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TROLLING CASTE: CYBER PUBLIC SPHERE IN THE ERA OF POST TRUTH

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Abstract:
        Reservation policy stands for the representative nature of the Indian democracy as well as to guarantee equality as envisioned in the preamble of the constitution to every Indian citizen. This paper would look into how the reservation debates are proceeding in the online media and networking platforms, with emphasis given to the caste equations that underlie Anti- Reservation trolls that are shared online. Trolls have become a means to respond to anything and everything that is happening around. With regards to the increasing impact of trolls, the paper would be looking at cyber public sphere, a seemingly democratic space for its potential to be an agent of majoritarian hegemony. This paper uses the methodology of discourse analysis to analyse the biased portrayal of dalits in the anti- reservation trolls which denies the prevalence of caste based discrimination and poverty of the community across India. This paper uses the framework of Habermas' theory of public sphere to analyse the dalit participation online. By analysing varied facets of reservation debates online, this paper would be looking at politics of exclusion that marks cyber public sphere in India, with special reference to dalit marginalization online.

Keywords: Cyber Public sphere, Reservation policy, Trolls, Post Truth.

Contextualizing Reservation in India

        Reservation policy has been one which had a rather colossal socio-political impact upon the Indian society. As an ideal, reservation policy stands to ensure the representative nature of the Indian democracy as well as to guarantee equality as envisioned in the Preamble of the constitution to every Indian citizen. The reservation policy, its recommendation, implementation were not without dissent and controversies. Reservation in India cannot be understood without a clear understanding of the caste system in India. In a traditional society, social stratification is based on caste and ethnic affiliations. But in India, this traditional mechanism of stratification has transgressed from an institution that offers protection to a social group to that of one that promotes exploitation. India has a long history of caste based discrimination which has relegated a larger section of its people across the country into a state of multi-dimensional exploitation that involved dehumanizing punitive measures, sexual and economic exploitation. Moreover it was capable of generating a social psyche that accepted the arbitrariness of this caste hierarchy as the norm. Despite Ambedkar's best efforts to draft Indian constitution with provisions prohibiting caste discrimination, discriminatory attitude does exist in its covert and overt forms in modern India even today. However the tone and tenor of caste system in India is fast changing leaving some subtle oppressive mechanisms intact. India's constitution which offers certain set of rights fundamental to every Indian like right to equality and equal treatment before law; was an event to rejoice for the depressed classes, whose oppression was taken for granted since time immemorial. Post Independence, India has formulated remedies to alleviate the suffering of the dalits through the eponymous reservation policy, by which a percentage of electoral offices, government jobs and educational seats are reserved for the historically marginalized groups. Reservation policy stands for the representative nature of Indian democracy, where the underprivileged must reap the fruit of his or her intellectual as well as artistic capabilities, irrespective of the caste to which he or she belongs, which was once a hurdle hard to go by. The overwhelming majority in the nation that is still backward- socially, economically and educationally are eligible for reservations. The victims of

entrenched backwardness comprise the Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs) and other backward classes (OBCs).

Henceforth, the paper will be looking at the novel means by which reservation policy is debated in the new media and the caste politics intrinsic in the new media space, by analysing the aspect of undemocratic cyber public sphere and the Anti-Reservation debates and trolls that are disseminated online.

Cyber Public Sphere and Anti-Dalit Rhetoric

Democracy seems to have spread across the world in the twentieth century post the world wars. The central idea of democracy is rule by people. Though democratic ideas are in vogue, it need not materialize into democratic practice. As an offshoot of the burgeoning democracy and the developments in the arena of technology, communication and information technologies have spread in the twentieth century as never before. It has both been an agent of democracy and a medium to disseminate dominant discourse and political propaganda. Ideally one aspect of the democracy is its deliberative nature. For the making and the sustainability of a democratic society a public sphere is mandatory. Public sphere is an arena where people irrespective of the differences in their social locations and ideological affiliations convene to make their opinions and arrive at better decisions. "Jurgen Habermas remains the starting point for a large proportion of these theorists' understandings of the public sphere... Habermas describes the public sphere as an "intersubjectively shared space" reproduced through communicative rationality" (Dahlberg 111).

Jurgen Habermas in his theory of public sphere describes its evolution in three stages. The first stage is the feudal stage where the church and the privileged nobility had the education and power to make opinion and hence to be part of the process of decision making in the important policy decisions. In the idealized second stage of its evolution, public sphere has indeed been the seat of rational discourse, where the emerging bourgeoisie, who were conscious of their rights, had indeed made coffee houses, journals and newspapers, their avenues to discuss about matters political and moral (Habermas 175-77). Habermas, though conceives this stage as the golden period of the ideal public sphere, there is a serious problem with the perfectness associated with this second stage. Generally, participants in these early public spheres could have been from upper and middle classes. They published, discussed and arrived at conclusions on matters that concerned only with the middle class and the upper class. There might have been even the possibility of a problematic discourse on the working class by these bourgeoisie public spheres. So the absence of the confluence of these spheres of debate and rational discourse is indeed a great flaw in Habermasian conception of ideal public sphere. In the Indian context, the class is replaced by caste in the formation of myriad spheres of communication. It is this fallacy of attributing the idealist to this second stage is what can be seemed to extend to the cyber public sphere as well. Post the advent of Internet, the concept of public sphere has been shifted from its physical and concrete existence to that of a virtual or digital arena. This shift was indeed seen with so much of anticipation, as it would revolutionize the very idea of citizen participation in policy decisions as never before.

John Palfry describes the evolution of internet in four phases. That is from an initial stage of open internet to that of access- denied and access controlled phase. Internet has the potency to subvert the long held bastion of the privileged as the encoder and harbingers of the narratives. It is this possible potency at subversion can be considered as the reason for an access denied and access controlled phase. This is during the access controlled phase that the dominant ideology and hence its working narratives began to seep into the cyber public sphere as the legitimate narrative to the extent that other narratives got drowned in the homogenization tendency of the narratives. It is in this context that Habermas' third stage of public sphere comes in. In the third stage, Habermas talks of the structural transformation of the bourgeoisie public sphere, where the participants in the public sphere got transformed from a public critically thinking about their culture, its politics and the trends to that of a mass that merely consumes it. It is a stage which harks back on the conception of culture industry, where people are doped into believing and passively

consuming what they are been provided by the mass media. In internet too there is this mechanism to passivize the netizens and make them obeisant consumers of news, images and trolls shared online. A rational and critical discourse is largely absent there. It might be for the same reason that "Habermas opined that the internet is not in itself a public sphere. He describes the internet as a centrifugal force for disparate communications and discussion but which cannot, on its own, produce any public spheres" (Laidlaw 15-16).

Representational tactics in the Anti-Reservation Trolls

Trolls have turned out to be a novel means to critique, satirize and thus capable of generating attention to events, social, political and moral in our society. There is a hegemonic and orchestrated process at work in the making and propagation of the trolls where, the plebeian are to speak through the language of the subaltern, the discourse of the oppressors. Nevertheless it is now popular among the masses as a means to get the prime news and the various perspectives about it. It is in such a context where, trolls have been entrusted with the task of disseminating news to the hoi polloi that it demands serious attention like the mass media do. One interesting facet of troll is that, there is no certainty about the identity of the troller nor of its inception point. This sense of anonymity regarding the trolls make it a more potent medium to criticize and satirize. Interestingly trolls bring in an ideal situation of free speech, which was dreamed of for centuries. Because in the absence of clarity regarding the identity of the troller and the well spring of these trolls, government or any other authorities for that matter cannot contain its production, distribution and consumption.

These trolls which have an anti-establishment line of working also has on its other side a pro-elitist and pro-majoritarian ideology that works in favour of the majoritarian politics in India. The Anti-Reservation trolls thus have a pro-majoritarian agenda. Since these Anti-Reservation trolls have the same invincibility, in terms of its production and distribution, it is hard to tackle. Free speech in this context of Anti-Reservation trolls turn out to be hate speech and false news. It is in this context that the anti-dalit agenda of these trolls are to be analysed for its ability to widen the ambit of divisive politics in the realm of caste in India.
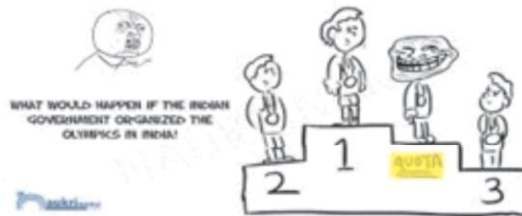

Fig. 1. From "We Hate Reservation Quota". 31 May 2015. Online Image. 24 Nov 2017. www.facebook.com.

Here in this troll as well in general parlance there is a tendency to place the reserved winner above second and third position and obviously below the first rank holder. Though seemingly a simple troll, the subtle ridicule implicit in the portrayal is strikingly obvious. Reserved candidate placed above second and third place holders is suggestive of how reservation policy overrides meritocracy. And another of the politicized element in the troll is that of how a general candidate still holds the position of supremacy, in spite of the reservation policy, which implicitly talks of intellectual, artistic and athletic superiority of the general category or upper caste over the dalit and backward communities or rather the inability of the reserved category to secure first position sans reservation. In this troll, every bit of it suggests an anti-dalit agenda.

Living in an age of criticism where even children's literature is under thorough analysis for its potency in disseminating discourse and dominant way of seeing, this troll comes as no surprise where a children's game is carried over to give a political tone and tenor. The implicit idea in this troll, albeit being less rude and ridiculing than the former, is that of anti-reservationists that reservation policy thwarts

meritocracy.

Fig.2 from "Anti Reservation Community". Facebook. 15 Aug 2011. Web. 25
Nov 2017. https://www.facebook.com.

This troll is significant in the respect that, there is a sense of majoritarian mindset that works where emphasis is given to " there are no seats reserved for SC & ST" or rather the dalit community not meddling with affairs that traditionally been dealt by the caste people. Catering to such demands for trolls that condemn, ridicule and thus pose the Dalits and the backward community at a position of disadvantage, is a rallying cry akin to that of pre-independence times, where a dalit or backward community person daring to learn, is punished in a crude manner; where there was the practice of garnering the benefits of education to oneself and one's community. Another interesting facet of Reservation debate is that of cry for inclusion in the reserved category. On the one hand there is a negative stereotyping about the inaptitude of the reserved category is disseminated in galore. On the other hand people are clamouring for being included in the reserved category. It clearly points to the fact that a large majority of people are literally unaware of the reason behind the constitutional provision for positive discrimination. In the general conception, it is a means by which benefits are being garnered by the dalit and the so called backward community. This absence of knowledge about one's own history can be traced to the politics in framing school syllabi in India. Most often, Caste system doesn't figure in the history textbooks. If at all it finds mention, it is portrayed as a system of division of labour that is divinely ordained. But nowhere in these texts can we find a tinge of what transpired under the guise of this division of labour. The rigidity of caste boundaries, the choicelessness of people who belonged to lower caste goes unrecorded in the syllabi.   It is caste ridden politics of historiography that is to blame for the lack of awareness of the gravity of atrocities that are committed by caste Hindus towards these marginalized group that contribute to such anti-reservation trolls.

Another aspect of the distortion of the reality is that of placing caste system as a system that is located in the remote past of India, thereby ignoring its rigorous working strategies in the present, as represented in the following troll. If a sociological practice is denied its existence, the question of remedy and solution is obviously out of the question. The anti-reservation debates in India is working with the same logic, where caste system with its oppressive mechanism is denied its existence in the independent India.

Fig.3. from "We Hate Reservation Quota". 31 May 2015. Online Image. 24
Nov 2017. www.facebook.com.

The above mentioned troll works exactly on the same logic. Interestingly this troll does not even take into account the immediacy of the caste system in India, where according to the troller the Dalits were denied water from wells, prohibited from temples and centres of learning, only way back in the 18th and 19th centuries and not henceforth. This distortion of reality is what makes anti-reservation trolls an area worth looking at for its hegemonic tendencies. The cruelties that are meted out to Dalits across India especially in the rural pockets are not anything better than the pre-independence times. Thus these anti-reservation trolls have become an agency of the dominant caste people to spread the message of hatred and polarization.

Another narrative at work is one that where reserved category is delegitimized of their credentials and abilities to the extent that deeming them capable of catering to the needs of their own community alone. In the above mentioned troll there is indeed a sly logic at work, by which dalit and the backward communities are depraved of their ability to excel and serve the nation and the citizens like their caste counterparts do. In India, a rhetoric is running the rounds that, let the Dalit doctors treat the Dalits and Dalit engineer build the houses of their Dalit counterparts.

Fig. 4.. from"Is there any ongoing protest against the reservation system?". 10 July 2017. Online Image.Quora. 9 Sep 2017. Www.quora.com

This rhetoric is far more pernicious than any other that figured in the anti-reservation debates so far. Implicit in this argument is that, the nation is merely giving an incentive for the Dalit and the backward classes and nation doesn't expect to receive their service back. Or rather their service cannot meet the quality of service a general candidate can provide. This rhetoric also works in ways by which the caste groups trying to bring back the rigid caste system where occupational specificity was strictly followed. Here in this argument in the troll, intrinsic in the proposal is the idea that Dalits belong to the realms of scavenging and menial jobs and not to the elite realms of medicine and engineering. Here in this troll, Dalits are blatantly relegated to the rungs of low standards and inefficacy. On the other side of the argument is an implicit idea where the quality and efficacy of the unreserved or caste candidates are acknowledged and given a blatant legitimacy.

 However it isn't that there are no pro-reservation trolls. But the number of trolls that supports reservation or rather provides a standpoint of Dalits or the perspective of an informed person is far too lower than the Anti-Reservation trolls. The frequency of it getting liked, shared and thus supported is far too lower than the Anti- Reservation trolls. Apparently in the online media, there is indeed an option or a choice for the netizens to choose the information or viewpoint of their choice. But as long as the production of polarized narratives remains at the hands of the powerful, how far this choice can be deemed a choice in the real sense of the word.. This illusion of choices and the reality of choicelessness is what makes online or social media platforms more or less propagandist agents of dominant ideology. Netizens are living under the belief that they are exercising their freedom of choice. But it is nothing but a deceptive hegemonical mechanism where discourse reigns.
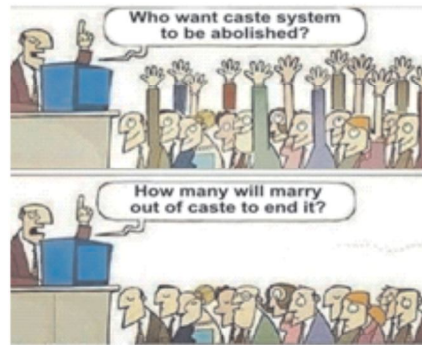
Pro-Reservation Trolls

Fig.5..from "Abolish the Caste system". Online Image. 23 Aug 2017. www.change.org. (not available now)

     The above mentioned pro-reservation troll is particularly noticeable for its narrative that neither ridicules nor spreads hate speech about the caste which oppressed them for centuries. There is a striking difference between the content and approach of pro-reservation trolls and Anti-reservation trolls. The above mentioned Pro-Reservation troll rather put forward an argument which was earlier proposed by Ambedkar that in order to do away with caste system and to enable a society that respects and treats every human alike, the easiest way is to intermarry among the high caste and low caste. This troll is simultaneously political and radical in its approach and content. In India, where there are still honour killings in the name of inter caste marriages, this troll sends a strong message to subvert the structure. One of the major argument of the anti-reservationists is that caste system with its oppressive mechanism and the demarcation line doesn't exist in the Independent India and it was a sociological set up of the past. The question in the troll, "How many will marry out of caste to end it?" is a brilliant argument to counter the fallacious and baseless argument of the anti-reservationists that caste system had been relegated to oblivion post independence.

     Interestingly this representative trolls, shows the magnitude of the disparity between the appearance of Internet as a democratic space and the reality in which it turns out to be least democratic and inclusive. This analysis of the online trolls divulges how the politics of the upper class are propagandist in tone and tenor when it comes to the utilization of online space.

Conclusion

     The anti-reservation trolls that are disseminated online is a perfect instance of how online media is not a liberated democratic space. Analysing the number of trolls for and against reservation, it is evident that online space has indeed been a hegemonic space, where counter narratives cannot survive. It is not primarily the government or co-operation that are controlling the online debates regarding the reservation, but the casteist forces. The low frequency with which pro- reservation trolls are been produced and circulated, itself becomes an instance to locate the dwindling dalit participation online. The pro-reservation trolls are being targeted, abused and forcefully deleted. It is in this scenario, that one has to reconceptualise the changing paradigm of this cyber public sphere. Looking at the production and circulatory mechanism of anti-reservation trolls, one can discern the transformation of public sphere from an ideal space of deliberative democracy to one that of hegemonic discourse. Here in this case, Habermasean third stage of public sphere has transformed into one that encompasses the characteristic features of the first stage, where nobles were the producers of messages. In Indian context, the place of the nobles are occupied and managed by the privileged upper class. This paper looks at this gradual shift of cyber public sphere from a democratic space to a place where information is mass produced and fed into an ignorant populace by the casteist force, with the anti- reservation trolls as the primary text. And its popularity in the online stream is augmented by the fact that there are many anti-reservation pages online

but not a single page on Pro-reservation.

Representational tactics in the trolls is noticeable for its anti-dalit agenda, which ignores the immediacy of caste system and discriminatory practices in modern India. One of the major argument in these trolls is that, if caste system with its exploitative tendencies has been a thing of the past, why promote reservation in the independent India. The selection of images, to represent the situation of Dalits and their general counterpart is far from reality. Yet these trolls don't fail to be shared and circulated, in spite of the distortion of reality, points to the ostensible facet of the undemocratic cyberspace and its anti dalit rhetoric. These reservation trolls conveniently ignores the difficulties that the reserved communities have to face, to be eligible candidates to be placed in educational seats and public service jobs. The magnitude of the impact of this troll is such that the objective behind reservation is lost to the uninformed netizens. Here instead of the envisioned inclusion of the erstwhile marginalized groups, an exclusion based on the stereotype that Dalit's ineptitude is propagated, which further alienates them from being at the receiving end of respect and social acceptance. By analysing these trolls one cannot help but notice how reservation and its objective is upended. Through these trolls, albeit implicit in its deliverance, Dalits are continuously been told that you don't belong to the realms of learning and bureaucracy. This is a mechanism by which caste based occupational specification is reinforced in modern India. When a troll is seen, liked and shared by many, it is natural for the netizens to believe in the content of the Troll or rather the argument it raises as well. The number of likes itself becomes a point to legitimize the narrative. Democracy in this respect is dangerous.

Thus this seemingly democratic set up where everyone can post their opinions turn out to be an undemocratic space where one self censors and filters one's take on issues to become one with the privileged position of majority. As Kofi Annan stated in 2003, while technology shapes the future, it is people who shape technology, and decide to what uses it can be put to(Laidlaw 1). So internet space in this sense isn't different from any other mediums which deny an open platform to register one's deviant opinions. The internet can be a powerful tool of democracy. But the problem with Internet is that it is neutral in the face of humans who use it and to what use it is put to.

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