

THE MAKING OF THE DALIT HUMAN RIGHTS MOVEMENTS IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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Dalits belong to the lowest, most oppressed caste in India's caste system. Despite the robust Dalit movement in India and its growing transnational visibility, few studies have empirically examined how Dalit groups have both used and been successful in using computer mediated communication (CMC) to shape transnational Dalit rights discourse and access a global platform. In order to fill the gap this paper asks two interrelated questions: What is the content of this discourse? What does the world know about Dalits and their rights? We answer the first question through quantitative and qualitative content analysis of top ranked web-pages on Dalits and use web-traffic analysis and Google trend analysis to answer the second question. Our findings indicate that much contemporary framing of the Dalit movement on cyberspace targets international advocacy units intent on linking to the human rights agenda. To do so, Dalit activists stress notions of "shared oppressions" with other marginalized groups. Second, measurements based on web-traffic analysis and Google Trends analysis demonstrate that the topic of Dalit rights and caste have successfully garnered interest among Internet audiences beyond India. However, this virtual interest is yet to fully supplant traditional modes of organizing and activism.

Keywords. Dalits, Human Rights, Caste, Transnational, Web analyses.

Social movement scholars have established the indispensability of communication for networking, creating and curating collective identities, mobilizing support and fomenting collective action. In this era of globalization, the emergence of



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computer-mediated communications (hereafter, CMC)¹ has revolutionized and restructured communication dynamics of social movements by bringing together social movement actors who may never have met otherwise. Their connections have defied space differentials (Martinez-Torres, 2001; Rheingold, 1993; Van Laer & Van Aelst, 2010). Consequently, in recent years, social movement scholars have generated abundant scholarship that analyzes the role of ICTs and digital activism platforms. Some scholars have examined websites (Ignacio, 2006; Narayan, Purkayastha, & Banerjee, 2011; Pudrovska & Ferree, 2004) while others focused on online groups (Fung, 2002) still others have studied social media platforms (Awan, 2017; Lim, 2012; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012) and blogs (Mitra & Gajjala, 2008). Scholars have profiled the use of CMC in range of social movements; the topics tackled have been just as diverse as the forums studied. Some of the movements were aimed at toppling powerful despots (Arab Spring) and others made courageous statements against corruption and inequality (#nadpl, #blacklivesmatter, #occupywallstreet, the Zapatista Rebellion). There are still others that are best described as counter-movements that seek to protect the interest of the dominant groups (for conservative Hindu groups see, Lal, 1999; and for white supremacist groups see Burris, Smith, & Strahm, 2000) or violent extremist groups that threaten humanity through terrorism (for more on cyber-Jihad and ISIS see, Awan, 2017). All in all, the impact of digital technology is written large across national and transnational social movements² and advocacy networks.³

This paper expands on the existing scholarship by analyzing a long standing yet understudied transnational social justice movement, i.e., the Dalit Rights movement. Despite the presence of a robust Dalit movement in India and growing transnational visibility since 1980s, only a handful of studies (Kumar, 2009; Majumdar, 2009⁴) have explored the nexus between the transnational Dalit rights movement and the use of CMC. Extending that scholarship, we ask the following three interrelated questions: What are the central themes of the social justice discourse on the web? How successful have Dalits advocacy groups been in creating visibility and generating global awareness? How effective have new communication

tools been in globalizing the Dalit movement compared to other traditional forms of political mobilization?

This paper contextualizes the Dalit movement within a growing body of research that examines both the potential and restraints of digital tools for social movements, as well as the interface between digital forms of activism and real-life activism. Our paper specifically focuses on web analysis as a virtual medium of transmission, not only because webpages provide useful data but also because webpages chronologically precede Facebook and Twitter and have been used by Dalit groups for a longer period of time. Websites are also more visible and accessible than closed email listservs (Kumar, 2009), which has also been used in the past to connect the Dalit diaspora. In the following paragraphs, we ground the study in extant literature, provide a succinct background to the Dalit rights movement, and follow with a discussion of data and methods. We conclude the paper with descriptions and discussions of findings and their implication for the transnational Dalit rights movement.

Social Movements in the Digital Age—Revisiting Debates

Despite the renewed interest in the impact of CMCs on sustaining and mobilizing movements, opinions are divided in scholarly literature with regard to the power and limits of digital technologies in contemporary campaigns for social and political change. Proponents of digital activism highlight the power of the Internet to globalize a social movement (Rheingold, 1993). They argue that the Internet facilitates the formation of transnational networks, connecting more people from all over the world than would have been possible through traditional organizing. The Zapatista rebellion, for instance, is an archetypical case used to emphasize the role of the Internet in enabling a global identity for social movements. Numerous scholars have examined how a movement confined to Mexico gained international support throughout America and Europe via a very active cyber presence (Martinez-Torres, 2001; Russell, 2005; Sagástegui, 2006; Schulz, 2007). More recently, scholars emphasize the role of social media sites, such as Facebook and

Twitter, in allowing movements with minimal resources to quickly mobilize a large number of ordinary citizens from all over the world (Bimber, Flanagin, & Stohl, 2005; Shirky, 2008; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012). Frequently used examples include the Arab Spring mobilization, the #Occupy movement, and the #BlackLivesMatter movement. Scholars contend that these movements effectively used social media to disseminate news and events to a global audience, as they were unfolding in real time (Freelon, McIlwain, & Clark, 2016; Lim, 2012; Shirky, 2011). As Butsch (2007) clearly states, “[T]he interactive capacities of new media have been hailed as the basis for a new form of public sphere” (p. 162).

Others note that the Internet is a space where grassroots organizations can challenge mainstream discourses giving a voice to marginalized groups who often do not have access to traditional media sources] (Kahn & Kellner, 2004; Rodgers, 2003). John Baglow (2011) points out that “new technologies are egalitarian, instant, uncircumscribed, freely collective (one can opt in or opt out at any time), anonymous, and nonlinear—and hence deeply subversive” (p. 2) Studies document that individuals use the web to dilute the consequences of gendering, racialization, class and other social hierarchies to which they are subject to in the offline world (e.g., Mitra & Gajjala, 2008). In essence, the literature asserts that alternative media platforms on the web are open, democratic and decentralized, increasing the potential of organizations and movements to reach individuals and groups who share similar identities and oppressions by bypassing traditional media gatekeepers (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008; McDonald, 2015; Thorson, 2008).

Finally, researchers claim the Internet and social media has enabled more engagement and participation of ordinary citizens on issues of social justice (Bennett, Breunig, & Givens, 2008; Coleman & Blumler, 2009; Coyer, Dowmunt, & Fountain, 2007; Kwak, Poor, & Skoric, 2006). Dolata (2017) argues that social media has “contributed to a remarkable pluralization of protest opportunities and activities; offer new actors such as individuals or small groups the opportunity to initiate protest; and create low threshold access to protest activities, which allows to attract sympathizers and participants who are otherwise apolitical or not part of the more classic social movement environment” (p. 23). Some studies establish a positive correlation between use of Internet and civic engagement (Jennings &

Zeitner, 2003; Kang & Gearhart, 2010). They argue that the breadth of information online and the availability of digital tools have given people the agency to influence and shape conversations about pressing social issues of our time. "Hashtivism," or Hashtag activism (such as #Ferguson, #Love wins, and many others), has had a transformative effect by creating digital communities and rallying people to influence social and political change (Blay, 2016; Moscato, 2016; Yang, 2016).

In contrast to the cyber-utopianism presented earlier, other scholars believe that the Internet does not always work as intended. Critics question the notion that the Internet is a bastion of freedom and egalitarianism (Hindman, 2009; Morozov, 2011; Putnam, 2000). They argue that the Internet is subject to dominance by a few large corporations (Google, Apple, Amazon, and Microsoft) that often act in self-interest. Others argue that besides corporate power, government control of the Internet is increasing as well in the form of censorship, surveillance and propaganda (Kahn & Kellner, 2004; Morozov, 2011; Schneier, 2013). Cyber-pessimists also claim that far from encouraging mass participation, the emergence of the Internet and knowledge society has generated deeper divisions between the information rich and poor, disproportionately benefitting affluent interest groups to reassert their control in the virtual sphere (Howard, 2006). In her analysis of the role of the Internet in the Latin American feminist and queer movement, Friedman (2017) says, "Despite the Internet's horizontal design, it allowed for hierarchies of communication, in some cases creating them where they did not exist before. Limitations in access to computers, software, and information restricted counterpublic participation. These findings illustrated how the Internet offered no solution to the deep-seated inequalities based on gender, race, class, geographical, or other privilege. At times, it reinforced them" (p. 97). Overall, many argue that the utopian vision that the Internet will empower ordinary masses and challenge traditional power blocs is a myth (Deibert, 2000; Stevenson, 2000).

Second, some claim that digital activism does not create long-term tangible results and participation. According to N. F. Barber (2015), "The age of unlimited and unfiltered expression through social media has produced these hashtag activists, the newest 21st-century version of the armchair activist. There is nothing inherently

wrong with hashtag activism. If you can spread awareness for causes (at least, causes that need awareness-spreading), then you are performing a valuable service. The danger of hashtag activism is that it often takes the place of real activism” (para 3). Often referred to as "Slacktivism" (Christensen, 2012; Morozov, 2011), critics maintain that using the Internet to bring about change is not sustainable. It is about personal satisfaction and feeling good rather than real involvement. It is passive and ineffective and once an issue loses steam, people quickly lose interest. This was demonstrated in the #bring back our girls campaign against the kidnapping of 276 girls by Boko Haram in Nigeria. Though this campaign was shared more than a million times on social media, it did little to rescue the girls and bring any real change (Taylor, 2014). Similarly, Morozov (2011) argues that many in the west touted the power of social media in ushering in democracy in the 2009 Iranian election. Andrew Sullivan coined the phrase “the revolution shall be tweeted” to demonstrate the use of Internet to mobilize Iranians. However, Morozov (2011) claims that, as with several other movements, the so-called twitter revolution quickly lost momentum.

In addition, skeptics claim that the Internet has led to the spread of misinformation, ideological sites and simplistic messages that limits our ability to critically evaluate information (Howard, 2006; Lal, 1999; Narayan et al., 2011). People participate in campaigns and support causes without a thorough understanding of the complexities that many issues entail (Christensen & Bengtsson, 2011). Furthermore, the use of algorithms and aggregators have facilitated social media outlets to customize content to individuals that corresponds to their own beliefs.

Finally, skeptics of online activism cannot replace real life and face-to-face participation in social movements. Gladwell (2010) asserts that digital activism seen in recent movements is weak compared to activism during the American civil rights movement. According to him, online activism does not involve the emotional mobilization (Collins, 1993), the camaraderie, and the human contact often seen in real-life protests. In the words of Gladwell (2010), “Facebook activism succeeds not by motivating people to make a real sacrifice but by motivating them to do the things that people do when they are not motivated enough to make a real sacrifice.

We are a long way from the lunch counters of Greensboro” (para 16). Overall, scholars like Gladwell (2010) and Dolata (2017) claim that digital activism as a symbolic tool of protest is often not as effective as traditional forms of mobilization. Building on this literature, the objective of this paper is to examine the digital activism of the Dalit Movement by examining both the content of the discourse on the web as well as the reach of this discourse to a global audience.

Dalits and the Making of a Transnational Movement

The caste system is a system of societal organization that is descent-based; traditionally power, privilege, status and even occupations could be conferred through birth and transferred through generations. Elaborate proscriptions and conventions around endogamy, rules of “purity and pollution,” secured caste boundaries. The Brahmins (priests, teachers and scholars) are at the apex of caste hierarchy. They are followed by the Kshatriyas (rulers and warriors), Vaishyas (merchants and tradesmen) and the Shudras (laborers). The Dalits, literally translated as the “broken people”, exist outside of this four-fold classification⁵ and are considered the most oppressed group within the caste hierarchy. Dalits were ascribed the most menial occupations deemed too unclean and lowly for the upper-castes.

Dalits have worked as laborers, leatherworkers, sweepers, night-scarvengers, and those tasked with cleaning and cremating the dead. They were barred from living in residential proximity to the upper caste and were prevented from using public goods such as temples and water wells. Food and water touched by Dalit were deemed unfit for consumption by the upper caste. In some places, even their shadows would be considered polluting. Their persecution was multifaceted and defended through scriptural conventions. Transgressions—real or perceived—were met with swift retribution in the form of physical violence and sexualized torture. In contemporary India, even as a section of Dalits become upwardly mobile, large numbers continue to suffer from disproportionate rates of poverty, illiteracy and mortality. Violence, public beatings, sexualized torture meted out by the upper caste continue to plague Dalit lives. The caste system endures as a paradoxical narrative

of continuity and change. While on the one hand reprehensible actions in the name of caste linger on, the other anti-caste activism thrives.

Anti-caste movements can be traced all the way back to social reform movements in colonial India, but for this paper we limit our discussion to key shifts after independence that signal the growing internationalization of the movement. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's contributions remain instrumental and, perhaps, unparalleled in this context. As a Dalit himself and an esteemed statesman, he believed that the annihilation of caste was imperative for India's progress. After India's independence in 1947, and as the chairman of the Constitution Drafting Committee, he institutionalized constitutional protections against caste discrimination and de jure reservations in education and public-sector jobs for Dalits. However, in the 1960s–70s, the growing frustration with the failures of the state and an erosion of faith in the state-brokered channels to end casteism led to the revival of anti-caste agitation. The Dalit Panthers, a radical anti-caste movement, emerged around the same time. They reclaimed the Dalit identity and called for a complete revolution that dismantled the socio-economic edifices of the religio-ritual caste-based discrimination. The economic liberalization, growing privatization, and consequent shrinking of the public sector of 1990s continued to expose the limitations of a state-centric approach (Jodhka, 2015; Prashad, 2001).

Around the same time, the “new”⁶ Dalit diaspora spearheaded anti-caste organizations abroad in their bid to garner transnational Dalit solidarity, aid Dalit activists, and create global visibility of India's caste problem. The economic mobility that the “new Diaspora” experienced in North America and Europe was curtailed by experiences of everyday casteist exclusions (Adur & Narayan, 2017; Kumar, 2009). Their attempts to expose the caste-based violations converged with the rising prominence of the transnational human rights movement that offered alternative political platforms and opportunities.

Innovations in communication technologies were critical in connecting and mobilizing the Dalit diaspora to advance social justice claims on the global platform. Kumar (2009) argued that the Internet revolution—the use of email, websites and e-magazines—was indispensable in forging transnational Dalit

networks. He writes, “The whole process of sharing of information about themselves which was not there in want of communication facilities has sensitized themselves and made them conscious that those who are at large distance can easily come together and raise their voice unitedly” (p. 66). However, though Kumar (2009) signals the centrality of CMC, his work tells us little about the content, reach and empirically measured efficacy of CMCs. While Majumdar (2009) discusses and debates the use of race and racism as social movement frames for Dalit activism, as we show below, race and racism are only one of several themes that are critical for the movement. We, therefore, extend the previous scholarship, by not only describing the thematic content (which today, as our findings show, have increased in complexity and nuance) but also empirically measuring the efficacy of CMC for the movement.

Methodology

This study employs two methodological approaches. First, we identified the predominant themes emerging from the web-discourse through a qualitative and quantitative analysis of the top ranked web pages on Dalits. Second, we used web-traffic analysis and Google trend analysis to measure where the audience to these webpages are coming from. Besides focusing on the content, we used metrics to analyze the geographic reach of these web pages in a systematic way.

Studying the Web-Discourse: Content Analysis

Our first research question is to identify what aspects of Dalits and the Dalit Movement are most salient in the web discourse. Accordingly, we conducted a qualitative and quantitative content analysis of the top ranked web pages on Dalits.

First, we created a sample of 50 most popular web pages to determine the type of information people are getting over a 3-month period (January 2016–March 2016). We used a web analytic tool that measures top ranked websites by keyword. Using basic descriptors such as “caste,” “caste system,” “dalit,” and “untouchability,” the software generated a list of the top ten webpages that rank highest on Google,

Yahoo and Bing for the keyword entered in real time. The objective was to create an exhaustive collection of top URLs that rank in the search engines.

Second, we archived the web pages in preparation to conduct a content analysis. Using a content analysis software, we identified the most frequently recurring phrases across the total sample. Phrases that were closely related were grouped together in categories called dictionaries. A Keyword in-context (KWIC) tool was used to analyze the phrase in the context of the site content and inconsistent terms were deleted. The analysis identified five major themes: Human Rights and Advocacy, Globalizing Caste, Caste and Race, Caste and Gender, Caste and Class, and Caste and Religion.

Finally, we used these emergent themes based on quantitative data to qualitatively analyze the textual evidence from the webpages to demonstrate that the quantitative data is consistent with the textual evidence.

Studying the Audience: Web Traffic Data Analysis

Our second research question is to analyze the audience of the web-discourse. Specifically, we were interested in learning where the traffic is coming from and how they were getting there. Catavero (2015) argues that traffic sources are an essential metric in estimating web presence. He identifies four sources of traffic: *Organic Search* refers to visitors who inadvertently arrive at your site through search engines such as Yahoo, Google, and Bing. *Direct Traffic* occurs when people are aware of your website and visit it intentionally by typing the URL. *Referral Traffic* occurs when visitors to a website come from links on other websites and *Social Media Traffic* tracks audience that visit a website through links on social media platforms.

To measure this traffic, we identified a small sample of four Dalit websites that ranked very high in our original sample. They comprise the following websites:

- Ambedkar.org
- Navsarjan.org
- idsn.org
- ncdhr.org

Using a tool that reveals site analytics data, including traffic and audience engagement, we mapped where the audience to these four websites are coming from. Overall, we used these metrics to identify which source drives most traffic to the websites in our sample.

Studying the Popularity of the Discourse: Google Trend Analysis

Finally, moving beyond the restricted sample of our data, we also wanted to get a sense of global interest in the issue of caste system on the web. We used Google Trends, a search analysis tool that provides data on the relative popularity of search terms or websites. Given that Google is one of the most popular search engines, it has become a useful tool to estimate people's interest in topics by geography. Depending upon the availability of data, Google Trends measures the popularity of a term or topic across the globe by providing a score between 0–100.

Results

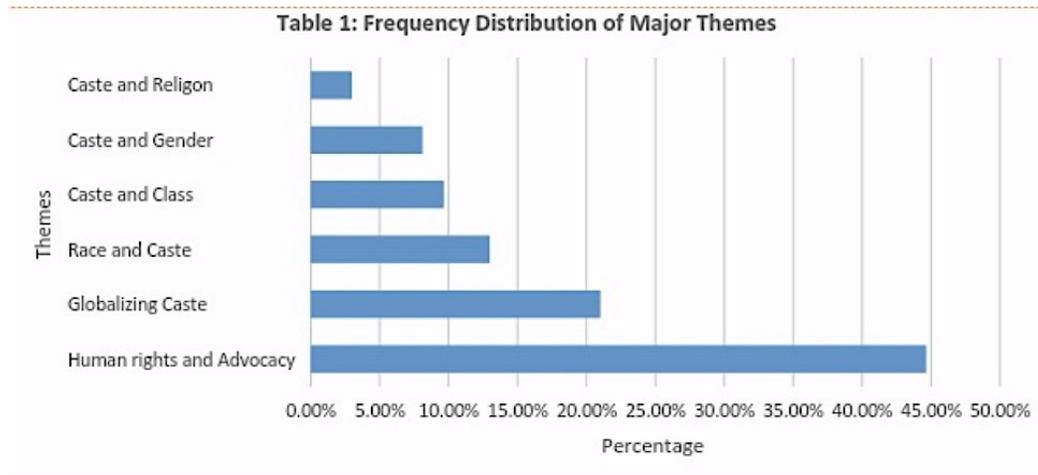
Analysis of Web Discourse

We examined the frequency of common phrases and grouped them into categories to answer the question to see which themes are most emphasized (Table 1, p. 12). We found that the most prominent themes were:

- Human Rights and Advocacy
- Globalizing Caste
- Caste and Race
- Caste and Gender
- Caste and Class
- Caste and Religion

Table 1.

Frequency Distribution of Major Themes



Human Rights and Advocacy. The predominant theme that emerges from the data is the framing of caste discrimination as a global human rights issue. Several articles document various forms of atrocities and violence against Dalits and lower castes. These topics include torture, rape, detention, and murder; lack of civil liberties, voting rights, severe poverty, bonded labor, starvation, and lack of access to basic education; also, health, social exclusion, and the practice of untouchability.

Second, the discourse highlights the failure of the Indian state to enforce the constitutional protections against caste discrimination. Specifically, the discourse underscores the state initiated violence against the Dalits such as police brutality, imprisonment without trial, excessive punishments, and rape of Dalit women by authorities. Numerous websites also categorically blame the Indian state for its reluctance to place caste discrimination on the radar of the International human rights community.

Most importantly, many websites document the various Dalit conferences and global outreach efforts by Dalit activists by redefining caste as a form of discrimination that warrants global attention and involvement. These include recognition from the UN bodies including the Committee on the Elimination of

Racial Discrimination (CERD). The reports by Human Rights Watch (*Broken People: Caste Violence against India's Untouchables* [1999] and *Hidden Apartheid* [2007]) are often featured on the websites as evidence of the international community's concern with the issue. In addition, two websites that appear predominantly among the top-ranked domains—namely, the National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR) and the International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN)—clearly demonstrate efforts to forge links with international groups and to increase global visibility of caste-based discrimination of violence. The IDSN website states (IDSN, n.d),

Caste discrimination is not an internal matter, which only the state is obliged to act upon. The international community has a responsibility to act because caste discrimination is a global human rights problem—one of the biggest and most overlooked of our times—which acts against the universal principles of non-discrimination, human dignity and equality.

Largely, it is clear from the discourse that Dalit organizations are trying to bring traction to the issue of caste discrimination within the international human rights community by framing it as broader human rights violation.

Globalizing Caste. A second major theme is the assertion that discrimination of caste is not merely a South Asian problem. Various websites note that this is a global phenomenon, affecting communities in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, the Pacific region, and various diaspora communities. They claim that there are approximately 250–300 million people who suffer from case and descent-based discrimination and highlight many common features between the caste system in India and comparable practices in other parts of the world. The IDSN website (IDSN, n.d):

Caste systems are also found in Africa, other parts of Asia, the Middle East, the Pacific and in Diaspora communities around the world. In Japan association is made with Shinto beliefs—Buraku people—concerning purity and impurity, and in marginalized African groups the justification is based on myths. Caste discrimination affects approximately 260 million people worldwide.

In addition, the discourse highlights the intersection between transnational migration and caste and documents the perpetuation of caste-based ideologies and tensions in South Asian diasporic communities in the US, UK, South Africa, and other parts of the world. Overall, the discourse reframes caste as a broader concept rather than a pure cultural practice. By conceptualizing caste as a global construct, the discourse illustrates the efforts of Dalit groups to form links with other forms of inequality and discrimination that exist around the world.

Caste and Race. The efforts to counter claims of the exceptionalism of India's caste system lead us to the next predominant theme in the web discourse: the analogy between caste and race. The discourse argues that while caste and race are not the same thing, their similarities are strong enough to foster solidarity with racial minorities in other parts of the world (also see Majumdar, 2009). In an article titled "Race and Caste Has Many Similarities," R. Sampath (2015) argues as follows:

Racial inequality in America has its parallel in caste inequality in India even though by definition, race and caste are not the same thing. The story of one struggle for social justice can illuminate the pitfalls and prospects of success of another.

Thus, these references to race challenge the uniqueness of caste oppression and reveal it as a form of subjugation analogous to racism, uniting them with minority groups across the world. Several websites document the efforts by Dalit activists to treat caste as a form of racial discrimination at the United Nations World Conference against Racism, held in Durban, South Africa, in 2001. Dalit websites are particularly critical of the Indian government's stand of treating caste as an internal matter and undermining the efforts by Dalit groups to address the issue of caste in a global forum such as the WCAR. While several web articles specifically analyze the scientific debates relating to caste as a form of race, it is clear from the discourse that Dalit activists and organizations are continuing to put pressure on the international human rights community to recognize caste-based discrimination as a form of modern-day segregation and slavery.

Caste and Gender. The websites also comment on the predicament of Dalit women by documenting the “severe discrimination they face from being both a Dalit and a woman” (IDSN n.d.). The discourse argues that the mainstream feminist movement in India represents the concerns and interests of middle class and upper caste women and does not take up the unique forms of oppression such as manual scavenging, the devadasi system, sex trafficking, and other forms of violence and poverty that specifically affect Dalit women.

The websites particularly detail the various forms of sexual violence and exploitation faced by Dalit women. The heinous gang rape and mutilation of a 23-year-old paramedical student in Delhi on 16 December 2012, who later died of her injuries, was the focus of numerous articles. Accordingly, they call for the need to turn abroad for alliances that could benefit Dalit women. The IDSN calls for Dalit women to fight back. Its website states (IDSN, n.d.),

Dalit women are uniting against one of the world’s most gruesome and effective systems of oppression—the intersection of caste and gender discrimination. Dalit women movements across the world are growing stronger and are connecting to each other and reaching out to decision-makers and people of the world.

Overall, the discourse calls for Dalit activists to forge alliances with minority women across the globe who share similar forms of oppression. Faced with inadequate representation by both the Dalit movement and the mainstream women’s movement in India, Dalit feminist activists, as the discourse demonstrates, have turned abroad for partnership in protest and advocacy as well as for sources of inspiration and hope.

Caste and Class. A relatively small segment of the data also focuses on the intersection of caste and class by highlighting issues of landlessness, bonded labor, manual scavenging, and inhumane working conditions among the Dalits. The debates on the web are particularly critical of capitalist globalization, which many argue has further marginalized Dalits. In fact, a couple of articles call for a strong working-class movement against all forms of oppression, including gender and caste

oppression. Thus, the discourse emphasizes how caste oppression and class exploitation remain intertwined and integrated, and that the need of the hour is to organize struggles that build links between the two.

Caste and Religion. Finally, a few websites critique the notion that the caste system is an intrinsic part of Hinduism. The IDSN websites states that “the division of a society into castes is a global phenomenon, not one exclusively practiced within any particular religion or belief system” (IDSN, n.d.).

The discourse underscores that, though the caste system is attributed to Hinduism, it is also found among other religions such as Islam, Sikhism, and Christianity. The websites provide examples of non-Asrafs (lower-caste) Muslims and Christian Parayas, who are provided separate burial grounds as evidence for the practice of discrimination and untouchability among non-Hindu groups. The discourse also emphasizes both the dynamic nature of Hinduism and prominent movements within the framework of the religion that fight against casteism.

The emergent themes from the content analysis of prominent Dalit websites offer a glimpse into the discourse and perspectives of the Dalit Movement. The data suggests that the dominant human rights based narrative to draw attention to the Dalit issue is an important entry point to open up the discursive landscape and provide the international community a possible lens to understand caste based discrimination. The discourse also establishes parallels between Dalits and similar marginalized groups globally aiding the possibility of transnational alliances.

Traffic Data

We also analyzed where the traffic to the four websites in our sample is coming from and the different kinds of sources that send traffic to these websites. Tables 2, 3, 4, and 5 (p. 18) show the geographic distribution of traffic to the four main websites.

It is evident that India is by far the most dominant source of traffic. The United States is a good second with a relatively impressive share of the traffic, meaning that India and the United States together account for a significant

proportion of all traffic. Other regions that appear among the top sources include the United Kingdom and Canada.

Tables 6, 7, 8 and 9 (p. 19) focus on the sources that are generating the most traffic to the four websites.

The data clearly underscore that organic search, defined as the natural search engine results that appear for any given query, is shown to receive the most traffic. Few external sites are sending traffic through links and there is a negligible number of social media sites generating visits to the websites.

Google Trends Analysis

As mentioned earlier, Google Trends is a tool that analyzes the popularity of specific keywords or topics in various geographic locations. Figures 1 and 2 (p. 20) and the maps there provide a worldwide overview of the popularity of two keywords, “caste system” and “Indian caste system,” from 2004 to the present.

By region, the Google Trends search data for the two keywords shows that, while the greatest level of interest in the issues of caste system comes from India, much attention emerges also from the United States, Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom, Singapore, and Malaysia.

Table 2

Percentage of traffic by country in navsarjan.org

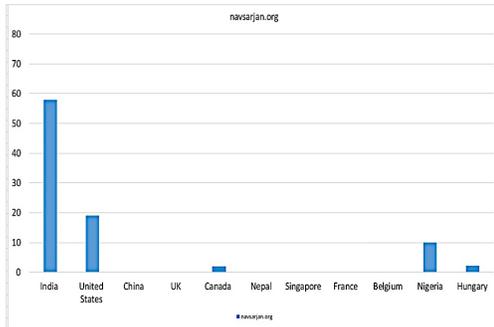


Table 3

Percentage of traffic by country in ncdhr.org.in

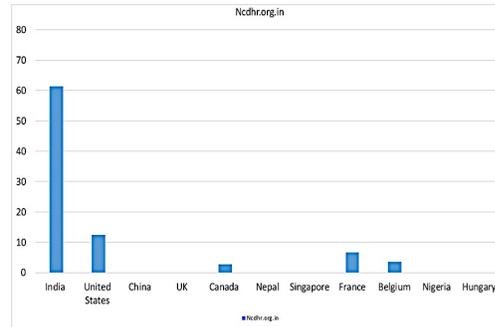


Table 4

Percentage of traffic by country in IDSN.org

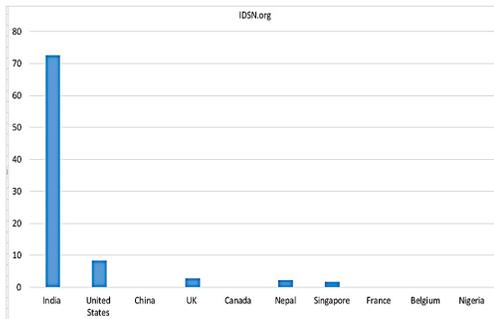


Table 5

Percentage of traffic by country in ambedkar.org

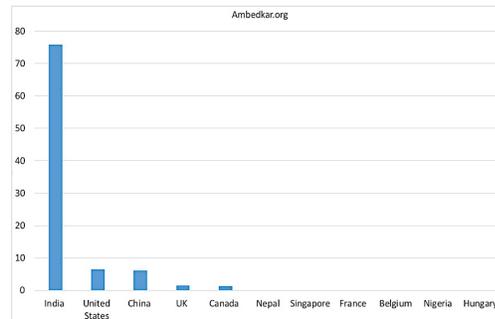


Table 6

Traffic source for ambedkar.org

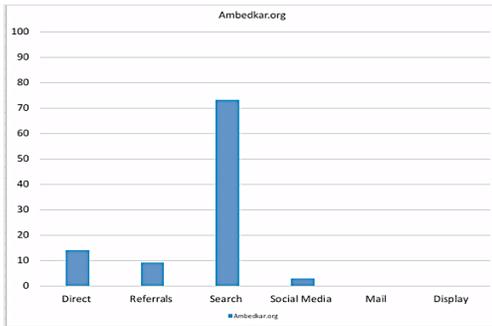


Table 7

Traffic source for navsarjan.org

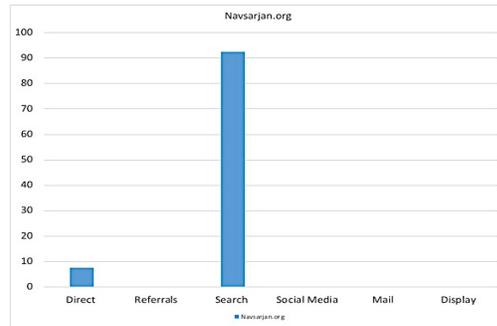


Table 8

Traffic source for ncdhr.org.in

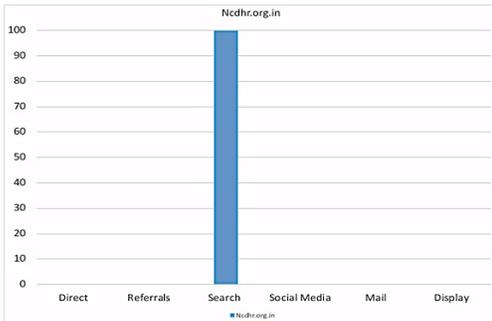


Table 9

Traffic source for IDSN.org

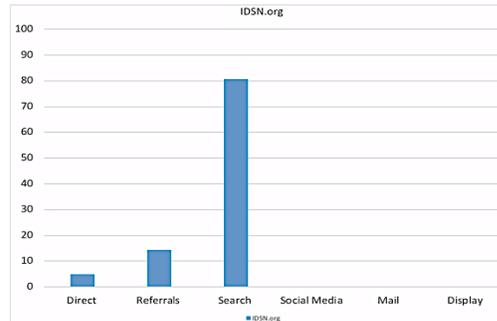


Figure 1

Worldwide Search Volume Index for keyword "caste system" (2004-Present)



Figure 2

Worldwide Search Volume Index for keyword "Indian caste system" (2004-Present)



Discussion and Analysis

Our analysis of the data is guided by three broad research questions. The primary objective of this paper was to identify the central themes that emerge from the discourse on web. Three sets of conclusions emerge from the content analysis of web data. First, the discourse articulates and documents the marginalization of Dalits by using human rights as the dominant language of protest. Second, the data demonstrates that there is an attempt by Dalit organizations to reframe caste from a concept unique to India and Hinduism to a more universal form of stratification

and inequality that is found in societies across the world. Finally, there is an acknowledgement of shared oppression with other minority groups, such as African Americans in the United States, who share comparable histories of oppression and marginalization in their home societies.

The high frequency of the first three themes that were culled, such as "human rights," "globalizing caste," and "caste and race," clearly show that much of the contemporary framing of the Dalit movement on cyberspace targets international advocacy units intent on linking to the human rights agenda. It parallels a move that not so long ago was made by the women's movement, which by framing violence against women as a human rights violation was then able to universalize the issue and strategically pressure governments and supranational organizations to prioritize women's rights, allocate resources, and implement laws and programs to protect these rights (Frost & Bunch, 2000). While the women's movement had to be attentive to both essentialism and issues of cultural relativism (i.e., not only emphasize unity but also respect diversity of women across cultures), the Dalit movement, as the discourse shows, emphasizes a *similarity* in political identity with other groups, especially racial minorities outside of India. The focus on 'intersectional' particularities of caste that amplify violence within the group—along lines of class and gender—are secondary to the larger discourse.

However, the emerging global identity that emerges through the web discourse does not often translate to making a social movement global. Accordingly, we developed a second related research question. What is the spatial reach of this discourse on the web? In other words, are these messages reaching out to audiences across the globe? The evidence from the traffic analysis indicates that India continues to be a hub for web traffic while countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada emerge among the top five sources of web traffic to the major Dalit organizational websites. Similarly, the Google Trends analysis also indicate that the topic of caste garners a lot of interest among Internet audiences outside of India, including in countries such as the United States, Canada, Australia, Denmark, Malaysia, and Singapore, among others. Thus, the Internet has aided the Dalit movement to reach audiences across the world in an unprecedented way. The interactivity and the connectedness of the web has allowed

the emergence of a transnational public space to forge solidarity with groups over geographically dispersed locales.

Our final research objective was to analyze the influence of online activism related to real-life activism of the Dalit Movement. The data demonstrates that prominent Dalit organizations have an insignificant social media influence. A large percentage of website visitors are coming from organic searches. Organic traffic is traffic originating from search engines such as Google. It's the best traffic to receive because it means your website is being visited by people because they are interested in the issue or the message. These findings raise some important implications to the discussions around digitally enabled activism. As Gladwell (2010) and Dolata (2017) have argued, despite the growing significance of new social media platforms for social activism, traditional forms of mobilization still serve as the driving force behind the success of a movement.

The top web domains that featured in our sample are websites of very successful Dalit organizations that have used grassroots fieldwork as a way to mobilize the movement both in India and abroad. *Navsarjan Trust* is an organization that began in Gujarat more than two decades ago. The founder, Martin Macwan, is a recipient of the prestigious Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Award. He was instrumental in demanding caste discrimination be placed on the agenda of the World Conference against Racism held in Durban in 2001. Similarly, the National Campaign for Dalit Human rights (NCDHR) is a coalition of numerous independent movements aimed at ending caste discrimination. In 2007, the NCDHR was awarded the Rafto Prize for its efforts to promote the issue of caste internationally. Finally, established in 2000, the International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN) has been instrumental in establishing a transnational network of organizations committed to eliminating caste discrimination and establishing purposeful connections with advocates against other forms of oppression across the world. Thus, having the websites of these prominent Dalit organizations appear on the first page of search results for a relevant query means having greater exposure to the many people using Google and other search engines every day.

While a deeper level of analysis is required to see if online engagement of Dalit organizations translates into offline activism, we argue that that digital tools can considerably enhance opportunities for coalition building and networking globally. It can be a catalyst for the Dalit Movement that has a rich history of grassroots activism and strong offline ties. Given that there is a global interest to understand Dalit issues, the optimal utilization of digital tools can make the movement infinitely stronger. ■

Notes

- ¹ CMC includes forums as diverse as websites, online groups, and social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter as well as blogs.
- ² Tarrow (2001, p. 11) has argued that transnational social movements are “socially mobilized groups with constituents in at least two states, engaged in sustained contentious interactions with power-holders in at least one state other than their own, or against an international institution, or a multinational economic actor.”
- ³ A transnational advocacy network, according to Keck and Sikkink (1998) consists of those actors and activists working internationally on an issue, who are bound together by shared principles and values, a common discourse, and dense exchanges of information and services.
- ⁴ Also the second author before she took on the surname Adur.
- ⁵ This four-fold segmentation refers to the varna classification, which depicts the ideal-typical organization of caste and is traced back to ancient scriptures. Scholars of the caste-system have distinguished between Varna and Jati. The Jati system, on the other hand, describes the everyday workings of caste system and depicts the reality, complexity, fluidity, and regionally variable expression of caste.
- ⁶ Kumar (2009) distinguished between “old” and “new” Dalit diaspora. The old consists of indentured and assisted laborers taken to plantation colonies. The “new” comprises the literate and professionally skilled Dalits who migrated after the 1970s to North America, the UK, and Australia.

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