



Selected Papers of #AoIR2023:
The 24th Annual Conference of the
Association of Internet Researchers
Philadelphia, PA, USA / 18-21 Oct 2023

TOWARDS ANTICASTE INTERNET: THE OPERATION, CHALLENGES AND ASPIRATIONS OF BAHUJAN PUBLISHERS.

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Background

Caste is fundamental to communication and digital technologies in India.¹ As sanctioned by the caste system: communication & knowledge in India has been historically controlled and gatekept by elite oppressor castes.² Oppressed castes (Bahujan³) which represent upto 85% of the population find negligible to no presence in Indian mainstream media.⁴ An overwhelming majority of leadership and editorial positions are occupied by members of oppressor castes (Savarna⁵).⁶ As a result, issues, perspectives and voices of marginalized castes are suppressed and often erased from mass media. Oppressor castes hegemonize the narratives on, and of the oppressed.⁷

Early anti-caste scholars recognised this hegemony and its impact on Bahujan emancipation & started landmark Bahujan-led publication spaces.⁸ Although most of these publications were outlasted by their mainstream media counterparts, with rapid

¹ Shanmugavelan, "A Proposal for Caste-Ing out Media: Exploring the Role That the Media Plays in Ushering in a Caste-Sensitive Society | Association for Progressive Communications"; Kumar and Subramani, "Internet as an Alternative Media for Dalits in India."

² Thirumal, "International Exploration of Technology Equity and the Digital Divide"; "What Dalit People Taught Us About Education and Why We Must Commit to It."

³ Karunakaran, "The Dalit-Bahujan Guide to Understanding Caste in Hindu Scripture."

⁴ While no caste census has been conducted since 1929, 85% combined figure for SC, ST and OBCs is widely used in anticaste movement based on estimates by Mandal commission

⁵ Dhanraj, "The Modern Savarna And The Caste-Is-Dead Narrative."

⁶ "Oxfam India- Newslaundry Report"; Mandal, "Upper-Caste Domination in India's Mainstream Media and Its Extension in Digital Media."

⁷ Kureel, "Indian Media and Caste."

⁸ Thirumal, "International Exploration of Technology Equity and the Digital Divide."

Suggested Citation (APA): Yatharth (2023, October). Towards Anticaste Internet: The Operation, Challenges And Aspirations Of Bahujan Publishers. Paper presented at AoIR2023: The 24th Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers. Philadelphia, PA, USA: AoIR. Retrieved from <http://spir.aoir.org>.

proliferation of internet & social media through smartphones, digital publications emerged as space for alternative media for several (intersectional) marginalized groups including Bahujans.⁹ Due to issues of access, affordability and English education; proportion of Bahujans with digital access and especially bahujan-women is significantly lower than that of Savarnas.¹⁰

Although digital platforms and social media are dominated by Savarnas, a sizable Bahujan counter-public¹¹ has started carving an alternative media culture, asserting identity, building community, retelling history, archiving lived realities and building a connective anti-caste resistance.¹²

In the last decade, a variety of Bahujan-led publishing projects including visual-arts, podcasts, infographics, video, blogs, news etc have emerged as spaces for discussion, assertion, community and resistance.¹³ These spaces have brought Anti-caste discourse into the mainstream, responding to rising atrocities against marginalized identities; Bahujan internet users often experience hate speech, harassment & opposition.¹⁴ Further exposing casteist logics of the technology industry¹⁵ that manifest through issues of poor protections against caste-based hate speech, discrimination in 'verification' & algorithmic bias.¹⁶

Bahujan-led publications serve a very important function of visibilising expressions, narrations and issues of an overwhelming majority of the structurally silenced population. Yet, anti-caste publishing and its operational nuances, community building

⁹ Kumar, "Internet Usage Pattern, Access and Utilization of Dalit Websites and Blogs by Dalits in India."

¹⁰ OxFam, "Digital Divide India Inequality Report 2022"; CSDS, "Social Media & Political Behaviour."

¹¹ Rao, "Democratizing the Op-Ed."

¹² Utrecht University and de Kruijf, "The Dalit I Define"; "Towards an Internet of Equals"; Kumbhojkar, "Dalits, Internet y Políticas Emancipadoras."

¹³ Thakur, "New Media and the Dalit Counter-Public Sphere"; Shivaprasad and Jain, "Anti-Caste Memes as Cultural Archives of Resistance"; Subramanian, "Bahujan Girls' Anti-Caste Activism on TikTok"; Chandran, "India's Booming Creator Economy Is A Battleground For Dalit Artists | BOOM."

¹⁴ "Online Caste-Hate Speech: Pervasive Discrimination and Humiliation on Social Media — The Centre for Internet and Society"; Shanmugavelan, "Caste-Hate Speech and Digital Media Politics"; CounterView, "40% of India's Casteist Facebook Posts Are Anti-Reservation, Anti-Dalit Reveals a US Research."

¹⁵ Omdevt, "Untouchables In The World Of IT"; Vaghela, Jackson, and Sengers, "Interrupting Merit, Subverting Legibility"; Kumar, "Tech Was Supposed to Be a Meritocracy. In India, It Reinforces Old Caste Divides in New Ways."

¹⁶ Cheema, "Why Is Twitter Silent On Casteism Allegations In India Over Verified Accounts?"

and challenges are relatively understudied. This work attempts to close this gap and situates itself in the emergent field of CCTS.¹⁷

Methodology

For this study, we conducted in-depth interviews with anti-caste publishing projects. These projects were identified from a list of content-creators and publishing projects¹⁸ led by SC/ST/OBC, across social media with between 1,000-100,000 followers/subscribers. Individual users engaging primarily in self expression, large news publishers and anti-caste allyship projects were not included.

Ten projects were selected, based on diversity of platform use, mediums used, audience size and gender perspectives. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with people in leadership roles with these publishing projects covering: operational models, infrastructure needs, motivation, community, hate-speech, platform-censorship, and future visions. The interviews were analyzed with a mixture of thematic and narrative analysis.

Findings

We found that, for bahujan publications, motivation to start publishing often comes from personal experiences and lived realities. For younger publishers, political activation during protests on citizenship laws and time availability during pandemic served as an entering point.

The absence of financial support makes anticaste work particularly difficult. Publishers, being Bahujan themselves, often do not have access to intergenerational wealth for self-funding. Further, they lack established caste networks of Savarnas that can help raise funding from external sources.¹⁹ Corporate funding is absent for anticaste publishing.

Bahujan publishers often have to operate on established platforms like Instagram, Facebook etc. Setting up one's own website takes substantial time, skill and funds. The projects are supported by small groups of volunteers working from their homes, who rely on free digital tools for their operations. Infrastructure is mediated by caste histories

¹⁷ Critical Caste and Technology Studies (CCTS) : CCTS aims to provide “technology-based critique of contemporary caste narratives,” and “unravel how and in what ways caste is embedded in the field of technology”.

¹⁸ This list included meme pages, instagram infographics, podcasts, blogs, youtube channels, new websites etc.

¹⁹ Kamath, “‘Untouchable’ Cellphones?”; “Caste and Entrepreneurship in India.”

as well. One podcaster mentions how having even a own room is out of reach for most bahujans. Lack of privacy and silence becomes a barrier for Bahujans podcasters.

Despite the infrastructural limitations, publications engage in a broad range of subjects: bahujan history, translation of anti-caste texts, dalit feminism, futurism, political theory etc. Publishers are motivated to capture the “full humanity (of dalits) without being oppression porn”; having informative discussions on caste history; & creating a space for representing and training bahujan writers. The platforms had a strong sense of founding ideology and believed in long term anticaste work over reactionary commentary which can put the operation & mission at risk.

While bahujan audiences often respond positively to these publishers highlighting relatability of caste-based experiences or for “saying what (they) wanted to say”, savarna audiences are mixed. Publishers spoke of ‘performance of merit’ demanded by the Savarna audience. They have to put extra efforts in fact-checking and language, as any mistakes could be used to either launch a caste-coded attack on ‘merit’ of bahujans.²⁰ Some savarna audiences respond positively with gratitude for learning something they were unaware of, others would react with denial, minimization of issues and even hate speech.

Most publishers reported experiencing hate speech, even treating it as an unavoidable outcome. Hate is primarily casteist, asking publishers to “go back and clean toilets’ ’ and other abuses alluding to their caste occupation. Threats of physical violence and rape against Bahujan women and gender-queer folks are also prevalent.

Threats of police and legal coercion are also common. Managing mental health has become a necessary part of working in this space. Publishers often take extended time off to maintain mental health and maintain anonymity. While there are personal support groups, institutional and systemic help is absent.

Thus, community and networks become important for the publishers. We found publishers often participate in Bahujan networks with other publishers. These spaces have provided a place of belonging, anti caste friendship for the first time. It serves as a place for learning, healing, sharing, collaboration, conflicts & support.

Meanwhile, little to no support is available from platforms. Platforms are inadequate in managing caste-based hate speech and providing protections to marginalized castes. Further, we found shadowbanning of caste issues to be a common experience for publishers. Since they often operate around sensitive discussions involving usage of

²⁰ Subramanian, “Recovering Caste Privilege.”

sensitive language & imagery, they often get poor algorithmic reach. Thus, some publishers try using euphemisms to get around the algorithm. Sudden unexplained drops in reach are also very common making relying on publishing financially extremely unstable. Publishers remarked about the unsustainability and unreliability of doing anticaste work on corporate-platforms. These platforms are designed & led by members of dominant castes & thus fail to address needs and concerns of bahujan users.²¹

Conclusion

Despite the challenges involved with platforms, funding & hate speech we find that the closing outlook of publishers to be predominantly positive. In the words of a publisher, this moment is akin to a “cultural-renaissance” for bahujans, with caste becoming a mainstream discussion, and importantly, led by bahujans themselves. According to publishers, an Anticaste internet would be a step towards claiming political, intellectual and structural mobility for marginalized castes through mass internet access for bahujans, strong caste informed platform regulations & greater platform ownership by bahujans.

In conclusion, Despite historic erasure and marginalization of bahujans from media narratives, bahujan publishing has opened a space for an emerging vision of anti-caste internet. At the same time, they face caste-coded challenges with funding, infrastructure, hate-speech, and platform-censorship. Through this study, we provide documentation of these challenges and recommend further study on platform governance and policy, the funding landscape and technical infrastructures from a CCTS lens as steps towards an anticaste internet.

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²¹ “Rules of Modern Manusmriti That Apply Only to Dalits on Social Media - Velivada - Educate, Agitate, Organize”; Chandran, “India’s Booming Creator Economy Is A Battleground For Dalit Artists | BOOM”; Cheema, “Why Is Twitter Silent On Casteism Allegations In India Over Verified Accounts?”; Tiku, “India’s Engineers Have Thrived in Silicon Valley. So Has Its Caste System.”

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