



Installations from Privilege to Survival: Emergence and Evolution of Dalit Voice on *Instagram* Accounts

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Abstract. Growth of New Media has paved way for abundant possibility to articulate marginal voices. It is the emergence of social networking services that aids all the subaltern expressions to visualize their concerns on divergent virtual platforms. Visibility is the only path through which they can present their own underprivileged problems of discrimination and sense of identity. Ten years have passed since *Instagram* released its initial operations as a photo and video sharing space, and now the service witnesses a gradual shift of content creations. The proposed research paper traces the evolution of *Instagram* from a content-based perspective, arguing that the service has become a realm of survival as far as some communities are concerned drastically moving away from the privileged shutterbugs. It has the efficiency to advocate Dalit voice through multiple interactions. The paper attempts to analyse the *Instagram* accounts of *Dalit Desk* and *The Blue Club* foregrounding how the issues of caste atrocities in India are being mediated without the support of conventional media. The intervention of *Instagram* is perceived of two types in a

	<p>structural approach; the first type being informative and persuasive for the common users where the second type seems to be academic and intellectual aiming to create potential exchanges on Dalit discourses. The former method makes use of the strategy of posting images directly which are related to segregation meanwhile the latter depends on a series of academic interactions in video format. Though the approaches are structurally different, they thematically intersect at a single point of representation. Considering the advancement of New Media as an alternative stream for the oppressed, the paper interprets distinctive installations in the form of real-life photos, short videos, posters, and long interactive videos as instances of rendering unheard inputs.</p> <p>Keywords: New Media, Marginal Voice, Dalit Discourse, Representation.</p>
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1 Introduction

In a world of netizens, the growth of New Media has paved way for abundant possibility of articulations. During the present pandemic period, physical dwelling of each being in academia strives to attain meaning on isolated armchairs staring eagerly at internet discourses whereas the technologically average laymen find it difficult to comprehend the world of total disorder yet move forward swiping their gadget screens. Altogether everyone is actively participating in global connectivity living virtually next door to other netizens. The barrier of geographical split is thus substituted by the existence of virtual arena. The possibility for the emergence of a democratic world is very close with more social connections and interactive sessions. A wide variety of voices find it easy to express themselves and carry out their mission attaching themselves to existing networks. Marginal voices, being the most distinctive and socially relevant expressions, find visibility on various digital spaces. Options to have individual and collective interference make the new platform unique in communication compared to the old model of broadcasting technology.

2 New Media: From Broadcasting to Communication

The user-generated contents of New Media landscape (a *Facebook* post, Tweet or *Instagram* story) usually address the individual or mass audience. Bloggers and social media users functioning in groups are the members of a community. They share what

they wish to express in any form of text with any individual or community, they do not broadcast, but communicate. Clay Shirky says:

Now that our communication technology is changing, the distinctions among those patterns of communication are evaporating; what was once a sharp break between two styles of communicating is becoming a smooth transition. Most user-generated content is created as communication in small group, but since we're so unused to communications media and broadcast media being mixed together, we think that everyone is broadcasting. This is a mistake. (87)

Every netizen in this process of communication is a not a reporter, but an individual or a representative of any collective self. Whose communication is to be considered with priority on social networking services? The voice of the voiceless/oppressed is found articulated in certain platforms because of the liberal nature of the medium and this must be prioritised based on media ethics. Traditional media could not provide sufficient representational channels for the oppressed; their newsrooms are almost completely occupied by elite class members who fail to look at the issues of marginal lives with firsthand involvement. It is the emergence of social networking services that aids all the marginal expressions to visualize their concerns on divergent virtual platforms. Visibility is the only path through which they can present their own under-privileged status, problems of discrimination and sense of both identity and subjectivity.

Entertainment and Intellectual activities are more encouraged in online space than those in offline resulting in sharing ideas. Each user can contribute to the entertainment spectrum or the intellectual sphere in virtual scenario. *Facebook*, *YouTube*, and *Instagram* are the prominent social networking spaces of content sharing through images and videos. Ten years have passed since *Instagram* released its initial operations as a photo and video sharing space. Users can share posts publically and those contents can be browsed by the followers. There are additional operations like tagging and putting reels. Editing is possible with filters and contents can be organized by hashtags. The medium was first popular as a trending app for image sharing. Snapchat was the opponent app that allowed photo sharing when *Instagram* came to existence. Within a couple of months after its official launch in October 2010, *Instagram* became a popular service with millions of registered users. *Instagram* stories talk about the social and cultural importance behind capturing and sharing life moments with followers unlike *Twitter*, which is a text-based social platform. Some of the central categories of images shared in *Instagram* can be selfies, activities, pictures with text, photos related to fashion and pet stories. Lev Manovich argues:

But a presentation of some strategies - what to photograph, how to create an aesthetically coherent theme, when to post, and so on - is anyway already a theory. It states that certain ways of using a medium lead to certain results, and this statement is derived from observing certain types of *Instagram* accounts ("hipsters", "fashion bloggers", etc.). (21)

Visual sharing among teenagers and youths is mostly interpreted as a result of obsession with photography. When theorising, the motives of sharing one's image can be analysed as self-expression, social interaction, or escapism. These users who regularly share photos, videos or reels find it too attractive, for it helps them to nurture their aesthetic abilities. It is quite impossible to evaluate or determine what is creative and what is not in a complex scenario of self-expression with promotion. It is the individual choice how to make one visible in front of the public. Negative publicity

also is a choice for public attention. Users enjoy the privilege of aesthetics and promote oneself along with texts and music. They don't have to struggle with any sort of representational issue or credibility crisis because they possess the privilege of aesthetic expression. Many of these activities are pleasure/attention seeking entertainments while the elements of intellect also can be traced in some of them. Anybody who possesses a smartphone can click an image or record a short video and post it after editing. So, *Instagram* app has been technically seen as a personal communication strategy in the beginning. Now too the common assumption of its service is not different.

3 *Instagram: Shift in Content Creation*

As a recent development, the service of *Instagram* witnesses a gradual shift in content creations. This evolution of *Instagram* from a content-based perspective is quite commendable. From a mere image/video sharing service, it has grown up to an app of social sharing. Like *Facebook* and *Twitter*, *Instagram* also has become a platform for many marginal voices. From personal expressions, the app has gone a long way to collective reflections and the service has become a realm of survival as far as some communities are concerned drastically moving away from the privileged shutterbugs. Lev Manovich observes:

Image cultures that develop around technological media are defined not only by raw technologies, the ways they are packaged and promoted by companies, or the ways in which people use these technologies, but also by cultural “languages”- systems of conventions and techniques that define the subjects, narratives, editing, compositions, lighting, sequencing, and other image characteristics. A “visual language” represents systematic choices made on every visual dimension recognized as relevant for creators and audiences. (19)

When analysing the *Instagram* accounts of *Dalit Desk* and *The Blue Club*, the efficiency to advocate marginal voice through multiple interactions is located. These two accounts foreground the issues of caste atrocities in India mediating themselves without the support of conventional media rooms. They do not broadcast but do communicate and since their collective voice is a single entity, they address the Dalit consciousness in the virtual world.

Instagram accounts of *Dalit Camera*, *Dr Ambedkar Caravan* and *Dalit Feminism Archive* are some other slots for marginal voices through which they articulate the issues of Dalit plight in India. As a media website and news portal, *Dalit Camera* keeps using posters of different kinds primarily to meet its aim of self-representation. A link to the story is provided in some posts to the contents on its *Facebook* and *Twitter* making use of the strategy of cross-posting. *Dr Ambedkar Caravan* also works in the same format sharing images from its other social media pages. *Dalit Feminism Archive* visualizes the feminist perspective of oppression, presenting their creative side of academic talks and writings. The below figure shows a post that appeared in *Dr Ambedkar Caravan* on 20 March 2021. It is created on the Social Empowerment Day or Mahad Sathyagraha day which was launched by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar in Maharashtra. The event will not be familiar for the mainstream Indian society, but it has been shared here as a Dalit reminiscence.



Fig. 1. Mahad Sathyagraha (Screenshot)

Instagram account of *Dalit Desk*, which claims itself as an independent media addresses the issues of marginalised groups. It provides quality content and wants more assistance and support from netizens. Being a Bahujan network, the team needs financial and technical assistance to maintain their consistency. In a post shared on 24 August 2021, they claim:

Babasaheb wanted us to have our own media outlets. Our stories, our struggles have always been denied by the mainstream media, but now we can speak for ourselves... In savarna dominated media spaces, Bahujan media is autonomously emerging with an ambition of change, holds a lot of importance and responsibility towards the community. (*Dalit Desk*)

The intervention of *Instagram* is perceived of two types in a structural approach; the first type being informative and persuasive for the common users where the second type seems to be academic and intellectual aiming to create potential exchanges on Dalit discourses. The former method makes use of the strategy of posting images directly which is related to segregation. *Dalit Desk* keeps on articulating their ideology using posters with quotations of Ambedkar and other Dalit leaders. Posters are political tools in democracy. Posting certain tools in social media is a new mode of revolution. Gary Yanker points out: "Perhaps the pictorial poster is the only bit of local political information able to break through the barriers of language and be understood by an international audience" (215). An image can be used as political material; a tool to highlight issues in a minimalist perspective.



Fig. 2. Unnao incident (Screenshot)

When everything goes online, let the protest also find its expression on the virtual space. News stories are converted in the form of posters with images and the main thread in limited texts as instances of agitation. The strategy behind creating posts in images can also be for informative and persuasive purposes at a single glance.

Over the past hundred years, posters have been used as a very effective tool for war-time recruitment, persuasion, motivation, vigilance and also, at times, to instill some form of guilt on the general public. These propaganda posters can give us an interesting visual into times gone by. (Vamvakidou et al, 256)

Here, as an image sharing network, *Instagram* shares a collective voice which is not uttered as fragments of entertainment, but as intellectually designed thoughts describing the sense of anguish, protest, and dignity. In a post that evokes memory of the “Bandit Queen” Phoolan Devi, *Dalit Desk* reminds the followers the gendered destructive history of our nation towards Dalit women. Phoolan’s life was a hegemonic misinterpreted narrative of exclusion, but the way she rebelled against the exploitation is always a nightmare for the elite patriarchy. The post calls attention to the deliberately ignored area of Dalit women empowerment. As a re-inventor of justice for the oppressed, her image is the most suitable one that can be archived and re-used for the purpose of displaying Dalit subjectivity.



Fig. 3. Phoolan Devi (Screenshot)

Dalit Desk does interfere in cultural, political, and social affairs. They don't celebrate through the media but communicate through it. They are real political beings, for they observe everything with a matured analytical sense. When the Tamil actor Surya unveiled the first look poster of his up-coming movie titled *Jai Bhim*, *Dalit Desk* identify it as something to which they are affiliated to. For them, any product of popular culture is not a matter of commercial entertainment, but a concern of political intellect. It's not the concept of movie that they are associated with. They are neither connected to any fan's association, nor related to any distribution agency. They may be anxious about the representational possibility of the movie and the impact it can bring about. The movie is reported to be inspired by a legal battle fought for tribal justice, but this is not an official confirmation. The title of the movie *Jai Bhim* is the dictum of Dalit organizations that itself can be a source of inspiration for *Dalit Desk*. In a variety of posters, they have already written the dictum when participating in public agitations. "Jai Bhim" is a phrase of protest, a phrase of anguish and justice. That title itself is spotlighted in the post.



Fig. 4. First Look Poster of the movie Jai Bhim (Screenshot)

Instagram account of *The blue Club* depends on a series of academic interactions in video format. Their approach is academic and enables them to have a capital in the field of knowledge. Though the approaches of *Dalit Desk* and *The Blue Club* are structurally different, they thematically intersect at the single point of representation. *The Blue Club* was initially started as an attempt to amplify the female collective of the marginalised communities functioning like a non-profit organization. As a venture of the independent film maker Priyadarsini Palani from Tamil Nadu, it started a *Facebook* page in 2018. The interactive sessions featured in the *Facebook* page are insightful arranging platform for Dalit women representatives of different sectors. Like *Dalit Desk*, the *Instagram* page of TBC also started talking through images in 2020, but it focussed on the words of unheard and unfamiliar Dalit women with whom they communicate. Quoting the underprivileged women from Dalit groups instead of borrowing words from their leaders is a deliberate act of representing the uncelebrated souls of upcoming activists, scholars, and academic intellectuals for intellectual sharing. Attention to the page has gradually shifted from the concept of sharing images to the possibility of communicating through academic debates. Several Dalit scholars work behind team TBC to conduct live sessions as series of discussions on caste and gender. The below image shows posts of TBC in the beginnings.



Fig. 5. Women’s Quotes (Screenshot)

On 27 July 2021, TBC organized a session “Writing Caste and Gender” as part of their *Instagram* live series titled #CallingOutcaste. The method of hash tag activism has also been experimented in this medium. The above referred session was handled by Christina Dhanaraj, writer and Co-founder of the Dalit History Month project moderated by Sabari Girija, Research scholar, University of Hyderabad and an active member of team TBC. The session of more than one hour was posted live on the page where Christina delivered her talk on caste in Indian society and argued on how gendered identity and class become severe obstructions for Dalit women. The session goes further to the understanding of Dalit Feminism and Black Feminism comparing both with the dealings of stereotypes and finding differences in many ways. Sessions are also conducted on cinema, law, activism, public sphere, and LGBT issues connecting those with a perspective of the marginalized. It is crystal clear that the intervention of *Dalit Desk* being informative, persuasive, and comprehensible for the common users of *Instagram* is different from the Intellectual, academic oriented structure maintained by the TBC. The direct (instant) use of images accompanied by social commentary and political caricatures invites flash attention whereas the philosophical discourses on caste and gender shared in videos demand serious academic attention and intellectual consumption. To address these two types of viewers (laymen and educated) the strategies are used alternatively by both accounts.



Fig. 6. Poster of the programme “Writing Caste and Gender (Screenshot)

4 Conclusions

Considering the advancement of New Media as an alternative stream for the oppressed, the referred *Instagram* pages make use of distinctive installations in the form of posters and long interactive videos for rendering unheard inputs. The thematic journey of *Instagram* pages from privileged photographs to a survival mechanism is traced in due course. They install Dalit voice in all technically feasible sense to make it visible. The formation of Dalit capital on virtual space is a demand of the time. Those who own more “data” are more powerful in the present socio-political scenario. Being virtually active is a matter of privilege when all transactions go digital and serve for the purpose of living. Analysing image culture in social media with any existing theoretical notions of fetishism, capitalism and commodification often prevents understanding it as a cultural phenomenon forgetting the aesthetic coherence. Nobody should liberate people from their aspect of living; posting personal stuff in social media is a private choice while politicising the marginalized stands as a collective requirement.

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