10

Una Video and the Political Economy of Social Media

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On 11th July 2016, seven people from the Dalit community were flogged, paraded and brutally beaten by cow vigilantes from Mata Samadiyara village in Gir Somnath district in Gujarat[1]. A video clip featuring four Dalit men (Vashram, Ramesh, Ashok and Bechar) being beaten up was shot and circulated through WhatsApp[2]. The video may have initially been circulated by people who felt deep disdain for people who were alleged to be engaged in 'cow slaughtering'. Ironically, however, it soon went viral on social media because of its graphic images of caste violence that exist in our country today. The circulation of these violent images led to major agitations and protests on social media platforms as well as on the streets of Gujarat[3]. Jignesh Mevani, a 35-year-old lawyer and Dalit rights activist and the convener of the *Una Dalit Atyachar Ladat Samiti*, led a rally in Ahmedabad where thousands of Dalits took a pledge to stop picking up carcasses[4]. According to Bezwada Wilson, National Convener of the *Safai Karmachari Andolan* who has been campaigning to end manual scavenging for many years, "These are protests derived from deep grievances. This is our way of asserting our identity, our rights."[5] It is said that it this was one of the biggest Dalit protest movements in recent years[6]. The role of social media in mobilising people and organizing the protests has been unprecedented[7]. This kind of outrage was also seen in the case of

student's protests after Rohith Vemula's suicide in Hyderabad University. In the absence of coverage in mainstream media channels, which traditionally have given little space to widespread cases of caste based atrocities, it was the assertion of Dalit politics through the use of social media which made sure that the event got reported widely.

This recent expansion of Dalit expression through the digital medium is important for addressing caste based injustice in our society. According to the National Crime Records Bureau report 2015[8], a total of 45,003 cases were registered for the crimes committed against the people from Schedule Castes (SCs) out of which 38,564 cases under the Schedule Caste and Schedule Tribe (Prevention of Atrocities) Act 1989 against 32,569 cases registered under the same act in 2010[9]. In addition to this, National Human Rights Commission Report has noted that "A large number of cases which deserve to be registered under the Protection of Civil Rights Act or the SCs & STs (Prevention of Atrocities) Act are not actually registered under these Acts, either due to ignorance of law or under pressure from the interested parties."[10] Although it can be argued that in the case of both the Una floggings and Rohith's suicide, justice has been denied. The demand for land rights of Dalits under constitutional provisions of the Land Ceiling Act and the Agricultural Land Ceiling Act in Gujarat are still far from reality[11]. The five accused in the Una flogging case have been given conditional bail by the Gujarat High court while the government of Gujarat has objected to a plea in High Court which demanded a CBI inquiry into the case. In the Rohith Vemula case, the circulation of his suicide letter on social media had stirred up feelings of rage and anger similar to those provoked by the Una video. Although court cases were filed against five people, including HCU's Vice Chancellor P. Appa Rao and a Union Cabinet Minister Bandaru Dattatreya, under the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities Act) 1989, no progress has been made on the case since then. The Ministry of Human Resources and Development appointed Allahabad High Court Judge AK Roopanwala to conduct an enquiry into the case. Although the report has not been made public, certain media reports alleged that Rohith's mother Radhika falsely claimed herself a Dalit to avail of reservation and Rohith didn't face any discrimination in the University[12].

Amidst attempts to de-caste issues, caste hegemonies still persists in our

system. ''The old local-level systems of hierarchy have indeed disintegrated but a new hierarchy of networks based on the institutions of caste and kinship appears to be thriving. These hierarchies work through 'monopolies' over social and cultural capital and enable the reproduction of caste (Jodhka 2015, pp 12)''[13]. However the promise of digital democracy has been to empower every citizen of this country with high speed internet to access information and governance through Digital India Programme. There is no doubt that the growth of digital infrastructure in recent years – the proliferation of Smartphone cameras, penetration of the Internet with 3G and 4G services and use of social media platforms such as Facebook– has played an important role in the proliferation of digital spaces where Dalit politics are asserted. At the start of 2016, there are 342.6 million people in India who have access to the Internet and 142 million people who use Facebook, out of which 133 million people access Facebook on their Smartphones[14]. Considering that the mainstream mediascape is largely composed of upper-caste men, the growth of the digital has a lot to offer marginalised voices. There are a number of Facebook pages, Twitter accounts, websites and blogs devoted to Dalit activism. The followers of these digital spaces have increased after Rohith Vemula's suicide in February 2016, a case that had national resonance. For instance, *National Dastak,* a news website which reports issues of marginalized sections like Dalits, tribes and women, has 1,81,230 followers on Facebook; journalist Dilip C Mandal, who writes extensively on issues related to OBCs and SCs, has 76.986 followers on Facebook; *Dalit Camera: Through Untouchable Eyes* has 30,640 followers and *Round Table India*, a platform for Dalit-Bahujan intellectuals' expression, has 19,894 followers on the medium. In addition to this, *Ambedkar's Caravan* and *Dalit Camera* have more than 17,500 and 11,000 followers on Twitter[15]. The rise of digital media is appears to empower people to express the discrimination that they face and it will provide for voices which have been invisible so far but the digital divide that surrounds the medium has remain a topic for concern[16] . This can also be seen in the manner which the use of social media is played out. One must probe the political economy of social media to get a broader picture.

If we analyze Facebook in particular, among the top trending topics of 2016 were the Uri and Pathankot attacks, surgical strikes, the Rio Olympics, the MS Dhoni biopic, Priyanka Chopra and the iPhone 7 launch[17]. The social media public sphere is heavily occupied by the mainstream and dominant

even in the political realm; e.g.[18] 'I Support Narendra Modi' is the most liked Facebook page among political organization pages with 11,381,410 likes, while alternative platforms like *Dalit Camera: Through Untouchable Eye* merely attracts 14,367 likes from its followers. The Right wing saffron had its rise even before the 2014 national elections[19]. There are a number of Facebook pages devoted to the anti-reservation movement[20]. Social media has slowly saw a shift of all mainstream news outlets and it is drawing a large viewership; e.g. *Times of India* draw Facebook videos had 112 million views only in the month of October 2016, also a result of large number of people who are using small screens (Web and Smartphone) for video streaming. This growth has been fueled by large huge advertising money shifting to these digital platforms of which these mainstream media outlets have been major beneficiaries[21]. No wonder social media platforms are becoming a major source of news and entertainment consumption for its users[22].

Social media is taking over the mainstream; where Google and Facebook have become one of the most powerful media institutions[23]: Algorithm-based design not only makes sure that we don't miss out on what is going 'viral' and what is 'trending on our news feed[24]' but it also perpetuates the kind of content and ideas that we already have grown accustomed to. It provides one with a much customized worldview where it is easy for advertisers to target their potential consumers.[25] On the other hand, it eliminates the chances of encountering contrary points of view and things that might be ideologically very different to ours. There is a danger that our news feed is manufacturing a narrow world vision for our self. This phenomenon has been identified as filter bubbles[26] or echo chambers of social media. The circulation of the Una video and the resultant anger might have exploded on one timeline while for many others there might not even have been a hint of what the issue was all about. These bubbles can be small or big, with a promise of keeping you happy and solidifying your ideology by borrowing solidarity from online spaces. But this fragmentation can lead to major estrangement from the ground realities of the world – Donald Trump's win in the US presidential election shocked a section of media and people who had no doubts that Hillary Clinton would win the elections; perhaps they never saw how supporters from the other side in their timelines were gaining momentum in the run-up[27]. In such circumstances, digital democracy is faced by a challenge where these bubbles of exclusion and isolation on the Internet provide for only minor

interactions among various perspectives. Although social media, barring state surveillance[28] and periodic restrictions, has been able to accumulate all kinds of political expressions quite successfully. Hardik Patel's lead Patidar movement in Gujarat and Militant Commander Burhan Wahni's popularity among Kashmiri youth were few examples of that. But corporate social media which run on the logic of capital and the growth of its services also associate its users as consumers as well as commodities.

Anand Teltumbde, author of the book *The Persistence of Caste: The Khairlanji Murders & India's Hidden Apartheid* says, "Technology—not just in social media applications, but the availability of cheap and abundant computing power, data capture and storage that in turn has created a new paradigm of analytics—cannot ignore Dalits as consumers of goods and services. Therefore, the media cannot afford to ignore Dalits any longer, although being still largely Dalit-free, it displays prejudice as well as ignorance in writing about them.[29]" Facebook had an ambitious plan of hijacking Internet in India with its Free Basic services but it was later disallowed on the principles of Net Neutrality. They wanted to target the untapped rural population who still has a very limited access to Internet services. Social media thrives on its users who are the producers as well as the consumers of the medium. Users' activity is carefully monitored the data generated by them is used for targeted online advertising. 'They store, merge and analyze collected data. This allows them to create detailed user profiles and to know a lot about the users' personal interests and online behaviors. Surveillance is an inherent feature of corporate social media's capital accumulation model. (Fuchs 2014, 100)[30]' The rise of political expression of Dalits on the Internet is a reality and it is likely to grow as the Digital India Program penetrates into parts of India where there is still no internet connection but under the logic of political economy of the corporate social media platforms they're likely to be used also as a commodity. 'Social media users are double objects of commodification: they are commodities themselves and through this commodification their consciousness becomes while online, permanently exposed to commodity logic in the form of advertisements (Fuchs 2014, 101).[31]' So every profile page is a space for further commoditization and a very single 'like' is an opportunity for advertisers.

In advent of mediated events such as Una violence incident; social media

sharing and reproduction of events becomes an object of scrutiny. Circulation of violence of committed on Dalit bodies starts to become a means to be a media spectacle and the reproduction of identities as an object of commodities. Philosopher Douglas Kellner in his essay *Media Culture and the Triumph of the Spectacle* writes ''Political and social life is also shaped more and more by media spectacle. Social and political conflicts are increasingly played out on the screens of media culture, which display spectacles like sensational murder cases, terrorist bombings, celebrity and political sex scandals, and the explosive violence of everyday life. Media culture not only takes up expanding moments of contemporary experience, but also provides ever more material for fantasy, dreaming, modeling thought and behavior, and constructing identities.''[32'] So the Dalit activism through the use of social media presents an interesting challenge to anti-caste movement itself amidst the reproduction of commodity nature of its own identities and events; where digital itself can become means for spreading caste based discrimination.[33] Una uprising did become one of the biggest Dalit movement in Gujarat in recent years but the sustainability of the movement will depend on organizing strength of people and the will to change centuries old system of domination. The role of digital mediums will be inevitable in such mobilization. But it is also important to understand that most of these platforms are owned by big companies like Google and Facebook. They own all the data in circulation. The idea of digital democracy should be threatened by such ownership of information and data. Caste hierarchies have defied promises of modernity to end the system of discrimination and hegemonies[34]. It persisted and reproduced itself during stages of industrialization and globalization. The digital throws an interesting turn to the present where majority of marginalized still find themselves on the lesser side of the digital divide.

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