



Dalit assertion and digital activism in contemporary India: From street politics to networked forms of social resistance

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Abstract

This paper examines the transformation of Dalit assertion in contemporary India by analyzing the shift from street-based political mobilization to digitally mediated forms of social resistance. Drawing on sociological theories of caste, social movements and the public sphere, the study conceptualizes digital activism as an extension of historical anti-caste struggles rather than a rupture from earlier modes of resistance. It argues that digital platforms have emerged as alternative arenas of political expression where Dalit activists, intellectuals and youth articulate counter-narratives reclaim marginalized histories and assert collective identity in response to persistent caste-based exclusion. This paper critically explores how social media, online journals and audio-visual platforms facilitate visibility trans-local solidarity and knowledge production while simultaneously reproducing inequalities through the digital divide, algorithmic marginalization, online caste discrimination and surveillance. By tracing the historical evolution of Dalit movements from print culture and street protests to networked mobilization, this paper highlights both continuities and ruptures in leadership, participation and repertoires of contention. The analysis further demonstrates that while digital activism enables symbolic resistance and discursive intervention, its capacity to effect material social change remains constrained without sustained offline mobilization and institutional engagement. Situating Dalit digital activism within broader debates on neoliberalism, media power and platform capitalism, the paper contributes to the sociology of caste by revealing how caste adapts to and is contested within digital spaces. This paper concludes by emphasizing the hybrid nature of contemporary Dalit resistance wherein street politics and networked activism operate in a mutually reinforcing relationship reshaping the public sphere while remaining embedded in enduring structures of inequality.

Keywords: Dalit assertion, digital activism, caste and technology, networked resistance, counter-publics, social movements

Introduction

Dalit movements in India have historically emerged as organized responses to entrenched systems of caste-based domination, social exclusion and structural inequality rooted in the Brahmanical social order with early anti-caste struggles drawing ideological strength from social reform movements and later acquiring a more coherent political character under the leadership of thinkers such as B. R. Ambedkar who conceptualized caste not merely as a social hierarchy but as a system of graded inequality sustained through religion, culture and everyday practices (Ambedkar, 1936/2014) ^[1]. From the late colonial period to the post-independence era, Dalit assertion largely unfolded through street-based politics including mass mobilizations, protests, satyagrahas, political parties, trade unions and the use of print culture such as pamphlets, journals and autobiographies which together constituted a counter-public sphere challenging dominant narratives (Omvedt, 1994; Guru, 2009) ^[6, 10]. However, the neoliberal restructuring of the Indian state and economy since the 1990s has significantly altered the terrain of political struggle, weakening traditional forms of collective action through labour informalization, depoliticization of welfare and the increasing marginalization of radical dissent within institutional democratic frameworks (Deshpande, 2011; Jodhka, 2015) ^[4, 7]. Street politics and electoral participation while still relevant, increasingly face limitations in terms of visibility, sustainability and impact, particularly in a media environment dominated by corporate interests and upper-caste perspectives where Dalit voices are often silenced, misrepresented or rendered invisible (Thorat & Newman,

2010) ^[12]. It is within this context that digital media has emerged as a new and significant terrain of resistance offering alternative spaces for articulation, mobilization and identity formation beyond conventional political structures. The proliferation of social media platforms, online news portals, blogs and video-sharing sites has enabled Dalit activists, scholars and youth to bypass mainstream gatekeeping mechanisms and directly engage in the production and circulation of counter-narratives rooted in lived experience (Manjrekar, 2018) ^[8]. From a sociological perspective, these digital spaces function as networked arenas of contention reshaping the nature of collective action by emphasizing symbolic resistance, discursive politics and cultural assertion alongside conventional protest (Castells, 2012) ^[3]. The research problem addressed in this paper arises from the need to critically examine why digital activism has become central to contemporary Dalit assertion and how it reconfigures older forms of resistance rather than simply replacing them. While digital platforms offer unprecedented opportunities for visibility and solidarity, they are also embedded within structures of inequality marked by the digital divide, algorithmic bias, online caste discrimination, and state surveillance, raising questions about the transformative potential of online activism for materially marginalized communities (Noble, 2018; Tufekci, 2017) ^[9, 13]. This paper argues that Dalit digital activism must be understood not as a detached or purely virtual phenomenon but as an extension of historical anti-caste struggles into the digital public sphere where identity, memory and political critique are continuously negotiated. The central objective of the study is to analyse the shift from

street politics to networked forms of social resistance by situating Dalit digital activism within broader sociological debates on caste, power, and media while examining both its emancipatory possibilities and structural constraints. Specifically, the paper seeks to explore how digital platforms facilitate new modes of Dalit assertion, how they reshape leadership and participation and how they contribute to the formation of alternative publics that challenge hegemonic knowledge systems. Structurally, the paper begins with a theoretical and conceptual discussion of Dalit assertion and digital activism followed by a historical analysis of the transition from street-based mobilization to online engagement, an examination of digital platforms as sites of resistance, a critical assessment of the challenges and contradictions inherent in digital activism and finally a conclusion that reflects on the broader sociological implications of this transformation for the study of caste and social movements in contemporary India.

Theoretical Framework and Conceptual Grounding

As a sociological concept Dalit assertion refers to the collective processes through which historically marginalized caste groups contest social exclusion, challenge symbolic degradation and claim dignity, rights and representation within an unequal social structure, and it must be understood not merely as episodic protest but as a sustained struggle against the ideological, cultural and institutional foundations of caste hierarchy (Guru, 2009; Jodhka, 2015)^[6, 7]. Rooted in anti-caste thought, Dalit assertion foregrounds lived experience as a source of knowledge and emphasizes the politics of recognition alongside material redistribution making it a critical lens for analysing contemporary forms of resistance (Rege, 2013)^[11]. This assertion increasingly intersects with digital activism in the digital era which sociologically signifies the use of networked communication technologies to mobilize collective action, circulate counter-narratives and construct shared identities beyond the constraints of physical space (Castells, 2012)^[3]. Digital activism differs from earlier modes of mobilization by privileging decentralized leadership, rapid dissemination and symbolic politics, thereby producing what scholars describe as networked social movements that rely on connectivity rather than formal organizational structures (Tufekci, 2017)^[13]. However, these digital spaces are not socially neutral; they are deeply embedded within existing power relations and caste continues to operate as a form of symbolic domination even in online environments through practices of exclusion, abuse, algorithmic invisibilization and epistemic marginalization (Bourdieu, 1991; Noble, 2018)^[2, 9]. From this perspective, digital platforms function simultaneously as sites of empowerment and reproduction of inequality where Dalit voices gain visibility yet remain vulnerable to surveillance, trolling and dominant caste control over discourse. The concept of the public sphere is therefore central to this analysis, particularly when reworked through the idea of alternative publics and counter-publics which emphasize the existence of multiple, competing discursive arenas formed by marginalized groups to articulate oppositional interpretations of social reality (Fraser, 1990)^[5]. Dalit digital spaces such as online journals, social media campaigns and virtual commemorations etc. can be theorized as counter-publics that challenge the hegemony of mainstream, upper-caste-dominated media by producing knowledge grounded in

Ambedkarite critique and lived experience (Manjrekar, 2018)^[8]. The relevance of Ambedkarite thought within digital resistance lies in its emphasis on annihilating caste through rational critique, democratization of knowledge and the creation of egalitarian public discourse, all of which find renewed expression in digital arenas that allow Dalits to reinterpret history, reclaim symbols and contest cultural domination (Ambedkar, 1936/2014; Rege, 2013)^[1, 11]. Importantly, Ambedkar's insistence on education, communication and organization resonates strongly with the logic of digital activism where information dissemination and discursive intervention become central tools of resistance. Conceptually, the linkage between street politics and networked resistance should not be framed as a linear transition from the physical to the virtual but as a continuum in which digital activism extends and reconfigures earlier forms of struggle. Street politics provided visibility through bodily presence, collective risk, and direct confrontation, while networked resistance amplifies these struggles by translating them into symbolic forms that circulate across time and space, creating new solidarities and sustaining movements beyond episodic protests (Castells, 2012)^[3]. Sociologically this linkage highlights the hybrid nature of contemporary Dalit movements, where offline mobilizations and online interventions mutually reinforce each other producing a layered form of resistance that operates simultaneously at material, cultural and discursive levels. Thus, the theoretical framework of this study integrates critical caste theory, digital sociology and public sphere theory to conceptualize Dalit digital activism as a historically grounded yet technologically mediated form of social resistance capable of challenging caste power while remaining constrained by structural inequalities inherent in both society and technology.

Historical Shift from Street Politics to Digital Mobilization

The historical trajectory of Dalit movements in India reveals a gradual yet significant transformation in the modes of resistance, communication and political organization moving from street-centred mobilization to digitally mediated forms of activism. Early Dalit movements were deeply rooted in print culture, public protest and organized political struggle, drawing upon pamphlets, journals, newspapers and autobiographical writings as crucial tools for consciousness-building and ideological dissemination (Omvedt, 1994; Rege, 2013)^[10, 11]. Print media functioned as an alternative communicative sphere through which Dalit leaders and intellectuals articulated anti-caste critique, challenged Brahmanical dominance, mobilized collective identity particularly in a socio-political context where mainstream media remained largely inaccessible and hostile (Guru, 2009)^[6]. Street politics like manifested in satyagrahas, rallies, processions, temple-entry movements and mass protests etc. played a central role in making Dalit suffering visible through bodily presence and collective risk transforming humiliation into political assertion (Ambedkar, 1936/2014)^[1]. Alongside protest, electoral politics and the formation of political parties provided an institutional route for Dalit assertion, enabling representation within democratic structures while simultaneously exposing movements to the constraints of co-optation, factionalism and state control (Jodhka, 2015)^[7]. Pamphlets and journals circulated ideas, rallies generated affective solidarity and

electoral participation offered symbolic inclusion, together constituting a multilayered form of resistance grounded in physical space and face-to-face mobilization. However, the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries witnessed structural changes associated with neoliberalism, media commercialization and technological expansion which reshaped the communicative environment and limited the effectiveness of traditional street-based politics (Deshpande, 2011) ^[4]. It is within this changing context that Dalit voices gradually entered cyberspace through blogs, online forums, social networking sites and later video-sharing platforms marking a critical shift in the geography of resistance. Early Dalit blogs and websites functioned as digital extensions of print culture, offering spaces for reflection, debate and documentation of caste discrimination that were often ignored by mainstream outlets (Manjrekar, 2018) ^[8]. With the rise of social media digital mobilization acquired greater immediacy and reach enabling rapid circulation of testimonies, visual evidence of violence and symbolic acts of resistance that transcended regional boundaries and facilitated trans-local solidarity (Castells, 2012) ^[3]. This shift also transformed leadership patterns within Dalit movements moving from centralized, charismatic mass leaders and party-based hierarchies toward more dispersed forms of influence where writers, students, activists and content creators gained prominence as digital influencers shaping discourse through visibility and connectivity rather than formal authority (Tufekci, 2017) ^[13]. While this decentralization expanded participation and reduced dependence on institutional gatekeepers, it also introduced new tensions related to fragmentation, performative activism and the uneven distribution of digital capital within Dalit communities. Importantly, the transition from street politics to digital mobilization should not be understood as a complete rupture but as a complex interplay of continuity and change. Offline activism continues to provide moral legitimacy, collective grounding and material pressure while online activism amplifies these struggles by translating them into symbolic and discursive forms that circulate widely and endure beyond the moment of protest (Fraser, 1990) ^[5]. Digital mobilization often draws its emotional force and narrative authority from street-based experiences of injustice suggesting that online resistance remains deeply anchored in lived realities. At the same time, ruptures are evident in the altered nature of participation, leadership, and risk, as digital activism enables engagement without physical presence and redefines the relationship between visibility and vulnerability. Sociologically, this historical shift highlights the adaptive capacity of Dalit movements demonstrating how older repertoires of contention are reconfigured within new technological environments to sustain resistance against caste domination. The movement from street politics to digital mobilization thus represents not the decline of collective action but its rearticulation within a changing public sphere, where the struggle for dignity, representation and equality continues through both embodied and networked forms of social resistance.

Digital Platforms as Sites of Dalit Assertion

Digital platforms have emerged as crucial sites of Dalit assertion by enabling new forms of visibility, narrative intervention and symbolic resistance within a media landscape historically dominated by upper-caste perspectives. Social media platforms such as Twitter,

Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp function as tools of visibility that allow Dalit individuals and collectives to articulate counter-narratives challenging dominant representations of caste, nation and merit thereby disrupting the epistemic monopoly of mainstream media (Manjrekar, 2018; Jodhka, 2015) ^[7, 8]. From a sociological standpoint, these platforms facilitate what can be described as everyday forms of digital resistance where personal testimonies lived experiences of discrimination, and localized struggles are transformed into politically resonant narratives that circulate across regional and social boundaries. The online assertion of Dalit identity plays a central role in this process, as digital spaces enable the reclaiming of stigmatized identities through the celebration of Dalit history, icons and cultural symbols that were previously marginalized or erased from public discourse (Rege, 2013) ^[11]. Visual imagery, quotes, biographies and reinterpretations of historical events circulate widely online contributing to a collective memory that counters Brahmanical historiography and affirms Dalit dignity and self-respect. Hashtag activism represents a particularly significant mode of digital assertion, as it allows dispersed individuals to coalesce around shared grievances, symbolic events and moments of injustice creating temporary but powerful networked publics that amplify Dalit voices and draw national and transnational attention to caste-based violence and exclusion (Castells, 2012) ^[3]. Alongside this, digital memorialization practices such as online commemorations, virtual anniversaries and the circulation of archival material serve to institutionalize Dalit memory within the digital public sphere transforming remembrance itself into a political act that resists historical amnesia and cultural domination. Virtual protests, including coordinated posting, online petitions and digital boycotts, further extend the repertoire of contention by enabling participation beyond physical constraints particularly for those marginalized by geography, gender or economic precarity. Beyond activism in the narrow sense digital platforms have become important sites of knowledge production with YouTube channels, podcasts, blogs and online journals facilitating the dissemination of Ambedkarite thought critical caste analysis, and vernacular sociological commentary outside academic and institutional gatekeeping structures (Guru, 2009) ^[6]. These platforms blur the boundary between intellectual and activist labour allowing Dalit scholars, students and cultural producers to engage in public pedagogy that challenges dominant knowledge systems and democratizes access to critical discourse. However, the apparent democratization of discourse enabled by digital media must be critically examined in light of algorithmic power and structural inequalities embedded within platform capitalism. While digital spaces lower entry barriers, visibility remains uneven and mediated by algorithms that privilege dominant voices, sensational content, and commercial interests often rendering Dalit narratives less visible or vulnerable to suppression and harassment (Noble, 2018) ^[9]. Online caste discrimination, trolling and coordinated hate campaigns reproduce symbolic violence in digital form revealing the persistence of caste power even within ostensibly egalitarian technological environments. Moreover, unequal access to digital infrastructure and skills continues to limit participation among large sections of Dalit communities reinforcing the digital divide and complicating claims of universal empowerment (Deshpande, 2011) ^[4].

Sociologically, this tension between democratization and marginalization underscores the contradictory nature of digital platforms as sites of Dalit assertion: they simultaneously enable resistance and reproduce domination. Digital activism thus operates within a field of power where agency is exercised under constraint and where symbolic gains do not automatically translate into material transformation. Nevertheless, the significance of digital platforms lies in their capacity to reconfigure the public sphere by creating alternative arenas of discourse in which Dalit voices assert presence challenge epistemic injustice, and sustain anti-caste critique in everyday life. By functioning as sites of visibility, memory and knowledge production, digital platforms extend the historical struggle for dignity into the realm of networked communication marking a critical transformation in the sociology of Dalit resistance in contemporary India.

Challenges, Contradictions and Limits of Digital Activism

Despite its emancipatory potential, Dalit digital activism is marked by significant challenges and contradictions that limit its transformative capacity and reveal the persistence of structural inequalities within technological spaces. Foremost among these is the digital divide which continues to shape unequal access to internet connectivity, digital devices and technological literacy among Dalit communities particularly in rural and economically marginalized contexts thereby reproducing patterns of exclusion within the very spaces that claim democratization (Deshpande, 2011; Jodhka, 2015) ^[4, 7]. Sociologically, this uneven access creates internal hierarchies within Dalit digital activism, privileging urban, educated and digitally skilled actors while marginalizing those whose experiences of caste oppression remain underrepresented online. Alongside access, the digital sphere has become a site where caste-based discrimination is rearticulated through trolling, hate speech and coordinated online harassment exposing Dalit activists and intellectuals to symbolic violence that mirrors offline hierarchies (Guru, 2009) ^[6]. Anonymity and platform affordances often embolden dominant caste users to deploy caste slurs, threats and disinformation, transforming digital spaces into arenas of psychological intimidation and silencing rather than dialogue. These practices not only discourage participation but also normalize caste prejudice within algorithmically amplified networks where sensational or abusive content often gains greater visibility (Noble, 2018) ^[9]. Moreover, the expansion of digital activism has intensified concerns related to surveillance, data control and political repression, as state and corporate actors increasingly monitor online dissent, collect user data and regulate content in ways that disproportionately affect marginalized groups (Tufekci, 2017) ^[13]. From a critical sociological perspective, digital platforms function within regimes of platform capitalism and state power where expressions of Dalit resistance are simultaneously commodified and policed limiting the autonomy of counter-publics and exposing activists to legal and extra-legal forms of repression. Another central contradiction lies in the fragmentation of activism itself, as the decentralized and networked nature of digital mobilization often leads to episodic engagement, issue-specific outrage and the proliferation of individualized voices rather than sustained collective organization (Castells, 2012) ^[3]. While this

decentralization broadens participation, it also dilutes leadership, weakens accountability and encourages performative activism where symbolic gestures of solidarity replace long-term commitment and organizational discipline. The rise of digital influencers further complicates leadership dynamics, as visibility and follower counts increasingly substitute for ideological coherence or movement-based legitimacy creating tensions between popularity and political depth. Perhaps the most enduring limitation of Dalit digital activism lies in the tension between digital visibility and material social change. Although online campaigns can generate awareness, solidarity and discursive shifts, their capacity to alter entrenched structures of caste inequality such as land ownership, employment discrimination, educational exclusion and everyday violence remains constrained without complementary offline mobilization and institutional intervention (Omvedt, 1994; Thorat & Newman, 2010) ^[10, 12]. Sociologically, this gap highlights the limits of symbolic power when detached from material struggle suggesting that recognition without redistribution risks reinforcing neoliberal forms of inclusion that leave structural hierarchies intact. Digital activism may thus produce a politics of presence rather than a politics of transformation where visibility is mistaken for victory. At the same time, it would be reductive to dismiss digital activism as ineffective; rather, its contradictions must be understood as reflective of broader social conditions in which technology operates as both a resource and a constraint. The challenges facing Dalit digital activism underscore the need to theorize resistance as a hybrid process, in which online articulation and offline organization remain interdependent. By foregrounding these limits, a sociological analysis moves beyond celebratory narratives of digital empowerment and situates Dalit activism within the complex interplay of caste, technology, power and political economy, revealing both the possibilities and the constraints of resistance in the digital age.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the transformation of Dalit assertion in contemporary India by tracing the shift from street-based politics to digitally mediated forms of mobilization arguing that digital activism represents neither a rupture with historical anti-caste struggles nor a complete substitute for offline resistance but a reconfiguration of established repertoires of contention. The analysis demonstrates that digital platforms have expanded the terrain of Dalit politics by enabling visibility, counter-narrative production, identity affirmation and trans-local solidarity while simultaneously remaining embedded within structural inequalities shaped by caste, class and political power. Digital activism emerges in this study as a transformed mode of resistance that amplifies voices historically marginalized in mainstream public discourse yet it remains incomplete in its capacity to generate sustained material change without organizational depth and institutional engagement. Sociologically, this ambivalence underscores the limits of symbolic politics when detached from collective action rooted in everyday social relations revealing that recognition and representation, though crucial, cannot alone dismantle entrenched caste hierarchies. The findings contribute to the sociology of caste by

demonstrating how caste power adapts to technological change reproducing symbolic domination through algorithmic visibility, online harassment and digital exclusion while also opening spaces for contestation and counter-public formation (Noble, 2018) ^[9]. For the sociology of social movements, the study highlights the emergence of networked resistance characterized by decentralized leadership, episodic mobilization and hybrid forms of participation that blur the boundaries between activism, cultural production and knowledge dissemination. This necessitates a rethinking of classical movement theories that privilege formal organization and street protest encouraging sociologists to account for the role of digital infrastructures affective publics and symbolic struggles in contemporary mobilizations. In terms of media sociology, the paper reinforces the argument that digital platforms function as contested public spheres rather than neutral technologies shaping whose voices are heard and whose narratives are marginalized through opaque algorithmic processes and corporate interests (Manjrekar, 2018) ^[8]. The policy implications of this analysis are significant particularly with respect to digital inclusion, regulation of online hate speech and protection of marginalized voices from surveillance and repression. Expanding affordable internet access, promoting digital literacy among marginalized communities and ensuring accountability of platform governance are essential for translating the promise of digital activism into more equitable participation. Future research should adopt mixed and ethnographic methods to examine how Dalit digital activism intersects with offline organizing, gender dynamics, regional inequalities and generational shifts, as well as comparative studies across Global South contexts to situate caste within broader debates on digital inequality. Reaffirming the central argument of this paper, the shift from street politics to networked resistance should be understood as a layered and cumulative process in which historical struggles for dignity, rights and equality are rearticulated through new communicative forms rather than abandoned. Digital activism thus stands as a significant yet constrained extension of Dalit resistance, one that reshapes the public sphere and sociological understanding of power while remaining dependent on material, institutional and collective foundations to realize its transformative potential.

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