ATUL LOKE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Rhiya Ahir, 27, a model and actor, says of her many critics: "I'm trying not to reply to any of them, just letting them do their thing and show their face to the world."

Young Women Who Joined Protests in India Attract Scorn

Pro-Hindu Sites Join Politicians And Individuals Spreading Venom

By ANUPREETA DAS

NEW DELHI — Rhiya Ahir went viral after an image circulated of her blocking a police van that was carrying detained protesters last month during India's youth agitation. A vast army of online trolls has stalked her since.

They called it a play for attention by Ms. Ahir, 27, a Mumbai-based model and actor. They insinuated that she sold sexually explicit content behind a paywall on Instagram. They circulated a video of her diving into the sea in a bikini. They flooded her social media accounts with slurs and rape threats.

Ms. Ahir has chosen to rise above it.

"You're not scared of someone who is telling you online that 'I'm going to rip you apart the day I see you,'" she said. "I'm trying not to reply to any of them, just letting them do their thing and show their face to the world."

Thousands of young women have participated in nationwide protests demanding accountability from the government for a flawed education system. But in the two months since the demonstrations started, they have been doxxed and bombarded online by people who have called them immoral, threatened sexual abuse and acid attacks, and used artificial intelligence to create demeaning images. A majority of the attacks have come from accounts, many anonymous, that push Hindu right-wing ideology and pitch themselves as custodians of religious morality. But high-profile politicians, commentators and outraged individuals have chimed in.

In a series of Instagram messages, Kangana Ranaut, a well-known Bollywood actress and member of Parliament from the Bharatiya Janata Party, the Hindu nationalist political party of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, called out a "new generation of so-called westernized Indian women." She labeled them "Generation Gutter," saying they had "nothing to offer the system" but were too "corrupt and ugly" to be "home makers."

There have been other consequences for women who joined the protests. Police officers visited the ancestral home of a student activist and protester, and suggested to her family that she should focus on her studies. Another protest leader had ink thrown in her face. A 15-year-old girl who had used profanities in talking about Mr. Modi during the protests later appeared in a video online apologizing.

In the aftermath of the protests, Mr. Modi called it a cultural shock that women protesters had used profanity, without remarking on the young men chanting alongside them. "How can the daughters of this country use this kind of language?" he said in an Instagram reel.

Danish Ali, a student activist and doctoral student in Delhi, said police officers showed up at the houses of her relatives in Bandarbarru, her ancestral village in the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh. The police told them that it was not an "official exercise" and there was no case against her but that an investigation was continuing. The authorities also called her father, telling him that Ms. Ali should "focus on her studies." Ms. Ali called it a "subtle threat" that tied her activities to her well-being.

"All this targeting of women offline and online happened because women coming to the protest site, women openly critiquing the government, women cheerfully making fun of the prime minister, even using profanity, that was something which could not be tolerated," she said.

Ms. Ali, 24, celebrated the fact that so many young girls and women joined protests across the nation — sometimes defying their parents or skipping school to do so. But, she said, it was "problematic to see" the hateful targeting of women at a protest demanding education reform, given that many women already have to fight for the chance to go to school.

That the attacks emanated from the Hindu right, which calls for a nation based on a religion that worships numerous goddesses, struck Ms. Ali as especially contradictory. "There is this binary that is created," she said. "Either you are a saint, or you are a slut."

Ms. Ahir, who has appeared in music videos and worked in theater, has become a central figure because her lifestyle challenges a deeply entrenched patriarchal system that confines women to certain roles and behaviors.

As she made news for defiantly putting her hand on the front of a police van in Mumbai, demanding that the officers show legal papers before she stepped aside, a section of the internet bubbled up with comments on her physical appearance: the nature of her clothing, the angle of her body.

Ms. Ahir said she had barely begun processing the unexpected attention that her act had brought her before "the hate started coming." The hoodie she was wearing, tucked into the back of her sweatpants, led to comments that she was showing off her body because she had her hip thrust out while leaning toward the bus, Ms. Ahir said. Other messages accused her of staging the episode.

"They're trying to demonize me and discredit us women from the entire protest," she said. The higher her profile rose, the more furiously the slander came, mostly in the form of comments on social media. Some insinuated, falsely, that 149 rupees (about $1.50) — the monthly subscription fee she charges for early access to her Instagram posts — would get them adult content, Ms. Ahir said.

Still, she worried that by constantly maligning her image, the trolls would discredit her enough that she would lose her newfound platform to demand accountability from the government on core issues like education and employment. On Aug. 5, Ms. Ahir was one of several protesters invited to join Rahul Gandhi, a member of Congress and the leader of the opposition in the lower house of Parliament, to speak at a news conference about online harassment.

She wants to be a role model for young girls and women. But in encouraging them to raise their voices, Ms. Ahir landed on the conundrum that millions of women in past generations have felt: how to dress and behave publicly in a patriarchal society in order to be taken seriously and treated with respect.

"These things are finding their way into the way I think about myself — my thong is visible in this, too much cleavage," Ms. Ahir said. "Why am I so scared of people seeing who I am and what I do?"

Ms. Ahir, who started modeling at 21, said she was trying to stop second-guessing herself. "Do I really have to wear a sari if I want to stand up for my country?"

ASHISH VAISHNAV/ASSOCIATED PRESS

When Ms. Ahir blocked a police van carrying detained protesters, she set off an online firestorm.

SAUMYA KHANDELWAL FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Cockroach Janta Party supporters demanded the resignation of India's education minister in July.

SAUMYA KHANDELWAL FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Security personnel stood guard outside the Parliament House in New Delhi during the protests.