

# Blogging and Ambedkar's Idea of Freedom of Speech

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## ABSTRACT

*Media and technology in every age has influenced the way people think and understand the life around. The invention of printing press had changed the view of literature forever. Similarly, the introduction of television had popularized mass culture. New Media and Communication Technology has ushered in a new era of interactive media in which the restrictions earlier placed on the masses to simply accept and passively consume the text, are challenged. For Dalits, a marginalized community of India, it has brought in an opportunity to discover their voice. The community, hitherto called voiceless is able to find a voice of its own through blogging, micro-blogging and social media networks. A number of researchers are trying to address this recent development in the field of Dalit activism. This paper attempts to relate the interactive, open and free space of blogosphere as a reflection of Ambedkar's idea of freedom of speech. It seeks to evaluate whether this platform, with McLuhanian promise, can be called a counter-hegemonic public sphere of Dalits.*

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## 1. Introduction

Ambedkar wrote "Annihilation of Caste" as a speech on the invitation of an anti-caste group, the Jat-Pat Todak Mandal of Lahore. The group found the text of the speech offensive, particularly the parts where he criticized sacred texts such as the Vedas and said that this would be his last address as a Hindu. As a result, the group decided to cancel the event. Ambedkar then printed 1,500 copies of the speech himself and distributed them. He realized that cancelling the event is an attack on his freedom of expression and is an attempt to censor his revolutionary agenda. This incident highlights the importance of free speech for Ambedkar. "Freedom of mind is the real freedom," said Ambedkar:

A person whose mind is not free though he may not be in chains, is a slave, not a free man. One whose mind is not free, though he may not be in prison, is a prisoner and not a free man. One whose mind is not free though alive, is no better than dead. Freedom of mind is the proof of one's existence."

Therefore, the most Ambedkarite thing to do, is to assert one's existence by writing about his/her personal experience which is humiliation due to caste, in case of Dalits. Moreover, when India's Constituent Assembly was debating on the idea of freedom of speech, it was proposed that there should be a special clause to ensure press freedom but Ambedkar, as the chairperson of the drafting committee of the Constitution, intervened that every Indian should have the right to free speech and nobody should be more equal in this regard. Had it not been for that intervention, the celebrity faces of Indian journalism would have been using the law to muzzle subaltern voices.

In spite of Ambedkar's emphasis on and endorsement of the freedom of speech and expression, Dalits have not been given their deserved place in the print and television media, the only major resources to transmit information in the past. They have failed to adequately represent the problems and issues faced by the subaltern community. In this context, Chandra

Bhan Prasad points at the castist nature of the Indian media: "If there is not a single Dalit who is an editor of a national daily, an anchor on TV channel, or a member of (industry bodies) FICCI or CII, it is not by incident, but by virtue of the doctrine of untouchability" (qtd. in Dharmadhikari 78).

Moreover, publication is an expensive enterprise. Dalits being an economically weaker section of the society, could not afford to get their works published through the institutionalized media. All these issues are now addressed at one place, the blogosphere which provides Dalits a democratic platform to represent themselves and their community. It thus seems to have the potential to politically mobilize the so-called voiceless community. S. Anand, the editor of a Dalit press Navayana argues in "Covering Caste: Visible Dalit, Invisible Brahmin," "almost one fourth of Indian population has never been able to participate in the mainstream press...has never become an issue for media managers, despite recent attempts by Dalits to point out this ugly and shameful anomaly" (173).

## 2. Blogging: A Space for the Subaltern Expression

According to Oxford English Dictionary a blog is a "frequently updated website consisting of personal observations, excerpts from other sources, etc. typically run by a single person, and usually with hyperlinks to other sites; an online journal or diary." It is mostly written by one person and is regarded as a personal space of self-expression which makes it an interpretative and subjective text. There are two types of blogs if we see from the perspective of authorship: they are single authored and multi-authored. The latter refers to a group of writers share the information with the participants on a blog. Blogging is also often compared to diary writing due to its subjective and personal nature. Often the blogs are used to publish personal narratives related to innermost secrets of a person's life. Recently, the blogs written by Afro-American and feminists have emerged in large number on cyberspace which indicates towards the activist tendencies of the platform.

But the issue is, what makes this platform more open, democratic and accessible than other media platforms.

Blogging provides an opportunity to individuals who had ideas but no convenient platform to reach a wider audience and that also in an informal manner and language. It has become the voice of people in the times when censorship and tedious process of publication has taken toll over freedom of expression. Moreover, people can participate in any discussion, write and interact irrespective of their geographical location. Therefore, blogging has effectively influenced the idea of mass culture as anyone can write and publish his/her ideas unlike the earlier notion of the publication as a privilege of the chosen few. It seems to have marred the pick and choose policy of the publishers because the ideological biases of the editor have often influenced the production of work.

### 3. Blogs and Identity Politics

There are two reasons for bloggers to write: one is personal and the other is social. The blogging is mainly taken as a private space to articulate personal experiences. But for some communities such as Afro-American, feminists and Dalits, it has become a space for political deliberations. The literature produced on blogs by such communities is written with an objective to reach masses and to spread their political agenda of identity politics. Dalit bloggers just like their other writings such as autobiographies, poems, essays, short stories etc. have a social purpose. In other words, they write with the sole intention of mobilizing the Dalit community, to bring awareness in society about their rights and grievances, and to contest the narratives of the oppressive social order. For this reason literature by Dalit writers is often referred to as the "literature of protest" or literature of hatred. " Though Dalits writers and critics like Sharankumar Limbale counter such labeling by saying that one can expect literature of pleasure

from the experience of humiliation and hatred. In this context, Dr. Ambedkar mentioned in one of his speeches:

We are ignoring our life, duties and culture. A little introspection will make us visualize a terrible picture of how our values of life and cultural values are being corrupted.... So the litterateurs immediately need to become vigilant to cherish our values of life and cultural values. These values should be strengthened, made radiant and enhanced.... So I want to tell emphatically all writers to express lofty values of life and cultural values through their work.... Don't let your pen be restricted to your own questions. Let its radiance dispel the darkness in villages. Don't forget that in our country there is a huge world of the marginalized Dalits. Understand well their agony and pain. Strive through your literature to enrich their life. In it rests real humanity." (qtd. in Nimbalkar 32-33)

Therefore, the digital media has become a platform for the educated Dalits to address issues concerning their community. Parmod K. Nayar in "The Digital Dalit: Subalternity and Cyberspace" observes the impact of new technology on caste politics. The new media according to him has brought about awareness, social change and a culture of dissent over a period of time. He argues that the mainstream ideologies of secularism and democracy are fiercely contested by Dalit activists on social media through the counter-representations of the ideologies of purity and impurity established by the upper-caste groups. For instance, in the blog Atrocity News, the biases against Dalit writes in the mainstream media houses are highlighted:

## Penguin Publication dumps a Book due to caste pressure!! 09jun14

Recent book from Wendy Doniger's 'The Hindus: An Alternative History' entails the story of India through Parihas (untouchable) perspective. Indians continue to deny the caste reality even after 60 years of Independence. Following is an example of pressure due to Caste love from section of affluent society in India. There is already neglect of Publishers [...]

Filed under: dalit atrocity | Leave a Comment

Tags: Parihas, untouchables, Wendy Dongier, Wendy Doniger's book 'The Hindus: An Alternative History'

(Image No. 1, Source: Atrocity News)

### 4. Dalit Bloggers Speak

Treading on Ambedkar's footsteps the bloggers write about issues considered controversial by the mainstream media. There are ample examples in the history of Indian journalism when they deliberately ignored the Dalit atrocities. Even the intensity of crime against Dalits does not awake the media from its deep slumber. For instance, when a Dalit family was lynched in Khairlanji (Maharashtra) by other caste group, no media channel came forward to criticize the brutal incident. It was the efforts of Dalit activists that shifted the media attention finally towards the Dalit family. However, the blog Atrocity News published all the major news related to the

incident. In a blog titled, "What is Khairlanji" the blogger refers to atrocities on Dalit family as shameless depiction on caste system:

Come October and celebration season starts for 80 million Buddhists in India .The celebration marks freedom from Caste shackles and entry into a dignified life. But for Bhotmange family such month never came. All family members, except the father, were butchered by the Villains of humanity in their own village, Kherlanji. Kherlanji is a village,120 Km, East, from Nagpur, has 178 household of which two are of educated Buddhist families , residing on the

outskirts . The village witnessed the ugly story of inhumanity that reflects to world a shameless depiction Indian caste system in its 55th year of Independence.

The blog is written from Dalit perspective. He is clearly being polemical which is not practiced in the traditional journalism. The words like “Villains of humanity” and “educated Buddhist families” refer to the bloggers’ stand. The blogger informs the reader about even the slightest development in this case. He writes about agitations, marches and protests against the crime. The blogger also inform time and place of the

agitation to the readers. In a post entitled “Solapur Unstable” the blogger writes:

The Kherlanji Massacre has still kept Solapur and Amaravati situation tense today. Solapur saw small incidents of stone pelting where as Amaravati was suspicious after the firing took place yesterday. 153 people were arrested in Solapur. In one or two places the crowd went violent and destroyed Government vehicles!

In another post from the blog, the violence erupted in Maharashtra is depicted:

## Kherlanji+ Kanpur 30nov06

Yesterday the foul play with Ambedkar statue at kanpur has made the situation worst which was getting little settled after Kherlanji . Mumbai- Riot similar situation Pune-band Ulhasnagar- 1 dead in firing Nashik- one dead in police firing Aurangabad- compete chaos Nanded-One dead Maharastra Into deep crisis....severe crisis. Amidst chaos, Administration is trying all ill tactics to take [...]

Filed under: [Uncategorized](#) | [Leave a Comment](#)

(Image No. 2, Source: *Atrocity News*)

Besides, the blogger writes about incident of caste based atrocities in order to bring them some public attention.

He criticizes the sick mentality of upper caste groups and empathizes with the victims.

## School drop out rates High in India and Dalits students treated worst than COW : Castevirus004RJ2015 17oct15

-Dozens of Dalit children from a government school in Rajasthan’s Berdo Ka Baas village say they are now too scared to go to school. Their classmate, 12-year-old Dinesh Meghwal, was beaten up last week by a teacher allegedly for touching a non-Dalit’s food plate. “I touched their plate by mistake so they beat me up. [...]

Filed under: [dalit atrocity](#) | [1 Comment](#)

Tags: [Caste Atrocity](#), [Cow prejudice](#), [Dalit Student](#), [Jat](#), [Rajasthan Atrocity](#), [School Dropout](#)

(Image No. 3, Source: *Atrocity News*)

Similarly, another Dalit blogger on the blog *Kherlanji Massacre* condemns the violence inflicted on the Dalit family. He comments in the introduction to his blog, “On September 29, 2006, four members of a poor peasant Dalit family in Khairlanji village in Bhandara district of northeast Maharashtra were brutally killed in planned mob violence... The women members, mother and daughter were raped, sexually assaulted. All the members were paraded naked and tortured and assaulted on their private parts. Only the father, who was away, working in the fields, escaped this horrible fate.” Anand Teltumbde criticizes the biased treatment of the mainstream media towards Dalit:

...the Delhi-based electronic media, which had recently carried out tenacious campaigns on two high

profile murder cases and catalysed a powerful protest against a corrupt police, did little for Surekha and Priyanka Bhootmange of Khairlanji...Even when they reported the story, the coverage was shoddy, lacking the passion dedicated to other instances. (*Mass Media* 141)

Anita Dighe too in “How the Globalized Media Treat Their Audiences - A Case from India” comments on the horrible violence of Khairlanji and highlights the biased treatment of the traditional Indian media against the poor and dispossessed. She argues that the reason behind such discrimination by media is the age-old Indian tradition of ostracizing a particular group from the society on the basis of caste. This is how Dalits

find themselves betrayed at the hands of traditional media, and it is with the help of new media that these newly educated Dalits are trying to create a counter hegemonic public sphere.

The bloggers writing for *Round Table India* believe that mainstream media either rations the space given to the Dalit Bahujan voice or twists the Hindu problem into Dalit problem. It explains itself in the introduction to their blog, as a unique Dalit Bahujan media that perceives through their eyes and ears and speaks through their voice. Some Dalit thinkers believe that when Dalit issue reaches to the newspaper it is inevitably diluted or hijacked. The conventional media, according to them, is not radical enough to address Dalit issue because it cannot question Brahmanism or its practices as it is dominated or owned by upper castes and Brahmins (Mangala Savari).

Stalin K., an activist and writer, mentions in this context that people are tired of “sensationalist news” with their own online blogs they can give audiences “something different; something real” (“IndiaUnheard- Pushing Marginalised Voices to the Mainstream Media” 9). So, some bloggers share current incidents of atrocities and others who write of past experiences of marginalisation. According to Pramod K. Nayar such records or “archives” of atrocities would create a counter history to the history of India written earlier which does not include the caste oppression of Dalits (“Digital Dalit” 4). The future generations can encounter both accounts of history. For example, the blog “Atrocity News” was started in 2006 and is still active. The close reading of the blog tells that the crimes against Dalits have not decreased in these years. The issues like rapes case, untouchability, discrimination at campus, and neglect by the mainstream media, are the dominant ones. Kuffir, a blogger and founder of Round Table India, talk about blogging as a platform which they consciously chosen to conduct democratic debates among educated Dalit bahujans. He says:

We are very aware that a cream of the community in many senses has emerged and there are all highly educated, very articulate people, they have fought and come upto high level. They will not take any bullshit and they are intensely involved in the movement. The impact is such that you know we have been provided a ground where people can congratulate and speak to each other. (Round Table India: Interview with Kuffir)

## 5. Conclusion

Nowadays, the blogosphere has emerged as an important platform for the subaltern groups to express themselves. Dalit blogs facilitate the mobilization of Dalits by encouraging them to participate in specific social and political activities. Dalit blogging is a reflection of Ambedkar’s idea of freedom of speech. The community, hitherto called voiceless is able to find a voice of its own through blogging, micro-blogging and social media networks. It is major development in the field of Dalit activism. Dalit bloggers challenge the narratives of caste and debunk the myth of superiority established by the Brahmanical system. The Dalit blogs facilitate the mobilization of Dalits by encouraging them to participate in specific social and political activities. They are able to express their resistance towards various anti- Dalit practices through this medium. Thus, the cyberspace is a counter-hegemonic public sphere for the Dalits of 21<sup>st</sup> century India. These blogs are not merely a record of their social and political activities but a new form of literature which gives expression to their hopes, fears, and aspirations in an unbiased manner due to the democratic nature of the medium.

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