

Digital Activism and Dalit women

Prof. Vijay. F. Nagannawar¹, Pooja Kamble²

¹Research Guide, Dean, Faculty of Arts, Rani Channamma University, Belagavi.

²Research Scholar, Department of Studies in English, Rani Channamma University, Belagavi

Abstract:

This paper attempts to understand that in the world of technology and its development, people are becoming so updated with the social media that they can connect to the world and gain any information, acquire knowledge across the borders. These digital media can be used to provide platforms for several people who are been unheard, they can share their thoughts and problem which can reach millions of people at the fingertips. It has given a great opportunity for the people who are always kept away from the mainstream media and restricted from all the social, political, economic rights. Such communities are like Dalit or Scheduled Caste Scheduled Tribes and, who have been from past isolated from the mainstream media, due to the roots institutionalized of casteism in India. After much of struggles, pains and hardships they are living a life on their choices in this developing world by representing themselves through their works. But still in many corners of the country, in the world of development people of these communities are still suffering from the issues, and the painful part of the situation is that, they could not make it heard with the threats of the society which is still been dominated by upper caste elites. The main sufferer of this community is the Dalit women, who are marginalized and subordinated with triple colonization that is from upper caste men, Dalit men and being a women oppressed in society, mainstream social media and other aspects of living. As the society is comprised of higher caste elites at different powerful positions and Patriarchal norms that have completely fused the lives of this community women. Digital media is proving up with its development that every citizen of this country is heard and can share their problems in front of the world and live a life with equal respect and dignity. Dalit women activist using both feminist media theory and social movement theory and are reaching to the levels of development which was always denied to them. The main concern of the study is to focus on the conditions of Dalit women and how these Digital Dalit media activism are paving the path and are providing opportunities to change their lives and make themselves heard to the society.

Keywords: Digital Dalit Media, Dalit activism, Feminism, Caste, mainstream

Introduction:

The article will give a brief outlook that begin with existence of Dalit and their contribution in building up their position with their voices that were suppressed from past decades. And how the voices were given an acceptance under their own framework to make people hear about their history and their suffering. It will also give us analysis about the beginning of Dalit Literature and its development in which both Dalit men and women contributed their works. It will also make us understand how Traditional offline activism through books and text and Digital online media activism differs in their approach. The main focus on how Dalit are segregated to the downtrodden position in mainstream media and how Patriarchal norms have completely fused Dalit women as marginalized in mainstream social media in India that are

comprised of higher caste employees at higher positions, which leads to high caste-centric media and leaves Dalit issues and its coverage out of mainstream conversations. Later it also bring out the development of Dalit Digital media and the growth of Dalit feminism theory and Social movement theory with different platforms that are giving opportunities to many Dalit women to make their voice heard to millions of people around the world with digital media.

The term *Dalit* means *Oppressed* and also refers to the people who are referred as *untouchables* belonged to the lower ladder of the caste system. They belong to different population of various caste groups all over India, South Asia and over the world. They are named with different perspectives like (Untouchable), *Harijans* (Children's of God) coined by Narsinh Mehta, a Gujarati poet- saint of the Bhakti tradition, refers to all the children's born from Devdasi who were Dalit women in relations with upper caste men. Later admiring Mehta's work Mahatma Gandhi used the word Harijan in the context of identifying Dalit in 1933. But in 1982, the Union government issued statement to all state government asking them not to use the term to refer to Dalit's. *Dalit* (Broken people) and Scheduled Caste, the official term for Dalit in the opinion of India's National Commissions for Scheduled Castes (NCSC). These term is rooted so deeply that historically they are outcaste from all the socio-economic, political rights by the society. They were targets of discrimination and isolated from all spheres of living. In 1932, the British Raj recommended the separate electorates to select leaders for Dalit in the Communal Award. This was favored by Dr B.R.Ambedkar but when Mahatma Gandhi opposed this proposal it resulted in the Poona Pact. That in turn influenced the Government of India Act. 1935, which introduced the reservation of seats for the Depressed Classes, now named as Scheduled Castes. Later with change of time and by the struggles of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar for Dalit communities, they were able to get rights and opportunities to make themselves heard with the writings in which they represented their suffering, oppression under the caste system.

Beginning of Dalit Literature to its modern approach: The first Dalit writer was Madara Chennaiah, a 11th century cobbler- saint who lived in the reign of Western Chalukyas. Another Dalit poet is Dohara Kakkaiah, a Dalit by birth. These writings gained a recognition and were included under the title '*Dalit Literature*'. In 1958, the term '*Dalit Literature*' was used at the first conference of Maharashtra Dalit Sahitya Sangha in Mumbai. It emerged in 1960's in Marathi language. The real establishment came up as identity creator in 1972, when a group of young Marathi activists and writers build an organization called as Dalit Panthers. This idea grew up in the minds through Black panthers in USA developed for gaining African- American rights.

Arjun Dangle, leader and writer of Dalit panther movement wrote: "Dalit is not a caste but a realization and is related to the experiences, joys and sorrows and struggles of those in the lowest strata of society. It matures with a sociological point of view and is related to the principles of negativity, rebellion and loyalty to science, thus finally ending as revolutionary."

Muktibodh Sarat Chandra defined Dalit Literature as: "Dalit Literature is one which is produced by Dalit consciousness" therefore it might mean the literature of those that are oppressed.

In Traditional Offline activism and Digital activism, the traditional offline activism system made to approach to limited spheres, with the help of existing social networks and membership of organizations, political parties or educational institutions. It makes people to move from one place to another for developing an organization and build social networks. There will be based on spatial proximity, close relations, socio-professional category membership. The first Dalit movement can be traced in the 1990's with the formation of the National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW) and the All India Dalit Women

Forum. There are many such movements came into light as Maharashtra Dalit Mahila Sangathana. The National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR) founded in 1998, to bring an attention to the problems of atrocities against the Dalits. Later The International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN) was formed in the year 2000 organized a secretariat in Copenhagen, Denmark, played a valuable part in developing international support for the cause of Dalit women. Apart from this The Dalit Women's Access to Justice and Dignity (DWAJ) was a project launched in Nov 2006 organized by Department of Justice, the Government of India, and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

The offline activism also include the work that are in form of print text, books, articles, journals and so on. Through the era many writers came up with this vision through their works to express their ideas and views of expression like Baburao Bagul, Namdeo Dhasal, and Arjun Dangle. Women writers like Mukta Salve, Bama, Babytai Kamble, Shantabai Kamble, Urmila Pawar, Kumud Pawade, and Meena Khandasamy and so on. These writers represented their suffering, pain, oppression under the caste system. The Bharatiya Dalit Sahitya Akademi was founded to felicitate the writings by Dalit writers was founded by Babu Jagjivan Ram.

On the other hand, Digital activism system, can mobilize a large number of people within minutes, far easier than offline activism. It also provide an interactive approach and communicate with diverse groups of people can participate through online blogs, petitions and articles while connecting with others in online mode.

Richard Smith define Digital media: "It refers to any communication media that operate in conjunction with various encoded machine-readable data formats. Digital media can be created, viewed, distributed, modified, listened to, and preserved on a digital electronic device"

Paul Mason rightly said: "Digital activism can help formal forms of activism achieve scale- it's not an end in itself." As Rheingold said, "the development of communications technologies has vastly transformed the capacity of global civil society to build coalitions and networks" (Rheingold, 2004).

Digital media have created a platform for millions of people with vast development of technology. The easy accessibility making the world control under your fingertips and this made the life more creative. It has made a huge contribution in growth of industries, education system, entertainment, information-based platforms, connecting to the world with sharing your views, thoughts and utilize the platforms for career- oriented opportunities.

The main concern of the paper is to understand how this digital media platforms are giving opportunities for Dalit women with rise of feminist media theory and social movement theory.

Feminist media theory is generally rooted in feminist theory within the field of mass communication studies. It is like a power structures that is operating through media systems and from the past it is focusing on the general marginalization of women in media structures. It analyses the issues of marginalized identities, gender roles, institutional sexism and other intersectional feminist issues. (Linda Steiner, 2014).

There are different theories that emerged after 1990s, when media industries and their advertising, marketing approaches responded the feminist criticisms, trading on liberal feminist's platform about women's freedom to please themselves, reward themselves, and pursue their interests on their own terms. As Post- feminist, meanwhile claim that women are empowered, at least in terms of individual choices about sex, marriage and family life, work, and life styles and also as audiences. (Linda Steiner, 2014, p.368-70)

According to feminist activist Faith Wilding, “there is a tendency though among many cyber feminists to indulge techno-utopian expectations that the new e-media will offer women a fresh start to create new languages, programs, platforms, images, fluid identities and multi-subject definitions in cyberspace; that in fact women can recode, redesign, and reprogram information technology to help change the feminine condition.” This paper concern about the Dalit Feminism which came up in 1990 that deal with feminist perspective that includes questioning caste, identity and gender roles, with the help of social movements and using feminist media theory.

The role of Dr.B.R.Ambedkar, the great personality in himself with his ideas in favour of breaking down caste barriers and naming himself and his community as Dalit’s to highlight their oppression and marginalization faced due to caste system. The main goal of Babasaheb was to reconstruct Dalit identity and destroy away all the domination related to caste associations. Kumbojkar through his text explains how Dr. Ambedkar served as a leading figure and a single representative for the cause of Dalit and Dalit activists.

From the year 2001, speeches of Dr Ambedkar reported in a daily newspaper The Hindu, they have found the online edition of newspaper back in 1951, in the pages on the websites of Columbia University it was been indexed and archived by Francis Pritchett.

In Oct 1998 in Kuala Lumpur by Mr. Raj Kumar Kamble and his colleagues organized the first ever Dalit International Conference through the Dalit International Organization, Malaysia.

And in September 2006, members of a Dalit family were abducted, raped and killed in eastern Maharashtra, with no witness ready to testify. Mainstream media did not report the news for weeks together. A Dalit government officer used the potential of the internet by publicly uploading the report of the Fact Finding Commission that documented the findings about the crime. This was quickly taken down from the website, but by then it had been widely shared and reported in the mainstream media. Whether the action helped secure justice for the sole surviving member of the family is a different issue, but the internet was usefully harnessed to at least give voice to an otherwise voiceless victim.

The historical and systematic marginalization has kept Dalit’s away from media circles, but now there is a growing presence of them in Indian media, from the rise of the internet. With the low-level of occupation of places in media corporations, it started to show the potential of its powers for Dalit activism which can be used as community building tool to “offer a counter hegemonic representation of Dalit’s” (Kumar and Subramini, 2014).

In Social media and Dalit women, the social media will work in two way process for Dalit women. On one hand it leads to pass the issues of Dalit women through social media that reaches to the people in lightning speed in the postmodern era. It has played an important role in highlighting the justice for Dalit women in many atrocities across the country. On the other hand, social media has become a platform to gain justice and self-respect for Dalit women with means of patriarchy and caste system. The social media has proven the strong carriers of Dalit women issues, who were getting a least importance with its roots in the caste system of Indian society as the most of the media sector is been controlled by the upper caste communities.

Women’s movements on social media by Sujatha Subramanian, who interviewed a Dalit feminist activist, noted, “In Kerala, the voices of subaltern groups are very prominent on social media, especially sexual minorities and Dalit groups. On social media, all of us are publishers. Only some communities get the space to get published in mainstream media. Social media allows marginalized voices the possibility of being heard in the public discourse.”

They are some of the online forum which are basically build up and run by Dalit women included as: Writing with fire, it is the only news agency run by Dalit women in India since 2002 that led newspaper Khabar Lahariya, was co-founded by Kavita Devi, as they shift from 14 years of print to digital journalism using smartphones. These women journalists report from some of the most difficult regions of the country, risking everything to speak truth to power. In this male-dominated media landscape, the women through this newspaper risking their life to cover the country's political, social, and local news from a women powered perspective. This was made into a 2021 Indian documentary film. Meera Devi, managing editor of the news outlet of "Writing with Fire" a spirited 30 journalist at Khabar Lahariya declares, "The journalist must use this power responsibly. Otherwise, media will become like any other business". (Aseem Chhabra 2021)

The Dalit Women Fight, where Shobhana Smriti, an activist working with the Uttar Pradesh division of All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch (AIDMAM) said, "In large number, Dalit women are harassed, kidnapped, raped, and brutally murdered every day in India – yet, we do not get the same kind of coverage as other victims from upper- castes".

Dalit Women Fight (DWF) is the online wing of the boarder organization called AIDMAM. Though the organization is based in New Delhi, teams composed of around 35 young Dalit women activists working in six different states of North India, including Haryana, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Odisha. DWF mainly focuses on four major areas of advocacy: survivors support, grassroots activism, leadership development, and international advocacy. This organization trains Dalit women to use social media and self-defense and teaches them about digital security and women's rights.

Anju, a spokesperson for and national coordinator of DWF told "Dalit women face horrendous crimes every day, but we do not sees the mainstream media and prominent forums reporting those," she said, "Therefore, it is upon us to create a space for ourselves where we can talk about the issues that we face." DWF believes that they have created a online space via social media "act as great platforms to not only engage Dalit women from around the country but also to highlight our issues and voice our concerns."

A Facebook page managed by Dalit women (Dalit Women Fight) states the importance of recognizing the unequal caste structure that exists in feminist discourses and academia. It stresses that there are linkages between caste and patriarchy, and that the '#Me Too' movement will not be relevant for Dalit women unless intersectional marginalities are acknowledged.

In an interview with Christina Dhanaraj, a co-founder of the Dalit History collective and a volunteer for #DalitWomenFight. Dalit History Month is a participatory radical history project.

"Our goal is to share the contributions to history from Dalits around the world. We believe in the power of our stories to change the savarna narratives of our experience as one solely of atrocity into one that is of our own making. Our story may have begun in violence but we continue forward by empassing our assertion and resistance" She also further says that:

'I realized the complexity of being both a Dalit and a women, particularly, when we talk about sexual violence, one cannot just talk about it the way we did when Nirbhaya happened. Being a women, you obviously feel very enraged, and your heart goes out to the victim and realize that the responses Nirbhaya received is a lot more than your sisters typically do. Every time it happens to them and it is that frequent we never see the kind of response that it demands; we never see the kind of traction the way we do for non-Dalit women". One part of me wants to ask myself, "why would you want to compare something as heinous as that?" But another major part of me thinks, "if I don't

talk about it as this point, when do I get to talk about?’ How do I get my non-Dalit savarna women to ally with me, and fight for my sisters as well?

In the interview conducted by The News Minute where Aswini KP speaks about being, the first Dalit women to be appointed as the special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of the racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance by the UN.

“I actively took part in Dalit History Month which is initiated by Project Mukti is primarily to focus on the history and narratives of the Dalit community which is often appropriated or not spoke of. The time I spent for Dalit History Month has taught me several aspects in terms of the distinctive themes and topics that we as a team focused on. Dalit history month was truly a process of knowledge creation which will facilitate in constructing an authentic history of the Dalit assertion. Babasaheb Ambedkar has written and spoken extensively about caste and racism. He was also of the opinion that through caste and racism are similar to each other, the aspect of untouchability makes the caste system worse than racism. He has provided a socio-political and legal perspectives of how caste or race should be addressed. This perspective on race provided by Ambedkar is extremely significant in the process of anti-caste or anti-racism movement in the global context.

In Savari Movement, another online forum Savari and its editor Sruthi Herbert a space created, developed and sustained by Adivasi, Dalit women writers, translators and editors. It focuses more on larger questions of “self, family, and community”. Savari describe itself as: “We are Adivasi, bahujan and Dalit women. Here we share our thoughts about our lives and the society we live in, including conflicts with the self, family and community. These are perspectives from our history, and our dreams for the future. Here we are in conversations with each other, with the men from our communities, and others. Inspired by our foremothers, the free spirited, knowledge bearing, community healers of the Saura people, this space is named Savari”

A bahujan girl-research scholar said “Blogs like Savari empowers us to move beyond Brahmanic feminist rhetoric. It is a new feminist intellectual ideology/practice that is grounded in the epistemic space of Adivasi, Dalit, and Bahujan women”.

The Dalit Women Caucus (DWC), is another online website, which deals with Dalit women’s issues, mostly focus on domestic violence. This blog was launched on March 18, 2001. It has its pages on the social media websites like Facebook and Twitter.

In Round Table India, which was started on January 3, 2009, on the birth anniversary of Savitribai Phule. It was been evolving over the years, trying to deepen its reach across regions, issues and perspectives. Its aim is to help in building of an “informed Ambedkar age” To build a Bahujan civil society. It was started when the internet was acquiring its space and blogs, networking sites began to make its appearances.

Dalit Camera, is a news website and YouTube channel set up in 2011 by Raees Mohammed (previously Ravichandran Bathran) to document the life in India from the perspective of Dalit. They take up videos of protest, public meeting, discussions, and talks and upload it on the Internet. And the expenses are meet by voluntary contribution. It is a YouTube Channel, which document the voices of Dalits, Adivasis, Bahujans and Minorities (DABM).

The Dalit websites and discussion forums, and members of the community from across India and abroad are building their own public space has they can exchange ideas, share information, and present a perspective on issues from their point of view. The organizations like Round Table India, Dalit and Adivasi Students’ Portal, Dalit Camera Dalit Women Caucus, and Savari have emerged as some of the

important Dalit websites. There are also a number of Facebook groups as well as Twitter accounts that share commentary and news on Dalit's, commemorate histories and leaders, discuss Dalit literature and cultural material, and mobilize their opinions in India and abroad. Across India, numerous Dalit's have joined WhatsApp groups to discuss their social and political concerns.

There are some of the limitations or drawbacks for development of Digital Dalit activism, for which we have to work on it for the more exposure of the Digital Dalit venture among the Dalit people in the country. Some of the limitations are as the poor, illiterate dalits, living in the rural areas where technology can be a major issue for the access to the peoples. As three-fourth of the dalits reside in the rural areas. They face a lot of issues to connect to the people outside their community with barriers of caste system and fails to get a support to overcome this issues and make themselves heard. The major threats come from the society, political parties and the power of law that still suppress the dalits in some areas or places in rural India.

The second drawback is the advancement of technology and education that we come across. In the rural areas there are still lacking back for advance technology. They are not updated with day to day issues and changes in the developments across the country with the issues of technology. As the government with their policies are not giving enough attention to the rural backward areas where many backward peoples are suffering with societal issues that are not heard by the law. This issues are not been solved by the law officers like police, government sector etc, who are appointed for helping the people in their problems.

According to the recent reports given by The Hindu, about 90% of leadership position in Indian media are occupied by upper caste groups. There is not even a single Dalit or Adivasi people are not heading Indian mainstream media. The second addition of Oxfam India Newslanduary's report 'who tells our stories matters: Representation of marginalized Caste Groups in Indian media' says that around 90% leadership positions in print, TV, and digital media are occupied by General Caste groups with no Scheduled Caste(SC) or Scheduled Tribe (ST) are heading mainstream media outlets.

According to Amitabh Behar, CEO of Oxfam India said:

"Our second report in the three years continue to show that newsrooms in India are not an inclusive place for the marginalized communities in the country. The leaders of media organizations across all platforms continue to fail in creating an enabling environment for Dalits, Adivasis and Bahujans." The media in the country needs to uphold the constitutional principle of equality in not just its coverage but also in its hiring practices, he said.

In UP it is recorded 3.4% rise in Dalit rapes though national figures has been dropped from these cases. This rise was the third-highest in India and followed Telangana (27.7%) and Maharashtra (17.7%). In October 2021, a Dalit women was gang raped at gun point in a village in Jewar in Gautama Buddha Nagar district of poll-bound Uttar Pradesh. On February 3, 2022, the dead body of a 17 years old Dalit girl was recovered in Gonda district

Activist Seema Gautam argued that the reported numbers are a fraction of the actual acts of sexual violence against Dalit women. In this out of 10 incidents one is likely to came to light or been reported, she said,

"That is how underreported the number are. When an FIR is not even registered, how will people get to know the real scale of violence against Dalit women?" she asked.

Meera Bharti, a lawyer and a Zila Parishad member of Saria ward in the southern UP district of Chitrakoot, told that Dalit complainants are humiliated every step of the way.

“When a Dalit women goes to report an incident of sexual violence, the police either blame her for using the law to extort money or strata questioning her character. She is further subjected to an inappropriate and derogatory line of questioning. We think rape happens just once, but a Dalit women is emotionally tortured in every police station and every court room she visits to seek justice,” said Bharti

In 2019-2020, the number of 14 survivors of sexual violence all across the UP districts were asked about their experience of getting justice. All of them denied of not able to get reported their cases or register any FIR at first attempt. There are studies conducted by Center for Human Rights Initiative (CHRI) and Association for Advocacy Legal Initiative (AALI), titled Barriers in Accessing Justice, said that every victim of sexual violence in UP faces several problems in accessing justice.

Long before in the Hatras case, were the body of the young Dalit girl had been burnt by the police in Muzaffarnagar district of west UP claimed by local activist Rani. It has become a routine of the police who tamper with the evidence which are crucial to the way in investigations which will be helpful for upper caste perpetrators, she added.

Dalit groups say that in the society both social and justice system are both prejudiced. “The rapists are upper-caste, the police officials who file our complaints and carry out investigations are upper caste, and those who fight our cases and pronounce judgment are also upper caste. How can we expect justice?” said Gautama.

These were some of the cases were we can find out the issues, that the Dalits faces many problems to get justice in the community they live or the places they belong. As per the reports mentioned in many backward rural communities’ government or law suppress the voice of the Dalit’s and the suffered victims and their family from being accessing the justice as the laws are governed by all the upper caste powers. The crimes are done by the upper caste elite group people on the lower caste women, as they are easy prey to target and they can easily handle the matter as they exercise the power in their hands.

It is a threat to the Dalit people who suffer in the hands of other caste people and never raise their voices, or if they raise they are been killed. In such cases people are joining hands with many digital platforms that are giving opportunities to such victims to come forward and raise their voices. These platforms are governed, build and supported by Dalit communities to help their people, to come out from such suppression and lead a life on their own. They are getting enough support to help them grow independent financially and take up employment in different sectors.

The main idea behind every Digital media platform is to join hands with the advancement of technology and make it’s accessible to every citizens from all communities. Many are using to develop their business and some other sectors, but it has given a new form of living to the people who can change their lives from all the suppression suffered from the years, especially Dalit’s.

In the growing fast generation, every news is provided with the access to the internet at our finger tips and that is posted and gets viral in a second to millions of people. So any issue which is not covered by main stream media or by the law, it reaches to the people with the help of smartphones, internet. People’s reaction and support to the issues make the law to focus on the matters and take an action against it. Digital media has given access of power to the people of the country to make themselves heard.

The use of Digital media for Dalit digital activism is an opportunity to overcome their suffering and raising the voice against the community and lead a fearful life.

Conclusion:

Digital Media is playing an important role in modern world. It's marking a print in every field for the growth and development, and helping in making life easy for millions of people around the world. It has even build a great opportunity for changing the lives of Dalit's, who are always downtrodden in the society. They were not allowed to showcase their suffering in the mainstream media and were not given much importance to their problems and issues to provide justice. But digital media has broken all the restrictions and given an opportunity to share their problems to the world. It has given a platform for Dalit women's in more moderate sense, who suffer from triple oppression. They face lot of hardship in bringing out their pain to the world, so using this digital media as a tool to build various platforms to change their lives and list themselves in mainstream media from all forms of oppression and subordination by the male counterparts. This platforms will make Dalit women to make themselves heard and gain justice to their suffering, and also build their personality through education and lead an independent life.

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