Productivity to Precarity on Instagram: Digital Feminism in India during the Covid-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how digital feminism deconstructed neo-liberal ideals of technological productivity in India during the Covid-19 pandemic. By creating a productivity scale, I delineate new social disparities and risk factors brought on by the unprecedented shift to a work-from-home digital economy. Through theories of biopower, I argue that technology is not neutral, apolitical, or unequivocally in favour of equal access and human rights. The creation of a new social group termed the 'technoprecariat' during lockdown is discussed using a 'cripqueer' approach to digital feminism. I extend Judith Butler's early work on gender performativity to the neo-liberal ideal of gender productivity, where the onus of appearing perpetually 'productive' in lockdown was mainly on women. By analyzing how women debunked productivity on social media platforms like Twitter and Instagram, I examine queer influencers whose profiles demonstrated the cost of social non-conformism. I reveal how three feminist activists Priyanka Paul, Durga Gawde, and Roshni Kumar subverted gender productivity during lockdown through their distinct aesthetic and political standpoints.

Keywords: technoprecarity, productivity, digital feminism, Covid-19, pandemic, queer, Instagram

Technoprecarity in the Pandemic

As a potential third wave of the coronavirus looms in India, it is worth examining how neo-liberal ideals of digital labour interacted with feminist activism on social media. With the spectre of mass death during the pandemic, the Indian State announced complete lockdown periodically between March 2020 – July 2021. This meant the closure of most major commercial, corporate, and government offices. The rapid transition to a work-from-home economy assumed the ubiquity of technological access and digital literacy that a large section of the Indian population does not possess, nor is likely to acquire in the immediate future. The average Indian worker lacks adequate internet bandwidth, fluency in English and technical communication, or the visual and mental ability to engage in uninterrupted productive labour online. In a recent interview, Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak claimed that "digital idealism" is nothing but a form of "digital colonialism" due to which the imposition of a complete lockdown by the State to prevent the spread of a virus ironically creates "humanitarian crises" (Spivak, 2020).

The first disaster that India witnessed in the summer of 2020 was not the spread of a viral plague but an exodus of daily wage labourers. With a sudden and unprecedented lockdown, migrant labour had to walk kilometres without food or water to return to hometowns and villages. This was a national crisis to be expected since it concerned a part of the population already living below the poverty line. The overnight shift into a digital economy during the coronavirus pandemic in India exacerbated existing forms of socio-economic precarity. However, we also witnessed an increase in deaths-by-suicide among high-school and university students and rising rates of health and reproductive disorders among middle-class working women. Since they had to work without childcare assistance or domestic help, the burden of managing both work and home fell completely on their shoulders (Afridi, Roy, & Dhillon, 2021). Studies showed that lockdowns also increased stress on LGBTQIA persons resulting in sexual detransition and PTSD-like symptoms (Policy brief: The impact of COVID-19 on women; and COVID-19 and ending violence against women and girls). The year ended with the farmers protests at the National Capital Region against the farm bills that openly supported the privatization of agricultural markets and grain distribution in a new digitally motivated economy.

Coercive lockdowns brought forth a perceptible expansion of the economic and gender precariat in India by shoring up a kind of toxic nationalism that permitted – on an almost Darwinian scale – the survival of only the *least* precarious. Those who had never faced shortage of food or water, incessant power cuts, patchy WIFI signals, job uncertainty, domestic abuse, online trolling, governmentality, or even the lack of something as essential as oxygen and pulse oximeters, were thrust into the condition of what may be termed "technoprecarity". According to recent research conducted by the Precarity Lab at Michigan, "technoprecarity" is a term associated with new risk factors and social inequality indices generated due to the proliferation of digital economies during the Covid-19 pandemic, "Technoprecarity is the premature exposure to death and debility that working with or being subjected to digital technologies accelerates. It is the unevenly distributed yet pervasive condition that the gig economy, toxic metals, denied welfare, and biometric surveillance systems perpetuate. We use the term technoprecarity to mark a contemporary expression of long-extant forms of violence under racial capitalism" (2020). A correlative to this would be the term 'technoproductivity' that connotes a minority of individuals working in the Global North and privileged parts of Indian society whose lives were least impacted by the pandemic. In both cases, however, the neo-liberal subject became a product of surveillance and "hyper-objectification" in his/her/their private and public life due to a shift to virtual realities.

Ironically, the more citizens stayed at home in lockdown, the more they were expected to *show* compliance with the neo-liberal ideal of technoproductivity on social media apps, government websites, and employer-generated digital platforms. As the researchers at the Precarity Lab note, "the digital is a medium of hyper-objectification. It is a fantasy of hyper-efficient and fulfilling capitalism. The digital automates and abstracts governance. It is also a commodity, a

product of both hyper-visibilized and invisibilized labor. The digital is a set of technologies that mediates, intensifies, abstracts, reproduces, and generalizes existing forms of domination" (2020). In an article on the impact of lockdowns on the Chinese digital labour market, Wu Yilong denies "the neutrality of technology and argue(s) that technology often serves as a political tactic to maximize and optimize social mobility, social productivity, and the security of the population" (2020). Therefore, "technology is essentially a type of biopower" in extension of Michel Foucault's work on modern liberal and neo-liberal cultures that govern people's political beliefs by controlling their health, basic resources, and fundamental rights. Foucault's extensive work on biopower reflects on the failure of the state to protect its citizens from the exacerbated effects of class and social inequality. Yilong gives the example of the Chinese government's replacement of the NAT standard with the CT standard in the second phase of lockdown so that worker 'productivity' was not compromised. The Indian State similarly monitored the circulation of medical data on Covid-19 and updated its vaccine policies in 2021 and policed popular discourses on social media pertaining to vaccine dissemination and the oxygen crisis in order to maintain its biopolitical control over the population.

In this paper, the extent to which biopower normalized a work-from-home economy during the pandemic is measured by constructing a *technoproductivity scale* using qualitative metrics. The scale reveals how known risk factors and systemic inequalities grew to include new forms of technoprecarity. Being technoproductive manifested in the willingness to conform to a neo-liberal work ethic in India, which is undoubtedly patriarchal, classist, casteist, and heterosexist. Those who were unable to participate in the digital economy entered a widening spectrum of technoprecarity. Clearly, the pandemic most affected social groups and bodies that have historically been relegated to various "zones of depletion" in India, however, this is not to say that the pandemic did not also affect "digital producers in enrichment zones" (Precarity Lab, 2020). With the expansion of the category of the 'technoprecariat' through more and more social groups being marginalized, disenfranchised, or "treated as disposable by algorithms that increasingly condition life chances" (2020), technology became a double-edged sword wielded both by those in power as well as marginalized groups. Social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook have been the bastion of neo-liberal values like individualism, self-promotion, and social conformism. But in lockdown there were many trending hashtags in India that challenged the neo-liberal work ethic and promoted a sense of global altruism. Tweets and Facebook photographs began to move away from neo-liberal ideals such as fashion, food, disposable consumerism, world travel, and social conformity through marriage, career growth, and childbirth. Instead, there were status updates that performed technoprecarity in several ways.

In the summer of 2021, there were urgent requests on Instagram for instance to share information about oxygen cylinders, verified Covid resources, and available beds in hospitals. These status updates were monitored and regulated carefully by the State's IT cell as they constituted a living digital archive of precarious testimonies. Even personal statements about experiencing the death of

a loved one, feeling disconnecting from friends and family, screen fatigue, job precarity, and disillusionment with State policies faced rigorous digital censorship (Scarr, Chowdhury, Sharma, & Dutta, 2021). Digital platforms brought forth into the public discourse lived narratives of horror, suffering, and loss, frequently implicating the State or various ideological state apparatuses like religion, media, and family. Influencers on the gender and disability spectrum shared posts on mental health awareness and advocated for fair trade, equal wages, the human rights of farmers and migrant labourers. They organized crowdfunded oxygen delivery campaigns and made pleas for a gender-neutral division of domestic chores that made them increasingly relatable to followers. Their posts highlighted the vulnerability of living on the margins of state welfare and social validation. More and more citizens who live above the poverty line empathized with issues pertaining to marginalized groups of India like women experiencing emotional burnout and domestic violence, the protesting farmers, or persecuted caste and religious minorities, migrant labour, or the differently abled. In the following sections, I study how three feminist activists Priyanka Paul, Durga Gawde, and Roshni Kumar subverted gender productivity during lockdown through their distinct aesthetic and political standpoints on Instagram.

Measuring Technoproductivity in an Intersectional Framework

It must be noted that in the initial stages of lockdown there was a euphoria around the ideal of technoproductivity. A Google search for "How to stay productive during quarantine" yielded over 1,00,00,000 results in the fall of 2020. There was a slew of 'listicles' or lists of things to do in lockdown ostensibly with the goal of being 'happy'. If happiness remained just out of reach but attainable through ceaseless productivity, one could avoid a nation-wide panic or existential crisis in lockdown. The biopolitical twist to traditional practices of self-care during this health crisis was that 'productive' work could induce a feeling of capacitation, a sense of purpose, and self-worth. Consequently, there was a "hyper-objectification" of traditionally female-dominated activities involving home maintenance and cleaning, nutrition and wellness, and arts and crafts on social media. If one received multiple 'likes' or shares for creating a new recipe or uploading a tutorial on how to wash dishes, then one exhibited technoproductivity.

The article "Mood of India During Covid-19 – An Interactive Web Portal Based on Emotion Analysis of Twitter Data" claims that on 1 May 2020, when the first nation-wide lockdown had been extended by two weeks, the largest part of 25440 tweets posted by Indians relating to Covid displayed a "happy" emotion (Venigalla, Vagavolu, & Chimalakonda, 2020). It categorized the emotions of the nation on Twitter into six basic groups "anger, disgust, fear, happiness, sadness, surprise" and "neutral" or non-emotive. The method employed was a sentiment analysis using data extraction of about 10,000 tweets pertaining to Covid per day, processing it by removing nouns and prepositions, ranking keywords that connoted these emotions, and finally subjecting

the data to an emotion-based classification. Since the article was published, there have been two waves of the coronavirus and a severe health-care crisis resulting in thousands of undocumented mortalities. Even if the mood of the nation could be indexed in such a manner, there is no account for traumatized silences that are impossible to translate into social media vernacular. Grief, mourning, and loss after all, do not comply with the neo-liberal ideal of individual success, stoicism, and endless productivity in the face of death.

This raises questions of accessibility that prevent data mining outside the digitally fluent demographic in the country. Categorizing tweets in such a quantified manner does not consider what exactly affected the people who expressed sadness. It does not account for those lacking the ability to express themselves on social media and thus ignores the forces of biopower that dictate technological accessibility. What about the 'mood' of the migrant labourer walking home for hours without food or water? It reduces the "mood of the nation" to a smattering of uncensored, filtered, and conformist social media updates. Instead, an intersectional socio-cultural model that measures one's ability to be deemed technoproductive may yield a more accurate and long-term picture of technoprecarity. In Pierre Bourdieu's words, we need to analyze "the peculiarity of cultural capital, which we should call informational capital to give the notion its full generality, and which itself exists in three forms, embodied, objectified, or institutionalized" (Bourdieu, 1992). The productivity scale developed and illustrated below (Fig. 1) shows that to perform the neo-liberal ideal of technoproductivity in lockdown, an individual needed to possess at least three types of socio-economic capital. The scale is designed using qualitative analysis and in theoretical response to the case studies explored in detail in the subsequent section.
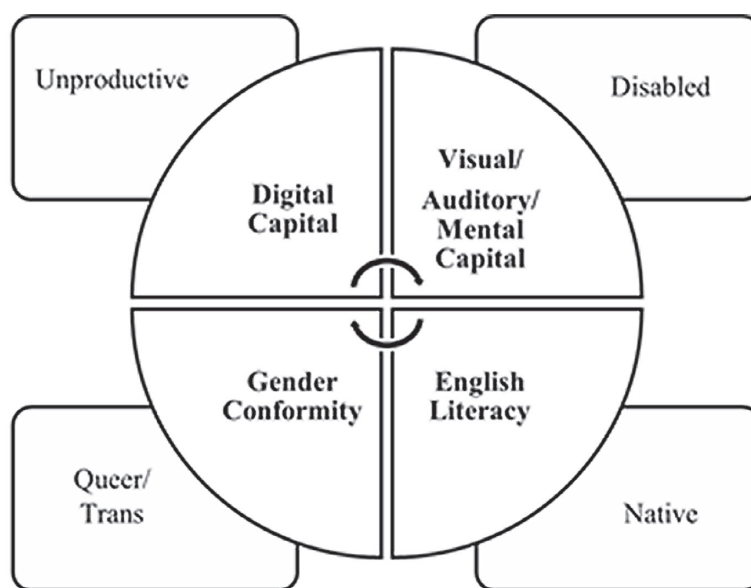

Figure 1: Productivity Scale during Lockdown in India 2020-21

The work-from-home economy first and foremost required digital capital to operate. Without a working personal computer or set of accessories like personal charger, headphones, microphones, storage devices or subscriptions to back up data, it was impossible to be employed or enrolled in school. Without even touching upon the medical technology requisite in a pandemic like the pulse oximeter, digital thermometer, and medical apps, it is quite clear that anyone lacking a smartphone or personal computer was rendered technoprecarious because of a new inability (or rather, *disability*) to work. Since they could not access digital capital in the workplace, many Indians fell below a new technoproductivity line (akin to the poverty line). This explains the 'happiness' of those who continued to express themselves on Twitter everyday versus the digital 'silence' of students and working professionals who dropped out, lost their jobs, or died-by-suicide. The fact that most individuals in any given society are always already on a spectrum of precarity is well known but the pandemic enabled us to bear collective witness to its myriad manifestations. The mass death of health care workers, refuse collectors, bus drivers, street cleaners, underprivileged students, and protesting farmers made a mockery of the neo-liberal ideal of technoproductivity. Their death is metonymic of a biopower that, like a pathogen, attacks us silently but surely.

Corresponding to the possession of digital capital was fluency in English and ownership of anglophonic capital. Although most digital platforms can operate in different languages, much official correspondence in India takes place in the language of the global hegemon. Fluency in English is considered evidence of socio-cultural capital in middle-class India and via its colonial roots enables a neo-colonial and neo-Protestant work ethic in urban centres. Studies show that even dating apps like Tinder, Grindr, and Bumble measure fluency in English to create compatible matches or filter out users who comment in Hindi, Hinglish, and other vernaculars (Birnholtz, Fitzpatrick, & Handel, 2014). Then there is the case of accessibility and how individuals on the disability spectrum in India responded to the work-from-home economy. Zoom meetings updated to include automatic closed captions, Twitter and Instagram posts began to appear with trigger warnings and image descriptions, laptops and smartphones developed more sophisticated speech-text and text-speech technology. But there was no corresponding professional or academic training provided to accommodate individuals with dissociative personality or bipolar disorder, manic depression, attention-deficit disorder, or those on the autism spectrum. Once digital platforms became the exclusive way to perform productivity, it precluded alternative modes of labour and learning, creativity, skill development, and socialization that are crucial for persons with disability. To cite the Precarity Lab, "We need new vocabularies for attending to the generalized production of precarity under contemporary racial capitalism. This is not the language in which the digital dream is advertised. In the promotional brochure for digital interconnectedness, these networked lives are pictured as always hyper-productive, virtuous, connective, and efficient. But it is clear to us that both these dreams and these networks themselves are broken" (2020).

When it came to gender conformity, it is interesting to observe that the very same State that prescribed complete lockdown to prevent the spread of the coronavirus would relax restrictions for

weddings and ceremonies pertaining to childbirth. Various lists and tutorials being shared on home care and maintenance, health and wellness, arts and crafts, food and culture were dominated by female users and audiences. For example, "Lockdown List Ideas" (Fig. 2) uploaded by a female user "i wish i could wink" on Pinterest lists tasks that conform to idealized femininity.

Lockdown
LIST IDEAS

Food
- Make a forgotten fave
- Pickle some vegetables
- Make something from a recipe book
- Join an online cook-a-long
- Make something vegan
- Learn how to make something you would normal buy pre-made
- Put together a meal plan and avoid decision fatigue
- Stage a bake off against whoever you live with, or a timer
- Make some treats for your pet
- Invent & name your own cocktail

Cleaning & organising
- Clean make up brushes
- Sort out 'crap' drawers
- De-weed garden
- Prune/propagate houseplants
- Clean the oven naturally
- Organise Pinterest boards
- Sort out phone photos
- Take eBay pics & create drafts
- Sort out old make up and nail polish
- Unsubscribe from unwanted emails

Entertainment
- Learn a Tik Tok dance
- Create a film club
- Join DuoLingo
- Take an online museum tour
- Try a virtual pub quiz
- Take part in an online escape room
- Watch online theatre
- Take part in an Instagram hashtag challenge
- Read all the books by one author

Creative
- Do some nail art
- Start a one line a day journal
- Make pom poms
- Follow a YouTube make up tutorial
- Press some flowers
- Tie dye something
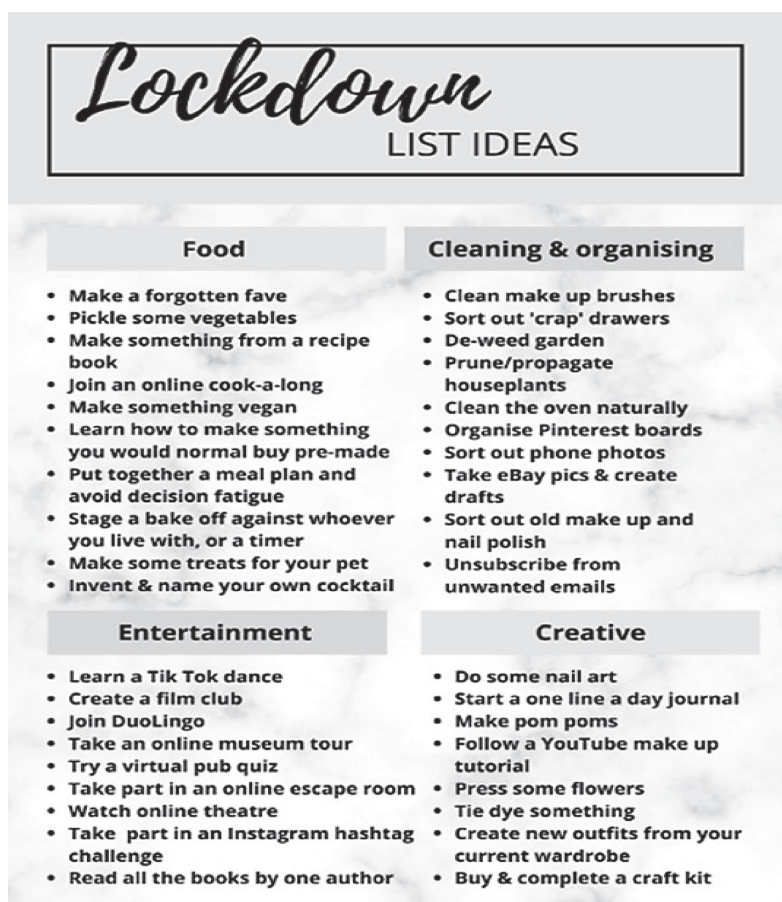- Create new outfits from your current wardrobe
- Buy & complete a craft kit

Figure 2: "Lockdown List Ideas," (April 5, 2020) I Wish I could Wink, http://www.iwishicouldwink.com/2020/04/my-lockdown-list-template-to-create.html#.YPbD2OgzY2w.

he pastel pink and marbled background of the listicle targets a female audience. But even within such blatantly gendered marketing lies the assumption that the tasks prescribed may be performed by women 'universally.' Tasks such as "de-weed garden", "learn a TikTok dance", "clean the oven naturally", "stage a bake-off against whoever you live with" require specific motor skills which would make the tasks impossible for a person with disability. Tasks such as "try a virtual pub quiz", "take part in an online escape room", "invent and name your own cocktail", and "read all the books by one author" become shareable only if one is fluent in English. And no doubt, such fluency is determined by economic, gendered, and systemic inequalities in the nation rather than an individual failure to be technoproductive.

Further, the neo-liberal ideal of the domestic goddess on social media did not translate for queer and trans communities, who suffer high rates of domestic abuse, unemployment, and homelessness (28 July 2020). For these individuals, the home is not necessarily a safe space to practice and perform aesthetic individualism on social media. The fact that queer and BIPOC users were trolled viciously for performing the very same activities glamourized in the above listicle, makes the heterosexism of the ideal of technoproductivity a glaring reality. Take for example, the ordinary task "create new outfits from your current wardrobe" and apply it to the transphobic reactions that the queer activist Alok V. Menon received on their Facebook and Instagram page for sharing fashion advice and photographs. Menon countered the trolls by posting a photograph where their body is cloaked by word clouds of hate speech (Fig. 3).

Figure 3: "Today on #NonBinaryPeoplesDay I wanted to be vulnerable" (July 15, 2021), Alok V Menon, Facebook, https://www.facebook.com/AlokVMenon/posts/today-on-nonbinarypeoplesday-i-wanted-to-be-vulnerable-with-you-all-my-entire-li/354221922740955/

They shared a long message holding these vitriolic comments accountable for promoting transphobia and cancelling their gender identity on a public platform:

> Today on #NonBinaryPeoplesDay I wanted to be vulnerable with you all. My entire life I've been harassed by the cis/hetero world. But if I'm being honest there's no pain quite like experiencing vitriol from your own. These are a few of the countless messages I receive all the time from other queer and trans people. I know that this is about internalized homophobia/transphobia, but that doesn't make it any less devastating and painful. These really hurt. There is an ongoing project of scapegoating gender non-conforming people instead of targeting the gender binary system. […] Non-binary people aren't the problem. The gender binary is the problem. This was not about what we look like, this is about what they feel like. Queer/trans people should be able to look like whatever we want without being discriminated against. We shouldn't have to adhere to gender binary norms to be real, let alone safe. Our acceptance shouldn't have to be conditional on disappearing our difference. An earnest plea: Please challenge transphobia, even when it comes from trans people. Protect gender non-conforming people. Interrupt the cycle of violence. Create a more kind and just world.
>
> *(Menon, 2021)*

Clearly, Menon's attempt at technoproductivity did not comply with, what Judith Butler calls the "culturally intelligible" category of the ideal feminine. It would be erroneous for us to assume that digital economies are level-playing fields of productivity. In a bizarre reincarnation of colonial laws like the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, the transgender community in India was marginalized as "corona transmitters". Their livelihood was destroyed because the rule of quarantine coincided with the contagion-model of policing non-normative sexualities in India. In her interview of a sex-worker Prerana, Banshikha Ghosh discovers that the identity of *kothi* women was literally erased during lockdown, because they had to shift to occupations that did not permit them to cross-dress (Ghosh, 2021). Butler's concept of "cultural intelligibility" raises some important theoretical questions regarding the agency of the individual living in lockdown, "If gender is constructed through relations of power and, specifically, normative constraints that not only produce but also regulate various bodily beings, how might agency be derived from this notion of gender as the effect of productive constraint?" (Butler, 1993).

A live talk given recently on Instagram by the journalist Gayatri Shah drew attention to the epidemic of "productivity anxiety" (Ferrao Walker, 2020) that came with the coronavirus pandemic. She discusses how her decision to hold an Instalive session stemmed from a desire to compete with the overflow of digital voices and rapid content generation. It was one thing for ordinary women to upload recipes or dance videos for social validation, but for female entrepreneurs it mandated an overnight adapting to massive social media engagement. Since lockdown spiked the global consumption of digital content, female entrepreneurs, independent researchers, journalists, activists and environmental workers were thrown into the deep end of a space where voices circulated with

alleged freedom and plurality. All these women had to perform what Hemangini Gupta identifies as an "emergent form of entrepreneurial activism" to coercively declare their relevance as "desiring subjects of neo-liberal feminism in India" (Gupta, 2016). One must understand that even within feminist voices in India, there is a strong impulse towards neo-liberal ideals of individualism and personal heroism. The notion of the collective is rather stunted in these versions of digital feminism. And yet, there were some feminist activists on Instagram who invented new aesthetic and political standpoints to challenge neo-liberal and patriarchal ideals. The following case studies explore how lacking two important sources of cultural capital on the technoproductivity scale - gender conformism and mental ability – rendered certain influencers precarious on Instagram. Even though they possessed digital capital and reasonable fluency in English, their work was delegitimized and trolled. This violent erasure required them to evolve new dissident models of social media interaction that deconstructed the ideal of technoproductivity and created an archive of precarious bodies and subjectivities in the pandemic.

Case Studies of Digital Feminism on Instagram

Subverting the Ideal of Technoproductivity: Durga Gawde

Durga 'Shakti' Gawde is a Bangalore-based trans activist popular on Instagram as "India's 1st Drag King". Their posts advocate gender fluid fashion and photography and work to destabilize online models of misogyny. The subversive way that Gawde produces a non-compliant gender identity through layers of gender parody and performance is interesting. For one, their appropriation of the religious moniker "Shakti" subverts the myth of the *devi* or goddess in a Hindu-majority India. The label "drag king" is reminiscent of the Butlerian model of "drag" as a weaponized performance of gender non-compliance. But by opting for "drag king" rather than the more American "drag queen", Durga further challenged Western homo-normativity from the perspective of a BIPOC influencer. In a recent interview, they clarify that their aesthetic and political stance is a performance that parodies Western gender norms and fashion:

> Everyday, I am putting something on, taking something off. I go out with a beard, I go out with a really deep V-neck top – whatever I feel like. It doesn't matter as long as it's how I want and how I feel and choose at that moment. But when I'm performing, it is all of my life experiences that come together, and I perform that emotion. That's what drag gives to me.
>
> *(Mehra, 2020)*

When the first nation-wide lockdown was announced in March 2020, Gawde posted a self-portrait (Fig. 4) in their bedroom, which stood out for its anti-drag aesthetic. The caption declared "IT TOOK A PANDEMIC FOR THE MALE GAZE TO STOP INTERFERING WITH THE PEACE OF MY MIND". As a visualization of this statement, their face is turned away from

the camera and folded legs convey a drawing of boundaries. Where the post celebrates a feeling of safety from the male gaze, it also communicates an anxiety of how to perform trans identity in isolation. Gawde confesses that "it is difficult to allow my femininity to come through" and signals towards the anxiety of trans-people to 'be' trans at home. Compared with the conventional posts by trans-persons on Instagram that promote personal acts of heroism and stoicism in a global crisis, Gawde reveals how gender dysphoria produces mental health concerns that may impact technoproductivity.

On May 20, 2020, Gawde organized a virtual fundraiser to raise menstrual health awareness and promote eco-friendly disposal practices among rural women in India called "Period Party 2: Periods in Pandemics" (Fig. 5). In terms of their location on the technoproductivity scale, their use of digital capital as an influencer and fluency in English is not a privilege being exploited here for social validation but used to forge social change. It promotes a campaign that reaches out precisely to those who lack digital capital in India. While there are countless such online campaigns, what is striking about the event poster is Gawde's promotional photograph. They are dressed in a black formal shirt with a red tie, hair brushed back in a butch aesthetic, with black lipstick. The post questions the controversial binary within Western feminism of those who are born women and termed "menstruators" versus those who become women and are termed "transsexual". Notably therefore, feminist influencers like Durga Gawde demonstrate through their dissident social media presence that gender precarity is not an individual failure to perform productivity in a pandemic. Gender precarity is a politically induced state of vulnerability engineered by the neo-liberal state and its impossible ideal of technoproductivity (Butler, 2009). Few escape the condition entirely but technoprecarity impacts marginalized communities more due to the multiple jeopardies they already suffer at the hands of class, caste, race, gender, and ableist hierarchies in contemporary India. This reality is precisely what feminist trans-influencers in India like Durga Gawde make apparent with their digital content.

Crip-queer Critiques of Femininity: Roshni Kumar

Roshni Kumar is a Mumbai-based photojournalist, artist, and activist who supports sexual diversity, body positivity, and animal rights through her sustained practice of veganism and queer-BIPOC friendly content on Instagram. Through her Instagram handle @rosh93, a large part of her transgressive identity on social media depends on her being a cancer survivor. Through intimate shots of her naked body, shorn head, and campy make-up and filters, her body challenges idealized femininity in middle-class India. Rather than conform to the image of the long-suffering de-sexualized female cancer survivor – whose 'beauty' resides only in a kind of toxic positivity or stoic technoproductivity – Kumar's self-portraits reveal that the disabled and diseased female body is a precarious but desiring body.

In the early days of lockdown, Kumar described how similar the experience of living in lockdown was to being confined to a hospital bed during chemotherapy:

Isolation;

What a wonderful paradox of feelings it's given me. From freedom to love to loneliness to independence to happiness. I was just thinking the last few days have been unnecessarily anxious and hard and wonder what may happen for the rest and there I stumbled on my Facebook memories - reminding me on this [sic] day in 2008 I'd kept cute little status of happiness because I was finally done with the hospital and my chemos and my treatments and I was going back into the real world. I stayed in a hospital for a good 6 months and hardly went home and called the hospital my home. I was in complete isolation from the world other than my family. I had to look at ceilings and the same window with the same view for all those days. I couldn't walk or eat real food, I missed so many things and I didn't do so many things but guess what? It didn't matter after. I survived and I came out stronger. (Kumar, April 25, 2020)

Such confessional posts subvert a neo-liberal culture of individual success-stories and personal heroism. Through the explicit connection Kumar forges between her personal experience of suffering from cancer in isolation to the suffering of millions experiencing debilitating symptoms of the coronavirus, anxiety, and loneliness in lockdown, she exposes the biopolitical agendas of the neo-liberal state. Margrit Shildrick claims that precarity is a kind of "embodiment" or "ontological state" that defines being marginalized or 'debilitated' in neo-liberal society. In response to the umbrella term "precarity," Shildrick uses the term "bioprecarity" to connote specific "material and ontological effects" (Shildrick, 2020) of biopower. Shildrick notes that the spread of the coronavirus has medicalized bodies so much so that erstwhile bodily norms – even those relating to the gender binary – have been disrupted. To continue to perform technoproductivity therefore requires a kind of impossible hyper-productivity where any semblance of humanness is wiped out.

Through a lengthy confession framed in the narratological device of the personal diary, Kumar performs gender non conformism rather than technoproductivity (Fig. 6). The self-portrait displays her seated with head resting on her arm in a symbolic gesture of exhaustion. We see evidence of the 'hands' that cleaned and maintained the home rather than a glossy image of her clean bedroom as a finished or fetishized image. The space fades into background as if it were one of the many homes where Indian maids and domestic assistants work every day. Almost exactly a year later, Kumar's Instagram posts chronicle her visual journey of mental disability. In the above photograph (Fig. 7), she erases her face and pinches her stomach to create an 'emoji' of sadness with her flesh. This is far more accurate picture of the 'mood of the nation' rather than a sentiment analysis of Twitter status updates. Kumar poses the imperfections of the female body to parody the selfies uploaded by health and fitness professionals during the pandemic. Kumar also denigrates the spirit of mindless competition on

social media that generates "productivity anxiety". She not only critiques neo-liberal ableism in statements such as, "we all cannot function at the same capacity, and no one can function at a 100% everyday - all day" but also subverts the 'slow death' of all precarious bodies in the pandemic by draping her breasts with a white 'hospital' sheet that foreshadows the funeral shroud.

Whether it is her flamboyant mimicry of Lady Gaga and Katy Perry's wigs, or the prosthetics used by cancer survivors, Kumar's Instagram feminism is a good example of what a "crip-queer" resistance to the productivity ideal. Working through Robert Mcruer's concept of the "cripqueer" (2018), Shildrick states, "In feminist thought in particular, precarity mobilizes both a critical perspective on neoliberalism and a surprisingly transformative prospective. Against any simple expectation of negativity, the notion of precarious bodies can paradoxically signal the potential of communality and the strength of relationality" (2020). McRuer's "cripqueer" approach connects Disability Studies and Critical Race Theory to imagine a new kind of "relational" futurity where all forms of currently devalued and precarious embodiment signal a revitalization of global cultures in more sustainable and equitable directions. Shildrick invokes the term "crip" from McRuer to define a non-compliant stance against neo-liberal norms of technoproductivity. She argues that crip activism – such as Roshni Kumar's celebration of the cancer survivor's body, the domestic help's body, and queer and trans bodies on social media – may not resolve the real human losses brought on by lockdown. Nevertheless, they weaponize precarity and create new ways of resisting neo-liberal ideals that appear illegible, disorienting, or downright offensive to the digital norm.

Dalit Feminist Aesthetics: Priyanka Paul

Priyanka Paul is a Mumbai-based artist and queer BIPOC activist whose Instagram account @artwhoring was reported and trolled repeatedly during lockdown due to which it was temporarily closed. Signifying her failure to perform technoproductivity on social media, Paul's posts were vilified by casteist, ultra-nationalist, and heterosexist trolls for their gender non-conformist content and anti-caste activism. Her case stands out for the sheer volume of hate speech she received for not complying with the norms of technoproductivity; the closure of her account symbolizing a kind of digital 'suicide'. She regularly campaigns for Dalit and queer rights on social media and appeared in community-level projects. Prominently, she participated with Alok V. Menon and Fatimah Asghar in the international virtual event "Poets for Power: A Reading Featuring Queer South Asian Poets" on May 16, 2020. Composing from the vantage point of the gender and caste subaltern in urban India, Paul's art critiques the ideal of technoproductivity that rely on invisible layers of privilege. In the image given below for instance (Fig. 8), she lulls the viewer with a background of pink, passive, and ideal femininity. Then she launches her deeply scathing attack on pervasive discourses of Brahminical patriarchy that dominate trolling and social media violence in India. The figure on the right is a parody of Brahminical ideology symbolized by the three-heads of the Hindu godhead. Quite literally, the figure wears "caste" as a badge on its chest

Paul designs the figure's jacket with Pop Art images of Brahmins with well-built bare chests representing their toxic masculinity and muscular nationalism. In the tabular caste hierarchy written besides this figure, the "shudra" appears near the feet and the word is partially cut-off to refer to the "men from down under". This instance of gender and caste dissidence functions as a kind of narrative performance emerging from the experience of what Bhushan Sharma calls the "outsider within". Sharma employs standpoint theory, which claims that the unofficial perspectives of oppressed and marginalized individuals – such as Instagram posts – can provide a more objective account of social reality, and therefore, may be seen to challenge mainstream feminism. He highlights the importance of narrative representation in forging intersectionality, "As reality can only be known if it is represented, Dalit women penned their life narratives – social epiphanies – that then drove women impregnated with Dalit and feminist consciousness to trail the ethics of Black women writers" (Sharma, 2021). While much of Paul's artwork was lauded for gender non-compliance and anti-caste activism prior to the pandemic, it is important to remember that during lockdown her number of followers increased exponentially, many of whom were trolls invested in delegitimizing her unique brand of digital feminism.

For instance, a few months prior to closing her account, one of Paul's posts showcasing her new hair colour became viral as a Hindutva troll called @katuaslayer photoshopped and reposted her photograph with the caption "Why are we missing the signs of autism in girls?" (Fig 9). As may be seen from the image, Paul had to report the account and requested her followers not to share the image. Even as Paul tackled these trolls deftly by re-posting their hate speech so that her followers may block them, she was continuously attacked and ended up having to 'kill' her account. To transform her feminist activism into the precarity of a trolled and silenced subject on social media, the Hindutva troll employed a pejorative ableist vocabulary to invalidate her identity. Her harassment clearly demonstrates how intersections between the native woman, queer woman, Dalit woman, and disabled woman merge into a brilliantly precise image of gender precarity in neo-liberal India. The scale reveals how technoproductivity is both repression and repressive; it traps the precarious individual in a Sisyphean cycle of "hyper-objectified" labour that must comply with the norm. When users perceive their labour as being 'good,' likeable, or relatable on Facebook or Instagram, they erroneously believe they can pave the way to salvation in a global healthcare crisis. What of those who get mercilessly trolled and their digital labour invalidated, simply because it did not comply with the patriarchal and neo-liberal norms of technoproductivity?

It is clear that the very same ideological apparatuses in India that normalized technoproductivity and measured the 'happiness' of a nation reeling under a pandemic criminalized these examples of gender non-conforming feminist influencers. Who was lauded for being technoproductive on social media versus who were trolled for political and feminist dissidence indicates a discursive battle for what constitutes as normative labour in contemporary Indian capitalism. It is important to remember that capitalism sustains itself by invisibilizing labour and normalizing socio-economic exploitation. It prevents us from asking questions such as:

How is disablement produced through global supply chains? Who is sacrificed? Digital economies contribute to the uncompensated breakdown of the mind and body. The precarious laborers of the digital sit at screens and filter violent or sexually graphic content, mine digital gold, operate tech support, mine literal cobalt/rare metals, assemble chips and screens, enter data, recycle or dispose of digital waste products, clean buildings in Silicon Valley, drive app-based rideshare cars, transcribe walls of text, write code, edit code, write fanfiction, produce videos, tweet, load computer chips on container ships, buy and sell stock. Some of these jobs are physically demanding, from mining to sitting hunched over at a desk. Others are psychically demanding, even traumatizing. The risks of labor, its likeliness to result in disability, sickness, trauma, stress, death, are organized by race, gender, and other categories that come pre-loaded with precarity.

(Precarity Lab, 2020)

Going forward, the productivity scale designed in this paper may be used to measure how emergent feminist politics on social media platforms in India challenged the ideal of technoproductivity. The need of the hour is to redefine parameters by which we analyze the efficacy and impact of Indian digital feminism. We need to study the dissident strategies employed by young artists and activists that deconstruct neo-liberal ideals on social media. It is worth interrogating how such new non-conformist corporealities, aesthetics, and representations usher a more inclusive and intersectional future in Indian feminism.

Figure 4: "IT TOOK A PANDEMIC"
(May 2, 2020), Durga Gawde,
Instagram https://www.instagram.com/p/B_sVd2MJMkx/

Figure 5 - "Period Party", (May 20, 2020), Durga Gawde,
Instagram https://www.instagram.com/p/CAw-xZTJJd5/

Figure 6 - "Lockdown Diaries", (April 25, 2020), Roshni Kumar,
Instagram https://www.instagram.com/p/B_Z0nVdFWh0/

Figure 7: "Gentle Reminder", Roshni Kumar, April 15, 2021,
Instagram, https://www.instagram.com/p/CNr0Og_l9_Z/

Figure 8. "I wrote from The Margins", Priyanka Paul, May 31, 2020, Instagram, https://www.instagram.com/p/CA26qvGDDJP/

Figure 9: "If you see any memes", Priyanka Paul, Stories,
Instagram https://www.instagram.com/p/CAsgDmHjlo4/

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ENDNOTES

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