

8. Exploring the Digital Divide as a Component of Intersectionality Through the #DalitLivesMatter Moment

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Abstract

Social media activism presents citizens, especially the marginalized, with an opportunity to form and sustain collective identities in a mediated space through the course of a social movement. This chapter uses #DalitLivesMatter as a case study to examine Dalit women's online participation and visibility. Our content analyses of Twitter conversations and news articles in the mainstream media show that although sexual abuse and forced cremation of Dalit women in 2020 spurred #DalitLivesMatter, it largely became a space for Dalit men to raise their concerns. For centuries, Dalit women have been victims of triple violence (caste, class, and gender), which is used to maintain the existing caste and gender disparities. Dalit women's suppression in the form of domestic violence, verbal abuse, denial of education, security, and safety have hardly received any attention or space in the news media. Their absence from the social media space for social and economic reasons, including the digital divide, adds the fourth dimension to their exclusion. By incorporating insights from deeper subjective aspects of the

caste system and literature on intersectionality, this study finds further marginalization of Dalit women's voices in the hashtag era.

Key Words: Dalit women, Digital divide, Intersectionality, Gender, Caste, Social activism: #metoo.

Introduction

Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies—for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement. (Cixous, 1997, p. 347)

The rape and murder of a Dalit woman on September 14, 2020, in Hathras, India, brought forth the horrors of caste and gendered violence (Jaiswal, 2020). Although similar incidences of Dalit rape have been common for centuries, this incident shook India, with enormous protests organized by activists on digital media platforms against such oppression of Dalits. The forced cremation of the victim by the state police without the family's approval marked a new macabre low, creating nationwide uproar against the Dalit suppression. This incident engraved a great image of solidarity and change in the anti-caste activism history in India. Eventually, social media tools were combined with state-level protests to push for an anti-casteist Dalit agenda.

Previous literature on activism has often criticized a lack of engagement by minority women (Brown, 2006; Thomlinson, 2014). Similar arguments have been made in the case of Dalit women and activism, whereby Dalit women have been left out due to the Brahmanical social system and patriarchal order that prevails in India (Govinda, 2008; Guru, 1995). While Dalit solidarity sought to include people from different backgrounds and genders, the presence of Dalit women voices seems to be compromised by the intersectionality of caste, class, and gender. This is more evident in the era of digital activism, when #metoo revived the movement against gender violence across the world in 2017, spurring several similar local hashtag movements. The lack of resources, technological affordances, digital literacy, and patriarchal restrictions on women's autonomy, mobility, and self-expression, hinders Dalit women's

participation in digital activism (Dey, 2020; Jain, 2020). Oppression of such traditionally marginalized women is more complex than that of Black or white women (Mrudula et al., 2013). Hence, we could argue that several intersectional factors hinder Dalit women's voices during social activist moments and exacerbate the suppression of their voice against social inequalities. However, few studies have discussed Dalit women's participation on digital platforms. Hence, this chapter fills the gap in the existing literature and analyzes the rate of Dalit women's participation in the online movement following the Hathras incident.

Dalit activism in the form of protests after the Hathras incident were largely conducted online, where the Dalits used #DalitLivesMatter, #JusticeforHathras, and many other hashtags to seek justice for the victim. #DalitLivesMatter was most widely used hashtag on social media. Although #DalitLivesMatter was initiated following #BlackLivesMatter after George Floyd's death in the US in May 2020, it gained prominence during the Hathras case. Eventually, #DalitLivesMatter became an epitome of the Hathras case. This chapter uses the Hathras case and analyzes Twitter discourse and mainstream news articles surrounding #DalitLivesMatter to understand the visibility and participation of Dalit women in the social activist movement in India.

Kathleen Fallon and Sophia Boutilier (2021) claim that women's participation in digital platforms is crucial to equality and quality of social activism movements such that their absence could lead to the failure to actualize the potential of these movements. Minority voices are required in digital spaces because the mainstream media fails to report minority grievances in an appropriate and accurate manner (Balasubramanian, 2011). Participation in digital media has the potential to promote the formation of counter-publics, wherein mainstream hegemonic discourses is challenged, and experiences of the disenfranchised are brought to the fore

(Thakur, 2020). Hence, this chapter conducts a comparative analysis of how the Dalit women were reported in the mainstream and their voice on social media platforms during the Hathras case; it then elucidates the relevance of Dalit women's participation on digital platforms. This chapter ends with the argument that the digital divide as an added layer of intersectionality reinforces minority (Dalit) women's powerlessness and exclusion.

Dalits

The Dalits/untouchables/Harijans (people of God) evolved because of the caste system, sanctioned by Hindu religion (Sana, 1993) and lie at the lowest level of the social hierarchy. As a result of their location in the caste hierarchy, Dalits have often been connoted as pollutants, or “dirty” (Zelliot, 2010), and have been excluded from public places and forced to perform degrading tasks such as manual cleaning (Thorat, 2002). Their caste-sanctioned subordination and oppression relegated their identity as being the “discriminated one.” Dalit people's subordination reflects the power distribution, control, dominance, and subordination embedded within the caste system. The Indian constitution abolished untouchability and the practice of the caste system in 1947, created special provisions to prohibit discrimination based on caste, and guaranteed equal social, political, and economic rights for the Dalits. For example, the Indian Government introduced the *Prevention of Atrocities (POA) Act in 1989* to counter the social power of dominant castes and stop the appropriation of Dalit stigmatization. Although this and other similar acts have been able to provide legal acknowledgement to the anti-casteist caste, the laws could not effectively deal with the casteist imbalances in society (Chakravarti, 2018). The caste ideologies embedded in the minds of the people continue to make the 24.4% of Indian Dalits vulnerable to physical, psychological, and sexual violence by people from other castes (Teltumbde, 2020; Zelliot, 2010). Seventy-five years after the country gained independence, census figures show that more than 25% of the Dalit and Adivasi populations

are still forced to live in extreme poverty, with little access to health and education. The term “Dalit,” with its various regional nuances, and despite its wide usage, has little legal standing and is recognized legally as scheduled castes (SCs) (Pai, 2013).

Due to the intersection between caste and gender in India, discrimination of Dalit women is more intense and frequent than that of Dalit men. These aspects of gender, religion, caste, and practices of untouchability (purity and pollution) have resulted in the denial of social, cultural, political, and economic rights of Dalit women who constitute approximately 16.6% of all Indian women. Despite this, the dominant castes often get away with the crimes, justifying their act as a form of punishment permitted in the Dharma shastras (religious texts) (Chakravarti, 2018). Violence serves as a crucial social mechanism to maintain Dalit subordination in society. Rape is the most common form of violence committed against Dalit women (Puniyani, 2012). Swabiman society’s report, “Justice Denied: Sexual Violence and Intersectional Discrimination—Barriers to Accessing Justice for Dalit Women and Girls in Haryana,” noted that 80% of the sexual violent cases against Dalit women were committed by upper-caste men (NH Web Desk, 2020). Moreover, in all indicators of human development—for example, economic capability, literacy, and longevity—Dalit women score worse than Dalit men and non-Dalit women. This marks them as the victims of the “triple burden” of gender bias, caste discrimination, and economic deprivation, causing further suppression and sexual harassment, which eventually shapes and intensifies the caste system (Puniyani, 2012).

Intersectionality

The concept of intersectionality was discussed in the 1970s and 1980s by Marxist–feminist theorists to analyze the relationship between capitalism and gender, and gender and disability (Lutz et al., 2011). However, it was Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) who articulated the concept of

intersectionality in relation to the oppression and rights of Black women in the US, which advanced its discourse. Crenshaw (1991, p. 1242) observes that:

Feminist efforts to politicize experiences of women and antiracist efforts to politicize experiences of people of color have frequently proceeded as though the issues and experiences they each detail occur on mutually exclusive terrains. Although racism and sexism readily intersect in the lives of real people, they seldom do in feminist and antiracist practices.

Patricia Hill Collins (1990) describes race, class and gender as “interlocking systems of oppression,” while Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis (1992) use the term “racialized boundaries” to demonstrate the interconnections between the categories of race, nation, gender, skin color, and class. The idea of intersectional discrimination was included in various conventions of the United Nations bodies by the beginning of the new millennium (Lutz et al., 2011). Crenshaw (1991) adds that race and gender intersect in shaping structural, political, and representational aspects of violence against women of color. Based on her observation of a battered women’s shelter, she noted that many women were burdened by poverty, childcare responsibilities, and a lack of job skills because of their gender, class oppression, and racial discrimination when seeking employment and housing. In recent decades, although intersectionality has entered the vocabulary of the feminist movement, scholars and activists from minority groups have remained critical of feminist and other movements as being tokenistic in their attempt at incorporating intersectionality (Moni, 2020).

Most of the past studies on intersectionality are based on the Western concepts of gender, race, and class (Mrudula et al., 2013). Intersectionality can be much more complex. For example,

take Indian women, who may have to deal with various forms of abuse, which vary between women of different caste, class, and their geographical location (i.e. urban or rural areas) (Sircar, 2018). In India, the intersection of caste, religion, class, and gender creates a greater feeling of disempowerment for women from minority backgrounds than is the case for men from a minority caste or religion. Similar to Black women in the US, who are victims of triple oppression of color, gender, and class (Lynn, 2014), Dalit women suffer because of their caste, gender, and poverty. Many sections (Dalits and non-Dalits) consider Dalit women available for any kind of exploitation and violence because of their low and impure status. This consistent belief that Dalit women do not deserve honor or dignity makes them vulnerable to repeated sexual violence (Kumar, 2011). Despite horrific discrimination, Dalits continue to fight for their rights to overcome oppression (Teltumbde, 2020).

Dalit Resilience and Activism

Individuals and Dalit organisations have used different strategies in their struggle for social and economic equality (Lerche, 2008). The rising tide of Dalit consciousness under the leadership of Ambedkar followed by the six decades of democratic politics in India opened new avenues of opportunities for power negotiation between the Dalits and non-Dalits. This, in turn, paved the way for their recognition as a distinct identity. However, in an environment of ongoing suppression, Dalit women face the consequences of their resistance. For example, Chakravarti (2018) and Teltumbde (2020) use the examples of the Tsundru Massacre, the Khairlanji massacre, and many other incidents to exemplify that Dalit women's modesty has been repeatedly outraged by non-Dalits—often the upper caste—to revenge Dalit men's resistance. Over the decades, Dalit women have been compelled to voice their despair, giving rise to Dalit feminism (Sailpar, 2015). Hence, Dalit women are “at the heart of the conflict as

protagonists and as victims, and also as aggressors in this new moment” when the constitution protects and guarantees equal human rights to all citizens (Chakravarty, 2018).

Media and Dalit Activism on Mainstream and Digital Media

In the current era, media representation is crucial to the Dalit identity. That is, the media tells the audience what to do and how to behave (Cohen, 1963). Hanna Adoni and Sherrill Mane (1984) explicate that, specifically, the news media promotes a particular view of the world that influences viewers’ schema or script, which is then relied upon when endorsing attitudes and enacting beliefs in a society. It could be argued that the media creates a framework based on which the society functions. Representations of certain communities in the media can help reconstruct their identity, redefine social hegemony, and replenish or reduce ethnic community-based inequalities.

Social science and media scholars have noted the media’s capacity as a platform to amplify minority communities’ voices, leading to the framing of policies against discriminatory practices (Eisenman et al., 2007). However, a corollary of the systemic discrimination that Dalits endure in India is that their perspectives are often shunted from the mainstream discourse, the atrocities perpetrated against them are either ignored or misrepresented by the mass media, the Dalit resilience is framed as social unrest, and Dalits are identified as “Bad Citizens” (Kumar & Subramani, 2014; Teltumbde, 2020). Moreover, the media reflects an excessive association between Dalits, victimization, and social unrest, while not adequately covering other “positive” aspects of their life and personal identity (Foncesca, 2019). The mainstream media’s representation of Dalit women is grim. Bollywood movies and the mainstream news repeatedly institutionalize the brutal system of caste discrimination, legitimize, and normalize gender roles, and glorify the unpaid labor and struggles of Dalit

women (Kureel, 2021; Yengde, 2018). According to Patil (2011) and Balasubramaniam (2011), such representations are because of a minuscule number of Dalit men and an almost negligible number of Dalit women in the media houses, which are owned by non-Dalits, mostly upper-caste elites.

Similar to elsewhere around the world, social media has enabled a “subaltern consciousness”—a sense of collective identity that empowers minorities (in this case, Dalits), to take control of their own narratives, share their trauma and fight against the upper-caste imperium (Thakur, 2020, p. 367). Digital media offers them a chance to create alternative venues of expression that is dependent on the virality of the content produced (Udupa et al., 2020). Contrary to the casteist mainstream media, social media provides a space for democratic communication, irrespective of one’s caste, class, and gender. Social media provides a sui generis (of its own) opportunity for Dalits to freely articulate their lived experiences and participate in “counter-meaning-making practices” (Thakur, 2020).

After 2012, when the #Nirbhaya and #Damini hashtags trended to express outrage at the rape and murder of the intern in Delhi, “trans, queer, feminist, and Dalit” digital activists have used social media to ensure a more factual representation and correct their general lack of misrepresentation in public life (Gajjala & Maitrayee, 2021). Dalit hashtag movements like the #MrDalit campaign, which trended after three men from a lower caste were brutally beaten in 2017, and #DalitBlue in 2016, are examples. In 2016, the hashtag #BoycottMotilalOswal trended on Twitter, protesting comments made against reservations in education for members of scheduled castes. Protecting the idea of affirmative action saw Dalit Twitter users raise strong voices against a popular television advertisement, which the company ultimately withdrew. The tragic suicide of Rohith Vemula, a Dalit doctoral student on a reputed university

campus, saw a major Dalit-led agitation in 2016, propelled by social media and strengthened by grassroots activism, to protest the egregious daily harassment that Dalits face (Thakur, 2020). In 2019, Twitter saw an explosion of caste assertion when a professor and journalist was suspended because of unfair caste discrimination (Nandy, 2019). Hashtags such as #CasteistTwitter, #JaiBhimTwitter, and #TwitterHatesSCSTOBCMuslims were used to express anger and outrage. Nonetheless, these hashtags were not just limited to Twitter, but even on newer platforms such as Tik Tok and Instagram, reels where the Dalit men, girls and Dalit women produce content to assert their identity (Subramanian, 2021) and to highlight their culture rather than issues of abuse and discrimination (Verma, 2021).

According to Nabamallika Dehingia and Anita Raj (2021), in their examination of tweets in 2020 and hashtags related to caste, #TheyInspireMe, #DalitHistoryMonth, and #DalitWomenFight were among the most tweeted hashtags. This visibility has helped create new affiliations, enabling a “transnational subaltern project” and structures of mutual support (Murray et al., 2018). The testimonies of Dalit women—especially their experiences of sexual violence, which the #MeTooIndia movement overlooked (Bansode, 2020)—found a new voice and strength in the #DalitWomenFight. The #SayHerName, #BlackLivesMatter, and #DalitLivesMatter movements were created by the All-India Dalit Women’s Rights Forum (All India Dalit Mahila Adhikaar Manch, AIDMAM) in India in 2014 and included offline activities such as marches with Dalit activists visiting various states to underline systemic caste-based violence (NBC, 2015).

Online feminist activism in India has shown that Twitter has the capacity to connect activists, participants, and journalists and encourage activism and dialogue that can lead to important and lasting social change (Poell & Rajagopalan, 2015). Digital spaces in India and hashtag

movements like the recent #MeTooIndia movements (Pain, 2021) have shown the potential of Twitter to advance the rights of women, but they also be spaces where only certain women with education and technology can gain access. Thus, while digital spaces can be spaces of empowerment, they can also lead to discrimination and legitimization of certain voices over others. This is especially true of Dalit women, where even in the impactful #MeTooIndia, we see erasures of the violence that Dalit women face (Bansode, 2020). In the next section, we discuss how digital affordances affect the voice of Dalit women.

Social Activism, the Digital Divide, and Intersectionality

According to Chow-White et al. (2018), the “digital divide encapsulates the inequality that exists between individuals, social groups, nations, etc., in terms of access to and use and impact of the digital infrastructure, knowledge, and skills that constitute the digital age.” That digital divide is a manifest of already existing inequalities in the society and creates a new form of division and discrimination in the current technologically advanced society (Nakamura et al., 2013). In fact, many scholars claim that these inequalities are further exacerbated by the development of new and relatively expensive digital technologies. Shruti Jain (2020) contends that digital spaces can bolster activist movements by encouraging inclusion, improving accessibility in organizing collective action, and helping to weave local narratives with global discourses. However, the digital divide among a population can degrade their potential to collectively vouch for their identity, degrade their agency, and reinforce subordination and passives (Thakur, 2020). While the internet has the potential to usher in a digital “global village” (Negroponte, 1995), it must be stated that those without access to digital platforms are left out of this “village,” thereby either creating or adding to the existing level of hierarchical divisions in the society. The Centre of Development Studies (2019) in India has reported that upper and middle classes are still more likely to use social media platforms than the

economically weaker sections in India such as Muslims, Dalits, and Tribals because of the cost of access and literacy required to use the internet.

Research Method

The study takes a mixed methods approach combining both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The quantitative approach is based on the idea that the volume of media coverage and the various voices and issues would indicate the relative significance and silence awarded to a specific issue, whereas qualitative analysis will help elucidate the broad social context, meaning, and evidence of the dominant perspectives in the media and voices, and locate any potential problems, such as resistance and negligence. While the qualitative approach is important to understand who participated in the media, the quantitative approach gives a clearer view of what is represented and how often.

This chapter starts with an analysis of the mainstream media's representation of the Hathras case in *The Times of India* (TOI) and the *Hindustan Times* (HT) between September 14 and October 1, 2020, with the search terms "Dalits" and "Hathras." The search results revealed more than 116 reports in 2020, with 54 and 62 reports published in the TOI and HT, respectively. Of the total number of reports, approximately 21 and 24 reports were repeats, thus bringing down the total number of reports published in the first 16 days after the rape and murder incident to 33 and 38 reports in the TOI and HT, respectively. Later, we also carried out a qualitative Twitter analysis on posts including the search term "#DalitLivesMatter" from September 20 to October 14, 2020.¹ Although the Twitter search brought up a large number of posts, this research selected Twitter's TOP 60 episodic² posts for the study. Twitter, according to Venkateswarlu and Rao (2017), stands as one of the most used platforms by Dalits to raise their voices against discrimination; hence, it has been studied for this research. A comparison

of the mainstream media and social media representations provides (i) an understanding of how and whether Dalit women's issues and voices are represented in the mainstream media, and on a popular social media platform during an incident, (ii) the relevance of Dalit women's voices on the social media platform, and (ii) how the presence or absence of Dalit women's participation in social media contributes to Dalit women's movement.

Results

This section presents an overview of the Dalit women's representation in the mainstream media and on social media platforms as it erupted in response to the Hathras rape and murder case. In the context to Dalit women's representation on mainstream, the news articles show:

1. **Equal number of males versus female voices:** The number of male and female voices in the news reports is almost equal. However, the voices were mostly non-Dalit elites. Male voices represented in the news articles included politicians, police, and Bollywood actors, whereas female voices included politicians, Bollywood actresses, and women's rights spokespersons.
2. **Predominance of elite voices:** The data suggests that the Hathras case received more coverage when non-Dalit Bollywood celebrities and politicians advocated against the incident. The data also reveals that the number of coverages per day increased by 25% when the Hathras victim died on September 28, 2020. Interestingly, a qualitative analysis of the news reports demonstrates that the reason for the increase in the number of articles was because of the rapid increase in number of tweets by politicians and Bollywood celebrities in support of the Hathras victim. More than 15% of the newspaper articles published between September 28 and October 1 were regarding the tweets. However, the two dominant Indian newspapers did not include tweets posted by Dalits. In the first and second week following the event, the news

reports repeatedly relied on second-hand narratives of the police, and then from the victim and their family. On average, the ratio of second-hand narratives to first-hand narratives was 15:3.

3. **Dalit voices in the mainstream:** Two in 10 reports in TOI, and two in nine reports in HT interviewed Dalit men, including the victim's brother and Dalit protestors. In comparison, more than half of the reports referenced a Dalit woman's voice, but 90% repeated the statement "she needed good treatment and on time. For almost a week since she was admitted (to the Aligarh hospital), she was not attended to properly" made by the Hathras victim's sister-in-law.
4. The newspaper articles brought in Dalit voices—especially those of the Dalit activists—only after September 28, when the arguments about the Dalit girl being forcefully cremated by the police without informing her family started gaining attention. On September 28, two Dalit protestors—one each in TOI and HT—discussed the Dalit victim's murder and her family's ill treatment.
5. **Representing Dalit men versus Dalit women:** The variety of Dalit men's voices included the diverse roles a Dalit man plays, ranging from carers to protestors. The Dalit women were repeatedly portrayed as victims. On average, between October 1 and October 14, six in 10 posts discussed Dalit men protestors, whereas only two posts mentioned Dalit women protest.
6. **Sensationalistic stories:** Most of the reports were sensationalistic—that is, they described the horrific news of the event repeatedly, without any acknowledgment of the casteist nature of the attack. On average, eight of 10 stories were sensationalistic both in the TOI and HT.

The analysis of the 60 episodic Twitter posts demonstrates the following:

1. **Most posts were made by Dalit men and organizations:** Of the top 60 Twitter posts, 37 were made by Dalit men, 16 by Dalit organisations, and seven posts that trended on Twitter were made by Dalit women.
2. **Posts largely focused on rape, but ignored other forms of abuse of Dalit women:** Of the total number of posts reshared, 33 cases discussed sexual and physical abuse—especially the rape and murder of Dalit women—17 cases discussed discriminatory behaviors against Dalit men and included conflicts between Dalits and non-Dalits, arrests, verbal abuse, and death. Ten discussed casteism and the discriminatory behaviors that Dalit face in their day-to-day lives. The data suggests that Dalit women victims were tweeted about only during the rape and death event. However, other forms of abuse or discriminatory behaviors against Dalit women such as verbal abuse, denial to education, or economic freedom among many others, remained unaddressed.
3. **Anger vs pity:** The social media posts constantly reflected the emotion of anger regarding atrocities against Dalits in general and pity for Dalit women’s suffering.
4. **Posts focused on casteist practice but ignored intersectional factors affecting Dalit women:** Although the Hathras case was about Dalit women oppression, Twitter posts repeatedly advocated for emancipation of casteist practice and ignored the other intersectional factors, such as gender and class, that contribute to Dalit women’s oppression.
5. **A lack of amplification of Dalit women’s voices on Twitter:** The Twitter analyses demonstrated that the stories posted by Dalit women were the least shared; only seven of the many posts made by Dalit women made it into the top posts. On average, a post made by a Dalit man received 40 likes and 15 retweets, while a post by a Dalit woman received only 17 likes and three retweets.

Discussion

Overall, the newspaper reports reflect an ongoing significant lack of Dalit women's representations in the mainstream. The biased nature of the mainstream media was repeatedly visible in the number of reports preferring elite voices over Dalits—especially Dalit women, whose presence was ignored until it had a sensationalistic component. The mainstream media ignored any tweets published by Dalit organisations and Dalit men and women condemning the crime and casteism. Dalit men and non-Dalit voices were preferred over Dalit women, and Dalit women's voices and narratives were included only when they suffered discrimination or were suppressed. When translating the voices represented in the newspaper reports based on hierarchy, one could observe images of “powerful elites” being supported the most, followed by “resilient Dalit male,” and then the “passive, and victim Dalit women.” Overall, the mainstream media analysis demonstrates that Dalit women are far less likely to be seen in the media than Dalit men and non-Dalits. This gender-imbalanced picture of society can reinforce and perpetuate harmful gender and ethnic stereotypes. As a result of the imbalances of representation of Dalit women in the mainstream media, it is inevitable for Dalit women to participate on digital platforms to make their voices heard during activism movements. In the next section, we analyze the participation of Dalit women on Twitter after the Hathras case.

Overall, Twitter analysis reflects an ongoing lack of Dalit women's voices/posts on Twitter that could effectively address their suppression and emancipation of the intersectionalities that cause oppression. Despite the atrocities committed against a Dalit woman, Twitter posts focused on the general issue of casteist practice and ignored the intersectional factor of gender that resulted in Dalit women's oppression. Of the top 60 tweets, only seven were made by Dalit women. However, these posts were relatively less liked and retweeted/shared, again highlighting the absence of Dalit women's voice on social media platforms.

A comparative analysis of mainstream and Twitter demonstrates that the number of Dalit voices and representation was much higher on social media than in the mainstream media. In this era of convergence, minority activism influences the reporting of events pertaining to minority communities in the mainstream media (Saha, 2019). An analysis of the mainstream media reporting suggests a growing number of news reports that discuss non-Dalit elites' tweets around Dalit issues. Access to social media platforms has transformed the relationship public sphere. Various findings suggest that social media networking sites provide another avenue for members of majority groups to advocate for minority rights (Poell & Rajagopalan, 2015). The growing number of non-Dalit voices on Twitter could therefore be considered a manifestation of Dalit activism on social media and increasing recognition of Dalit rights. These voices eventually could be argued to have resulted in the inclusion of Dalit's issues in the mainstream media. Hence, Dalit voices on social media are crucial to the identification and reporting of Dalit issues in the news media.

The data on Dalit women's participation on Twitter indicates a grimmer picture. Crenshaw (1991) observes that in cases of rape involving minority women, the mainstream media's interests often fall in the void between concerns about "women's issues" and about "racism/casteism." In such scenarios, it is increasingly expected that social media counter-narratives will fill the gap by highlighting Dalit grievances and issues. A comparative analysis of mainstream and social media discourses displays that although social media addressed some of the issues neglected by the news media, it did not bring out Dalit women's narratives crucial to counter the sensationalist coverage by the mainstream media. For example, while the mainstream media completely ignored the casteist nature of the discriminatory act, one-third of the posts claimed Dalit discrimination because of ongoing hegemonic beliefs, and Dalit

suppression against laws of the Constitution. However, the top tweets failed to bring out other variables of intersectionality that cause Dalit women's rape and murder as a regular occurrence. While #DalitLivesMatter became the epitome of the Hathras case and a rallying call for Dalit women's equality, a study of the Twitter posts as well as the mainstream media articles reflects the suppression of Dalit women's voices and discourses of Dalit women's rights in India.

Previous scholars, such as Chakravarty (2018), have established the involvement of Dalit women in Dalit activism movements to amplify their voices for justice. However, the representation and voices of Dalit women were scarce both mainstream media and social media during the Hathras case. The absence of minority women's narratives in the media is often claimed to be a result of the absence of participation of people from certain demographics in the news-making process (Balasubramaniam, 2011). On social media, it can be argued that a dearth of posts highlighting Dalit women's grievances in the context to their various intersectional vulnerabilities is because of a lack of participation by Dalit women on social media platforms. They lack access to digital platforms and digital literacy for several reasons, including the domination of Dalit men in decision-making roles at different levels of society and their control of economic resources. Hence, the significant difference between Dalit men and Dalit women's voices vouching for #DalitLivesMatter and the reduced relevance to their stories in mainstream and social media can be argued to be a result of the digital divide.

Based on the theoretical concept of social networking and technology affordance, stories and narratives posted on social media platforms are validated by likes and shares, which in turn influences political participation (Valenzuela et al., 2019). Moreover, followership of a particular cause or a person, which contributes to likes and shares, is widely seen as a reason for in-group favoritism or identification of similarities in group norms, beliefs, or ideologies

with those of other social media users (Shin & Thorson, 2017). This study elucidates social media narratives by the elite—such as politicians and Bollywood celebrities—and Dalit men and Dalit organisations receiving comparatively higher attention from mainstream newspapers and other social media users than tweets posted by Dalit women. For example, as discussed elsewhere, the proportion of likes and shares (40 likes and 15 retweets) on a post by a Dalit man is higher than that of the response received on a post by a Dalit woman (17 likes and three retweets). Hence, non-Dalit elites and Dalit men were successful in building a larger digital followership, thus enabling their messages to spread throughout the network. Dalit women's tweets received a comparatively lower number of retweets, and hence were not as validated and widely circulated as those of the others. These can be argued to be the result of the digital divide among the Dalit women, which hindered Dalit women's participation on social media platforms because there was a low number of followers who would identify with the Dalit women's grievances, and hence a failure to retweet, share, and mobilize the counter-narratives.

Interestingly, the study reflects on non-Dalit women advocating for Dalit women's rights in the mainstream media and on social media platforms. This can be considered an important development in society because it depicts a decline in race/caste-based ignorance, whereby upper-caste women vouch against upper-caste discrimination. However, the relevance of Dalit women's voices cannot be ignored. Behm Morawitz, Pennell and Speno (2016), in the context of white women's participation in non-white activists' movements, state that the ability of white users to present themselves as non-white in online spaces has the potential to develop empathy for racism experienced by people of color. Nonetheless, such experiences also allow white users to appropriate the culture of Indigenous people and people of color, and to gain from "virtual blackface" and being temporary "tourists" into racist experiences without working to change them in their lived worlds (reference needed). We argue that the relevance

of Dalit women's voices in social discourses lies in the fact that only a Dalit woman could consider the effect of intersections of caste, class, and gender in their lives, and adequately describe and give an account of the violence meted against them in a number of ways. Gopal Guru (1995) reiterates an activist's statement that the caste factor is not adequately recognized in the analysis done by non-Dalit, middle-class, and urbanized women activities. Rather, the voices need to arise from the grassroots level—from women who experience the violence.

Previous scholarship mentions that Dalit women use digital platforms to bring in positive stories that can shift the discourse of Dalit women as being helpless and passive. Additionally, they could reflect on Dalit women as leaders and activists and help in uplifting a community (Jain, 2020). Given that none of the stories in the mainstream media or on social media platforms discuss positive stories or stories of Dalit women's upliftment, Dalit women's presence on digital platforms is crucial in bringing out the narratives that are crucial to shaping feminist social activism movements. This absence of positive stories may be due to the digital divide that exists in India. Hashtags have the power to move discourses across the media landscape, produce a robust public discussion, and contribute to "affective solidarity" followed by new lived possibilities of women identification, experience, organizing, and resistance. Additionally, in the era of convergence, Dalit women's voices on social media are not just crucial, but also significant for informing and influencing the mainstream media's reporting. However, in the absence of voices that could pronounce or claim for Dalit women's rights, it would not be possible for the hashtag to intervene both discursively and affectively into hegemonic public discourse. The digital divide among the Dalit women could, then, be considered an additional aspect that causes the silencing or oppression of Dalit women. That is, the digital divide can be said to be adding a fourth layer of oppression to the already triple-oppressed Dalit women. It is these intersecting factors that hinder the minority women from

engaging online and navigating marketplace discrimination. Irrespective of the relevance of social media and digital access for Dalit and other minority women, few studies have investigated the intersection of social activism in the context of minority women and the digital divide. Hence, this study fills this gap.

Conclusion

Digital communications enable the extension of ideologies located in casteist culture, and the new affordances of social media need to be evaluated critically with attention to the various components of intersectionality. In this context, this chapter discusses Dalit women's representation and participation in Dalit activism movements and elucidates the relevance of digital access to Dalit women's identity construction. Considering the digital divide another component of intersectionality in addition to gender, caste, and class, this chapter reflects on how a lack of digital access and support from fellow Twitterers hinder the creation of robust public discussion about Dalit women's rights. Feminist hashtags on social media have the potential to move the media landscape, and counter-storytelling can provide vital heuristics that help enlighten the experiences and outcomes of racial/caste groups (Chang, 2013). However, the limited involvement of Dalit women in online spaces due to the digital divide, and hence the reduced number of narratives from within the marginalized group, affects the presence of Dalit women's narratives in the public sphere. This additional factor restricts the discourse of stories that is crucial to Dalit women's empowerment. Overall, the study reflects that, in this mediated era, the three elements of caste, gender, and poverty are not enough to explain the absence of Dalit women from the public discourse. Given that digital participation is crucial to advocating against suppression, the digital divide can be argued to be the fourth component of intersectionality that contributes to the suppression of Dalit women.

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END NOTES

¹ Initially the twitter search was conducted between September 14 and October 14, 2020, similar to that of the timeline used to collect newspaper data. However, the Twitter data collection revealed that a major chunk of messages started discussing and using #DalitLivesMatter moment in relation to Hathras case only after September 21. Hence, the Twitter search timelines were extended by two weeks to October 14, 2020.

² Episodic posts in contrast to thematic posts refer to the posts that discuss lived experiences of the Dalits. It excludes those reports that talk about academic events such as lectures and conferences.