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WHITE BLACK LEGAL is an open access, peer-reviewed and refereed journal providededicated to express views on topical legal issues, thereby generating a cross current of ideas on emerging matters. This platform shall also ignite the initiative and desire of young law students to contribute in the field of law. The erudite response of legal luminaries shall be solicited to enable readers to explore challenges that lie before law makers, lawyers and the society at large, in the event of the ever changing social, economic and technological scenario.

With this thought, we hereby present to you

# **"BREAKING THE CHAINS OF SILENCE: DALITS' STRUGGLE FOR FREEDOM OF SPEECH AND EXPRESSION IN THE DIGITAL ERA"**

AUTHORED BY - METTUPALLI LAKSHMI NAINA REDDY

Freedom of speech and expression is a fundamental right that is enshrined in the Indian Constitution under Article 19(1) (a), all citizens shall have the right to freedom of speech and expression. The philosophy behind this Article lies in the Preamble of the Constitution, where a solemn resolve is made to secure to all its citizens, liberty of thought and expression. It is a crucial component of democracy and allows individuals to express their opinions, ideas, and beliefs without fear of retribution. However, the digital era has brought about a whole new set of challenges for individuals who wish to exercise their freedom of speech and expression, particularly for marginalized communities such as Dalits. The Dalits, a historically marginalized group in India, have fought for their freedom of expression for a very long time. Years of dominant narratives perpetuated by the higher castes have silenced their voices and stifled their stories. However, the digital age has given the Dalits a new platform to break the bonds of silence and tell their tales to the world. Social media has become a powerful tool for Dalits to speak out against caste-based discrimination and violence. Similarly, an article in the Hindu times highlights the role of digital media in creating new forms of representation for Dalits. The digital age has enabled Dalits to reclaim their narratives and contest the hegemonic representations that have historically served to maintain their oppression. Nonetheless, the advent of the digital age has presented a unique array of difficulties, such as online hate speech and the digital divide. Therefore, it is critical to weigh the advantages and disadvantages of the digital age for Dalits and consider whether this disadvantaged group now has true freedom of speech and expression. With the rise of the digital era, many Dalits have found a platform to express themselves and share their experiences with the world. This expanded ability to speak one's mind has, however, given rise to some novel difficulties.

One of the primary challenges faced by Dalits in the digital era is online hate speech and abuse. Dalit activists and social media users are often subjected to online abuse, trolling, and harassment. They

are targeted for their caste identity and their efforts to challenge the dominant narrative. This not only affects their mental health and well-being but also hampers their ability to freely express themselves. Another challenge faced by Dalits is the censorship of their voices. Many social media platforms have been criticized for their lack of transparency and consistency in enforcing their content policies. This has led to the arbitrary removal of content and accounts, particularly those belonging to Dalit activists and individuals who are critical of the government. This undermines the very concept of freedom of speech and expression. Furthermore, the digital divide and lack of access to the internet and technology have resulted in the exclusion of many Dalits from the online sphere. This has led to a digital divide where only a select few have the privilege of accessing and utilizing online space to exercise their freedom of speech and expression. The proliferation of social media has had limited impact on the Dalit community, with a significant proportion of its members remaining unaffected by this phenomenon. Presently, a significant proportion of Dalits, approximately 75%, continue to inhabit rural areas of India. Furthermore, a considerable number of those who reside in urban areas are unable to access the internet. Dalits who possess digital empowerment are inclined to reside in urban areas and exhibit a relatively elevated socioeconomic standing. The potential alleviation of these limitations is expected with the increased accessibility of affordable smartphones.

Despite these challenges, the digital era has also opened up new avenues for Dalits to express themselves and challenge the dominant narrative. Social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube have enabled them to share their experiences and amplify their voices. Dalit bloggers and online publications such as Round Table India, Dalit Camera, and Savari have also emerged as important sources of information and analysis.

In 2016, Rohith Vemula, a Ph.D. student of Dalit origin at the University of Hyderabad (UoH) in Telangana, India, tragically took his own life after experiencing incidents of caste-based discrimination while on campus. The aforementioned incident ignited a broad discourse, leading to the mobilization of young individuals by activists and Dalit online platforms, including Round Table India and "social media journalists." Over the following months, Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) located in New Delhi, Osmania University, University of Hyderabad (UoH), English and Foreign Languages University situated in Hyderabad, Allahabad University located in Uttar Pradesh, and Jadavpur University situated in West Bengal, orchestrated grassroots movements to combat



discrimination and rallied students and other support groups. The protest in question was notable for its utilization of novel media tactics and incorporation of social media as a means of coordination. Specifically, the Twitter hashtag - DalitLivesMatter was employed, taking inspiration from the "#blacklivesmatter" movement in the United States. Millennial members of the Dalit community, along with their progressive supporters, have effectively channeled their frustration by initiating discourse surrounding the #DalitLivesMatter movement. The mobilization of social media has resulted in a proliferation of viewpoints and individualistic expression. The online debates within this expansive Dalit forum are facilitating the development of arguments and theories among Dalits, which aid in comprehending how to navigate the caste system and the injustices present within Indian society. It can help the Dalits to challenge the status quo and demand justice for the discrimination and oppression they face. It can empower the Dalits to hold the government accountable for its policies toward marginalized communities. It is also important to recognize the power of the digital era in facilitating social and political change. Dalits are no longer silent and are challenging existing power structures. The internet and social media have provided a platform for their voices to be heard, and this has led to greater awareness and action. It is important to continue to support and amplify these voices. Digital media has the potential to provide access not only to goods and services but also to basic rights. This can be demonstrated through several examples, highlighting the benefits of digital inclusion and reinforcing this point. The CGNetSwara project, which is based in Bhopal, provides a voice portal for citizen journalists to report or listen to news briefs about Chhattisgarh. This is accomplished through the use of mobile phones, with the option to communicate in Hindi and Gondi languages. (a language spoken in the central Gondwana region of India, which comprises the central tribal region stretching from the Adivasi areas of Gujarat to West Bengal). An interview with Pitbasu Bhoi from Ambikapur was posted by a citizen journalist on 8 January 2011. Bhoi had reportedly worked for 100 days under MGNREGA but had not received his wages. After a span of seven days, an additional citizen journalist encountered Bhoi and ascertained that his offspring had passed away as a result of the failure to receive remuneration. Following coverage by Swara, two prominent national newspapers, namely the Times of India and The Hindu, pursued the story and subsequently on 20th January 2011, Bhoi received his remuneration. Digital interventions such as CGNetSwara have the potential to overcome conventional socioeconomic communication barriers by offering intangible benefits such as information, knowledge, and ideas, as well as by empowering marginalized communities to create and improve livelihood opportunities. By allowing Dalits and unprivileged

communities to highlight issues and crimes, this social-media activity is also forcing mainstream media to pay attention to some of them. Budaun Rape Case – Social Media’s Impact played a vital role, it was a rape case of two minor girls this complaint was not registered by cops. But the news spread like wildfire and was soon on social media. It went viral. Soon enough, every media house was there presenting live reports. The government had to sit up and take notice. The cops were suspended. CBI (Central Bureau of Investigation), India’s highest investigating police agency, was asked to [investigate](#).

A potential counterargument to the assertion that Dalits lack freedom of speech and expression is that the internet already serves as a platform for them to voice their opinions.

Although the Indian Constitution provides all citizens, including Dalits, with the right to freedom of speech and expression, the actual situation on the ground presents a contrasting picture. Dalits are subject to pervasive discrimination, violence, and oppression that impede their capacity to exercise freedom of expression and voice their opinions. This holds particularly true in rural regions where individuals belonging to the Dalit community encounter significant levels of social and economic marginalization. Furthermore, although the internet may serve as a medium for self-expression, it presents a distinct set of obstacles, such as instances of cyberbullying and discriminatory language aimed at individuals belonging to the Dalit community as mentioned above in the paper. For instance, Instagram Reels seems to have an algorithm that prefers particular Savarna aesthetics. Savarna means people who fall within the caste system: in the four main castes of Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra. There isn’t any Dalit account that features on ‘top- influencer’ lists. This doesn’t mean that Dalits are not creating great content on Instagram. There is a strong underground culture where many Dalit accounts are trying to express themselves by making use of modern digital vocabulary. The quote by playwright Bertolt Brecht: “In the dark times there will be singing and dancing... but only by Savarnas.” The notion that dance and music are artistic expressions traditionally associated with lower castes, but have been co-opted and modernized by the upper castes to obscure the ongoing challenges of India's rigid caste system, is a compelling observation. The continued relevance and necessity of the struggle for freedom of speech and expression in the digital age for the Dalit community are evident.

In conclusion, the Dalits' struggle for freedom of speech and expression in the digital era is a double-edged sword. It has brought about new challenges as well as new possibilities for expression and mobilization. The issues of online hate speech, censorship, and the digital divide must be addressed to ensure that marginalized communities such as Dalits have equal access to the online space. The spread of hate speech and misinformation about the Dalits in the digital space raises questions about the quality and accuracy of the information available online. It is important to recognize the benefits and challenges of the digital era for the Dalits and to work towards creating a more democratic and inclusive digital space. The government and social media platforms must take proactive steps to ensure that the freedom of speech and expression of all individuals, including Dalits, are protected and respected. A significant problem that requires attention is the increase in online slurs and trolling. It is essential to hold perpetrators accountable and create safe spaces for Dalits to speak out. As per an article published by The Print, a nationwide demonstration by the Dalit community ensued in response to the Supreme Court's dilution of the Prevention of Atrocities Act. The protests were organized in under a fortnight and were not centrally led, but rather facilitated by Dalit networks on social media platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook. The youth of the Dalit community are able to engage with one another in new ways thanks to the internet. Once confined to small metropolitan centers, protests can now spread rapidly to many other locations. What impact, if any, has social media had on Dalit politics? I contend that despite its revolutionary impacts, Dalit politics has had a negligible impact on the internet so far. Despite their benefits, digital connections have a restricted lifespan, which is a noteworthy aspect to bear in mind. The likelihood of individuals maintaining consistent collective action is low unless they engage in direct interpersonal communication and establish personal connections during collaborative efforts. Digital collectives play a role in shaping the Dalit agenda, however, they are not a substitute for community-based organizations operating at the grassroots level. The centrality of Dalit politics will persist with the continued involvement of Dalit movements, activists, politicians, and parties. To guarantee that all Dalits have equal access to these resources, efforts should also be made to close the digital divide. To understand the above text we have to critique it in a very factual manner, that is, we need to talk about the caste system that persists in India.

The caste system is a long-standing social structure deeply embedded in Indian society. The caste system remains a formidable obstacle in the current digital era, presenting notable obstacles,

particularly with regard to digital bias and the suppression of underrepresented groups such as the Dalits. The caste system has been subject to significant criticism in contemporary times due to its perpetuation of inequality and discrimination within the digital realm. Notwithstanding endeavors to narrow the digital divide, Dalits and other underprivileged communities persist in encountering impediments to entry into digital technologies and platforms. The restricted capacity of individuals to engage in online discussions curtails their potential to exercise their entitlement to freedom of speech. Additionally, online algorithms and filters serve to perpetuate caste-based bias and discrimination, thereby reinforcing the caste system. This can limit the visibility of Dalit voices and restrict their ability to reach a wider audience. One additional critique of the caste system in contemporary times is its role in perpetuating instances of online harassment and hate speech. Dalit individuals who vocalize their opposition to caste-based discrimination frequently encounter online harassment and intimidation, resulting in self-censorship and the suppression of their viewpoints.

The emergence of the internet and social media has provided Dalits to an extent with a mechanism to circumvent intermediaries and communicate directly with a broader demographic. This has resulted in a heightened awareness of the challenges encountered by Dalits and a push for social and political change. The question that emerges pertains to whether the rise of the digital age has genuinely created unhindered liberty of speech and expression for the Dalit community. The advent of the digital age has undoubtedly opened up novel channels for Dalits to articulate their views. However, it is imperative to scrutinize whether this has translated into tangible transformations in their existence. Although there has been a rise in visibility and awareness regarding the challenges faced by Dalits, the issue of caste-based discrimination and violence remains prevalent in India. Hence, it is imperative to inquire whether the digital age has successfully accomplished its objective of emancipating Dalits from the shackles of silence, or if it has solely furnished a fresh avenue for their voices to be repressed.

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