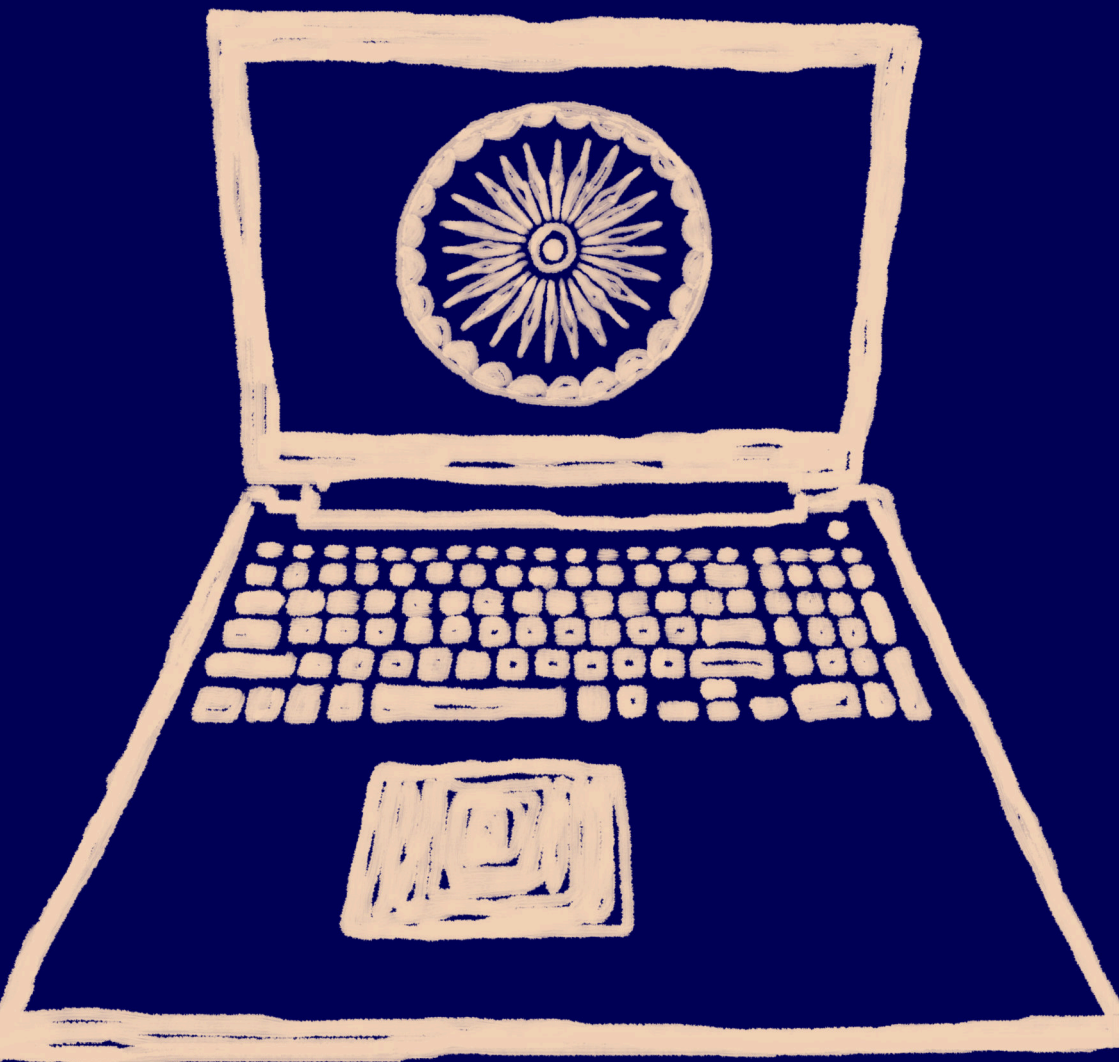




Centre  
for Internet  
& Society

# Bahujan Digital Publishing Infrastructures





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**ⓘ Trigger warning !**

This report extensively discusses issues of caste and gender. Sections on hate speech and mental health discuss online and offline casteism, caste violence, and sexism in detail. This includes themes of caste trauma and self-harm. Some details can be sensitive and triggering to readers.

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# 1.

# Introduction

Indian society is organised in a hierarchical system of caste, where a person is born into an immutable caste that ascribes to them a position in the hierarchy. The caste system has been prevalent in the Indian subcontinent and across parts of South Asia for millennia. Those at the bottom of the caste hierarchy continue to face a multiplicity of systemic forms of marginalisation, violence, and exclusion. Caste influences the social, economic, and political opportunities of individuals and communities across class, gender, and religion in India and its diaspora.

The caste system codifies dignity, profession, and access to knowledge based on caste, where knowledge and its dissemination are restricted to castes higher up in the hierarchy, such as the Brahmins. For most of the history of the Indian subcontinent, members of lowered castes and those technically ‘outside’ the caste hierarchy — variously called Shudras, Dalits, and Adivasis — were prevented from accessing education and punished for obtaining it.<sup>1</sup> Even today, knowledge production is largely the domain of higher castes, who, on average, have greater access to education than Dalits and Adivasis.<sup>2</sup> Further, members of the higher castes dominate culture and knowledge work, leading to the canonisation and normalisation of their ideologies, worldview, and cultural habits.<sup>3</sup>

This also extends to media and communication sectors in India, which are monopolised by members of higher castes.<sup>4</sup> In the last few decades, digital technology — including the internet and social media — has made rapid inroads into Indian society, with an increasing number of public services, news media, communication, education, and other services moving online. This technology is being shaped by the caste system and thus ends up reproducing it. Today, Indian internet spaces and social media are dominated by members of higher castes, not just as users but also as policymakers, engineers, and designers.<sup>5</sup>

Work on race, gender, and class has shown that access to technology, its usage, and control are intrinsically linked to

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1 . Kalota, ‘A History of the Education of the Shudra Untouchables before and under the British Rule in India, Circ. 2000 BC to 1947.’

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2 . Thorat and Khan, ‘Why Inter-Caste Inequality in Educational Attainment Still Persists?’

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3 . Vyas, ‘Why Do We Only See Upper Caste South Asian Characters?’

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4 . Das and Majhi, Caste, Communication and Power.

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5 . Subramanian, ‘Recovering Caste Privilege’; Vaghela, Jackson, and Sengers, ‘Interrupting Merit, Subverting Legibility’; Singh and Vaghela, ‘Anti-Caste Lessons for Computing’.

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6 . Benjamin, 'Race After Technology'.

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7 . Shanmugavelan, 'Critical Caste and Technology Studies'.

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8 . The Wire, 'What Happens When Caste Enters Mainstream Media?'

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9 . Nisha, 'Indian Media Covers Caste Only When There's a Tragedy. X, Instagram, YouTube Changed That'.

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10 . Deshpande, 'Caste and Castelessness'.

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11 . Tenhunen, 'Intersectionalities and Smartphone Use in Rural India'.

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12 . Jaffrelot and Nair, "'Educated Dalits Are Mobilising Against Upper Caste Antagonism, Rise of Hindutva Forces"'; Tenhunen, 'Intersectionalities and Smartphone Use in Rural India'.

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13 . Thakur, 'New Media and the Dalit Counter-Public Sphere'.

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14 . Shanmugavelan, 'Caste-Hate Speech and Digital Media Politics'; Kain et al., 'Online Caste-Hate Speech: Pervasive Discrimination and Humiliation on Social Media'; Narayan, 'You Are Un-Welcome'.

and often reinforce existing power hierarchies.<sup>6</sup> An emerging body of work is exploring the relationships between caste, technology, and communication.<sup>7</sup> This report contributes to the discourse on internet use by members of lowered castes and how they interact with, subvert, and challenge casteism embedded in knowledge production and media spaces and on the internet.

Caste-critical conversations have become more prevalent in Indian social media in the last few years, and discussions on caste has now entered the "mainstream".<sup>8</sup> While caste has always been part of public discourse both online and offline, the discussion in traditional media has primarily been saturated by the perspectives of higher castes and been limited to reportage of acts of extreme caste violence<sup>9</sup> and debates on caste-based electoral politics. Members of higher castes often deny the existence of caste in 'modern India'.<sup>10</sup> However, as a result of the increased uptake of social media by the oppressed, the 'mainstream' discussion on caste has shifted significantly. This uptake can be attributed to the increased availability of affordable smartphones, cheap data plans, and education for some members of oppressed castes.<sup>11,12</sup> The shift can be observed through the lively and heated caste discourse on social media, which include trending hashtags, coverage of caste issues in the media, identity assertions, and digital events such as Dalit History Month.<sup>13</sup>

A large number of anti-caste creators, influencers, and digital publishers have emerged across different forms of media, such as illustrations, memes, music videos, and infographics, bringing to light the issues and perspectives of the caste-oppressed, participating in knowledge production by and about them, and organising anti-caste consciousness. Their presence has exposed caste tensions within social media and other digital platforms in India. Users from lowered castes experience caste-based hate speech, unequal treatment, and inadequate protection on social media.<sup>14</sup>



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15 . Vaghela, Jackson, and Sengera, 'Interrupting Merit, Subverting Legibility'

This experience of the caste-oppressed interrogates the supposed 'castelessness' of digital technologies.<sup>15</sup>

Anti-caste conversations on social media are not homogenous; they are diverse and intersectional, with disagreements and internal conflicts. At the same time, a sense of anti-caste solidarity and community is emerging, often organised in small, interconnected social networks. These networks engage in liking, resharing, commenting, and discussing with each other, often forming close friendships and allyships both offline and online—they have been described as “networked counterpublics.”<sup>16</sup>

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16 . Warner, 'Publics and Counterpublics'.

In this report, we build on the body of work on caste & media and anti-caste counterpublics to study the phenomenon of Bahujan digital publishing. Bahujan digital publishing sits at the intersection of established news organisations, media publications, etc., and individual users, activists, creators, etc. on social media. They are run by members of lowered castes (referred to in this report as 'Bahujans' hereafter), who use an assemblage of digital media to talk about caste and other related issues online.

In this study, we document and explore Bahujan publishers' motivations, operation models, challenges, and aspirations. We look at the role these publishing spaces play in anti-caste activism, knowledge dissemination, and community building. We examine the challenges of being anti-caste online and how publications navigate them. We ask publishers what future they see for their anti-caste work online. Finally, we explore emerging anti-caste visions of the internet. This report is an explorative study that will help us understand anti-caste assertions, community building, and knowledge production online, as well as how internet and policy research can be approached from an anti-caste lens.

This study is dedicated to all the anti-caste thinkers, scholars, and activists who came before us and laid the groundwork for us to be here and to be able to do this work. This report is dedicated to all the Bahujans and allies working towards the annihilation of caste.<sup>17</sup>

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17 . Ambedkar, 'Annihilation of Caste'.

# 2.

# Methods.

## 2.1

# Defining 'Bahujan'

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18 . Karunakaran, 'The Dalit-Bahujan Guide to Understanding Caste in Hindu Scripture'.

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19 . Ambedkar, Castes in India.

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20 . Shepherd, The Shudras: Vision for a New Path.

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21 . Omvedt, 'Non-Brahmans and Communists in Bombay'; Sagar, 'Kanshi Ram's Political Vision for Bahujans Can Still Unseat India's Ruling Class'.

In this report, we use the word 'Bahujan' (translating to 'majority')<sup>18</sup> to refer to a collection of oppressed castes, legally defined as Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), and Other Backward Classes (OBC). Politically, the first two may be loosely defined as Dalits and Adivasi, respectively, though the alignment between legal and political categories is not perfect. We use 'Savarna' and 'privileged caste(s)' to refer to those who belong to what are regarded as 'upper castes', which commonly comprise Brahmin, Kshatriya, and Vaishya varnas as well as some Shudra castes within the caste hierarchy. However, it is important to note here that the caste system is a graded and contextual hierarchy,<sup>19</sup> where some castes within the Shudra varna self-identify as Bahujans and 'lower-caste' while others align with an 'upper-caste' identity.<sup>20</sup>

The word 'Bahujan' traces its history to Buddhist traditions and the works of 20th-century anti-caste scholars and activists such as Jyotirao Phule, BR Ambedkar, and Kanshi Ram.<sup>21</sup> While there are several frameworks and terms used to describe various coalitions of oppressed castes, the political implications of each framework are subtly different and contextual. We use the word 'Bahujan' as we believe it represents a collective and organised approach of the caste-oppressed against the caste hierarchy.

We also acknowledge the limitations of the 'Bahujan' phrasing, as it can flatten the experiences and identities of SC, ST, OBC, and converted minorities. Further, the phrasing fails to capture the graded inequalities and inter-caste dynamics that are the hallmark and foundation of the Indian caste system. We have made attempts to add specificity wherever required. Phrasing such 'as' marginalised castes', 'oppressed castes', and 'lowered castes' is also used, as dictated by the context, to refer to Bahujans. Similarly, phrases such as 'dominant castes', 'oppressor castes', 'higher castes', and 'upper castes' are used to refer to Savarna castes.

# 2.2 Research design

For the literature on Bahujan experiences of the internet, a mixture of academic and non-academic sources are considered. As discussed later in the literature review, in the context of the Indian media, despite 70 years of Indian independence and several forms of affirmative action, the representation of Bahujans in academia remains limited.<sup>22</sup> Scholars have pointed out that in the Indian media and in academia, “it is always the dominant producing knowledge on the dominated, and never the vice versa.”<sup>23</sup> Thus, we have consciously adopted an approach that incorporates and centres Bahujan authors, journalists, and academics.

We consciously choose the word ‘publishing’ over alternatives such as ‘content creation’, ‘social media page’, and ‘alternative media’. As we discuss later in the literature review, in the Indian context, various forms of traditional publishing, cultural production, and knowledge production have historically been dominated by the Savarna castes, who have also made a point of gate-keeping them against Bahujans.

While there is a rich history of literature, knowledge, and forms of cultural production by the caste-oppressed, the oppressor castes dominate academia and other mainstream modes of knowledge production, and publishing ultimately exercises power over the legitimacy and canonisation of knowledge. Owing to this Savarna monopoly over formal knowledge and publishing work, anti-caste expressions and, specifically, publishing have historically flourished outside of formal books, magazines, and newspapers, instead turning to media such as zines, pamphlets, folk songs, and theatre.<sup>24</sup>

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22 . Raman, ‘Only 4% of Professors in 45 Central Univs Are OBCs’.

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23 . Kureel, ‘Indian Media and Caste’.

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24 . Nayar, ‘Dalit Literature’; Basu, ‘In the ’70s, the Dalit Panthers Made Pocket-Sized Magazines That Challenged Social Hierarchies in India’; Gopani, ‘The Need for Studies on Dalit Musical Traditions’; Sherinian, ‘Tamil Folk Music as Dalit Liberation Theology’; Bonington Gallery, ‘Formations’.

Following in the footsteps of these older forms of anti-caste publishing, contemporary Bahujan digital expression and knowledge production isn't just limited to text-based formats; it includes multimodal media, such as illustrations, video, audio, music, memes, etc.

Further, work on Indian languages and on translation and archiving of anticaste work (including in digital media in recent years) also represent strong attempts to explore, capture, and preserve this multimodality of creative expression.<sup>25</sup> The work of Bahujan internet users and content creators problematises, challenges, and subverts the oppressor-caste monopoly over knowledge production and dissemination of knowledge, taking Bahujan knowledge and expression directly to Bahujan audiences.

Through the framework of its publication, our research too challenges the Savarna authority over the legitimacy and rigour of knowledge systems.

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25 . S, 'The Arduous Journey of Modern Dalit Literature'; Vandana, 'Rethinking Translation and Publication Politics'; Thirumal and Kommaraju, 'Listening to the Sonorous: Digital Archiving as a Political Practice'.

## 2.3 Data collection & sampling

For primary data collection, we conducted in-depth interviews with emergent Bahujan publishing projects. In-depth interviews were chosen to capture and document the experience of Bahujan publishers in their own words. The projects were identified by first creating a database of anti-caste content creators, artists, authors, and publishers across social media.

We define digital publishing as content produced primarily to address a recurring audience, and we define Bahujan publishing as projects started and/or led by individuals self-identifying as SC, ST, or OBC. Anti-caste allyship projects that are not led by Bahujans have not been included in our study. These publications use assemblages of media, such as text, blogs, illustrations, memes, short- and long-form videos, podcasts, etc. to present the perspectives of Bahujans on the internet and on social media.

For this study, we wanted to explore emergent Bahujan publications. Thus, we focused on small- to medium-sized publishing projects with 1000–100,000 followers, subscribers, or other forms of recurring audiences. While self-expression is an essential part of independent digital publishing, which has been explored by other research in this space, we wanted to explore other motivations, audiences, and operation models. Thus, individual Bahujan users engaging primarily in self-expression were not included in the scope of this study.

We selected 10 projects to represent a diversity of platform use, media, audience size, and gender perspectives. The sampling includes Spotify podcasts, YouTube channels, Instagram infographic pages, meme creators, mixed media publishers, and news blogs.

We then conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with people in leadership positions within these projects, covering a range of topics, including motivations and content, finances and infrastructure, audience interactions and community, platform issues, and perspectives on the anti-caste internet. The interviews were then transcribed and analysed through thematic and narrative coding.

All interviews were conducted online. A consent form that explained the objective, goals, methods, and attribution preferences was shared with the participants and discussed before the interviews to ensure informed consent. Some interviews were recorded; these recordings were stored on a password-protected server for transcription and analysis purposes. All the quotes were shared with participants for their approval before attribution. The final draft of the report was shared with all participants for feedback before publication. All recordings and transcripts shall be securely deleted within two years of publication of the report.

# 2.4 Research participants

Over a span of two years, between 2022 and 2023, we interviewed the following representatives of the following publications:

Anonymous,	<b>Woman writer,</b> Independent contributor, <i>Newsletters and Instagram</i>
Lakhshya,	<b>Ambedkarite Marxist</b> Political education infographics, <i>Instagram</i>
Rajat Mourya,	<b>Bahujan Sahitya</b> Podcast and book reviews, <i>YouTube and Instagram</i>
Siddhesh Gautam,	<b>Bakery Prasad</b> Political illustrations and digital art <i>Instagram</i>
Mithran T. Samuel,	<b>Clear Blue Skies</b> Long-form podcast, <i>Spotify and other podcast platforms</i>
Sahil Valmiki,	<b>DalitDesk</b> News reporting and editorials, <i>Website, Instagram, YouTube, and X</i>
Shivani Rawat,	<b>Dalit History</b> Political history infographics, <i>Instagram and website</i>
Shrujana Shridhar,	<b>Mavelinadu</b> Publishing house, <i>zines, website, and Instagram</i>
Anonymous,	<b>Meme page</b> Meme page, <i>Instagram and X</i>
Tejas Harad,	<b>The Satyasodhak</b> News reporting and opinions, <i>Website, X, and Instagram</i>



## 2.5 Challenges & limitations

Since Bahujan publishing is a rapidly evolving space with poorly defined boundaries between personal profiles, influencer work, and publication work, with complex and dynamic interpersonal relationships, we acknowledge that the framing of this study ('Bahujan publishing') cannot capture the full experience of Bahujan internet use.

The study's limited sample size ended up primarily featuring OBC and SC-led publications, and thus the perspectives of STs, DNTs (Denotified, Nomadic, and Semi-Nomadic Tribes), and converted minorities may not be adequately represented. Further, as mentioned earlier, the 'Bahujan' term risks flattening the dynamics and complexities of thousands of different caste groups in India and thus must be used contextually outside the scope of this study.

While a significant amount of Bahujan publishing and internet use happens in regional languages and on smaller social platforms, the study primarily focuses on English publications; thus, the perspectives and unique conditions of Bahujan publishers are not well represented.

While the study makes a conscious effort to incorporate participants across gender and sexual identities and expressions, the unique experiences and challenges of women and queer publishers could not be fully covered within the scope of this explorative study. Future studies centred on intersectional frameworks such as Dalit-feminist theory are therefore much required to understand this space.

This study primarily relies on semi-structured, in-depth interviews to document perspectives from Bahujan publishers; thus, important learnings based on discourse analysis, content analysis, or a study of the platforms themselves are not within the scope of our study. Further, this work, being an explorative and qualitative study, has a small sample size, which may not fully represent the complexity and nuances of Bahujan internet use. A series of supplementary quantitative studies is therefore required for a more comprehensive understanding of internet usage within the communities.

This research is rooted in the positionality of the researcher as an English-speaking, cis-gender, OBC researcher embedded as an active participant within online anti-caste and Ambedkarite discourses. This comes with the challenges of navigating positionality and interpersonal relationships within the online anti-caste community during the research and writing process.

# 3.

## Literature Review & Background.

# 3.1

# Caste in the mainstream news media

The 2020 Oxfam survey on media representation revealed there were no Bahujans in leadership posts in any of the 121 organisations surveyed; no flagship shows had a Bahujan anchor. The representation of Bahujans has been disproportionately low in print and television media across languages<sup>26</sup> — this is alarming, given that their share in the population is estimated to be up to 85 per cent.<sup>27</sup> In addition, caste concerns find very little coverage in the Indian news media. In print media, only 10 front-page articles out of the 972 that Kureel reviewed involved coverage of caste issues.<sup>28</sup>

Per the Oxfam survey, a disproportionate majority (up to 90%) of leadership and anchoring positions are dominated by the elite Brahmin castes,<sup>29</sup> which the Hindu caste system designates as having authority over knowledge and its production.<sup>30</sup> This issue of representation in Indian media has been persistent throughout Indian history.<sup>31</sup> Ambedkar recognised the absence of Dalits and backward castes — and their issues — from the media in pre-Independence India and described the mainstream media of the time as ‘Brahmin media’.<sup>32</sup>

*“[The Untouchables] have no press, and the Congress Press is closed to them. It is determined not to give them the slightest publicity. They cannot have their own press... for obvious reasons... The staff of the Associated Press of India, which is the main news-distributing agency in India, is entirely drawn from Madras Brahmins — indeed, the whole of the press in India is in their hands.” — Dr. B.R. Ambedkar*<sup>33</sup>

Indian mass media has always been “elite-oriented” and

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26 . Oxfam India, ‘Digital Divide India Inequality Report 2022’.

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27 . Chandrasekharam, ‘For First Time in a Century, India’s States Count Politically Sensitive Caste Membership’; Kumar, ‘India Needs a Caste Census – and Southasia Does Too’.

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28 . Kureel, ‘Indian Media and Caste’.

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29 . Oxfam and NewsLaundry, ‘Oxfam India- NewsLaundry Report’.

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30 . Ambedkar, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches.

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31 . Mandal, ‘Upper-Caste Domination in India’s Mainstream Media and Its Extension in Digital Media’; Kumar and Subramani, ‘Internet as an Alternative Media for Dalits in India’.

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32 . Thirumal, ‘International Exploration of Technology Equity and the Digital Divide’.

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33 . ‘Dr Ambedkar’s Journalism’.

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34 . Kumar and Subramani, 'Internet as an Alternative Media for Dalits in India'.

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35 . Thirumal, 'International Exploration of Technology Equity and the Digital Divide'.

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36 . Kureel, 'Indian Media and Caste'; Kumar and Subramani, 'Internet as an Alternative Media for Dalits in India'.

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37 . Rajamani, 'Bhima Koregaon and the Savarna Gaze'.

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38 . Kureel, 'Indian Media and Caste'.

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39 . OxFam India, "Who Tells Our Stories: Representation of Marginalised Caste Groups in Indian Media", 2022.

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40 . Krishna, 'Dalit Journalist Accuses BBC Hindi of Discrimination, Says Was Let Go Due to Caste'; Yashica, 'I Had to Say I Didn't Know My Caste as If I Was Upper Caste'.

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41 . Thirumal, 'International Exploration of Technology Equity and the Digital Divide'; Kumar and Subramani, 'Internet as an Alternative Media for Dalits in India'.

“monopolised” by the upper castes and classes.<sup>34</sup> Thirumal points out that, after Independence, national public media houses such as Doordarshan and All India Radio operated with a “Delhi-centric elite point of view” and “deliberately pursued a policy of Brahminizing the content” through TV and radio adaptations of the Ramayana, Mahabharata, and other upper-caste Hindu programming.<sup>35</sup> This continues today, with programmes and media channels celebrating upper-caste Hindu festivities and the “cultural hegemony of [the] upper castes” while ignoring the festivities and cultures of the Bahujan groups, leading to the cultural invisibilization of the Bahujans.<sup>36</sup>

The rare mainstream reporting on caste issues is often limited to coverage of severe caste atrocities and debates on reservations and electoral politics, almost always presented through the “savarna gaze.”<sup>37</sup> Further, coverage of caste atrocities is focused on the victim and not the perpetrator, where “journalists fly down to villages to report the details of the caste atrocities, but all their narratives remain one-sided, highlighting the oppression and oppressed while completely omitting the other part of the story — the oppressor”.<sup>38</sup>

A comparison of surveys shows that representation of SC/ST/OBC groups in leadership positions in Indian media hasn't significantly improved over the years and, in some categories, has even gotten worse.<sup>39</sup> Further, Bahujan reporters face marginalisation and discrimination in journalism schools as well as later, as professionals.<sup>40</sup> These issues of representation, marginalisation, and invisibilisation of Bahujans extend to all forms of mainstream media in India. In the absence of the equitable presence of Bahujans in traditional media, it is digital and social media — and the internet in general — that have emerged as sites of greater Bahujan participation, expression, and representation in public discourse.<sup>41</sup>

# 3.2 Technology, access & caste

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42 . Sunilkumar, 'India Has 5th Lowest Mobile Data Prices in the World. Check Pak, Sri Lanka Rates'.

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43 . CIA, 'Internet Users Comparison - The World Factbook'.

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44 . OxFam India, 'Digital Divide India Inequality Report 2022'.

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45 . CSDS, 'Social Media & Political Behaviour'.

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46 . Bansode, 'The Missing Dalit Women in Testimonies of #MeToo Sexual Violence'; Subramanian, 'Bahujan Girls' Anti-Caste Activism on TikTok'.

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47 . CSDS, 'Social Media & Political Behaviour'.

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48 . Kamath, "'Untouchable' Cellphones?'

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49 . Kumar and Subramani, 'Internet as an Alternative Media for Dalits in India'.

Despite India boasting some of the most affordable data costs globally<sup>42</sup> and the largest user base in the world,<sup>43</sup> internet access for the caste-oppressed continues to lag. Dalits and Adivasis, in particular, are less likely to own a mobile phone or be able to afford internet access. Savarna castes have significantly higher smartphone access (43%) than the SC (25%), ST (23%), OBC (30%), and Muslim (32%).<sup>44</sup>

Owing to this lack of access, Indian social media were still largely "dominated by upper castes" in 2019, with twice as many Savarna being 'heavy exposure' internet users than Dalit and Adivasi.<sup>45</sup> In addition, Bahujan women—who occupy the triple intersection of caste, class, and gender—are less likely to have access to the internet or to social media.<sup>46</sup> Despite lower rates of access, the sheer demographic proportion of Bahujans in the Indian population implies that the majority of Indian internet and social media users are likely to be Bahujans.

While urban Bahujans are more likely to have access to smartphones and social media,<sup>47</sup> access to technology alone does not always translate into equal opportunity in use. Dominant castes are able to use digital media more effectively for networking and to access employment due to the cultural, social, and economic capital afforded to them by their caste location. For a majority of Bahujan internet users, participation in the 'digital revolution' is limited to being a passive consumer or an "implicated actor".<sup>48</sup>

Language access, especially fluency in written English, is a major barrier to the Bahujan use of digital media. A majority of Bahujans use local languages and dialects in their everyday lives and work.<sup>49</sup> The issue of language access is a historical one: Ambedkar emphasised the importance of learning the

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**50** . Rahman, 'India's Outcasts Put Faith in English'.

**51** . Kumar and Subramani, 'Internet as an Alternative Media for Dalits in India'.

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**52** . Kamath, "'Untouchable' Cellphones?"

**53** . Thirumal, 'International Exploration of Technology Equity and the Digital Divide'; Maitreya, 'My English Isn't Broken; Your English Is Brahmin'.

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**54** . Kamath, "'Untouchable' Cellphones?"

English language for the caste-oppressed by comparing it to "Lion's Milk; only those who drink it will roar", regarding it as an essential tool for the caste-oppressed to assert their voices.<sup>50</sup> Despite this historical emphasis on English, the amount of anti-caste writing in the language remains limited.<sup>51</sup>

For Bahujans with access to digital media, knowledge of English opens up more opportunities than for their peers who don't speak english.<sup>52</sup> As a corollary, digital media allow Bahujans with functional knowledge of English to participate in public discourse.<sup>53</sup> Educated Bahujans (mostly men) with greater class mobility have significantly benefited from internet access, which affords them a certain level of 'caste anonymity' to access work.<sup>54</sup> It also offers opportunities for community building, enables their political participation, helps in building caste solidarity, and allows a space for creating alternative media.

## 3.3

# Bahujan digital media

Bahujan literature and alternative media exist within a long history of Savarna oppression and Savarna domination of media, culture, and discourse. Publications such as *Mooknayak*, *Deenbandhu*, the *Dalit Panther Magazine*,<sup>55</sup> and *The Oppressed Indian*<sup>56</sup> were among the several Bahujan-run print publications that represented the voices of the caste-oppressed through the 20th century. Digital technologies such as social media and the internet further opened up opportunities for Bahujans to fill in the gaps left behind by Savarna-controlled mainstream and traditional media through independent publishing.

Historically, the Bahujan media has sought to write alternative histories and reject narratives constructed by the oppressor castes.<sup>57</sup> Contemporary Bahujan media has continued this tradition, using social media to circulate alternative readings of historical and contemporary issues and advocating for the causes and issues important to Bahujan communities. According to a 2014 study, the primary motivation of some Dalit internet users was to advocate for Dalit issues and associate with the larger Dalit population.<sup>58</sup>

Broadly, contemporary Bahujan digital media engages in:

1. **retelling history:** by writing its own historical accounts and alternate readings of mainstream narratives,<sup>59</sup>
2. **digital archiving:** through documentation of issues ignored by mainstream media,<sup>60</sup>

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55 . Harad, 'Phule to Panthers via Ambedkar'.

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56 . Velivada, "The Oppressed Indian", a Monthly Journal Was Started by Saheb Kanshi Ram - Velivada - Educate, Agitate, Organize'.

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57 . Kumbhojkar, 'Dalits, Internet y Politicas Emancipadoras'.

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58 . Kumar and Subramani, 'Internet as an Alternative Media for Dalits in India'.

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59 . Kumar, 'Internet Usage Pattern, Access and Utilization of Dalit Websites and Blogs by Dalits in India'.

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60 . Paul and Dowling, 'Digital Archiving as Social Protest'.



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61 . de Kruijff, 'The Dalit I Define':

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62 . Ibid.; Thirumal, 'International Exploration of Technology Equity and the Digital Divide':

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63 . Maitreya, 'My English Isn't Broken; Your English Is Brahmin':

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64 . Thirumal, 'International Exploration of Technology Equity and the Digital Divide':

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65 . Rabindran, 'The Subaltern Dalit Counterpublic'; Warner, 'Publics and Counterpublics'; Pallavi Rao, 'Democratizing the Op-Ed':

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66 . Thakur, 'New Media and the Dalit Counter-Public Sphere':

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67 . Kumar and Subramani, 'Internet as an Alternative Media for Dalits in India':

3. **articulating and asserting identity** in the process of self-expression and participation, and<sup>61</sup>

4. **connective mobilising**, with an individualised perspective and yet a shared sense of community, oppression, iconography, and ideas.<sup>62</sup>

The Bahujan alternative media consists of an assemblage of blogs, news portals, and archives presented in a variety of formats and capacities on social media, including textual expression, audio–video content, memes, visual arts, and more. The internet and digital media together offer a broader range of expression to Bahujans than traditional media, with the latter's need for upper-caste editorial English being replaced by a more accessible semantic understanding of the language.<sup>63</sup> Further, media produced by marginalised communities looks as "polished and professional" as Savarna media on a digital screen, adding to its "legitimacy", which was not possible given the material costs of production in traditional media.<sup>64</sup>

Some scholars have characterised Bahujan media as "counterpublics" who oppose "hegemonic ideas" through their very identity and their distinct worldviews based on shared experiences of oppression, a sense of community, and unique resistance models.<sup>65</sup> Bahujan digital media covers issues and subjects largely ignored by mainstream media, creating a space for Bahujan perspectives to be articulated without gatekeepers and barriers. Social media and blogs allow editorial and expressive freedom to Bahujans which the mainstream media limits or outright denies.<sup>66</sup>

*"Big media houses that own the major publications rarely give opportunity to Dalit (ex-untouchable) writers, and there's an absence of Dalit/anti-caste writers who write in English [...] I was not writing [on her blog] because anyone was commissioning me, I didn't have to follow other people's diktats, I could speak my mind. Google and tagging ensure that I can get heard without having my own column in any newspaper."* — Meena Kandasamy<sup>67</sup>

In addition to affording expression, Bahujan media — particularly social media — has become a site for identity formation for Bahujans, the same identities that mainstream media in India has invisibilised. Social media gives Bahujan youth a sense of “identity and community” which is not commonly afforded to them in either urban or rural spaces and in-person interactions, allowing them to explore what it means to be Bahujan. Particularly for Bahujans living in informal settlements, a lot of whom may not have stable addresses, the internet provides agency, allowing each to become an “individualised citizen” with the opportunity to “not only be heard and seen but to require a response.” For Bahujan internet users, the online and the offline are not separate spaces but are becoming an integral part of their lived reality and experiences.<sup>68</sup>

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68 . Harad, ‘Towards an Internet of Equals’.

Social media allows for new forms of activism in addition to enhancing existing activism. For Bahujan users, the internet has allowed the emergence of a collective identity, providing a sense of solidarity and community; it also provides safety in numbers for mobilisation and action.<sup>69</sup> However, Bahujan digital mobilisation is described as connective rather than collective, where individualised technology allows users to express themselves and participate in what inspires them without the need for collective mobilisation and the resources, uniform ideology, and symbols required for the latter.<sup>70</sup> A connective action entails a contribution to a common cause through personal expression and is often spontaneous and in reaction to important events, such as the resurgence of the #DalitLivesMatter hashtag in protest against various instances of caste violence and caste-based atrocities.<sup>71</sup>

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69 . Kumar and Subramani, ‘Internet as an Alternative Media for Dalits in India’; ‘Towards an Internet of Equals’.

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70 . de Kruijf, ‘The Dalit I Define’.

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71 . Saha, Rodrigues, and Pain, ‘Exploring the Digital Divide as a Component of Intersectionality through the #DalitLivesMatter Movement’, 2022.

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**72** . Thakur, 'New Media and the Dalit Counter-Public Sphere'.

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**73** . Saha, Rodrigues, and Pain, 'Exploring the Digital Divide as a Component of Intersectionality through the #DalitLivesMatter Movement', 2022.

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**74** . Patil, 'Debrahmanizing Online Spaces On Caste, Gender And Patriarchy'; Rao, 'Caste and the LoSHA Discourse'.

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**75** . Thaali, 'Rejecting Victimhood'.

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**76** . Ibid.

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**77** . Kumar, 'Between Rage and Silence'.

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**78** . Singh, 'With Stories of Her Oppressed Community, a Journalist Takes Aim at the Walls of Caste'.

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**79** . Patil, 'Debrahmanizing Online Spaces On Caste, Gender And Patriarchy'.

However, it is important to note that this activism is largely dominated by Bahujan men.<sup>72</sup> Bahujan men are also more likely to receive engagement and viewership than Bahujan women.<sup>73</sup> In addition, Bahujan women are invisibilised in mainstream feminist politics, which is dominated by Savarna feminist concerns.<sup>74</sup> At this intersection of caste, gender, and digital divides, Bahujan women use the internet and social media not just for entertainment but as a way to lay claim to public spaces<sup>75</sup> and to articulate lived experiences that challenge both Brahminism and patriarchy. Bahujan feminist internet users take up the important task of rejecting victimhood,<sup>76</sup> building community,<sup>77</sup> and telling stories<sup>78</sup> rooted in the epistemic reality of Bahujan women.<sup>79</sup>

# 3.4 The caste of digital media

While Bahujan digital media has enabled new opportunities for some Bahujans to express themselves, assert their identity, and organise, digital media in general is riddled with its own issues of caste. As Ragnedda states, “The Internet is least likely to promote structural mobility since its use relies on existing social structures.”<sup>80, 81</sup>

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80 . Shubham, ‘Caste and the Digital Sphere’.

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81 . Ragnedda, The Third Digital Divide.

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82 . CSDS, ‘Social Media & Political Behaviour’.

Bahujan representation is proportionately lower on social media compared to that of oppressor castes,<sup>82</sup> which has left Bahujans feeling under-represented or, worse, tokenised in even progressive digital spaces. For visible Bahujan users, opportunities for jobs and networking decline, as most Indians only fraternise within their own caste. For Bahujan internet users, any amount of caste criticality limits audience growth since the platforms are themselves Savarna-dominated.<sup>83</sup> More vocal Bahujans may feel their expression becomes limited to repeatedly portraying only hurt, victimhood, and rage. While there may be an illusion of listening, anything actionable needs Savarna approval.<sup>84</sup>

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83 . Chandran, ‘India’s Booming Creator Economy Is A Battleground For Dalit Artists | BOOM’.

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84 . Kumar, ‘Between Rage and Silence’.

As anti-caste, Bahujan-led publication spaces have emerged, so have reactionary and organised spaces for oppressor-caste ‘pride’. Private groups, meme pages, and YouTube channels have emerged that celebrate and promote caste purity, casteist practices, and hate speech against Bahujan internet users.<sup>85</sup> Social media platforms in their entirety have been segregated according to the Indian caste structure,<sup>86</sup> where platforms such as TikTok, with its easy entry point and substantial space for Bahujan expression,<sup>87</sup> are labelled “Shudra” and “cringe” by Savarna internet users,<sup>88</sup> whereas platforms such as Instagram, with one of the lowest Bahujan presences,<sup>89</sup> have been declared the ‘Brahmin’ of Indian social media, alluding to the ‘purity’, ‘cleanliness’, and eliteness of

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85 . Shubham, ‘Caste and the Digital Sphere’.

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86 . Yadav, ‘TikTokers Dubbed “Shudras of Internet”’.

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87 . Subramanian, ‘Bahujan Girls’ Anti-Caste Activism on TikTok’.

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88 . Verma, ‘Cultural Cringe’.

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89 . CSDS, ‘Social Media & Political Behaviour’.

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90 . Verma, 'How Instagram Reels Is a Mirror to Modern Casteism in India':

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91 . Shanmugavelan, 'Caste-Hate Speech and Digital Media Politics':

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92 . Thaali, 'Rejecting Victimhood':

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93 . Kiruba Munusamy, 'Intersection of Identities':

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94 . Chandran, 'India's Booming Creator Economy Is A Battleground For Dalit Artists | BOOM':

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95 . Cheema, 'Why Is Twitter Silent On Casteism Allegations In India Over Verified Accounts?':

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96 . Chandran, 'India's Booming Creator Economy Is A Battleground For Dalit Artists | BOOM':

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97 . 'Towards an Internet of Equals':

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98 . Vaghela, Jackson, and Sengers, 'Interrupting Merit, Subverting Legibility'; Omdevt, 'Untouchables In The World Of IT'; Kumar, 'Tech Was Supposed to Be a Meritocracy. In India, It Reinforces Old Caste Divides in New Ways':

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99 . Chandran, 'India's Booming Creator Economy Is A Battleground For Dalit Artists | BOOM':

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100 . Velivada, 'Rules of Modern Manusmriti That Apply Only to Dalits on Social Media'; Kiruba Munusamy, 'Intersection of Identities':

dominant caste expression on the platform.<sup>90</sup>

Openly Bahujan and anti-caste profiles have to face extensive caste-based violence and hate speech online, including death threats, caste shaming, mass reporting, and doxxing.<sup>91</sup> For Bahujan women, it adds another dimension to online gender-based violence (OGbV) when they don't receive adequate support from either Bahujan men<sup>92</sup> or Savarna women.<sup>93</sup>

Most social media platforms have only recently started incorporating the issues of caste in their policies, and even then, the policies are both inadequate and poorly enforced.<sup>94</sup> Further, Bahujan users have reported instances of algorithmic bias, as they feel their work does not get the expected traction and reach when compared to similar profiles of Savarna users. In addition, it has been claimed that 'verification', which was used by some social media platforms as a badge of 'authenticity' and 'notability'—often a key to extending reach and opportunities—was reported to be discriminatory against Bahujan and anti-caste profiles, with users reporting that verification requests of even very prominent Bahujan users were denied while relatively anonymous Savarna profiles were approved.<sup>95</sup> Even for profiles with significant reach, the opportunity to monetise their work is limited, with users reporting that "brands do not want to associate with anti-caste content".<sup>96</sup>

Although digital platforms allow Bahujans to express themselves, the platforms are themselves controlled by corporations, which have a history of suppressing marginalised communities.<sup>97</sup> Indian technology professionals primarily come from oppressor castes<sup>98</sup> and go on to build and govern a lot of these platforms, which may explain the often inadequate and occasionally casteist policies built into platforms.<sup>99</sup> At the end of the day, it is an oppressor caste-governed platform that decides who (or, which caste) is notable and who is not. Some Bahujan users characterise these platforms and their rules as a "modern-day Manusmriti."<sup>100</sup>

## 3.5

# Gaps in the literature

Research on caste, media, and the internet shows that mainstream media has been excluding Bahujans and their issues. Although digital media provides an alternative for marginalised communities, access to digital technologies is still a function of caste, class, gender, and language. While earlier work shows that digital media is being used by Bahujans to form an anti-caste counterpublic through digital publishing formats such as blogs and through individual expressions on social media, the Bahujan use of newer digital publishing formats such as short-form videos, memes, infographics, and podcasts isn't well studied.

Further, we find that earlier works have primarily engaged in content analysis of Bahujan publishing. Our understanding of Bahujan operational models is limited and fragmented: the infrastructural requirements, editorial processes, incentives, and challenges are not well understood. Also, the literature on Bahujan digital media has yet to adequately speak of the role of the platforms themselves. Finally, while there has been some recent attention to caste-directed hate speech on digital platforms,<sup>101</sup> the various aspects of Bahujan community building, expectations, and aspirations with respect to digital media have not been adequately studied.

In the following chapters, we expand this body of research and close some of the gaps through our conversations with 10 Bahujan publications about their operations, finances, challenges, and aspirations, among other subjects of discussion.

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<sup>101</sup> . Kain et al., 'Online Caste-Hate Speech: Pervasive Discrimination and Humiliation on Social Media'; Shanmugavelan, 'Caste-Hate Speech and Digital Media Politics'; Narayan, 'You Are Un-Welcome'.

# 4.

# Research Findings.

# 4.1.

| Why do Bahujans  
start publishing?

**Needs & Motivations**



## 4.1.1 Historical landscapes

The Bahujan digital publishers we spoke to emerged against a backdrop of (1) Bahujans having little to no representation in the media landscape and (2) the possibilities opened up by access to affordable digital technologies such as smartphones and the internet. Various publishers pointed out that when they started out, there were barely any spaces for Bahujan voices within mainstream media and literature. Although there is a rich history of anti-caste work by Bahujans in regional languages, they were not available or accessible to a broad readership and were often excluded from mainstream publishing and literary discourse.

Bahujan  
Sahitya

“ There was a show on Lallantop regarding books that used to call the authors to talk. I saw many episodes of it because I had an interest in books. I have never seen any people from the Bahujan community.”

Mainstream media, and even alternative media, has always been a hostile space for Bahujans. The small number of Bahujans who did make it into these spaces had little to no editorial say, especially when writing about caste. Bahujan publishers say that mere presence in these spaces did not guarantee a voice or editorial freedom for them. Additionally, they feel that the coverage of caste issues in the mainstream media is often biased and dehumanising. Misinformation and disinformation on caste were (and are) rampant in mainstream digital discourse, such as ‘caste was invented by the British’ and ‘reservations were meant for 10 years’. There has been an absence of accessible resources to learn about Bahujan histories and perspectives, and this is a continuing knowledge gap even today.

Finally, there has also been a lack of platforms (digital and otherwise) for and by Bahujan creatives, artists, journalists, and authors. While there has been a growing recognition of caste in alternative media, even mainstream ‘anti-caste publishers’ such as Navayana<sup>102</sup> are not owned and run by Bahujans. Our interviewees felt there was a need for platforms and spaces to express themselves freely, claim and assert their identity, represent Bahujan stories and histories, and give back to the Bahujan community. Thus, starting their

102 . Maitreya, ‘Roy–Navayana Project: Brahminic Violence on Dalit Intellectual Challenge – Round Table India’.

own digital publishing practice was an essential step in creating a space where Bahujan perspectives and stories could be told by Bahujans, for Bahujans.

These Bahujan publishers, then, started their projects in response to major political events of the last decade and the protests and activism that emerged in their aftermath. These included the ‘institutional murder’ of Dalit scholar Rohith Vemula (2016),<sup>103</sup> the dilution of the SC/ST Act by the Supreme Court of India (2018),<sup>104</sup> the passing of contentious CAA laws (2019),<sup>105</sup> and the gang rape and murder of a young Dalit woman in Hathras (2020).<sup>106</sup> Once they started expressing themselves online and participating in online caste-related discourse, their audiences grew and, over time, their online presence organically evolved into digital publishing projects. Then, in this decade, the COVID lockdowns and work-from-home arrangements (2020–21) provided opportunities for these publishers to invest more time and energy in these projects.

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103 . Raveendran, ‘The Legacy of Rohith Vemula’s Sacrifice Breathes Life to Campus Movements’.

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104 . AL Jazeera, ‘Dalits in India Hold Mass Protests to Demand Rights’.

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105 . Roy, ‘How the CAA Protests Ignited Hope and Prompted Indians to Reimagine Citizenship’.

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106 . Perrigo, ‘A Fatal Gang Rape Is Forcing a Reckoning in India Over the Caste System’.

“ I figured out that something is wrong in the country, and I wanted to talk out about it. I started using my own personal Instagram, but I realised that’s getting me in a lot of trouble. A lot of college people sent a screenshot to the college administration. I started [this Instagram page] to find an alternate space where I could express my political opinions without getting into trouble.”

## 4.1.2. Ideology and principles

This independent Bahujan publishing is driven by strong anti-caste ideologies and principles, positioned in opposition to Brahmanical approaches to knowledge and culture. Some publishers started out with clearly stated objectives, while for other publishers, the goals evolved over time. Publishers mention that while being ideological can be challenging, they find it essential to stay focused on their goals and mission and not get entangled in responding to ongoing trends and controversies.

Most of these publishers state that they avoid responding to controversial or sensational discourse as that can distract from and jeopardise their long-term goals, which include building independent and safe platforms for Bahujan history, creativity, expressions, discourse, and community. Instead of controversies, they prefer to talk about caste issues disregarded in mainstream media and online discourse. For them, making caste a part of the mainstream national and international discourse is essential for the anti-caste movement. To this end, one publication states that they decided to report in English because while there were discussions on caste in regional languages, English allowed the discussion on caste to go pan-India and made it part of the global discourse on cultures, intersectionality, and human rights.

DalitDesk

“ I think English journalism is important because your voice can reach pan-India. If we had restricted ourselves only to Hindi journalism, it would have limited us to North India. We started English journalism so that our voice could reach pan-India. It should reach globally because caste and manual scavenging are issues of human rights ”

Bahujan publishers aim to build a space where, unlike in mainstream media and online discourse, Bahujan voices are not censored but centred, where all facets of a Bahujan identity can be explored without constraining it in “niches of marginalisation and oppression”, as described by one publisher. Some publishers put particular emphasis on the intersectionality of Bahujan identities and stories, including issues of gender, class, fashion, climate, etc.

Our interviewees state that while caste tragedy, conflict, and rage drive engagement online, they want to navigate this space with care and consideration to represent the “full humanity” of Bahujan experiences, including joy and resistance. To this effect, publishers working with visuals mention how they are intentional about their aesthetic decisions, including the use of Bahujan colours, symbolism, and iconography of resistance and assertion over the prevalent images of Bahujan pain and violence.

Mavelinadu

“ In our visuals, you can see a lot of anti-caste motifs, symbols, and icons, but beyond that, we like to make sure that our goal, [the] hope of a utopia and [a] world we dream of, remain in the picture.”

Bahujan publishers mention that while they place special emphasis on fact-checking, accuracy, and referencing, they feel ‘objectivity’ is a contentious concept. Given the historic power differentials embedded in the context of exercising authority over culture and knowledge and the resulting politics of citations, objectivity is defined and dictated by the elite castes and is often used to erase Bahujan expression and experiences. Thus, these publishers try to bring subjectivity and sensitivity to their work, which is derived from their own lived experiences as Bahujan.

For most of these publishers, the focus is knowledge production and dissemination by and for the Bahujan community, as well as the education of allies in the anti-caste cause, rather than confrontations with casteist actors. Digital publishing serves as a space for community building through collective education, knowledge exchange, and shared stories. Thus, Bahujan publishers feel it is important to keep the content, its format, and its language accessible and approachable. Bahujan digital publications are often built on the foundation of community building, collaboration, and shared knowledge. One publisher characterises it as a form of Bahujan “digital commons,” which is in stark opposition to Brahminical restrictions on the flow of knowledge, hegemonisation of culture, and gatekeeping of communities.

“ If I want to look for any Ambedkarite art or resources on decolonisation and that kind of stuff, there are literally so many resources to pull from (for free) because the people who made them available believe in the same things as I do. This is like a digital commons. ”

To this effect, Bahujan publishers extensively share each other's work and the works of other Bahujan creators as a form of community storytelling, solidarity, and support. Finally, Bahujan publishers actively oppose the categorisation of their work as 'niche' anti-caste publishing. They see their work as challenging dominant and mainstream narratives and claiming those spaces for and by the majority—Bahujans—for long-term cultural impact.

“ We don't want to limit ourselves to only talking about the special days in the community. Since we are publications, we have a responsibility to do more. [...] We don't know how being mainstream will work out for us, but we for sure don't want our writings or the work to be categorised into some “alt” or “subaltern” genre. We want to be within the reach of people, and we want to be accessible.”

The Bahujan publishers we spoke to are working to achieve this long-term cultural impact through a diversity of approaches, including providing English access for the caste-oppressed, educating Bahujans about their history, challenging progressive narratives through an anti-caste lens, countering misinformation on caste, archiving anti-caste literature, reclaiming Indian visual culture with Bahujan imagery, creating spaces for Bahujan authors and creatives, and finally, building independent platforms for anti-caste discourse.

Online publishing by Bahujans serves as an important step in building anti-caste platforms and discourse for, as we discuss in the next chapter, the aforementioned anti-caste ideologies and principles are situated and operationalised within caste-coded realities of digital infrastructures and resources in India.

## 4.2.

What are the  
infrastructures of  
Bahujan publishing?

**Resources & Finances**

#### 4.2.1

### Platforms chosen by Bahujan publishers

Operating publications requires access to infrastructures normally not available to oppressed castes, as in India, access to resources is governed by caste histories and caste identity. While a move to independent online publishing has lowered barriers to access, publishing remains challenging for Bahujans in the absence of reliable access to technical infrastructures such as the internet, technical expertise, production equipment, financial support, and the safety nets of social security, temporal freedom, and mental health, all of which are not reliably available to Bahujans. Thus, Bahujan publishers mention having to make a difficult choice between contributing to an existing progressive publication or starting their own.

Working with an established progressive publisher offers Bahujans access to a larger audience, the safety net of a recognised name, the opportunity to gain experience in formal editorial workflows, and legitimisation of their work as a ‘valid source’ of knowledge. Most importantly, working with established publishers’ platforms allows Bahujan contributors to leverage existing infrastructures, networks, and resources to get their work out.

Anonymous woman writer

“ When a story goes through a known publication [instead of being self-published], it becomes more valid in the eyes of the public, as opposed to a social media post that has not been cross-checked and verified by editors. When one has to cite sources for research/academic purposes, one can refer to articles [by a known publisher], but one cannot refer to Instagram posts, even though the Instagram post could have been better or more informative.”

However, given the dominant caste nature of progressive and feminist publishing in India, anti-caste work gets toned down to make it ‘palatable’ and is restricted to niches and target audiences of the publisher. Quite often, it is also censored or simply rejected. Even when a pitch does get approved, it is limited by the publishers’ timelines, editorial goals, and technical requirements.

Anonymous  
woman writer

“Some editors and publishers try to tone you down or try to make your writing more palatable for their audiences. They cannot tolerate even basic conversations on caste; they say this target audience won’t understand this kind of thing.”

Thus, despite the risks, limitations, and lack of resources associated with operating independently, publishers choose it for the complete editorial and temporal control it affords them. It also allows Bahujan publishers to respond to the needs of their community as well as provide a space for them to articulate their experiences in their own raw voices, even without a formal training in publishing or journalism.

Anonymous  
woman writer

“Independent publishing is possible even for those who have just begun or those who might not be that [well-]trained. Either they could not go to an English-medium school or they had no access to the internet through their growing-up years. Yet, [through independent publishing], you are allowed to be complete and be beautiful in your flaws.”

The publishers we spoke to primarily started out and operate on popular social networking sites such as Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, and X (formerly Twitter). Although some publishers have their own websites or communication channels, social media is often integral to their publishing activities. While most publishers wish to move away from social media to exercise greater control over the medium, format, and audience interaction, the technical, temporal, and financial costs of starting their own platform are prohibitive.

For example, running one’s own website often requires publishers to have a good understanding of web development, web design, server deployment, content management systems (CMS), etc. While some of these can be outsourced, improvised, or managed through beginner-friendly low-code tools, as we discuss later, Bahujan publishers usually don’t have the funds, technical expertise, personnel, and time available to take on the extra tasks involved in running a website.



“ I also didn't know much about [hosting websites]. I didn't even have an estimate of how much it costs. [...] I could not afford to hire a professional web designer. [...] You need to know a bit of technical stuff, things like how a website functions, what a domain is, what a server is, how you host it, and what people see on the screen.”

Thus, publishers often end up opting for big social media platforms as they provide easy access to large audiences, have little to no platform costs, are easy to set up with low technical expertise, and provide opportunities for monetisation.

Despite Instagram's primarily urban and largely Savarna user base, it has slowly gained popularity among Bahujan publishers, especially after the ban on TikTok. It allows Bahujan publishers to reach large audiences through accessible visual formats like reels, infographics, digital art, short-form writing, etc. In the last few years, infographics and illustrations have emerged as particularly popular mediums for learning and unlearning about caste on Instagram.

YouTube has also found popularity among Bahujan publishers; some of the biggest Bahujan news publishers primarily operate on YouTube, including the likes of National Dastak, Mooknayak, and BahujanTV.<sup>107</sup> YouTube videos and short-form content are accessible, have a broader reach than other platforms, and also provide opportunities for publishers to monetise and financially support their work. This may explain why a significant amount of anti-caste content, especially in regional languages, is found on YouTube.

Podcasts are also emerging as a popular medium for Bahujan publishers, as they can be accessible and engaging for the audience and provide a verbatim representation of Bahujan voices too. Facebook and X (Twitter) are also important sites for Bahujan publishers to share their work and connect with their audiences.

<sup>107</sup> . Dilip Mandal, 'What Mooknayak Was for Ambedkar, YouTube Is for Dalits Today'.

While popular platforms provide an accessible entry point for self-publishing, as we discuss later in Section 4.4.2, these platforms can impose severe restrictions and limitations on political content, especially anti-caste content. Thus, some publishers choose to maintain their own websites as they allow for complete editorial freedom, archival documentation of their work, and greater platform control. Some publishers have also built custom distribution channels where they can communicate with their audiences directly (through WhatsApp, Telegram, and newsletters), sidestepping the restrictions, uncertainty, and censorship of social media platforms.

Further, most Bahujan digital publishers move between platforms as needed, often operating on multiple platforms simultaneously with different objectives. The publishers are also expanding their work through other forms of publishing and media-making, including print, news, media arts, etc. For most publishers, social media publishing is a transient phase and not central to their mission in the long run. As we discuss later in sections 4.4.2 and 4.6.2, most publishers wish to build their own anti-caste platforms, which social media platforms decidedly cannot be.

## 4.2.2. **Publishing workflows**

While the editorial processes vary for each platform and medium, we find most Bahujan digital publishers we spoke to use a mix of the following approaches: (1) using an anti-caste calendar, (2) responding to ongoing events, and (3) long-term editorial goals.

### **1. Anti-caste calendars:**

Publishers we spoke to maintain a calendar of significant events in anti-caste history. Mainstream media has erased, invisibilised, or co-opted anti-caste history; therefore, Bahujan publishers use these calendars to revisit and reclaim Bahujan history. This can involve celebrating the lives of important anti-caste figures, revisiting atrocities and acts of caste violence, reviving the memory of anti-caste protests and movements, and commemorating landmark events in anti-caste history. Although each publisher maintains their calendars independently, together they create a shared anti-caste memory that gets operationalised through publishers discussing different aspects of the event in parallel, with the discussion trending on social media, and histories entering mainstream cultural discourse. Dalit History Month, observed every April, represents the culmination of this editorial approach and its cultural impact.

### **2. Responding to ongoing events:**

Publishers also respond to ongoing events, political landscapes, and cultural conversations with the goal of providing alternative and anti-caste perspectives, especially on issues of significance to the Bahujan community, such as caste violence, caste discrimination, caste legislation, and media representations of caste. However, most publishers we spoke to indicated that they avoid reacting to events and controversies unrelated to Bahujan concerns, as that can distract from their editorial goals, eat into their limited resources, and put their operations at risk.

### **3. Long-term editorial goals:**

Some publishers decide their stories and other content based on pitches by contributors and audience suggestions, besides their own editorial goals. This allows publishers to focus on their long-term impact while producing content that is diverse, self-reflexive, reflective of Bahujan experiences, and

foregrounding under-represented and original ideas. Media such as podcasts, videos, and long-form publishing operate primarily with long-term goals, as these media demand more planning and have longer production cycles.

Since most Bahujan digital publishers have small teams, these processes are loosely defined and often reflective and reflexive, although for larger teams, multiple rounds of ideations and reviews are common.

More often than not, Bahujan publishers deploy media and formats where there are no precedents of anti-caste publishing. Thus, publishers don't have established processes, workflows, and examples to learn from. Further, due to the gatekeeping of knowledge and learnings within Savarna publishing circles, Bahujan publishers often have to develop their own processes from scratch through trial and error, while managing resource constraints.

Also, Bahujan publishers feel they have to be overly cautious with fact-checking, verification, grammar, and citations, as any small mistake can be used to question their 'merit' as a caste and also places them at disproportionate legal and political risk. In India, 'meritocracy' is often invoked by Savarnas to deny the work and educational qualifications of Bahujans.<sup>108</sup> Bahujan publishers feel that Bahujans are burdened by expectations of 'performing' merit and being 'exceptional', which is not demanded of comparable progressive Savarna or right-wing publishers.

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108 . Subramanian, 'The Caste of Merit'.

“ We have to cross-check and double-check our stories multiple times. They [casteists] say, “Since you are from a reserved category, you don't have any 'merit'.” That is why one has to be double sure [sic] to not make any mistakes. Meanwhile, there is this big mainstream channel with a lot of staff, resources, and money. They put up [a story claiming] there is a microchip in the 2,000-rupee notes. It was a massive error, but nobody questioned their merit.”

### 4.2.3.

## Infrastructure needs for publishing

Bahujan digital publications we spoke to are run by individuals and very small teams. The workload can be high, as independent publishers often have to take on multiple roles and tasks themselves, including administration, social media, web development, editing, and more. This is especially challenging and stressful for Bahujan digital publishers, as their projects are largely self-funded and often sustained through full-time jobs they do alongside their publication work.

Further, working in Bahujan publishing carries the risk of exposing one's identity and positionality, particularly for Dalits and Adivasis. Being publicly outed as Bahujan can pose significant risks to one's primary employment and reduce job opportunities, as casteism in hiring and workplaces remains prevalent in India.<sup>109</sup>

<sup>109</sup> . Siddique, 'Evidence on Caste Based Discrimination'; Banerjee, Memon, and Sharma, 'Casteism and Career Change in India'.

“ Any company you go to [for a job], they verify your social media profiles. They check your profile for what ideologies you have and what work you do [outside of office]. Thus, you don't get a job anywhere (because of your social media). Since my identity is public, it is difficult to say for how long I will be able to stay in a job.”

In addition to these risks, operating a publication requires a significant investment of skills and infrastructure.

Most publications, regardless of the medium, require some amount of research and writing skills. English education and training in editorial skills are unavailable to most Bahujans. While functional knowledge of English suffices in independent publishing, the supposed 'informality' of functional language does restrict access to formal publishing spaces and opportunities. Thus, Bahujan publishers such as The Satyasodhak also train their Bahujan contributors in editorial English and publishing workflows to prepare them for journalistic and editorial careers.

“ I used to see Bahujans struggling to get published in other publications. People might have good arguments, but they struggle with language. I help them in the process through my platforms, where they can publish.”

For social media, in addition to research and writing, skills in design and visual presentation are also important. Although tools for making visuals and infographics have become accessible and affordable (most Bahujan publishers use free software such as Canva, Figma, or PixArt), significant training and practice are still required to create high-quality visuals, which is important for audience engagement on social media. Some publishers do the visual work in-house, while others work with friends and colleagues experienced in visual design and marketing.

Working with audio and video content can be challenging for independent Bahujan publishers because of the high skill and infrastructural requirements of these media. Video work needs recording equipment, accessories, high-end computers, and expensive software, which can be difficult to access within Bahujan networks. Bahujan publishers often rely on phones for recording audio/video, improvised and ad-hoc setups, self-learning of skills through the internet, and pirated software, as they often don't have access to sufficient resources to rent equipment or outsource the work. This can have an impact on the production quality, which in turn can result in lower audience engagement.

“ You should have good lighting, a camera, a laptop, and a microphone. If you have these things of lower quality, then the quality of your production will also be lower and people will not watch it. People want more engaging content.”

Similarly, in audio podcasting, it can be challenging to procure equipment such as expensive microphones and access a quiet studio space. As a Bahujan podcaster points out, the availability of a private space is not always a given for a majority of Bahujans.

Clear Blue  
Skies

“ If you want to run a podcast like mine where I am putting in all of these effects and putting in news reports, putting in clips, etc., all this stuff is high [sic] production; while it doesn't need a lot of money, you do need privacy, space, and time [to record and edit]. I think that is why we don't have a lot of Ambedkarite podcasts.”

In addition to resource constraints, the absence of precedents in Bahujan publishing and lack of access to Savarna publishing networks dictates that first-time Bahujan publishers sometimes struggle to figure out what skills, resources, and infrastructure they need to get started in the first place. In the absence of access to Savarna publisher networks, a lot of time and effort goes into figuring out processes, workflows, and skills required for running a publication. Thus, some Bahujan publishers have started forming communities with other Bahujans, both offline and online, sharing knowledge and resources.

#### 4.2.4. Financing anti- caste work

Globally, funding for digital publishing has been in sharp decline, although for Bahujan publishers, it wasn't available in the first place. Nine out of the ten publishers we spoke to were self-funded at the time. All the publishers mentioned financial insecurities. Being underfunded impacts both the quantity and quality of the work produced, especially for financially intensive media such as audio and video. Further, with a lack of funding, publishers are unable to expand the scope of their work and struggle to sustain operations in the medium to long term.

Mavelinadu

“Everybody knows that publishing is not a field of making profits. We need to figure out a way to sustain ourselves. We have salaries to pay; we have frequent payments to make to keep this running. As of now, it's just limited to fundraising, applications for grants, and things like that.”

In India, the availability of funding is a function of caste networks and histories. Wealth and resources are distributed on caste and class lines, with a small percentage of dominant castes having access to the lion's share of resources. Studies have shown that funds and resources predominantly only flow within select caste groups. According to publishers, this makes fundraising extremely difficult in anti-caste work, as organisations do not fund Bahujan publishers, citing their 'too political and activist-y' nature, while similar projects run by Savarna publishers get funded.

Dalit Desk

“We were having an unofficial discussion on funding. The response would be that what we are doing is not journalism but activism. I know of several organisations that started after ours, but they get funding from everywhere. Their work can also be characterised as activism, yet nobody questions them. This is because of their caste connections — it's almost a nexus. This connection does not reach Dalit people.”



Independent publications are often operated informally; in the absence of relevant registrations, it is difficult for Bahujan publishers to access formal funding streams. Navigating registration processes, government regulations, and legal compliance takes significant administrative resources, which independent Bahujan publishers rarely have access to. Further, fundraising is also an extremely labour- and resource-intensive process, and in practice, it is still largely defined by access to dominant caste networks in national and international organisations.<sup>110</sup>

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**110** . Deshpande and Spears, 'Who Is the Identifiable Victim?'; Roohi, 'Giving Back'.

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**111** . Shetty, 'FCRA Licence Crackdown Has Plunged India's Non-Profit Sector into a Crisis'.

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**112** . CSR in India mandates companies with profits over ₹5 crore to spend at least 2% of their net profit on social initiatives, as outlined in the Companies Act, 2013.

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**113** . Bihari, 'Lack of a Dedicated Focus on Dalit in Corporate Social Responsibility Projects'.

For publishers who do manage to get through the processes, regulations such as the FCRA,<sup>111</sup> which regulates foreign funding for nonprofits, make it all but impossible for small publishers to access international grants and funding. One publisher tells us how in their experience, the CSR (corporate social responsibility)<sup>112</sup> wings of corporations refuse Bahujan publishers funding as they do not want to be associated with them or don't see value in discussing caste.<sup>113</sup> Corporates in India often overlook and invisibilise caste in diversity and equity conversations too. Some publishers mention that while they have been offered political funding on occasion, they tend to avoid it to maintain their editorial freedom.

“ If you are accepting the funding from some organisation, then you have to give them something in return. Most of the time, this clashes with our objectives. We don't want to do propaganda for anyone.”

In the absence of formal funding streams, publishers either self-fund (which can involve using up their personal savings or taking out personal loans and often puts them at severe financial risk) or rely on funding through public donations, subscriptions, advertising, etc. Some publishers use subscription management services such as BuyMeACup and Patreon. Since Bahujan publishers normally have a relatively small number of followers/readership compared to similar Savarna publishers, earnings from these avenues are insufficient. Further, recent changes in regulations on

114 . Anupam, 'Recurring Payments Conundrum & How It Has Shaken India's Subscription Economy Boom'.

recurring payment have severely impacted publishers operating on subscription models.<sup>114</sup> To supplement their income from subscriptions, many publishers — especially the ones working with visual media — have been exploring the sale of merchandise, art prints, books, etc.

Other publishers had to run multiple emergency donation drives in recent years just to keep going. Yet, while a donation drive every few months may rescue the organisation from an imminent shutdown, it often barely covers the minimal salaries and expenses of running a publication — which is not sustainable.

Bakery Prasad

“ The government keeps on changing the regulations. Last time they changed the regulations [on recurring payments], a lot of my patrons just dropped. People do not subscribe again. I have three or four Patreons left; that's just enough for paying my electricity bill.”

Dalit Desk

“ We survive on crowdfunding, which is not a sustainable model. If you are running an organisation, this should not be your financial model. Every four to five months, we have to do crowdfunding again. Our team is underpaid, and we are totally exhausted.”

Some platforms, such as YouTube and Spotify, allow users to monetise their content through advertisements; but due to low advertisement payouts and the unreliable reach of anti-caste content, this income is difficult to rely on.

One publisher tells us how advertisements that are played before anti-caste content are priced lower because of factors such as geography, audience, and content niche. The advertisement rates and the payouts are too low to make financial sense, even for publishers with 100,000 followers. Further, as we discuss later in Section 4.4.2, anti-caste content is at a higher risk of demonetisation, shadowbanning, and limitations on reach, making it difficult for them to rely on a consistent advertising income.

“ You get something like Rs 45 to Rs 70 per 1,000 ad views. Nobody wants to advertise on book content, even less on Bahujan books. High-value advertisements rarely come on a channel like mine.”

The financial landscape for Bahujan publishers is precarious due to factors such as caste-coded funding networks in India, administrative and regulatory hurdles, and the unreliability of advertisements and digital platforms. This financial precarity impacts not only the operations and viability of the publication but also the personal and financial lives of publishers. Some publishers mention relying on loans and informal borrowing to fund these projects, which has led to significant financial losses, decreased credit scores, and a severe impact on mental health.

Making things worse, public visibility as a Bahujan due to their publishing endeavours can lead to decreased employment opportunities and increased risks within jobs and promotion, making this a vicious financial cycle.

“ I tried to commit [sic] suicide twice within the last three years. If you have emotional support or financial support, then all the challenges and hate are fine; you feel no worries; you know you can do it. But if you are always thinking about how you will be able to pay the rent for this month, then it's very difficult.”

## 4.3.

Who engages with  
anti-caste content?

**Audience & Community**

## 4.3.1.

**The reach of  
Bahujan  
publishers**

Independent Bahujan publishers have to build their own audiences from scratch. Working with an established publisher gives one access to a large and established audience, but the audience is rarely well-informed about caste. This limits caste-related discourse by larger progressive publications to basic explainers on caste issues. Thus, for Bahujan publishers, going independent allows them to build and interact with audiences who can participate in more nuanced conversations.

Publishers find new audiences either through moments of virality (when a post or story on a subject organically goes viral) or through networks of other anti-caste publishers (when audiences of other publishers get algorithmic recommendations or are manually recommended by the publisher).

While some publishers try to follow online marketing tips on timing posts, adding elements, using specific keywords, and following ongoing trends to optimise their algorithmic reach, as we discuss in *Section 4.4.2*, most information on social media algorithms are just best guesses and often rapidly changing. Thus, for Bahujan publishers, word of mouth and anti-caste networks are often the most reliable ways to reach new audiences.

The reach of anti-caste content varies drastically and is often subject to platform censorship. Publishers feel their reach increases when discussing recent caste atrocities and violence or during events of Bahujan significance, such as Dalit History Month and Ambedkar Jayanti. Some publishers feel the stories of Bahujan pain and suffering get more reach and engagement than the stories of Bahujan joy and success. They attribute this to the very nature of social media, which encourages instantaneous responses and intense reactions to trending events, and the mainstream news cycle, which—when it comes to caste—often means a focus on caste atrocities and violence.

However, they feel audiences on social media can often limit Bahujan identities to victimhood. Bahujan publishers break out of this expectation of victimhood by actively diversifying the stories, experiences, and subject areas they talk about.

Dalit Desk

“When we show something related to atrocity, brawl, death, or crime with Dalit victims, people share it [on social media]. But when we share stories of victory or triumph, like someone’s child getting a government job and saving his parents from caste occupation, people don’t care. They [the audiences] wait for [a Dalit] death to care.”

### 4.3.2. **Relationships to audiences**

Anti-caste content finds an audience across caste groups, though exact demographics are hard to determine as analytics don't include caste as a category. Despite growing access to the internet, Bahujan presence on social media remains limited compared to that of Savarnas. Thus, publishers with large followings often have significantly large Savarna audiences. For the English-language publications we interviewed, a majority of the audience was young and urban, and for men-led publications, the primary audiences were men. While it is not possible to estimate the exact caste split in the audience demographics, most publishers experience a marked difference in how Savarna and Bahujan audiences interact with anti-caste content.

Some Savarna audiences identify as allies of the anti-caste cause. They respond positively, acknowledging their privileges and expressing gratitude for the education provided by the content. Although publishers mention finding it difficult to trust all Savarna audiences, as some can project stances of entitlement, an overt sense of guilt, being owed knowledge, and woke posturing. This often leads to uncomfortable and uninitiated interactions for Bahujan publishers.

As we discuss in Section 4.4.1, a portion of the Savarna audience reacts negatively to Bahujan content, often engaging in denial of caste issues, trolling in the comment section, caste-targeted hate speech, and threats to the publisher.

“ Savarna people tend to talk less about the ideas [in the podcast] and more about themselves and their personal lives. Once a person sent me a video link of her wedding without me asking. She said, “I am Brahmin, and my partner is Brahmin; our family is really oppressive.” I don't know what she wanted from me. We are strangers. Are they responding to my ideas or are they using me to get some validation?”

Bahujan audiences have a sense of ownership in the work, solidarity with the anti-caste cause, relatability to Bahujan experiences, and a sense of community. Thus, they predominantly respond positively, supporting the publishers' work. They are thankful to the publishers for giving voice to their thoughts and helping in learning about their own histories. They tend to provide constructive feedback and extend a hand of friendship to the publishers. With increased collectivisation and visible presence, Bahujan audiences also take up the critical role of defending publishers against trolling, harassment, and hate speech on social media platforms by voluntarily engaging with and reporting bad actors.

Ambedkarite  
Marxist

“Bahujans sometimes say that they wanted to say something but didn't have the words to say it. It makes them feel good that I said it in English and people understood it.”

Anonymous  
Meme Admin

“As the page gained popularity, Brahmanical trolls realised that followers and admirers of the page were quick to come to its defence. Now we hardly see any trolls on the page.”

While for most publishers, Bahujan audiences engage extensively with their content, in the experience of some publishers, Bahujan audiences engage publicly (liking, sharing, or commenting through named accounts) less frequently than Savarna audiences. Instead, they prefer to engage privately (over direct messages or through anonymous accounts). After all, as discussed, a Bahujan person's public engagement with anti-caste content can expose their caste location and thus put them at risk of harm, both online and offline.

In the experience of some publishers, a portion of Bahujan audiences question the 'authenticity' and Bahujan-ness of their projects, imposing a uniform and non-intersectional view of Bahujan identity, sometimes echoing Brahminical notions of caste purity.



Further, Bahujan women and queer publishers often face resistance, dismissal, and hate from within the Bahujan community as well. In the experience of Bahujan women publishers, who face multiple dimensions of marginalisation (including caste and gender), both Savarna women and Bahujan men engage in misogyny, name-calling, body shaming, and dismissal of their experiences. Thus, for Bahujan women and queer publishers, finding safety and community online is especially challenging, as neither feminist spaces nor anti-caste spaces are inherently intersectional.

Despite the contradictions and conflicts, Bahujan audiences form an essential part of the anti-caste communities of Bahujan publishers.

Dalit History

“ *Somebody said that you should not be publishing Dalit, Bahujan, or Adivasi content because you have a Brahminical surname [therefore not an authentic Dalit]. Being a Dalit itself is a lot [to deal with], and then being a female, it becomes too much. We get a lot of backlash from our own families and community.*”

Bakery Prasad

“ *I have noticed that whenever I draw women of the community, I get very few views. I think within the community, a lot of men do not engage with content about Bahujan women.*”

### 4.3.3. Community and publishing

Online anti-caste communities consist of loose groups of Bahujan publishers, Bahujan users, and allies of the anti-caste cause. For Bahujan publishers, these communities provide a sense of belonging—often for the first time. These communities become a safe space for the publishers because, in their public and professional lives, their Bahujan-ness is often suppressed or punished.

Clear Blue  
Skies

“ I am aware that there are factions, and people have disagreements. I don't like to get into [the conflicts] because this community has given me so much. For the first time, I feel like I fully belong somewhere. I don't want to jeopardise that by getting into some silly Twitter argument or such.”

Most publishers have strong relationships with other Bahujan publishers and audience members, often extending into their personal lives. These networks can take the shape of messaging groups, formal and informal collectives, and personal friendships. Publishers describe these networks as spaces for learning together, exchanging ideas, support, and mutual aid, spaces where they feel a sense of safety and ownership.

Anti-caste communities too actively engage in knowledge and cultural production, working with each other, collaborating, and sharing resources. One publisher described the last two decades as a “cultural renaissance” for Bahujans. As we discuss later, in the absence of institutional and platform support, these anti-caste communities play a central role in providing various forms of support for the Bahujan publishers.

Maveinadu

“ I find the anti-caste space online to be a very hopeful and collaborative community. It's extremely supportive. There is constant knowledge production. There's a sense of newness and hope in the way people in the community interact with each other.”

However, it is important to note that the anti-caste communities are non-homogeneous spaces with diverse lived experiences, dynamic relationships, and even conflicts. Issues of gender, class, religion, and caste are present within anti-caste spaces as well. Bahujan publishers from marginalised genders, minority religions, and non-metro backgrounds mention the difficulty of accessing support and speak of conflicts and lack of intersectionality within anti-caste spaces. They say that while conflicts and differences are unavoidable as they often deal with contentious topics and subjects, they try to limit confrontations within the Bahujan community as it can lead to deeper impacts on mental health and put the safe spaces they have built at risk.

“ There is a class divide within this caste divide. Within the Dalit community, 1 per cent of the children go to get a higher education. It should be their responsibility to work to fix this class divide and work towards the community’s upliftment. It cannot only be the responsibility of people like me. I don’t have any generational wealth or support.”

## 4.4.

What resistance  
do Bahujan  
publishers face?

**Digital Casteism**

**Note:**

Some quotes have been anonymised as “Anon” in the following section to protect the identities of participants.

Codified through religious texts, Bahujans have historically faced restrictions and violence in knowledge production. In addition to logistical, financial, and resource challenges, Bahujan publishers face systemic caste-coded challenges on and from digital platforms themselves. These include hate speech, harassment, and censorship on digital platforms and the failure of the platforms to provide recourse mechanisms and safeguards for Bahujan publishers.

#### 4.4.1. Caste-based hate speech

For these publishers, hate speech is an unavoidable and everyday reality of being a Bahujan online. While the rise of right-wing Hindu nationalism is sometimes cited as a reason for the prevalence of online caste hate speech, publishers contend that caste hate speech often comes from all across the Savarna political spectrum, including right-wing, leftist, feminist, and liberal positionalities. Bahujan women and queer publishers face gendered hate in addition to caste hate.

Anon

“ They say, “Go clean toilets”, “Go back to your forest”, or “Go get educated; you haven’t read anything”. If you are queer, it gets homophobic. If you say, “Muslims in India are facing a dire situation”, they call you a “jihadi” sympathiser and ask you to “go to Pakistan”. This sort of hate is very prevalent. It’s an everyday thing now.”

Hate speech often takes the shape of suggesting publishers “go back” to their caste professions, questioning their merit and educational qualifications, casteist abuses directed at the publisher or at other Bahujan figures, and shoehorning discussion of triggering topics such as affirmative action.

For some publishers, the majority of ‘engagement’ with their content happens to be hate speech. One publisher feels that the algorithm shows their content primarily to casteist users, whose negative reaction drives up the ‘engagement’, thus reaching more casteist users and leading to a vicious cycle of algorithmically enabled hate speech.

Anon

“Once a casteist viewer comments, the algorithm assumes that he is interested. Then the algorithm makes the content reach people in his network. Because of that, a majority of my viewers are now Brahmanical. That’s why my content is getting so much hate. If I had an Ambedkarite viewership, they would have written ‘Jai Bhim’ in comments instead of abuses.”

Publishers also experience doxxing, hacking attempts, and threats of physical, sexual, and legal harassment. Anonymous accounts tend to engage in more vicious forms of casteist harassment, trolling, and hate. Larger publishers have to deal with organised hate campaigns, malicious mass reporting, or templetaised casteist comments. Women and queer Bahujans are in particularly vulnerable positions, as they have to face both caste- and gender-based hate, sometimes from within the Bahujan community as well as Savarna feminist circles. Gendered and caste-based hate speech additionally includes body shaming, slut shaming, unwarranted advances, and threats of sexual violence.

Anon

“They say that [my opinions] are a result of the reservation policy, and I am not so well-read. They don’t know that I have read more books than they have ever seen. I get a lot of hate comments like this. Some say that I have a very ugly face and that I look like a pig.”

Bahujan publishers feel platforms do not have adequate tools and policies in place to deal with online casteism. Until very recently, caste was not a protected category on most social media platforms. Even now, platforms regularly fail to detect and take action on casteist language and other forms of caste-based harassment. Further, publishers say even manually reporting caste hate does not ensure action by the platforms, as platforms more often than not claim to find no violations of their policies. Platforms are either unwilling or unequipped to address online casteism.

Anon

“ We try to report [caste hate speech], and then nothing happens. Instagram doesn't find anything problematic. We feel disappointed and hurt. First, there is [the] trauma, and then [platforms] deny that trauma. We can't even state our pain or our hurt. The algorithm is rigged in their [oppressor castes] favour.”

Anon

“ Meta and Twitter exhibit double standards when it comes to content moderation between the West and India. In the West, they have a zero-tolerance policy for content from white supremacists and neo-Nazis. However, in India, content from Brahmin supremacists (including various 'trad' Reddit and Discord groups, Twitter handles and Instagram pages) spreads casteist content under the guise of humour or 'dank' memes, yet it rarely faces moderation.”

This follows the state of legislation on caste in India. Anti-caste activists have flagged recent judgements on laws such as the Prevention of Atrocities (PoA) Act as a dilution of the legal protection provided to SCs and STs against caste discrimination and violence.<sup>115</sup> While rulings have classified some forms of online caste hate as being within the purview of the PoA Act, its enforcement remains poor.

Thus, Bahujan publishers are left to navigate online casteism and hate on their own. Some navigate it by manually deleting comments and limiting their comment section; others navigate by blocking or not responding to users engaging in caste harassment. In some cases, publishers are left with no choice but to stop working, take an extended time off, and self-censor to protect themselves. The failure of platforms to provide protection and safety to their Bahujan publishers puts these individuals at risk of physical, social, and legal harm, deeply impacting their work and personal lives. Further, dealing with caste harassment and hate speech takes a severe toll on the mental health of publishers, including burnout, low self-esteem, anxiety, and depression.

115 . Huchhanavar, 'From Transformation to Dilution'.

Anon

“When we put on this [story about a caste atrocity], people wrote in the comment section that the editor himself a [casteist abuse]. It had become very toxic. We had to turn off the comment section. How much can you report [to platforms]? Now, we ignore such things. Platforms say it doesn't violate our policy. There is no caste option in their report menu. If the comment is very toxic, we just delete it.”

Anon

“I feel sad that I miss important comments or good DMs. I get so much hate and threats that I have stopped interacting online. It's very common to see “You go feed the pig” or “Clean the gutter of my street” in the comments. Once a person wrote, “We know where you live; we know where your parents live in [city name].” I got really scared.”

In defiance of the rampant caste hate, some publishers see this response to their work as validation of them asking difficult, uncomfortable questions and challenging power structures. This includes the digital platforms, which are not only indifferent but complicit and also responsible for online casteism.



#### 4.4.2.

### Caste on platforms and their algorithms

116 . Cotter, “Shadowbanning Is Not a Thing”; Are, ‘The Shadowban Cycle’.

In addition to failing to curb online caste hate, publishers feel platforms themselves pose a challenge to their work. Most publishers mention experiencing some form of ‘shadowban’, a colloquial term used to refer to opaque restrictions on algorithmic reach, which is in line with the experiences of other marginalised and political content creators worldwide.<sup>116</sup> Publishers find that their audience reach and engagement reduce significantly and without any explanation, despite having significant follower counts. The content is simply not shown to their followers consistently.

Bakery Prasad

“A lot of people have told me that they can’t see my work on their feeds. They have to type “Bakery Prasad” in the search bar to get to my profile. Now they follow my hashtag, because of which they get to see my work.

In the absence of explanations from the platforms and the opaqueness of their algorithms, publishers are left to guess what causes this reduced reach and engagement. Publishers think content on caste gets flagged by social media because it often deals with violence and atrocities. In the experience of some publishers, content that was doing well suddenly stops reaching audiences, raising doubts about how organic the change might be.

Bahujan Sahitya

“Right now, I feel like I am shadowbanned. For example, 1,00,000 views were coming on a single video in one day, and suddenly, it’s not getting even 1,000 views. Views decrease gradually; it doesn’t happen all of a sudden.”

Other publishers think that anti-caste content sometimes gets mass-reported by casteist audiences, which leads to algorithms flagging their content. One publisher on YouTube mentions how their content reaches a right-wing casteist audience more than their followers, as more people engage with the content through hate speech.

Publishers have received alerts from platforms that their content violates ‘community guidelines’. The platforms not only fail to specify what guidelines are violated, but the appeal mechanisms are also slow and ineffective — if they

exist at all. Most reporting and appeal mechanisms are automated, with very limited human oversight. Publishers also feel that social media platforms are rapidly moving towards favouring short-form video content over images and text, the formats often preferred by anti-caste publishers.

Dalit Desk

“ They automatically restrict the reach of [reporting on caste atrocity] contents. The platforms say you can’t show violence. We had done a story on Instagram last year. It was about a tribal woman who was sexually harassed by people on the road. We uploaded that video after censoring it. Many people reported that post, and Instagram deleted that post, citing community guidelines. That case had gone to Meta’s oversight board.”

Bakery Prasad

“ Four of my artworks were taken down for not adhering to the community guidelines. I don’t know what those guidelines are.”

Since there are no explanations from platforms on their algorithmic decisions and appeal mechanisms, publishers have to rely on colloquial knowledge to circumvent shadowbans. Publishers have started asking followers to turn on notifications or follow their hashtags for new content. Some have started sharing their work with audiences through direct channels such as websites, WhatsApp, and newsletters. Publishers have also started using euphemisms and avoiding sensitive imagery to avoid getting flagged by algorithms.

Recently, in the fallout of the Israel–Gaza war, platforms have started actively moving away from progressive political content;<sup>117</sup> X has started cracking down on conversations on race and gender,<sup>118</sup> and Instagram has declared itself an apolitical platform.<sup>119</sup> Further, contentious legislation such as Section 69A of the Information Technology Act and the Draft Broadcasting Regulation Bill further threaten independent political content. In April 2024, the Government of India invoked the IT Act, instructing YouTube to block National Dastak, a news platform that discusses Bahujan and caste issues. This makes the work of Bahujan publishers more precarious and uncertain.

117 . Deconstructed, ‘How the Gaza War Is Reshaping Social Media’.

118 . Defosse, ‘I Coined the Word Cisgender. Here’s Everything Elon Musk Gets Wrong about It’.

119 . Guzman, ‘Instagram’s Political Content Limit’.

While publishers have found some informal ways to navigate the platform challenges, they feel platforms and their algorithms restrict, limit, or, in some form, censor anti-caste work. Most Bahujan publishers mention that the reach of their content is unpredictable and in decline, which makes it extremely difficult to sustain or rely on social media platforms for publishing work, especially financially. This uncertainty adds to the social, financial, professional, and emotional precarities of doing anti-caste work.

### 4.4.3. Navigating mental health

120 . Johri and Anand, 'Life Satisfaction and Well-Being at the Intersections of Caste and Gender in India'.

Caste and mental health are intrinsically linked: Bahujans are more likely to struggle with mental health than members of Savarna castes.<sup>120</sup> Most publishers mention facing mental health challenges, which had a negative impact on their publishing, professional, and personal lives. Working on anti-caste content is challenging for mental health as it often deals with triggering subjects such as caste violence, discrimination, and trauma. Publishers mention that the subjects they deal with can leave them emotionally drained, hopeless, and burnt out.

Mavelinadu

“ The nature of the work is really difficult and requires a lot of responsibility. It is difficult to keep creating pieces of culture that speak to very painful experiences for all of us.”

Bahujan  
Sahitya

“ Dalit literature is depressing. There is little in it to motivate someone. The news is also very depressing. There is news of rapes, someone being paraded naked, or someone not allowed to keep a moustache. When you see such news and you read painful books, you produce similar content.”

Dalit Desk

“ When you wake up in the morning, you see caste violence has happened somewhere. A girl, nine years old, was raped in Delhi Cantt. She was burnt alive. We were covering the story from there. We were on the ground. When we came back after those six days, we couldn’t sleep for 3–4 days. We were trying to sleep, but we were unable to do so. Same thing happened in Hathras too. We had isolated ourselves for 2–3 days. We did not feel like talking to anyone.”

Further, hate speech, harassment, and the platforms’ failure to safeguard them against these have a severe impact on the mental health of publishers. While most publishers take some steps to distance themselves from the hate, the emotional toll is high and can lead to a decline in self-confidence and trigger caste trauma.

Anon

“ My parents and family should not be in danger because of me. I went into depression. I thought I’d stop doing it [making anti-caste work], I’ll take a job. But I am not able to do that. Because I am a product of this anti-caste movement.”

Anon

“ I have to hear things like, “We will rape your mother”, “We will mistreat your sisters”, “We will kill you”, or “Give us your address”. There was even an attempt to hack my account. How can a person be positive when he is financially broke and mentally ill? When he’s getting so much hate and has no support systems?”

The financial precarity of independent publishing adds to the emotional toll. Bahujan publishers often come from humble social and financial backgrounds and are not afforded safety nets and social security to sustain themselves through financial difficulties.

Most publishers mention facing emotional burnout and struggling to focus on their publishing work, while some seek professional mental health support such as therapy and counselling. In addition to mental health support being unaffordable, it is rarely caste-conscious and caste-affirmative for Bahujans.<sup>121</sup> These publishers have faced instances of their very mental healthcare providers making casteist remarks.

121 . Paul, ‘Is Therapy in India Inherently Casteist?’

Anon

“ I have tried therapy, and one of the therapists sent me this article on how reservation is killing merit. Even finding a therapist is difficult for the community.”

In the absence of support from either the platforms or the mental healthcare system, publishers rely on their communities and networks to navigate their mental health. Some publishers are part of support groups, while others rely on close friends and families.

Anon

“ People have made their own support groups on Facebook and Instagram. But on a larger level, there is no support available. There is no dedicated person; there is no organisation; there is no helpline.”

Publishers also try to safeguard their mental health by protecting the identity of contributors, limiting their audience interactions online, blocking harmful users, and not responding to harassment. Publishers also take extended time off from social media and the internet to process and heal.

Anon

“ The only solution that I have [for maintaining mental health] is ignorance. Sometimes I'm not there on the platform for a week. I just vanish and not see anything, not do anything, and try to get better.”

Some publishers have started diversifying their anti-caste content to include stories of anti-caste joy, achievements, and resistance in addition to those of trauma and violence, seeking in this way to avoid burnout, maintain optimism, and build hope.

Anon

“ Some works I never published because they are too violent. There is too much blood of my people and mutilations of our bodies. We get stressed and depressed every time an atrocity happens anywhere. So, I actively try to bring imagery that is powerful and hopeful rather than depressing or violent.”

## 4.5.

How do Bahujan publishers view mainstream progressive movements?

## 4.5.1.

## Contention with mainstream progressive & feminist discourse

When asked about their relationship to progressive movements and publishing projects, Bahujan publishers predominantly felt that these, including mainstream feminist discourse, did not adequately support the anti-caste cause.

The feminism discourse is dominated by Savarna feminists. The space often ends up being an exclusionary echo chamber for the concerns and worldviews of Savarna women and does not include Bahujan women, transgender people, or queer people.

Similarly, Bahujan publishers feel liberal–progressive discourses are stuck in a non-intersectional dialogue on religious marginalisations, fail to acknowledge and make caste visible, and are often dominated by Savarnas across religious identities. According to Bahujan publishers, progressive spaces can often be actively harmful and oppressive towards Bahujan identities.

Mavejinadu

“Folks from the [Bahujan] community end up having really bad experiences with non-profits, NGOs, and progressive spaces. The casteist mentality [of Savarnas] doesn't go away.”

Anonymous  
Woman Writer

“A minority of upper caste, upper class, and metropolitan women in India are termed mainstream feminists. Most women in the country do not fall into these categories at all, nor do I.”

As caste has entered mainstream discourse through the work of Bahujan publishers, anti-caste ‘allyship’ has become commonplace online. However, Bahujan publishers feel this solidarity does not extend beyond social media, as support, collaboration, and funding rarely come from outside of the anti-caste networks. The progressive Savarnas do have access to cultural, social, and economic capital, which they gatekeep from Bahujans.

Mavelinadu

“ Most progressive spaces are dominated or gatekept by uppercase people who pretend to be liberal and progressive. But they do not want to let go of their caste power and cultural capital. We try to keep away and avoid collaborating with them.”

Clear Blue Skies

“ The people who are going to make the most monetary and professional benefits [out of anti-caste work] will be Savarnas. They want to capitalise on it. True allyship is only possible if they properly credit and compensate Bahujans for all the work they have put on the internet for free. It should not lead to us being tokenised.

If you look at [progressive publications], everyone wants to do content on caste and politics but is deeply apolitical. They might hire a few [Bahujan] people to write about [caste] or do some exhibition on it.

But are they committed to the anti-caste cause? Will they still put out anti-caste content five years from now? I don't know. “

While progressive digital publications have started picking up caste as a topic, Bahujan publishers do not feel convinced of their commitment to the anti-caste cause beyond a ‘trend’ to capitalise upon. A cursory glance at the comments section of these publications shows that a vast majority of progressive Savarna users respond negatively to caste-critical discussions. Further, Bahujan publishers feel that only Savarnas are able to monetise scholarship and publishing on caste, while Bahujan identities are left to be tokenised, appropriated, and face caste hate. Thus, independent and Bahujan-led digital publishing is essential for the anti-caste movement.



## 4.6.

How do Bahujan publishers think about the internet?

**Futures & Aspirations**

### 4.6.1. **Reflections on the internet as it is today**

Publishers we spoke to largely feel that the internet has provided spaces for anti-caste discourse and organising that were not available to Bahujans in the past. The internet has opened up access to knowledge for Bahujans not only in metros but also in small towns and rural areas—anyone with access to a smartphone can access and participate in anti-caste knowledge work now.

The publishers say that over the years that they have been active, they have noticed an increasing number of Bahujans becoming visible and assertive across mediums. Mithran T. Samuel calls this moment akin to a “cultural renaissance” for Bahujans, where Bahujans are coming together, collaborating, and learning with each other to reclaim, reframe, and reshape knowledge and cultural production, both online and offline.

Dalit Desk

“ Without the internet, it would be impossible for someone like me to launch a news press or broadcast channel. You need crores to do it. Due to the internet, it has become easy. With just a mobile and an internet connection, you can start writing. You can start citizen journalism. You can start talking about your issues on social media. Social media is a revolution for the marginalised communities.”

Although the internet and independent publishing have allowed Bahujans to claim their own space and narratives online, in its current form, the internet retains and reproduces the caste characteristics of Indian society. As the internet is dominated by Savarnas, platform policies are designed around (and by) them and thus fail to account for the concerns of its Bahujan users and publishers. Publishers feel the internet is not a democratic force in its current state and that social media platforms cannot be trusted for long-term anti-caste work. Without transparency and democracy in the working of algorithms, policies of platforms, and composition of people making decisions, social media platforms cannot provide safe and sustainable spaces for the anti-caste cause.

“ The internet is dominated by people with power and money. Earlier, for a YouTube channel, you needed a basic setup and simple production, but now you require professional-grade cameras and other expensive resources. These resources are not available to our community. So even beyond just overt forms of gatekeeping and casteism, there are things like this that we cannot access. How will we be able to create a voice for ourselves?”

Publishers point out that a vast majority of Bahujans impacted adversely by caste do not have access to the internet. A lot of Bahujans are accessing the internet for the first time, especially in rural areas. Without the knowledge of how to use the internet effectively for education and collectivisation, they are at high risk of misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda. Thus, publishers feel that while the internet has been a great catalyst for anti-caste causes, it cannot liberate Bahujans. A radical reimagination of the internet is required.

“ People are getting booked for Facebook comments and WhatsApp statuses. How can it be a Dalit Bahujan Adivasi internet? How can it be a feminist internet if people with the least amount of protection don't have the most freedom?”

## 4.6.2. **Imagining an anti-caste internet**

We refer to this re-imagination of the internet as an anti-caste internet. While the publishers have differing opinions on whether an anti-caste internet is possible in the current social, economic, political, and technological landscapes, when asked about how they see an anti-caste future of the genre, they shared some broad principles of what an anti-caste internet might look like. For publishers, an anti-caste internet is a space that is:

1. **feminist and intersectional** in its approach, and a space for Bahujan women and queer folks,
2. **sensitive and inclusive** of all identities, marginalisations, and positionality, and a space for shared safety,
3. **proportionally representative** of the Bahujan population in all aspects, including as an audience as well as content creators,
4. **connected to the masses**, including urban as well as rural Bahujans and their concerns,
5. **not limited to stories of violence**, publishers don't need to only talk of their pain, hurt, and violence to be heard,
6. **a utopia of Bahujan joy and creativity**, where Bahujans can tell stories of happiness and build beautiful things,
7. **takes the anti-caste work of the past forward**, celebrates the work of anti-caste activists, and builds upon it for the future,
8. **strong platform regulation and sensitivity on caste**, a place where a Bahujan doesn't feel threatened to be themselves, and where caste hate speech and harassment don't go unpunished and Bahujans feel safe,
9. **algorithmically fair and transparent**, where anti-caste content is not throttled without explanation and recourse,
10. **Bahujan-owned and controlled**, when platforms are built and run by Bahujans themselves, creating a place without censorship and Brahminical limitations.

Bahujan digital publishers feel the existing internet and social media platforms cannot be trusted to build this anti-caste internet. As demonstrated by Meta's recent policy changes for political content (where political content is given lower priority in the algorithmic feed), relying on corporate platforms leaves publishers in a precarious situation and leaves Bahujans at the mercy of the platforms. Thus, for most publishers, platform, technological, and financial sovereignty are their primary long-term goals. Siddhesh Gautam ( Bakery Prasad ) felt the distribution of resources and technology access has been based on caste and class lines, where technological solutions tend to only serve the interests of elite caste groups. Thus, equitable distribution of technology and proportional representation within tech platforms are essential for building an anti-caste internet.

Dalit  
Desk

“ The day when we don't have to publish stories of violence  
The day when we are not abused for writing something, that  
would be Begumpura. “

Mavelinadu

“ Begumpura or a Mavelinadu would be when we do not have to talk  
about caste and our painful caste experience at all. We would just talk  
about beautiful flowers and beautiful oceans all day. We would be  
making music because the day is beautiful. Caste will stop existing;  
gender will stop existing. That would be the ultimate utopia.”

Anonymous  
Woman  
Writer

“ I think it's time to start our own platform, which may coexist on  
social media platforms but will also be independent. A lot of anti-  
caste accounts post on Instagram, Twitter, or Facebook. We need  
our own websites and our own newsletters.”

Despite the recent mainstreaming of caste on the internet, there is resistance and active opposition in Savarna-dominated political, economic, technology, media, and policy establishments to undertake radical reforms towards caste justice, both online and offline. According to Sahil Valmiki the accountability of building an anti-caste internet and society has to be taken by the Savarna establishment, as they have created and benefitted from the caste system at the cost of Bahujans. At the same time, Bahujans must be centred and lead this process of building the anti-caste internet.

Dalit Desk

“ This question (on building anti-caste internet) shouldn't be asked of the marginalised communities. This question should be asked to upper-caste people. Caste runs in your mind subconsciously right from childhood. You can't learn in one day from somewhere. It's not our responsibility to tell you how to unlearn. After these many years of our work, if you can't manage to learn, then you either can't learn or you don't want to learn. The process of caste annihilation should not be entirely on our shoulders. We have not created the caste system, but you have.”

Further, publishers feel that doing anti-caste and resistance work is becoming difficult. While anti-caste voices are becoming stronger, so is opposition from the caste structure. With the increasing shift towards dominant right-wing ideologies, doing anti-caste work has become extremely challenging with increasing polarisation, surveillance, draconian regulations, and rising caste and class inequalities. In the face of this pushback, publishers feel that for Bahujan internet users, organising together, building community, sharing knowledge, and offering mutual aid forms the way forward towards an anti-caste internet.

Mavelinadu

“ With the kind of surveillance today, it's becoming harder to come together and organise against oppressive forces. Caste is getting reinforced; gender is getting reinforced. The government is actively trying to interfere with our nutrition, our lives, and our education.”

Clear Blue Skies

“ People [Bahujans] are setting up their own magazines; people are figuring out how to get grants and funding from abroad. They are getting each other into graduate schools and jobs. The only way forward for us is in knowing and supporting each other [...] Structural change can only happen through us; the Savarnas will just tokenise our lives.”

Finally, according to these publishers, building an anti-caste internet has to be interlinked with anti-caste work in political, economic, social, and technological spheres, as digital work by itself has severe limitations. The online anti-caste work needs to lead to on-ground social work, as an anti-caste internet can only exist in an anti-caste society.

# 5.

# Takeaways

# 5.1 Publishing as a socio-technical response

Bahujan publishing can be called a socio-technical response, where the social conditions and opportunities created by new technologies are intertwined. Digital Bahujan publishers have largely started in response to shifting political landscapes within India, where caste oppression, while increasingly invisibilised, has only strengthened through the weakening of legal protection and schemes for Bahujans, incarceration of Bahujan activists, increasing religious and caste violence, and digitisation of caste through digital technologies.

Internet and mobile access have greatly lowered the barriers to entry for Bahujans to organise and pushback against this strengthening of caste structures through anti-caste discourse, knowledge and culture production, and community building. Despite extreme resource constraints and pushback, these publishers are ideologically driven, adaptable, and reflexive in their use of evolving social media trends, emergent digital mediums, and rapidly shifting technological, algorithmic, and policy landscapes.



## 5.2 Publishing as a community

Bahujan publishing exists primarily within online anti-caste communities. These communities include other Bahujan publishers, Bahujan audiences, and anti-caste allies. Bahujan publishers have a strong sense of responsibility and commitment to anti-caste movements and are deeply involved in these anti-caste communities. This includes having a strong relationship with their readers, promoting each other's work, sharing resources, and providing support systems to each other.

These communities organically lead to collaboration, the cross-pollination of ideas, synchronised content programming, and close friendships. Anti-caste communities help each other navigate resource constraints to raise funds, build safe spaces to provide critical mental health support, provide safety from hate speech, and build resistance and resilience together.

Although publishers can have very different experiences interacting with other Bahujan publishers and Bahujan users, differences and conflicts are also common owing to different caste and class backgrounds, lived experiences, viewpoints, and other intersectionalities within these communities. For Bahujan women and queer folks, the promise of the anti-caste community doesn't always materialise, however, as they can face gendered resistance within anti-caste spaces in addition to facing caste in feminist spaces.

## 5.3 Caste as a publishing infrastructure

In India, access to opportunities, infrastructure, and resources is governed by caste histories. Savarnas (including progressive persons and entities) rarely collaborate or share their resources and learnings with Bahujan publishers. This leaves Bahujans to figure out the processes and resources on their own, with no precedents of Bahujan publishing to learn from.

Further, Bahujan publishers often do not have access to financial resources to start and sustain their publishing activities. Monetisation is not reliable due to the uncertainty of social media algorithms and policies. Institutional funding is marred with complex compliance requirements and limited to Savarna caste networks. Therefore, anti-caste work is often precariously self-funded by publishers and sometimes survives through emergency funding drives. Thus, Bahujan publishers are unable to acquire the equipment, expertise, and time needed for their work. This impacts the frequency and quality of their content.

While independent publishing in India has flourished with the introduction of the internet, only Savarna-run publications have managed to attain some level of financial sustainability and mainstream success. This is in large part because of the Savarna domination of media and funding landscapes, which operate as caste nexus. Bahujan publishers are often not allowed in this space, and when they are, they risk being exploited or tokenised.

## 5.4 Caste-based hate speech as a platform responsibility

Caste-based hate speech is rampant on social media platforms. Hate speech comes from across the political spectrum and is almost unavoidable for most publishers. Online hate can lead to targeted attacks, doxxing, and risk violence. It takes a severe toll on the publisher's mental and emotional health. This especially hurts Bahujan publishers from smaller towns, women, and queer folks.

While this hate is largely rooted in everyday casteism in Indian society and the vocal Savarna preponderance of social media, the prevalence of caste hate speech can also be characterised as failure or indifference to social media platforms. Most social media platforms are inconsistent in their enforcement of caste hate speech policies. Automated content moderation often fails to detect caste hate speech and instead falsely flags and reduces the reach of anti-caste content. Further, manual reporting of caste hate rarely results in any action by the platforms.

While this can be attributed to inadequate training of moderation algorithms and insufficient caste sensitivity within moderation teams, it can also be characterised as the indifference or complacency of tech platforms towards caste. Ultimately, Bahujan publishers are left on their own to manage hate speech through blocking, deleting comments, disabling comment sections, or reducing online interactions.

## 5.5 The uncertain future of anti-caste content

In addition to their failures to curtail caste hate speech, social media platforms regularly throttle anti-caste content. Bahujan publishers often experience 'shadowbanning', which can result in a drastic reduction in the algorithmic reach of their content. Posts discussing caste and caste incidents often get flagged by social media and taken down, with little to no recourse or appeal. The reach of Bahujan publishers varies wildly and unexplainably, which makes it difficult for them to rely on social media for audiences and monetisation. Social media algorithms are opaque, and platforms rarely provide explanations and tools to understand them, so publishers are left to navigate them on their own through colloquial knowledge.

Through this opaqueness of algorithms and their indifference to the concerns of Bahujans, social media platforms embed casteism. Bahujan publishers face a triple whammy: algorithms that suppress anti-caste content, social media platforms moving away from political content, and contentious legislation that censors independent political content.

# 5.7 Anti-caste internet as a vision

Digital Bahujan publishing has emerged as a cultural renaissance for a new generation of anti-caste politics online. A growing number of Bahujans are coming online and expressing themselves, sharing knowledge, building communities, shaping discourse, and leading political action. Yet, the internet and social media platforms remain caste-coded.

Most publishers do not believe that digital platforms will be able to sustain the anti-caste movement in the long term. Any changes in their algorithm and policies can make the already precarious work of Bahujan publishers unfeasible. Publishers want a radically different vision of the internet and platforms. Publishers expect better transparency, enforcement, and sensitivity about caste from existing platforms.

Further, Bahujan publishers desire platform sovereignty—to own and control their own platforms and to be able to control what they put out and how it reaches their audiences—and a vision of the internet that works towards the annihilation of castes, both online and offline.

6.

Afterword.

Bahujan digital publishing builds upon rich histories of anti-caste work and brings it to digital spaces. While the study shows challenges related to finances, infrastructures, and hate speech, Bahujan digital publishing, more than anything, manifests the needs, desires, and aspirations of Bahujans for an anti-caste society. Bahujan publishing cannot be relegated to a 'subaltern' niche, though. In a media ecosystem where the elite oppressor castes have controlled media and knowledge narratives, Bahujan publishing gives glimpses of a world where the majority tells the stories of the majority. This report was written at a cultural moment when simultaneously online anti-caste consciousness is giving voices to millions of Bahujans, while at the same time oppressive fascist, casteist, and religious forces are becoming stronger.

Social media, the internet, and digital platforms operate on the logic of caste. They are for the Savarnas, by the Savarnas. From engineering and leadership of social media platforms to policymakers, civil society, and even alternative media, all spaces and cohorts are dominated by the Savarnas. These spaces often don't acknowledge caste, and even when they do, they don't let Bahujans speak for themselves. We decided against providing recommendations and suggestions in this report because, primarily, this report was an effort to document the motivations, voices, and desires of a dozen Bahujan publishers. This report is also an attempt to articulate an anti-caste vision of the internet through the voices of Bahujan publishers.

Building an anti-caste internet will require a significant amount of work. This includes research work that involves exploring anti-caste resistance in different regional languages, on smaller platforms, accommodating nuances of inter-caste dynamics, and through Dalit-feminist thought. Furthermore, it is crucial to actively foreground the voices of Bahujans in discussions about digital technologies, policies, and governance. Critically, anti-caste technologies and platforms must be imagined and built from scratch with the active engagement and leadership of the community. With this report, we embark on some of these conversations by documenting and imagining alternatives — but there remains a lot more work to be done.

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