



## Voicing the Mute: Digital Culture and Dalit Activism in India

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Madhu

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In modern India, caste-based discrimination continues to remain one of the rare and unfortunate social practices to be unanimously embraced by all major religions. Caste discrimination involves massive violations of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights. Caste system is a hierarchical, unequal social system that is based on the notion of ritual purity and pollution and discriminates against those who are at the bottom of the ladder by treating them as impure and polluting to other caste groups. In recent times digital space has allowed for a unique mobilisation of caste and has created a new wave of subalternity with the use of social media which has provided the platform for identity formation and assertion of marginalised groups. Internet seems to have the power to bring social equality to the Dalits who comprise of more than 200 million of India's population. The mainstream Indian media dominated by the upper castes has failed to include voices of the Dalits. This explains the emergence of Round Table India, *Dalit Camera*, *Dalit Dastak*, *Dalit Lekhak Sangh*, *Ambedkar's Community Live*, *The Colonization of Ambedkar* and many other similar online platforms which Dalits are using to voice their concerns, mobilize and protest. This paper argues that with the help of digital technology certain sections of Dalits in India are not only resisting the dominant narrative but also voicing their opinions and fighting a pitched battle in the contested public sphere. With the help of various case studies from India in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century the paper analyses the movements like *#Dalitlivesmatter*, *Bhima-Koregaon* and *Una* protests. The paper also raises the problem of lack of diversity in the newsroom, which needs to be confronted and though the online Dalit platforms are doing a commendable job but unless the journalistic establishments starts the procedure of bridging the gap, these may remain separate, unequal and treated as alternative voices rather than coming from the mainstream.

## Objectives and Methodology

The major objective of this paper is to map the assertion of Dalits using digital platforms such as Dalit websites, blogs on social media, Facebook pages in their mobilization and

activism. The objective is also to highlight new digital spaces which has given voice to the subaltern people and also to analyse the approach of the mainstream media in reporting Dalit issues. The conceptual discussion on the issue explores why Dalits are resorting to online medium for contesting the dominant narrative which is discriminatory in reporting the Dalit issues. An interpretative case study approach drawing upon mainly three events (agitation over Rohit Vemula suicide case of January 2016 and *Una* protest later in the same year and agitation over *Bhima-Koregaon* in January, 2018) along with a recent survey conducted among 300 educated Dalits such as Dalit students, teachers and office goers who access Dalit websites and blogs, the perception of mainstream media towards Dalit issues was studied. It was found that majority of the respondents (89%) of the survey disagree that the mainstream media is neutral in its coverage of Dalit issues. Eighty seven percent of them supported the view that mainstream media is biased and discriminatory, 80% of them deem the mainstream media as compromised by corporate interests (most media houses are owned by upper caste people) while 78% of them thought mainstream media was motivated by profit. The survey conducted on Dalit websites and blogs revealed that the major motivation for accessing these websites by the Dalit activists and followers was to have an alternative media platform to voice their opinions, concerns and to mobilize for agitation. A macroscopic view of the content with non-participant observation of leading Facebook pages, Twitter handles and online forums in Hindi and English run by members of the Dalit community in phases from January to December 2016 and August, 2017 to January, 2018 has been examined to map the mobilization aspect of the Dalits using digital platforms.

More theoretical questions on the perspectives of the Dalit movement ( Eleanor Zelliot, 1992; Gail Omvedt, 2009) on contemporary situation in the news room (Balasubramaniam, 2006; Jeffery, 2003; Kumar, 2014; Ganguly, 2005; Garret, 2009; Neyazi, 2018) provides the analysis of the counter public sphere. With the new age media technologies and the increasing number of urban, tech savvy, well-educated Dalit activists, a successful counter public sphere has been created by multilingual media productions like *Roundtable India*, *Dalit Camera*, *Ambedkar Caravan*, *Dalit History Month*, *Velivada* etc. and Twitter handles like, *Dalit Diva*, *Savari*, *Dalit Voice*, *Ambedkar Periyar Study Circle*, *Savarna Fat Cat*, *Everyday Casteism*. These have been effectively used to organise and agitate. Apart from many other factors such as economic livelihood, shelter,

education, and unemployment, lack of knowledge of English language prevents Dalits to access internet. Only a fraction of this socially disenfranchised urban and rural community has little presence in the public sphere. They comprise of college-educated Dalit men and even fewer women with mostly government jobs. These men and women have taken up the English language for discourse over internet. Meena Kandaswamy, a Dalit activist and writer, Bathran Ravichandran, founder of Dalit Camera, a YouTube channel, Anu Ramdas ,founder and editor of Round Table India are a few of them. The captivating nomenclatures and semiotic and sociological reading of these sites offer several connotations of injustices, social exclusions, subaltern subjectivities through digital platforms, representing new forms of agency, power and politics.

## **Tentative Findings and Conclusions**

Internet in India has become a boon to educated Dalits who now have access to digital platforms and are using them to communicate, agitate and organise with their fellow Dalits. Issues concerning Dalit communities are discussed freely and openly which the mainstream media has been ignoring for so long. Dalit activists feel that websites, online forums, blogs, Facebook pages, Twitter handles contribute immensely, enabling access and participation by the members of Dalit community. Thus, internet is acting as a focal point for re-igniting the triad of caste and discrimination, religion and class. Incidents like suicide of Rohit Vemula, *Una* protests and *Bhima-Koregaon* protests not only provide with a counter public sphere but also as entry points to a larger battle which the Dalits are taking head-on with the help of digital culture and politics. The several instances and stories reported online of discrimination, torture, abuse and violation of human rights of Dalits by the upper castes indicate that online mobilization and agitations are being resorted to but the widespread online publicity may or may not always translate into offline actions because of the barrier of language and technology which majority of the Dalits do not have access to, thus putting the focus back on the mainstream media which still has a much wider reach.

Key words: Dalits, caste, discrimination, alternative media, mainstream media, subaltern

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