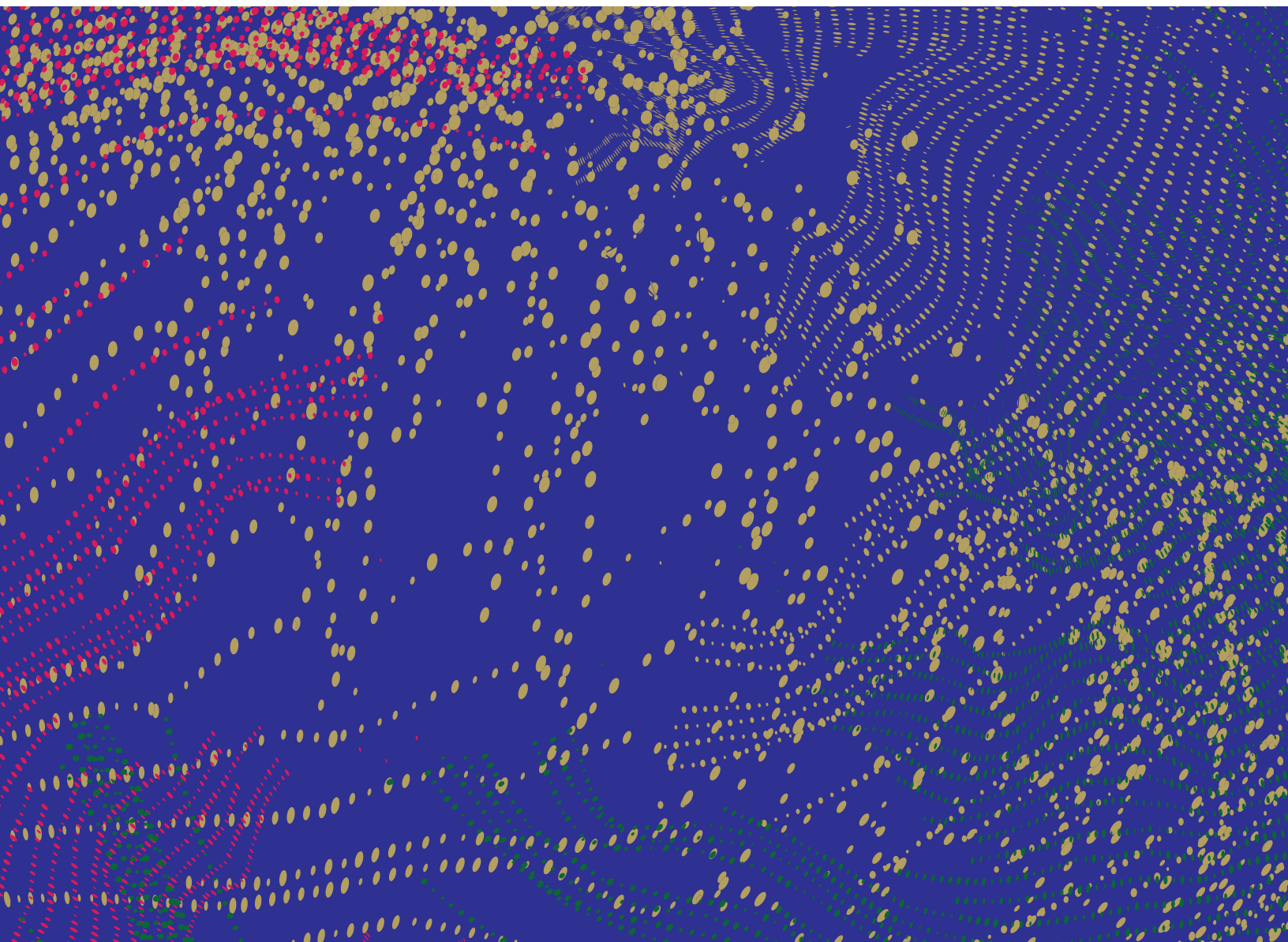


The World Humanities Report
**Critical Thought in the
Time of Digital
Technology: The Case of
Feminist and Anticaste
Activism on Social Media**

Sujatha Subramanian



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Critical Thought in the Time of Digital Technology: The Case of Feminist and Anticaste Activism on Social Media

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The relationship between critical thought and social change is one that humanists have constantly grappled with. *The World Humanities Report 2015* found that those who do humanities research see value in its ability to “challenge widely accepted social values and traditions” and to generate critical thought that asks “deep-seated questions with the aim of gaining profound insights into the multiple challenges that face the human condition.”¹ What are the different sites in which these bodies of critical thought and knowledge are produced? Who are the people and communities that create such critical knowledges? And how do these bodies of knowledge intervene in our understandings of power structures? My essay attempts to answer these questions by studying activist engagements, specifically queer, feminist, and anticaste engagements with social media, to explore the forms of critical knowledge that are produced at these sites. My objective in the essay is not to provide an exhaustive survey of all such engagements but to understand the objectives that guide some of these engagements and how they open up possibilities of questioning and disrupting existing power hierarchies.

Discussions of what constitutes activism are often fraught, especially when discussing whether digital technologies and social media can be sites of activism.² Some of the issues debated when it comes to activism in digital spaces are those of risk, efficacy, and investment, with some critiques seeing digital

¹ Poul Holm, Arne Jarrick, and Dominic Scott, *The World Humanities Report 2015* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 21, 32.

² Gina M. Chen, Paromita Pain, and Briana Barner, “Hashtag Feminism: Activism or Slacktivism?,” in *Feminist Approaches to Media Theory and Research*, ed. Dustin Harp, Jaime Loke, and Ingrid Bachmann (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 197–218; Evgeny Morozov, *The Net Delusion: How Not to Liberate the World* (London: Allan Lane, 2011); Kaitlynn Mendes and Jessica Ringrose, “Digital Feminist Activism: #MeToo and the Everyday Experiences of Challenging Rape Culture,” in *#MeToo and the Politics of Social Change*, ed. Bianca Fileborn and Rachel Loney-Howes (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 37–51.

activism as hurting “real” civic action.³ However, scholars have also argued that in the public imagination, activism is often understood to be constituted of outward forms of protests and rallies, ignoring the slower set of actions that constitute an important part of activism.⁴ Another factor when debating definitions of activism, as May Chazan argues, is the need to critically reexamine “whose actions are most recognized within activist movements and how the history of social change is constructed and remembered.”⁵

Heeding Chazan’s critique, I propose that activism be defined broadly as a set of actions aimed at bringing about social and political change with the goal of achieving justice.⁶ An important aspect of activism that is often erased and that I wish to foreground in this essay is the engagements that generate bodies of critical thought and knowledge. The importance of critical thought to activism has been underlined by the father of the Indian Constitution and one of the most important anticaste intellectuals and leaders of our times, B. R. Ambedkar, who exhorted people from oppressed caste communities to “educate, agitate and organize.”⁷ Similarly, according to decolonial theory scholar Boaventura de Sousa Santos, “There is no global social justice without global cognitive justice.”⁸ Santos writes that critical theory provides “both the intellectual instruments to unmask the institutionalized lies that sustain and legitimate social injustice and the political impulse to struggle against them.”⁹ In this essay, I focus on critical thought as an important aspect of activism and look in particular at how feminist and anticaste activists use digital technologies, specifically social media, to generate and disseminate such critical thought, creating possibilities of social change in the process. *The World Humanities Report 2015* found that many humanists see the humanities as epitomizing critical thought, with one response

³ Yu-Hao Lee and Gary Hsieh, “Does Slacktivism Hurt Activism? The Effects of Moral Balancing and Consistency in Online Activism,” paper presented at the Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems, Paris, April 27–May 2, 2013, <https://doi.org/10.1145/2470654.2470770>.

⁴ May Chazan, “Introduction: Amplifying Activisms,” in *Unsettling Activisms: Critical Interventions on Aging, Gender, and Social Change*, ed. Patricia Marie Evans, May Chazan, and Melissa Baldwin (Toronto: Women’s Press, 2018).

⁵ Chazan, “Introduction,” 2.

⁶ Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, *Grassroots: A Field Guide for Feminist Activism* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005); Chazan, “Introduction.”

⁷ Goldy M. George, “Ambedkar’s Journalism Was an Integral Part of His Call to ‘Educate, Agitate, Organize,’” *Forward Press*, January 31, 2020, https://www.forwardpress.in/2020/01/100th-anniversary-of-mooknayak-launch_educate-and-mobilize/.

⁸ Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against Epistemicide* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), viii.

⁹ Santos, *Epistemologies*, viii.

seeing the end goal of research as critical thinking itself.¹⁰ Thus, in studying the generation and dissemination of critical thought on social media, I attempt to address key concern of both activists and humanists.

The last few decades in India have seen the emergence of mass movements that have not only highlighted the deep inequalities of gender, religion, caste, and class that structure Indian society but also opened up spaces where marginalized and oppressed groups have made claims to equality, dignity, and justice. The 1970s and 1980s, for instance, saw the emergence of many movements, such as the Naxalite movement,¹¹ the anticaste movement of the Dalit Panthers, and the Indian women's movement, leading to a proliferation of organizations and associations beyond state-controlled and state-promoted civil society. The histories of feminist and anticaste activism in the Indian context have demonstrated that different sites—from the streets to institutions of the state and civil society—have all been critical in struggles for justice by various actors. It is in this context that digital technologies and, with these technologies, new ways of organizing and building political communities and critical solidarities were introduced in India. Thus, while I highlight critical thought in online spaces as forms of activism, I do not intend to erase other forms of activism that take place both online and offline. I also do not wish to present digital technologies or the activism carried out on social media as exceptional.

Such engagements with multiple spaces and modes of activism have also characterized the history of what can be called internet activism. Anja Kovacs traces this history to the early 1990s, when protestors against the World Trade Organization (WTO) in Seattle used a variety of digital technologies as part of

If humanities research is indeed “about values, the meaning of existence, and of our life,” then to not recognize social media as a site of the humanities is to miss out on understanding the many possible worlds that are being built every day on these sites.

¹⁰ Holm, Jarrick, and Scott, *The World Humanities Report*, 33.

¹¹ The term “Naxalite” is associated with the peasant uprising in Naxalbari of West Bengal in 1967. It was a rebellion against the feudal landlords and land tenancy. Over the years the insurgency has inspired peasants, tribals, and youth to fight against injustices related to land and human dignity in society. Hostility against the state is an essential feature of these movements. The Naxalbari rebellion led to the birth of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist).

their protests.¹² In India the Pink Chaddi campaign has gained prominence as one of the early examples of feminist activism in which digital technology played a key part.¹³ As part of the Pink Chaddi campaign, a group of women who called themselves the Consortium of Pub-Going, Loose and Forward Women set up a Facebook group, which saw close to thirty thousand members sign up in a week. This group campaigned to send three thousand pink panties to the head of the Hindu right-wing group Sri Ram Sene as a protest against the Sene's attack on pub-going women. Both the Pink Chaddi campaign and the protests against the WTO are examples that connect online activism with offline organizing, a correspondence that continues to be privileged in dominant understandings of internet activism. In her book *Digital Diasporas*, Radhika Gajjala shares how an activist that she interviews sees digital activism as "secondary ... yet a natural everyday tool that is interwoven with the offline campaigns that she has worked on."¹⁴ Gajjala writes that in the present context, for activism and protest to be seen as authentic, social media posts that document the work that the user is doing offline are often used to lend legitimacy to a person's claims of being an activist.¹⁵

However, I propose that neither online nor offline spaces be privileged over the other when defining activism; instead, online and offline spaces should be seen as being interwoven. As Michael Petersen and others have argued, digital media should be studied as part of a larger process of mediation and be located within the broader pattern of human communication and interaction.¹⁶ The binaries of online and offline become especially difficult to delineate as users of digital technology, including activists, move seamlessly between the two spaces. This is not to say that corporeal, offline identities are irrelevant in the study of digital technologies. As scholars studying online spaces have argued, the promise of the internet as a utopian space of potential disembodiment has been challenged by experiences of misogyny, racism, and transphobia in online

¹² Anja Kovacs, "Inquilab 2.0? Reflections on Online Activism in India," Centre for Internet and Society, January 13, 2010, <https://cis-india.org/raw/histories-of-the-internet/blogs/revolution-2.0/digiactivprop>.

¹³ Kovacs, "Inquilab 2.0?"; Sujatha Subramanian, "From the Streets to the Web," *Economic and Political Weekly*, April 17, 2015, 71–78.

¹⁴ Radhika Gajjala, *Digital Diasporas: Labor and Affect in Gendered Indian Digital Publics* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2019), 40.

¹⁵ Gajjala, *Digital Diasporas*, 20.

¹⁶ Michael N. Petersen, Katherine Harrison, Rikke Andreassen, and Tobias Raun, *Mediated Intimacies: Connectivities, Relationalities and Proximities* (London: Routledge, 2017).

spaces.¹⁷ As Gajjala argues in her book, the connections between online and offline spaces are complex, with questions of identities, offline geographic locations, and labor all shaping participation with digital technologies.¹⁸ As I explore in detail in the next section, the creation of feminist, queer, and anticaste thought on social media has been greatly shaped by the social locations of my research participants and their experiences with power hierarchies that structure the many spaces and institutions that they are a part of.

Keeping in mind these complexities of defining what constitutes social media activism, for the purposes of this study, I conducted semistructured interviews with twelve individuals, comprising both people who self-identified as activists and intellectuals who I know are actively engaging with questions around social media activism. The questions aimed at exploring how individuals who self-identify as activists understand the objective of their work and how they see social media as integral to this work. Conversations around this question led to discussions of how identities, solidarities, and intimacies are forged within feminist and anticaste activism on social media. I also employed textual and discourse analysis to look at the engagement of the intellectuals and activists with social media and the various kinds of social media texts they create as part of their activism. The social media websites I primarily look at are Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Tumblr, and TikTok. In addition to studying the individual social media accounts of the research participants, I also studied social media accounts such as the Dalit History Month project, the Dalit Feminism Archive, and various TikTok accounts. I was unable to interview the creators of these accounts; however, studying the content of these social media pages allowed me to explore the bodies of feminist and anticaste knowledge created and shared on these sites. I also studied specific hashtags, such as #MeToo and #GayIndia, on different social media platforms, studying the mobilizations that these hashtags had enabled and the content that was shared using them.

¹⁷ In her discussion of how embodiment in online spaces has been conceptualized, Padmini Ray Murray writes, “Much of the appeal of the web in its earliest incarnations was characterized by the euphoric possibilities of escaping ‘meatspace,’ that is, the physical world, as well as transcending embodiment. Some of this radical potential was realized by spaces for online community called MOOs (short for Multi-User Domain Object-Oriented), but the promise of transcendence was short-lived, and one of the web’s earliest examples of sexual violence online took place as early as 1993.” “Bringing Up the Bodies: The Visceral, the Virtual, and the Visible,” in *Bodies of Information: Intersectional Feminism and the Digital Humanities*, ed. Elizabeth Losh and Jacqueline Wernimont (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 189. For a discussion of online experiences of misogyny, racism, and transphobia, see Lisa Nakamura, *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

¹⁸ Gajjala, *Digital Diasporas*.

This study of queer, feminist and anticaste activists and activism is also informed by own identity as a cis-heterosexual woman from a Bahujan community.¹⁹ My engagement with social media has been both as a scholar of feminist media and as a participant in different activist movements. My status as a participant informed my definition of activism and the recruitment of participants. Acknowledging my status as a scholar-participant, I approach this study as a critically engaged ethnographic study.

Self-Assertion and the Creation of Experiential Knowledges on Social Media

As a number of research participants stated in their interviews with me, the space of critical thought is often assumed to be institutions such as universities. However, most research participants agreed that social media had enabled the creation and proliferation of knowledge beyond universities. Rohini Sen, a professor and student of law, shared in her interview with me that since many of her students are on social media and follow her accounts, she thinks of social media as an “extended classroom.” Sen stated that she has often conducted classes in closed social media groups. The extension of traditional academic spaces into social media has been especially visible during the global pandemic, which shifted instruction from physical classrooms to online spaces.

However, despite such blurriness between social media and traditional spaces of teaching and research, critical thought enabled by online activism is not the mere extension of traditional academia into social media spaces. In addition to seeing social media as a site where knowledge created within universities can

¹⁹ In my use of the word “Bahujan,” I describe my backward-caste identity. I borrow my understanding of the term from the Bahujan movement started under the leadership of anticaste political leader Kanshi Ram. The Bahujan movement sought to unite people from various oppressed caste and religious communities and liberate them from the hegemony of upper-caste communities. Like the term “Dalit,” which has been adopted by those at the lowest rung of the caste system as a term of self-assertion, the term “Bahujan” has also been adopted by those of oppressed caste and religious communities. Both terms signify political communities and histories of resistance that people of oppressed caste background have been part of. In this essay I use the term “Bahujan” in most places to signify a coming together of various oppressed caste communities. In certain instances, I identify Dalit communities differently, especially when talking about initiatives and spaces exclusively created for Dalit people. While a longer discussion of this issue is required, separate spaces on social media have been created by Dalit activists for Dalit communities, since Dalit people face violence and exclusion not just from upper-caste communities but also from other backward caste communities. Central to understanding this is remembering that despite the efforts of the Bahujan movement, caste remains a graded system of inequality in which each caste oppresses those below it.

be disseminated, research participants pointed out that social media also enabled the creation of unique forms of knowledge. One of the research participants, Riddhima Sharma, a PhD student who studies digital feminisms, discussed how several individuals have taken initiatives to create and preserve “byte-sized knowledges” on social media. Sharma spoke about how, by documenting their own and others’ experiences through status updates on Facebook or tweets on Twitter or through the creation of memes and posters, people from marginalized groups enabled discussions on structural forms of discrimination. Sharma argues that not only can anyone with an internet connection learn from these discussions but, given the format of these discussions, they are also more easily understood compared to traditional forms of scholarship.

The creation of feminist and anticaste knowledge on social media is critical since the inclusion of feminist and anticaste thought within academia has not been comprehensive, as pointed out by the research participants of this study. Sharma highlighted how mainstream academic curricula continue to erase and invisibilize marginalized people’s lives and perspectives, including the lives and histories of women and queer people and those belonging to Bahujan communities. She shared that she learned about key women political thinkers when she enrolled in a certificate course in women’s studies at a university: “I was twenty-three when I did the course on women’s studies, and I was shocked to discover that until then nobody taught me about Savitribai Phule or about Phoolan Devi and her revolutionary spirit or about Pandita Ramabai.”²⁰ The histories of Bahujan communities have similarly been excluded from mainstream disciplines. As Savyasaachi states, curricula in different disciplines “do not address questions that arise from the specific historical experiences of Dalits.”²¹

However, universities in India have not just excluded the experiences and

²⁰ Savitribai Phule (1831–1897) was among the first to publicly challenge the caste system in modern India. She and her husband, Jyotirao Phule, were the leading proponents of the anticaste ideology, which broadly translated into mass advocacy against the traditional caste mores and values. Hailed as modern India’s first women educator, she realized the emancipatory power of education.

Phoolan Devi (1963–2001) was born in a poverty-stricken and lower-caste Mallah family and later fought against the dominant high caste in the Jalaun district of Uttar Pradesh. She was imprisoned for eleven years for her involvement in a gang of *dacoits* (bandits), which also made her the subject of legend and a 1994 Bollywood film *Bandit Queen*. She was elected to parliament in 1996 and again in 1999, and she was assassinated in 2001.

Pandita Ramabai (1858–1922) was a social reformer who worked on religious reform and women’s rights. Her book *The High-Caste Hindu Woman* was a seminal contribution to Indian feminism.

²¹ Savyasaachi, “Dalit Studies: Exploring Criteria for a New Discipline,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, April 24–30, 2004, 1658.

perspectives of marginalized people, they have also excluded students from marginalized communities themselves. In the context of India, access to education has historically been shaped by one's gender and caste identity in addition to class position. Sharma pointed to this when she said, "Historically, knowledge creation and sharing has been a really contested space where different hierarchies of power, privilege, access have converged to make knowledge more readily available to some and more visibly closed to large groups of people. We can see that in India particularly, existing caste hierarchies have meant that upper-caste communities have historically denied access to education to marginalized communities and castes."²²

As Shailaja Paik highlights, anticaste leaders such as Ambedkar and Jyotiba Phule understood how high-caste males subjugated men of low castes and women of all castes by depriving them of their human rights, including their right to education.²³ Anticaste leaders thus focused on access to education as a means of the collective liberation of marginalized communities, including of Bahujan communities. However, despite the efforts of these leaders, Bahujan students, especially those who are gender and sexual minorities, continue to be underrepresented in higher education. Women continue to be severely underrepresented in terms of publications in high-impact journals, representation in prestigious groups, opportunities for research funding, acceptance of project findings in research journals, and so on.²⁴ More significantly, even when students from marginalized groups are able to enter universities, they experience different forms of violence. As editor and journalist Tejas Harad shared in his interview, for young Dalit people, educational institutions become spaces where they feel alienated and discriminated against.²⁵ Nancy Fraser argues in her seminal work on the public sphere, "The question of open access [of the public sphere] cannot be reduced without remainder to the presence or absence of formal exclusions. It requires us to look also at the process of discursive interaction within formally inclusive public arenas."²⁶ Hence, when talking about marginalized groups' experiences of higher education and their potential for

²² See also Savyasaachi, "Dalit Studies."

²³ Shailaja Paik, *Dalit Women's Education in Modern India: Double Discrimination* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

²⁴ Vineeta Bal, "Women Scientists in India: Nowhere near the Glass Ceiling," *Economic and Political Weekly*, April 7–14, 2004, 3647–49.

²⁵ See also Tejas Harad, "Towards an Internet of Equals," *Livemint*, August 31, 2018, <https://www.livemint.com/Leisure/c7XqIj7NcWEhmcV3WdeauI/Towards-an-internet-of-equals.html>.

²⁶ Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text* 25/26 (1990): 63.

participating in the creation of critical thought, in addition to lack of access, the various forms of gatekeeping, discrimination, and violence they face within institutions of higher education must also be considered.

The violence and alienation that students from marginalized communities, particularly Bahujan communities, face within universities were made most visible in the protests following the death of Dalit student Rohith Vemula in 2016. Vemula, a young Dalit PhD scholar at the University of Hyderabad, committed suicide. However, as a number of activists have pointed out, his death needs to be seen as an instance of institutional murder and as driven by the violence meted out to him within his university, especially the retaliation by the university administration to his activism against casteism and Hindu right-wing politics within the university.²⁷ The institutional murder of Vemula provoked widespread protests and what anticaste scholar Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd has termed a “collective assertion.”²⁸ A significant site of these protests was social media. As journalist Manik Sharma writes, “Vemula’s death happened in the age of social media. Words and images could thus be freely shared.”²⁹ In the immediate aftermath of Vemula’s death, calls for organized protests were shared on social media using hashtags #JusticeForRohith and #DalitLivesMatter. In addition to enabling the organizing of offline protests and documentation of these offline protests, social media became a critical site of conversations around the structural oppression that Bahujan students often face inside universities. Vemula’s suicide note was widely shared across different social media sites, provoking conversations about Bahujan students’ potential and the loss of that potential because of the discrimination they face within universities.

Significantly, visible in the social media conversations were self-assertions of Bahujan identity, specifically Dalit identity, as a form of resistance. Commenting on the “eclectic range of journalistic, oratorical, literary, visual and sonic representations of Dalit resistance,” Subin Paul and David Dowling write that

²⁷ K. V. Syamprasad, “Rohith Vemula: The Antecedents and Aftermaths of His Institutional Murder,” Round Table India, March 19, 2016, https://roundtableindia.co.in/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=8514%3Arohith-vemula-the-antecedents-and-aftermaths-of-his-institutional-murder&catid=119%3Afeature&Itemid=132; N. Sukumar, “Red Sun in the Blue Sky’: Rohith Vemula’s Utopian Republic,” *Social Change* 46, no. 3 (2016): 451–57; H. S. Wankhede, “Three Years Later, Rohith Vemula’s Soul Still Haunts Us for Failing Him,” *The Wire*, January 17, 2019, <https://thewire.in/caste/two-years-later-rohith-vemulas-soul-still-haunts-us-failing>.

²⁸ Shepherd quoted in S. Shantha, “Rohith Vemula’s Suicide Triggered a New Political Wave,” *The Wire*, January 17, 2019, <https://thewire.in/caste/rohith-vemula-suicide-triggered-a-new-political-wave>.

²⁹ Manik Sharma, “Why Rohith Vemula Will Never Be Forgotten,” *Qrius*, January 17, 2018, <https://qrius.com/rohith-vemula-will-never-forgotten/>.

the representations “created an ephemeral environment of proximity for Dalits across the country and internationally. Such representations asserted ... claims to Dalit belonging and presence in online space to outsiders for whom Dalits’ physical presence is considered defiling.”³⁰

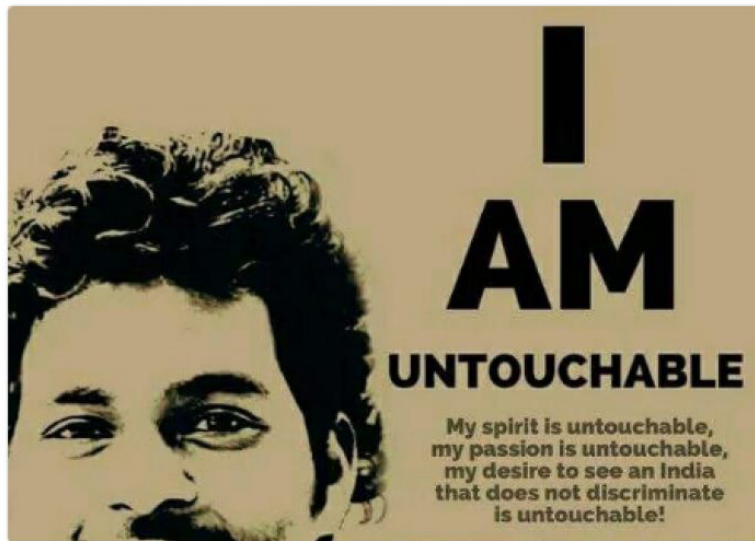


Figure 1. Tweet protesting Rohith Vemula’s institutional murder. Sneha Jaiswal, “Rohith Vemula: ‘A Hero, Coward and Victim,’” *Deccan Chronicle*, January 17, 2017, <https://www.deccanchronicle.com/nation/in-other-news/170117/rohit-vemula-a-hero-coward-and-victim.html>.

Perhaps the most striking instance of identity assertion in this context was a note shared by journalist Yashica Dutt on Facebook three days after Vemula’s death. In the note, titled “Today I Am Coming Out as Dalit,” Dutt wrote about how she had to either omit talking about her caste or lie about it in the various spaces she had thus far occupied, including in her university and in her workspace. The note was then carried by various mainstream publications, including *Scroll*, *HuffPost*, and *Indian Express*. In her note, Dutt wrote, “[Vemula] made me ‘come out’ to the people I grew up hiding from, wanting to fit in with. He made me recognize that my history is one of oppression and not shame. He made me acknowledge that my great grandfather learned to write by scrawling a stick in the mud because the higher caste schoolteacher forbade him from holding a slate. And he made me proud.”³¹

³⁰ Subin Paul and David O. Dowling, “Digital Archiving as Social Protest: Dalit Camera and the Mobilization of India’s ‘Untouchables,’” *Digital Journalism* 6, no. 9 (2018): 1246.

³¹ Yashica Dutt, “Today, I’m Coming Out as Dalit,” *Indian Express*, January 21, 2016, <https://indianexpress.com/article/blogs/dalit-suicide-hyderabad-today-im-coming-out-as-a-dalit/>.

In her note Dutt not only resisted the shame that is ascribed to people of oppressed caste communities by asserting her Dalit identity but also opened up a space for self-assertion by other Dalit individuals when she stated her decision to start a page called “Documents of Dalit Discrimination” on the social networking website Tumblr.³² Explaining the rationale for the Tumblr page in her post, Dutt wrote,

I know I am not alone to feel this. There are many of us whose experiences of growing up Dalit and navigating a society that forces us to feel shame, need to be told and heard. That’s why I am starting Documents of Dalit Discrimination. A safe space for conversation about caste that needs to go beyond ‘reservation’ and ‘merit’ and voices that echo the hurt so many of us suffer silently. Let us hear stories of pride, of history and ownership against the emotional, personal, physical and mental toll of the caste system. Let it be known that Rohith’s birth was no “fatal accident.”³³

The “Documents of Dalit Discrimination” Tumblr page includes narratives submitted by several Dalit people about their experiences not only of discrimination and oppression but also of individual and collective acts of resistance. One such note, by Manisha Mashaal, discusses the structural discrimination that Dalit students face within different educational institutes.³⁴ Mashaal mentions that even within a women’s studies classroom at her university, she was unable to voice her opinions regarding the sexual violence faced by Dalit women, with her classmates and professor disagreeing vehemently with her assertion that such violence is a result of structures of both caste and gender. The notes shared on the page also express solidarity among Dalit people, as seen in a note by Dutt herself, in which she writes, “I also didn’t know that being Dalit would give me my voice. A voice that will make fellow Dalits reach out to say that they are not scared to ‘come out’ now. A voice that would instigate such pitiful fear among fundamentalists that they would be forced to carry out a 24-hour hate tweet cycle to shut it up.”³⁵ Dutt’s intervention on social media in the form of the “Documents of Dalit Discrimination” Tumblr page is an illustration of how the

³² “Documents of Dalit Discrimination,” accessed November 21, 2021, <https://dalitdiscrimination.tumblr.com/>.

³³ Dutt, “Today, I’m Coming Out as Dalit.”

³⁴ Manisha Mashaal, “There Were Times When I Thought It Would Be Better to Die,” Documents of Dalit Discrimination, March 22, 2016, <https://dalitdiscrimination.tumblr.com/post/141498451367/there-were-times-when-i-thought-it-would-be-better>.

³⁵ Dutt, “This Can Also Happen When You’re Dalit,” Documents of Dalit Discrimination, May 23, 2016, <https://dalitdiscrimination.tumblr.com/post/144838449732/this-can-also-happen-when-youre-dalit>.

sharing of experiences by oppressed groups on social media moves beyond the mere sharing of facts to fostering collective critical consciousness.

In his study of emancipatory cultural forms developed by Dalit communities, Badri Narayan asks, “When do questions like ‘who are we?’ become central issues in the political mobilization and emancipatory politics of marginalized communities? How are stories, statues, craft and politics developed around these questions?”³⁶ In this section, I bring some of these questions to my study of social media, arguing that the affirmation of the critical knowledges of marginalized people has been especially potent on social media because of the strong forms of identity assertion found there. Given the exclusive and discriminatory nature of educational institutes in India, the perspectives of people from Bahujan communities have remained marginal. As Dutt wrote in her Facebook note, for people from Bahujan communities, social media holds the potential of being a “safe space” where they can not only assert their identity with pride but also voice critiques of the different institutions that they are part of.³⁷ These assertions of identity on social media can be liberating for people from marginalized communities in a context where they are silenced in different institutional spaces.

The self-assertions of those from marginalized communities are also inseparable from the experiential knowledges they share as part of their engagement with social media. Harad has pointed to the edge that social media conversations have over discussions held in traditional spaces of scholarship. In an interview, he shared that his vantage point as a Bahujan person from a small village and a first-generation graduate shapes how he views both academia and social media spaces:

I don't think social media alone has produced feminist and anticaste discourses, but these discourses become livelier and more urgent on social media. When the discussions around social and political issues happen in academia, they can feel very theoretical and abstract, because people who are carrying out those discussions are well-represented in academia or in other aspects of civil society and power centers. But on social media the same discussions become very real; there is an urgency. People who participate in them are from underrepresented communities, and the issues they discuss often affect them directly.

It is also important to note that these conversations don't remain limited to social media. As Harad stated in his interview, when people from Bahujan

³⁶ Badri Narayan, *Women Heroes and Dalit Assertion in North India: Culture, Identity and Politics* (New Delhi: SAGE Publications India, 2006), 24.

³⁷ Dutt, “Today, I'm Coming Out as Dalit.”

communities interact with scholars and researchers on social media, they enable a “churning” and “transformation” of these spaces. It is for this reason that such social media conversations and engagements are valuable for those who seek to build institutions of education and learning that can serve as spaces of liberation for those of marginalized communities. In such instances, the sharing of experiential knowledges “is never an incorrigible starting point—but is rather a dialectical process of collective articulation by persons who have conflicting social location.”³⁸ Once again, this process highlights the close relationship between critical thought, conversations, and justice.

Dutt’s and Harad’s narratives illustrate how oppressed groups’ use of social media goes beyond being merely descriptive and beyond claiming the evidentiary nature of experience.³⁹ As discussed above, in a context where marginalized groups, including gender minorities and oppressed caste groups, continue to be kept out of traditional spaces of learning and research (such as universities), social media becomes a site where these groups become theorists of their own

lives. As interpreters of their lives who place their personal struggles in the context of larger sociopolitical structures, marginalized groups on social media challenge the divide between the “theoretical brahmins and empirical shudras” that characterize universities in India.⁴⁰ For this reason, it is important to

In a context where marginalized groups, including gender minorities and oppressed caste groups, continue to be kept out of traditional spaces of learning and research (such as universities), social media becomes a site where these groups become theorists of their own lives.

understand the engagement of marginalized groups on social media not merely as an extension of traditional university or activist spaces but also as spaces of theorizing and knowledge creation in their own right.

Self-assertions and the sharing of experiential knowledges on social media also enable the development of critical consciousness and solidarities among marginalized communities. As Kanchana Mahadevan writes, “A woman who articulates her trauma in public overcomes her own alienation from social struc-

³⁸ Kanchana Mahadevan, “Dalit Women’s Experience: Toward a Dalit Feminist Theory,” in *Dalit Feminist Theory*, ed. S. Arya and A. S. Rathore (New Delhi: Routledge India, 2019), 232.

³⁹ Joan W. Scott, “The Evidence of Experience,” *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 4 (1991): 773–97.

⁴⁰ Gopal Guru, “How Egalitarian Are the Social Sciences in India?,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, December 14, 2002, 5003–9.

tures to spell out a critique of her own aspirations. Personal experience opens up other experiences.”⁴¹ The next section demonstrates how the knowledge created and shared as part of feminist and anticaste engagements on social media creates archives not only of individual lives but also of communities and their collective histories. Such engagement challenges the invisibility of marginalized communities from the public sphere and provides recognition to the different bodies of knowledge and critique generated by them.

Digital Archives of Bahujan Lives

The “Documents of Dalit Discrimination” Tumblr page, started by anticaste intellectual and activist Yashica Dutt, contains narratives submitted by Dalit people about individual and collective experiences of discrimination, as well as stories about Dalit people who have questioned and challenged their dehumanization. In being a repository of all these stories, the Tumblr page has become an archive of Dalit lives, oppression, and acts of resistance. In this section, I look at how the engagement of feminist and anticaste intellectuals on social media and activists have challenged dominant knowledges and transformed the conventional understanding of archives.

In an interview, Padmini Ray Murray, who established the first degree-level digital humanities program in India, discussed the significance of archives within the humanities: “Any kind of humanities scholarship is embedded in what the archives offer it. What is studied within the humanities is the archive, that may be literature or sociological texts or other texts. What the digital allows is space for that archive to be enlarged.” The impact of digital technologies on practices of archiving is examined in *The World Humanities Report 2015*, which looks at how the creation of digital editions and the management of metadata using digital technologies enable greater access to archival material and allow for greater ease in conducting research.⁴² The digitization of archives has also enabled researchers to access vast quantities of information in a short period of time. However, as the report states, moving texts from paper to hard disks should not be considered the only work of digital humanities; it is just as critical to ask how digital technologies enable us to ask new questions.⁴³ Taking my cue from this, I explore how feminist and anticaste engagements with social media have enabled us to rethink the notion of archives, including the content of archives

⁴¹ Mahadevan, “Dalit Women’s Experience,” 232.

⁴² Holm, Jarrick, and Scott, *The World Humanities Report*, 75.

⁴³ Holm, Jarrick, and Scott, *The World Humanities Report*, 83.

and the process of creating them. I begin by asking why archives have been of interest to anticast and feminist scholars and activists and by looking at how storytelling and the crafting of alternate narratives has been a significant tool of the anticast movement.

Arguing about the necessity of acknowledging the larger collective struggles of the anticast movement, Chinnaiah Jangam writes, “The debilitating experience of oppressed castes is that the ontological wound can be healed not just by recounting the experience of oppression. Rather, it needs to be coalesced with a positive historical memory of anti-caste traditions which can instill self-confidence in them to fight and assert their right as equals.” Jangam points out that in resisting caste oppression, Dalits work out multiple means through which to “preserve their individual and collective souls”: “While enduring a strangled social existence Dalits subverted dominant ideas and ideologies by weaving soothing alternative narratives of caste as a form of protective layer to withstand Brahmanical onslaughts in the form of folk songs and stories.”⁴⁴ Thus, according to Jangam, the act of telling stories, including the narration of histories of oppression and resistance, constitutes not only an art form for Dalit and Bahujan communities but also the means of their very survival.

Central to the act of healing and telling stories as part of the anticast movement are the acts of self-assertion by Dalit and Bahujan communities whereby they claim the active roles of being the authors of their own histories rather than being passive objects of the archive. In his study of cultural forms developed by Dalit communities, Narayan writes, “Today, the Dalits attempt to transform their position by constructing their own histories by snatching, from the historians, the legitimacy and authority to narrate histories and handing it to Dalit activists and intellectuals. In this process they change their positions from being passive subjects as treated by professional historians to active conscious subjects.” As discussed in the previous section, Brahmanical control in India over institutional spaces, including university classrooms, academic publishing, and mainstream media, has meant the invisibility of Dalit and Bahujan histories from the larger archives of India’s history. Similar to efforts around decolonizing archives, for Dalit and Bahujan communities, addressing the absence of Dalit and Bahujan histories and challenging dominant historiographies require the process of de-Brahmanizing the archive. However, critical to this process of de-Brahmanizing is the possibility of a dynamic archive. As Narayan writes, “There is still a problem in the representation of [Dalits’] own histories. The

⁴⁴ Chinnaiah Jangam, “Politics of Identity and the Project of Writing History in Postcolonial India: A Dalit Critique,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, October 3, 2015, 68, 64.

histories that are circulated through the print media freezes their historical position, makes it static, and then transforms them again into passive and silent subjects. To turn themselves into active subjects of historical representation the Dalits have to continuously deconstruct their earlier positions and write new histories based on their changing aspirations and new social struggles for survival and progress.”⁴⁵

Bahujan activists have identified the possibilities of creating such dynamic archives on social media as illustrated in an article titled “My Name Is Memory,” where feminist and anticaste activist, musician, and filmmaker Thenmozhi Soundararajan writes:

We need to talk about what are the kinds of narratives that will empower us for the future. Rather than wait for the mainstream media to carry our stories, we can bring our stories to the mainstream ourselves. The creation of media in the age of social networks is all about making our process become the product. At every step of our dialogue, we are shaping our history to define our future.... Because by breaking the media silence we have already won. Each word, photo, film is our way forward and our way of saying: Our name is memory and, we, we will survive.⁴⁶

Anticaste engagements on social media have created possibilities for Bahujan people to “write new histories” and represent themselves as active subjects of historical representation. Using social media, Bahujan communities have sought to challenge the Brahmanical representation of Bahujan lives that has so far dominated the archive of their lives and create new archives in its place. Jangam writes that historians from dominant caste groups who seek to write the history of Dalit lives “assume the silent/dead to exist in archives and bring them to life through their research and writing,” creating a divide between the object/subject of the archive. However, such archives are resisted by Dalits, who, “as a recalcitrant subject and object in history [do] not conform to the normative rules of the craft of history writing as Dalits are not the dead past and as subject and object of past and present they ceaselessly break the disciplinary boundaries and remain difficult to comprehend.”⁴⁷ The engagement of Bahujan intellectuals and activists with social media has created archives of their everyday lives, struggles, and protests, challenging the idea that they are the “dead/silent” objects of the archive. These archives of everyday lives and struggles are also dynamic and

⁴⁵ Narayan, *Women Heroes*, 108.

⁴⁶ Thenmozhi Soundararajan, “My Name Is Memory,” Round Table India, October 9, 2011, <https://www.roundtableindia.co.in/my-name-is-memory/>.

⁴⁷ Jangam, “Politics of Identity,” 69.

always in the act of being made, challenging the notion that caste discrimination is a thing of the past.

An example of the “recalcitrant” Dalit subjects and the archives they have created can be seen in the website Round Table India, set up in 2009. One of the most widely read and referenced contemporary resources on caste, Round Table India was born out of the efforts of anticaste activists, many of them belonging to Bahujan communities. Kuffir, one of the founders of the site, writes that the objective was to create “a website where we could resource dalit history and anti caste history, Ambedkar’s writings and philosophy; where we could also get Dalit poetry, women’s poetry, anti caste poetry across religions, Muslims, Buddhist, Christian in whatever form. So, you will find the largest collection of anti caste poetry shared in the blog which is affiliated to

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RTI. We also wanted to be very current and aggregate news related to dalits and adivasis [indigenous tribes of India] from mainstream media. We wanted a section on reservation policy, policies affecting dalits, adivasis and OBCs.”⁴⁸

As Kuffir states, Round Table India is different from a traditional archive in that it is dynamic and frames the history of caste as one that continues to unfold every day. Thus, along with hosting content such as anticaste histories and the writings of anticaste leaders, the platform aggregates contemporary news around caste. It also includes contributions by several writers belonging to Bahujan communities, which makes the platform a very comprehensive resource on caste. This essay cites a number of essays published on Round Table India. Kuffir states that, for him, one of the greatest achievements of the platform is that it has been able to counter “every new epistemic challenge by the ruling class and every form of violence committed at the village, town level or in the universities.”⁴⁹

Another example of an archive created by feminist and anticaste intellectuals and activists is the Dalit History Month project, an initiative set up in 2014 and

⁴⁸ Panthukala Srinivas Kuffir and Prudhvi Raj Duddu, “Round Table India: Interview with Kuffir,” *Broadsheet on Contemporary Politics* 13 (2018), <https://www.anveshi.org.in/broadsheet-on-contemporary-politics/archives/broadsheet-on-contemporary-politics-vol-2-no-1011/round-table-india-interview-with-kuffir/>.

⁴⁹ Kuffir and Duddu, “Round Table India.”

hosted on multiple platforms, including Twitter, Facebook, and a web portal. Many anticaste and feminist intellectuals and activists belonging to Bahujan communities, including Soundarajan, Christina Thomas Dhanaraj, Asha Kowtal, and Sanghapali Aruna, were involved in the creation of the Dalit History Month project. I studied the archives of the Dalit History Month Facebook page and found that in addition to the stories of anticaste leaders such as Ambedkar and Periyar, the page includes stories of contemporary anticaste activists and prominent Dalit and Bahujan individuals in different fields. On April 23, 2017, for instance, the page shared the story of boxer Thulasi Helen, narrating not just her experiences with the sport but also the difficulties that she faces as a Dalit woman, including sexual harassment at the hands of sports officials.⁵⁰ Helen is quoted as saying that upper-caste women do not face such harassment and that it is inevitably Dalit, Bahujan, and adibasi women who are robbed of their value. In this instance, while Helen references the violence that she faces at the hands of upper-caste oppressors, the focus is on naming this oppression rather than presenting Dalit and Bahujan people as abject. In narrating stories such as Helen's, platforms like the Dalit History Month effect an ontological shift, from being premised on Dalits' deaths to affirming their resistance and their will to survive. It is critical to note that platforms such as Dalit History Month make extensive use of images in their narration of Dalit and Bahujan histories.⁵¹

Exploring the salience of visual images on social media, P. Thirumal and Gary Michael Tartakov argue that visual images communicate on a different register compared to text and that they convey verisimilitude and psychological depth to a greater extent than written text: "What happens when Dalit graphic designers and illustrators escape the control of caste-bound editors? They are able to show and share imagery that the caste-based media has shunned. They are able to share imagery with each other like the archives of Ambedkar's history and pictures of Dalit history and daily life to which they have had little or no access previously. And they are able to share imagery of their current struggles with those outside the community who would otherwise be less able to understand their experience."⁵²

⁵⁰ Dalit History Month, "Thulasi Helen 'The Lady Muhammad Ali,'" Facebook post, April 24, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/dalithistorymonth/photos/a.779060925510757/1290141904402654>.

⁵¹ Dalit History Month, "Madhu Bai Kinnar," Facebook post, April 3, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/dalithistorymonth/photos/958771584206356>; and "Ginni Mahi," Facebook post, April 10, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/dalithistorymonth/photos/1273715116045333>.

⁵² P. Thirumal and Gary Michael Tartakov, "India's Dalits Search for a Democratic Opening in the Digital Divide," in *International Exploration of Technology Equity and the Digital Divide: Critical, Historical and Social Perspectives*, ed. Patricia Randolph Leigh (New York: IGI Global, 2010), 20–39, 31.

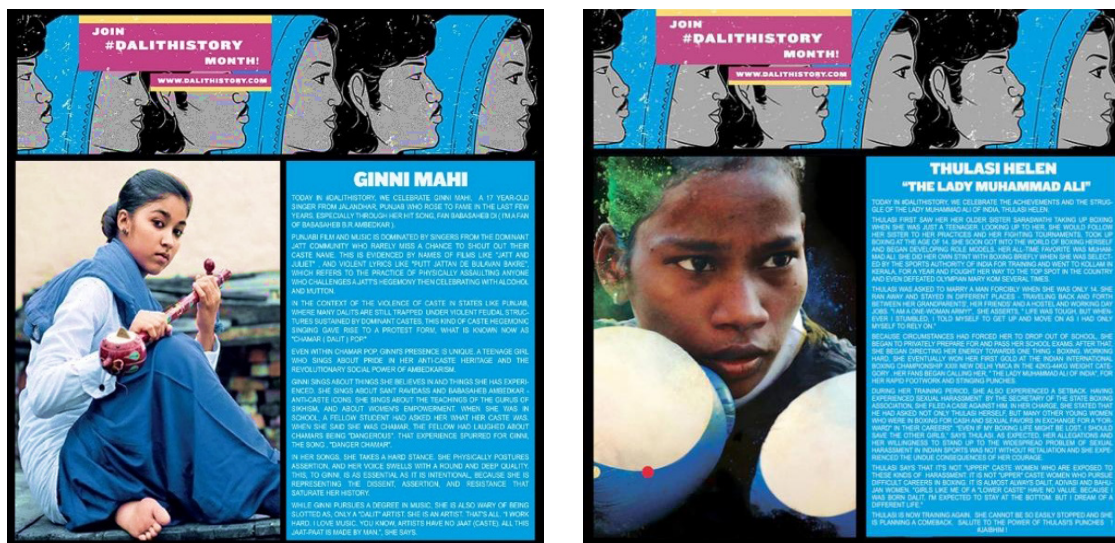


Figure 2. Profiles of Ginni Mahi (left) and Thulasi Helen (right) shared on the Dalit History Month Facebook page, April 10, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/dalithistorymonth/photos/1273715116045333>, and April 24, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/dalithistorymonth/photos/1290141904402654>.

The engagement of Dalit and Bahujan intellectuals and activists with digital technology and social media has provided alternative ways of visualizing Dalit and Bahujan lives, alternatives that are not premised on the objectification and dehumanization of their bodies. It was a similar imperative of creating alternative knowledges around Dalit and Bahujan lives that prompted feminist and anticast activist Jyotsna Siddharth to start the Dalit Feminism Archive on Instagram in 2019.⁵³ Explaining the content and the objective behind the archive, Siddharth stated in an interview with me:

One of the projects at the Dalit Feminism Archive is trying to document aesthetics and what does aesthetics mean for women from the margins and what is the relationship of caste with aesthetics. Whatever is being written or done around aesthetics is essentially by upper caste people, whether it is in the art space or it is in academia or literature. And what has happened is that the aesthetics of women from the marginalized groups are constantly fetishized and looked at a certain way as if women from the margins only look a certain kind. And that for me is really problematic, because it is again reinforcing Brahmanical notions of what beauty means, what desire means, what a desirable body looks like. Dalit Feminism Archive is moving along a path where it tries to highlight the stories and narratives of women from all these marginalized backgrounds.⁵⁴

⁵³ Jyotsna Siddharth, Dalit Feminism Archive, Instagram profile, accessed November 21, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/dalitfeminismarchive/?hl=en>.

⁵⁴ Jyotsna Siddharth, telephone interview with the author, April 22, 2020.

As part of this project, Siddharth put out a call for submissions from women and gender and sexual minorities from Dalit, adibasi, and other backward communities, asking them to post their photos on Instagram with the hashtag #AestheticsFromTheMargins. These stories were then featured on the Dalit Feminism Archive Instagram account. Another archival project started by Siddharth on Instagram is the Project Anti Caste Love, done with the objective of documenting how social identities play out in the intimate sphere.⁵⁵ As part of the project, users can submit stories and narratives of intercaste, interfaith relationships, which are then featured on the Instagram account of Project Anti Caste Love. One of the initiatives that Siddharth started under Project Anti Caste Love was the Love Letter Series, where she asked users to submit love letters. The pictures of several of these handwritten letters were then shared on the Instagram account of Project Anti Caste Love. In one of these letters, the writer details the struggles of marrying as an intercaste couple, describing not only the ostracism they faced from their families but also the community they found among their friends. Another letter, written by a person in an intercaste, interreligious relationship, evocatively states that relationships should be based on love and not governed by structures of gender, sexuality, religion, and caste. Siddharth states that the objective behind starting Project Anti Caste Love is precisely to highlight these structures of power and control and initiate conversations around the politics of our intimate relationships.⁵⁶

Siddharth makes use of crowdsourcing in both her projects, which enables a broad examination of the various power dynamics at work in intimate relationships, allowing for intersectional perspectives on the same to be created. Crowdsourcing as a method means that the histories of communities and their struggles are being written collectively. Studying digital archives, Ekaterina Haskins writes, “The internet levels the traditional hierarchy of author-text-audience, thereby distributing authorial agency among various institutions and individuals involved in the production of content and preventing any one agent from imposing narrative and ideological closure upon the data.”⁵⁷ Haskins reads the collective authorship and interactivity enabled by social media as democratizing the archive. The possibility of collective authorship that disrupts the authority of single authors or archivists makes social media a potent site for

⁵⁵ Jyotsna Siddharth, Project Anti Caste Love, Instagram profile, accessed November 21, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/projectanticastelove/>.

⁵⁶ Siddharth, interview.

⁵⁷ Ekaterina Haskins, “Between Archive and Participation: Public Memory in a Digital Age,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (2007): 406.

Bahujan and other marginalized communities to create and share their collective histories. Round Table India and Dalit History Month projects too are sustained by community efforts. About Round Table India, Kuffir writes, “We have built this space together. It should be sustained, and it depends totally on the community which has been involved. It is a communal home. Everyone has contributed to it brick by brick.”⁵⁸ Stating that it is critical that the community expands and Bahujan civil society grows, he writes, “We are expanding into publishing so that we don’t remain mere clients to upper class publishers and media. We could develop knowledge and research completely independent of mediation of brahmanic institutions like academia or media just like BAMCEF and Ambedkar’s discourse are constructed.”⁵⁹ In addition to the diversity of perspectives that crowdsourcing and collective authorship make possible, what happens in the process of building such archives is the forging of intimacies and the formation of communities. In an interview with me, Siddharth stated that a reason behind her starting these crowdsourced projects was the desire to connect with other women, especially those of Bahujan communities such as hers.⁶⁰ In this regard, Siddharth said that online spaces allowed her to meet and learn from people interested in the same political objectives as hers. In the next section, I carry forward some of the themes discussed in this analysis of Siddharth’s work with archives—those of intimacy, community, and politics—and look at how feminist and queer engagements with social media produce new understandings of intimacy and politics.

Intimacies, Communities, and Justice on Social Media

Tejas Harad writes that social media has played a critical role in shaping political identities, arguing that collective identities are activated during political incidents that affect Bahujan communities.⁶¹ An instance of the formation of such collective identities and communities is also seen in Yashica Dutt’s Facebook and Tumblr notes written in the aftermath of Rohith Vemula’s death and in the communities of contributors to the archival projects discussed above. In her notes, Dutt writes that Dalit people realizing that they are “not alone”

⁵⁸ Kuffir and Duddu, “Round Table India.”

⁵⁹ Kuffir and Duddu, “Round Table India.” BAMCEF refers to the All India Backward and Minority Communities Employees Federation, an organization established in 1971 by Dalit leader Kanshi Ram and others to represent the interests of employees from the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes, and minority communities.

⁶⁰ Siddharth, interview.

⁶¹ Harad, “Towards an Internet of Equals.”

and then reaching out to each other are what make social media a “safe space” where identity assertion and the voicing of critiques are possible.⁶² Siddharth too emphasizes this aspect of connecting with others in her community and collaboratively working on anticaste and feminist interventions on social media. In this section, I explore the activism enabled by the formation of such communities and the forging of intimacies between people on social media. I also examine how these communities seek to create counternarratives around experiences of gender and sexuality.

Exploring the relationship between intimacy, collectives, and politics, Lauren Berlant has offered the concept of “intimate publics” to think about the “affective registers of collective life that keep people loosely knotted together (attached to themselves and to the social) while the ground is shifting.” Berlant states that in moments of crisis, “intimate publics often redirect their attention to transforming the terms of the political, converting their collective insider knowledge about injustice to political labor–power in struggle against the dominant terms.”⁶³ Social media is an especially productive site for studying the imbrications of intimacy and politics. Defining intimacy as involving “shared emotions, experiences and/or affective bodily proximities,” Petersen and others write that “social media is inherently designed to emphasise and facilitate intimate practices and connections—the nature of which affect the form and content of the media through which these practices are formed. Both the architecture of online spaces and the etiquette of behaving within these spaces tend to favour the dense proliferation of intimacies with others.”⁶⁴ They write that while traditionally, intimacies have been associated with physical proximity and have involved practices of close association and familiarity, in some situations, distance and anonymity create the conditions for online practices of intimacy. In this section, I explore queer and feminist engagements with social media to study how intimacies forged and expressed on social media enable shifts in dominant understandings of gender and sexuality. I begin by studying the #MeToo movement, which was started by feminist activists in response to the sexual violence faced by women and gender minorities.

The #MeToo movement, which originated in the United States with the activist Tarana Burke in 2007, seeks to highlight the pervasiveness of sexual violence in everyday life, with survivors sharing accounts of the violence they have faced and naming the perpetrators. In 2017, following allegations of sexual

⁶² Dutt, “This Can Also Happen.”

⁶³ Lauren Berlant and Jay Prosser, “Life Writing and Intimate Publics: A Conversation with Lauren Berlant,” *Biography* 34, no. 1 (2011): 183, 184.

⁶⁴ Petersen et al., *Mediated Intimacies*, 3, 1.

violence being made against Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein, the movement spread on social media, with survivors across the globe sharing their accounts with the hashtag #MeToo. In October 2017 India saw what is considered to be the first wave of the #MeToo movement when Raya Sarkar, a law student, compiled the List of Sexual Harassers in Academia, or #LoSHA. In an interview, Sarkar stated that while the names of the survivors were kept anonymous, the list was based mostly on first-person accounts.⁶⁵ Sarkar's list laid the groundwork for the second wave of the #MeToo movement in India, beginning in September 2018. During this time, using the hashtag #MeToo on different social media websites, women shared accounts of being sexually harassed in various professional spaces and institutions, including those of entertainment, news, media, and education. Journalist Rituparna Chatterjee started an account on Twitter called IndiaMeToo, where she compiled and shared accounts of survivors.⁶⁶

What made #MeToo a movement rather than a mere collection of accounts was the sense of a collective that emerged in the process—a collective of survivors of sexual violence and of allies who listened to the accounts of sexual violence, validated these accounts, and recognized the harm that the survivors had faced. Scholars Kaitlynn Mendes, Jessica Ringrose, and Rachel Loney-Howes argue that the #MeToo movement must be located in the context of the consciousness-raising and public speak-outs that emerged as part of the radical feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s, when, through collective sharing of personal experiences, women were able to highlight the systemic nature of their oppression.⁶⁷ Mendes and Ringrose write, “Although women have been speaking out against sexual violence for decades ... the difference with #MeToo as a networked movement across continents isn't that the silence has finally been broken, but due to perhaps volume and mass of response, the wider public are beginning to listen and take seriously what (some) victims are saying.... The potential of having experience recognized by others using the hashtag was particularly important for some participants, given the shame, stigma, and disbelief levelled toward those who disclose experiences of sexual violence.”⁶⁸

⁶⁵ K. Shankar and Raya Sarkar, “Why I Published a List of Sexual Predators in Academia,” *BuzzFeed News*, November 15, 2017, <https://www.buzzfeed.com/karthikshankar/why-i-published-a-list-of-sexual-predators-in-academia>.

⁶⁶ Rituparna Chatterjee, “#MeTooIndia,” Twitter profile, accessed November 19, 2021, <https://twitter.com/IndiaMeToo?s=20>.

⁶⁷ Mendes and Ringrose, “Digital Feminist Activism”; Rachel Loney-Howes, “The Politics of the Personal: The Evolution of Anti-rape Activism from Second-Wave Feminism to #MeToo,” in Fileborn and Loney-Howes, *#MeToo and the Politics of Social Change*, 21–35.

⁶⁸ Mendes and Ringrose, “Digital Feminist Activism,” 41.

Like Dutt's Tumblr page, which sought to act as a safe space for Dalit people, the aspect of solidarity and care that the survivors expressed toward each other as part of the #MeToo movement was central to enabling them to share their accounts, which meant that their voices could be validated and amplified in the form of retweets and shares. Social media in the #MeToo movement made possible not just a proliferation of survivor accounts but also expressions of intimacy and care between unfamiliar people who might even remain anonymous. According to Mendes and Ringrose, the aspect of coming together as part of #MeToo "was not simply about individual empowerment but was done because of the recognition that 'nothing will change until we act collectively.'... [M]any articulated how adding their voice to #MeToo was about more than simply sharing an individual experience, but about simultaneously building a political analysis of structural violence and wider communities of care."⁶⁹ The care and intimacy that survivors and allies expressed also made the movement into something more than just one of retributive justice. For instance, Sarkar stated that LoSHA was not created with institutional action in mind but was published to warn students and save them from being harassed.⁷⁰ Mendes and Ringrose read these expressions of support and solidarity as creating "affective counter-publics" that are "forged through feelings of intimacy such as personal sharing, meaningful resonance with others," going against dominant social norms, and "forming new languages, vocabularies, and communicative modes or vernaculars of engagement and resistance."⁷¹ The narratives that women and gender minorities shared as part of #MeToo have "the power to testify, to warn, and, perhaps most importantly, to change the world as we know it."⁷² What the #MeToo movement seeks to create is an atmosphere where women's accounts of sexual violence can be heard and validated in resistance to a culture where women are either disbelieved or blamed for the violence they face. These accounts of women then become critical bodies of knowledge that illuminate the power hierarchies upheld by dominant notions of gender and sexuality.

While the #MeToo movement activated communities and intimacies that drew attention to experiences of sexual violence, queer engagements on social media also enable us to rethink definitions and ideas of intimacy, including those of romance and sex. Citing anthropologist Shaka McGlotten, Amy Dobson, Nicholas Carah, and Brady Robards write that "social concerns and 'technopho-

⁶⁹ Mendes and Ringrose, "Digital Feminist Activism," 40–41.

⁷⁰ Shankar and Sarkar, "Why I Published."

⁷¹ Mendes and Ringrose, "Digital Feminist Activism," 39.

⁷² Mary Anne Franks, "A Thousand and One Stories: Myth and the #MeToo Movement," in Fileborn and Loney-Howes, *#MeToo and the Politics of Social Change*, 95.

bic panics' about the impact of new technologies on our lives have always turned on questions of intimacy."⁷³ Some of these concerns arise from the assumption that intimacy is that which is private and personal; thus, any manifestation of intimacy on public platforms is a corruption of the same. Such panics around the corruption of intimacy are perhaps best seen in the reactions to some of the content shared on the social media application TikTok.

TikTok is a social media application designed for sharing short videos that often depict people dancing and lip-synching. In 2019 a petition filed in the Madras High Court in India asked the court to ban TikTok, stating that the application "was containing degrading culture and encouraging pornography besides containing explicit disturbing content and causing social stigma and medical health issue between teens.... Majority of the teens are playing pranks, gaffing around with duet videos and sharing with split screen to the strangers."⁷⁴ The petition very clearly highlights the widespread anxieties around social media that can be used to express intimacy on public platforms, describing such displays of intimacy as being "explicit" and against "culture." What exactly is the culture that is under threat by the content created and shared on TikTok?

In an interview, Dnyaneshwar Surwase, a graduate student in women's studies, described to me the transgressive potential of TikTok and stated that the spaces and knowledges created by TikTok users challenge casteist and patriarchal constructions of Indian culture, including those that privilege heterosexuality, monogamy, and conjugality: "Such transgressions in online spaces serve to strengthen the expressions of sexuality and desire by critiquing the oppressive and exclusionary ideas of Indian culture." What is exceptional about TikTok as compared to other social media is the number of users who have used the platform to create content around queer sexualities. TikTok has been called "the flagbearer of queer narratives," and content creators on TikTok have been lauded for "not just entertaining at large, but also normalising LGBTQIA+ on ground level."⁷⁵ A whole genre within TikTok videos are those where content creators use Bollywood songs to depict queer themes, including same-sex romances and

⁷³ Amy Shields Dobson, Nicholas Carah, and Brady Robards, "Digital Intimate Publics and Social Media: Towards Theorising Public Lives on Private Platforms," in *Digital Intimate Publics and Social Media*, ed. Amy Shields Dobson, Brady Robards, and Nicholas Carah (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 4.

⁷⁴ P. Gill, "An Indian Court Has Banned Tiktok for 'Encouraging Pornography,'" *Business Insider India*, April 5, 2019, <https://www.businessinsider.in/tiktok-ban-in-india-for-hosting-porn/articleshow/68720430.cms>.

⁷⁵ For example, see "How TikTok Users Are Using Bollywood to Say 'It's Okay to Be Gay,'" *Free Press Journal*, February 20, 2020, <https://www.freepressjournal.in/viral/how-tiktok-users-are-using-bollywood-to-say-its-okay-to-be-gay>.

drag performances. Calling TikTok “one of the most accessible platforms in India today,” journalist Kairvy Grewal writes that this genre of TikTok videos is especially subversive because it takes songs from an industry that is homophobic and regressive and turns it on its head to show queer themes.⁷⁶ Surwase also affirmed the “normalizing” of queer content on TikTok, stating that the people creating this content were not professional actors but users of the app from small towns in India. In creating videos that showed acts of intimacy such as kissing, cuddling, and dancing as part of everyday life, such users question queerness as being exceptional or spectacular, thus challenging heteronormativity. As *Gaylaxy* magazine observes about such videos, “Apart from entertaining their followers, they are also educating them on gender and sexuality issues, normalising the conversation around queer issues, or breaking gender stereotypes.”⁷⁷

The representation of queer sexualities on TikTok is also made possible by the sense of acceptance, solidarity, and intimacy between content creators and users. As *Gaylaxy* magazine states, “It’s amazing how many gay couples are open about their relationship status on TikTok. Maybe it is the accepting nature of the users of TikTok that encourages them to be so.”⁷⁸ The petition to ban TikTok highlights that what is considered threatening is not just the representation of queer sexualities but also the possibility of forging transgressive intimacies. In commenting on teens who are “play[ing] pranks” on each other, “gaffing [*sic*] around with duet videos,” and “sharing with split screen to the strangers [*sic*],” the petition pointed to the connections that the participatory acts of creating and viewing such content might enable.⁷⁹ While the content and comments on TikTok are public, the solidarity and “the accepting nature of the users of TikTok” allow users to see it as a safe space for the articulation of their desires.

Rohit Dasgupta reaches a similar conclusion in his study of queer men who use the virtual platform PlanetRomeo. Dasgupta writes that for a number of users, “their social backgrounds close their access to a private space. Thus, their articulation of being queer and forming intimate attachments is only made possible through a space such as PlanetRomeo. Despite the very public nature of the forums that they unhesitatingly participate in, they still feel protected. There is a conscious understanding that the other users of these forums are also

⁷⁶ Kairvy Grewal, “Om Shanti Om to Helen: TikTok Users Are Taking ‘Man-Woman’ Bollywood Songs & Going Queer,” *The Print*, February 20, 2020, <https://theprint.in/opinion/pov/om-shanti-om-to-helen-tik-tok-users-are-taking-bollywood-songs-going-queer/368289/>.

⁷⁷ “Queer Desi TikTok Accounts You Must Follow,” *Gaylaxy* (online magazine), June 19, 2020, <http://www.gaylaxymag.com/exclusive/queer-desi-tiktok-accounts-you-must-follow/#gs.btutd1>.

⁷⁸ “Queer Desi TikTok Accounts.”

⁷⁹ Gill, “An Indian Court.”

‘like them.’”⁸⁰ As in the #MeToo movement, it is the creation of a collective and of the safe space brought into being by this collective that allows users to share their experiences of gender and sexuality on social media. In the case of TikTok, this collective is of queer people and allies. These collectives create spaces for further expressions of intimacy in a way that queer desires proliferate on social media spaces. In no longer remaining exceptional or even private, such expressions of queer desire challenge heteronormativity and create intimacies that heal the ontological wound that heteronormative societies inflict.

Conclusion: Social Media as an Imperfect Site of Politics

In this essay I have looked at the potential of social media in generating critical knowledges that challenge power hierarchies by studying various feminist and anticaste engagements. I have looked at the form and content of the bodies of knowledge produced by such engagements and the processes of creating them. I have argued that central to the process of creating such critical bodies of knowledge are individual and collective self-assertions by those most affected by oppressive power structures, including women, gender and sexual minorities, and Dalit and Bahujan people. The self-assertions of those from marginalized communities are made possible by the forging of solidarities and intimacies on social media platforms and the facilitating of connections and collectives among those who share common political goals. The creation of such collective and safe spaces holds the possibility of healing the ontological wound inflicted by the violence of hierarchies of gender, sexuality, caste, and class, “wounds and injuries that may limit or constrain one’s existence as an agential subject in the world.”⁸¹ Such spaces enable critical reflection on the many injustices faced by marginalized communities, but these spaces also create contexts in which marginalized communities can collectively imagine alternatives where they are no longer victims of violence but are political actors.

While I have written this essay in the spirit of identifying possibilities, I want to add that the processes of individual and collective self-assertion on social media are not without their tensions. As discussed in the last section on TikTok, public institutions (such as courts of law) frame intimacy as belonging to the

⁸⁰ Rohit Dasgupta, *Digital Queer Cultures in India: Politics, Intimacies and Belonging* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), 52.

⁸¹ Sonia Abigail Sánchez Carmen, Michael Domínguez, Andrew Cory Greene, Elizabeth Mendoza, Michelle Fine, Helen A. Neville, and Kris D. Gutiérrez, “Revisiting the Collective in Critical Consciousness: Diverse Sociopolitical Wisdoms and Ontological Healing in Sociopolitical Development,” *Urban Review* 47, no. 5 (2015): 829.

realm of the private. Simultaneously, these institutions also regulate and govern intimacies, legitimizing only certain expressions of desire and kinship. However, it is not just public institutions that regulate expressions of self-assertion by people of marginalized communities and their efforts to forge intimacies on social media. Despite attempts at building safe spaces, self-assertions by those belonging to marginalized identity groups are often met with violence in online spaces. This was highlighted by feminist writer and researcher Dyuti Sudipta, who shared in her interview with me the threats and abusive language she faced from cis-heterosexual men when she described her experiences of intimate partner violence on social media. As I have found in previous research, such acts of violence can be deeply traumatizing and often lead to women deactivating their social media accounts.⁸²

The other issue at stake when studying engagements of marginalized communities on social media is that of the digital divide. Despite initiatives that encourage collective assertions of identities, differences in social locations, even among those who belong to the same gender or caste or sexuality, continue to dictate who can engage with such initiatives. It is here that an intersectional exploration of how caste, class, gender, and sexual identities together shape social media engagements becomes critical. A report titled *The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2020*, published by the Global System for Mobile Communications Association (GSM or GSMA), states that only 51 percent of women in South Asia use mobile internet and cites “literacy and skills” and “family does not approve” as among the key reasons behind the low levels of mobile ownership and internet use among women.⁸³ Similarly, Arvind Kumar Thakur cites poverty and illiteracy as reasons behind the digital divide that disadvantages Dalit communities.⁸⁴ What happens to bodies of knowledge when the people possessing them are illiterate? How do current engagements on social media privilege certain literacies and languages over others?

The digital divide has profound implications not only for who can participate on social media but also for the activist interventions themselves. For instance, while the #MeToo movement is intended to highlight the experiences of all women and gender and sexual minorities, the voices of Dalit women, trans people, and nonbinary people have remained marginal. Similarly, as Dasgupta demonstrates, even within queer communities in online spaces, inequalities of caste, class, and religion make their presence felt in how expressions of desire and

⁸² Subramanian, “From the Streets.”

⁸³ Oliver Rowntree, *The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2020* (London: GSMA, 2020).

⁸⁴ Arvind Kumar Thakur, “New Media and the Dalit Counter-Public Sphere,” *Television and New Media* 21, no. 4 (2019): 360–75.

intimacy are directed only toward people of certain social locations, excluding working-class men. As Zizi Papacharissi states, in the absence of digital technologies being affordable and accessible by everyone, electronic public spheres remain exclusive and elitist.⁸⁵ The inaccessibility of social media is not merely a question of the representation of diverse voices. Instead, this inaccessibility has profound implications for the idea of justice that the activist interventions I study are geared toward. Can movements fully achieve justice if they exclude those who are at the margins of even marginalized communities?

Anant Kamath argues that the digital divide must not be understood as merely the lack of ownership of digital infrastructure. He states that many Dalit individuals in India “may possess a smartphone but lack the effective participation in the digital revolution either as creators of technological products and services or as customers who are beneficial for information feedback to the producers. Instead, they are simply passive marginalized consumers of digital technologies.”⁸⁶ This was reiterated by Sudipta, who stated that members of Bahujan communities continue to be underemployed as engineers, app developers, coders, and policy makers in social media companies, and this must change to ensure effective participation on social media across castes.

These critiques on the limited accessibility of digital technology to marginalized groups, including to women and Bahujan, are relevant to how we imagine their potential. Given a context where marginalized communities in India continue to have limited accessibility to digital technologies and face backlash when they do engage, this essay does not seek to uncritically posit that social media is the perfect tool for activism. Rather, it shows that in the context of the power hierarchies that structure existing institutions, many people, especially those from marginalized communities, have turned to social media. These individuals and communities have created critical bodies of knowledge that ask for a reexamination and reconstruction of those institutions. This is especially critical in contexts where universities and other institutions of knowledge creation also uphold hierarchies of race, class, caste, ability, gender, and sexual identity and where those from marginalized communities are often the objects of inquiry but rarely the creators of knowledge.

My objective here has been an exploration of the visions of justice that feminist and anticaste engagements on social media have produced. I have also highlighted the critical need for an expansive notion of what constitutes humanities

⁸⁵ Zizi Papacharissi, “The Virtual Sphere: The Internet as a Public Sphere,” *New Media and Society* 4, no. 1 (2002): 9–27.

⁸⁶ Anant Kamath, “‘Untouchable’ Cellphones? Old Caste Exclusions and New Digital Divides in Peri-urban Bangalore,” *Critical Asian Studies* 50, no. 3 (2018): 375–94, 396.

research not just in India but across the world and the need to decenter universities as the only legitimate sites of critical knowledge production. Studying the engagement of marginalized communities with social media enables us to recognize how critical thought generated by these communities transforms into radical action in the presence of communities of solidarity and how empathy and intimacy are central to such acts of activism and to the bodies of critical thought thus produced. If humanities research is indeed “about values, the meaning of existence, and of our life,” then to not recognize social media as a site of the humanities is to miss out on understanding the many possible worlds that are being built every day on these sites.⁸⁷ While the realization of such visions of justice remains incomplete on social media, what remains valuable are the blueprints that such engagements have created of what is possible and what we might work toward when creating spaces for the generation and dissemination of critical thought.

⁸⁷ Holm, Jarrick, and Scott, *The World Humanities Report*, 35.

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