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Can the Subaltern Tweet?

A Netnography of India's Subaltern Voices Entering the Public via Social Media

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Abstract

This netnography depicts the notions of India's subaltern voices entering the public via social media. The study puts an emphasis on feminists and caste critics, divided into two case studies. The study witnessed dynamics of Twitter use between sociality and activism as well as the notions of performance and identity of these two intersecting, yet polarised groups.

Privilege remains a governing factor, which regulates access, accessibility and the use of the subaltern sphere and makes it exclusive for a privileged group of the *subaltern*. The main benefits of Twitter in the subaltern sphere, as the study suggests, is the factor of sociality and networking around causes, which leads to peer dialogue in the public sphere and increases visibility. This eventually leads to more attention for certain causes in the public discourse and to the countering of mainstream media narratives, for example in the case study of the *Dalit Lives Matter Movement* and its ad hoc fame, which evolved after the suicide of the Dalit PhD scholar Rohith Vemula.

Further, while online activism is present, its impact remains hard to measure. The main benefits of the *space* are the plurality of voices that inhabit it. Also, the unleashing of the counter-narratives towards the mainstream media that are even more controlled by the state than the new media landscape, is an important benefit.

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Preface

This research study is motivated by my personal as well as my academic interests in the critical social science of modern India as well as the study of the human dimension of the Internet.

For the last two years, I combined my studies of India at the University of Göttingen, Germany, with the studies of Communication for Development at Malmö University, Sweden. Especially, caste and gender related issues have become a major research interest of mine. The critical engagement with India convinced me that both topics do not only intersect but are also of major importance for the social science discourse. In this netnography, both aspects have been researched in the setting of the Web 2.0, with an emphasis on Twitter. Having an undergraduate background in Internet Studies, the social dimensions of the Internet interests me. The methodology of netnography helped me to gain insights into the social dimension of the Internet via first hand engagement.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background Information

This research study aims to investigate the use of the subaltern sphere of the Web 2.0 in the Indian context. The mainstream media has been historically controlled by the state and the upper castes, especially Brahmins (Parameswaran, 1997), but with the Web 2.0 the subaltern have found a way to articulate their interest in a more pluralistic media sphere. Or better: Do they? This is the guiding question of this research study. The subalterns are pluralistic on their own. However, this study aims to mainly look on the group of caste critics, with an emphasis on Dalits in one of the case studies. In the second case study women's use of the Web, with an emphasis on feminists are researched. The study will look at how casts critics and feminists employ Web 2.0 platforms, with a focus on Twitter.

Arguably, feminist and Dalit interests intersect, but does this play a role in the online interaction or activism? More importantly, does the use of the Web 2.0 really have an impact in the world largest democracy? The research lies at the heart of *Communication for Development*, as it investigates the potential and limitations of new media, the Internet in particular, to foster social and political change by depicting two different case studies. The approach links to what Hemer and Tufte (2012) call “Communication for Development in a Mediatized World”. It is a non-institutional social change process that is mediated through social media, but facilitated through bottom-up engagement of subaltern voices.

1.2. The Background of the Indian “Subaltern”

First, the term *subaltern* dates back to the 16th century and originated as a term that refers to having an inferior position, for example in the army (Harper, n.d.). The term entered the spotlight of the academic discourse with Spivak’s book “Can the Subaltern Speak”, a major work in postcolonial theory (Spivak, 1988).

India’s cultural hegemony is linked to the caste system. While being the world’s largest democracy, the country is ethnically and religiously diverse. This diversity is linked to a strong hierarchy and patriarchy (Olivelle, 2004). The hierarchy and patriarchy lead to the pluralistic groups of subaltern that we can witness in India today.

One of the most distinctive features of the Indian culture is the caste system.

In regards to the current population, the chart below illustrates the share of the population in regards to different castes:

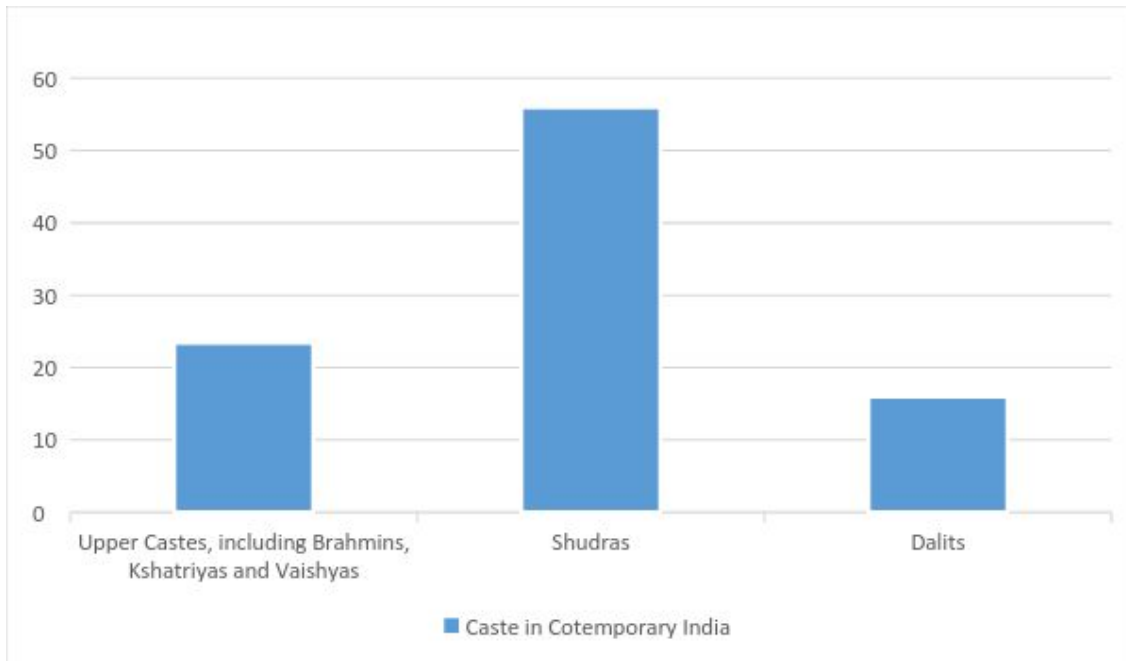


Image 1. Caste in Contemporary India; Source: Census of India (<http://www.censusindia.gov.in/2011census/>). The Dalits, in this fairly simplistic chart, are displayed as a minority and the upper castes are similarly a rather small group compared to the Shudras, the labouring caste. The shudras, who are also called the labouring caste, mark the majority of the population.

The chart aims to depict the current demographics of caste in India. The majority is marked by the *labouring* caste, the *shudras*.

The upper castes that are traditionally privileged mark the second largest groups, while *Dalits* mark the smallest share of the entire population.

While there is a lot of romanticising about the Indian culture in the Global North, the caste system is oppressive, for Shudras as well as Dalits (Kumar, 2000). Dalits, which mark roughly twenty percent of the current Indian population, have been marginalised throughout the Indian history. There have been various movements to date to address this oppression and to oppose it. The *Anti-Brahmin Movement*, which opposed the upper caste Brahmins, as Kumar (2000) states, is such an example.

Two and a half decades ago, the Dalit literary movement of the 1990's acknowledged the under- and misrepresentation of Dalits in the Indian literature (Prasad & Gaijan, 2007). During the time of this movement, the Marathi term *Dalit* has been chosen as a self-definition and as a replacement for the degrading term *untouchables*. This name has been used top-down by the more privileged castes. Untouchability has been linked to the myth of touching these people makes you *polluted*. The term Dalit means broken and is also used as a synonym for oppressed. Social movements driven by caste critics, who were mainly Dalits, have been present in history, both pre- and

postcolonial (Zelliot, 1992). The literary movement brought Dalits into the discourse of the Indian literature, in which they have been misrepresented or non-represented at all (Prasad & Gaijan, 2007). With the Web 2.0, Dalits have the chance to enter the new media sphere that is more pluralistic than the broadcast media sphere. The history of oppression is not only marked by Dalits but also by a group of the Indian society that mark an even larger share: women.

Women have been linked to the domestic sphere throughout the Indian history. Not leaving the house on their own, especially after marriage, is still the reality for the majority of women. However, already in the nationalist movement, women participated from the domestic spheres across the country (Thapar-Björkert, 1997). The Web 2.0 also offers a way for these women to enter the public sphere from their homes or elsewhere and might be a gateway to fight against their very own oppression this time. Women of lower castes or Dalit women face oppression that is linked to their caste status and the fact that they are women. This often translates into being oppressed in a pluralistic sense (Kannabiran, 2001).

How both these struggles, of Dalits and women, are connected will be discussed in the next chapter.

1.3. Connecting History and the Current State – Defining the Struggles of the Subaltern

The current struggle is real for Dalits and women alike.

Going back in history, already *Manu's code of law* (or Manusmriti) put women under the control of men through all phases of their life (Olivelle, 2004). The book is written out of a Brahmin-centric perspective and prescribes the different roles of men and women as well as of different castes in the Indian society.

Only the twice born, including Brahmins, Vaishyas and Kshatriyas are privileged, with Brahmins ruling on the top of the hierarchy (Olivelle, 2004).

Manu's law is hundreds of years old, rooted in a time when kings (Kshatriyas) were important, or arguably the most important parts of the society, in regards to hierarchy and power in India. Manu's code of law puts Brahmins in the favour of the Kings and, therefore, secured their societal standing. With the system converging over

time, other forces are needed to maintain the Brahmin-centric social order that is in particular oppressing for women and Dalits. Dalits were meant to do (bonded) labour and far too often the dirtiest work humans could ever imagine, like manual scavenging (Olivelle, 2004).

Unfortunately, violence seems to be one way in maintaining this oppressive culture. The next paragraph will look closer on violence and why the oppressor in the Indian society uses it to silence Dalits and women.

Kannabiran and Kannabiran (1991) argue that violence in the caste system, and in particular gender based violence, is used to maintain the order of social relations in the caste system and the Indian society as a whole. Even though the text dates back to the early 1990's, this article has still relevance, as it links violence to the maintenance of social order in the Indian society. The caste system is the social institution, which informs the social relations next to the hierarchy in the Indian society. The authors highlight the use of force, or in other words 'violence', to maintain the social order. By looking at Kannabiran and Kannabiran's (1991) statement from the 1990's, and comparing on contemporary examples of caste-based violence, it becomes clear how current the issue still is. The case of the Dalit man who was killed in Maharashtra for allegedly keeping an Ambedkar song as a ringtone, earlier in 2015, shows the extent of the issue today (NDTV, 2015).

Looking on the targets of gender- and caste-based violence, I want to use the term 'oppressed' here as an umbrella term. These oppressed people include Dalits, but also women, who are oppressed no matter where they are based in the hierarchal caste system. Oppressed seems to be a more suitable term compared to victims, as they are not victims per se, but their oppressed standing in the society is indirectly linked to their situation as *victims of violence*. Indirectly, violence is used to maintain their low status in the society. Keeping them oppressed without doubting their role in society seems to be one of the key outcomes of caste based violence. While gender-based violence takes place around the world, in India it is a further sub-category of caste-based-oppression and more or less, a way of maintaining the caste based societal order without leaving room in the public sphere for questioning this hierarchy.

The oppressive system on the one hand-side claims equality in its constitution. However, like the *Human Rights Watch* discovered, institutions, and especially legal institutions, are biased and are, therefore, fuelling the system of oppression (Human Rights Watch, 2014). If a Dalit woman faces gender and/or caste-based violence, the law is rarely enforced. The report states that the system fails to prosecute rape cases and this is in particular a problem for women (Human Rights Watch & Narula, 1999). In 1993, more than 80% of rape cases were pending for trial, with a very low chance of even getting to trial. This shows that, while the system represents itself through its constitution as equal, it is a system of and made for the privileged people, the oppressor or in other words *Brahmin males* (Human Rights Watch & Narula, 1999). Not taking the victims of violence seriously, is just another way of maintaining the overall oppressive order across the Indian society and the diaspora community of Indians abroad.

At this point, it is already quite clear that the caste system in India is still oppressive, but it is important to highlight the current social dynamics. From an activist point of view, there is little hope, as the title of the report called “Gender Based Violence in India: A Never-ending Phenomenon“ by Sharma and Gupta (2004) implies. The article states that gender-based violence is common in almost all countries of the Global South. Looking on the societal level, women’s bodies are seen as owned by men. The article goes, therefore, beyond the caste system and looks clearly on the dimensions of patriarchy in India compared to other countries in the Global South. Still, I would argue that one should not perceive the caste system and patriarchy as something divided. It is clearly interlinked or connected. While rapists could even face death penalty based on the Indian law, the report states that the biased realities of courts make it doubtful that such a law might be enforced in the end. The suggestions of the report are wide-ranging, from tightening the link between legislation and actual enforcement, to women’s education about their legal rights and empowerment approaches that are linked to education (Sharma & Gupta, 2004).

Further, there have been many approaches by the government through legislation to give Dalits a place in the Indian society beyond manual scavenging. The caste system has been officially abolished since the 1950’s (Hoff & Pandey, 2004).

However, all these institutional efforts did not change the system. Arguably, a way to tackle the system would be to approach it in a bottom-up way, rather than a top-down approach. Government policies and reservations are rather fuel to the system of violence. As the brahmanical system is weakened due to societal and political convergence, the policies are rather fuelling the aggressor, who uses violence against the oppressed to maintain their societal status. Bottom-up approaches would target, in the Indian context, especially the rural areas and the local communities.

There is some resistance by activists, though. Sunitha Krishnan, a feminist from Hyderabad, for example, entered the public debate about gender-based violence and addressing the problem of gender-based violence in a bottom-up way by using the Internet to spread rape videos and get attention in the public discourse about the oppressor (Devichand, 2015). She has been a survivor of rape herself and uses this controversial way to get attention to the problem and force authorities to act upon the problem. While women do not have a place in the public sphere of India that is dominated by men, the Internet is yet a relatively *open space* and the attention forced the authorities to take action, which is often not taken in cases of rape by the authorities. So far three rapists have been arrested due to the attention of the videos posted by Krishnan, which shows the potential of bottom-up approaches (Devichand, 2015).

By looking on examples like this, it is clear that feminists try to enforce public debate about gender-based violence, but often the link to casteism is missing. It is mostly portrayed as a patriarchal problem. To tackle the problem efficiently and intersectional, feminists must tackle casteism or at least open up their advocacy and empowerment agenda for other oppressed members of the Indian society, like Dalits (Haq, 2013). The caste system can be traced as the origin of women's oppression in the Indian context. While in most other societies this is solely based on patriarchy, the roots of brahmanical male domination is different in the Indian society. Manu's code of law implies that it is deeply rooted in a past which has been defined by brahmanical patriarchy (Olivelle, 2004).

The historical overview implies the need for the subaltern to raise their voice in the new pluralistic media sphere. Most of the subaltern are oppressed, hence the urge to raise their voice and oppose this oppression. Therefore, this research study will take a

deeper look on the use of the Internet by the subaltern groups of caste critics and feminists via selected case studies of the Indian context.

1.4. The Web 2.0 Platforms in the Context of India and Beyond

In India, until 1991, there has been a strong state business alliance that left the poor on the margins of the political agenda (Kohli, 2012). With the new opening of the Indian market and a more pro market driven approach, Facebook plays a major role in the new area of state business alliances. With the pictures of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Mark Zuckerberg going around the globe (Akbar, 2015), there is little doubt that the government and Facebook have a good relationship. The Indian government censored critical communication on social media. The recently abandoned Act 66a stated that

Any person who sends, by means of a computer resource or a communication device

- (a) any information that is grossly offensive or has menacing character; or*
- (b) any information which he knows to be false, but for the purpose of causing annoyance, inconvenience, danger, obstruction, insult, injury, criminal intimidation, enmity, hatred or ill will, persistently by making use of such computer resource or a communication device,*
- (c) any electronic mail or electronic mail message for the purpose of causing annoyance or inconvenience or to deceive or to mislead the addressee or recipient about the origin of such messages, shall be punishable with imprisonment for a term which may extend to three years and with fine.*

(Sharma, 2005).

This has led to various imprisonments for applying the right to freedom of speech (BBC, 2015). While the act is abandoned, the censoring, for example on Facebook, is still present. Even students were arrested for posting certain materials online (BBC,

2015). Other random arrests led to the questioning of the paragraph in the public discourse. Some even argued it would be unconstitutional (Chaturvedi, 2015). In early 2016, the announcement of the government to “closely track, counter News and blogs online” gives another impression about the role of the Indian state and its interference in limiting the freedom of speech online (Basu, 2016).

While the notion of freedom of speech is constantly at risk in India’s Internet, the masses defeated the attempt to implement a limited version of the Internet. Facebook recently tried to implement a version of the Internet that is accessible for free. However, not the entire Internet would have been available. The user’s access would have been gated through various commercial platforms, like Facebook. The power of India’s democracy has beaten Facebook’s top-down approach to implement an “Internet for the poor” that would risk the notion of the net neutrality (Bharat, 2016).

When using social media platforms or networks as a research environment, the inevitable power of the corporate stakeholders must be acknowledged next to the power of the state (Dencik, 2015). The intrinsic interest of the operators is far beyond the ‘social’ in the social media. Their interest is capitalistic and driven by the selling of data and adds (Dencik, 2015), whilst the state inevitable wants to increase its governmental power. Social media, therefore, is neither a common battle ground nor a political neutral gatekeeper to the public sphere (Dencik, 2015).

1.5. Contemporary Social Media Use of the Subaltern – Selection of the Case Studies

Due to the historical connectedness of casteism and women’s oppression and the neglect of this intersectionality, both in the popular and in the academic discourse, the research study aims to connect two case studies. The following screenshots are aimed to illustrate some of the contemporary accounts that are in use in the subaltern sphere online.



Image 2. Screenshot of the Twitter account of *Feminism in India* (<https://twitter.com/FeminismInIndia>).

The first account depicts the notion of intersectionality and is an example that shows feminist activism on Twitter. Intersectionality does not only intersect with caste, but also with other factors like disability, which is included in the narrative of these activists. This has been explored in more detail during the netnography, looking on aspects of use and interaction. *Feminism in India* or *FII* is a crowd-sourced platform which gives a voice to more than 70 writers. It had been selected due to its participatory nature and the element of being particularly crowdsourced. Hence, the platform offers a space to facilitate voices, for example of the subaltern.

Further, the caste critical movement *Dalit Lives Matter*, unleashed due to the suicide of the Dalit PhD scholar Rohith Vemula, had been selected due to the contemporary nature and the ability to investigate the social media reaction from the very beginning, including the corporate media. Rohith Vemula committed suicide in early 2016. His suicide note depicts the struggle he faced as a Dalit both, institutional and socially, all his life.

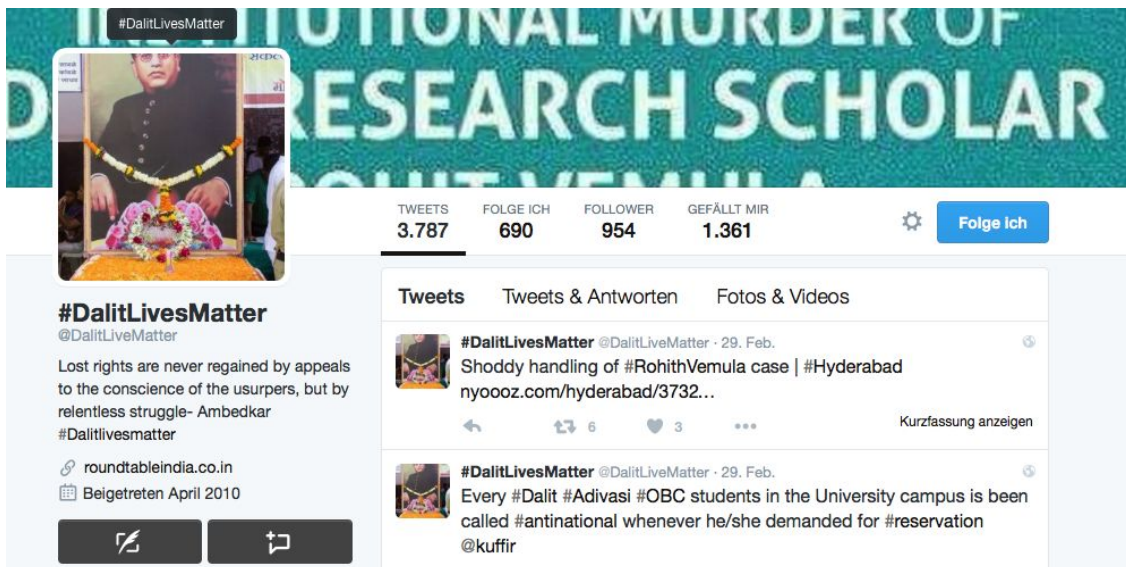


Image 3. A Twitter account has been named #DalitLivesMatter after Rohith Vemula's suicide (<https://twitter.com/DalitLiveMatter>). The screenshot aims to illustrate an example, chosen out of the various accounts present in the subaltern sphere, to depict the kind of accounts investigated in regards to the caste critics.

The @*DalitLivesMatter* and similar accounts, as an example, refer to the current suicide or even altered their visual identity for the cause by using Rohith's picture as a profile picture. Some of these accounts might have been solely registered for the immediate response. In contrast, other accounts has been investigated that generally engage with caste critic and are not only responding to the immediate cause. These accounts are active on a regular base and also provide updates about caste related issues in India.

2. The research question(s)

2.1. Problem Formulation

So far, it has been discussed *why* India's feminists and caste critics need or want to raise their voices online. This study mainly focuses on the following questions:

How is Twitter Used by Caste Critics and Feminists in India?

Regarding the following sub-questions:

1. What are the limitations and benefits of entering the public via social media?
2. How is social media employed for activism?
3. What are the representational practices and performances?

3. Theory and Methodology

3.1. Theories and Literature Review

3.1.1. The Media Sphere.

Habermas' (1969) notion of a pluralistic media sphere has been already framed a few decades ago. The public sphere as a concept includes spaces where people can freely and openly discuss all kind of topics (Habermas, 1969). With the rise of the participatory web, new voices, including the voices of the subaltern, are moving online. This translates into a representation of multiple narratives in the media sphere as part of the public (Downey & Fenton, 2003). Therefore, the broadcast media lost its monopoly on news reporting. The plurality makes the Web 2.0 in particular interesting for the bottom-up use in the context of *Communication for Development*, as emphasised by techno-optimists like Clay Shirky (2008). Shirky (2008) suggests that the Web 2.0 made it possible for people to organise without organisations, making it a powerful tool to organise, network and for social mobilization.

Spivak's (1988) important theoretical work of postcolonial theory called "Can the Subaltern Speak" states that the subaltern can speak, but they are often not heard. The notions of Spivak's approach to the communication of the subaltern displays the deep hierarchical structures in the political sphere, where the voices of the marginalized

or subaltern often do not find a space to get heard. For this research study, it is of interest to investigate whether or not this has changed in the context of the Web 2.0.

Further, due to media convergence, new cultural practices enter the media sphere, which opens up possibilities for new ways to communicate and connect. Hashtags have become a cultural artefact by using it for cultural reasons beyond just the pragmatic reason of technological order. Hashtags, so Bruns and Burgess (2014), since its emergence and adoption by Twitter, have been used for social, cultural and technological reasons. Hashtags are part of the social media logic and have become characteristic for social movements online but also to shape community online and, therefore, *the public communication*. Bruns and Burgess (2014) name the ad hoc fame through hashtags as one reason for hashtags to be *meaningful*. This ad hoc fame is also linked to the second case study, in which Rohith Vemula's suicide has been investigated in context of caste critical online activism and the major outcry on social media. In this case, the hashtag *#DalitsLivesMatter* has been of major importance for the collective action and the ad hoc fame.

3.1.2. Online Activism.

This section aims to take a closer look on the academic discourse of online activism by reviewing key literature concerned with online or Internet activism.

Activism or social movements have been characterised by top-down group and collective behaviour (Veenstra, Iyer, Hossain, & Park, 2014). Social media, due to its low costs and network potential, challenged this form of mobilisation.

Online activism and its impact has been portrayed critically in the academic discourse. Veenstra et al. (2014) stress that social media facilitates, in the context of movements, a much easier informal communication between the movement and sympathetic individuals. The binary division of techno-optimists and techno-pessimists is much more complex in practice and must be seen as more diverse. The use of the subaltern is arguably linked to online activism. While the case study of Rohith Vemula's death investigated a more current event and the rise of hashtag activism in the context of ad hoc fame, the case of women's rights activists is a much more sustainable one that converged over time to a digital movement and/or representation of women's issues.

Vegh (2003) depicts that there are three types of activism, classifying them into three categories. The first category aims at *advocacy* and *awareness* raising. The second category aims at *mobilisation* and *organisation* and the third for *action* as well as *reaction*. These parameters are also useable as a conceptual framework to measure the outcomes of online activism. However, these classifications may intersect, just as groups of the oppressed often intersect. To apply these categories in an exclusive way would deny the dynamics of activism and the media.

Further, impact and impact measurement is a problem when it comes to researching online activism. Lewis, Gray and Meierhenrich (2014) depict in their case study that online activism can be elusive. In their case study, Facebook activism had the least impact at all. Deep-participation, which goes beyond hashtag activism, seems to be viral according to the research study. This poses an important question about the impact of social media activism and the use of the different platforms. Their research is in general rather a techno-pessimistic than a techno-optimistic one. The aim to measure the impact of media is not a new endeavour. Already in the broadcast area of television, Mankekar (2002) questions the impact that television might have had in regards to the religious identity and the deadly march of the Ayodhya movement in India. In this march the Hindu nationalists tried to reclaim the Babri mosque in Ayodhya, India. A show that had been hosted on television before, linked the place of the Babri mosque to the birthplace of the famous Hindu god "Ram". This might have had potentially caused the deadly march. The question remains how this impact can be testified (Mankekar, 2002).

Barberá et al. (2015) stress the importance of the periphery. The periphery is composed of the users that share and retweet messages of protest, social movements or online activism. These stakeholders of online activism make the messages go viral. This is of importance while looking on the dynamics and the engagement with the subaltern and their messages in both of the case studies.

Temporality, as discussed by Barassi (2015), is another character of social media that affects how it is used and how it can be used for activism. The character of being fast paced, is also mirrored in the need of being catchy, rather than elaborative or reflective. On the other hand, temporality also mirrors the fast paced environment,

which changes quickly and *forgets* the hype around certain trending topics as quickly as it has trended before.

Milan (2015, pp. 55-56) stresses the *materiality* which is depicted in the embodiment and the possibility to express emotions that social media offers in the context of social movements and activism. The Internet offers a space for embodiment but also for identity expression. The Expression of emotions and identity may become a ritual in such spaces, as Milan (2015, p. 61) argues. Especially, identity is expressed through a certain performance that represents the collective identity and literally defines the collective in this sphere, when it comes to movements. However, also the individual may express an identity and express emotions that only partly intersect with the movement she or he is affiliated with. For the collective, the possibility to act as a human collective and the possibilities of embodiment the sphere allows, is one of the big chances for activism and social movements. The embodiment, for example of a certain identity, also leads to a certain visibility in this sphere (Milan, 2015, pp. 55-62).

To build a critical framework for online activism and social media use, it is important to look on the social media platforms critically and to contextualise their characteristics as an environment, where online activism takes place. Twitter and Facebook are capitalist enterprises. This implies that their major interest is in revenue, like Hintz (2015) states.

In the early stages of the Internet, the so called Web 1.0, the new way of expressing oneself freely online was something striking, but as Leistert (2015) puts it “...the revolution won’t be liked”. Especially, the Terms of Service often limit these spaces and its capacity due to the policies that may hinder freedom of speech or make revenue out of the material shared in these spaces. The space of the subaltern is, therefore, not to be mistaken for a political neutral platform. Neoliberal interests are present and the connection of the enterprises with the government are often comparable to alliances. The legislation is one area, where the state still has the power to cut the freedom of speech out of the social media platforms (Leistert, 2015).

Next to the problem of censorship, getting attention is a vital problem for businesses, individuals and activists alike. As Hintz (2015) puts it

“Everybody says that there is no censorship on the Internet or at least only in part. But that is not true. Online censorship is applied through the excess of banal content that distracts people from serious or collective issues” (Hintz, 2015).

3.2. *The Subaltern Online*

3.2.1. Indian Feminists Online.

When I speak of feminism in this study, I refer to feminism as defined by the Oxford Dictionary: “The advocacy of women’s rights on the ground of the equality of the sexes” (Oxford University Press, n.d.). I do not want to depict a radicalist notion of feminism, but rather want to depict the behaviour of the community of women and men who have a shared interest in gender equality and equity.

Munro (2013) depicts the current debates in the academic discourse of feminism and the new move towards *digital feminism*. It is contested if there is such a thing as a fourth wave feminism, as the different waves, in which feminism is chronologically ordered, is controversial itself. The fourth feminist wave, however, is incontestably a feminism, which is moving into the digital sphere. This *digital feminism* or rather *digitally mediated feminism* is the key focus of this research study. If one accepts the premises of different waves of feminism, intersectionality has already been present in the third wave of feminism (Zack, 2007). Fighting for gender equality, while highlighting the issues that intersect with it, is especially important for this research study. Intersectionality is often related to race, ethnicity, gender, disability and age. In the Indian context, the intersection with caste is especially important but often not sufficiently depicted. Therefore, feminism online has been critiqued for not intersecting with the issue of caste and being too narrow minded (Zack, 2007).

Guha (2015) depicts the problem of the trending feminist hashtag on social media but not getting attention in the broadcast media. Therefore, the feminist topics are limited in the reach. The Twitter sphere is yet a limited sphere, which is exclusive. The attention of the broadcast media is still important. The article further argues that Indian feminists need to collaborate with major news outlets to drive policy change. Overall,

there is the tendency towards intersectionality in India, which often is critiqued for dismissing caste.

3.2.2. Caste Critics and Dalits Online.

I cannot really say if all these users who engage in caste critical activities after the suicide of Rohith Vemula are Dalits themselves or which caste they belong to.

Therefore, the general definition of the users that have been investigated can be coined as ‘caste critics’ rather than Dalits.

In his recently published article de Kruijf (2015) depicts the new identity politics online but also the self-definition of Dalits in an online context. Dalit’s capacity to express their identity online is stressed by de Kruijf (2015), with an emphasis on the individual capacity. This research study, however, rather looks on the collective and collective identity of Dalits and caste critics.

As this case study aims to depict the use of the Internet by caste critics, the emphasis has been put on activism. The Internet offers caste critics a space to counter narratives of the mainstream media. As Dencik (2012, pp. 19-20) argues, traditional media has less resources these days due to the nature of being competitive and, therefore, the human resources are limited. The crucial point she makes is that this often limits journalists to certain locations and decreases their mobility. Caste critics, on the other side, are located across India and can often make use of social media to share news. Most importantly being caste critics online gives the possibility to represent themselves. This self-representation is also a chance. Often the representational practices of Dalits have been similar to Hindu nationalists, as Chopra (2006) argues. In the *Dalit Lives Matter movement* representational practices play an important role and are defined by the caste critics themselves, as the case study depicts.

4. Methodology

4.1. Qualitative Approach: The Netnography

The research study is mainly concerned with *behaviour* and *interaction* online. In this context, the emphasis is on the limitations of use and its impact by the target group of caste critics and feminists, including people concerned with feminism/women's rights in general. Therefore, the chosen methodology is netnography. *How is the subaltern sphere used?* This question asks for a methodology that has an emphasis on the behavioural dynamics of the subaltern sphere. Historically, netnography has been employed for marketing research and to get insights about what people are talking about in online forums and, more recently, on social media (Kozinets, 2002; Kozinets, 2015). According to Kozinets (2015), the approach has gained acceptance in the area of business studies and increasingly in more academic fields.

The study applies a cross-platform approach with an emphasis on Twitter, while also looking on Facebook (Facebook groups). Twitter is a semi-public social media platform, while Facebook is a semi-private one (Kozinets, 2015, p. 253). The founder of netnography, how Robert Kozinets calls himself, argues for a post-community netnography, where the study of sociality or consociality is in the focus, rather than closed community groups. Therefore, the application of netnography as a methodology can be used to study topics and is not only limited to online communities (Kozinets, 2015).

A netnography is a *qualitative* research method that applies ethnographic practises in an online environment, like social media, social networks or online communities (Kozinets, 2010). Netnography is a *multi-method* by definition. It combines two qualitative approaches, observing and participation that include conversation and active participation (Kozinets, 2010). The methodology of ethnography is adopted to the environment of the Internet but not 1:1. The context of the Internet needs special adoption of the ethnographic methods, for example looking on issues of access and accessibility that are unique to the online environment (Kozinets, 2015, p. 65). Firstly, observing is the primary part of the method the research study has applied. Observing is the best methodology to collect data about human interaction (Denscombe, 2014, p. 277).

Secondly, dialogue that is (in)directly part of the netnography, has been applied to complement the observing part and is integrated homogeneously as an active member of the social media platforms. The active part has been utilised to get to know the opinions of other group members in relation to the main research question (Kozinets, 2015). Conversations have been augmented by interviews, for example via social media chat functions. Upon approval, screenshots have been taken and incorporated into the narrative of the netnography.

As Bowler (2010) pinpoints, netnography is a method that is specifically designed to study cultures and communities online. Therefore, it is the best method to investigate behaviour online. Only a netnography offers the possibility to experience the community first-hand next to just analysing data and is, therefore, the choice for this research study. Comparable to ethnographic and anthropological research offline, the research has been conducted in the setting of the user's interaction, which is located across social media platforms in this case (Janowitz, 2010).

This primary engagement aims to observe the subjective feelings of the users in a qualitative way (Fowler, 2013, p. 2).

Importantly, Kozinets (2015) depicts that netnography, with its diverse range of methodologies combined, remains primarily a form of writing, like an ethnography, which is experimental and dependent on the researcher. Therefore, the representation of the written netnography is the end product of a diverse methodology that is not limited to ethnographic practices per se, but also incorporates representable practices, which are dependent on the author.

It is important to acknowledge that netnography as a method is in part also experimental when it comes to new environments, like social media (Kozinets, 2015, p. 158). Especially, the focus on Twitter makes it rather innovative compared to an online forum as a space for doing netnographic research. The platform is much more dynamic, when it comes to the user's behaviour. The platform as a space is one of the imagined boundaries that hold the social interaction in a certain place.

Further, the anthropological self (Whittaker, 1992) has been important for the research study. In this case study, my identity is linked to my profile that I used for the research study and which has been the primary representation in the interaction.



Image 4. My personal Twitter profile, which has been used during the netnography (<https://twitter.com/ChrisComDev>).

The Twitter profile has been my main identity during the research study and my embodiment as a researcher during the study. It is, therefore, also a public representation and influences my interaction with other users on Twitter. The netnography depicts the *lived* experience of the engagement with the subaltern sphere as a digital native. I am personally rather *privileged* and have an etic perspective. This needs to be acknowledged while interpreting my investigations. The privilege is based on being a white, western male and not part of any of the oppressed communities of the research study. However, this also comes with the benefit of having a more objective view on the topic. As Chandran and Hashim (2014) state, nearly all caste critical or feminist article have an emic perspective and lack objectivity while engaging with the topics of caste and feminism.

Due to the nature of the platforms, observing is the major focus of the study. The engagement with the group of subalterns is similarly crucial as well as the interaction on social media. Interviews, for example via social media chat function, have been a vital tool to get into dialogue.

However, the limitations of netnography relate to its scope. It does not offer a representative picture of the entire web, nor does it offer a quantitative or statistical approach, which invites for generalisations. For researching the social dimensions of interactions in the subaltern sphere, the netnography offers insights in regards to the use of a limited scope. The account of *Feminism in India* has contemporarily about 3000

followers. The caste critics I encountered have between 20 and 10 000 followers. As Bornmann and Daniel (2009) are referring to Albert Einstein: “[N]ot everything that counts is countable, and not everything that's countable counts.” The netnography can depict the interaction I witnessed as a participant in the subaltern sphere and offer ethnographic insights into social dimensions of its use via case studies.

5. Ethics

As Banks and Scheyvens (2014, p. 184) states “All researchers accessing written sources face challenges and questions regarding access and permits. Further, research permission should be sought after if the online forum requires membership”. No real names will be used in the documentation if these are parts of private (Facebook) groups. Only important data for the research question(s) has been collected. Only necessary personal information that might help to differentiate has been collected. Full disclosure that this data is used for research is necessary.

This is all in accordance with the research ethical guide as proposed by Markham and Buchanan (2012). Markham and Buchanan (2012, p. 12) suggest to look on the context of the specific case and reflect on ethical considerations in the process of the research. This has been done, for example by gaining permission to use screenshots of private conversations via social media chat functions.

In regards to social media, different platforms also need different ethical considerations. While Twitter data is mainly public, it has been also treated as public. Zimmer and Proferes (2014) also stress the new arising ethical issues when it comes to research on Twitter, which is linked to personal profiles and data. The protection of the privacy is important. Private conversations are also treated as confidential. For every interview, consent has been taken before conducting it.

6. Limitations of the Research Study

The research study is limited to the English speaking part of the subaltern sphere. This excludes all the other major Indian languages, like Tamil, Hindi, Telugu and the vast

amount of vernacular languages of India (Emeneau, 1956). The research study itself is, therefore, *exclusive*.

This study mainly aims to depict a qualitative impression of the subaltern in the web, with an emphasis on caste critical and feminist voices. The study aims to rather show the notions of the two case studies, while telling the story of my digital encounter via the netnography with individuals of the collective.

For a thick and nuanced description time is a serious concern. In ethnographic research, both on- and offline, it is important to get to know people in depth, which takes time. Arguably, social media comes with its very own limitations, like missing body language. On the other side, written communication is more persistent and can be a valuable resource when curating the netnography and its narrative.

The dimensions of Twitter use may seem vast with its 22.2 million users in India. However, this is only a small share in regards to the 1.2 billion citizens of India. Twitter use marks only a share of about 13 percent when it comes to the total share of social media use across all platforms in India (eMarketer, 2015).

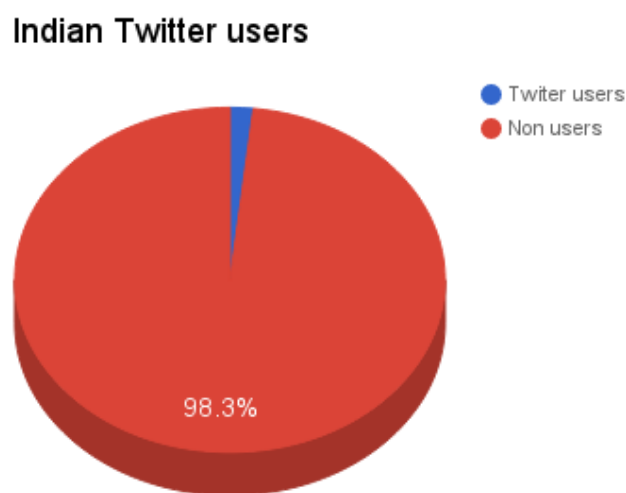


Image 5. Only 1,7% of the Indian population use Twitter (eMarketer, 2015). This minor share depicts the limitations of the research study. Only a small share of the Indian population can be reached, while using Twitter for research.

7. The Netnography

7.1. Introduction

This netnography is separated into two different, but intersecting case studies. The subaltern sphere is much more diverse than these two groups, but these two groups have been characteristic for India and their oppression has been historically connected, as elaborated in the introduction section.

Firstly, I want to depict the notion of the feminism, or better intersectional feminism, via the account of *Feminism in India* (FII). The account of FII and the connection with other user accounts as well as accounts of organisations that share an interest in the same topic have been investigated. Therefore, the study has an emphasis on the interaction related to the account FII.

During the second part, caste critics have been investigated, with an emphasis on the rise of the *Dalit Lives Matter Movement* and the related hashtag *#DalitLivesMatter*, which converged out of the suicide of Rohith Vemula. The uprising of the hashtag and the movement during late January 2016 was at the right time to investigate it in this netnography. I was able to research its rise and fall related to the overall ad hoc fame.

7.2.1. Case Study One: Encounter with Feminism in India and other Feminists

As this is a cross-platform netnography, I do not enter one specific closed community in particular. The same applies for Twitter. Its structure and its characteristics do not allow to *enter* a community setting per se. It is much more open than a Web 1.0 forum setting, where static forums have been the norm (Shirky, 2008). First of all, I try to navigate myself in the subaltern sphere of the Indian web and try to find the so called *subalterns*. I look for the term *feminism* via the Twitter search function and browse across tweets and accounts concerned with feminism.

Feminists, or women in general, clearly belong to the group of the subaltern. I have already followed the account of *Feminism in India* on Twitter before, next to other accounts that are concerned with the cause of feminism or gender equality. Generally, the feminists are often connected to accounts of organisations like *Feminism in India* or others and not through hashtags per se. The cultural artefact of hashtags is

rather used for certain campaigns that are seasonal. *Feminism in India*'s Twitter narrative is not limited to the narrow definition of feminism. The organisation work intersectional, including caste. For this netnography, I want to look particularly on the intersection with caste. Contrasting to the literature review, which highlighted that the academic discourse criticises feminists for not looking on intersectionality with caste, this organisation also works on caste and gender issues.

I start a conversation with FII, including the hashtag *Feminists* as well as *Intersectionality*, and highlight the importance of the intersectionality of caste and gender in India. The Twitter account of *Feminism in India* is responsive and acknowledges that intersectionality is at the core of their work.



Image 6. Screenshot of dialogue with the account “@FeminisminIndia” on Twitter.

Shortly later, I take the discussion out of Twitter and approach the organisation via email. I ask for permission to extend my research on their organisation in their closed Facebook group. However, due to privacy issues, they only grant me to do research on their Facebook page and not in the closed Facebook group. Therefore, I proceed with my research on Twitter.

Soon, I witness harassment of others due to the engagement of FII with topics concerned with caste, both on Twitter and Facebook.



Image 7. *Feminism in India* and the account of Japleen Pasricha, founder of *Feminism in India*.

The tweets above link to the harassment that FII encounters when they engage in topics concerned with caste. Due to privacy issues, I can only share the screenshot of Twitter and not of the Facebook group. Both, the account of FII and the account of the founder Japleen Pasricha, share their encounter with the critique to “stick to feminism” when they engage with caste related issues. Looking on the Twitter history of FII, the interaction concerned with feminist topics in India is not always friendly and caste is not tolerated by the entire feminist community, yet. This shows the progressiveness of being intersectional but also the potential downsides and threats that accompany the work on caste. Harassment remains a major problem on social media, like my following poll suggests.

7.1.3. The Issue of Trolling.

Trolling is a serious issue across online communities. Its effects on the individual can be abusing, hindering or worse (Fichman & Sanfilippo, 2015). Therefore, I start a Twitter poll in regards to trolling. I want to know if trolling is an issue for the feminists. This also leads to getting a lot of attention via likes and retweets.



Image 8. A Twitter poll that has been published by myself.

The Twitter poll gets three retweets and six likes. 25 votes are on my poll at its closing date. Nearly two-third are agreeing that trolling is a serious issue when it comes to practising feminism online. More importantly, while looking on the *reach* of this poll, the majority of interaction comes from users I already know. They are somehow connected to me via following or previous engagement on Twitter, which shows the limited reach if a Tweet does not go viral.

While Twitter is open and public, the reach is still limited in a sense that being *public* does not mean to instantly get attention.

The engagement is often more likely if there is some kind of previous relationship.

While Twitter is rather characteristic for getting in contact with weak ties, I witness across accounts that the pattern of engagement is rather ritualised between accounts that are somehow connected via following and have a shared interest in the feminist cause. I encounter the same names again and again. Some of these users contribute to *Feminism in India* as authors, others just seem to regularly engage with the account on Twitter.

Having a closer look at the Twitter account, I truly witness intersectionality.

The currently evolving suicide of the Dalit scholar Rohith Vemula is also depicted by the feminists, for example by stressing the implications of the suicide for his mother. This truly intersects with caste. Proceeding with my research about feminism and intersectionality in the Twitter sphere, I must admit that it is hard to find intersectional feminist groups beyond this account in the Indian context. Most of the other accounts are rather narrow-casting about feminist issues. However, a second poll suggests that feminism should also fight caste-based oppression.

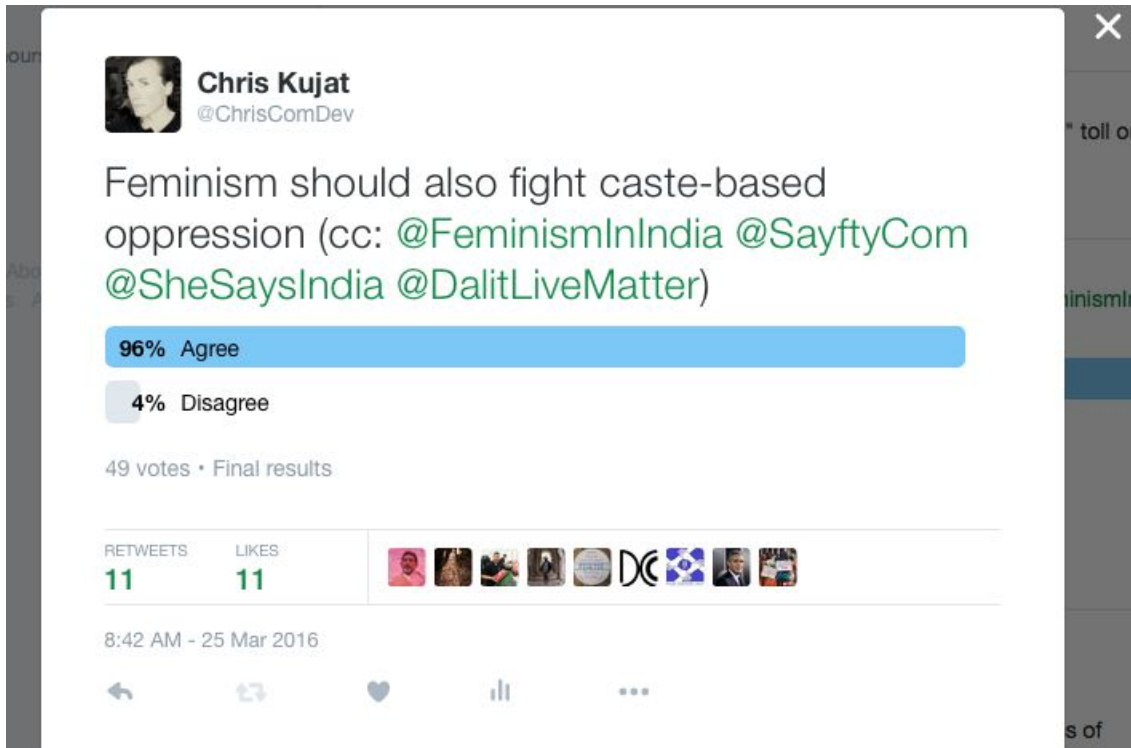


Image 9. Screenshot of my Twitter poll asking if feminists should also fight caste-based oppression.

7.2.2. Getting into Dialogue via Direct Messages on Twitter.

The possibilities to communicate across social media is just as vast as the space is pluralistic. I also use the direct message function of Twitter quite avidly to engage with feminists. One example, is to interview Twitter users directly via this function. The direct message or private message function has benefits. Here, the interaction is not happening in the public sphere per se and I can use screenshots to document the conversation after consent has been given by the interviewee.

The following screenshot depicts such a scenery.

Hey, Chris. I believe, alienating the social aspect would be looking at it very narrowly. With "activism", one of the aims is to reach out to people who believe in the same; opening up possibilities for dialogue.

8 Std.

Also, the sociality of it also helps in collaborating with other human rights causes, which we generally call 'intersectionality', giving a horizontality to the cause.

8 Std.

Image 10. Excerpts from a Twitter interview via the Twitter chat function. I asked if the factor of *sociality* is important next to online activism.

To get some more information about the personal opinion of a contributor, I get in contact with the *Feminism in India* editor Adishi Gupta, who allows me to quote her directly and with her real identity. The topic of the social or sociality is important to her, like her statement above depicts.

My interviews further show how important *digital* feminism is today and what the Internet has to offer for the individual feminist in the Indian context. The Internet is a space where feminists can be activists and raise their voices against oppression. However, while feminists can use digital feminism to enter the public sphere, often in their social environment of the family, liberal ideas are not welcome and traditional structures are reinforced, for example through arranged marriages, like my interviews with (digital) feminists depict.

Other interviews confirm the patrilineal ideas and the traditional role of women. The Internet is often the *only* space where one can share liberal ideas or socialises with like-minded people concerned with a similar cause, like feminism.

Engaging with the topic of feminism in the Indian subaltern sphere for a while, I feel that the major benefit of the use is of social nature, which literally means sociality in this context.

Further, another crucial point is that I have the impression that the people who are generally already informed about the issues regarding women's rights in India are engaged in the debates on Twitter. In contrast to television, it is rather unlikely that certain messages appear on the Twitter feed without having contacts that care about the issue or having in general feminist accounts on the following list. Therefore, it appears to be a sphere on its own that is public, yet determined by personal interests. A *micro public* that is defined by personal interests and engagement.

7.2.3. Exclusion and Privilege.

The following tweet by someone I follow on Twitter depicts the issue of access to technology for women:



Image 11. Tweet shared by @phat_controller about the ban of mobile phones for women in Gujarat villages.

In this case, mobile phones in rural Gujarat are *exclusively* banned for women. It implies, of course, that patriarchy and the male dominated leadership perceive a potential threat in this technology. While censorship is clearly taking place in the Indian

context, the ban of the entire technology to gain access to the network, clearly is a sign of oppression.

Using the Internet in the Indian context and especially as a woman is still a privilege. I engage with Adishi again to ask her “Do you see yourself as *privileged* being able to raise your voice for feminist issues online and express yourself openly?”

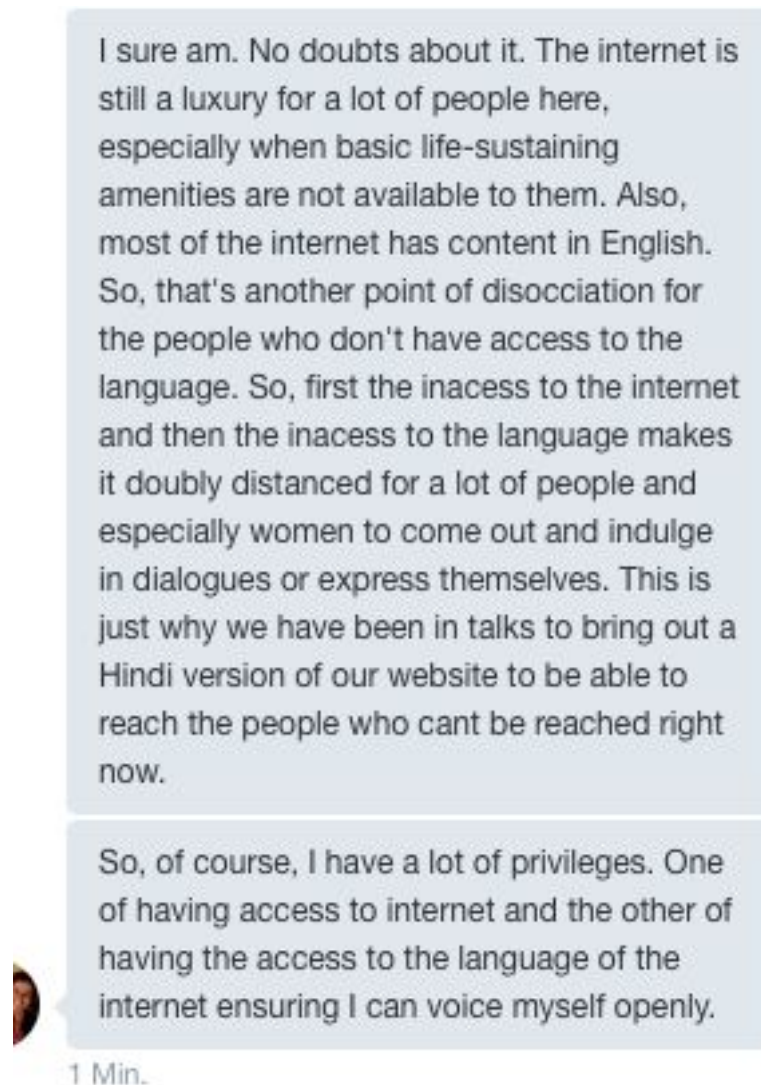


Image 12. Twitter chat interview with one of my informants.

Her statement shows the awareness of her privilege and it implies how privileged the users the of Web 2.0 are, especially in the Indian context. *Feminism in India* as a platform is limited to the English speaking community and this is clearly a limitation of the study, too. She further points out that she has suggested to also develop a Hindi speaking platform, as her primary contact with the youth from rural parts showed that it is difficult for them to read or write in English. This would add to the reach and access to the platform of *Feminism in India*.

In the social media landscape online, Twitter is often also used as node, linking back to the central web presence like a weblog. This is also the case in regards to FII (<http://feminisminindia.com>). Most importantly, the website or the central node seems less frequently updated than Twitter and there is a lot of interaction compared to the website. Of course, this is due to the nature of the website. It also shows that even if Twitter is just used to augment a certain platform, as a *node* it is often the key element for engagement in the public sphere of the web and to reach out to the public.

Hashtags are often used to reach out to the public that engage with a certain topic.

A lot of tweets about violence against women turn up in my Twitter feed often accompanied by the hashtag #VAW.

Already in the introduction section, it has been discussed that violence against women is a never ending phenomenon in India. A very popular account, I encounter, is the one of *sayfty.com*. The account is curated by volunteers, which are changing weekly. Here, activism clearly links to the category of awareness raising. The topics vary from violence against women to masculinity.

Of course, there are not only organisations but also individuals engaging with feminism. Some individuals share or retweet about the intersectionality of caste and gender like the following screenshot shows:



Image 13. Screenshot depicting intersectionality of caste critics.

The main narratives, I encounter, are still rather divided. Beyond the main account of FII, which I investigate for this study, the main feminism related accounts do not approach the issue of caste. After working on the issue for quite some time, I personally feel that there is a systematic neglect of caste by many feminists or feminist organisations. Of course, caste is a political troublesome topic.

7.2.4. Sociality and Engagement with Feminism.

A lot of content is retweeted and favoured in the networks of feminists themselves. This means, feminists or feminist organisations retweet, like or comment on each others tweets. Following one or more accounts of feminists, often produces an intermix of Tweets in my feed and I witness that these different feminist organisations also engage with each other quite avidly and regularly. Is this sociality, networking or is this activism? I cannot witness a clear cut division and to some extent a lot of the interaction is basically sociality, which is based on a certain topic, in this case feminism. In my encounter with the feminists in the subaltern sphere as an abstract space in the Web 2.0, I encounter an interesting environment, which has been inevitably dominated by the feeling of sociality rather than activism. Activism, it seems to me, is rather driven by hashtags and not by individual accounts of organisations or individuals.

I encounter various topics in the broad field of feminism.

As feminism also engages with sexuality and sexual liberation, the role of the state is beautifully depicted in the following tweet.



Image 14. Screenshot of a tweet. While the tweet above mainly depicts the notions of state surveillance and sexual activity “online”, feminists also counter the mainstream narrative of patriarchally dominated sex and its representation.



Image 15. Tweet engaging in women's sexuality.

Sex positivity and counter-representations of a sexuality, where women are not the “victim” of rape or objectified like in porn, is one way of feminists to counter the mainstream narratives of male dominated sexuality. A crucial point is, that in India sexual education is rather limited in the public discourse, including schools. One of my informants stated that there has been no sexual education in her school at all. She personally thought that the emergency contraception would be an adequate form of contraception. With women often being limited to the domestic sphere as well, the chance to access information about sexuality and sexual health is empowering. Especially in a country where talking about sexuality is rather limited in the public sphere or public discourse, feminism clearly links to raising awareness. It depicts another notion of what the Web 2.0 in general might be good at: awareness raising.

I also get personally involved in awareness raising campaigns and I feel welcome amongst feminists of *Feminism in India* and other groups. Having an etic perspective and being a man has not been critiqued and the majority of encounters have been friendly. The screenshot below depicts my engagement with both, the *Red Elephant Foundation* and *Feminism in India*. The *Red Elephant Foundation* is an organisation that also works on gender-related issues. I engage with them during my netnography next to FII randomly.



Image 16. Participating in a Selfie-contest by the *Red Elephant Foundation*, India. The organisation has been known to me before the netnography.

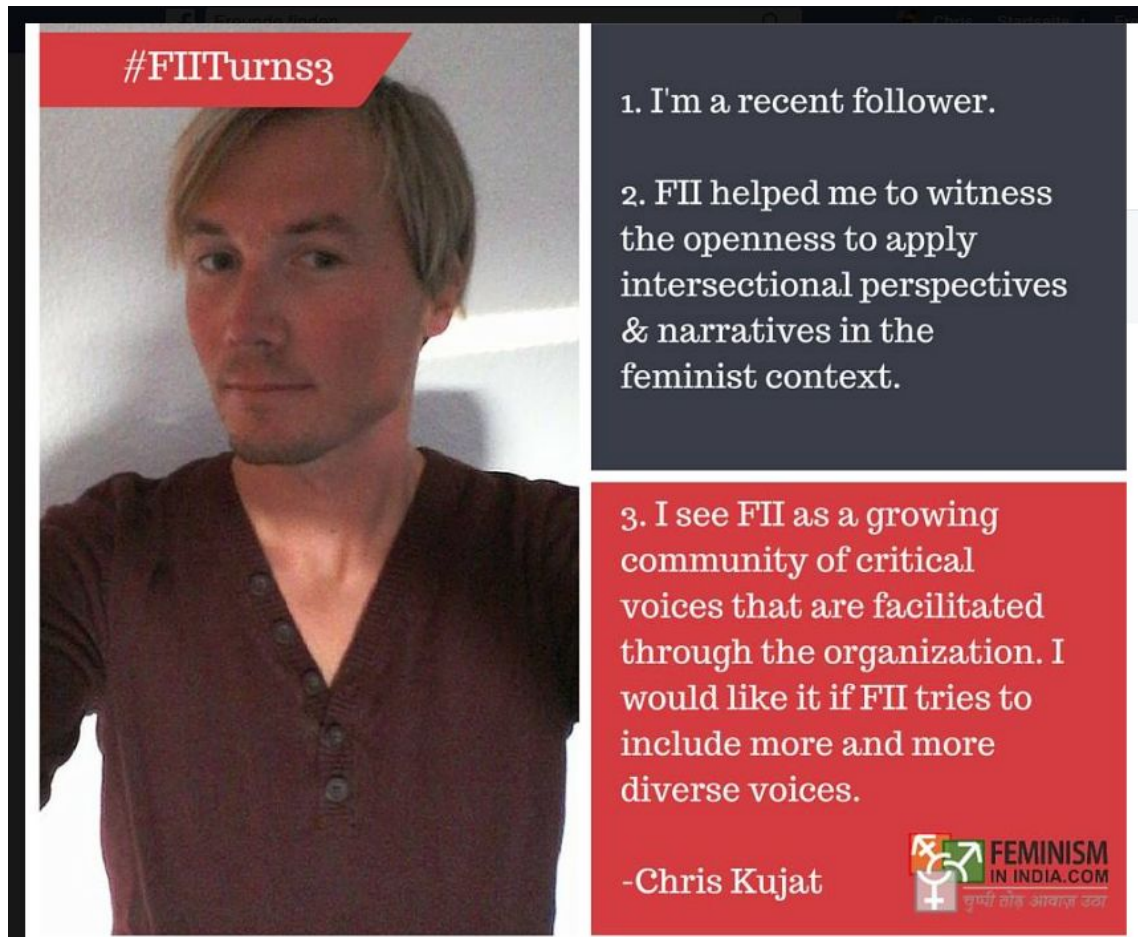


Image 17. Sharing my thoughts in regards to the third anniversary of *Feminism in India*.

In both cases, I receive a direct message, which asks me to participate in their campaign. It makes me feel welcome and appreciated in the community. I get the feeling of how important the person in the context of these social media initiatives is. Sociality, in a way, feels political. However, there is no radicalist notion of feminism witnessed by me. Open debate is encouraged. Adding one's very own thoughts to tweets is often used to add an individual aspect.

Already the very first case study depicts that the subaltern can tweet but its impact and if they are “heard” goes beyond this study.

7.3. Case Study Two: Investigating the Hashtag Activism Around Rohith Vemula's Suicide and the Caste Critics

Next to feminism, I chose another case study to investigate the political bottom-up perspective of online activism in the Indian context of the subaltern. Feminism, as a representation of women's issues in India has been investigated in the previous case study. Both, caste and gender intersect, which the case study before also depicted. In this case study, I want to depict the notions of caste critics with an emphasis on the impulse that the suicide of the Dalit scholar Rohith Vemula brought into the digital sphere. Rohith Vemula was a PhD scholar that committed suicide in early 2016. In his suicide note he portrayed his life as a Dalit and the consequences caste had on his life. Dalits are generally oppressed in the Indian society, but the suicide of Rohith unleashed the outcry acknowledging the collective suffering and mental oppression Dalits face (Mhaskar, 2016). The suicide note of Rohith is comparable to an ethnographic writing, depicting his emotions while living the state of being oppressed from an emic perspective.

A major social media outcry after the suicide led to the mimicking of the hashtag *#BlackLivesMatter* with the hashtag *#DalitLivesMatter*. New accounts have been set up like *Dalit Lives Matter*, which are also arguably inspired by the *Black Lives Matter* movement in the US. In this case, the intersectionality is rather between *racial* and caste based oppression. The aspect of temporality has been also quite visible due to the quick rise in popularity and the ad hoc fame the movement gains. I witness the rise of tweets on Twitter and later the decline of the popularity due to the change of the trending topic from casteism to anti-nationalism regarding the controversy at the JNU, one of the most prestigious universities in India. The complexities of the JNU incident go beyond this netnography. For the study the decline in the hashtag and the transition of attention from one event to another is important to notice.

I follow the movement across Web 2.0 platforms and blogs. What I witness, while observing and following the movement called *#DalitLivesMatter*, is its rise and fall of the trending hashtag. What is the *outcome* of this awareness raising, I ask myself? As caste issues are not new, there is awareness. Caste and caste based oppression has been banned under law for more than 50 years now. Therefore, the social media activism rather seems as a catalyst for suppressed emotions of the oppressed. Caste

critics seem to identify with Rohith Vemula as he seems to embody the struggle of the oppressed.

Even though I have an etic perspective myself, I feel the emotions heating up. Social media, and especially Twitter, is used for what it is good at: immediacy in regards to response of the event. The tweets are full of emotions, heated emotions. The outcry is accompanied often by emotions that link to the overall caste system. The connection to the *bigger picture* of Dalits' struggle is made even in the most immediate response.

7.3.1. Racing to Fame or Raising Consciousness?

My Twitter feed is loaded with hashtags like #DalitLivesMatter and #RohithVemula shortly after the suicide of Rohith Vemula. This depends on the many caste critics or caste critical accounts, which I follow. The caste critics are creative in connecting the suicide of Rohith with the overall struggle of Dalits. They catalyse their emotions across tweets and other social media platforms. The tweets depict how outraged the caste critics are about the suicide. They are speaking of homicide rather than suicide. It feels as if the suicide is a catalyst for the oppressed to raise their voice and narrate their oppressed situation to the public. I follow the hashtag across Twitter and just registered a new Facebook account for the research study to catch up with the posting about Rohith Vemula there. I become friends with a major supporter of the #DalitLivesMatter movement and I can clearly see the wall of his Facebook account plastered with posts concerning Rohith Vemula. A few hundred friends are his main audience. A few comments are under the posts every once in a while. It truly feels like an expression of free speech, but what is the impact? The friends are rather a minor audience. Is this interaction really much more than participatory narrowcasting? The caste critical interaction is, due to the nature of a personal Facebook page, limited to commenting. The audience is also limited due to the semi-private character of the Facebook page.

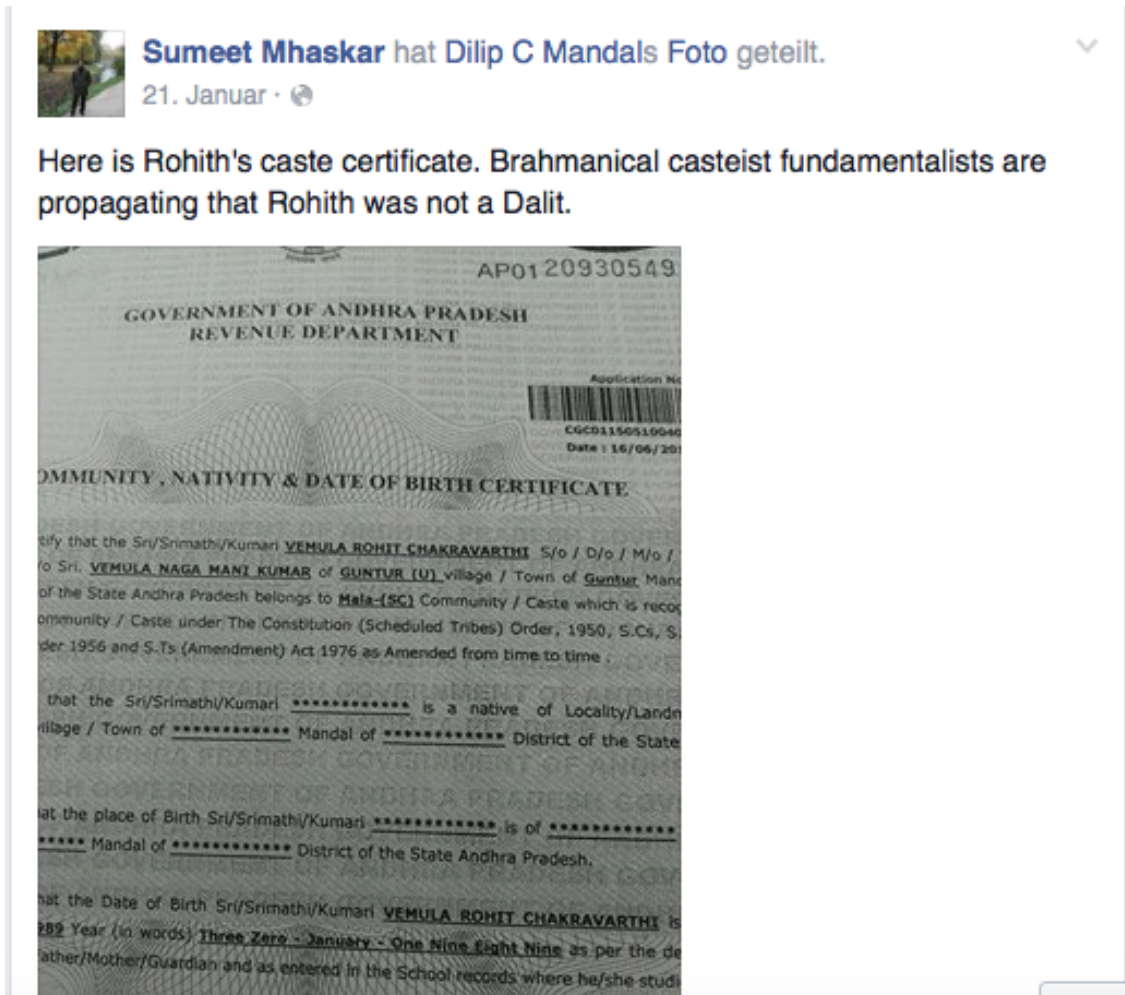


Image 18. Facebook page engaging with the mainstream media representation of Rohith Vemula.

However, no matter what size the potential audience might have caste critical activism can be found on both, Facebook as well as on Twitter. The Facebook post above depicts a certain counter-narrative to the mainstream media that portrays Rohith Vemula as not being a Dalit. The mainstream media representation is depicted in the following screenshot.



Image 19. The Broadcast media represents Rohith as a non-Dalit

The mainstream media defamed him and argued that he only aimed to claim government benefits and reservations by occupying the caste identity of a Dalit. Both screenshots depict what social media is good at, as long as it is not *totally* censored: In countering the narrative of the mainstream media, especially if the mainstream media is in control of the elite or the state. Up until now, the subaltern, who are using the Web 2.0 and its applications, are privileged themselves as the first case study implied. While the collective works well together as caste critics to counter mainstream narratives, it is hard for outsiders, like me, to get into the community.

It is in general harder to engage with individual caste critics. The individuals, in many cases, hide their individual identity. When I ask for useful accounts that I should follow in regards to Dalit issues, *Roundtable India* (<http://roundtableindia.co.in>) is named by an insider of the caste critical groups. In general, organisational accounts are recommended to me rather than individual activists. The website of *Roundtable India* is clearly caste critical. During my very own research for further caste critical accounts, I stumble over the *@DalitLivesMatter* account, which is linked to the website of *Roundtable India*.

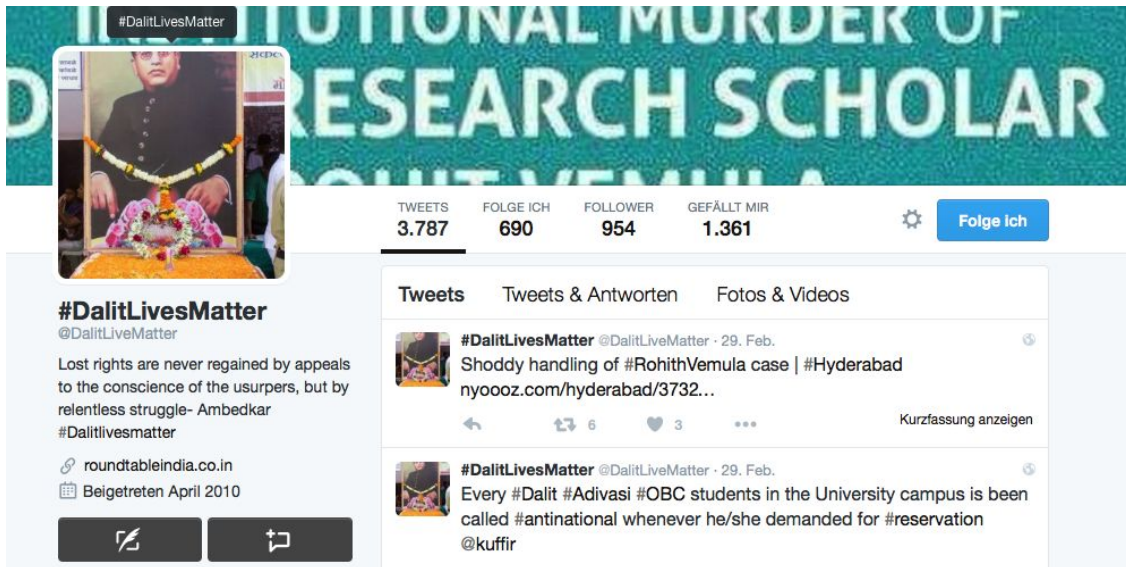


Image 20. The profile picture has been changed to the picture of Ambedkar, who is very important for the Dalit community and their self-representation. Caste critics often critically occupy the identity of Ambedkar as a liberator for the Dalit community.

Other accounts, namely *Ambedkar's Caravan* and *Dalit Camera*, which both have been suggested to me, can also be found as retweets in the Twitter feed of the *Dalit Lives Matter* account.

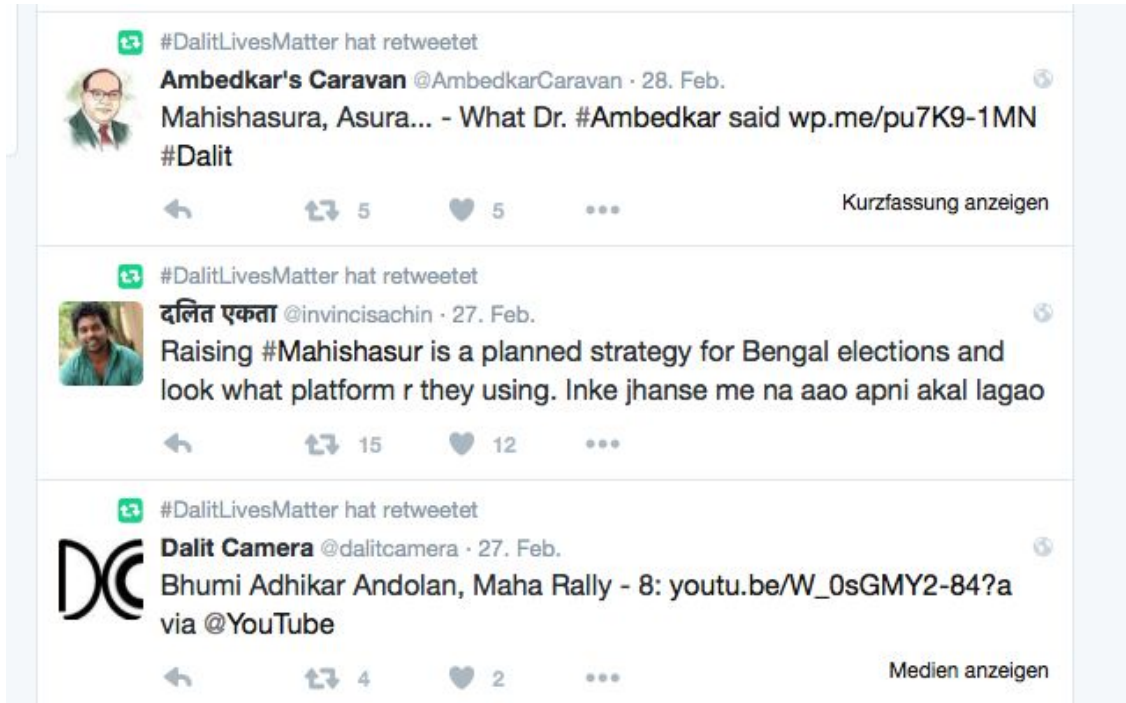


Image 21. Various caste critical accounts.

The interaction between these accounts depicts a sociality similar to what I witnessed during the encounter with the feminists. Interest groups are interacting, sharing as well as liking each others tweets.

While caste critics are avidly engaging with each other, the reach of this activism remains questionable. Not even 1000 followers of the *Dalit Lives Matter* account that is currently using the Twitter handle of *@DalitLivesMatter* makes me sceptical, not only about the impact, but also about the audience and its reach.

Beyond the engagement with caste critic, there are also some tweets that link to feminist causes or to women affected by caste based oppression, like the following screenshot depicts:



Image 22. *@DalitLivesMatter* account reporting about Dalit women and girls.

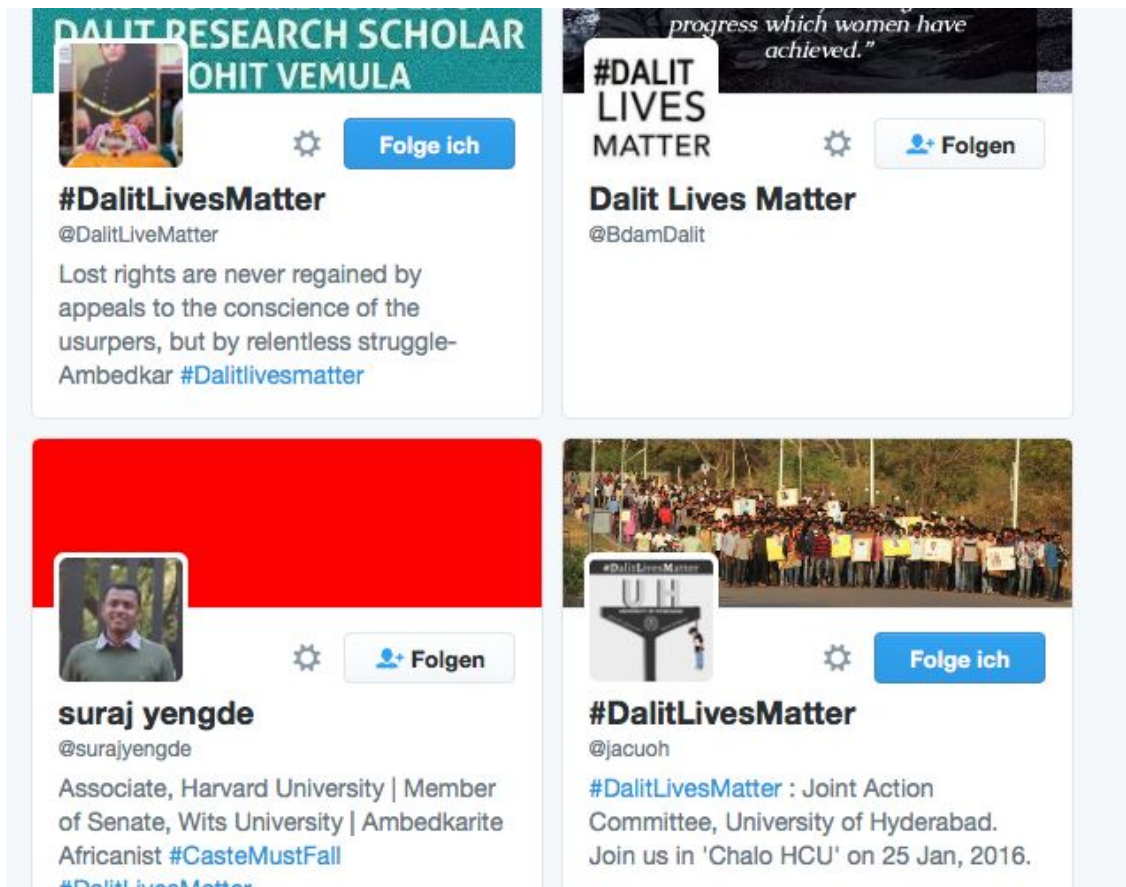


Image 23. Various Twitter accounts that changed their name to *Dalit Lives Matter*, like three out of four Twitter accounts above depict.

However, the overall identity and representational practice are only linked to caste criticism. As changing the name on Twitter is simple, I encountered three accounts that changed their name to *Dalit Lives Matter*. Fostering a collective identity and critically occupying their identities as a caste critic.

The collective identity has fostered a certain fame through the hashtag and the collective action that gained visibility on social media on the one hand side. On the other hand side, their social media attention also raised consciousness, for example by countering the mainstream media.

7.3.2. *The Fall of the Hashtag Fame.*

At the beginning of March, there are little traces of the outcry left in the public (Twitter) sphere.



Image 24. India Trends on Twitter. *DalitLivesMatter* and co are not trending anymore.

The trending topic(s) related to caste or *Dalit Lives Matter* are gone. Political topics that are not related to caste are trending now. Not even two months after the suicide, the hype and outcry already loses its loud voice. The accounts, which have been active before, are also active now by being caste critical. However, the ad hoc fame of the hashtag *#DalitLivesMatter* diminishes fast. There is a Rohith Vemula related tweet upcoming every once in a while, but the ad hoc fame is gone as ad hoc as it has begun. After the decline of the social media hype about Rohith Vemula, the next big media debate is the anti-national crisis at the most famous Indian higher education institution Jawaharlal Nehru University. The hype around Rohith was intense but not sustainable. The ad hoc fame brought an intense visibility in the public, especially through social media. The impact, however, is hard to measure. This shows the fast rise and fall of an activism, which is born out of a single event and linked to ad hoc fame.

7.3.3. Identity and Solidarity.

To extend and broaden my Twitter centred research approach, I also want to engage in Facebook groups concerned with Dalit or caste critical issues.

There is an endless seeming amount of shared Ambedkar pictures across various Facebook groups. The followers of Ambedkar are often referred to as Ambedkarites. Dr B. Ambedkar is the most famous Dalit social reformer, lawyer and the identification of many Dalits on their way to liberation from oppression. I encounter Ambedkar pictures next to pictures of Rohith Vemula, which are both used as a visual representation of caste critics. Both caste critical idols, namely Rohith Vemula and Ambedkar, are *men*. Therefore, the major collective identity of caste critics is limited to a male identity.

While engaging on Twitter casually, an interesting Tweet gets my attention:



Image 25. Tweet about the “Black Live Matter Movement” and its on- and offline implications.

The article depicts the importance of the hashtags for social movements. Hashtags can, according to the article, have a real impact in the society or even drive policy change. Similarly, the hashtag *#DalitLivesMatter* is used to increase the visibility of the issue in the Twitter sphere.

Identity in politics seems to be majorly important throughout post-constitution India. Ambedkar has been historically the visual representation of caste critics during the last decades and still accounts for a large share of identity pictures. The personal cult around Rohith Vemula facilitates the voices of the oppressed masses and is also used as a visual representation across social media platforms. The body cult is even visible in the offline world as the statue in the following image depicts.

Joint Action Committee for Social Justice -UoH hat etwas über [#JusticeForRohith](#) gepostet.

Joint Action Committee for Social Justice -UoH hat **Bhimrajyas** Foto geteilt.

7 Std. · 🌐

Rohith Vemula Statue at Namantar Smarak Nagpur.
[#JusticeforRohith](#)



Bhimrajya
16 Std. · 🌐

👍 Seite gefällt mir

Image 26. Body cult related to Rohith Vemula.

It seems like Rohith literally embodies a way to liberation from the oppression for caste critics, both online and offline.

Next, solidarity can be witnessed across social media platforms with the *DalitLivesMatter* movement. Academia, represented through various universities, jumps on the train to discuss caste based exclusion in a panel. It depicts a direct impact of the incident that gains public momentum. Therefore, interest groups show their solidarity and add to the virality of the cause.

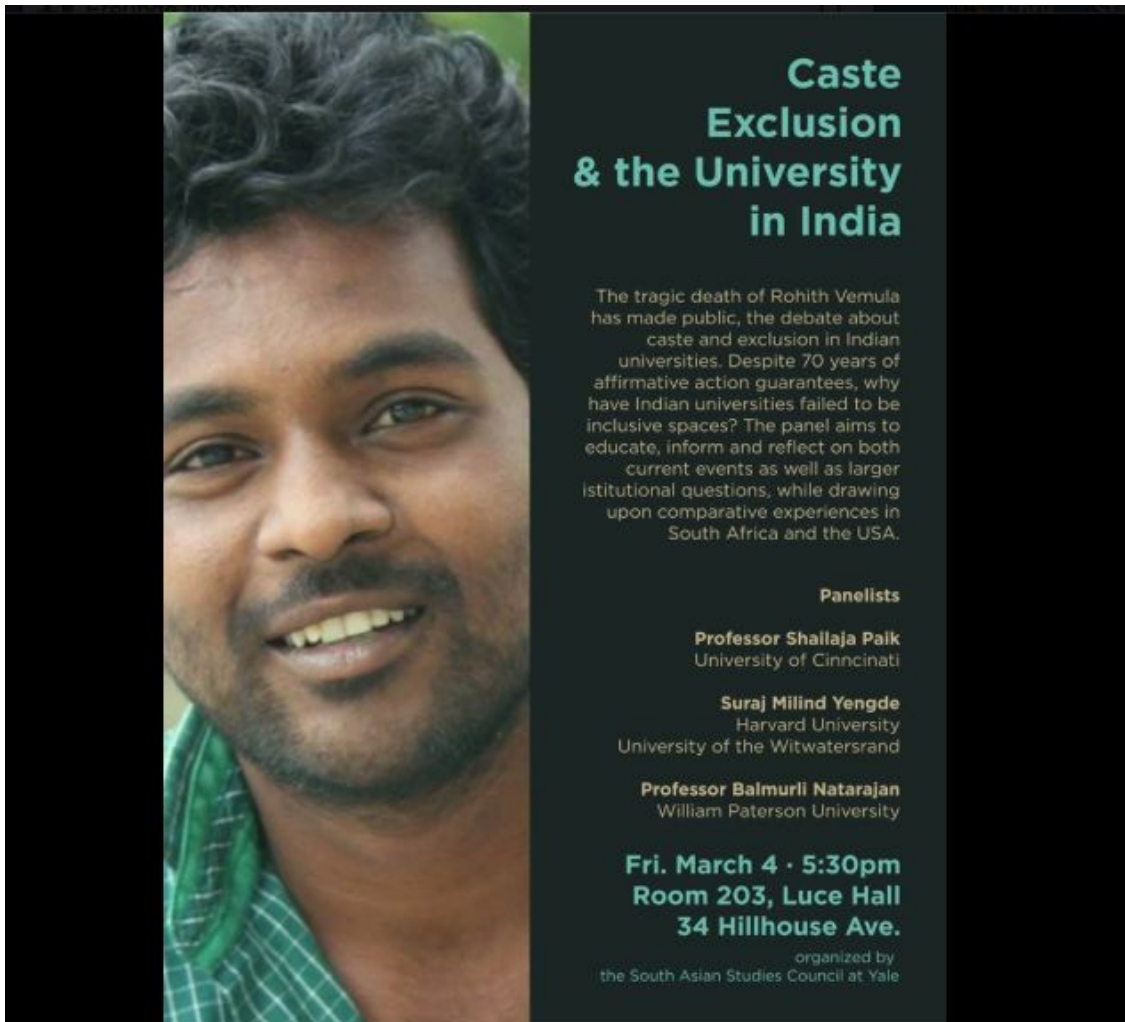


Image 27. Facebook post of an academic event putting Rohith's suicide in the context of caste exclusion.

Caste based oppression is far from being a new phenomenon, but the case even triggered outrage of scholars across the academic sphere in the Global North. The circle of activism gets induced by people from the public, like academics that also get into activism in the Twitter sphere.

Especially, in the case of Rohith Vemula it seems as if spreading the message is already an important part of the entire activism campaign. Spreading the message and the narratives of the subaltern seems to be important for the subaltern themselves.

Rohith embodied with his suicide the struggle of the Dalits, similar to Ambedkar who is an embodiment for raising the voice against this oppression. For the entire fame of the rising hashtag, the individual added only little to the overall identity. The collective and its representational practice has been defined by a shared identity that is visually depicted via profile pictures of Rohith Vemula or Ambedkar.

There are accounts, which I encounter on Twitter, that truly ask for *action* and work intersectional. This would make it suitable for categorisation number three, which asks for mobilisation as defined by Vegh (2003).



Image 28. The account's name *Jai Bhim* is the Hindi term to depict the end of all kinds of oppression in society. *Jai Bhim* is a caste critical account that also works intersectional.

The account further circulates, as a pinned tweet, an article about caste oppression and violence against women in India. While the account asks for action to annihilate caste, this account also intersects with the critique of capitalism and patriarchy. The Hindi term *Jai Bhim* is the call for the end of all oppression and the exploitation of people. It is one of the accounts that actually intersects with feminist interests in the closer sense, as it also names patriarchy to be abandoned. This shows to a certain solidarity with feminism. The example depicts that there are caste critical endeavours that also intersect with feminism. It is an example of a caste critical accounts that regularly posts about caste critical issues and facilitates problems of the subaltern in the public via social media.

At the end of every fieldtrip, whether online or offline, the researcher needs to have an exit strategy. For me, however, this is only the end of this particular piece of writing. I have gained new friends and will stay engaged as well as in touch with many

people I encountered during the netnography, for example during my studies of India at Göttingen University.

8. Discussion

8.1. The Limitations of Access and Accessibility: Exclusiveness and Privilege

The digital divide is one of the various factors that still makes the subaltern sphere online *exclusive*. Various conversations, chats and interviews have confirmed this. Adishi Gupta, the editor of *Feminism in India*, knows about her privilege of being able to express feminists' opinion online, like my interview has shown. Further, the English language was named to make the interaction with *Feminism in India* exclusive. A plan to extend the web presence with a Hindi version is in discussion. The urban/ rural divide is just another factor, which is depicted by Ghadially (2007). In the rural parts other languages than English are spoken and this is another limiting factor that decreases accessibility of the web. Rao (2005) stresses the efforts for closing the digital divide in India. However, the ban for mobile phones in some rural parts of India shows the diversity of access problems. There are multiple factors determining if one is able to access the Web 2.0 in the Indian context. Women, however, are still more likely to be affected by the digital divide (Rao, 2005). Therefore, a large part of the so called subaltern, are excluded from the web and cannot raise their voice online, nor use the Internet to access information. This implies that only the privileged parts of the subaltern in India are able to make use of the Web 2.0.

Next, privilege also goes beyond the access and accessibility debate. Narrative authority as depicted by Beverley (2013) is a serious issue when it comes to privilege and power relations. From white males discussing women's issues to upper caste women discussing Dalit issues, privilege is a recurring issue and one of the major limitations for activism. The less privileged subaltern, or the "subaltern of the subaltern", are still often excluded from activism. This links to Habermas' (2006) argument about the "mediated political communication" that is "carried on by an elite".

It is still linked to privilege to communicate in the subaltern sphere as depicted by the netnography.

Therefore, the subaltern can tweet, but it remains an exclusive practise, which not all of the subaltern can join. It is important to contextualise that the actors in this study most likely belong to the middle class(es) as well (Harindranath & Khorana, 2014).

Similarly, exclusive is the Indian public sphere, which is dominated by men. For example, an account I encountered during the netnography called *Why Loiter?* mainly depicts what Chattopadhyay (2011) calls the representation of “offline activism” online. Their campaign is not limited to online activism, but rather augments offline activism with the online presence, for example on Twitter but also on Facebook. It narrow-casts about the offline activities, while also posting about women’s rights issues.



Image 29. The account @whyloiter on Twitter. *Why Loiter?* is an example of offline-activism mediated online.

As Chattopadhyay (2011) states, new media offers a place for belonging, for example for Indian women. As the Hindutva movement redefined women’s role to mothers and housewives and define their role attached to the domestic sphere, the web is a place to join and socialise. Even though one cannot physically loiter and is bound to the domestic sphere, one can socialise online (Turner, 2012). The *Dalit Lives Matter* movement also depicted a certain form of belonging due to the importance of the collective, rather than the individual. The collective literally socialised around the cause of caste critic, while also engaging in activist activities.

It remains a complex issue, in which sense this subaltern sphere is exclusive in itself. Using two different case studies that, in theory, have an intersectional root, shows how polarised the worlds of these two causes still are. While the feminists opened up to intersectionality, the caste critics are much more narrow in their use of social media.

Of course, the subalterns are not limited to Dalits, caste critics or feminists. Ghai (2002) criticises Indian feminists for excluding the disabled. The netnography depicted *Feminism in India*'s example of a convergence towards intersectionality that also includes caste and disability. For other women's rights accounts, this is often not the case. The majority of tweets I encountered that were concerned with feminism were not connected to caste. Various tweets even depicted that FII is critiqued for talking about caste.

8.2. The Benefits: Activism and Awareness Raising

Beyond the factor of activism, the account of *Feminism in India* and other feminist accounts, which I encountered during my netnography also have shown valuable as a resource of information by spreading awareness about various issues. The *Sayfty Chat*, facilitated by the account of *@SayftyCom*, which is organised around a certain topic like gender based violence, also helps to educate people about this topic and invites for discussion. This also applies to other accounts, who aim to educate the audience about certain causes. Spreading information or educating people about certain issues relates to activism.



Image 30.. The hashtag #SayftyChat is employed for regular chat sessions initiated by @SayftyCom. The topics vary weekly and feature special guests.

Ollis (2008) depicts accidental activism and links it to the new cultural convergence towards lifelong learning. Especially, in regards to the feminist accounts I encountered, the educational value has been high, even though it is clearly diverse and varies. Not every tweet is backed with scientific or infotainment components, yet there is an educational factor in the overall narrative of the tweets. The same applies to accounts of similar organisations. For example, debunking myths about contraception and sexual education seems to be important in a country, where sexual education is often neglected. Until now, sexual education is not part of the school curriculum in India. Therefore, awareness raising remains important (Seervai, 2015).

Feminism in India is open to various oppressions women face and raises awareness. The organisation also works horizontally with other causes of marginalisation. I witnessed a strong sociality between rather *strong* seeming ties, for example contributors of the same organisation also share or engage with FII on Twitter. The agenda of the organisation is opened up to intersectionality, for example disability, but also caste, as discussed before. While this has been mainly a qualitative study, a quick Twitter search related to the account of FII witnessed 13 times the mentioning of caste in their tweets. While this says nothing about quality in return, it is evidence that they actually talk about caste and are not silent about the issue, which has been often

critiqued in the academic discourse before (Haq, 2013). Lépinard (2014) further depicts that intersectionality is a struggle for feminists of other nations as well, like her case study of France depicts. This implies that intersectionality is often neglected, but there are cases where intersectionality, for example between caste and gender, is emphasized.

Caste critics mostly engaged in various ways to counter the mainstream media representation of Rohith Vemula. The use of Facebook and Twitter has been a powerful tool to share and publish counter narratives that brought the truth into the Indian public sphere. This properly would not have been possible, if the only source of information had been the state controlled media. In Habermas' (1969) sense, social media leads to a pluralistic media sphere and that is where I identify the strength of social media in the context of including the subaltern and their voices.

8.3. The Representational Practices and Performances: Same Roots - Different Identities

As depicted in the introduction, women's and caste based oppression have the same roots in the Indian society.

Embodiment in online activism, like Milan (2015) calls it, varies in regards to the two different case studies. While feminists embody their personal selves and their social media identities via their accounts, the caste critical movement tends to externalise the embodiment via the idols of Ambedkar, and more currently, of Rohith Vemula. This is often depicted visually via pictures of Rohith and Ambedkar. The account of *@DalitLivesMatter* also changed the profile picture back to an image of Ambedkar after the decline of the ad hoc fame of Rohith Vemula's suicide.



Image 31. @DalitLivesMatter changed the profile picture back to an image of Ambedkar after the decline of the hype around Rohith Vemula's suicide.

Therefore, the individual identity also shapes the feminist movement as a whole and is not focused on idols compared to the caste critics. The notion of the individual in the context of social movements has been often neglected (Castells, 2015, pp. 9-13).



Image 32. Example of an individual contributor in regards to feminism.

However, in the case study of feminists the individual is an important fragment with an individual identity that adds to the overall collective. My personal encounter and participation in campaigns implies the importance of the individual for the overall movement of feminism. Castells' notion of a networked society implies the network potential for both, the social and the political (Castells, 2015). Castells (2015, pp. 9-13) critiques that social movements or social movement analysis often neglect the individual. However, the individual plays an important role in the case study of the

feminists. In this case, the individual has shown to be important, both in his or her contribution and with the individual self-representation.

Cultural change is what both, the Dalit movement and the feminists, aim at. However, while the feminists, in general, seem to identify with the overall international feminism cause, the Dalit movement and its identity is strongly linked to the *Black Lives Matter* movement in the US (Polletta & Jasper, 2001). Even on Facebook, identity is performed, as Zhao, Grasmuck and Martin (2008) state. While the feminists represent themselves by using mostly pictures of themselves, pictures of Rohith Vemula or Ambedkar are often used by the caste critics as a collective visual identity across social media platforms. Representing the self, both in the context of feminists and in the context of caste critics is an act of *performance* (Kendall, 1998). While the feminists tend to put an emphasis on their individual representations, the caste critics rather represent themselves via shared idols, without performing a strong individual identity. Like Vikram Aditya Sahai (Ashoka University, 2016) states, privileged people do not necessarily reflect on their identity and how they perform these identities. Both groups share a commitment of representational practices that show their connection to their causes, either visually or via their profile description. In some cases, only the feminists' Twitter engagement depicts their linkage to the feminist cause, though. The representational practices of caste critics are not only complex, they can be divided into two different categories. The caste critic's identity and self-representation expresses the culture and religion of the oppressed, including cultural artefacts like pictures of Ambedkar, which go beyond activism (De Krujif, 2015). Especially the Facebook groups have been filled with cultural artefacts.

8.4. Performing Activism: The Role of Hashtags and Temporality

The lived experience and socialising online seems to be an important point, leading to authenticity for online activism. Dencik (2015, p. 15) states that being grassroots driven, bottom-up and horizontal in nature leads to a certain authenticity of a movement. Especially, the account of *Feminism in India* shares all these characteristics. The ad hoc

fame of *#DalitLivesMatter* is also grassroot driven and working bottom-up, but leaves only limited space for working horizontally.

However, the periphery like Barberá et al. (2015) call it, is stronger in the case of ad hoc fame, like the case of Rohith Vemula has shown. The engagement of the periphery is not as ad hoc in the context of sustainable use. The engagement around the account of *Feminism in India* is more based on regular engagement with intersectional feminism, making it rather sustainable than ad hoc. There is no ritualised use of a certain hashtag like *#DalitLivesMatter* and the engagement is rather facilitated through the Twitter account than hashtags. The diverse take on feminist issues makes it more pluralistic, too. Feminists tend to employ seasonal hashtags like *VAW* that translates to *violence against women*. Hashtags increase the visibility of a certain cause, which has been especially important for the *Dalit Lives Matter* movement. The use of hashtags is inevitable on Twitter for the performance of activism. The ritualized engagement happens ad hoc and the factor of temporality was important (Barassi, 2015). Just as the suicide of Rohith gained major public attention, the caste critical voices used the hashtag at the right time to gain attention for the Dalit issues. The attention through the trending hashtag has been crucial to stand out of the mass of banal content (Hintz, 2015).

The facilitation of informal communication (Veenstra et al., 2015) is further helping to understand how the *Dalit Lives Matter Movement* raised to fame. The oppressed group of caste critics have been able to engage relatively easy with the hashtag, get into dialogue and spread information. The hashtag has been important for the ad hoc fame of the movement (Bruns & Burgess, 2014). However, one has to be critical that online engagement does not necessarily translate into offline action. Sassen (2002) reminds on the connection of the offline and the online world. Success of a social movement online does not mean that there is necessarily a positive impact offline. The findings of Freelon, McIlwain and Clark (2016) are promising as these evaluated the online movement of the *Black Lives Matter* movement as one of the most successful movements in fostering change in the last decades, in regards to US based politics.

8.5. *The Use of Social Media and its Implications: The Notions of the Public, Twitter and Co*

The netnography depicted the limitations of the use of social media, with an emphasis on Twitter. Sociality clearly is an incontestable feature of the use for both, feminists and caste critics. Bruns and Highfield (2016) depict the notion of the Twitter as a series of public sphericules, which are included in the public sphere, leading to various “micro-publics”. Especially for the feminists, it is a micro public that lies beyond the private sphere, in which they are often reduced to in the context of India. They can socialise, for example by directly engaging with each other or via hashtags. Sociality seems to be a key factor in the case study of the *Feminism in India*. While the accounts represent the cause in the public, it also connects people with a shared interest. This interest can be centred around an account or a certain hashtag. The limitations of this use have been depicted at the beginning of the discussion, but thinking about the subaltern sphere in spatial terms, it rather depicts various micro publics. The micro publics are depicted in various forms and are diverse. In the case of caste critics and the case study of Rohith Vemula, it has been a sphere that has been based on micro publics of counter narratives and an outcry for the annihilation of caste. For the feminists investigated in this research study, the spatial is much more persistent and the engagement with the topic driven by a problem, which is deeply rooted in the Indian history.

While social media is majorly imbedded in the public sphere, it is offered via private enterprises that have capitalistic interests and are often closer to the state than to the public. This means, censorship and state control is no stranger to these spaces (Dencik, 2015). With the shutdown of the entire Internet by the government for more than 60 million users in the Indian state of Gujarat, due to the fact that riots have been organised via WhatsApp, we see how vulnerable the infrastructure is due to the control of the state (Goshal, 2015).

The Terms of Service often take the illusion of the rights and possibilities and one witnesses the corporate interest in the space as well as the threat of state business alliances as depicted by Kohli (2012) in the case of India.

The success of the *#DalitLivesMatter* hashtag has been ad hoc and short.

It helped to counter the narrative of the mainstream media, but, as Leistert (2015) states, the revolution will not be liked. The immense speed and changes on the Internet, and the Web 2.0 in particular, are also linked to western notions of speed and capitalism, like Barassi (2015) depicts. This immediacy, as Barassi (2015) calls it, is characteristic for the new media sphere. Social media offered a space to counter the narrative of the broadcast media. The sheer storm of tweets and engagement of the issue on Facebook and Twitter was vast. However, typical for a hype was the fast decline of the attention and its fame has not been sustainable. The next big media hype has been replacing the hype. This connects with Guha (2015) stating that social media activists need to collaborate with mainstream media to foster change, for example in policies. However, in this case the social media has been rather an opposition to the mainstream media. Counter narratives have been important in regards to caste critics. They presented hidden documents or countered the statement by the mainstream media that he is not a Dalit.

Media converges and within the lifetime of Web 2.0, we have already seen the digital death of various platforms, like Myspace (Jenkins, 2006). The social network Myspace is now just analysed by scientists, who are interested in the remaining comments (Brubaker & Hayes, 2011). This implies how quickly the new media world changes and that death in the setting of social or new media in general may occur (Brubaker & Vertesi, 2010). For the contemporary setting, Twitter offers a public platform that allows people to get into dialogue about causes, which are important to them. The state, however, can intervene and in the case of Facebook, the Indian state does intervene regularly. With the shocking announcement of the Twitter feeds being changed via algorithms, we see how vulnerable the landscape is to change (Williams, 2015). Similarly, to the privatisation of the public sphere offline, the Web 2.0 platform is privatised from the very beginning, when it comes to the major spaces like Twitter and Facebook (Hintz, 2015). The neoliberal interest is a capitalistic one, which is undeniable embedded in the social media environment.

9. Conclusion

The subalterns can tweet, as long as they belong to the more privileged group of the subaltern. This makes access and accessibility, including the digital divide, a serious issue in the use of the subaltern sphere. Looking on the use of the subaltern sphere, the characteristics of the space are inevitably influencing the way people interact and use the space. This also leads to certain limitations that are contextual and converging all the time, just as media is converging over time. Looking on the limitations of social media as a space for the subaltern. The corporate side of these social media platforms as gatekeeper into a pluralistic media sphere remains a threat, especially if state and business alliances are stronger than the support for freedom of speech. Similar to the common perception of India as unity in diversity, the Indian subaltern sphere online is also defined by a diversity of actors.

The discussion pointed out that the subaltern sphere in the Indian context is polarised, but not binary in its use. Many interactions, especially on Twitter, are linked to weak ties, which seem to become stronger over time and making interactions, like retweets, more likely. This has been depicted by the nature of the account of *Feminism in India*, where interaction has often been dominated by the same users. Even in the context of online activism and social media, the platforms are used for sociality. This sociality is often linked to certain accounts, like *Feminism in India* or seasonally employed hashtags. Sociality can also be political, for example by claiming a certain space in a male dominated Indian public sphere, like the example of *Why Loiter* depicted.

The complex task of measuring the impact of online activism goes beyond the approach of this research study. This study concludes that the (privileged) subaltern can raise the voices and express their interests, if they get heard is not clear yet and needs further research.

It is not all about activism in the context of the subaltern sphere per se. The academic discourse is already critical about online activism and its impact. It implies that many interactions in the subaltern sphere are rather sociality or consociality linked to a certain *cause*. Bounded by hashtags or in networks that are facilitated by following, retweeting or posting, Twitter is often used for sociality, even in the context of activism.

The netnography showed that the account of *Feminism in India* opened up to caste criticism. The poll questioning, if feminists should also work on caste-based oppression, has been retweeted by caste critics and feminists alike. However, another poll has shown that trolling remains a serious issue for feminists. FII has been even harassed for talking about caste critical issues. While the feminist discourse slowly opens up to intersectionality, like the case study has shown, the issues of caste and gender are still rather polarised than complemented in the subaltern sphere. Further, there is no homogenous or monolithic *subaltern sphere*. The subaltern sphere of the Indian social media spaces is pluralistic and leads to multiple narratives of the very same causes, which is one of the major advantages.

The case studies have shown that the feminists' accounts are rather resilient and not used for supporting a single *hype* around a certain hashtag. In contrast, the case study of Rohith Vemula and the trending on social media was only popular for a short time frame and linked to a certain ad hoc fame. The next scandal regarding the JNU gained the major attention of the public and the media alike and caught the attention, which Rohith's suicide had caught before.

Further, looking on the representational practices of these two groups. For caste critical Facebook groups and Twitter accounts the representation of their identity and their cause can be seen similarly important. The vast amount of Ambedkar as well as Rohith pictures witnessed during the study, shows how important the visual representation of a shared identity is, which goes beyond activism. The study has shown that the subaltern critically occupy their identity (Ashoka University, 2016). This means they are critical about *how* they represent themselves. Feminists rather represent themselves and add to the overall collective with their individual identity. There is no collective feminist identity and the individual adds to the overall diversity of the (intersectional) feminist cause. This makes the identity of the cause defined by a diversity of individuals rather than a monolithic one, like in the case study of the caste critics that is visually defined by (male) idols.

The methodology of netnography offered me the possibility to engage with different actors like feminists or caste critics online. It helped me to gain insights about issues and benefits of the Web for the individual. Especially, the feminists have been welcoming to me and engaged me personally in their campaigns. However, I identified

these spaces as still dominated by privileged people. Engaging with people gave me an impression about their socio-economic background. A (higher-)education background has been the norm rather than the exception. Being able to gain such insights has been a major benefit of the netnography that involved direct engagement. Privilege has been a recurring issue during my netnography. I constantly had to remind myself of the privilege that I have as a white western male with an etic perspective on the topic. This has been a recurring issue in the history of anthropology and of ethnographic writing (Fabian, 1990; Geertz, 1994) and also applies to the fieldwork in a netnographic sense. The netnography is focused on the social and human dimension in the context of the environment rather than on the technology itself.

In Communication for Development, the academic discourse should encourage a diversity of researchers engaging in reflective writing about the human dimension and potential of the Internet. Then, netnography could become a vital method that leads to multiple narratives that inform Communication for Development.

The *social* aspect has shown far more sustainable than the factor of online ad hoc activism. From a *Communication for Development* perspective, sociality should not be neglected as unimportant as feminists referred to the importance of the web as a space to socialise and express their point of view. In the case of feminists, I encountered various people who stated that the Internet is a valuable space to communicate with others who are concerned with similar social causes. Often the domestic sphere does not invite for liberal ideas and women are still confined to traditional ideas, including arranged marriages and being linked to the domestic, rather than the public sphere.

As Communication for Development practitioners or academics, we need to make these (web) spaces more inclusive (Cornwall, 2003). Otherwise the less powerful will be excluded, as Cornwall (2003) argues. The account of *Feminism in India* has shown to be characterised by an engagement, which is sustainable. The crowd-sourced character includes many different voices and seems to be similarly sustainable as an offline participatory project. In contrast, a single hashtag only lead to a limited time of attention in the public. Therefore, Communication for Development should not limit its attention to activism that is characterised by hashtags per se, but rather aim to drive sustainable development that includes various voices of the yet excluded.

While there has been a tremendous focus on women in development (Wilkins, 2005, p. 262), we may not objectify women but rather empower them to express themselves and make their own choices. Crowd-sourced platforms like *Feminism in India* are such spaces where social constructs of “womanhood” are debunked and stories are shared by women themselves.

Especially, if we see Communication for Development as a two-way process of communication (Mefapoulos, 2008), dialogue that is fostered via accounts like *Feminism in India* offers a way to communicate in the public sphere.

In contrast, hashtag activism is rather a way to get attention in an ad-hoc way for certain causes but does not remain sustainable beyond the hype nor does it encourage dialogue.

Next to voices, choice is important. Women need to be able to make their very own choices. With Kleine’s (2010) appropriation of Sen’s capability framework that she defines by the level of choice people have, the level of choice can be a determination of the success of development interventions that focus on humans. Communication for Development may aim to make these spaces more accessible and increase access in general so that women and other marginalised groups can make contributions that is defined by their voice but also determined by their very own choice. In the case study of *Feminism in India*, women create content and connect. They are active participants by choice. This is especially important from a Communication for Development perspective, as the active part of women beyond traditionalised roles has been neglected (Wilkins, 2005, p.261).

The notion of intersectionality, which has been significant in the case study of *Feminism in India*, seems to foster new alliances out of old divisions that can be powerful and tackle old power relations (Cornwall, 2003). For example, the alliance between caste critics and feminists can tackle the systematic oppression that has the very same roots in both cases.

It is important for future research studies not to neglect the factor of media convergence and the corporate dynamics that also frame the social media landscape as a space. In Communication for Development, academics and practitioners must be aware of the environment and the stakeholders involved. Online activism lives in a fragile space that is influenceable by corporate changes. Therefore, new media activism needs to be seen critically and embedded in the context of capitalism. Future research might

look on the impact of the *Dalit Lives Matter Movement*, like the study of Freelon, McIlwain and Clark (2016) whose research on the *Black Lives Matter Movement* depicted the positive impact on driving policy change in the United States.

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