

Reading Digital platform and marginalization from gender perspective

Ms. Nalin Nath

Research scholar

Indira Gandhi National Open University

Introduction:

Social media has become an indispensable aspect of daily life in contemporary times, enabling people to express opinions and connect with a larger audience. Many social media platforms have created countless opportunities because of their considerable success in generating revenue. Marginalized communities, who have historically struggled to be heard and acknowledged, have found social media a more accessible platform for expressing views and opinions. In recent times however, mainstream media transformed into a limited and rigid space focused on a singular narrative, while social media emerged as a powerful space and tool for marginalized groups.

Society often excludes, misrepresents, and renders marginalized individuals invisible, denying them access to the resources readily available to others. This is also the case in the digital realm, where the impact of the digital age on society has further reinforced the exclusion of marginalized individuals and groups. This paper focuses on how digital spaces are evolving, and the views, experiences and challenges encountered by marginalized women such as Dalit, Muslim and Tribal women within digital space. Using qualitative interviews, the paper examines the advantages and disadvantages of digital spaces for marginalized women. The weaponisation of digital platforms to silence and invisibilise marginal women's voices is highlighted. The advantages and the constraints of digital space for women from this constituency are discussed.

Marginality

Marginality is defined as a state of being whereby individuals or social groups are subject to social exclusion on account of social identity, lack of resources and/or a lack of social acceptance. To be marginalized means to be relegated to an unimportant or powerless position. Marginalization may result in confinement, seclusion and displacement, and other crippling disadvantages; it reflects various layers of social closure. (Kidwai, 2020)

There are several causal factors for marginalization, including religion, caste, class, gender, and patriarchy. Throughout history, religious texts have consistently depicted women as inferior to men, using their perceived physical, mental, intellectual, and biological weaknesses to justify their status. For instance, Rousseau propagated the idea that women were less rational than men and therefore needed male protection. (Emile, 1762) In "The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State" (1884), Frederich Engels argued that labor and economy were the root causes of women's suppression, exclusion, and marginalization from mainstream society. The notion of an ideal womanhood is often problematic and can be attributed to the effects of patriarchy. While patriarchy itself is hierarchical, with men of different races, classes, or ethnic groups occupying different

positions men are united in a shared dominance over women (Hartman, 1981) As a result, women are often constrained in their rights and relegated to passive roles. Uma Chakravarti argues that “the general subordination of women assumed a particularly severe form in India through the powerful instrument of religious traditions which have shaped social practices” (Brahmanical Patriarchy, 1993)

Throughout history, women have often been marginalized and subjected to various forms of discrimination and exclusion based. These practices encompass different cultures and religions and have had a profound impact on the lives of women. Despite progress made towards gender equality, there is still a significant distance to cover in achieving a just and equitable society where women are valued and respected. The emergence of digital social space however, has not enabled self-expression by all women; in many instances it has heightened women’s marginalization in digital space, exacerbating existing inequalities by silencing women from marginal backgrounds.

Digital Marginalization

Women from marginal locations, especially in rural areas, begin with an inherent disadvantage in digital space. There are multiple reasons for the exclusion for the exclusion of vulnerable groups from digital space that include poor ICT infrastructure in rural areas compared to urban centers, inadequate access because of high data costs, and unreliable internet connectivity. Lack of digital skills due to low socio-economic status and resources contribute to this exclusion. (Florence A. Ouma, 2022).

Notwithstanding the many challenges, women from marginalized communities, including Dalits, Adivasis, Muslims and members of the LGBTQ+ community, have found ways to express themselves and share their opinions through digital media. Social media allows creation of virtual networks of support and solidarity, for women to share their experiences, stories, and struggles. At the same time however, sharing personal information such as names, photographs, gender and religion as required by social media policies also renders them vulnerable to online negativity and harm. Online hate speech targeting marginalized identities adds to daily discrimination of women in other social spaces.

Feminist theory

The idea of alienation, othering, and domination becomes relevant to our understanding of marginalization. (Spivak, Can the Subaltern Speak? 1988) For Spivak, subalternity is a position without identity; and has been deprived of agency, autonomy, and a voice of its own. Therefore, her voice is never articulated but represented. Social media makes it possible for marginalized voices to tell their own stories directly without relying on others to tell their tales. This clears up misinformation and prejudice about their respective communities and facilitates interaction with others with similar experiences.

People from different caste and tribes are marginalized because they follow different cultures, languages, and traditions from mainstream Indian society. Adivasi and tribal are forced to leave their homes due to deforestation; migrants in urban areas feel out of place. Muslim minorities face discrimination because of a different religious identity. Women from such locations are also highly susceptible to gender-based violence due to class caste and ethnic difference. Bell Hooks observations

that: "There will be no mass-based feminist movement as long as feminist ideas are understood only by a well-educated few" (Hooks, 1984) Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center is a significant intervention. It is a persuasive and powerful call to re-orient feminist struggle toward a more equitable and just society.

The following section delves into the journeys of women belonging to marginalized communities, examining how they navigate social media and its impact on their lives. Social media's potential as an enabling space for women's self-expression is highlighted as are the struggles of such women as they navigate the digital world. The paper uses qualitative research by way of in-depth interviews of a sample of three women, including Meena Kotwal, a journalist formerly of BBC Hindi and now the founder of *Mooknayak*, and two respondent who opted to remain anonymous. Among them one was a student from Delhi University; she shares her revolutionary poetry on Facebook and Instagram and other respondent was a Muslim girl, a law student and digital content creator who is particularly active on Instagram where she shares legal information and entertaining reels was interviewed.

The method of purposive sampling was used to carefully select individuals best suited for the study. Questions related to the use of social media, its impact on individuals' lives, online challenges, and how digital space affects marginalized individuals. Benefits and drawbacks of social media for participants, and the challenges encountered while using digital platforms were explored.

Meena Kotwal

Meena Kotwal is a Dalit journalist, human rights defender, and founder of *The Mooknayak*, an online news channel and website focused on social justice for the Dalit minority and marginalized people. She founded *The Mooknayak* in 2021, and described it as "a Dalit-centered newsroom".

When discussing the significance of the digital world, Meena highlights how social media empowers individuals to share their stories without depending on others. "We don't have to wait for news outlets or journalists to reach out to us - we can use our social media platforms to express ourselves. Even those who are not well-versed in writing can share videos or audio recordings on their accounts to connect with others."

Despite acknowledging the downsides of social media and its potential to be a double-edged sword, she believes in neither completely abandoning nor wholeheartedly embracing it. Instead, she recognizes that both positive and negative experiences can arise and that we must learn to navigate them effectively. She also appreciates how social media makes it easy to connect with people from diverse backgrounds. Facebook is popular among both literate and illiterate individuals, while Twitter tends to attract a more educated audience. Instagram, on the other hand, is favored by younger generations for sharing political, social, or casual content.

The topic of discrimination in digital spaces was brought up during a conversation. She mentioned that it is difficult to make generalizations about everyone's experiences, as different online audiences can have different attitudes. However, discrimination can and does occur on social media platforms. The participant, who focuses on caste-related issues, has encountered discriminatory behavior from

a wide range of audiences. When asked about personal experiences, the participant shared instances of trolling and abuse from individuals of different backgrounds. She mentioned that being a Dalit and a woman has resulted in being doubly targeted. Initially, such negative comments affected her emotionally, and she refrained from using her social media account. However, over time, she has learned to adapt to the reality that not everyone will agree with her actions. She strives to do what she believes is right, even if it means facing criticism. She considers being criticized as a validation of her good work, while not receiving any criticism feels like she is not progressing in the right direction.

Are social media platforms perpetuating discrimination and silencing marginalized communities, particularly women? She shared that, "I cannot say for certain about everyone's intentions, but I have experienced harassment from various individuals, including those who claim to work for the welfare of Dalits and women. Even individuals like Ravish Kumar have targeted me on a few occasions. It seems people like me are considered an easy target for humiliation. My mother, daughter, and I have been subjected to abuse, including death threats and threats of rape. I never know when or where I might be targeted next, or when my social media posts or pages may be deleted. Despite these challenges, I believe it is important to continue working and amplifying the voices of those who are marginalized. Social media provides a platform for discussing issues and struggles that might otherwise go unheard."

Law student

The second respondent comes was a Muslim college graduate currently studying law. She has been using social media since her school days, creating content about entertainment and social issues on her Facebook and Instagram accounts. Recently, she has been more active on social media, sharing posts about political and social issues. Social media helped her discover her passion for the performing arts, which she pursued in college. She created content for Insta reels for which received negative comments for her content, but it did not affect her confidence. She used the feedback to reach a larger audience. She did not let negativity deter her from pursuing her dreams.

She believes that social media has more benefits than drawbacks. Through social media, she could explore her hobbies and aspirations. However, she faced trolling for expressing her political opinions due to her Muslim background. She learned to block such individuals and move on with her life. Overall, she had positive experiences meeting people who encouraged and complimented her in the digital world.

Student of Delhi University

As a member of the Tribal community in Chhattisgarh, she has been an active Facebook user for the past decade. She believes that social media has been a valuable tool in dispelling negative stereotypes and biases surrounding the Adivasi people. By connecting with the younger generation through social media, she can share the beauty of her culture and art with a wider audience. She has had a passion for writing poetry since her school days, which led her to create a Facebook account to showcase her

work. Facebook has played a crucial role in her writing career, allowing her to receive valuable feedback and get her work published.

When asked about the negative aspects of social media, she disclosed that she initially used it only to showcase her writing skills. However, soon she began sharing pictures and videos of her dance performances. Despite receiving positive feedback on her dancing, she also received negative comments about her skin tone and physical appearance. As a member of a marginalized community and a woman, she experiences a dual burden in the online world compared to others. Whenever she posts something that challenges the conventional ideas and opinions of the majority, she is often subjected to abusive behavior. Previously, she would block such people but she has stopped doing that now. Instead, she responds whenever someone tries to provoke her. She has realized that ignoring them won't make any difference to her. By replying and standing up to them, she feels a sense of fulfillment when she attempts to convey her thoughts.

I asked her about her online experiences and she shared, "I often receive negative and objectifying comments on my pictures, as well as sexist remarks. Additionally, when I express my political beliefs, some people can be quite harsh. I have even received death threats and been told to leave the country. It can be challenging for us to express ourselves, but we still speak out despite the risks." She also mentioned how social media has given her community a platform to share their struggles and advocate for their rights. Although there are trolls who try to bring them down, they remain steadfast and continue to speak out for themselves.

Conclusion

As we have seen, the above discussion on digital access and experience for women from various marginalized communities using online spaces social media is an important enabling factor registering voice and presence for women from marginalized backgrounds. Meena Kotwal's participation as an active social space used stands out as positive and enabling: Meena generates revenue and provides employment opportunities to a significant number of individuals through social media. The other two respondents on the other hand use social media to share their work and expertise with a larger audience.

Although all participants were aware of the negative aspects of social media, they were unanimous in agreement that the benefits of digital spaces surpass its drawbacks. Staying connected and informed through these platforms was considered crucial. Meena Kotwal takes her appalling experience of harassment, including death and rape threats on account of her caste and gender identity in her stride. All three women agreed that sharing political views renders them vulnerable to mistreatment and intimidation.

The emergence of digital media as a space of women's presence and self-expression renders them vulnerable to victimization and marginalization. Online harassment, cyber bullying, and abuse are rampant - highlighting the urgent need for digital platforms to implement better safety measures and for larger society to address the challenges. Notwithstanding the challenges however, social media

remains a powerful tool for individuals to express themselves, connect with their communities, challenge casteist and racist stereotypes and project positive self-image of marginalized communities. Digital spaces help break down barriers and promote inclusivity, giving people a sense of belonging and empowerment. Respondents shared that their presence on social media can inspire those who may not have a voice or a platform of their own. By sharing their experiences and portraying their communities in a positive light, these individuals feel a great sense of fulfillment, knowing that they are making a positive impact on others.

Social media is thus a powerful tool that can amplify the voices of those who are often overlooked or marginalized. It is important to acknowledge the immense potential of social media in bringing attention to issues and envisioning a more inclusive future where marginalized voices and contributions are valued. Social media is integral and indispensable part of contemporary life. It is imperative to work towards ensuring equal access to digital space for women from all social backgrounds.

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