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## Emergence of digital Dalit spheres and cyber activism: Indian experiences

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### Abstract

The Dalits have endured unrelenting discrimination, social and economic marginalisation, and subjugation throughout known history. Around 16. 23% of India's population, or 170 million downtrodden and marginalised parts of society, were subjected to crude forms of stigmatisation, exploitation, and humiliation in the social context, as per the 2011 census. Even though Dalits are a stigmatised and marginalised population in all contexts—political as well as communication—mainstream culture never stops bragging about the advantages of protective discrimination and reservations. Indian media handles, interprets, and reports Dalit news in a biased manner, sometimes referred to as caste apartheid politics. Social media has opened up new channels for public conversation and Dalit politics. Dalits are deprived of spaces in mainstream media, subjected to discriminatory news and viewpoints, and victims of most targeted violence. As such, they have limited access to public, national, and international discourses. Digital media provides a forum for them to draw attention to these issues. In order to mobilise them and bring their issues and identity to light, the Dalit community is developing its own public space. The paper aims to investigate Dalit assertion on social media, delving into the problems of Dalit identities in the media mainstream and Dalit empowerment online. Additionally, it tracks the circumstances facing Indian Dalits in the political and social diaspora, investigates the role that cyberspace plays in the community's survival, and familiarises with Dalit-friendly digital platforms that strengthen Dalit voices within Indian society.

**Keywords:** Dalit, digital Dalit, online activism, counter public sphere, subaltern public sphere

### Introduction

The Dalits have endured persistent oppression, discrimination, and socioeconomic marginalisation since the dawn of humanity. According to the 2011 census, 170 million people in India were classified as oppressed or marginalized, making up around 16. 23% of the country's population. These individuals have endured ineffective methods of systemic social exploitation, stigmatization, and humiliation. The term Dalit literally means “oppressed”, constantly an umbrella term refers to traditionally outcaste groups or untouchables in the stratified and hierarchical Hindu caste system (Zelliot, 1992) <sup>[20]</sup>, which has left its imprint on non-Hindu religions such as Christianity, Sikhism and Islam (Omvedt, 2001) <sup>[14]</sup>. Comprising heterogeneous caste and sub caste groups, Dalit is a multilayered structure with regional variations (Pai, 2013) <sup>[16]</sup>. Dalits face severe discrimination, social exclusion and violence, and crimes against them are increasing 10-20% every year (Human Rights Watch, 2015) <sup>[5]</sup>, such that at an average, three Dalit women are molested, two Dalits murdered and two of their houses burnt every day (NHRC, 2014). A Scheduled Caste (SC) person faced crime every 10 minutes in India in the past year, cumulating a total of 50, 291 cases registered in 2020, an increase of 9. 4% from the previous year (National Crime Records Bureau, 2020) <sup>[11]</sup>.

In a situation where atrocities and neglect against Dalits are increasing, both historically and statistically, many devices should emerge as solutions that go beyond the causes and circumstances. The fact that the media, which is frequently referred to as the fourth pillar of democracy, often adopts a passive stance towards Dalit news and Dalit incidents in general is demonstrated by the fact that they repeatedly avoid delving further into such news. Where systems and politics fail and become irrelevant, Dalits often do not get justice, and denial of justice becomes a recurring story.

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The media must be able to carry out a variety of tasks and represent the public in this situation. It is in the midst of many such conditions that the new hopes that the advent of digital media brings to Dalit lives should be discussed. People who believe in freedom, justice, and equality can protest and deny justice in digital realms. Many issues that have been rejected in the public eye, despite being issues of human values, have often failed to capture public attention. There is potential to increase public awareness of these concerns using digital means.

### Mainstream Indian Media and Dalits

The media, which bills it as the fourth pillar of democracy, needs to speak up for change when Dalits are subjected to such cruel treatment in the biggest democracy on the globe. In India, however, the elite and upper classes are the ones with the communication system. People from higher castes possess a sizable portion of India's media broadcasting sector. The majority of Indian journalists employed by print and visual media companies are from higher castes. Put differently, Dalit news, discussions, and analysis receive very little priority since Dalit participation is extremely low and Dalit issues are rarely addressed. The study of Robin Jeffery made the point that "there was no Dalit exist in newsrooms of India's media organization" and he termed the Dalit exclusion in the mainstream media as the betrayal of the constitutional guarantees of equality and fraternity (Jeffery, 2012) <sup>[7]</sup>. The Dalits were dehumanized and rendered insignificant by Indian media, which used the same strategy as the country's socioeconomic structure. The Dalit group has a tendency in the media to be reduced to a topic with no news value, discussions, statistics, or analysis; this results in the news being little and unimportant. In all its manifestations, whether in political or communication systems, Dalits remain a stigmatized and marginalized population, despite the mainstream society's ceaseless boasting about the advantages of protective discrimination and reservations. The Indian media portrays Dalit news in a biased, interpreted, and reported manner, related to caste apartheid politics. Rather than reporting on actual events, the media frequently attempts to center the conversation on the Dalit identity. When the media, which is meant to support Dalit empowerment, deliberately chooses which people to include and exclude, it becomes relevant. Oxfam India published a report about the representation of marginalized caste groups in Indian newsrooms (Oxfam India, 2019) and some of the key findings of the report are:

- Of the 121 newsroom leadership positions - editor-in-chief, managing editor, executive editor, bureau chief, input/output editor - across the newspapers, TV news channels, news websites, and magazines under study, 106 are occupied by upper castes, five by other backward classes and six by people from minority communities. The case of four individuals could not be identified.
- Three out of every four anchors (among a total of 40 anchors in Hindi channels and 47 in English channels) of debates are upper caste. Not one is Dalit, Adivasi, or OBC
- For over 70% of their primetime debate shows, news channels draw the majority of the panellists from the upper castes
- No more than 5% of all articles in English newspapers are written by Dalits and Adivasis. Hindi newspapers

fare slightly better at around 10%

- Around 72% of by-lined articles on news websites are written by people from the upper castes
- Only 10 of the 972 articles featuring on the cover pages of the 12 magazines under study are about issues related to caste.

### Social Media as a Liberating Realm for Dalits

Dalit politics and public discourse gained fresh momentum thanks to social media. Since they are the majority target of targeted violence, Dalits are excluded from mainstream media and have limited access to public, national, and international discourses. Dalits can now voice their concerns and opinions about the discrimination they experience because of the platform provided by digital media. Dalits are inspired by cyberspace to overcome any types of discrimination, to transcend boundaries and caste systems that still exist, and to dismantle outdated customs and traditions that are so unfair. Since explosions like these were not previously feasible or within their grasp, it can be concluded that this represents the 'before and after' of the digital world. Dalits are blatantly using social media to carve out a different space for themselves, fight against injustice and inequality, share concerns, make claims, engage in global communication, and advance theoretical viewpoints on the political, philosophical, and sociological aspects of Dalit issues. Digital media are seen as organizing tools for political protests against oppressive forces and forums that enable the sharing of hope and despair through horizontal and bottom-up civic engagement (Castells, 2015) <sup>[1]</sup>. Due to linguistic and cultural differences, Dalits have a history of failure, which has prompted a national Dalit identity, movement, and consciousness. Stuffing that division allows online spaces to shape that national identity. Many Dalits, especially those who are intelligent and well-educated, swiftly voice their opinions and reactions on social media about an array of concerns. All the online debates in this vast Dalit forum are helping Dalits to formulate arguments and theories that enable them to understand how they can deal with the caste system and the cruelties of Indian mainstream society (Dhillon, 2016) <sup>[3]</sup>.

Dalits broke the taboo of silence imposed on them by the rigid caste system by speaking out for the first time in history. With an outpouring of thoughts and online discussions in these expansive virtual forums, the Dalits ushered in a new age as they sought to break free from the notion that they were subject to an oppressive system and to comprehend and address the injustices perpetrated by the upper caste-based system in general. Because Dalits have experienced a dark history in which even the news and their presence was unsuitable, social media, as a liberating force greater than any other reform, also requires mainstream media to pay attention to or be vigilant towards Dalit concerns. Media have purposefully marginalized Dalits practises, as evidenced by their responses on social media. It is hard for the mainstream media to ignore the subject and depict it in a way that serves their goal when a crime or act of discrimination against a Dalit occurs because the Dalit discussion forums are overrun with pictures, videos, and information. The Dalit discussion forums become inundated with images, videos, and information, making it impossible for the mainstream media to ignore the story and present it in a way that suits their agenda. With the help of social media, traditional media concepts representing gender,

caste, colour, creed, and religion are being altered, and a new, more democratic framework that considers the diversity of social aspects is being developed. It challenges the hegemonized, elite media by arguing that Dalit voices shouldn't be left out in the process of constructing and defining Indian democracy.

### Digital Dalit

There are several competing meanings and interpretations for the newly coined term "digital Dalit." There is no agreed-upon definition or identity for the phrase "digital Dalit," which is sometimes applied to Dalit internet users or active participants. Urban professionals and educated middle groups, who can be relatively easily mobilized through social networking sites, are labeled digital Dalits (Kujat, 2016; Thirumal & Tartakov, 2011) [8, 18]. The groups which led the various Dalit online forums were coming under the category of digital Dalits. The online activism of Dalits permeates social battles, online protests, and virtual platform activities as agents of social transformation.

### Dalit Counter Public Sphere or Subaltern Public Sphere

Since the pattern or nature of the public sphere varies depending on the system it advocates, Habermas' Theory of Public Sphere has been subject to some criticism in its formulation. The public sphere has similar features in the country where systemic injustices or inequities were prevalent, and this attribute has also affected power dynamics and identity formation. In order to address their complaints and mobilize a large number of people, the marginalized populations in postcolonial or developing nations urge for the creation of a counter public sphere or a subaltern sphere. Fraser (1990) [4] and Warner (2002) [19] have commented that women, colored people, sexual minorities, and subaltern communities constitute "counter-publics" who oppose hegemonic ideas by using their identity and the distinct phrases and idioms based on specific world views, rather than a universal model of "rational critical debate. It is important to highlight that digital Dalit spaces do more than just establish a closed off or alternative public sphere; they also challenge mainstream media coverage of Dalit issues and the Indian media system's discriminatory social makeup. The rise of digital platforms that encourage and put pressure on the media to cover Dalit-related problems more because of the demands of the circumstance or the widespread exposure they receive on social media. By allowing Dalit views to be heard in digital settings, social media is sufficiently beneficial in diversifying the social structure of Indian media. The "Presence" is complex enough to offer inclusivity in the communication sphere or the participation perspective, both of which are hallmarks of a democratic society. The affluent upper caste dominates the agenda-setting process in Indian newsrooms, and the caste equation appears to be fairly indifferent to Dalits.

Surprisingly, Dalits intended to create new social groupings by creating blogs, websites, YouTube channels, Twitter accounts, Facebook pages, and Instagram profiles in order to talk about their issues and change the statistics of public participation and mobilization. Dalits believe that their complaints, experiences, and reactions to governmental policies are exposed on social media platforms. The rise of Dalit websites and blogs prove the emergence of an Online (Subaltern) Counter Public (Kumar & Subrahmi, 2014) [9].

An advanced form of Dalit mobilization which concedes the raising of Dalit voice is incredible in the cyber space as Mitra points out that the Internet is providing "a unique forum for the dispossessed" to articulate opinion and "produce their presence" in the public sphere (Mitra, 2004) [10]. The politics of voice or the politics of presence is pertinent here when we consider social media as a realm of Dalit public sphere. The social media opened spaces in the walls of the caste system and so the class system, that Dalits in India can use to the advantage of those seeking an end to the super discrimination they presently endure (Thirumal & Tartakov, 2011) [18]. Dalit websites and forums for discussions contribute a public sphere for Dalits to exchange ideas and introduce their own perspectives and vision. Social media amplifies Dalit voices to a greater extent than the situation in which there were no such democratized and cheap avenues of public debate as argued by Rodrigues (2016) as "new Dalit awakening". Some of the Dalit digital spaces are websites like Round Table India, Dalit and Adivasi Student's Portal, Ambedkar.org and Savari, and prominent Dalit YouTube channel named Dalit Camera. Apart from these, there exists a number of Facebook and Twitter accounts that share news analysis, discussions, and opinions on Dalit writings, history, and culture, society discrimination in India and abroad. Social media in India, therefore, has emerged as what is called the counter-public, where instead of one exclusive sphere, there exists multiple counter public spheres where subaltern identities can be articulated effectively (Chadha & Harlow, 2015) [2].

The ongoing engagement of social media is about appealing to the international community including United Nations rather than drawing the attention of the country's government, judiciary or political parties to Dalit issues. The interventions mentioned combating caste-based discrimination generally, accountability, implementation and enforcement of laws to protect Dalits, combatting violence against Dalits, eradicating caste discrimination in education, ensuring access to adequate housing, water and sanitation for Dalits, and enhancing activities aimed at eliminating discrimination against Dalit women (International Dalit Solidarity Network, 2017) [6]. Pramod Nayar suggests that the internet thus allows Indian and diasporic Dalit activists to make their local quest in to a 'transnational subaltern project' and link with foreign sympathizers, activists, NGOs, transnational organizations and with other 'histories of oppression' (Nayar, 2011) [13]. More than 10 lakhs of people subscribed to YouTube channels and other social media accounts, demonstrating their powerful influence on people. The growing amount of posts, shares, and likes shows how accepted Dalit-related problems are, and it has raised awareness of historical injustices, social inequities, and tragic experiences within the Dalit community throughout the nation.

### Dalit Digital Activism in India

Two notable incidents connected to Dalit digital activism in India are the Una incident and the Rohit Vemula incident. The death of Rohit Vemula spurred the digital Dalit protests. In light of the death of Dalit student Rohit Vemula, a research scholar at the University of Hyderabad, on January 17, 2016, caste-based systemic exploitation and psychological harassment in educational institutions have been highlighted in the Indian sociopolitical scenario. Strong responses and remarks were made on the matter by

Dalit-Bahujan online forums, such as Round Table India and Dalit. Since the topic did not receive the news attention it deserved, one may argue that the mainstream media was unable to spark a popular mobilization. The Dalit people are still adamant about defending their human rights and dignity in the wake of Rohit Vemula's murder. Vemula's supporters demonstrated on social media by using hashtags, maintaining Vemula's profile image, and other actions. With the sentence "my birth is my fatal accident" becoming viral in Rohit's suicide letter, which also stated his dreams, people from all over the world joined the online protest. Students' demonstrations, later renamed Joint Action Committee, have been adopted by politically liberal organisations and universities around the nation. Using social media as a coordination tool and new media tactics, this movement can be understood as a protest by the most marginalised population. Later on, even Rohit Vemula's obituary, "My birth is a fatal accident," turned into a model of activist writing. In order to mobilise and win acceptability around the world, this digital endeavour was undoubtedly successful. Following the demonstrations that the digital media named Round Table sparked in order to draw attention to the killing in front of the public as an institutional murder, the protests expanded throughout the nation and even beyond. Several communities have been actively involved in the #Dalit Lives Matter Twitter hashtag campaign, which is akin to the Black Lives Matter movement's catchphrase against racism in the United States. The term kept evolving, becoming a catchphrase linked to more instances of prejudice and unfairness. It also embodies a subaltern consciousness that reverberates throughout injustices, both domestically in India and abroad. The Vemula Protests served as the impetus for the website Velivada, which translates as "Ghetto" in Telugu. The website was established to expose the subjugation of subaltern grievances by dominant forces and to contest historical marginalisation and conservative media policy. The nationwide protests against discriminatory practices and caste prejudices in higher education institutions were made possible by the enormous mobilization provided by social media. Rohit committed himself as a result of the media's degradation of integrity and unwillingness to cover Dalit and Adivasi issues. American journalist Kenneth Cooper and B N Uniyal in 1996 hardly found a journalist from Dalit background and excerpted the opinion of Jeffrey. Uniyal wrote, "In all the 30 years I had worked as a journalist I had never met a fellow journalist who was a Dalit, no, not one". Social media also seized the opportunity to politicize the 2016 Una Dalit flogging episode, sparking widespread demonstrations against the viral video. On July 11, 2016, a group of over forty men belonging to the upper caste Darbar community attacked the Sarvaiya family in Una town, Gujarat, for de-skinning a dead cow. Social media users denounced the horrific and barbaric conduct, and those who were harmed urged that justice be served and that mercy killing be permitted. The victims demanded to be treated like citizens of the nation. To secure justice for the Una victims, the Una Dalit Atyachar Hadat Samiti (Committee to fight crimes against Una Dalits) was established, with Jignesh Mevani, a lawyer, journalist, and Dalit activist, serving as its founding member. Mevani's image was improved by the successful Dalit Asmita Yatra from Ahmedabad to Una, which raised Dalit concerns and demanded justice for the victims of Una. Soon after, he

became a well-known young Dalit social media star. The Dalit community continued to support him despite his Congress party membership, and he was recently detained over a tweet he sent criticizing Prime Minister Modi. He was freed after being given bail, but he was later arrested again for acting inappropriately around a police officer. Jignesh Mevani was a tenacious advocate and a perfect example of an activist turned politician for the people, regardless of whether the issue was genuine or made up. Social media played a significant role in creating and promoting that image, therefore it is difficult to undermine or sabotage such a positive perception among the general public. Transnational Dalit solidarity groups establish connections with other marginalised groups. Global agitations now have a wider audience and greater resonance thanks to transnational linkages, as the Vemula and Una movement demonstrates.

'Show Your Mustache' was another Dalit protest carried out through social media. To show support for a Dalit teenager who was allegedly attacked by members of the upper caste for sporting a moustache, Dalit youth in Gujarat launched a social media campaign. Dalit youth protested by taking selfies with their moustaches while sharing them on social media as part of this campaign. They shared posts and hashtags like #JativaadNaVirodhMa (opposing casteism), #SamidhanNaSamarthanMa (in support of the constitution), and #RightToMustache, with the message that we will stand up to protect our constitutional rights.

### **Digital Dalit Spheres**

Numerous Facebook sites honouring Dalit figures exist. Given the contributions of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Periyar Ramaswamy, Kanshiram, and other luminaries, it is noteworthy that discussions and arguments about the current socioeconomic circumstances surrounding caste in India and political representation are being actively shared via these pages.

The majority of the alternative Dalit media outlets were headed by journalists who left traditional media. These venues reflect Dalit viewpoints, experiences, identity concerns, and various other issues.

#### **i. The Shudra**

Shudra was the Dalit run YouTube Channel which has three lakh subscribers and uploaded news items and videos on various traditionally oriented occupations and life styles of Dalit community. Their focus was on documentaries, news bulletins etc.

#### **ii. Round Table India**

It is a news and information Portal, which stands for the progress of Dalits and Bahujan community and works to reshape the society according to Ambedkar ideals of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. It acts as a platform for Dalit voices and highlights Dalit issues to the mainstream. By opening free digital spaces, it provides columns, blogs, creative writings, and articles on current issues as well as a digital library. More of an informative space, it acts as a forum for interaction, debates and discussion. Their main caption is "when others interpret the world for you, can you change it?" Writings that theoretically and historically reveal the injustices perpetrated by the caste system, narratives and perspectives on Ambedkarism lively discussed, were updated and uploaded in the portal.

### iii. Dalit Camera

Dalit camera was a YouTube channel and a news website started in 2011 described as a 'team of volunteers.' Documentation and uploading of videos of protest, discussions, public meetings, and talks were the prominent activities of this channel. The noteworthy issues the channel protested against were the desecration of Ambedkar Statue in Hyderabad, beef issues at the Osmania University, Ambedkar cartoon controversy etc. It has a Facebook page which focuses on the issues of the Dalits and the marginalized. Their recent activities expose the miserable condition of sanitation workers, sewage workers, sweepers etc. Also, they were involved in the protest against atrocities towards Dalit writings.

### iv. Savari

Savari is a web portal as well as a Facebook page created by a group of Adivasi, Bahujan and Dalit women. It is a platform for sharing their thoughts, about their lives, conflicts with the society in terms of caste discrimination, anti-caste struggles etc. Standing for an equal world they invite support base from the Dalit communities, irrespective of religion, from India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. The writings revolved around Dalit feminism, identity crisis, Dalit patriarchal system, impact of feminism on Indian women etc.

### v. Ambedkar.org

Ambedkar.org is a website which puts forward the writings, speeches, ideas, and vision of Ambedkar. Writings and speeches of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar in different Indian languages like Hindi, Bengali, Gujarati, Tamil, Punjabi and English are translated in the portal and audio format of the same are also given. An affluent video gallery including UN visiting of Ambedkar, video, films, and memorials on Ambedkar are also available. The contribution in relation to the ideals and objectives of Indian constitution is also provided in a precise manner.

### vi. Dr. B R Ambedkar's Caravan

It is a Facebook page which provides news and information, analysis on social issues and perspectives in connection with the thoughts of Ambedkar. Insights on Ambedkar's works, readings of Ambedkar, and his narratives are discussed and analyzed.

### vii. Dalit Adhikar Network

Dalit Adhikar Network (DAN) was formed in the state of Rajasthan in 2007 in association with other civil society organizations and Dalit activist groups in emphasizing the need to address the questions of discrimination, exploitation and violence. This network has been standing as a platform in bringing the Dalit communities together under a long term programme for their development as well as the empowerment. The main area of operation comprises the social security schemes, food security, education, child rights, women rights, land rights and atrocities against Dalit people.

The online networking site International Dalit Solidarity Network represented the internationalization of caste questions, addressed caste issues in terms of human rights violation and render strategies encompassing wide range of functionalities like documentation, lobbying, mobilization and so on. Dalit Dastak, Dalit History Month, Dalit and

Adivasi student's Portal, Dalit Feminist, Dalit Diva, Dalit Women Fight, the Dalit voice and SRF News are among others which are active in contributing Dalit thoughts and concerns. Many of them have high subscription rates and are vibrant in the online world. All of these are spaces for the whole Dalit community including Dalit intellectuals, which instill the downtrodden community with self-confidence and mobilization.

For a very long time, Dalits have used literature and writing to highlight their disadvantaged conditions in India. Today's digital era has enabled art to be incorporated into social media, giving voice to the ignored and showcasing signs of protest. Dalit discussions in visual art demonstrate this. They argue that traditional, stereotyped Indian arts are of a Brahminical type and that they share glimpses of Dalit lives through visual arts on Instagram and Facebook, which visualize periods that were deliberately left out. Additionally, digital Dalit art collectives serve as a reminder of the need to liberate Indian art from the cycle of upper-caste dominance.

### Conclusion

Social media platforms are useful for discussing and debating casteism, generating ideas, and exchanging more in-depth discourses on the social fears the caste system generates. It is a reality that information and ideas are being transmitted among Dalits more quickly than ever before, and that this medium serves to connect them not just domestically but globally as well. These social networking sites have undoubtedly assisted Dalits in creating their own universe, as they previously only had access to a realm reserved for the higher castes of mainstream society. It appears that the prevalence of digital media increases the visibility of marginalised voices and Dalit issues. However, the validity of these talks is called into question because to the fractured or skewed nature of Dalit ideas. The democratic framework of Indian society is threatened when specific segments of the population are left out of media discussions. Even though Dalit digital activism created a liberal public space and a cohesive framework for their views, they still face a variety of obstacles in their quest to achieve their goals and get past prejudice or inequality. The word "Dalit" itself is hampered or dispersed by variation in sub castes, gender, geography, ideology, and class. The main causes of the polarisation of the Dalit public sphere on the internet include political and ideological affiliations and differences, economic regression, the digital gap, and accessibility concerns. Nevertheless, social networking sites continued to exist as democratic venues for assertiveness.

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