

Challenges and Possibilities of Dalit Literature in the Digital Age: A Media Discourse

Flying Officer Dr. Chaman Lal

Head, Department of Journalism and Mass Communication

Vallabh Government College, Mandi

(Sardar Patel University) Himachal Pradesh

Email: flyingofficerdrchaman@gmail.com

Abstract

The digital era has opened new horizons of expression whose impact is clearly visible on Dalit literature. Traditionally, Dalit literature has foregrounded the voices pushed to the margins—experiences of social exclusion, caste-based humiliation, and exploitation. After printed books, little magazines, and alternative publishing experiments, social media, blogs, digital journals, web portals, podcasts, and YouTube have emerged as new platforms for Dalit writers. These platforms have expanded the scope of expression and created new readerships and modes of dialogue. However, Dalit literature also faces serious challenges in the digital age. The most critical issue is the **digital divide**, which restricts equal access to the internet for rural and economically marginalized Dalit communities. A lack of digital devices, technical resources, and digital literacy prevents many potential writers from participating actively online. Moreover, troll culture, casteist hate speech, online harassment, and subtle forms of censorship often push Dalit discourse back to the margins. Algorithmic bias and the corporate-controlled media ecosystem further limit the visibility and promotion of Dalit writing. At the same time, digital platforms offer powerful new possibilities. **Self-publishing**, e-books, online magazines, and social media campaigns have challenged traditional barriers of censorship and publication monopoly. Digital archiving, audiobooks, video storytelling, and documentary formats are opening new pathways for documentation, education, research, and public awareness. Digital media also enables inter-regional dialogue and networking among Dalit writers working in different Indian languages. This research paper critically analyses the challenges and possibilities of Dalit literature in the digital era through the lens of media discourse. Through examples from social media platforms, online magazines, digital campaigns, and alternative media initiatives, the study investigates to what extent Dalit literature has become empowered, visible, and influential in an age that claims to be digitally democratic—and explores the potential future directions of Dalit literary expression.

Keywords: Digital Age, Dalit Literature, Social Media, Digital Divide, Online Harassment, Algorithmic Bias, Alternative Media, Digital Archive, Media Discourse, Caste Discourse, Online Activism.

Introduction

Caste is a deeply entrenched reality of Indian society, which for centuries divided people into hierarchical layers and denied marginalized communities even their basic human dignity. Dalit literature emerged as a resistant literary movement shaped by the historical experiences of injustice, oppression, and exploitation. It transformed the fundamental assertion—“I, too, am human”—into a powerful intellectual, political, and cultural force.

In the early stages, Dalit literature reached readers primarily through printed magazines, books, autobiographies, and experimental alternative publishing. But since the second decade of the 21st century, the digital revolution—marked by smartphones, affordable internet, and the spread of social media—has radically changed the landscape of communication and expression. Blogs, Facebook, Twitter (X), Instagram, YouTube, podcasts, OTT platforms, online journals, and web portals have become new spaces where Dalit experience, resistance, and discourse are emerging with new forms, languages, and networks.

The digital age has simultaneously created opportunities for democratization of expression, rapid communication, and the rise of alternative/citizen media, while also introducing challenges such as the digital divide, algorithmic bias, online harassment, trolling, and a corporate-controlled information order. This research paper, therefore, examines the complex relationship between Dalit literature, digital transformation, the media landscape, and the discourse of social justice.

Research Problem

Digital media is often considered a democratic and inclusive space that provides equal opportunities. It is frequently claimed that social media and online platforms “give voice to the voiceless”—those who were unheard in traditional media can now articulate their experiences freely.

Yet, crucial questions arise:

- Has Dalit literary expression truly become more empowered, visible, and influential in the digital age?
- Are digital platforms equally accessible to Dalit writers and readers?
- Do casteist biases, symbolic censorship, and online violence restrict Dalit discourse in new ways?
- Thus, the central research problem of this paper is:

“How do the challenges and emerging possibilities of Dalit literature in the digital age operate within the structures of media, technology, power relations, and the discourse of social justice?”

Objectives of the Study

1. To analyse the form and nature of Dalit literature in the digital age—its platforms, genres, and modes of expression.
2. To identify the challenges faced by Dalit literature on digital platforms—digital divide, online trolling, caste-based hate, algorithmic bias, language and class barriers, etc.
3. To understand the new possibilities emerging from digital media—self-publishing, networking, digital archives, audio-visual content, alternative media, online activism.
4. To analyse the socio-political implications of Dalit literature’s digital transformation in relation to media discourse—public sphere, media agenda-setting, and symbolic representation.
5. To offer suggestions for the future—policy, education, media training, digital literacy, and alternative media models.

Research Methodology

This paper follows a **qualitative, descriptive-analytical** methodology.

Secondary Sources

- Books, reviews, research papers, autobiographies on Dalit literature
- Media studies literature on digital media, social media, digital divide, and algorithmic bias

Observational Study of Digital Content

- Content from Dalit writers, literary groups, and pages on Facebook, X, YouTube, Instagram
- Online magazines, web portals, e-journals, and blogs

Illustrative Analysis

- Representative examples to understand how digital media affects the reach, form, language, and discourse of Dalit literature

Theoretical Framework

- *Public Sphere Theory* (adapted to caste-based exclusions in India)
- Media representation, framing, and agenda-setting
- Subaltern Public Sphere, Ambedkarite thought, Critical Caste Theory

Although primary interviews were limited, the extensive analysis of secondary and digital sources provides a strong foundation for the study's conclusions.

Social Realities: Two Recent Incidents from Himachal Pradesh

Two recent tragic incidents—the suicide of a 12-year-old Dalit boy, Sikandar, in Rohru (Shimla district), and the suspicious death of Chhannu Devi in Banjar (Kullu district)—expose the deep-rooted social inequalities and gender insecurities in rural Himachal Pradesh. In the Rohru case, the boy was allegedly beaten, locked in a cowshed, and humiliated for entering an upper-caste house and “polluting” it. His suicide raises urgent concerns regarding Dalit children’s dignity, mental health, and safety. It underscores the need for strict enforcement of the SC/ST Prevention of Atrocities Act and greater sensitivity at the school and community level.

In Banjar, Chhannu Devi’s prolonged disappearance and the eventual recovery of her decomposed body raise questions about women’s safety, domestic violence, and the functioning of police and local administration.

Viewed together, both cases reveal that caste-based oppression and gendered violence stem from the same deeply embedded mindset. Solutions must go beyond legal action to cultivating equality, dignity, and sensitivity across schools, panchayats, media, and civil society.

Dalit Literature: Historical Background and Intellectual Trajectory

Dalit literature must be understood not merely as a literary experiment but as an articulation of struggles for social justice, human rights, and democratic equality. The lived realities of untouchability, caste hierarchy, degradation of labour, and cultural exclusion constitute its foundation.

- The Ambedkarite movement in Maharashtra sowed the seeds of a nationwide Dalit literary consciousness.
- In Hindi literature, writers such as Omprakash Valmiki, Mohandas Naimishray, Sharan Kumar Limbale (translated), Kancha Ilaiah, and others challenged mainstream literary conventions.
- Autobiographies like *Joothan* and *Murdahiya* demonstrated that Dalit bodily experience, labour, and suffering are deeply political, not merely objects of sympathy.
- Traditional mainstream publishing often sidelined Dalit writing as “marginal” or “non-classic,” making alternative publishing essential.

Against this background, the digital revolution emerges as a medium that challenges traditional gatekeeping and publication monopolies.

The Changing Face of Media in the Digital Age

With the spread of mobile internet and social media, India witnessed a dramatic expansion of digital communication. YouTube allowed the rise of independent video creators; WhatsApp and Facebook became platforms for sharing news, poetry, and political messages.

Key features of this transformation include:

- Rise of **citizen journalism**, alternative media, and community media
- Creation of independent spaces where Dalit writers can express themselves without editorial censorship

- Expansion of “text” into multimedia forms—audio, video, memes, reels, podcasts, documentaries, infographics

Dalit literature is no longer confined to the printed book; it has entered multi-media and interactive formats.

Why Is Cinema Silent on Dalit and Adivasi Freedom Fighters?

Although Adivasi and Dalit communities played crucial roles in India’s freedom struggle, cinema has remained largely silent about their contributions. This silence emerges from:

1. **Mainstream historiography** that marginalizes these heroes—Birsa Munda, Tantya Bhil, Siddhu-Kanhu, Rani Gaidinliu, Uda Devi, and hundreds of others.
2. **Sociocultural bias in the film industry**, dominated by upper-class, upper-caste perspectives that prefer stories aligned with “majority audience expectations.”
3. **Discomfort with narratives of anti-caste resistance**, which question casteism, feudalism, police brutality, and continuing social injustices.
4. The fact that even a single book—D.C. Dinker’s *“The Contribution of the Untouchables in the Freedom Movement”*—contains accounts of more than 400 Dalit heroes, most of whom are invisible in cinema.

To create a more inclusive national memory, alternative cinema, documentaries, OTT platforms, student films, and regional cinema must highlight these stories.

Major Challenges for Dalit Literature in the Digital Age

Digital Divide and Unequal Access

Digital inequality involves disparities in devices, connectivity, data availability, speed, language, and digital literacy. Rural and economically marginalized Dalit communities still lack:

- High-quality smartphones or laptops
- Stable internet access
- Digital skills needed for online expression

Thus, urban, educated Dalit voices dominate the digital space, while the most marginalized voices remain unheard.

Algorithmic Bias and the Politics of Visibility

Social media algorithms privilege content that generates high engagement—usually sensational or entertaining posts. Serious Dalit discourse, analytical articles, or long videos receive less visibility. Casteist trolling, although harmful, sometimes increases engagement and is algorithmically amplified.

Thus, algorithmic systems reproduce structural inequalities under the guise of “popularity.”

Online Harassment, Trolling, and Hate Speech

Dalit writers face:

- Casteist slurs

- Threats
- Coordinated trolling
- Character assassination

Dalit women face intensified caste + gender attacks. As a result, many writers resort to self-censorship.

Corporate Control and Market Logic

Global corporations prioritize profit, not social justice. Dalit content often appears “less marketable,” and mainstream digital news portals or OTT platforms use Dalit issues only symbolically or event-based.

Linguistic and Class Barriers

English and urban-centric Hindi dominate digital spaces. Writers from regional languages and oral traditions receive limited visibility.

Possibilities for Dalit Literature in the Digital Age

Self-Publishing and Resistance to Censorship

Blogs, personal websites, e-books, and social media reduce dependence on traditional publishers. Dalit writers now create their **own media**, shaping discourse on their own terms.

Social Media Networking and Solidarity

Digital platforms connect Dalit writers, activists, researchers, and readers across regions and languages. Online communities strengthen inter-regional solidarity and accelerate translation work.

Video, Podcasts, and Audio-Visual Storytelling

Platforms like YouTube, podcasts, reels, spoken-word poetry, and documentaries help reach audiences who do not engage with traditional books.

Digital Archives and Documentation

Digital repositories preserve rare documents, speeches, articles, autobiographies, and photographs, expanding global access to Dalit epistemologies.

Online Activism, Hashtag Movements, and Public Pressure

Many caste atrocities gain national attention only through social media. Hashtag campaigns and online petitions transform Dalit literature and slogans into instruments of political intervention.

Media Discourse and Dalit Literature: A Critical Perspective

Representation vs. Participation

While digital spaces allow more participation by Dalits, institutional representation in mainstream media remains weak.

Framing and Narrative Control

Media often frames Dalits only as victims, ignoring agency, creativity, and leadership. Dalit media must resist such reductive framing.

Multiplicity of Public Spheres

Dalit public spheres exist alongside casteist and hate-driven digital spheres. Key questions include:

- Can Dalit public spheres influence mainstream public discourse?
- Are digital discourses shaping policymaking and social consciousness?

Knowledge Production and Academia

Digital Dalit literature is increasingly used in universities, webinars, and global research, linking Dalit thought to international academic circuits.

Conclusion

The digital age presents a paradox for Dalit literature. On one hand, challenges such as:

- Digital divide
- Algorithmic bias
- Corporate control
- Online casteism and harassment
- Linguistic and class barriers

restrict free, fearless, and wide expression.

On the other hand, opportunities such as:

- Self-publishing
- Alternative media
- Digital archiving
- Audiovisual storytelling
- Online activism

have expanded the reach and political sharpness of Dalit literature.

Digital Dalit literature is not merely a shift “from paper to screen”; it represents a reconfiguration of power relations, media structures, and debates on social justice.

Future Directions

- Expand digital literacy and resources for marginalized Dalit communities
- Ensure representation in media institutions, universities, and cultural bodies
- Develop community-based digital platforms independent of corporate control
- Strengthen laws and platform policies against hate speech
- Encourage translation, inter-language dialogue, and international networking

If these measures are implemented, the digital space can become a powerful instrument for building an Ambedkarite, egalitarian, and humanistic society—where Dalit literature is not only a voice of resistance but also the ideological foundation for a just social order.

References

1. Singh, Chaman Lal Kranti. “Why is Cinema Silent on the Role of Adivasis and Dalits in the Freedom Movement?” *Cinema and Social Concerns*, ed. Dr. Dayanand Gautam & Dr. Kamna Mahindru. New Delhi: Navbharat Publications, 2015, pp. 86–91.

2. Flying Officer Dr. Chaman Lal Kranti Singh et al. *Great Visionary and Social Reformer Bharat Ratna Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar*. Advent Publishing, 2022, pp. 65–73.
3. Ambedkar, B. R. *Annihilation of Caste*. Trans. Raj Kishore; Notes: Dr. Siddharth. New Delhi: Forward Press, 2018.
4. Ambedkar, B. R. *Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development*. Trans. Raj Kishore; Notes: Dr. Siddharth. Forward Press, 2018.
5. Ambedkar, B. R. *Pakistan or the Partition of India*. Trans. Dr. Ajay Kumar. Siddharth Books Publication, 2022.
6. Naimishray, Mohandas (Ed.). *Bayan Magazine*.
7. Naimishray, Mohandas. *Mahanayak Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar*. New Delhi: Dhamm Jyoti Charitable Trust, 2013.
8. Ambedkar, B. R. *Collected Speeches and Writings on Caste, Nation, and Constitution*.
9. Valmiki, Omprakash. *Joothan*.
10. Valmiki, Omprakash. *Sadiyon Ka Santap*.
11. Limbale, Sharankumar. *Dalit Sahitya Ka Saundaryashastra* (Translated Edition).
12. Naimishray, Mohandas. Various story collections and critical essays.
13. Ilaiah, Kancha. *Why I Am Not a Hindu* (English and translations).
14. Ilaiah, Kancha.
15. *Post-Hindu India: A Discourse on Dalit-Bahujan, Socio-Spiritual and Scientific Revolution*. Sage Publication, 2009.
16. Standard texts on media and digital culture.
17. Contemporary research on digital divide, social media, algorithms, and public sphere.
18. Various online Dalit portals, e-magazines, blogs, and YouTube channels.
19. Case studies, contemporary examples, and data sources.
20. Kishori Lal. *Yugpravartak Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar: Vichardhara, Prasangikta evam Prabhav*. Kangra: Krishna Prakashan, 2011.
21. ChatGPT

IJRTI