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CURATED VOICES

Social Media, Dalits, and Politics of Presence An Analysis of the Presence of Dalit Voices in the Indian Media

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ABSTRACT

This issue brief inquires into the presence of Dalit voices in media by employing 'politics of presence' as a conceptual tool for analysis. These voices in the media reflect how issues related to the Dalits are interpreted and how much they shape the discourse at the national and international level. While tracing the presence of Dalits in mainstream media, this issue brief highlights the otherwise upper-caste dominated journalism space. It argues that the absence of Dalits in newsrooms and the lack of social diversity severely impact the way issues related to the most marginalised community of Indian society are covered or abandoned by media organisations. After

the advent of the internet, social media has become an alternative option for Dalits to present their stories. This bypassing of traditional media challenges the hegemonised mainstream media sphere and brings the matters and issues related to Dalits into discussion. This issue brief further argues that even the liberating aspects of internet-based social media have not completely transformed the 'narrative formation' and 'agenda-setting' in discussion on mainstream media platforms.

Keywords: Social Media, Dalit, presence, voice, representation, caste, media

Introduction

How successful has social media been in diversifying the social structure of the Indian media? The idea behind the internet is trying to narrate liberating tales in the popular consciousness. Liberating tales are always interwoven with the hope that it will democratise the public sphere by providing accessible and cheap virtual platforms to every person despite their caste, class, gender and religion. Facebook strengthened this idea in 2004, YouTube joined in 2005, and Twitter followed in 2006. The internet hastened the process of communication through web portals and email, providing millions of Indians an opportunity to create websites and accounts to narrate and present their own stories.

This issue brief traces the social structure¹ of Indian media, the changing dynamics of representation, and the presence of Dalit voices before and after social media. Dalits are the most marginalised community in Indian society². This issue brief tries to answer whether social media³ increased the presence of Dalit voices in the mainstream Indian media? If so, then how has it impacted 'narrative formation'⁴ and 'agenda-setting' in discussions in newsrooms and on media platforms? Section I demonstrates the importance of equitable representation of people from diverse social backgrounds in different media organisations. The section argues that representation is necessary in realising the true sense of media and only such presence ensures that everyone speaks. Section II inquires Dalit representation in the social structure of mainstream Indian media. The mainstream Indian media is hegemonised by the upper-caste and it reflects in misrepresentation of issues related to Dalits. Dalit issues are rarely covered with sincerity. Section III delves into the era when social media countered the Indian mainstream media's narrative and provided everyone an opportunity to present their opinions and emotions on digital platforms. In this section, it is argued that social media surely increases and strengthens the presence of Dalit voices and it has also pressurised mainstream media to cover Dalits issues with more earnestness and sincerity. The last section looks into the limitations of and constraints to the access to digital media as well as their social structure. This

¹ Social structure, here, investigates the caste and class structure of people who own and have authority over the editorial board of media organisations.

² Dalits were at the lowest in the social stratum of the hierarchical Varna system for over a thousand years. This inhuman system is a big reason for their current deprived positions.

³ Social media consists of many app-based platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube etc. I here use the term 'social media' also to denote blogging websites.

⁴ This single term depicts the multi-layered processing of news. The layers are (a) which news is allowed to report by editors/owners (b) who covers the news on ground (c) how do the reporters cover the news (d) editing process (e) how is the news presented by anchors.

section contends that the increased presence of Dalit voices is fragmented and, hence, can not be considered as ‘liberating’⁵.

I. Why is presence vital for the Indian Media?

Presence of people from diverse backgrounds is important on various social media platforms. Anne Phillips (1996) in differentiating between ‘politics of ideas’ and ‘politics of presence’⁶ says that accommodating differences through representation of ideas, opinions, and beliefs is not sufficient. The politics of ideas fails to incorporate the experiences and perspectives of different communities into the political institutions. Politics of presence is the only way to ensure the representation of every individual’s voice in Indian media. Phillips argues that anyone can not stand in for anyone (ibid. 146). Accommodating differences through diversity of ideas can privilege the voices of some individuals, thereby hegemonising the public sphere and other democratic institutions. Phillips’ argument aims to ensure that diversity of subject positions should be a part of the conversation. Presence⁷ ensures that ‘politics’ acknowledges the identity of people. People’s interests and preferences must reflect in institutions and as well as the public sphere by themselves ultimately ensures the politics of ideas.

Equitable representation is critical because it ensures much needed presence of Dalits in Indian Media, which in turn shapes the opinions of a nation. The media has a great impact on the way people think about social, political, and economic issues and policies. Dalits are one of the most marginalised communities of India, and they need the media to narrate their story of thousand years of exploitation and oppression under the brahmanical structure of Hinduism. The media and communication must present their story in the way the Dalit community wants.

Politics of ideas can be exclusionary without accommodating the presence of marginalised communities. One can not understand the pain and anxieties of others if it is not their lived experience. Presence of people from Dalit community is necessary at media houses in order to understand the issues according to their vantage point. How Dalits are excluded from the coverage of issues and matters related to them by the mainstream media can be investigated by studying the presence of Dalit voices on social media.

⁵ Liberation here means how much social media increases the access to media for Dalits. It begs the question, is it able to sensitise the people from other castes about the deprived conditions of Dalits? Does it increase the representation of Dalits in mainstream media in proportion to their population? Do media organisations incorporate any mechanisms for the inclusion of Dalits in their newsrooms and editorial desk?

⁶ Phillips’ analysis focuses on the importance of representation in democratic institutions. I have used her analysis here to understand the importance of the presence of Dalits in Indian Media.

⁷ Here presence is different from representation. It asserts that its important for the Dalit community to be present and responsible for representing their own stories in their voice.

II. Presence of Dalit in mainstream Indian media before the age of Social Media

In 1945, B. R. Ambedkar wrote, “The press in India is an accomplice of the Congress, believes in the dogma that the Congress is never wrong and acts on the principle of not giving any publicity to any news which is inconsistent with the Congress prestige or the Congress ideology” (Ambedkar 1945 as cited in Loynd 2008).

In 1996, Kenneth J Cooper, an African American journalist who was the first person to inquire into caste representation in Indian media, wrote an article titled ‘India’s majority lower castes are minor voice in Newspapers’. It exposed the biases of Indian mainstream media. Cooper said that the voice of Dalits, who make up more than 70% of the country’s 93 crore and 40 lakh inhabitants, is notably absent in the 4,000 daily newspapers published in nearly 100 languages.

Following Cooper, B. N. Uniyal wrote in the same year, “suddenly I realized that 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.”⁸ (Cooper 1996 as cited in Balasubramaniam 2011: 21).

In 2006, the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies [CSDS] conducted a survey of 37 Delhi-based publications and television media platforms. The survey found no Dalit in its list of the 315 most influential journalists (Venkateswarlu and Rao 2017). Jeffrey (2012) writes that there were no dalits in the newsroom of India’s media organisation in 1992, and there are almost none today. He calls this unfortunate situation a betrayal of the constitutional guarantee of equality and fraternity.

Singh (2019) surveyed two Hindi dailies of North India, namely Dainik Jagran and Rashtriya Sahara between 1 Dec 1998 and 20 April 1999 for understanding the coverage of issues related to Dalits. He noted that Jagran and Sahara dealt with Dalit issues insufficiently. There were very few reports on Dalit economic issues. Political issues were not discussed consistently or on a case by case basis. Attacks on Dalits by Ranvir Sena⁹ were not covered very openly and boldly. When upper-castes killed any lower-castes, the victims were identified simply as ‘persons’. However, when any upper castes were killed, their castes were mentioned (ibid.). Loynd (2008) observed in his study that dalit stories are often represented only in the context of two basic themes, either as victims of oppression or recipients of reservations in government jobs and educational institutions. For instance, he mentioned that Bahujan Samaj Party is always portrayed as a casteist, anti-modern, and anti-democratic party in mainstream media. Balasubramaniam (2021) further notes that the English media was more keen on narrating the violence against Dalits than questioning the system of caste and state policies that enable it in the first place.

⁸ Cooper, in one of his reports, wanted to incorporate the views of a Dalit journalist but was unable to find one himself. He requested Uniyal to find a Dalit journalist in Delhi (Cited in Mandal 2020: 34).

⁹ The Ranvir Sena is a militia group based in Bihar that functions as a landlord group. The group was formed by Bhumihar landlords in 1994, with the aim to counter the influence of various left-wing militants, Naxalite groups, and the Communist Party of India-Liberation in central Bihar.

From the above stated examples, we can see how the social composition of media organisations constitutes people from upper-castes. First, this results in the severe lack of social diversity in the newsroom. Second, discourse-making remains in the hands of people who exclude the voices and issues of Dalits. Third, mainstream media excludes the Dalit from the newsroom and hegemonises agenda-setting. This reflects in the distorted or no coverage of Dalit matters, ultimately failing to sensitise rest of the people regarding the injustices faced by them. This brings us to the main question, did the coming of social media expand the presence of Dalit voices?

III. Presence of Dalit voices after the coming of social media

Round Table India (n.d.) writes that Indian media has played an important role in maintaining an unjust social order based on a system of hierarchy of caste and continued existence of untouchability. It helps the dominant social forces to deny the larger problem created by structural unjust pattern of Hindu religion and depict it into only as 'Dalit problem', noted by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. Same social forces controlled the mainstream and so-called alternative media in India.

Round Table India is one of the websites that emerged as the voice of the Dalit community after the coming of internet. Several blogging websites¹⁰, YouTube Channels,¹¹ Twitter Accounts,¹² and Facebook pages¹³ have also been created for raising Dalit issues. These alternate media spaces are challenging the narratives of the mainstream media. The postings, discussions, and responses in Dalit social networks contain their pain, pathos, anger, and anguish against the inhuman caste system (Venkateswarlu and Rao 2017). Kumar (2015) states that the advent of the internet has provided Dalits the hope that social media will make their voices, arguments, and perspectives more visible to the broader public. The internet provides the Dalit community extensive space to articulate their social perception. Mitra (2004: 492) writes "the internet has challenged the popular culture by providing a virtual forum in which different groups can produce a 'presence' that might have been denied to them in the 'real world'."

Tirumal and Tartakov mention that small but vigorous groups of Dalits are using information technologies to transcend barriers of caste in ways not possible before. Information technology has helped Dalits take advantage of democratic opportunities that can break through the walls of caste and ritual, as well as share understandings and interests with each other and with those who have previously been beyond their reach. The authors also believe that the internet has created fissures in the walls of the caste and class system (Tirumal and Tartakov 2011 as cited in Kumar and Subramani 2014: 126).

Hundreds of YouTube channels have been created in past 10 years that claim to

¹⁰ Examples such as Round Table India, Savari, Dalit & Adivasi Students Portal etc.

¹¹ National Dastak, Bahujan TV, National India News, Awaaz India TV, Voice News Network, Dalit Dastak etc.

¹² Jai Bhim, Joint Action Committee - UoH, Ambedkar's Caravan, Dalit Ekta etc.

¹³ All these Twitter accounts and YouTube Channels also have a presence on Facebook.

post videos related to Dalit-Bahujan¹⁴ issues. Some channels have more than 10 lakh subscribers and have been successful in creating impact (See Table 1).

Table 1: YouTube channels posting on Dalit-Bahujan issues.

Name of Youtube Channels	No. of Subscribers (In Lac)	Year of Inception
National Dastak	50.42	2015
Bahujan TV	20.67	2015
National India News	20.4	2017
Awaaz India TV	10.48	2013
Dalit Dastak	8.89	2012
SM News	7.58	2015
Dalit News Network	7.24	2017
Mulnivasi TV (MNTV)	6.09	2015
Bahujan Hub	2.27	2016
Samyak India TV	NA	2013
Samta Awaz TV	NA	2013
Voice News Network	NA	2018
Dalit Camera	0.82	2007
Dalit Song	0.43	2010
Jai Bhim Channel	0.25	2016
The Think	0.21	2020
The News Beak	4.74	2018
Dalit Times	NA	2021
Forward Press	0.19	2012

Source: Author provided [data collected on 6 November 2021]

Singh (2019) surveyed three newspapers published in Lucknow in 2016-2017 and noted that the volume of coverage of issues related to Dalits has increased. Newspapers started covering individual atrocities, discussing Dalit issues from different angles in editorials, and even showing themselves as champions of Dalit's cause. This happened due to many reasons, but the presence of original and genuine voices of Dalits forced mainstream media to include their matters in discussion and debate. What remains to be seen is whether this increased coverage of Dalit issues on social media can be successful in changing 'narrative-formation' and 'agenda settings' in the mainstream media.

IV. Liberating Presence or Fragmented Presence?

As noted earlier, Dalits are one of the most socially deprived and economically poor classes in India (Kumar 2015). They lack shelter, economic livelihood, basic education, respectable jobs, and English education, which are the greatest barriers to accessing the internet. Venkateswarlu and Rao (2017) observe that

¹⁴ Dalit-Bahujan is a political term consisting of people from the category of SCs, STs, and OBCs.

most of the people who are active on social media are university students, activists, party members, and middle class dalits. Kujat (2016: 51) found in his study that while dalits tweet, it remains an exclusive practice. Even in the age of social media, Dalit presence is linked to the privilege of being able to communicate on the internet based social sphere. Mandal (2020) claims that upper-caste dominance in mainstream media has also extended to digital media. He writes that four media matrices, namely, big capital, veto power of advertisers, dominant ideology, and government control, are also the biggest constraint to equal access to digital media. Top YouTube channels are also the same upper-caste owned organisations of mainstream media. The top 20 most followed journalists on Twitter belong to the upper-caste (ibid.). Freedom of speech provided by social media does not guarantee equality of speech. These platforms allow users to pay money to boost their posts. The account verification process also creates hierarchy through unequal circulation and visibility of content through their paid services. Mandal concludes that democratic digital media seems to be unrealistic (ibid: 39). He argues that connectivity does not ensure a more representative and robust public sphere. It may leave people with a false sense of empowerment, which misrepresents the true impact of their opinions.

This unequal access to the digital devices and capitalist market forces help those who already have a high status in the social stratum to widen their audience engagement. The idea that digital media increases the pluralist-democratic culture of the mainstream media is only half true. The case of Cambridge Analytica shows how political parties use social media to manipulate the opinions and views of users in favour of their candidates. The presence of Dalits and their voice has been increasing but their content and quality of discussion and opinions are fragmented and scattered. The trends, tweets, posts, and YouTube videos are not able to change the narrative and the agenda setting. Most of the top trends on Twitter are termed as “ad-hoc fame” (Kujat 2016: 46) and disappear as ‘ad-hoc’ as they start. Most tweets are not sustainable even for one day. Scattered discussions do not convert into a larger agenda of policy formulations.

Even increased presence of Dalit voices on social media did not materialise into the diverse social composition of media organisations. Oxfam India (2019: 6) found that of the 121 newsroom leadership positions, such as editor-in-chief, managing editor, executive editor, bureau chief, and input/output editor, across newspapers, TV news channels, news websites, and magazines, 106 were occupied by journalists from the upper-castes and none by those belonging to the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes. Three out of every four anchors of flagship debates are upper-caste. Not one is Dalit, Adivasi, or OBC. For over 70% of their flagship 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%. This data shows how mainstream media in the name of the presence of ideas does not give proper space for the presence of people from diverse backgrounds. Over half of those writing on issues related to caste in Hindi and English newspapers are upper-caste. Around 72% of bylined 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.

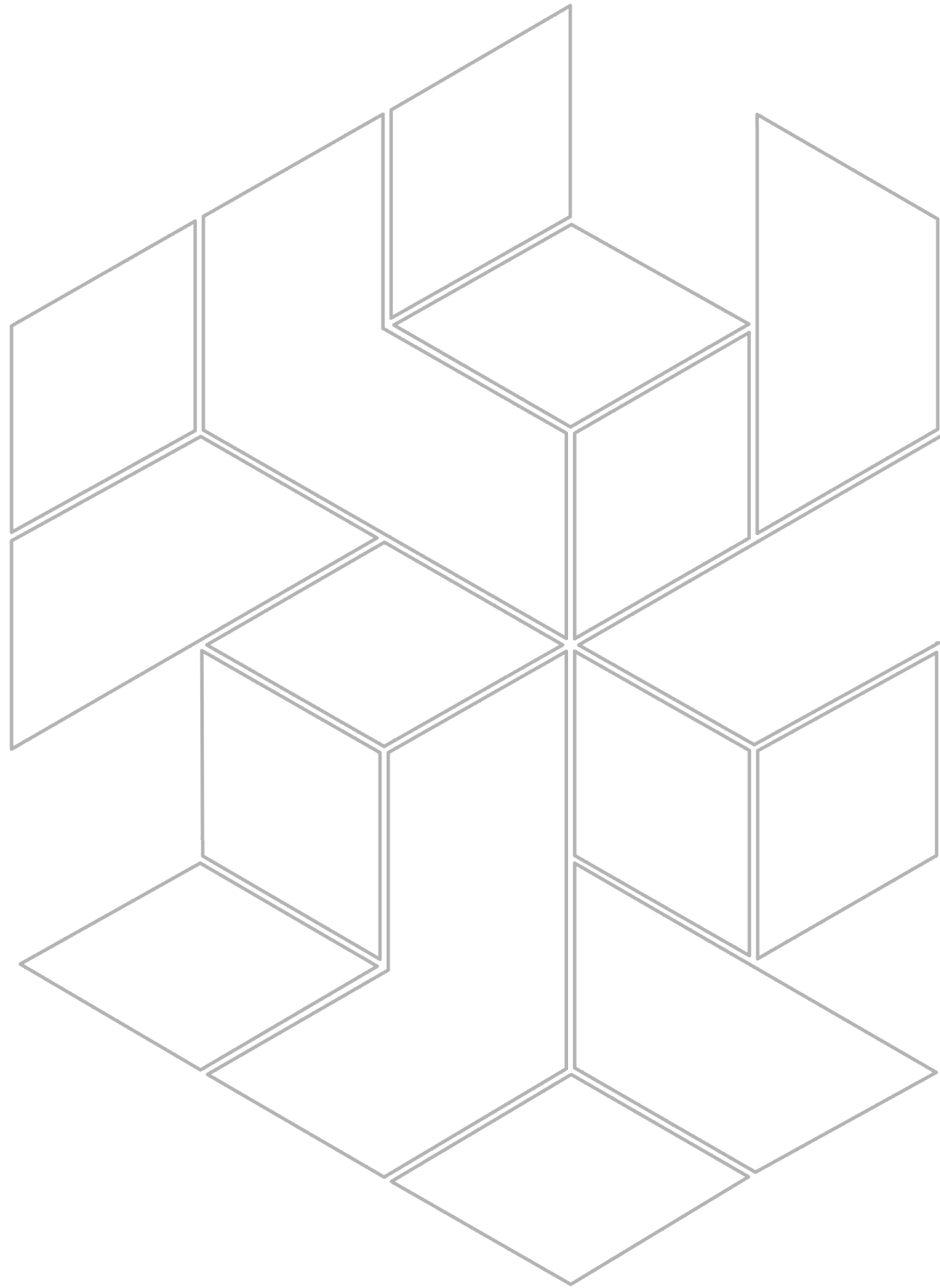
SUMMATIVE REMARKS

This issue brief shows how mainstream Indian media is hegemonised by the upper castes and the vast majority of people are only subject to news created by them. The media is important in shaping discourses at the national and international level. How will that discourse be more inclusive if there is no one to represent the opinions and voices of a vast majority of the Dalit population? Even after the advent of social media, the organisational structure of mainstream media has not changed.

This issue brief concludes with the following statements. First, social media increases the presence of Dalit voices on issues related to them. Second, this increased presence poses a challenge to biased interpretations of Dalit issues by mainstream Indian media. This challenge results in mainstream media including and discussing the issues and matters related to Dalits in newsrooms and editorials. However, this increased presence of Dalit voices has not succeeded in changing the 'narrative formation' and 'agenda-setting' in discussion on media platforms. The struggle of Dalits to liberate themselves from the biased interpretation and distorted and insensitive reporting and coverage of their issues by mainstream media is ongoing. This is the time to make structural changes in Indian media in order to incorporate the people from Dalit community as per the larger democratic character of Indian constitution. Serious efforts, affirmative action policies, and proper training must be put in place to include journalists and reporters from across the social spectrum.

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