

Research Paper



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SOCIAL MEDIA FOR THE EMPOWERMENT OF DALITS

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ABSTRACT

The social media are a form of collective wisdom which can be used to make quantitative predictions that outperform those of artificial markets. Dalit intellectuals and organizers make use of social media to address the issue of marginality and social injustice in the case of Dalits. The social media have immense potentials for the discussion of issues concerning Dalit empowerment. Social media have come to the rescue of Dalits for better social networking and promotion of Dalit struggle for justice and empowerment. The corporatized media is ignoring not only Dalits and OBCs but all marginalized communities. In this scenario Dalits should make use of social media which can effectively challenge the vice-like grip of monopolists on the media. Studies have provided evidence of the contribution of social media in educating, empowering and strengthening Dalit community they serve. The social media skills of Dalits should be improved on the basis of proper orientation to ensure optimum utilization of social media for the empowerment of Dalits in India.

KEYWORDS: social media, Dalits, social network, economic development

PREAMBLE

The new democratic republic was made aware of its responsibility towards the welfare of Dalits and other weaker sections of society thanks to the revolutionary struggle launched by Ambedkar. The constitutional safeguards have apparently helped Dalits in protecting their legitimate interests and accelerated their socio-economic development. The credit for incorporating these safeguards in the Constitution of India goes to Ambedkar, Chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Constitution. Social media are Internet based means which connect the likeminded users. The online social network is useful for sharing information, ideas, experience and expertise in modern times. The social media are very effective tools of participatory communication. All the interactions which take place through social media are safe and convenient. The social media have become all pervasive interactive and participatory communication tools and technologies in modern times. The

consumer use of the Internet first became popular through dial-up Internet access in the 1990s. By the first decade of the 21st century, many consumers in developed nations used faster, broadband Internet access technologies. The role of social media in the empowerment of Dalits is examined in this article based on qualitative research methodology.

SOCIAL MEDIA

The technological factors (increased broadband availability, the improvement of software tools and the development of more powerful computers and mobile devices), social factors (rapid uptake of social media by younger age groups), economic factors (increasing affordability of computers and software and growing commercial interest the social media sites) and political factors (increasing political mobilization and several political changes) have brought about the social media revolution in the world.



The current technological landscape shows tremendous promise and presents numerous opportunities for news and professionals despite certain potential pitfalls. The social media have also posed serious challenges to media professionals. The users of print and electronic media are going online for their news. Most of the users receive their international and national news from the Internet (Alejandro, 2010:01). The social media are a form of collective wisdom which can be used to make quantitative predictions that outperform those of artificial markets.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND DALITS

Explorations of online Dalit activism generally focus on the web presence of Dalit organizations. The reason for this is undoubtedly their prominence in what has been referred to as Dalit cyberspace. The Internet thus allows Indian and diasporic Dalit activists to make their local quest into a 'transnational subaltern project' and link with foreign sympathizers, activists, NGOs, transnational organizations and with other histories of oppression. The online conduct and contemplations of digital Dalits show the kind of intertwinement of self identity and activism.

Dalit intellectuals and organizers make use of social media to address the issue of marginality and social injustice in the case of Dalits and other marginalized sections of Indian society. Their activism materializes as a creative combination of original content and recycled contemplations and images of fellow Dalits and global icons of political struggle. The social media have emerged as the new tool/avtar for the multicultural networking in India, stimulating a new form of dialogic discourse in the space of democratic governance. It is unfolding as a space of liberation, a platform of cogitation or a site of celebration of provoking assertions and identity formation, according to empirical evidence.

The robust forms of social media networking, especially engaging the younger generation, in last few years have witnessed a new mode of citizen engagement in India, marked by a hitherto unseen celebration of power of connectedness engaging individual-citizens and groups. The social media also provide the platform for awareness generation – acts as a new tool for campaign and collective action. The social media reconstructs the debates around social justice, inclusive development and sustainable development related issues and concerns. The social media calls for action and demands a pro-active citizenship, feeding the interface of online and offline campaigns by expanding the scope of the campaign beyond virtual space to the field from Dalit empowerment point of view.

The vibrancy of social media in generating awareness on empowerment of women and weaker sections has been well acknowledged in recent burst of online campaigning by various organizations, human right groups or civil society associations. The evolution of Internet and development of social media in India have become a great boon to Dalits, particularly to educated Dalits and activists. The social media have immense potentials for the discussion of issues concerning Dalit empowerment. There are mammoth problems unnoticed and uncared by the mainstream media. In this scenario, Dalits are making use of social media to speak for themselves, develop social networking, ensure connectivity and achieve the goal of empowerment due to the negligence of the mainstream media in representing Dalit issues.

The coverage of the anti-reservation agitation was indulgent and one-sided in Indian media which lacks diversity

in the newsroom. The Dalits put up with this drawback and hardship since several years. The protest of Dalits did not find any space in the Indian media. There was reasonably good coverage of the issue of reservation in Outlook, The Hindu, and Frontline since there was a greater degree of caste diversity in the newsroom. The absence of Dalit or OBC journalists is the product of conscious discrimination best known to the people of India (Varadarajan, 2006:16). The social media have come to the rescue of the marginalized sections and provided adequate space for the discussion of the issues of the neglected Indians.

The absence of Dalits in the newsroom is a pointer to the disinterest of Indian mass media towards the retrogressive caste system in general and the issues faced by Dalits in India in particular. Space in the print media and time in the visual media is sparingly kept apart for the Dalit issues. The Dalit insurgency, social media revolution, viability and usefulness of social media and the emergence of a sub-altern cyberspace with interesting and important consequences have expedited the exchange of information between Dalits in India and abroad (Philip, 2013:11). Social media have come to the rescue of Dalits for better social networking and promotion of Dalit struggle for justice and empowerment.

Social media have gained an upper hand over the mainstream media as instruments of social justice in a pluralistic society like India. They have provided adequate space for the discussion of the issues, trends and developments concerning the marginalized sections of Indian society. They have also become powerful tools of dismantling the edifice of hierarchy in India. Dalits and Bahujan Samaj have used them to take the caravan of Baba Saheb Ambedkar ahead (Guru et. al. 2013:08).

There is an association between the educational qualification and the blogging platform used by Dalits. There is a need for the literate Dalits to access and use internet regularly for speaking to each others, combating caste problems and bringing about mobilizing for their rights and equality. Apart from Dalit websites and blogs, social media like Facebook play an important role in the lives of Dalits by connecting, expressing and sharing with others. There is a lot scope for doing a research on Dalits usage of social networking sites like Facebook (Kumar, 2014:09).

The mainstream media have not given *adequate attention to the condition of the Dalit-Bahujans in India. The journalists working for big media houses are rabidly casteist. They make fun of news of assaults on tribals, Dalits, OBCs and Muslims. This is true of both the print and the electronic media (Forward Press, 2014:06).*

The news relating to Dalits never gets the place that it deserves. The media gives the same space to AAP as to Modi but it has no place for Dalits. The social media have become useful means to spread the message to various stakeholders of empowerment of Dalits. The media's attitude towards issues relating to social justice is extremely biased. Of course, that does not mean that the Dalits do not need media houses to present their world view before the people at large (Raj, 2014:12).

It is not only a question of Dalits and OBCs. News regarding all depressed groups and communities is ignored by the media. And there is nothing new in this. It is a very old trend. But after the economic reforms, there was the hope that the media would give up its old, feudal mindset. But that

did not happen. Instead, those with a feudal mindset forged an alliance with the so-called captains of the economy. The corporatized media is ignoring not only Dalits and OBCs but all marginalized communities. In this scenario Dalits should make use of social media which can effectively challenge the vice-like grip of monopolists on the media (Urmillesh, 2014:15).

The Indian media are not giving adequate coverage to the voice of the Dalits. There is hardly any hope of societal reforms in the media which are controlled by the market forces. The upper castes dominate the top positions in media organizations. The Dalit-Bahujans should work towards developing an alternative media because there is urgent need to publicize the way they see things. The social media can fill the vacuum as the voice of the Dalit-Bahujans in India. It would be able to take on the mainstream Indian media and emerge as its viable and credible alternative (Das, 2014:04).

The mainstream media are dominated by the upper caste owners and professionals in India. These media are scandalously unrepresentative and failed to dismantle the edifice of hierarchy. The social media offer new opportunities to Dalits as effective channels of social education and social networking in India. These new voices may now be a 'counter public', drowned out in the din of powerful interest groups (Gopalakrishnan, 2015:07). The Indian masses have successfully exploited the social networking and popularization in India.

The Dalit community is using Twitter, Facebook and other social networking sites to educate people about the idea of India that Dr. Ambedkar envisioned. The spaces occupied by the Ambedkarites lag far behind the right wing elements. But, the growing importance and influence of the assertion of the oppressed classes on the social media and the audience, at large, cannot simply be ignored (Sanket, 2016:14).

RECENT ISSUES AND CONCERNS

The Dalits and issues pertaining to them have been categorically ignored by the Indian media. Their approach towards Dalits has always remained biased. Dalits have no scope in the media industry dominated by both money power and caste power. With Dalit journalists encountering caste-based discrimination and antagonism against them is pervasive in the mainstream media, social media could be the only hope to bring Dalit issues for discussion (Chinnaswamy, 2016:03).

The Round Table India, a Dalit Bahujan portal has given space to Dalit Bahujan intellectuals to articulate on several issues and concerns of Dalits. There is increasing number of Dalits who make use of social media for social networking and social activism in the present times. The social media have paved a way for the oppressed masses to voice their grievances and agitate through various short films, lectures and documentaries. The battle for the emancipation and empowerment of Dalits is intensified in India under the influence of Dr. Ambedkar through active social media usage. Rohith Chakravarti Vemula, a research scholar at the University of Hyderabad, Telangana state had agitated along with four activist of Ambedkar Students' Association against the death penalty for Yakub Memon. He was ill treated by the Ministry of Human Resources Development, University Grants Commission and Central University, Hyderabad for democratic agitation. He was forced to commit suicide on January 17, 2016. The incident invited nationwide attention and condemnation mainly due to active social media application by the progressive intellectuals and activists across

the country. In the recent elections to the students union, the representatives of Ambedkar Students' Association won a majority of the seats. This incident reveals the power of social activism and social media intervention.

In Una, Gir Somnath district of Gujarat four dalits were mercilessly beaten for skinning a dead cow by the Gau Rakshaks or Cow Vigilantes on July 11, 2016. The Una incident of Gujarat has brought about remarkable awakening among Dalits. They firmly resolved to refuse the lifting of any dead carcasses on the basis of social media intervention. The video uploaded on social media by the accused helped the protestors organize more dalits and helped the dalit victims of Una to assert their rights. Gujarat's dalits should be saluted for taking this extraordinary way of protesting by throwing carcasses outside the collectorate's office. It was indeed a sign of a new commendable assertion which caused huge embarrassment for the ruling party in Gujarat. The picture and slogans of Dr. Ambedkar formed the core of the agitation, not Gandhi's.

Dalits in Jaloor village, Sangrur district of Punjab were attacked on October 05, 2016 due to pressure put forward by Dalits to grant 16 acres of the village common land, reserved for them. As many as 24 persons from both groups were injured in the clash and a lady Gurdev Kaur, died at the PGI, Chandigarh. The incident was brought to the notice of Dalits in India through video put on social media for public opinion formation and remedial action (Bharti, 2016:02). The social media has given a voice to the people who are neglected by the modern mass media. They have empowered the country's most oppressed group such as Dalits. An entire ecosystem of blogs, websites, online forums and social media groups voice the sentiments of India's approximately 165 million Dalits, smashing the silence that was imposed on them by the caste system (Dhillon, 2016:05).

A Dalit was lynched by the upper caste Patel community for watching people do the garba, the traditional Gujarati dance, on September 30, 2017. Another Dalit was beaten up on October 01, 2017 in the Gandhinagar district by Rajputs for sporting a moustache. These two ugly incidents attracted the attention of the nation through social media. Dalits were again up in arms against the government for continued atrocities perpetuated by the upper caste in Gujarat. The people had also posted the selfies on Twitter and Facebook, showing off their moustaches as a matter of self respect and democratic protest.

There is a requirement for the informed Dalit populace to locate an option media through which they can express and react with outside world. The calculated exchange on the issues has obviously exemplified the despicable situation of the scope of Dalit issues by the predominant press. The web has transformed into an instrument for the limited Dalits to utilize it as a choice media. The social media have become meaningful alternative to discuss the issues of Dalits and to get related with each other (Sagar, 2017:13).

The Bahujan Samaj Party has changed tack and gone for a different brand of campaign – a departure from its earlier methods. Besides audio-visual campaign, the party has also extensively used the social media network for political image building endeavor. The speeches of the four-time chief minister are also posted on Youtube in the new 'avatar' of the party. Other new candidates have their own teams for social networking. They also keep track of their opponents and devise ways to beat them using technology (Oman Tribune, 2017:10).

Dalits have taken shelter under the alternative media like websites, online forums, blogs, Facebook, etc. The social media play the role of alternative media as instruments of empowerment of Dalits and other marginalized sections of society in India. The social media have the power to stand on par with the mainstream media and can offer a counter-hegemonic representation of Dalits. Thus, social media have become a tool for the marginalized Dalits to utilize it as an alternative media.

CONCLUSION

Studies have provided evidence of the contribution of social media in educating, empowering and strengthening Dalit community they serve. Social media are acting as focal point for the members of the Dalit community to inform others about the day to day issues on Dalits and to get connected with each other. Dalit intellectuals are required to understand the challenges posed by new forms of media, including social media. The writings should be relevant to the readers on the basis of effective focusing on various issues of Dalits. The social media skills of Dalits should be improved on the basis of proper orientation to ensure optimum utilization of social media for the empowerment of Dalits in India. The Dalit community which arguably is under-represented in the Indian mainstream media, with the awakening of platforms like Twitter and Facebook have become good platforms to educate people about the struggle for the empowerment of Dalits. The anti-caste activists and their audiences on Facebook and Twitter have created their own unique space, which is unquestionably commendable. The active use of social media by Dalits for social networking and social activism has become a matter of dissatisfaction to the right wing elements in Indian society. Dalits have intensified their struggle for justice and empowerment through active use of social media.

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