

Dalit Camera: Through Untouchable Eyes

Dr. C. Suresh Kumar

Assistant Professor

Department of Visual Communication

Pondicherry University, India.

ABSTRACT

In India, Dalits also known as 'untouchables' have been exploited and subjected to various sorts of atrocities due to the social stratification of Indian society. Though Dalit populace is around 23 percentage of total Indian population, they are underprivileged and discriminated in numerous ways. Dalits are socially, economically and politically segregated and oppressed by the caste dominated society. Mass media which claims to be the social institution seldom gives coverage to Dalit related issues. Even if any news items were to appear in the mainstream media, it was only misrepresentation of facts. For centuries, Dalits have been making an effort to emancipate from the clutches of caste system, and many Dalit leaders have even laid down their lives for this cause. Nonetheless, Dalits continue to undergo the caste discrimination in all spheres of their lives. Dalit intellectuals and activists tried to voice their concerns to the mass media, but owing to the caste dominated media and the absence of Dalit journalists, their voices were unheard and silenced. Dalits were even denied the space to work in such media institutions. When Dalits themselves tried to own their media to champion Dalits' cause, economic factors miserably failed them in perpetuating such efforts. Thus, Dalits were denied their space to voice their views on a public platform. In a situation such as this, the emergence and proliferation of internet and social networking sites have provided a sigh of relief to them to voice their problems to be heard even to the international community. Dalit Camera, a YouTube channel has become a rallying point for the Dalit community in India. This article throws light on how Dalit Camera is a platform for the expression of discrimination and avenue for exposing the atrocities committed on Dalits.

Introduction

Caste-based discrimination is a form of discrimination prohibited by international human rights law, which subjects millions of people globally on the basis of work and descent. Victims suffer a hidden apartheid of segregation, modern-day slavery and other forms of discrimination as a result of having been born into a marginalized group or caste. Caste discrimination constitutes one of the most serious and widespread global human rights challenges today, affecting large proportions of societies in many regions of the world, which continues to function as a deeply rooted system of grave human rights violations. The Dalits (also known as Untouchables, *Harijans*, or Scheduled Castes) have historically been poor, deprived of basic human rights, and treated as social inferiors in India. They still face economic, social, cultural, and political discrimination in the name of caste (Gochhayat, 2002). “Centuries of this ‘hidden apartheid’ that has perpetuated discrimination and denial of their human rights, has resulted not only in Dalits representing a disproportionate amount of the poor in India, but also in the creation of numerous other obstacles that hinder Dalit’s ability to change their situation” (Artis et al., 2003).

Human Rights Watch (2007) in its report *‘Hidden Apartheid Caste Discrimination Against India’s Untouchables’* explains the term Dalit says, “Dalit or so-called untouchables known in Indian legal parlance as scheduled castes, to a lifetime of discrimination, exploitation and violence, including severe forms of torture perpetrated by state and private actors in violation of the rights guaranteed by the Convention”. The report of *International Dalit Solidarity Network* says that Dalits are those who are beneath the entire caste system – and are therefore literally ‘outcaste’ as well as ‘untouchable’ – call themselves ‘Dalits’. The word “Dalit”, meaning “broken” or “ground down”, is used by ‘outcaste’ people themselves to describe at the same time their oppression, their identity and their collective power for emancipation.

Varadarajan (2006) in his article on *Caste matters in the media* writes about his experience on how the story of atrocity committed on Dalit students was not heeded and he narrates that only after a lot of struggle he managed to publish only a part of the story “in a cut and mutilated form, a full month after the Dalit students began their dharna”. Further, he says that absence of Dalits in the media industry is one of the reasons as to why there are no reports about Dalits in the Indian media (Varadharajan, 2006). Chawla, Editorial Director of *The New Indian Express* accepts the absence Dalits in the media in a talk show on *Dalit and media*, a programme called *Media Manthan* conducted by *Lok Sabha Channel*. But he defends in the show that caste bias in the media is not premeditated or any conspiracy hatched to avoid Dalits from entering the media industry (Chawla, 2012). This is not an acceptable statement as one reads Balasubramanian’s experience about his rejection in the print media in his research paper (Balasubramaniam, 2011). Speaking on this issue Varadharajan (2006) says that the absence of Dalit journalists is not the product

of conscious discrimination though that factor cannot be ruled out. But the reality of their absence is something the media must have the courage to acknowledge. In the same talk show *Media Manthan on Dalit and media*, Kancha Illaih (2012), a Dalit activist and an academician answers to the question as to why Dalit are sidelined in the media industry. He says that from pre-independence to post-independence, almost all the press had been with Brahmins. Even if the owner of the newspaper organization is from the Shudra community, the persons who worked in the media were Brahmins or majority of them in the press were Brahmins. So, they avoided reporting the issues concerning Dalit community.

Dalits and Main

Dalits and Mainstream media

In 1996, B.N Uniyal, a senior journalist in *the pioneer*, was confronted by a foreign journalist who wanted to get an opinion from a Dalit journalist over the reported dispute between Kanshi Ram and a few journalists. In an effort to find a Dalit journalist and to help the foreign journalist he started searching for a Dalit journalist. Faced with an utter failure in finding a Dalit journalist he writes,

"Suddenly I realized that in all the 30 years I had worked as a journalist, I had never met a fellow journalist who was a Dalit; no, not one. And worse still, was the thought that during all those years it had never occurred to me that there was something so seriously amiss in the profession, something which I should have noticed as a journalist. In all these years I have traveled almost every district of the country in the company of numerous journalists and met hundreds of others in different in different cities and towns and yet do not remember having met any Dalit journalist" (Bhan, 2006)

India's 4,000 daily newspapers publish in nearly 100 languages, but one voice is largely absent in the press of the world's largest democracy: that of the lower castes, which account for more than 70 percent of the country's 934 million people. Not one daily newspaper has made speaking on their behalf its role. Few daily newspaper reporters come from lower castes, and none of the nation's prominent columnists does. (Washington post, 1996, September 5)

Prasad (2006) places the Indian media in the top ranking of "India's Hall of Shame". He says:

There are two reasons why the Indian media is ranked number one in India's Hall of Shame. First, like any profit making enterprise, media also is an industry. Second, unlike the rest in the Hall of Shame, the morality gown the Indian media adorns Despite all that, the media remains overwhelmed by caste apartheid.

In 21st century India, Television, Cinema and Newspaper have been extremely inaccessible media for Dalits issues and Dalit Participation (Guru, 2000). Post-independence mainstream media always bypassed the dalits and issues and the Indian

media, controlled by caste Hindus, ridiculing the demands and politics of the dalits through cartoons and headlines; the present politics of the dalits through cartoons and headlines (Tirumal, 2004). In 2007, for example when Mayavati Naina Kumari was elected chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, India's largest state, the election coverage by the mainstream press was very poor. Mainstream media coverage on dalit also has helped to construct "The Dalit questions" in negative connotation and portrayed them only as the victims. The international media also showed similar attitude when it comes to reporting dalits. Kanshi Ram, disappointed with the mainstream media started his own media. He was very well aware that the mainstream media's nature of reports on dalits. He was concerned that stories about dalit atrocities only focused on how many people were killed or injured. There was rarely follow up to illustrate that fact that the perpetrators always got away with the crime (Mehta, 2008).

Ratnamala (2009) in her doctoral research on "*the coverage of Dalit participation in politics in Tamilnadu by the Tamil Press*" finds that Dalit politics is not at all given its due prominence by the Tamil Press and the Dalit leaders were never consulted for their opinions. Furthermore, Dalit political participation is not considered as news value. She observes:

The findings reveal that the extent of news coverage in terms of space and frequency is very low. The news concerning the Dalits which are normally covered is about crime and violence against the Dalits. The types of news which are not being covered include untouchability, PCR, manual scavenging, education and human rights violations. The data show that the Dalit news seldom appears in front page. Dalit news are often given less prominence by burying them in the inside pages of the Tamil dailies. The vocabulary and lexical choice in the text of the news being covered about Dalits are evidence for bias.

On 30th August 2006, in an open letter to Rajdeep Sardesai, Editor-in-Chief, CNN-IBN and IBN 7, Ravikiran Shinde, a professional from USA points out the treatment Dalits receive today. He points out specifically about two incidents where media failed utterly in reporting in the mainstream media. The first incident talks about is the Golden Jubilee of conversion to Buddhism at Nagpur. On this day as many as 20, 00,000 people gathered from across the world to mark the 50th year of conversion to Buddhism. He asks, "How many white collar Journalists holding Handy Cams from the leading electronic media turn up, including your own?" further he asks, "Hindu festivals like Ganesh festival or Kumbh Mela gets not only full coverage by the Media but discussions and special features running for hours" but the media ignore such event just because it belongs to Dalits. Another incident he talks about is the Khirlanji massacre. He tells, "News medium is as responsible for these inhuman crimes as the Kheranjali oppressors by just being selective and dishonest". He concludes, "Awake the people on the gruesome caste realities in India. Telecast a half an hour program dedicated specially to Dalit atrocities every week" (Shinde,

2006). Shamefully, what Ambedkar said in 1945 remains true till date (Telumbe et al., 2010).

Dalits and Internet

Tirumal & Tartakov (2011) argues Internet provides an opportunity to Dalits to explore with other Dalits as to who they are and what they want to become. With those beyond the world of Dalits they can explore the actual experience and the reconstruction of the world they share in ways never before possible.

India's Information & Technology has been always hailed as a great hope for the country's future development. The IT industry is one of India's fastest-growing sectors, its software analysts have become a prestigious export in themselves and India is a centre for overseas data processing from accounts to customer calls. However, just a small proportion of educated people have access to IT - but the vast majority of Indians, about 70% of the population, still live in villages and the challenge is to make sure they don't get left behind. (BBC, 25th may 2003) According to National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO) report on expenditure in 2009-10 only about 0.4% of rural households had access to Internet at home when compared with about 6% of urban population. (*iGovernment Bureau*, July 5, 2012) Asha Roa in her article argues that information poverty largely belong to the underserved and marginalized individual (Roa, 2011). Thus it is obvious that Dalits who are marginalized in India fall in the category of lacking access to information via internet.

Dalits are not only discriminated and stigmatized in socio-cultural aspect but they are also discriminated in the information and Technology field. Omvedt (2001) speaks of 'the upper-caste dominance in the professions, business, culture and the world of Information Technology'. Dalits are near invisible at the Indian Institutes of Technology, India's premier technological institutions. Pointing out that private sector IT firms in India have been reluctant in adopting affirmative action policies to increase Dalit presence, Omvedt wryly notes that Indian cyberspace seems particularly populated by the Indian elite. 'If upper caste Brahmins have always seemed to live in a world of philosophy and abstraction', she argues, 'the electronic "virtual" realm of IT seems somehow especially appropriate for them' (Omvedt, 2001). Tirumal consents with Omvedt in this regard and writes that in India the digital technology is confined only to the three upper castes in Hinduism, the Brahmins and two other "twice born", so-called Aryan castes that compose the national elite" (Tirumal 2011).

There is no denying that media coverage of Dalit-related incidents and issues in India were very scant. Literatures show that the Dalits were either underrepresented or misinterpreted. Communication is real power. It gives power over other. Those who own media like Newspaper, Television and Movie Studios, etc. wield enormous powers in society. This power was denied to the Dalits, who became as landless labourers. Thus there was a need for the quarter of the population to express themselves in a platform that will take them to the rest of the world. That's why Dalits adopted different alternative media

like Paintings, Sculptures, Folklores, Bhajans, Street plays, Poetry, cartoons, tabloid newspapers, magazines and journals.

As the result of burgeoning internet-savvy, Dalits are making their presence felt. They no longer depend on the corporate media waiting for their stories to be published, as it happened in the case of Khairanji Massacre or where it took one full month to publish the atrocity by the mainstream media. Dalits have fashioned their own websites and social media to speak for themselves and for their fellow members.

Dalit Camera: Eyes of the Untouchables

If one has to turn the history of 20th century of India, one can witness a number of cases of atrocities committed against Dalits. In order to rescue from such atrocities, Dalits established their own organization to counter against such atrocities. This gave birth to Dalit writers, critics, lyricists, theatre artists who wrote the narratives of oppression and resistance of the forgotten the Dalits in India. This kind of organizations and Dalit intellectuals addressed the caste discrimination and initiated a debate in the civil society. Since, Dalits were neglected education, the intellectual works of Dalit scholars either forgotten or little explored. Thus, the narratives were confined to only to oral and mnemonic transmission. Besides, these alternatives and historiographies were also kept aside by mainstream media as well. In this scenario, the emergence and the availability of the new media challenged the monopoly of power. The emergence of this new space on the public platform has enhanced for the egalitarian society and empowered the Dalit writers and activists to write and share their narratives freely without any restrictions to the global audience. Dalit Camera is one such initiative to document the issues surrounding Dalits in India. Discrimination is common ubiquitous phenomenon in India and they are hardly documented by the mainstream media. Dalit camera enables the marginalized voices to tell their own stories and provides perspectives on voices of Dalits, Adivasis, Bahujans and Minorities (DABM).

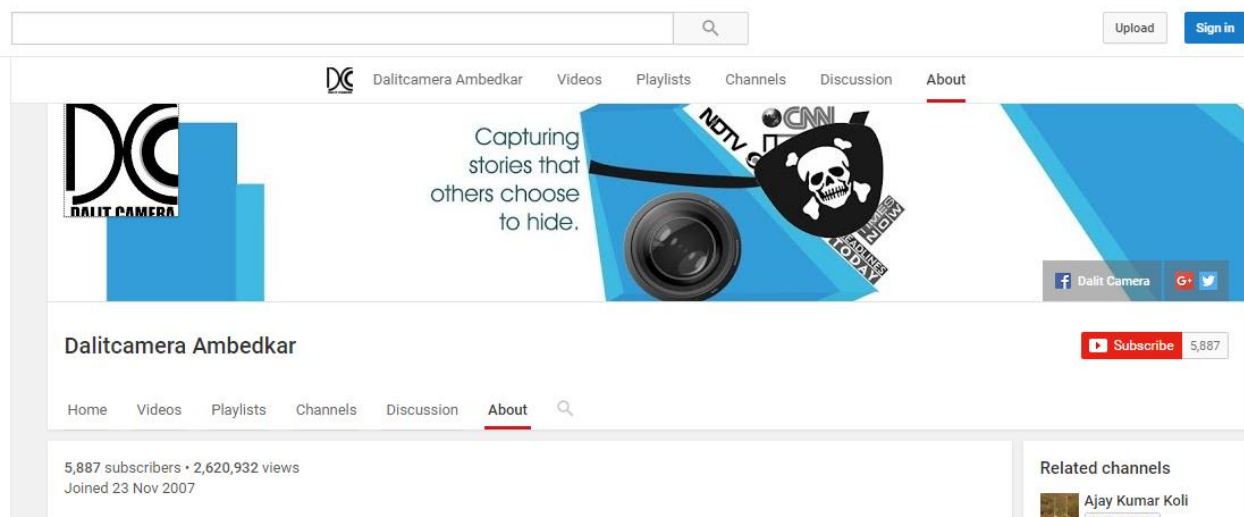


Figure.1 Screenshot of Dalit Camera

As one enters the home page of Dalit Camera, as seen in the above figure, the motivation behind such an initiative is very clear where the message is bold and direct-capturing stories that others choose to hide. The description in the web page reads as follows:

"Dalit Camera: Through Un-Touchable Eyes" captures narratives, public meetings, songs, talks, discussion on Dalits. It is largely run by students and their expenses are mostly met by themselves.

Hailing from a Dalit family in TamilNadu, Ravi Chandran Chakkilliyan popularly known as Ravi Chandran started Dalit Camera when he was pursuing his doctoral degree in English at the English and Foreign Languages University in Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh. As there was lack of coverage on the Dalit problems - Dalits are killed, denied entry into temples or access to wells, forced in schools to sit separately in a corner, served tea in tea shops in different cups that they have to wash themselves, denied jobs, beaten up for demanding their rights, or raped and paraded naked in front of a village, the crimes go unreported. As a Dalit activist Ravichandran wanted to find a solution for these sorts of pathetic situations inflicted on Dalits. Thus was born Dalit Camera. He says:

"As a student, I didn't have the means to start a newspaper or television channel. But what I could do was to film instances of discrimination. When we hear of an atrocity, we interview the victim, put up whatever raw footage we have, record dalits' opinions and upload the video," says Ravichandran. (April 13, 2014, The Sydney Morning Herald)

The notion of a YouTube channel appeared in the mind of Ravichandran when he was brutally assaulted by 20 upper-caste students on campus for being too "bolshie" as a student leader two years ago in Hyderabad. When he was contemplating on as to deal with the mortification the incident of a dalit woman head of a village panchayat (council), known only as Khrishnaveni, had been so severely assaulted by upper-caste villagers outside Hyderabad and for several months she would be unable to walk. Ravichandran says:

"I borrowed a handy camera from a friend and went and interviewed her. We filmed people who described how the upper castes had stopped her functioning. She wasn't even allowed to sit in a chair during meetings." (7 January, 2014, BBC)

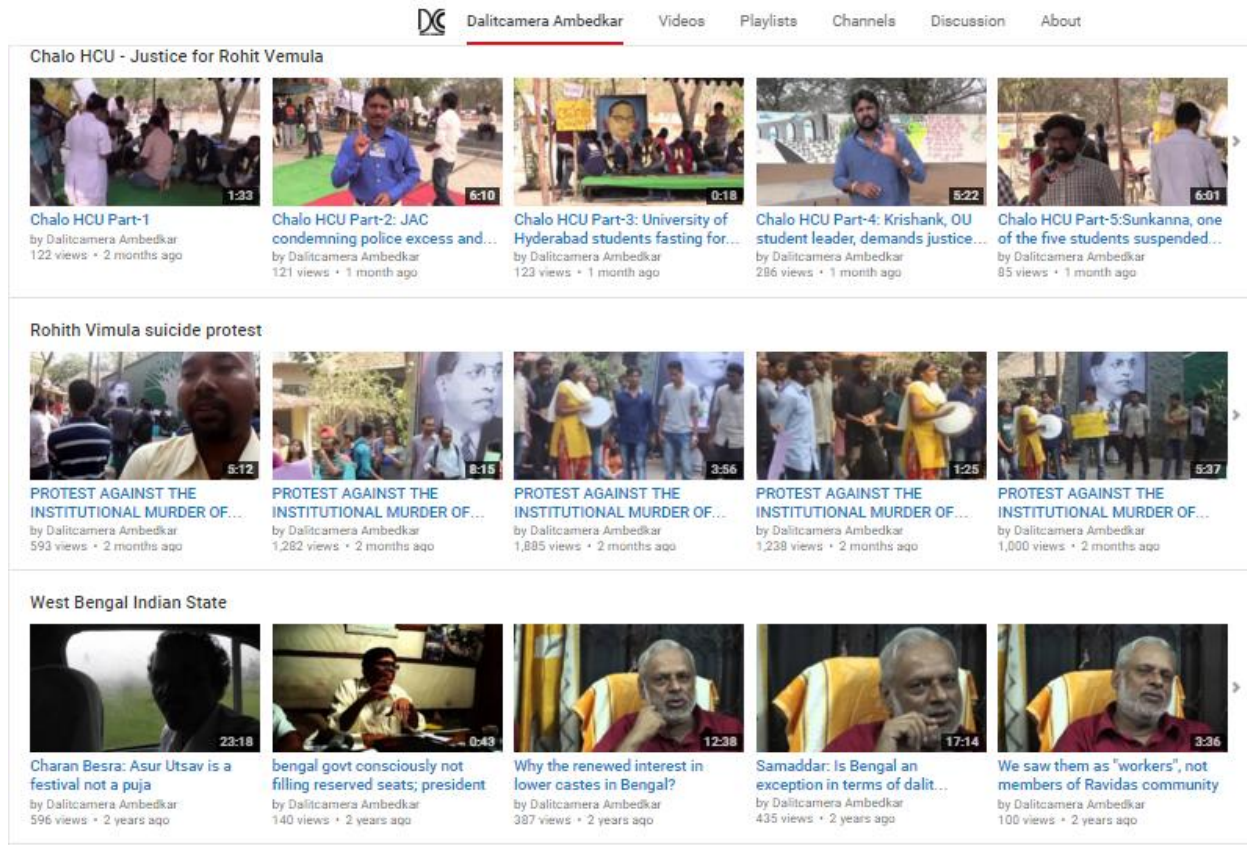


Figure.2 Screenshot of Dalit Camera videos

Since then, the team of 20 Dalit activist and Ravichandran have kept filming and uploading videos. Till date there are 1765 videos being uploaded in Dalit Camera. The total number of persons subscribed is 5896 and there are currently 2,620,932 viewers on this channel. It is noteworthy to mention that Dalit Camera has been very successful and has grown leaps and bounds in terms of its viewers and subscribers. Within one month of its kick start, Dalit Camera has achieved a remarkable milestone and well received not only in India but in other countries as well. A face book note says:

“When Dalit camera was started, the channel had around 4,000 viewers and now, it has crossed 50,000 viewers within few months. All the credit for this growth in popularity goes to the various ground-level activists, who never hesitated to give exclusive interviews to Dalit Camera, ignoring even the mainstream media. Dalit Camera has grown in popularity also because of many friends who keep watching and encouraging the work. We want to categorically stress that Dalit Camera has not contributed anything new to the Dalit movement. It just took the videos of activists on the ground and also took interviews of people. In that sense, Dalit camera does the work of a chronicler and that of a postman. (www.globalvoice.org)

Dalit Murasu a last Dalit magazine in Tamil Launched in 1997 by Punitha Pandian had the objective to give voice to the people, who could not find adequate space in the mainstream media. Unfortunately, this magazine was reeling under financial crisis and it

has almost found its way. But then, Dalit Camera is flourishing well day by day by attracting more number of viewers and subscribers. The coverage varies enormously activist-writer Arundhati Roy, Dalit music, Dalit women, a southern Indian porn actress speaking about male dominance in the film industry, Osmania University, Hyderabad Central University, Jamia Millia Islamia and Jawaharlal Nehru University, where Dalit-Bahujan and Minority students conflicts on conducting beef festivals for gaining basic food rights in their respective campuses, Afzal Guru's hanging and Ashis Nandy's remarks at the Jaipur Literature Festival about lower castes and corruption, Ambedkar Cartoon controversy, Police atrocities on Dalits and the recent issue of Chalo HCU- Justice for Rohit Vemula. Within two days of Rohit Vemula suicide totally 31 videos were uploaded in Dalit Camera by its volunteers. Ravichandran its team members are now raising enough money to procure professional cameras and they have also planned to host a website exclusively for Dalit stories alone.

"If everyone starts filming what is happening to Dalits, just imagine the impact we can have. The camera has become a tool for our self-respect," says Ravichandran.

Conclusion

Time and again there is a huge cry from the Dalit activists on the attitude of mainstream media towards Dalit issues. They reiterate that Dalit voice is inevitably diluted and hijacked and the mainstream is not balanced enough to address Dalit issues. Mainstream media picks and chooses which atrocities against Dalits they want to highlight. Hence, a large scale crimes committed on Dalits invariable get unnoticed. In a scenario such as this, internet has proved to be a great boon to the marginalized in the society. Internet serves as a medium where marginalized individuals can exercise discursive power, and resist damaging representations. Socially marginalized groups speak to one another as they speak against authority. "On the Internet, the marginalized can call on the dominant and put the dominant in the difficult position of acknowledging the marginalized, or further distance the dispossessed by ignoring the call" (Mitra, 2001). The Internet also affords marginalized people a place to discuss and debate amongst themselves, which facilitates the process of individual and collective identity (re)construction. (Drzewiecka & Nakayama, 1998). Outlook columnist S.Anand of the opinion that Dalit have created their own websites, mailing lists and blogs such as Round Table Conference, Dalit & Adivasi Students' Portal and Savari, a YouTube channel called Dalit Camera. Besides, social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter groups have mushroomed. Mainstream media is no longer depended on to tell their stories. Dalit Camera is one such new media platform for Dalits in India. Dalit Camera has become mainstream media. It has had a reach I could not have imagined," says Ravichandran.

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