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The Lockdown Times: Reading Crisis of Caste/pandemic in India

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Abstract:

The ideas of 'social distancing' and 'physical distancing', so widely promoted during COVID 19, are not new to India's Dalits. During COVID 19 lockdown, several instances of caste atrocities were reported from the quarantine centres across the country. Moreover, the notions of un/touchability, inter-caste relationships, access to basic human amenities, sexual assaults, etc were not under any lockdown. In view of this, the objectives of the present study are: i) to analyse the textual narratives of caste discrimination during corona crisis, ii) to understand the role of digital media in creating awareness on caste discrimination by new generation Dalits. The text No Lockdown on Caste Atrocities: Stories of Caste Crimes during the Covid 19 Pandemic is selected as the primary data to explore the stories related to sexual vulnerability of Dalit women. However, news stories and social media campaigns are used as secondary sources for the present study. With the theoretical perspectives of Jurges Habermas's notion of public sphere and Nancy Fraser's counter-public sphere, the study seeks to understand how digital media can be the new public sphere.

Keywords: #CasteApartheid #SocialMedia #Pandemic #DalitLivesMatter #DigitalDivide #ViralNecropolitics

Introduction

The 'legitimized apartheid' practiced in India in the name of Caste has created an artificially graded society, leading to the erasure of a significant segment of Indian society. Despite constituting approximately sixteen per cent of the country's population, Dalits are circumscribed by caste rules. One can easily see that the practice of physical/social distancing, so emphasized during the Corona pandemic, has been practiced in India since ages.

Review of Literature

Caste crisis during Corona pandemic

India went into a nationwide lockdown from 24 March, 2020 (extended upto a couple of months) to curb the spread of the deadly virus, and there is no doubt that Covid-19 aggravated the already existing 'Othering' of Dalits in India. It cannot be denied that the Dalits and other marginalized sections were the

most affected. The Dalit rights activist, Goldy M George, shares from the study conducted by the IDSN¹ in 2013 that ‘any emergency makes Dalits, Adivasis and economically backward classes more vulnerable...that Dalits are frequently the worst affected. Further, they are often systematically excluded from relief and recovery efforts due to their inherent socio-economic vulnerability.’ Foreseeing the gravity of the disaster, the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR), in association with National Dalit Watch (NDW) made an appeal to the Chief Minister of Delhi, Shri Arvind Kejriwal and to the Prime Minister of India, Shri Narendra Modi, on 23 March, 2020 to take proactive measures to ensure dignified life to the dalits and adivasis of India. To further reiterate the vulnerability of Dalits, many scholars have drawn parallel with the Bombay Bubonic plague of 1897 when similar discriminations along the line of caste were practiced. Patil (2021) quotes Gatacre in her paper stating how the caste Hindus refused to eat food cooked by Dalits (4). During Covid-19 also, several such cases were reported in the media, especially during the first phase of lockdown, of people refusing to eat the food prepared by dalit cooks in quarantine centres. Moreover, in places like Hazaribagh, Banaso Panchayat, Bishnugarh Block (Jharkhand), the upper caste people demanded dry ration instead of cooked food, to avoid any chance of ‘pollution’. The news was covered by *The Times of India*, and even tweeted by the Jharkhand Janadhikar Mahasabha. In Bhumka village of Nainital, a 23-year-old man refused food cooked by Dalit woman in the quarantine centre (Times of India, May 20, 2020). Similar cases were reported from Kushinagar, district of Uttar Pradesh (Telegraph, 13th April, 2020) and Hazaribagh, district of Jharkhand (Times of India, May 25, 2020).

Lockdown also caused sudden loss of jobs of workers, primarily in the unorganized sectors. As a result, migration of labourers began from urban to rural India. With no proper conveyance provided, the poor started the journey back home on foot itself. Talking about reverse migration, Dr. Mrunmayee Satam (2020), in her study, “India, Untouchability and Quarantine: A Historical Perspective”, mentions about the reports from various parts of the country where chlorine solution was sprayed on the groups of migrants returning home due to lockdown. Though the migrants were a heterogeneous group, comprising people from various caste backgrounds, the severity in the case of dalit migrants was manifold.

Another significant effect of lockdown on Dalits could be seen in the digitalization of education. Across the country, the pattern of online teaching-learning was implemented, and this was done without realizing the existing digital divide amongst the population, between the privileged sections of India on one hand, and the most marginalized Dalits on the other. Media again reported instances of dalit students either committing suicides or dropping education altogether as a result of being “systematically excluded from the field of education through accelerating the digital divide” (Patil 2021, 5) and Suchitra (2021), in her article, “Dalits, Adivasi children locked out of education during Covid-19 lockdown” portrays the bleak image of education in rural India. The inaccessibility to online education and poverty led to the exclusion of dalit students from formal education and marred their future prospects.

When sanitization and social distancing were the buzz words, Dalits were physically abused for demanding these rights too. The ideas of ‘social distancing’ and ‘physical distancing’, so widely promoted during Covid 19 to avoid catching the virus, cannot/should not be seen as new to India’s Dalits. Smita Patil (2021) in her essay, “Gender Equity and Covid 19: Dalit Standpoints” emphasizes that the interpretation of “social distancing” needs “to be revisited as a trope that reminds of the stigma and oppressive memory related to caste, trauma and gender stereotypes” (2). In the Indian context, we cannot deny the “exclusive levels of language and power” (Patil 2021, 3) deeply embedded in the term ‘social

¹ The International Dalit Solidarity Network, a network of international groups fighting for Dalit human rights

distancing'. While the present-day emphasis on maintaining distance is purely on medical grounds, the 'caste apartheid' in India is based on the notion of purity-pollution, to safeguard the non-dalits from getting polluted by the dalits, thus maintaining a 'sanitized' society. The present study explores "the web of complex relations based on power and privilege" (Raina and Ananya 2021, 12) in the multilayered country that India is. The paper reads into the use of social media by Dalits to voice their issues, fight for their rights and to demand justice against the atrocities done to them especially during the lockdown period.

Social Media at the time of 'social distancing'

The online spaces are the new medium of communication in the internet world. The Internet helps in communicating ideas and allows discussion in this new public sphere (Papacharissi, 2002, 11). Media has an active role to play in the formation of public opinion. Social media has shown the importance of its medium in both crisis and non-crisis situations around the world. A study carried out by Abd Alrazaq A et. al, (2020) mentions the role of media and public response during major events such as sports, disease or natural disaster. Social media can act as an alternative to the marginalized groups who often fail to get fairly represented in the mainstream media especially the newsroom (Mondal, 2020). Social media can also be considered as a new site for activism. Sushmita Dey (2020) discusses the emerging public sphere in India and the use of social media as an instrument of activism. There has been a rise in social movements on social media. Rao and Wasserman (2017) call the social movements as "spontaneous movements from below" (2). The popularity of social media platforms primarily lies on the key features of the media such as flexibility, ease in access, and less expensive that makes it an effective medium to disseminate information (Daniel et al, 2020).

Research Methodology

The present study adopts constructivist worldview by employing qualitative research approach to study the caste narratives in the book 'No Lockdown on Caste Atrocities: Stories of Caste Crimes during the Covid 19 Pandemic'. The book is the primary source for the current study and news published on digital media platforms on caste discrimination during corona are used as secondary data. The text is a collection of real stories, curated and collated by Dalit Human Right Defenders and Activists, published by Dalit Human Rights Defenders Network (DHRDNet) and distributed by Zubaan Publishers. The time span of the stories is primarily March to November 2020 and the regions covered are Gujarat, Kerala, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu and Telangana. The study is purely based on purposive sampling to get an in-depth understanding on 'pollution-purity' and 'social distancing debate in the name of caste in India'.

Theoretical perspectives

Especially during the COVID pandemic, social media became a prominent platform to gather information while maintaining 'social distancing'. Especially in the issues concerning the minority groups, digital platforms come as a blessing to overcome the danger of a single narrative. More so, Social media is getting prominent attention which some scholars associate with Jurgen Habermas's 'public sphere', introduced in his influential work, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962). Habermas argues that the press has contributed to the democratization of Europe by creating an environment suitable for discussion and agreements between the citizens (Cela, 2015). The utopian notion of the public sphere promises individuals access to information and freedom to discuss the events/ideas. However, with the rising monopolized media structure the dominant discourses tend to vary. Lisa et.al (2017) disagrees with

the notion of social media as a public sphere. Chadwick (2013) considers social media as the best hybrid media system. Shirky (2011) also highlights on the nature of social media that allows individuals to participate and discuss on various topics. Christian Fuch (2014) emphasizes the power and reach of social media that can promote freedom of speech and togetherness.

It is reported that there has been insufficient coverage of dalits on mainstream media. Jeffrey (2001) noted the absence of dalit discourses in the mainstream media in India. Hence, it can be seen the use of social media by marginalized communities has increased for online activism. The use of social media not only helps in collecting information but has also evolved to be an important site of online mobilization among the marginalized communities. This trend is gaining acceptance among certain sections of Dalits, who are contributing “counter-narratives” within the subaltern digital space (Thakur, 2020). Nancy Fraser (1990) in her work critically argues Habermas's notion of the public sphere in a democratic society and voices for the counter-public sphere. Fraser critically examines the utopian model of Habermas's public sphere that did not consider the non-bourgeois and non-liberal public sphere. As the society is divided into various social systems and strata, the public opinions are mostly controlled by the dominant players and it corners the other voices. So it can be argued here that social media is not only addressing the dominant public opinions but is also facilitating the issues of the periphery. And thus social media can be the public sphere of the limited public and by the limited people.

Lockdown and Caste Atrocities: Discussion

The title chosen for the text under study is quite relevant and thought-provoking – there was indeed ‘No Lockdown on Caste Atrocities’. The book is not merely a narrative account of the caste crimes committed in these seven states of India, it also appries us of the legal struggles ensued thereafter “to enable the victims to get legal and social justice” (10). Instead of sympathizing with the victims, the DHRDNet activists urge the readers “to commit to enquiring into the psycho-social and legal dynamics that perpetuate such heinous crimes” (10). Each story gives the specificities of the case, the complaints filed, and the follow-ups. These also highlight “the legal gaps, negligence of the Police and the failure of the Administration in controlling such crimes” (11). Besides the written accounts of caste violence, each story is substantiated by an apt illustration by the Bahujan artists that further help in highlighting the dreadful acts. As the stories are real accounts of caste violence, the organization DHRDNet and the collection, *No Lockdown on Caste Atrocities* aptly serve the purpose to explicate the argument of the present paper. Also, though these are real-life experiences, the incidents discussed exist not in isolation but are representative of many such similar incidents that often do not even get reported.

Though the thrust of the present study is not on Dalit women, for a focused study, the stories related to sexual vulnerability of Dalit women are selected. Dalit women suffer triple marginalization - on the basis of class, caste, and gender. This also reflects the hypocrisy of the upper castes who consider the shadow of a dalit falling upon them as ‘polluting’ but their purity remains intact even when they violate a dalit woman. Stories like “She May Never Walk Again”, “The Tragic Tale of a Dalit Girl”, “A Crime in An Ambulance”, “Gang Raped in Quarantine Centre” and “Innocence Robbed in Lockdown” would be the prime focus of the discussion to highlight the ruthlessness of the upper caste people. The intersectionality of caste and gender accentuate the marginalization of dalit women.

The famous dalit artist from Bihar, Malvika Raj, uses her art to poignantly depict the rape of a 16-year old girl by a powerful man from the ‘Darbar’ community. The story “She May Never Walk Again” gives an account of the dalit families in the Palitana town of Gujarat's Bhavnagar district, who lived under the

dominance of the Kadva Patels, Darbars and Kolis. The Dalits in this area live in abject poverty while the upper castes are financially and politically quite powerful. The sexual harassment of dalit women was borne in silence, and a similar horrific incident happened on 7 April, 2020, ‘amidst a nationwide lockdown and deserted streets’ (23) when a young dalit girl was raped by Jayrajsinh and was dumped near a water tank. The rape had caused multiple fractures of the spine and hip, and the girl was left almost paralyzed waist down. The trauma becomes all the more excruciating as the area had an elected Dalit representative, yet all were powerless against the clout of the Darbars. Though the accused was arrested after a police complaint was filed, the road to struggle is not smooth. The victim’s family now has the support of the DHRD network lawyers, but the finances involved in the girl’s medical treatment and also in the legal battle, are enormous.

“The Tragic Tale of a Dalit Girl” talks about the unfortunate dalit girl who succumbed to her injuries on 12 August 2020. The story comes from the Telangana region where a 14-year old dalit girl was regularly sexually abused by a donor of the orphanage. The man, Venugopal Reddy, with the help of the warden, Vijaya would often rape the girl. Her physical and mental trauma was discovered only when a nation-wide lockdown was declared and the girl was sent back to her relatives in the New Bowenpally area of Hyderabad. The plight does not end here; though the NGO, the ‘Bharosa centre’ for women’s distress in Hyderabad helped in exposing the ‘organized sex racket (being) run in the guise of an orphanage’ (45), it did not take further actions. To worsen the situation, the organizations such as the Rangareddy District Child Welfare Committee, instead of protecting the victim, used the recorded statements as evidence to file a police complaint against the relatives. The negligence of the CWC caused a fatal lapse in the timely medical help to the victim, and she passed away in the Niloufer Hospital, Hyderabad. This case brought forth the nexus of certain powerful groups that flout the integrity of the judiciary. It was also shared on the Facebook page and several angry posts can be read. Even the leading daily, *The Hindustan Times* covered this ghastly incident, “Minor girl allegedly raped in orphanage five months ago dies in Hyderabad”.

The stories “A Crime in An Ambulance”, and “Gang Raped in Quarantine Centre” discussed below, blatantly expose the caste crimes done in the quarantine centres. The places that were meant for the treatment and recovery of COVID patients, marred their souls for life.

The next case in line comes from one of the progressive states of India. Kerala detected the first COVID-19 patient and the government tackled the situation with much alacrity. However, the horrific case of rape of a 19-year old dalit girl (September 2020) left the entire state in shock. The girl was being sent to a hospital in the Pandalam area, which was a twenty-minute drive from the Adoor, the original place of the girl. With a shortage of ambulances and drivers, some local people were hired (without a proper background check). It was Noufal, a newly hired driver, but a wanted criminal, who drove the girl and an elderly woman to Pandalam and Kozhencherry, respectively. The older lady was first dropped at the destination, and later Noufal took the ambulance to an isolated place, raped the girl, and then dumped her back to Pandalam. The horrific incident sent shockwaves across the state, resulting into protests against the District Medical Officer for having sent the woman patient without an escort. The accused was later arrested, but the victim tried to commit suicide in the quarantine centre, though her attempt was thwarted by timely intervention of the medical staff. However, all this cannot put balm on the traumatized psyche of the girl. Kanishka Ziko, a graduate from Lady Sri Ram College for Women, and later a product of JNU, is an artist, photographer and writer. The images done by her accentuate the pain in the story.

The state of Rajasthan also witnessed the loopholes of the local administration in maintaining safety in the quarantine centres. When the country was under lockdown, on April 21-22, 2020, a 40-year old mother, traveled on foot, back and forth from Sawai Madhopur district to Dausa (a distance of nearly 100 kms), to meet her son in jail. As per the rules, upon coming back to her village, she was quarantined in a government school. Again, without any escort, the woman was gang raped by three men. The lapse of the local police, of not deputing any lady constable or volunteer, or any other kind of safety to the woman in the quarantine centre, cannot be overlooked. The accused were arrested and the head constable at Batoda police station was suspended, however this could not provide any relief to the scarred life of the victim. The DHRD network activists came to the aide and are closely following the case. A compensation of Rs 50,000 was also given to the victim, but given the casteist nature of Batoda village where almost 700 dalit families live separately from the upper castes; such cases of caste abuse and sexual harassment are too common. The Audaiyarko village in Tamil Nadu's Pudukottai district speaks volume of caste divisions. The dalit hutments are secluded from the main village and the Dalits are subjected to poverty and other related issues. The case pertains to the rape and murder of a 7-year-old dalit girl (in June 2020) who was lured by a caste Hindu, Raja, was raped and later murdered and thrown in the swamps to rot. In this incident also, the accused was arrested but at the same time, it opened the well-known fear of dalit women – sexual vulnerability. The title of the story, “Innocence Robbed in Lockdown” reiterates a dalit woman only being seen as merely a ‘body’ by the upper castes, irrespective of their age. The image for the story is done by the visual artist, Saviya Lopes, and the repeated use of the words “I want..” only highlight the shattered dreams of a young child just because of being born in a dalit family.

As aforesaid, the selected stories are mere indicative of the horrendous crimes committed against Dalits. Many such similar cases occur almost daily in India but fail to catch the attention of the mainstream media. Despite several affirmative policies implemented by the Government, there is still a gap in the realization of a just society.

Gen Z Dalits and Digital media

With ‘Dalit’ emerging as a political identity, the great reformers like Jotibarao Phule, Periyar, Narayan Guru, and Ambedkar, to name a few, worked towards the anti-caste movement in India. The ambit of these movements was not confined to social and political spaces only; the activists entered into the literary and cultural arenas too. A distinct Dalit literature for instance, can be interpreted as an act of empowerment; the aesthetics is always combined with the political. While it initially started as a vehicle of political and social change, it has now become a serious subject of academic study. In a bid to establish a counter-narrative and re-write their history, the dalit activists are more focussed on reviving the lost dalit culture. While textuality became a symbol of representation that questioned the erasure of Dalits in mainstream literature, in the hands of new generation dalits, the anti-caste movement has taken on new dimensions. With their access to English education and exposure to technology, the Gen Z Dalits are digging deep into their native dalit culture/s to design alternative and new idioms, thereby re-establishing and promoting dalit culture. By having Dalit Students’ organizations in Higher Educational Institutes, the young dalits attempt to connect with the ground realities/challenges of the present-gen dalits, and accordingly mould their strategies. Dalit activism is not new but has taken a more collective action post Rohit Verma's suicidal death that triggered new political wave (The Wire, 2019). As mainstream media is alleged for biased reporting, digital media is seen as an important public medium by marginalized communities for

their representation. The new generation dalit activists consider new media as alternative media (Kumar and Subramani, 2014).

Media has always been an extended platform in Dalit activism. In the past also, Dr Ambedkar had to launch his own newspapers like *Mooknayak*, *Bahishkrut Bharat*, *Janata* and *Prabuddha Bharat* to communicate with the society on the caste-based discrimination in the country. The failure of the mainstream Indian media to include the Dalit voices has resulted into the emergence of “alternative media platform to voice their opinions, concerns and to mobilize for agitation (Madhu 2020, 2). Internet is seen as a boon to Dalits to further their activism, “In recent times digital space has allowed for a unique mobilisation of caste and has created a new wave of subalternity with the use of social media which has provided the platform for identity formation and assertion of marginalised groups” (Madhu 2020, 1). The urban Gen-Z Dalits, with their exposure to education and access to technology, are using the counter public sphere “created by multilingual media productions like Roundtable India, Dalit Camera, Ambedkar Caravan, Dalit History Month, Velivada etc. and Twitter handles like, Dalit Diva, Savari, Dalit Voice, Ambedkar Periyar Study Circle, Savarna Fat Cat, Everyday Casteism” (2) to organize, mobilize, and voice their concern for protest. The Dalits started using online media for activism which gained popularity within and outside the community in India and abroad. Some of the popular news sites for the marginalized group are *Dalit Dastak*, *Bahujan Nayak*, *Ambedkar.org*. Dalit Camera attempts to capture stories of Dalits and other marginalized communities (Commonwealth Foundation 2016).

The social media platforms explored in the discussion are to be appreciated for having taken the initiatives for justice for Dalits. The digital space allows dalit activists to cross the geographical/linguistic barriers and connect to other “communities of interest,” (Nayar 2011, 71) across the world. The narratives easily become *transnationalized*. Organizations like International Dalit Solidarity Network (Copenhagen, Denmark) or Equality Labs (by Thenmozhi Soundararajan) or Tumblr handles like *dalitdiscrimination.tumblr.com* (started by Yashica Dutt) are a few examples of caste issues moving beyond the national borders and becoming a global movement. The exclusive approach of ‘mainstream’ media finds a befitting counter-space in dalit digital activism. It enables the Dalits to construct an ‘alternative history of India’ (70). The works like the text under study are archives of caste-based violence and such documentations help in constructing cultural memories (71). These digital archives, as Nayar states, are “less about the present or the past than about the future because they represent the aspirations of the people: how will the future interpret these ‘texts’?” (71)

The mainstream media in India is allegedly accused of being biased and elitist in nature. Dilip Mandal’s article, “Upper-caste domination in India’s Mainstream Media and its Extension in Digital Media” is an elaborate study to depict the disparity in representation of caste in the newsrooms, eventually affecting the kind of news to be included.

Media reportage on COVID-19 crisis

Media being the watch-dog of society played a crucial role in making people aware and informed about the COVID-19 pandemic. The dissemination of information during pandemic (Wang PW, 2020) accelerated with the active involvement of media. The dependency on social media became comparatively higher during COVID 19 pandemic (Wong et.al 2020). Be it for education or information, there was a dependency on social media feeds. It is also to be noted that social media also comes with negative impact (Kathuria 2021). So, at a time, when social media was the most used medium to search for facts/updates on COVID 19, it also led to diffusion of misinformation and disinformation. As part of the Coronavirus update series *The Harvard Gazette* (2020) reflected on the rise of dissemination of misinformation and

disinformation on social media. While addressing a meeting on World Press Freedom Day, U.N Secretary-General Antonio Guterres referred the phenomenon to be a 'pandemic of misinformation' (*UN News* 2020).

It has been evidently noted that mainstream social media reported mainly the deaths caused by coronavirus, ignoring the deaths caused due to violence, displacement, hunger etc. during COVID lockdown (*The Wire* 2020). Sujatha Surepally talks about this selective coverage of reports of caste and pandemic intersection, in an opinion article published in *Deccan Chronicle* (2020). The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) data released in 2020, reported on the increase in number of crimes against Dalits and tribals in the COVID pandemic period (*The Hindustan Times* 2020). Apart from the national media coverage, international media also reported on the COVID situation in India. A news report filed by Piyali Sur for CNN (2020), pointed out the atrocities and discrimination faced by the Dalits during corona times in India. Sushitra in her news story presented the unheard stories and sufferings of Dalit and tribal women in India during the global crisis (*Al Jazeera* 2021). Shruti Srivastava in *The Print* (2020), mentions the challenges the lower caste workers faced in the workplace and also back at home. Diwakar et. al (2022) employed quantitative and qualitative methods to find out the plight of Inter-State migrant workers in Kerala during the COVID lockdown. In an opinion article published in *The Indian Express* (2020), Suraj Yengde talked about the discrimination faced by the migrant workers especially the Dalits during the pandemic. It is even alleged that coronavirus helped in bringing back caste discrimination in India (Bloomberg, *The Indian Express*, 2020).

Conclusion

The Dalits in India, and the marginalized sections across the globe, are using digital platforms to reach out to the maximum community people. However, it is necessary that the online media is used to disseminate information and not misinformation, for a better and sustainable future. The online campaigns have become a novel method to mark resistance, to assert the voice for justice. #LockdownCasteAtrocities is just one of those portals exploited by the dalit activists to let the world know of 'the other side of the story' as well. Covid-19 may be over, the scars it has left on the psyche of most of us, can never be cured. Untouchability is legally abolished in India; however, the above stated cases are evidence in themselves on the existence of caste/pandemic. This partiality of the mainstream media is answered by Dalits using social media, and with special campaigns to protect the rights of Dalits. DHRDNet is one such organization that was active and instrumental during the lockdown to foreground the issues of Dalits. It is indeed unfortunate that when 'physical distancing' and 'social solidarity' should have been practiced and reinforced, we ended up creating a 'caste/pandemic society'.

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