

DALIT ACTIVISM, SOCIAL MEDIA, AND TRANSNATIONAL ADVOCACY

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This paper argues that social media engagement and strategy offers Dalits to not only construct their own identity as an empowered Dalit but also offers them opportunities to unite and forge transnational ties with other marginalized communities across the globe to fight against caste-based discrimination. This paper highlights the assertion of Dalits using social media pages like Roundtable India, Velivada, and YouTube channels like Dalit Camera, and Dalit organizations such as National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR), International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN), Equality Labs, etc., in India and abroad for voicing their opinions, mobilizing, and fighting a pitched battle in the contested public sphere. The paper explores the question of how subalterns are using new media technologies by analyzing reports of various Dalit organizations, pamphlets, and social media posts.

Keywords: Dalits, social media, transnational advocacy, discrimination, identity

1. Introduction

Dalit¹ political assertion in different parts of India rarely becomes a nationwide movement. Today, the imagination of the Dalit community has begun to expand beyond the confines of city and state seeking to further the cause of democracy

¹ Etymologically the word Dalit derived from “crushed, ground, destroyed” which leads to the meaning of “depressed” (Narayan 2008, 171). Dalit as a category is a modern construct and has been in use since early 20th century from the beginning of the Dalit social movement. It was Dalit Panthers who expanded the meaning of it by including Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), Other Backward Classes (OBC), and all “oppressed” groups (Webster 1999, 68). In legal and constitutional terms, Dalits are known in India as Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. India’s erstwhile untouchables became an official category of “Scheduled Castes” and “Scheduled Tribes” in 1936 when a list or Schedule of castes was drawn throughout the British administered provinces. There are currently some 16.6% SC and 8.6% ST respectively, of India’s population according to 2011 Census data (Express 2013).

and equality (Thirumal and Tartakov 2011, 34). The government's affirmative action policies in post-independence India have not made much of a difference as Dalits remain a socially stigmatized and economically marginalized group that is severely underrepresented in politics and media. This paper discusses the trend of emerging online Dalit activism. It focuses on the attempts of Dalit Internet users to explore and exploit various social media platforms to battle Dalit deprivation, discrimination, inequality, and injustice.

G. S. Ghurye, a sociologist, identified at least six different features of the Hindu caste system which included caste membership to be ascribed by birth, hierarchy a scheme of social precedence amongst castes, restrictions on inter-dining, civil and religious disabilities, and privileges of different sections, lack of unrestricted choice of occupation, endogamy, and no inter-marriages between castes (Ghurye 1969). Several village ethnographies account for mainly two rigid pillars in which caste system were reproduced – food and marriage (Marriot 1968, 133–134; Mayer 1960, 35–40; Parry 1979, 41). French sociologist Louis Dumont in his well-known book, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and its Implications*, argued that caste was above all an ideology, “a system of ideas, beliefs and values.” He called hierarchy as an essence of caste and purity-pollution as an important aspect of caste, using mainly Indological sources (Dumont 1980, 49–51). Since colonial times caste was redefined, as many scholars believe it to be a colonial construct, because under the British rule that the practice of manual scavenging expanded phenomenally. The British both legitimized and systematized caste, while setting up army cantonments and municipalities. The official posts of manual scavengers were created because the colonial army, railways, courts, industries, and quarters of the officials were equipped with dry toilets instead of water born sewerage. The British did not invent caste, they institutionalized it (Dirks 2001, 9). The colonial officials and the municipal authorities of that time drew on the edifice of caste to recruit sanitation workers and brought in Dalit workers, many of whom were agricultural laborers in the countryside, to the cities. Wherever there was a shortage of sweepers and scavengers in urban areas, municipal authorities looked to Dalit migrants from rural areas to meet the shortfall. This cemented caste occupation into a waged “occupation.” Nicholas Dirks in *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* has shown how Christian missionaries, colonial ethnographers, Brahmins, and civil servants made caste into an essential element of Indian society since they were more concerned with the strategic questions of land ownership and sovereignty, as well as cultural and political questions of social relationships and caste (Cohn 1996; Dirks 2001; Rao 2009). Louis Dumont approached caste through the conceptualization of purity and pollution considering them to be an essential element of Indian society. No attempts have been made by the upper caste Hindus to annihilate caste, whereas several attempts have

been made by them to reform caste, through religious, political, legal issues, and practices of normalization.

Caste can also be seen through the tensions between the nationalist and anti-caste movement (Rao 2009). While on the one hand, the Gandhian nationalists searched for India's history and identity for the young nation and the "lost past," Dalits on the other engaged in the construction of India's modernity by challenging its "pre-modern" past as "oppressive." In the present times, NGOs, advocacy platforms and human rights activists tend to use a narrative of caste which was the construct of colonial knowledge and are including caste perspective in their work. Caste-based atrocities continue to be inflicted on the Dalits in more ways than one even today. While Dalit identity remains deeply historicized and primordialized and rooted in Indian modernity formations, at the same time it is re-conceptualized on the transnational level against the backdrop of human rights, development, governmental policies, reservations, etc. The activists of transnational organizations, the International Dalit Solidarity network (IDSN), the National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR), Equality Labs have been raising the voice of the subalterns by lobbying to include caste-based discrimination as a protected category as grounds for discrimination in the United Nations (UN), and the European Union (EU) in order to put pressure on the Indian state to address the issue of inequalities arising out of the caste based social structure.

Studies in digital cultures in India have not given due recognition to the presence of subalterns in the cyberspace. This can be attributed to online Dalit self-representation which contradicts the right-wing Hindutva² self-representations (Nayar 2011, 69). Issues concerning Dalit communities are discussed freely and openly on the social media platforms, which the mainstream media has been ignoring for a long time. Dalit activists feel that websites, online forums, blogs, Facebook pages, and Twitter handles contribute immensely, enabling access and participation by the members of Dalit community. Thus, the Internet is acting as a focal point for re-igniting the triad of caste and discrimination, religion, and class (Krishna 2018).

Since the year 1999, when the first Dalit website Dalitstan.org was launched, the visibility of the Dalits on the Internet has increased many folds. Today, Dalits are using social media as a counter public sphere³ to raise their voices. For example,

² Hindutva is the name by which the ideology of the Hindu right, represented by the political party, the Bhartiya Janata Party is known. The Hindutva movement has been described as a variant of "right-wing extremism," and as "almost fascist in the classical sense," adhering to a concept of homogenized majority and cultural hegemony.

³ The Habermasian public sphere was the one that ignored the existence of other public spheres and reflected and protected the specific interest of the bourgeoisie. Bonfiglio (1997, 179) has asserted that Kant says that people who were propertyless were locked into com-

the suicide of Rohit Vemula, who was a Ph.D. student at Hyderabad University, and killed himself on January 17, 2016 after he was expelled from the university's housing facility along with four more students on false charges of indiscipline. He was a member of the Ambedkar Students' Association and fought for the rights of Dalit students. He blamed the system for his death. His suicide note went viral on social media fueling widespread nationwide protests. Dalits are exposed to online discourse from different parts of the country and they imagine themselves as part of a larger collective and community cutting across language and cultural divides. Following the Una incident, in which seven members of a Dalit family were assaulted by the members of cow vigilante group in Una, Gujarat, video of the incident went viral on social media platforms sparking protests by the Dalits. Jignesh Mevani, a Dalit activist, led the protest march and blocked highways, forcing the state to take note and act towards the redressal of the complaint made by the Dalit victims of violence involving the incident. In both these incidents, a pattern was seen where people protest instead of remaining confined to their states of origin, and gained prominence and widespread following the release of as images and videos on the online platforms by several Dalits who were not necessarily playing a leadership role (Ahuja 2018).

The upper caste or *savarna* Hindus have used historic traditions for legitimizing the lowly status of the Dalits and it has been very important for the Dalit publics to construct and provide a counter-historiographical tradition. Central to the Dalit websites is the contribution of a different or alternative history of India. Dalits are challenging the mainstream narrative of the Hindu nationalist caste history by presenting counter narratives. The battle of Bhima-Koregoan, fought in 1818, which had resulted in the defeat of the Peshwa by the British army comprising a large number of Dalit soldiers is loaded with a powerful narrative of the Dalits battling caste oppression that runs parallel to the uncomfortable fact of its being a victory for colonialism.

The online Dalit discourse has helped youth from different parts of the world to imagine themselves as part of a larger community beyond borders and divides of language, culture, countries, and continents. The news of a former employee of the tech major Hindustan Computers Limited (HCL) for unlawful termination and discrimination at job, based on his caste identity by his superiors, has been doing rounds on social media platforms. A lawsuit against Cisco, a multinational technology company that allegedly failed to prevent discrimination against a Dalit engineer in San Jose, U.S.A. has once again highlighted the issue of caste and discrimination associated with it among the Indian diaspora (Moorthy 2020).

petitive social relations that prevented them from being able to deliberate upon universal, moral, and political concerns.

India's erstwhile untouchables, now called Dalits, are using digital mediums to communicate, agitate and organize with their fellow Dalits worldwide. Over the last six decades, Dalit activists have built connections with groups across the world, including, for example, with the Roma in central Europe, the Burakumin in Japan, African Americans in the United States, and landless workers in Brazil (Thorat 2009, 149). Groups such as the Dalit Panthers, the National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR), the National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW), and the Navsarjan Trust express a clear internationalist vision for the empowerment and liberation of all oppressed communities. The transnational dimensions of this activism illuminate the ways in which they reach beyond and transect the Indian state (Keenan 2004, 435–49). The International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN),⁴ Equality Labs,⁵ and Voice of Dalit International (VODI)⁶ are some of the groups active on social media which highlight and internationalize the appalling plight of Dalits of South Asia and the diaspora.

Dalit activists consistently use social media to share things as they happen in society. The agency of social media provides the Dalits, who have been historically deprived of agency to tell their own story, in constructing and expressing identity. The importance of internet and opportunities it offers for networking with fellow human beings cannot be overemphasized. Today, Dalit activists are spending much time in sharing posts, life stories, writing blogs, Dalit histories, opinions challenging the basis of the caste system in Hinduism in more interactive and logical ways. While the digital divide remains unbridged, as only a fraction of Dalit users is able to afford better connectivity and devices, many are trying hard to make their presence felt in the cyberspace. Digital bonds that are forged online are also limited in their durability unless backed by on ground mobilization and activism, as social media activism may not always translate in offline activism.

2. History of Dalit activism and quest for an identity

Hindu society is organized on caste lines, which is a hierarchy of ritual pollution. The Hindu masses practiced untouchability as part of their caste obligations. In general, the practice revolved around avoiding physical contact with particular

⁴ IDSN is an international human rights group which works on a global level for the elimination of caste discrimination and human rights abuses against Dalits and similar communities that suffer discrimination on the basis of work and descent.

⁵ Equality Labs is an Ambedkarite South Asian power-building organization dedicated to ending caste apartheid, gender-based violence, white supremacy, Islamophobia, and religious intolerance. Thenmozhi Soundararajan is its Executive Director.

⁶ VODI is a UK based group that champions the rights of all individuals to equality and freedom through integrated development programs.

groups to save oneself from being “polluted.” The varna system is a four-fold categorical hierarchy of the Hindu religion with Brahmins (priests/teachers) on top, followed, in order, by Kshatriyas (rulers/warriors), Vaishyas (farmers/traders/merchants), and Shudras (laborers). In addition, there is a fifth group of Outcastes, that is, people who do unclean work and are outside the four-fold system (Massey 1995 39–40). Dalits are not formally included in this scheme, but as evident by designations such as *avarna* (“without varna”) or *Panchamma* (“fifth varna”) they can be considered included in the system by virtue of their explicit exclusion.⁷ The Portuguese were the first to use the term “caste” to denote the hierarchical divisions in the Indian society (Samarendra 2011, 51–52).⁸

The group of Outcastes is known by various names such as Untouchables, Scheduled Castes, Harijans, and Dalits. First coined by Jyotirao Phule, an activist of Non-Brahmin Movement in the 19th century, the term “Dalit” has served as a central organizing identity for the anti-caste movements of post-independence India. The term comes from the Sanskrit root *dal*, meaning “to break” or “to crack,” and is often glossed in English as “the oppressed,” “the downtrodden,” or “the crushed.” B. R. Ambedkar, the leader of the Dalits, popularly known as “Babasaheb,” was an Indian jurist, economist, politician, and a social reformer under whose leadership the Dalits became organized and joined struggle for their rights, first used the term in 1928 to describe people who had experienced degradation and deprivation, but the term “Dalit” did not gain popularity as an identity marker until the 1960s (Rao 2009, 15).

Before Ambedkar’s prolific writings, Dalit writings existed mainly in the form of poetry and songs of the Dalit Bhakti⁹ poets. Madara Chennaiah,¹⁰ a cobbler

⁷ Ambedkar (1948, 11315) argues that the reason why Dalits are not included in this framework is because untouchability was established as a social institution around 400 CE, after the creation of the varna system.

⁸ Samarendra notes that “caste is a foreign word” and argues that the concept of caste “as conceived in contemporary academic writing or within the policies of the state” has “never characterized the Indian society.”

⁹ Bhakti means “devotion” in Sanskrit. The Bhakti movement was an important historical religious movement in 12th century India that sought to bring religious reforms to all strata of society by adopting the method of devotion to achieve salvation. The rigid caste system, the complicated ritualism that constituted the practice of worship and the inherent need to move to a more fulfilling method of worship and salvation perhaps spurred this movement. Their method of expression was to sing devotional compositions in the temples, Gurudwaras, and at shrines of the Sufi saints.

¹⁰ Madara Chennaiah belonged to the *Madiga* Caste (largely involved in Manual Scavenging work, however, Madara worked as a cobbler) and was a staunch devotee of Lord Shiva. He was one among the galaxy of enlightened men and women which included mystics and seekers of truth and were part of *Anubhava Mantapa*, a body established by Basaveshvara (known as the founder of the Lingayat religious sect in India). Madara composed several vachanas in

saint from the 12th century Karnataka, who is among the earliest known Dalit writers. He is often referred as “the father of Vachana poetry,” a form of writing with rhymes in Kannada. Many others like Chokhamela¹¹ (14th century), Guru Ravidas¹² (15–16th century), and several Tamil Siddhas (6–13th century), wrote poetry questioning inequalities of the caste system (Duhan 2018). It was primarily in the 19th century that literature became an instrument of resistance. Strong egalitarian thinkers such as Sri Narayan Guru,¹³ who wrote several pieces in Malayalam, Tamil and even Sanskrit, Jyotirao Phule,¹⁴ who wrote in Marathi, highlighted the core problems of caste oppression. Dalit pamphlet literature highlighting caste histories became popular in the 1920s. U.B.S. Raghuvanshi wrote *Shri Chanvar Puran*, around 1910, and Sunderlal Sagar wrote *Jatav Jiwan* in 1929, challenging their *jati*’s (caste) history’s low caste position in the dominant upper caste literary representation (Hunt 2014, 32). Around the same time Ambedkar too started his own movement for Dalit people to be allowed inside Hindu temples which did not bear any fruits (Kharat 2014, 46–47). It was after the Poona Pact¹⁵ in 1932, that Ambedkar grew more critical of the Gandhian program for the removal of

Kannada where he spoke about the futility of flaunting one’s caste as superior, as all are born of the same process and are made of same flesh and bones. According to him a person’s pedigree depended upon righteous conduct alone and not on caste.

- ¹¹ The 14th century Bhakti saint Chokhamela belonged to Mahar (untouchable) caste and spent most of his life doing the peculiarly menial work *Mahars* were mandated to do. He was devoted to *Vitthal* (God) but did not transgress lines drawn by society and its privileged elders. During his entire lifetime he was told where he really belonged: the door. Even today his memorial stands outside the *Vitthal* temple in *Pandharpur*.
- ¹² Born in Varanasi, Ravidas wrote many devotional songs during the Bhakti movement. He became a spiritual figure and was bestowed with the title Guru and Sant in regions of Punjab, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh. He worked towards reforming people from social evils including caste system.
- ¹³ Sri Narayan Guru belonged to *Ezhava* caste, from Kerala. He learned Vedas, Upanishads, literature, logical rhetoric of Sanskrit, Hatha Yoga and other philosophies. He founded Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP Yogam) in 1903. He gave the slogan “One Caste, One Religion, One God for All.”
- ¹⁴ Jyotirao Govindrao Phule was an Indian social activist, thinker and anti-caste social reformer from Pune, Maharashtra. His critique of the caste system began with an attack on the Vedas, the fundamental texts of Hindus. In his book *Gulamgiri*, he thanked British colonists for making the exploited castes realize that they are worthy of all human rights. He also founded *Satyashodhak Samaj*, through which he opposed idolatry and denounced caste system.
- ¹⁵ Poona Pact was an agreement between the upper caste Hindus and B.R. Ambedkar signed in the Yeravda Central Jail, Poona on September 24, 1932 on behalf of the Depressed Classes for the reservation of electoral seats in the legislature of British India. It was signed by Ambedkar on behalf of the Depressed Classes (the untouchables), and by Congress leader Madan Mohan Malaviya on behalf of Hindus and Gandhi as a means to end the fast-which Gandhi was undertaking in jail as a protest against the decision made by the British Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald to give separate electorates to the Depressed Classes for the election of members

untouchability. Since literacy was very low among the Dalits, usually songs were sung in the villages, poems and other writings were read out by the literate Dalits to the entire community. It is the educated Dalits and intellectuals who not only began to talk about the problems of the poor, exploitation, and humiliation from the upper castes but also integrated and used technology effectively to reach out and forge ties in a transnational manner (Aruna 2018). The majority of the Dalit representation emerged first in the Marathi¹⁶ Dalit literature. Namdeo Laxman Dhasal along with J. V. Pawar, and Arun Kamble founded the Dalit Panthers¹⁷ in 1972. The establishment of this organization is considered one of the major game changers in the Dalit revolution in the 20th century (Breiner 2020). In addition, Dalit feminist writings gained prominence in the 1990s with writer-activists like Bama, whose autobiography *Karukku* (1992) explored joys and sorrows in the lives of Dalit Christian women of her state or Om Prakash Valmiki whose autobiography *Joothan* (1997) is another strong literary work that movingly talks about caste-based discrimination.

Ambedkar belonged to the untouchable Mahar community from Maharashtra and fought for the rights of the Dalits since the colonial days (Zelliot 2005, 53). His period of struggle marks a transformation in the Dalit history (Zelliot 2005, 59). In post-independence India, Ambedkar while drafting the Indian Constitution, was aware of the disjunction between political status and social reality of the Dalits in post-independence India where caste fault lines were visible. Ambedkar pointed out in a speech in 1949 this contradiction and argued that "Political democracy" could only thrive if joined with "social democracy," which was not possible unless Hindu society gives up the practice of caste.

On January 26, 1950, a time of contradictions begins. In politics, there is equality, and in social and economic life there are inequalities. In politics there is recognition of the principles of "one man, one vote" and "one vote, one value." In the social and economic life, there is, by reason of the social and economic structure,

of provincial legislative assemblies in British India. Ambedkar had represented the Depressed Classes at the Second Roundtable Conference in 1932 after which the award was announced.

¹⁶ The Dalit writers began their focused and stipulated work in 1950s, much of which was written in Marathi. Anna Bhau Sathe, Baburao Bagul, Arun Kamble, Raja Dhale, Laxman Mane, Sharan Kumar Limbale, Namdeo Dhasal, all wrote in their literary works in Marathi between the 1950s–1970s).

¹⁷ Inspired by the Black Panthers movement for civil rights and against racism, Namdeo Dhasal and J. V. Pawar decided to form the Dalit Panthers in 1972. Pawar also named his daughter Angela after Angela Davis and began to network with civil rights groups worldwide. Dalit Panthers focused on economic issues and social justice as it was largely comprised of working-class people. The organization got dissolved in 1988 when their leader Ramdas Athawale was made a minister by Sharad Pawar of Congress party.

continued to denial of the principle of "one man, one vote." "How long shall we continue to live this life of contradiction?" (Scroll.in 2016).

For Ambedkar, caste was a systemic problem and without achieving Fraternity and Equality, political freedom could be quite meaningless. Ambedkar was instrumental in building a Dalit identity which was at the opposite spectrum of what Gandhi was trying to build. Ambedkar disapproved of the Gandhian nomenclature of Harijan¹⁸ for the Dalits and also made sure they are not known by their derogatory caste names. Rather, he chose the word "Dalit" which underlined the identity of oppression. Ambedkar followed in the footsteps of Jyotirao Phule who founded Satyashodhak Samaj, in 1873. Its mission was to provide education and increased social rights and political access for underprivileged groups, the Shudras, the Dalits, and the women. Savitribai Phule, Jyotirao's wife, taught at the school established by the couple in the face of stiff opposition from the upper castes. Jyotirao used Deenbandhu¹⁹ as an outlet for the voice of Satyashodhak Samaj. It was started in 1877 by Krishnarao Pandurang Bhalekar, a low caste, in Marathi language. Ambedkar, too, realized the importance of media but since most of it was owned by upper castes, he started newspapers²⁰ such as the *Mooknayak*, *Bahishkrut Bharat*, *Janata*, and *Prabuddha Bharat* to raise the voices of the Dalits. He used his journalistic writings to create awareness and mobilize people in the anti-caste movement. He communicated not only with Dalits but with society at large and tried to shape public opinion with respect to the caste system and various other social issues and events (Pol 2018).

Ambedkar slowly began to realize that structural reform was the only means to make way for social change in India and firmly began to believe that social revolution was necessary, which could come only from actively critiquing the cultural structure of Hinduism, as opposed to attempting to change it from within (Rodrigues 2002, 27). Ambedkar's identity evolved throughout his life with a strong sense of commitment to pursue justice not only as an activist but also as a prolific writer. (Narke 1979, 61–65). At a later stage, Ambedkar also started to look at religion as a valuable means to realize change through socio-cultural critique. While Hindu religion proved to be a vehicle for the structural violence of the caste system,

¹⁸ Gandhi used the term "Harijan," meaning "children of God" for the untouchables. The term was coined by Narsinh Mehta, a Gujarati poet-saint of the Bhakti tradition, to refer to all devotees of lord Krishna irrespective of caste, class, or sex.

¹⁹ Deenbandhu, was a weekly Marathi-language newspaper in British India to cater explicitly to the laboring classes. The weekly articulated the grievances of the peasants and the workers.

²⁰ Pol (2018) observes that the newspapers Ambedkar was associated with have largely contributed in disseminating radical political ideas and motivated a churn within the society. These newspapers also help to contextualize and trace the history of the Dalit political discourse, issues of caste violence, representation, and religious fundamentalism.

Ambedkar challenged its orthodox beliefs of Indian culture head on with fierce debate and rhetoric. He studied various religions of the world in order to find the one, which would best fit the untouchable communities and finally chose Buddhism. Gandhi criticized the idea of a "choice" of a religion and has remarked that "religion is not like a horse or a cloak, which can be changed at will. It is a more integral part of one's self than one's own body" (Queen 2013, 525). On October 14, 1956, on the 2500 anniversary of the Buddha's Nirvana, Ambedkar led a mass conversion of "untouchable" Hindus to Buddhism.²¹ For Ambedkar, changing his religion was an act of social protest which re-positioned the Dalit identity as collective and as well as personal. He used both secular (gaining rights through legislation), and religious narrative (converting to Buddhism), as a means of not only securing rights for the Dalits but also attempting to fill a void of cultural identity, which over two thousand years of caste discrimination had created. Ambedkar was a pragmatist who studied under John Dewey at Columbia University in the United States. He had a modern understanding of religion, which emphasized that belief was not only about ends, but also a means of social interpretation. He attempted to approach social conflict strategically in a way which neither privileges religious nor secular explanations (Taylor, Bougie, and Caouette 2003, 213). His main mantra for the Dalits to improve their condition remained: "educate, organize, agitate."

The revival of Buddhism and the changed social identity of India's Dalits is seen as an important marker of building a separate identity in a Hindu-dominated India. The Trailokya Bauddha Mahasangha, Sahayak Gana (TBMSG),²² founded in 1967 by an English Buddhist monk, Sangharakshika, is the largest indigenous Buddhist organization on the Indian sub-continent. It provides a stark contrast to secular focused Indian social activists who find the narrative structure of religion-based movements focuses on overcoming victimization through the reclamation of one's identity within each individual (Senauke 2015). The Dr. Ambedkar Non-Resident Indian Association (DANRIA),²³ is a group of non-resident Dalits

²¹ Queen (2013, 526) writes that approximately 380,000 "untouchables" took part in the outdoor ceremony. However, scholars disagree about the actual numbers of the converts, but most agree that it was probably the largest mass religious conversion in human history. Some scholars have estimated that as many as 800,000 "untouchables" converted to Buddhism on that day.

²² The basic guiding principle of TBMSG has been to form a civic-life, and community outreach around the idea of a renewed Buddhist Sangha ("community"), as well as, concepts of Kalyana Mitra ("spiritual friendship") and Dharma as social practice. The Bahujan Hitaya meaning "for the welfare of the many," is the social work wing of the movement.

²³ DANRIA is a small collaborative group of non-resident Dalits living in the United States who have incorporated an NGO in Baltimore, Maryland founded in 2006. Their goal is to provide educational assistance and social uplifts to Dalits living in India, particularly the manual scavengers of Uttar Pradesh.

living in the United States, have repeatedly made their stand clear that their work is to support secular Dalit education and empowerment. Their strict adherence to secular identity is seen as to have evolved from community-based religious ideologies and in turn, is considered a more effective vehicle for social change. It is the secular narrative structure of securing rights for the Dalits that has allowed activists to conflate Dalit rights with human rights. The opposite and secular narratives, by contrast focus on the re-humanization of past victims, posits that there is a need to push the collective mentality to a tipping-point in which a rights regime can be adequately enforced. Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism along with many of his Dalit followers remains an act of defiance, to show that they existed and now have a distinctly new identity that could not be simply disregarded and de-legitimized. Followers of Ambedkar's religious rhetoric can be exclusionary and appear pre-modern for those following secular narrative, while the followers of religious narrative find that the Dalits following the secular narrative structure having too much reliance on western notions of liberty, democracy, fraternity. However, most of the transnational organizations are hesitant to support religious commitment and are willing to sideline it in favor of an underlying, and more basic, commitment to humanism.

3. The mainstream media and the Dalits

The domination of the upper castes in the mainstream media has been described by Kumar and Subramani (2014, 125) as "elite oriented" and "monopolized" and is criticized by Dalit reformers as Manuwadi or casteist. Ambedkar (1945, 200) pointed out about the absence of Dalits in the newsroom:

The Untouchables have no press and the Congress Press is closed to them. The staff of the Associated Press of India, is entirely drawn from Madras Brahmins—indeed the whole of the press in India is in their hands who for well-known reasons, are entirely pro-Congress and will not allow any news hostile to the Congress to get publicity.

Even while reporting on the carnage of Partition,²⁴ the Indian and the British media were relatively silent on the problems of the Dalits. The main reason for this silence as argued by Ambedkar was the main news distributing agency, the

²⁴ Partition was the inevitable outcome of India's Independence in 1947. Incidents of mass violence spread all over Northern and Eastern India, with mass migration of people from these areas sometimes caused violence and sometimes resulted in violence. Partition set people against people of Hindu and Muslim faith. Systemic and organized violence against women was perpetrated as they were kidnapped, raped, killed and their bodies mutilated.

Associated Press²⁵ which was dominated by the English-educated “Madras Brahmins” (Pandian 2007, 3).²⁶

The alternative (predominantly print) Dalit media outlets were established already in the 1920s but had limited success due to financial constraints (Matta 2019). The Oxfam (2019) report reaffirmed that marginalized groups are absent in news media, particularly in leadership positions which determine who gets the space (Mondal 2017). The report revealed that the percentage of people from the upper caste holding leadership positions is 100% in Hindi television news; 89.3% in English television news; 91.7% in English newspapers; 87.5% in Hindi newspapers; 84.2% in digital media; and 72.7% in news magazines (Matta 2019). The survey reports the complete absence of Dalits in the decisive positions in India’s news media. Even anchors, panelists, and writers are predominantly from the upper castes. Except for the Hindi newspaper *Amar Ujala*, the percentage of anchors and writers from upper castes reporting on caste issues in India is more than 50% in all mainstream media (Matta 2019).

The Constitutional provisions and protective legislation all aim towards abolishing “untouchability” practices and promoting Dalits socio-economic development. The affirmative action policy, wherein seats are constitutionally “reserved” for the Dalits to ensure their proportional representation in federal government jobs, state and local legislative bodies, the lower house of parliament, and educational institutions, has not proved to be fruitful in achieving the inclusion of the oppressed and the underprivileged in several domains. It is also worrisome because, this leaves out a large share of oppressed people who need a platform to represent themselves. There is no democracy without diversity. For democracy to thrive, journalism must thrive and for journalism to thrive, diversity must be robust. This must be done consciously because the numbers on caste diversity in newsrooms are dismal. This is a dreadful commentary on the quality of Indian democracy.

It appears that things have changed little since Kenneth J. Cooper, an African-American and the then New Delhi bureau chief of *The Washington Post*, had noted in the mid 1990s that “India’s majority lower castes are minor voices in newspapers” (Cooper 1996), which was followed by B. N. Uniyal, a Delhi based journalist who wrote that in his career as a journalist spanning over 30 years he has never met a fellow journalist who was a Dalit (Uniyal 1996). Professor Vivek Kumar

²⁵ India’s Associated Press was re-christened as the Press Trust of India in 1947.

²⁶ Madras Brahmins had intolerant attitude towards the Dalits and it can be seen in their comments towards the controversial “Non-Brahmin Manifesto” of 1916 issued by the Nationalists of Madras. They did not open their discussion correspondence column on this subject citing that this may lead to acrimonious controversy.

(2017), who teaches Sociology at the Center for Study of Social Systems,²⁷ argued in a lecture that he gave at Center for Culture, Media and Governance, Jamia Milia Islamia University, that Dalit marginalization in media takes place at two levels. At one level the mainstream media suffers from a cognitive blackout and exclude the marginalized groups from the structures and processes. At another level, the Dalit icons and leaders are reduced to stigmatization, as their caste identity is always highlighted. He cited the example of Mayawati, the leader of Bahujan Samaj Party and the ex-Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh who is never credited for her brilliant mind but is only projected as a Dalit leader. Even Ambedkar's contribution towards the Constitution, labor reforms, and rights are not highlighted by the mainstream media and he is rather reduced to a Dalit leader, who fought only for the rights of the Dalits. The issue of reservation (Affirmative action) finds more space in discussions in the media than the universal idea of equality, fraternity, and justice for the Dalits. The entire Dalit movement is reduced to a fight for reservations, issues concerning caste atrocities of the Dalits are not brought into the discourse by the mainstream media (Kumar 2017).

4. Dalits and new/alternative media

Systemic exclusion and underrepresentation led the Dalits to a strong desire and need for an alternative media. By the year 2000, Dalitistan.org (now defunct) and International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN) were already on the horizon. Around 2008, the Internet began to be effectively used as a medium to achieve what the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions²⁸ were able to achieve in the Western world (Best et al. 2011, 231). The Khairlanji incident in which a Dalit family were abducted, raped, and killed in the village of Bhandara district of the state of Maharashtra, was a turning point in the use of the cyberspace by the Dalits. The mainstream media did not report the news for weeks on end. With no witnesses ready to testify, a Dalit government officer used the Internet to publicly upload the report of the Fact Finding Commission that documented the findings about the crime (PUDR 2007). The post was quickly taken down from the website, but by then it had been widely shared and reported in the mainstream media. The Internet was effectively used to at least give voice to otherwise voiceless victims.

²⁷ Professor Vivek Kumar's major works revolve around the issue of caste and he specializes in Dalit Studies and Sociology of South Asia.

²⁸ The Truth and Reconciliation Commission is an official body tasked with discovering and revealing past wrongdoing by a government. The Commissions are occasionally set up by states emerging from periods of internal unrest, civil war, or dictatorship marked by human rights abuses. The India Residential Schools Settlement Agreement is the largest class-action settlement in Canadian History. The Truth Commissions also formed part of peace settlements in El Salvador, Congo, Kenya, and others.

The Sessions Court, the highest criminal court in a district, held eight people guilty of murder, six accused were given death, and two life imprisonment. The court acquitted three of the accused (The Hindu 2016). The Bombay High Court commuted death sentence of six convicts to life imprisonment for a period of 25 years, drawing sharp reaction from the Dalit people including the lone survivor Bhaiyalal Bhotmange of the victim's family. He observed that not a single person has had a confirmed death sentence which was unfortunate (Hattangadi 2010).

The atrocities on the Dalits, such as those at Khairlanji, not only suggest media bias but questions state policy and principles (Sebastian 2009). It also focuses on the impact of Internet on the public sphere as it enabled the emergence of an alternative or counter public sphere, where political currents oppositional to the dominant mainstream can find support and expression (Dahlgren 2005, 152). In the book *Dalits and Alternative Media*, C. Suresh Kumar and R. Subramani (2017, 25) suggest that civic discussions and deliberations in the public sphere can prove an important catalyst of change. Since the first Dalit website Dalitistan.org came into being in the year 2000, many Dalit organizations have made their web presence felt in the cyberspace (Thirumal and Tartakov 2011, 26–27). They mention numerous websites run by Dalit collectives which question the normative structure of Indian modernity, most asking for political recognition or redistributive justice. Dalit Camera, a popular YouTube channel operating since 2007, has more than 76,000 subscribers and has over 3,000 videos uploaded with some fetching up to six million views. It also has films featuring Ambedkar's speeches, clips of his funeral procession, a television series on the making of the Indian Constitution, as well as of riots in early 2018 at Bhima Koregaon, filmed and shared by the members of the public.

The construction of an alternative identity through various online platforms is not just about presenting dissenting lower caste characters, glorified as Dalit heroes who fought against upper caste oppression and injustice, but also about educating the Dalits of their constitutional rights and highlighting their contribution in Indian history. Dalits are now claiming the authority to write independent historical narratives from their own point of view and discredit the grand narratives showing Dalits in poor light by the upper castes (Narayan 2008, 170–72). The legend of Nangeli,²⁹ a Dalit woman who cut off her breasts in protest against a horrific "breast tax" which is not found in the pages of history of Kerala, nor of Travancore, the erstwhile princely state, has made strides in the 21st century mainly with the help of Dalit social media platforms. An Instagram page #nangeli

²⁹ In the early 19th century, Dalit women were not allowed to cover their upper body in front of the high caste people and if they did so, they had to pay a hefty tax. Nangeli cut off her breasts in protest and presented the bleeding organs on a plantain leaf to the king's official who had come to collect tax for covering her breasts.

has photos, videos, and other information about her highlighting a lone Dalit woman's resistance against caste diktats (Instagram). Similarly, Dalits worldwide celebrate the birth anniversary of Savitribai Phule³⁰ the wife of anti-caste activist Jyotirao Phule, known for her contribution in the field of women's education in the 19th century. She is regarded as the first female teacher of India (Jamal 2019). Dalits has started to celebrate her birthday on January 3 as Teachers' Day instead of on September 5 which is the birthday of Dr. Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan,³¹ scholar and statesman who also served as the President of India between 1962 and 1967 (Navayan 2016). Social media activism of Dalit advocates and reinforces Dalit masses to think about their identities. Most believe that there is a deep conspiracy by the Hindu caste to maintained rigid religious norms and ignorance about Dalit identity and their historical contribution. Significant links backed by available literature on social media are exposing the hypocrisy of the Hindu caste in plotting a certain perception and understanding of the Dalit lives.

Beyond physical violence, ideological violence is a real threat to the Dalit movement. Building of ideological thought on the philosophy of Phule and Ambedkar is also one of the objectives which the digital platforms serve. It is the hypertextual nature of the digital medium that enables one to explore links to news reports, videos, and other documents. Digitized versions of the *Collected Works of Dr. Ambedkar*, compiled and published by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, and Phule's writings, such as *Ghulamgiri*, provide food for thought, while Human Rights Watch shares glimpses of anti-Dalit violence providing exposure to injustices against the Dalits. Dalits have also resisted efforts, from the "left" and the "right" of the Indian political spectrum in appropriating Ambedkar. Arundhati Roy, Booker Prize winning Indian author, wrote an extensive introduction of Dr. Ambedkar's *Annihilation of Caste* in 2014. Many Dalit activists felt her introduction did not convey the thoughts of Dr. Ambedkar (Sarvan 2019). Some Dalit scholars and thinkers also wrote their repartees around the theme and published their writings in a book titled *Hatred in the Belly* (Harad 2016). The website roundtableindia.co.in regularly features views and discussion of the book through the website and their Facebook page.

³⁰ Savitribai Phule was subjected to immense harassment every day as she walked to the school. Stones, cow dung and mud were thrown at her by the upper caste Hindus who opposed the idea of women's education. Savitribai faced everything courageously and her poems and efforts were noticed by the British Indian Government.

³¹ In India, Teachers' Day is celebrated annually on September 5 to mark the birthday of the country's former President, scholar, philosopher and recipient of Bharat Ratna (highest civilian award). Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, a strong supporter of the varna system, is alleged by The Roundtable India, a Dalit website, that he stole from his student's (Jadunath Sinha's) thesis.

5. Dalit activism and transnational advocacy

Digitization has increased communication manifolds and has allowed the Dalits to seek support and forge bonds with groups and institutions beyond the nation-state. This has internationalized the issue of caste-based discrimination as it has disrupted the isolation of Dalit voices in India and has helped them garner international pressure on the Indian state to act in the interest of the Dalits, who suffer from various kinds of socio-economic disabilities on account of caste. Transnational Dalit activism uses the language of human rights to articulate its protests and demands. This allows them to seek support from other groups like the Blacks from United States and gain from their social movement like Black-LivesMatter, highlighting similarities in the kind of discrimination Dalits face to garner support. Dalits from around the world can now meet on digital platforms and discuss issues and concerns that affects them on digital platforms. Social media thus plays a crucial role in shaping political identities in the movement.

In an example of transnational solidarity, six stone carvers of Pathar Gadhal Mazdoor Suraksha Sangh (PGMSS), a labor union of more than 3,000 stone carvers, mostly belonging to Dalit communities from the state of Rajasthan India, have filed a law suit against the egregious abuses they have faced while constructing Shri Swaminarayan Mandir in New Jersey (Backweb 2021). The temple was being built by the Hindu organization Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS), which has built several extravagant temples around the world (UK, New Zealand, Australia, Kenya, India), with intricate marble carvings. The Dalit workers who were recruited by the agents of BAPS were taken to the United States and alleged that their passports were confiscated on arrival and they were not paid the minimum hourly wage, and moreover were made to work for over 87 hours per week. The workers protested after one of the workers died and the leader of the protest was forcibly returned to India by the BAPS agents (Reddy 2021). The International Union of Bricklayers and Allied Craftworkers (BAC), which represents 75,000 skilled masonry-trowel trade craftworkers providing essential construction services across the United States and Canada and Global Labor Justice-International Labor Rights Forum (GL-ILRF) has shown solidarity towards PGMSS and has demanded a fair probe in the matter (GLJ 2021).

In an attempt to forge bonds with allies, Dalit activism lays emphasis on similarities in identity with other groups such as Blacks who face racial discrimination especially in the first world countries like United States, United Kingdom, and Australia. These groups are in a comparable social position facing discrimination and injustice just as the Dalits in India, but critically are outside of the Indian state. Dalits share an analogical history of oppression and marginalized structural position in society: a shared difference. The politics of a political identity of a "minority group" is relevant within a nation state however, for sharing solidarity with global

groups, analogies are drawn suggesting that Dalits are just like African Americans under Jim Crow laws or the Black South Africans under Apartheid. The success of the hashtags #Blacklivesmatter and #Dalitlivesmatter shows that these analogies and comparisons have been mobilized for many ends. Transnational activism thus communicates Dalit identity and human rights claims through the "citation" of these other communities (Burton 2012, 13). Making Dalit issues international/global issues, the activists have forged solidarities with other marginalized groups and have tried to recast "caste" as a global phenomenon, as a form of social stratification and inherent inequality that is found in societies across the world in different countries, such as Japan, Nigeria, or Senegal. The conceptualization of caste, while drawing similarities between other forms of inequality and discrimination on one hand allows solidarities across borders, and on the other hand raises questions about its unique nature specific to Hinduism.

Small inroads have been made by Dalit activists for international recognition of their issues. In 2001, the National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR) helped organize over 200 Dalit activists to travel to Durban, South Africa to protest against caste-based discrimination and violence at the World Conference Against Racism, Racial discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance (WCAR). The Dalit activists were successful in pointing to the global nature of caste arguing that "caste-affected" societies existed across the world, therefore caste discrimination should be considered as a human rights violation just like racism (Visvanathan 2001, 3125–3126). The attempts made by the Dalit activists to have caste discrimination included in their reports and declarations proved unsuccessful as these, were consistently opposed and blocked by the Government of India, which argued that racism and caste-based discrimination were distinct phenomena and outside the purview of the WCAR (Bob 2007, 84).

Earlier in the 1990s, attempts were made to include caste atrocities and discrimination as violation of human rights by the Dalit Indian delegation to the United Nations (UN) Commission on Human Rights but were rejected in favor of the arguments made by representatives of the Government of India who argued that caste was a social institution relating to matters of "birth" and "social origin" specific to India (Bob 2007, 166–170). In 1996, India's report to the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) presented the dominant nationalist narrative of Indian history which embedded a politically conservative understanding of caste (CERD 1996, 5). The 1996 report also cited a benevolent origin of the caste system and stated that caste has its origins in the functional division of Indian society during ancient times (CERD 1996, 6). The report argued that unlike racial discrimination, which is a product of global historical processes, caste discrimination was specific to India, and had local roots, and thus was outside the purview of UN covenants on discrimination (CERD 1996, 22). The Dalit

activists failed to obtain the international legal protections available to victims of racial discrimination at WCAR. However, the Dalit activists and sympathizers succeeded in galvanizing considerable support and increasing visibility of caste-based discrimination and the plight of the Dalits in India (Divakar 2004, 319).

Through the 1990s and early 2000s, a robust domestic and transnational Dalit advocacy network was developed which saw NCDHR, an umbrella group of Dalit organizations from 14 Indian states, changing the scope and reach of domestic Dalit activism. The International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN) was established in the year 2000 in Copenhagen, particularly for networking transnationally between the organizations that work for the eradication of caste discrimination. It is led by non-Dalits but seeks support for Dalit issues from the UN, EU institutions, and private sector actors (Tarrow 2006, 32). It regularly organizes international conferences on Dalit rights. The NCDHR connects the grassroots organizations from different parts of India, gathers data, monitors the media and allocation of Government funds, publishes reports, and plays a networking role as well as advocates Dalit rights in relation to their legal rights (Bob 2007, 170–182).³²

Reaching out for foreign support to put pressure on the local government is described by Sikkink and Keck (1998, 93) as a “boomerang” pattern.³³ Sikkink and Keck (1999, 95) argue that such patterns are used mostly for human rights cause and largely emerge in authoritative states where the activists’ access to their own governments is blocked and is used mostly for human rights causes. Although India is a democratic country and the Indian Constitution outlaws untouchability (the Constitution of India, Art. 17), Dalit transnational activists find usefulness in the boomerang pattern strategy by bringing the local issues into the transnational scene. Globalization and the spread of universal human rights norms thus offer new opportunities for Dalit movement. It brings caste into the international human rights discourse and locates caste into civil society and developmental discourse.

³² The focus of Bob’s work “Dalit Rights Are Human Rights,” is on the efforts of Dalit activists to include caste discrimination as a human rights issue within the international community. According to Bob, lack of coordination and poor organization among Dalit groups along with lack of human rights terminology have been some of the bottlenecks which denied Dalits making the human rights claim till the end of 1990s. However, he draws attention towards changes within Dalit community including the establishment of national and international network that built a rhetoric of fixing state culpability for caste-based discrimination. He draws parallels between Dalits and other minority groups such as Burakumin of Japan, Wolof, Pehul, Mandinka, from Senegal, and Fulani, Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo of Nigeria, indicating the need for recognition of human rights theories and international politics.

³³ The externalization strategy by reaching out for foreign support and putting pressure on the local government is called a “boomerang” pattern which was introduced as a concept by Keck and Sikkink (1998).

The 19th century anti-slavery movements tell us that transnational activism is not a new phenomenon (Keck and Sikkink 1999). Globalization and changing structure of international politics have strongly facilitated the new patterns of transnational activism of the age (Tarrow 2006, 5). Tarrow (2006, 25–27) emphasizes the actions of international institutions as important factors in the creation of opportunities for causing the contention of transnational activists. However, it is noted that the rise of Dalit transnational activism may not be a direct or indirect outcome caused by contention from international institutions, like the IMF, the World Bank, etc., because Dalit activists target international institutions mainly with a purpose of gaining support from them. It is the strategies such as networking, using the boomerang pattern, the spread of universal human rights norms in a globalized world, that offers new opportunities for the Dalit movement. It locates caste into civil society and a discourse on development.

The transnational Dalit activism uses a political logic and form of argumentation that departs from Ambedkar's movement for Dalit rights which saw caste as "parochial" having specificities peculiar to India regarding its origin. The main focus of transnational Dalit activists remains on finding similar grounds for caste-based discrimination and racism along with conceptualization of caste as a form of inherited inequality. The Cisco Systems Inc. case brought out the ghost of caste-based discrimination faced by the Dalit diaspora globally.³⁴ Equality Labs, a Dalit civil rights organization dedicated to ending caste apartheid across the world, conducted a survey in 2018, which revealed that two-thirds of American Dalits reported being treated unfairly at their workplace because of their caste. The report was cited in the lawsuit against Cisco (Mukherji 2020). Run by Thenmozhi Soundararajan, Equality Labs specializes in digital security for activist groups. Thenmozhi states that the lawsuit against Cisco is a landmark case because it is first civil rights case in the United States where a governmental entity sued an American company for failing to protect caste oppressed employees and creating a hostile workplace (Mantri 2020). The Indian Dalit organizations like The Birsā Ambedkar Phule Students Association BAPSA along with Ambedkar students' Association and several others showed solidarity by tweeting about the Cisco case.

The internationalization of caste discrimination as in the case of the Cisco and HCL employee reworks previous conceptualization of Dalit identity and caste and has paved the way for the recognition of caste as a category for discrimination.

³⁴ The California Department of Fair Employment and Housing (DFEH) filed a petition against Cisco Systems Inc. on behalf of a complaint given by a Dalit employee who alleged that his Indian supervisors practiced discrimination against him owing to his status of being a Dalit. The complaint also read that peers junior to him were given a promotion and granted the ability to supervise him, despite the fact that he was both competent and deserving of a promotion and salary raise.

Harvard University³⁵ has become the first Ivy League university to recognize caste as a protected category as a ground for discrimination (Kapur 2021). Most Dalits who have received higher education in India or abroad are hesitant to disclose their caste, fearing stigmatization and discrimination. After the advent of social media, many Dalit youngsters have often said that Twitter gave them a sense of community and for the first time they were not ashamed of disclosing their identity in public. Facebook pages like Ambedkar Caravan, Dalit History Month and Twitter handles like Ambedkar's Community Live, Dalit Voice, Dalit Diva, Savarna Fat Cat, and Everyday Casteism are used by the Dalits to create discourse, ideate, and connect with each other, and with the world. These platforms have allowed the Dalits to reshape caste imagination as people can overcome the ghetto mentality, which was ingrained by caste-based socialization. For a large number of Dalits who otherwise would not disclose their caste identity, social media has brought safety as they are part of a large Dalit community who can share their views with remote chances of receiving any physical violence from upper caste Hindus (Singh 2019).

For most Dalits, the Internet and social media are not a part of their ordinary life and within their reach. Even in the 21st century only a few thousand – mostly city-based, male Dalits – have access and competence (in terms of English language and technological skills) to be able to use social media effectively (Kumar and Subramani 2014, 127). However, for those few educated Dalits, the cyber space has provided access to the production and consumption of the digital world which they are keen to appropriate and use it for their individual, social, and political purposes. Such a situation is not without its pitfalls where a miniscule Dalit middle class what becomes the interlocutor between the State and the rest of the Dalits who are illiterate and technology challenged. This may lead to monopolizing the issues, material and symbolic resources available to all Dalits. The difficulties in combating misinformation and fake news have plagued the social media. Sometimes unverified or fake news is used to create Faultline and animosity. For example, *Newslaundry* ran the piece headline “The media's blind eye to President Kovind's humiliation” with the narrative, that mainstream media has not found the Dalit President's insult by Brahmin priests inside a temple a newsworthy story.³⁶

³⁵ Harvard now joins a handful of American Institutions such as the University of California, Davis, Colby College, and Brandeis University in formally accepting the prevalence of caste-based harassment on campuses.

³⁶ President of India Shri Ram Nath Kovind and his wife Savita visited the Shri Jagannath temple at Puri, Odisha on March 18, 2018. Some news reports suggested that there was possibly breach of President's security cordon and some servitors allegedly milled around Savita Kovind, while she was offering prayers inside the temple's sanctum sanctorum, leading to occasional jostling. The news was reported by some journalists with a caste angle to it stating that “*Brahmin*” priest allegedly misbehaved with President Kovind because he is a Dalit. Even

Later, the Press Secretary declared the article based on a fictional incident, stating that the event never happened in the first place. The story was suspended and taken down from the portal (*Newslandry* 2018). Fake news and disinformation over time may lead to decline in public trust in media which in turn might prove dangerous for democracies as governments would then use surveillance and control over the content posted on social media.

6. Conclusion

There is no doubt that today social media platforms are helping the Dalits raise their voices in the public discourse, reconstructing their identity and finding global support in fighting against caste-based discrimination and social injustice. Dalits are using all forms of social media to challenge the distorted notions that deliberately malign their identity and also piece together parts of their missing historical identity by challenging mainstream historical narratives and stereotypes about them. Social media is also shifting the existing caste paradigms from the religious arena to rationality helping Dalits to feel proud of their legacy, beliefs, and practices. Dalit's perception and conception of their caste identity are finding new grounds on the social media. It is a hard truth that Indian mainstream media does not address Dalit issues and the voice of the Dalits is largely absent from the newsroom even today (Cooper 1996; Jeffery 2012, 34). Identity formation and recreation are largely influenced by blogs, social networking, and online social exchanges in the digital era (Buckingham and Willet 2006, 24). The dominance of caste Hindus has been challenged at every point (Gupta 2004, 12). The several instances and stories reported online of discrimination of Dalits, their torture, abuse, and violation of their human rights by the upper castes indicate that on-line mobilization and agitations are being resorted to, but the widespread online publicity may or may not always translate into offline actions. The real and the virtual world are not exclusive as they may seem. The protests which are offline may sometime go unnoticed/without action, however, the hashtags and tweets posted by the social media users sometimes force the government, judiciary, print media, and political leaders to take notice and act upon it. Virtual media is not so virtual after all (Katariya 2018).

The digitally empowered Dalits making use of social media are more likely to be educated, city dwellers with higher socio-economic disposable income. It does lead to the danger of the Dalit middle class becoming interlocutors between the state and the rest of the disenfranchised Dalit community. This

eminent Journalist Shekhar Gupta tweeted that it was no surprise that Kovind and his wife were "treated so boorishly" by "casteist priests" at Puri.

could also lead to a cultural hegemony of the digitally advantaged Dalits over the disadvantaged ones. This also raises questions about available strategies for non-Ambedkarite Dalits especially in Eastern India, where an Ambedkarite approach has found only limited footing. It is human behavior that unless people interact offline and forge personal bonds while working together, they are unlikely to be able to sustain collective action with regularity. It is because of the barrier of language and technology which the majority of Dalits do not have access to, thus puts the focus back on the mainstream media which still has a much wider reach. What is required therefore is diversity in the newsroom, as it is of great importance not only from the point of view of the representation of the oppressed, but also because their presence contributes to ongoing social movements and subsequently drives social change.

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