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The Dalit Tryst with the Indian Newsroom and the Arrival of New Media

Abstract: Dalits form a major portion of the Indian population of more than 200 millions. However the media reportage about Dalits and their problems is skewed and their cause is not given adequate coverage, nor do they form a sizable part of India's newsroom workforce. With the advent of twenty-first century, internet has brought in opportunities for being heard for communities facing social exclusion by being an alternative to the mainstream media. The paper thus posits that the internet platforms such as Dalit websites, social media such as blogs are an excellent alternative media for Dalits to voice their issues in India. Furthermore, the paper tries to give a viable solution to overcome the digital divide, through developing ICT hubs.

J Balasubramaniam, after completing his Masters in Journalism arrived in Chennai with hopes of becoming a journalist in the Tamil media. Elated, that he was being called by a Tamil daily for the job of a reporter, he went for its interview; the nature of which he has described in his paper for *Economic and Political Weekly*-

Editor: Do you belong to the *pillamar* caste?

Me: No sir.

Editor: Then?

Me: SC.

Editor: Ok..(silence)

Editor: We will inform you when we need people, ok.

Me: Thank you sir.

I did not receive a call from that office after the interview. (Balasubramaniam)

The aforementioned incident in Balasubramaniam's life-, who was a Dalit journalist, is an echo of the lives of many Dalits seeking a job in the Indian media. It is an insight into the ugly underbelly of the Indian newsroom, where a Dalit journalist has to undergo innumerable ordeals in order to survive in the media industry where caste based nepotism is the order of the day. Many in fact, leave the profession mid-way; let alone initiate a media organization of their own. Robin Jeffrey, an acclaimed academic, has estimated that there are about 25,000-30,000 journalists for dailies in India (the basis of which is the hypothesis that each daily has at least 20 journalists on its roll) (Jeffrey). However, a Delhi-based journalist, Ajaz Ashraf (2013), could spot only 21 Dalit journalists—working in broadcast and print (both vernacular and English) — in the Indian media (Ashraf).

Says Sagrika Ghose, a prominent Indian journalist, “The Dalit’ or ‘Untouchable’ is a government servant, the teacher in a state school, a politician. He is generally never a member of the higher judiciary, an eminent lawyer, industrialist or journalist” (Ghose). B N Uniyal, a Delhi-based journalist, could not agree more, “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” (Uniyal).

Uniyal's was in fact a veritable odyssey that he embarked upon when he had to respond to a request from a Delhi-based foreign correspondent. The correspondent had asked Uniyal to recommend him a Dalit journalist to whom he could speak on the fall out between the media and Bahujan Samaj Party leader Kanshi Ram. Uniyal took the foreign correspondent's request to friends, editors, and columnists, only to find that none knew of a Dalit journalist. (Ashraf)

Mass Media and Nationhood

Mass media evolves in close synchronicity with the nation, and, indeed, is part of the process of constituting a 'national' identity (Muralidharan, Sukumar). However, vernacular press and papers by minorities often use the media to reach out and mobilize their community in order to be a stronger force. Milton Israel has in a study of 'propaganda and the press in the Indian nationalist struggle', posited that "in significant measure, the ideal of an All- India nation state that emerged out of the Indian nationalist struggle was imagined in English print" (Muralidharan, Sukumar). And since 'minority' and 'the nation' are co-constituted, the media could properly be viewed as a vehicle through which the minority identity is defined, represented and perpetuated.

Therefore, Dalits have in the past, persistently tried to run their own media organizations at par with the rest of the media industry in order to define their identity, and hence improve their conditions. However, owing to a host of issues, they were unable to survive in the trying and fast paced Indian media industry that hurled one challenge after the other at them; be it financial, lack of literacy or unjust and casteist government organizations.

This could be held true seeing Indian media's history which informs us how Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar who other than being a proficient jurist, politician and social reformer was also a

successful journalist and had cleverly used the media to fight for Dalit rights by publishing a series of newspapers namely *Mook Nayak*, *Bahishkrit* and *Janata*. Predictably, *Harijan* – the paper for the oppressed classes started by Gandhi is practically hailed as a legendary paper till date, in contrast to the lesser known Ambedkar's journalistic labours through the aforesaid newspapers. This indeed, is evidence, strong enough to give one a clearer picture about the exclusion of Dalits in the Indian mediascape. It offers a peek into the lopsided Indian public sphere which hardly manages to generate comprehensive debates as it systematically ignores the Dalit point of view. Corporate interests of the twenty-first century India have aggravated this malaise as the 'media industry' is increasingly being indifferent towards fomenting a diverse media which cuts across caste, religious and class lines. (S. Kumar)

This prejudiced Indian public sphere has in fact, neglected the voice of more than 200 million people in India. Dalits continued to face oppression despite their strength in numbers and the assurances of equality they have been given, underpinned both by the unrestricted right to vote and affirmative action. (Muralidharan, Sukumar). This brings us to deliberate on how a disenchanted Dalit journalist escapes from the labyrinth of caste discrimination in order to procure a job and be heard through the so-called 'fourth estate' of the Indian democracy.

The twenty-first century however, has been a harbinger of revolutions. It has brought in a new platform-the internet.

The Internet has rendered itself into being a promising avenue to revive the civic sphere and extend the community life by providing broad, diverse forums for discussions. Here, the Dalits are finally not only being heard, but are able to interact and invite online political debate, deliberate, consult, make decisions, get involved and scrutinize as well as mobilize, for

organizing, petitioning, and protesting. Evidently, the online media, in such a case is an obvious answer to the Dalit starvation for articulating their cause and reaching like-minded people far and wide. How and how much they are able to do so, is a question, the answer to which needs to be explored.

The Alternative Dais

A recent report from Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI), posits that the number of rural internet users have increased from 29 million as of December 2011 to 38 million at the end of June, and is expected to reach 45 million by the end of December 2014. These statistics stand against the 150 million total internet users in India by the end of December 2012. (Internet and Mobile Association of India, 2012). However, statistics apart, the lack of education amongst Dalits has made them pawns to the 'digital divide'. (Kumar and Subramani)

The digital divide can be defined as the gap between individuals or societies that have the resources to participate in the information era and those that do not. In India, a large chunk of the population, especially Dalits, face the problematic side of the divide that keeps them way from accessing the opportunities technology and internet can provide them with.

Therefore, if it becomes possible for Dalits and the government to overcome this divide, the new media exhibits immense potential to make information and media more accessible to all. Thiruamal and Tartakov (2011) in their research paper talk how internet has opened spaces in the walls of the caste system and the class system;

Through these openings a small but vigorous group of Dalits are using information technologies to transcend barriers of caste in ways not possible before, and thus to take advantage of democratic opportunities that can lead to breaking through caste and the ritual walls to share understandings and interests with each other and from those who have previously been beyond their reach. (Tartakov and Thirumal)

The Renewed Presence

The regression of 'mainstream' media from 'watchdogs' of democracies to business ventures is resulting in Habermasian 'refeudalisation of the public sphere', (Saeed) i.e dominance of the more powerful, upper cast and the rich in the Indian public sphere; which is indeed worrying as it is being reflected in the mainstream media's coverage. The dominance of mainstream players in media governance, complicated by sustainability concerns of grassroots enterprises is resulting in legislation that impedes the potentiality of community media access and participation. (Saeed)

The internet thus, has given Dalits an opportunity to use it as a form of rebellion against the global capitalist mainstream media regime since the internet is finally allowing the Dalit point of view to be heard. It is successfully defending Dalits rights and is articulating their opinion about the discriminatory practices based on caste. Meena Kandaswamy, a Dalit activist and writer muses on her website:

But, the democracy to speak up and speak out ensured that I was back to blogging again. Big media houses which own the major publications rarely give opportunity to Dalit (ex-untouchable) writers, and there's an absence of Dalit/anti-caste writers who write in

English. The elitist writers want to write the feel-good stuff, India Shining myths, and that's the work that gets into print. So, I wanted to tap the power and enormous outreach of the internet: how anyone can write and be read/ heard in the virtual space. I was not writing because anyone was commissioning me, I didn't have to follow other people's diktats, I could speak my mind. Google and tagging ensure that I can get heard without having my own column in any newspaper. Sometimes it helped me bring some happenings to light—such as the recent inside story of Dalit students being beaten up at a law university in Chennai (the mainstream media merely reported it as a clash at first) and so on.

Others have used the online media to bring together videos and documentaries by and for Dalits. Bathram Ravichandran, founded Dalit Camera, through which volunteers post videos of mistreatment of Dalits on YouTube (Dhillon). Ravichandran, who is a doctoral student of English at the English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU) in Hyderabad, the state capital of Andhra Pradesh, comes from the "manual scavenging" caste- who remove human excrement from toilets which do not have the modern sewage system. He says that the mainstream media did not give adequate exposure to the Dalit movements and the atrocities they faced, so by starting the 'Dalit Camera' channel on Youtube.com he decided to "give them a voice on the internet". This two-year-old channel is run by a team of 23-members who are equipped with four video cameras and it boasts about having some 1,400 subscribers. Several of its videos have been viewed more than 50,000 times (Dhillon). Vanya Mehta, an independent journalist reported for BBC that Dalit Camera, a popular YouTube channel dedicated to India's Dalits, has become a rallying point for the Dalit community. She says:

Dalit Camera is an attempt at a historical documentation of the realities of life in India "through the eyes of the untouchable". (Mehta)

Thus, proliferation of new media technologies has meant that increasingly, Dalit activism is becoming web-based with regularly updated websites such as ambedkar.org, dgroups.org, ambedkartimes.com/, upliftthem.blogspot.in, greatscholar.blogspot.in, and others to keep the world informed of the success and vicissitudes of the many Dalit battles against entrenched upper-caste hegemony in south Asia. Others like roundtableindia.co.in, kafila.org, countercurrents.com, support and champion the Dalit cause. (Kumar and Subramani) Recently, Prime Minister Narendra Modi called on BJP Dalit workers to 'embrace social media' to get connected and start expressing themselves through it.

Taking the Leap

This leap by the Dalit community has clearly rendered the 'illiteracy' argument void, as visuals can easily be understood and used to communicate ideas and assert opinions in local languages. The audience in such a case does not have to be literate. However, it brings in a greater responsibility for the government, to set up better and functional ICT (Information Communication Technology) hubs around villages and urban spaces in order to make the technology accessible.

The 'Hole in the Wall' experiment conducted by Sugata Mitra and his NIIT team in 1999 is a good example of how this could be done. The team carved a "hole in the wall" that separated the NIIT premises from the adjoining slum in Kalkaji, New Delhi. Through this hole, a freely accessible computer was put up for use and it proved to be popular among the slum children. With no prior experience, the children who were initially unable to read and write properly, learned to use the computer on their own. This prompted Mitra to propose the following

hypothesis; the acquisition of basic computing skills by any set of children can be achieved through incidental learning provided the learners are given access to a suitable computing facility, with entertaining and motivating content and some minimal (human) guidance. Therefore, setting up such ICT systems in Dalit localities for overcoming the digital divide is indeed an inspiring idea; where the website content is made for, of and by the Dalits themselves in their own languages.

Therefore, one can perceive that it is indeed important to conceive an all encompassing media in order to establish a strong democracy by placing communication at the centre of things.

The power of the media in a democracy comes from it being the 'watchdog' of society, the 'fourth estate', supplementing the other three pillars of democracy - the executive, the legislature, and the judiciary - by providing the necessary checks and balances on issues concerning its citizens. Alternately, it also provides a site of contestation, where citizens can express their opinion freely without any fear of coercion or control by the state on important policy matters played out in the 'public sphere'. The Dalits have been in dire need of such a 'public sphere' for a long time, and the new media places itself to be one such promising platform. However, the challenge of censorship and digital divide still threatens to take this gift of science away from Dalits. What the future holds for the Dalits is not known, but making the new media accessible at the grass root level through ICTs in villages and Dalit colonies in urban spaces, and by making it cheaper and removing the language barrier will indeed make this medium of communication a force to reckon with.

At this point, the pace at which the Dalits are being able to slowly and steadily overcome various barriers to put forward their voice through the internet is indeed encouraging. The uncensored, and free cyberspace is the perfect platform for Dalits to make themselves heard in a time where the fourth estate has inadvertently succumbed to the unending want for *moolah* and power; forgetting its original real ideal of being the voice of people. All the people.

Works Cited

Ashraf, Ajaz. [http://thehoot.org/web/The-untold-story-of-Dalit-journalists/6956-1-1-19-](http://thehoot.org/web/The-untold-story-of-Dalit-journalists/6956-1-1-19-true.html)

[true.html](http://thehoot.org/web/The-untold-story-of-Dalit-journalists/6956-1-1-19-true.html). 13 August 2013. 10 September 2014. Give site name, not URL

Ajaz Ashraf in this article in thehoot.com discusses his research- which is about Dalits who enter the media, believing it would empower their community, but are eventually disappointed by the lack of growth and opportunity it provides them with. To study their negligible presence in the media, Ashraf identified 21 Dalits who are or were journalists and spoke to them extensively about their childhood, their experiences in media institutes, and their disenchantment with journalism. Ashraf's research will help understand the Indian mediascape from a Dalit point of view and give statistical evidence about Dalit media practitioners in India's English news media

Balasubramaniam, J. "Dalits and a Lack of Diversity in the Newsroom." *Economic and Political Weekly* (2014). print or web?

This article by J. Balasubramaniam, explores how and till what extent is Dalit inclusion in the media industry prevalent in India. He argues through the paper that under-representation of Dalits in Indian media workforce leads to exclusion of news about the Dalits and their cause.

Balasubramaniam's paper will help me co-relate media and Dalits to engage with the idea of a more Dalit inclusive workforce and if it could actually make media more inclusive as a whole.

Dhillon, Amrit. *http://www.thenational.ae/lifestyle/well-being/dalit-camera-gives-a-voice-to-indias-long-abused-lower-castes*. 7 June 2014. 10 October 2014.

Amrit Dhillon in his article for thenation.ae interviews Bathram Ravichandran, on how and why he started the Dalit Camera youtube channel. The article, which is more or less like an interview, gives a peek into how it is for a Dalit activist to turn to alternative form of journalism to get together like-minded people and start an online media organization.

Ghose, Sagarika. "The Dalit in India." *Social Research* (2003): 28.

Through this paper, Sagarika Ghose- an eminent journalist tries to explore the Dalit cause. She discusses how despite the far reaching legislative and educational quotas for scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, and their undoubted benefits, Dalits still are savagely attacked in the rural countryside and how in the urban milieu untouchability is still prevalent for institutions like the arranged marriage, the caste Hindu temple, the classical music concert, and the private sector-like the media. It helped to build a background for caste in urban India through various tenants.

Jeffrey, Robin. *India's Newspaper Revolution: Capitalism, Politics and the Indian Language* Press. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999.

The continued growth of India's remarkable newspaper industry is the focus of the new edition of this widely-read book. While newspapers in the West struggle and fail, circulations in India have

risen steeply in 13 major languages. It was an excellent source for getting to know statistics about readership and journalists in various newspapers across India.

Kumar, C. Suresh and R. Subramani. "Internet as an alternative media for Dalits in India:

Prospects and challenges." *IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science* (2014): 5.

This paper by Kumar and Subramani, discusses the enormous power internet has to bring social equality for Dalits. Internet has been widely used by the people living on the margin of the society as an alternative to the mainstream media. Furthermore, the paper outlines the new opportunities that the cyber space offers to Dalits. It also discusses the deplorable state of affairs of the coverage of Dalit issues by the mainstream media.

Kumar, Sunalini. <http://kafila.org/2014/03/27/dalit-students-and-journalists-from-classroom-to-newsroom-shivnarayan-rajpurohit/>. 27 March 2014. 10 September 2014.

This article by Sunalini Kumar is built up on a guest post by Shivnarayan Rajpurohit in Kafila.org. It discusses the absence of dalit journalists and students from English press and journalism schools, the reason for their exclusion from the mediascape and their journey from classroom to newsroom. It also gives statistical evidence and comparisons between the number of students who enroll in Journalism schools and the number who eventually do end up becoming journalists and manage to climb up the career ladder.

Mehta, Vanya. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-25502849>. 7 January 2014. 10

October 2014.

Vanya Mehta, an independent journalist, reports for the BBC about how Dalit Camera, a popular YouTube channel dedicated to India's Dalits (formerly untouchables), has become a rallying point for the community.

Muralidharan, Sukumar. "Media, Modernity and Minorities." *Social Scientist* (2012): 40 .

Sukumar Muralidharan through his forty odd pages long paper tries to do justice to his title, and deconstructs modernity, history and media in context of minorities and their rights. He begins with discussing how Dalits continue to face oppression despite their strength in numbers and the assurances of equality they have been given, underpinned both by the unrestricted right to vote and affirmative action. He discusses Ambedkar's ideas and also how limited social power has rendered the Dalits cause powerless. So much so, that the media coverage about the same from a Dalit perspective is extremely low.

Furthermore, Muralidharan explores minority rights and its representation in media through various examples from newspapers like *The Hindu*, *Times of India* and *Indian Express*. He delves into comparing and analyzing news articles in the aforementioned papers to prove his points. This paper works well as a source to give a comprehensive background- both historical and contemporary to set forth a true picture of minorities in modern India and its media.

Saeed, Saima. "Negotiating Power: Community media, democracy, and the public sphere."

Development in Practice (2009).

Saima Saeed through her paper discusses the ownership patterns in the Indian media industry today. She discusses contemporary media questions about who gets to speak on behalf of whom,

and to what end. She states that the regression of 'mainstream' media from 'watchdogs' of democracies to business ventures resulting in Habermasian 're-feudalisation of the public sphere'. Her paper gives interesting insight about how unlike mainstream English media, the Community media re-engages communities on the periphery to open possibilities for social change, especially for Dalits; and hence Saeed's paper is an invaluable source for this research paper.

Tartakov, Gary Michael and P Thirumal. "India's Dalit International exploration of technological equity and the digital divide: Critical, historical and social perspectives." *International exploration of technological equity and the digital divide* (2011).is this a book/site/journal?

Thirumal and Tartakov explore how digital technology can promote equity through democratic dialogue They delve into history and explore how Dalits were silenced through lack of voice in print media, but the internet media and digital media now offers them hope to break these boundaries and define democracy for themselves.

Uniyal, BN. "In Search of a Dalit Journalist." *The Pioneer* 1996.

In this article, BN Uniyal- an editor and reporter for The Pioneer narrates an interesting tale about his futile search for a Dalit journalist.