete agenda and accommodation for individualism in taking actions and giving meanings. If BN at any point decided to advocate for a concrete structural action that demands long term intense commitment, such as for a law, the collective would falter because members were divided in opinions and individuals were no longer able to give meaning based on their personal preferences.

The *internal mode of action* is based on the *values* of inclusivity, openness, and individualism. These values also mean that people involved in BN are in different stages. Newcomers are still excited with confronting and exploring SSH in existing methods, while those involved in longer periods are looking for the next phase. The Core Team attempts to solve this challenge, but little could be done given the high interest of new volunteers and lack of people who could contribute full-time to the collective.

Any groups committed to social actions are hardly permanent because it is difficult to maintain both group effectiveness and the individual satisfaction of its members (Shirky, 2010). BN is unique in its ability to sustain and grow for the last seven years, mainly with volunteers shouldering the cost, but its future is still an open book.

Concluding Remarks

I have argued in this Chapter that BN exemplifies new ways of organizing: the structure is a fluid, flowing network with thick and thin points, anchored on the Internet given the absence of a physical base, it thrives on individualized way of meaning making and engagement enabled by the lack of a specific agenda or mode of organization. Having identified the newness of BN in terms of the four elements of social movement (issue, actors, values, internal and external mode of action), I will move on to reflect the relevance of the case in understanding youth activism in the contemporary era.

Chapter 5

Conclusions and Reflections

Throughout the paper, I have argued the following points. Firstly, the 21st century society is changing into a network society and that youth movements are changing accordingly (Chapter 2). I have outlined the gaps in the current perspectives used in understanding the current form and proposed to approach the topic by going beyond the digital: from a youth standpoint, exploring all the elements of social movement, and based on a case study in the Global South (Chapter 1). The methodology has allowed me to identify the newness in youth's approach to social change and ways of organizing (Chapters 3 and 4). Although I do not mean to generalize, there are some points where the case study resonates with the broader youth movement of today. In this concluding chapter, I will reflect on how the research journey has led me to rethink several points about youth, social change, and activism.

While social movements are commonly imagined to aim for concrete structural change, many youth movements today aim for social and cultural change at the intangible attitudinal level. Consequently, they articulate the issue with an intangible opponent (the mindset) and less-measurable goals. Their objective is to raise public awareness, but their approach to social change is through creating personal change at the individual level through engagement with the movement. Hence, 'success' is materialized in having as many people as possible involved in the movement. This is enabled by several factors.

The first is the Internet and new media/social technologies, which is used as a site for community building, support group, campaigns, and a basis to allow people spread all over the globe to remain involved in the collective in the absence of a physical office. However, the cyber is not just a tool; it is also a public space that is equally important with the physical space. Despite acknowledging the diversity of the public engaged in these spaces, youth today do not completely regard them as two separate spheres. Engaging in virtual community has a real impact on everyday lives; the virtual is a part of real life for many youth (Shirky, 2010). However, it is not a smooth 'space of flows' (Castells, 2009) either. Youth actors in the Global South do recognize that their ease in navigating both spheres is the ability of the elite in their societies, where the digital divide is paramount. The disconnect stems from their acknowledgement that social change must be multi-class and an expression of their reflexivity in facing the challenge.

The second enabling factor is its highly individualized approach. The movement enables people to personalize their involvement, both in terms of frequency and ways of engagement as well as in meaning-making. It is an echo of the age of individualism that youth are growing up in, shaped by the liberal economic and political ideologies in the 1990s India and elsewhere (France, 2007). Individualism has become a new social structure, in which personal decisions and meaning-making is deemed as the key to solve structural issues in late modernity (*Ibid*).

In this era, young people's lives consist of a combination of a range of activities rather than being focused only in one particular activity (*Ibid*). This is also the case in their social and political engagement. Very few young people worldwide are full-time activists or completely apathetic, the mainstream are actually involved in 'everyday activism' (Bang, 2004; Harris et al, 2010). These are young people who are personalizing politics by adopting causes in their daily behaviour and lifestyle, for instance by purchasing only Fair Trade goods, or being very involved in a short term concrete project but then stopping and moving on to other activities. The emergence of these everyday activists are explained by the dwindling authority of the state in the emergence of major corporations as political powers (Castells, 2009) and youth's decreased faith in formal political structures which also resulted in decreased interest in collectivist, hierarchical social movements in favour of a more individualized form of activism made easier with Web 2.0 (Harris et al, 2010).

A collective of everyday activists means that there are many forms of participation that one can fluidly navigate in, but it requires a committed leadership core recognized through presence and engagement. As Clay Shirky (2010: 90) said, the main cultural and ethical norm in these groups is to 'give credit where credit is due'. Since these youth are used to producing and sharing content rather than only consuming, the aforementioned success of the movement lies on the leaders' ability to facilitate this process. The power to direct the movement is not centralized in the leaders; it is dispersed to members who want to use the opportunity.

This form of movement defies the way social movements have been theorized before, where individuals commit to a tangible goal and the group engagement directed under a defined leadership. The contemporary youth movement could only exist by staying with the intangible articulation and goal to accommodate the variety of personalized meaning-making and allow both personal satisfaction and still create a wider impact; it will be severely challenged by a concrete goal like advocating for a specific regulation. Not all youth there are 'activist' in the common full-time sense, for most everyday activists their engagement might not be a form of activism at all but a productive and pleasurable way to use their free time¹⁸.

Revisiting my initial intent to put the term activism under scrutiny, I acknowledge this as a call for scholars to re-examine the concepts of activism and social movements through a process of de-framing and re-framing to deal with how youth today are shaping the form of movements. Although the limitations of this paper do not allow me to directly address the challenge, I offer my own learning from this process for the quest of future researchers.

The way young people today are reimagining social change and movements reiterate that political and social engagement should be conceived in the plural. Instead of "Activism" there should be "activisms" in various forms; there is not a new form replacing the older, but all co-existing and having the potential to complement each other. Allowing people to cope with SSH and

¹⁸ Or, in Shirky's (2010) term, those with 'cognitive surplus'.

create a buzz around the issue should complement, not replace, efforts made by established movements to propose a legislation or service provision from the state. This is also a response I offer to the proponents of the aforementioned “doubt” narrative.

I share the more optimistic viewpoint about how these new forms are presenting more avenues to engage the usually apathetic youth into taking action for a social cause. However, I also acknowledge that the tools that have facilitated the emergence of this new form of movement have existed for less than a decade; thus, we still have to see how it evolves through the years.

Hence, I also find the following questions to be relevant for proponents of the “hope” narrative. Social change needs to cater to the most marginalized in the society, but as elaborated before, the methods of engagement both on the physical and virtual spaces are still contextual to the middle class. Therefore, how can the emerging youth movements evolve to reach other groups in the society? Since most of these movements are divorced from existing movements, how can they synergize with existing movements to propel concrete change? These are open questions that perhaps will be answered with time, but my experience with BN has shown that these actors have the reflexivity required to start exploring solutions to the challenges.

The research started from a long-term personal interest and curiosity. In this journey, I have found some answers but ended up with more questions that will also stay with me in the long term. As a parting note before, I would like to share a quote that will accompany my ongoing reflection on these questions.

My advice to other young activists of the world: study and respect history... but ultimately break the mould. There have never been social media tools like this before. We are the first generation to test them out: to make the mistakes but also the breakthrough.

(Tammy Tibbetts, 2010)

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – The ‘Beyond the Digital’ Blog Directory

During the process of writing this research paper, I have been reflecting on my findings in the form of a series of blog posts for the Centre for Internet and Society (CIS), the organization that hosted my field work in Bangalore. The series, called 'Beyond the Digital', consists of 10 blog posts that will gradually be posted in the CIS website (www.cis-india.org) until December 2010. Writing the posts has helped me in analyzing the findings, but more importantly, it allowed me to share the research progress with people in the Blank Noise Project and obtain their feedback.

The following is a list of the blog posts that have been uploaded until 16 November 2010, also listed online at <http://cis-india.org/research/dn/the-beyond-the-digital-directory> :

1. Beyond the Digital: Understanding Digital Natives with a Cause

http://cis-india.org/research/dn/beyond-the-digital-understanding-digital-natives-with-a-cause/weblogentry_view

Digital natives with a cause: the future of activism or slacktivism? Maesy Angelina argues that the debate is premature given the obscured understanding on youth digital activism and contends that an effort to understand this from the contextualized perspectives of the digital natives themselves is a crucial first step to make. This is the first out of a series of posts on her journey to explore new insights to understand youth digital activism through a research with Blank Noise under the Hivos-CIS Digital Natives Knowledge Programme.

2. First Thing First

http://cis-india.org/research/dn/first-thing-first/weblogentry_view

Studies often focus on how digital natives do their activism in identifying the characteristics of youth digital activism and dedicate little attention to what the activism is about. The second blog post in the Beyond the Digital series reverses this trend and explores how the Blank Noise Project articulates the issue it addresses: street sexual harassment.

3. Talking Back without “Talking Back”

<http://cis-india.org/research/dn/talking-back-without-talking-back/>

The activism of digital natives is often considered different from previous generations because of the methods and tools they use. However, reflecting on my conversations with Blank Noise and my experience in the ‘Digital Natives Talking Back’ workshop in Taipei, the difference goes beyond the method and can be spotted at the analytical level – how young people today are *thinking* about their activism.

4. Taking It to the Streets

<http://cis-india.org/research/dn/taking-it-to-the-streets/>

The previous posts in the Beyond the Digital series have discussed the distinct ways in which young people today are thinking about their activism. The fourth post elaborates further on how this is translated into practice by sharing the experience of a Blank Noise street intervention: Y ARE U LOOKING AT ME?

Appendix 2 – Blank Noise’s Online Presence

Blank Noise’s presence in the virtual sphere is spread across the blogosphere, social networking, and content sharing websites. The “official:” presence I listed here are the ones formally acknowledged by Blank Noise in its main blog and excludes other “unofficial” Blank Noise accounts created without the knowledge and consent of its main organizers.

1. **Blank Noise**

<http://blog.blanknoise.org>

The first Blank Noise blog created in 2003 for archiving and organizing purposes, which has become its main site for mobilization, organization, attracting volunteers, and campaigning.

2. **Blank Noise Action Heroes**

<http://actionheroes.blanknoise.org/>

This is the first Blank Noise community blog, where the entries are stories and testimonials contributed by people who respond to Blank Noise’s call. The blog was created in March 2007 to archive the stories about women’s experiences in dealing with fear and the public space contributed for Blank Noise’s second blogathon to commemorate the International Women’s Day. The success of the blogathon prompted Blank Noise to continue the blog after the initial intervention ended.

3. **Blank Noise Spectators**

<http://spectators.blanknoise.org/>

The second of Blank Noise’s community blogs, created in 2008 and asks for contributions around experiences of witnessing street sexual harassment.

4. **Blank Noise Guys (<http://bnguy.blanknoise.org/>)**

The third Blank Noise community blog was created in 2009 to open the space for male contributions about the issue, whether from the perspective of a perpetrator, spectator, or victim.

5. **Blank Noise This Place – Flickr Account**

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/blanknoisethisplace>

A collaborative community online intervention using a photo-sharing website, which archives photographs of the various locations that women have been harassed in.

6. Blank Noise Video Channel at YouTube

<http://www.youtube.com/user/blanknoisevideo#p/u>

Created in 2008, Blank Noise's channel in the video sharing website shares clips of interviews with people during street interventions, a thought-provoking video performance, and Blank Noise's media coverage.

7. Blank Noise Facebook User Account

<http://www.facebook.com/home.php?#!/blank.noise>

Blank Noise registers itself as a user in the social networking site and use the account to share links, announce events, and manage the Blank Noise Facebook Group.

8. Blank Noise Facebook Group

<http://www.facebook.com/home.php?#!/group.php?gid=2703755288>

Blank Noise's community page in the social networking site, which hosts photos of interventions and posters, announces events, and enables discussions and interactions within its members through the 'Wall' and 'Discussion Board' features. As per 6 November 2010, the group has announced 38 events, discussed 27 threads of topic, shared 226 links and 539 photos as well as having 3,046 members since its initiation in 2009.

9. Blank Noise on Twitter

(http://twitter.com/blank_noise)

The account made in 2009 for this social networking and micro-blogging website is used to share snippets of updates, links, and also to engage in conversations with its 660 followers (per 6 November 2010). However, the account is also 'public', which means that non-followers and non-Twitter users can also access the account page.

Appendix 3 – A Selected Overview of Blank Noise’s Interventions

DID YOU ASK FOR IT?:

Blank Noise wants you to discard the clothes worn at the time you were sexually harassed on the streets. This collective building of an installation of clothes seeks, primarily, to erase the assumption that you 'asked for it' because of what you were wearing. The popular assumption is that the girl is to blame because she was 'provocatively dressed', implying that 'immodest' women are eve-teased. Clothes are contributed with a note by the volunteer which explains the circumstances under which they were harassed and includes a usually intimate description of what the participant was feeling, thus acting as an outlet for a kind of purging of experience as well.

We hope to collect 1,000 clothes and assemble them in a gigantic installation out on the streets in the major cities of India. The hope is that the clothes will act as a public testimony and rejuvenation of public memory, collectively defying the notion of 'modesty'. Clothes are coming in from as far apart as Baramulla, Kashmir and Chennai, Tamil Nadu and include school uniforms and salwar kameez's.

To sceptics who ask whether this doesn't imply falling into the role of “victim” whereas it might be more empowering to emerge from that label and fight the experience, Blank Noise suggests that this collection serves to purge memories, jog public and personal memories (thus countering the tendency to brush off street harassment or live in denial about its existence)

This part of the project is open to anyone anywhere: people need to mail in their clothes or arrange for us to help them ship it over to our Bangalore studio.

REPORTING TO REMEMBER:

Following a series of attacks against women and on minorities across Karnataka, Blank Noise began the [Reporting to Remember](#) project. Many of the attacks were against people found talking to members of the opposite sex when they were from a different community; or eating with them; or travelling in the same transport as them. But there were also concentrated attacks against women in a pub (Mangalore - 24/01/09), driving on a busy street (Bangalore, Feb 09), trying to catch an auto (Bangalore Feb 09) and others, indicating that women were being attacked for no other reason than that their actions were deemed to be against "Indian culture" whatever that monolithic identity was assumed to be by these -often right wing- young men.

This is an online project, launched in March 2009.

MAKE YOUR STREET SIGN:

This is a project inviting contributions online [here](#). The idea is: We are talking of safer cities not feared cities; We are talking of independent women, not paranoid women; We are talking about collective responsibility- don't tell me to be even more 'cautious';

We are talking about eve teasing as street sexual harassment and street sexual violence; We are talking about autonomous women, not just mothers daughters and sisters

amidst fathers brothers and sons. Over April-May 2009, online.

BLANK NOISE GUY:

Increasingly, Blank Noise meetings are attended by men. Blank Noise has now begun to document through video and written testimonial the relationship that men have to issues of street harassment; the reasons why they come to Blank Noise meetings and volunteer with us, despite our attention being largely focussed on the harassment of women. Some exploration has begun [here](#).

Internet based, begun in April 2009.

MUSEUM OF STREET WEAPONS:

No, we do not condone violence of any kind, but Blank Noise has been interested in examining how women convert everyday objects into articles of defence when on the street. This project also explores the mindset with which different women set out to face the street. Safety pins become little knives, deodorant sprays are accompanied by pepper sprays and ... well take a look [here](#). The project is also on facebook, up here... um, link coming soon.

It was begun online in December 2008.

BLANK NOISE THIS PLACE:

Remember it, record it, report it with a photograph at Blank Noise This Place. Begun online in 2008 (although informally before that!). Send pics in here: blurt-blanknoise@gmail.com and see the other photographic reportage on this Flickr set here: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/blanknoisethisplace>.

TALES OF LOVE AND LUST:

Also known as the vocabulary project, stemming from a need to build a dictionary of 'eve teasing', Blank Noise asked participants to email in to us comments and remarks they had heard addressed to them on the street. We compiled them into what we call an 'eve teasing' vocabulary. We represent this vocabulary in the form of charts, school-style, simple lettering and graphics, in an attempt to desexualise and remove obscene reference from the terms that are used leerily at us on the streets. When participants sent us food names that they had been called - 'cham cham', 'tamatar', - for instance - Blank Noise returned to the original, clinical, hard-fact meaning of the word and presented charts with the term followed by its meaning, to show what we are *not*. For instance, it might be hard for some men to believe when they hiss 'cham cham' at a girl on the street, but we are not in fact an *East Indian sweet. Sweet, spongy and soft patties made from milk, flavoured with saffron, in a sugar syrup*. In this way we take back the word and assign it its original meaning devoid of lewd ascription.

This was an online project, but posters have been printed and put up in offices in Bangalore.

UNWANTED:

Photographing the perpetrator:
Women, camera and the internet.

Here the Blank Noise volunteer responds rapidly and powerfully, by photographing the perpetrator, thus seizing control of the situation and flipping the power relation where the male has assumed control. Photographs are posted on the Internet, along the same lines as those practised by HollaBack NYC, a U.S.-based group that Blank Noise is associated with.

Critics may argue that this violates the rights of the perpetrator to state their defence, by publicly condemning them without allowing for a response from them, but Blank Noise believes that street dynamics are on-the-spot and rapidly changing, requiring a response that evolves within the same dynamic since the law is often handicapped to deal with street harassment. “Natural” processes of justice, for instance, would imply reporting street harassment, calling upon witnesses and requiring the filing of FIRs whereas the actions that violate personal and physical space are often fleeting or done on-the-run and sometimes hard/impossible to prove.

Mostly this has been used in Bangalore.

NIGHT WALKS:

Many women in India wouldn't imagine exploring the streets of their cities at night, alone, unaccompanied by a male escort or using private transport. Blank Noise Project's night walks invite women to come together to “hang out” on the streets... the feel of this intervention is often light hearted and celebratory. Women can stop to eat at roadside dhabas, or just run along the streets, enjoying the public space and reveling in the feeling of being out at a time usually considered taboo.

Some night walks have been more narrowly focussed, with women using stencils and posters to publicise Blank Noise and talk to people about it on their way.

Has been conducted in New Delhi, Bangalore and Mumbai.

Y R U LOOKING AT ME?:

One of the earliest Blank Noise interventions, here groups of people (sometimes joining the group spontaneously moments before it begins) wear one letter each of the provocative phrase Y R U LOOKING AT ME on their breasts in shiny red reflective tape. The group appears and disappears at traffic lights and at major public crossings and is completely silent, maintaining eye contact with the stream of traffic lined up at the signal. Often when challenged by a frank and fearless female gaze, onlookers tend to look away or feel embarrassed; thus the ubiquitous male gaze is countered and an interest is generated which allows for dialogue to open up. When the light turns green, volunteers disappear into the sidewalk, distributing pamphlets and answering questions.

Has been conducted in Bangalore, Mumbai, Hyderabad, Chennai and New Delhi.

ACTION HEROES:

This is the current stage of the project and can be considered a variant of the earlier stage. Conducted in the same spaces as the role playing interventions, these require women to take control and respond to harassment. Often street interventions involve an “incident” of harassment and action heroes respond as they wish, aware that whether they choose to scream out or stay silent, the response is a conscious and deliberate one.

Volunteers are handed whistles which often rent the air during an intervention, signaling the alarm and emergency that street harassment should trigger and thereby negating the denial response where the girl moves on, pretending nothing happened that is unusual.

In Bangalore, Mumbai and New Delhi. Details on blanknoiseactionheroes.blogspot.com

BLOGATHON:

On International Women's Day, March 8, 2006, Blank Noise extrapolated its current intervention onto its blog. In 2007, the blog-a-thon invited women to pick up the imaginary baton from the Blank Noise blog and write a post about a personal experience of harassment on their own blog, linking back to Blank Noise. Many women from across the world shared intimate experiences that they had buried or forgotten. The anonymity of the internet granted safety and a sense of power and women shared frankly experiences that resounded with other participants, thus creating an online community that shared universal experiences despite being separated by miles of physical space!

In 2007, in keeping with the Action Heroes theme of the main project, Blank Noise's blog-a-thon asked women to share how they had responded and/or fought back.

This is an online project open to anyone – those who use the internet could email us their posts or write them on their personal blogs, but people were also encouraged to share verbally and Blank Noise volunteers would translate this on to online text.

I WISH:

This campaign asked people to email us what they wished from their cities. Often city streets and parks are functional spaces, that we use merely to navigate and would not linger in, savour or enjoy. But we asked people to look beyond the reality of unsafe streets into an ideal world where they could imagine an alternate reality. The results were telling: people wrote in with wishes as simple as "I wish I could sit under a tree and read", suggesting that the simplest pleasures are a luxury in much of urban India today. The blueprint for this campaign could be used as a guide, showing Blank Noise what its participants are hoping for and could provide indications for what direction our future work might take.

Source: <http://blog.blanknoise.org/2007/09/interventions-and-techniques.html>