Weblogs: A Voice for the Marginalized Dalits in India

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Abstract

Blog is short for weblog. Log means "diary", as a captain's log on a ship. Weblog means a diary of sorts maintained on the internet by one or more regular contribution (Hewitt, 2005). Weblogs link together in a complex structure through which new ideas and discourse can flow. Such a structure is ideal for the study of the propagation of information. In a short span of time, blogs have silently penetrated into our culture and has occupied a permanent position in our society. This new genre does not have any boundaries and, limitations. It is reshaping our notion of how content is created and information is disseminated. Across the globe, blogospheres are emerging as an opinion maker of this century. This paper examines the role of blogs which play an important role of bringing into limelight injustices caused on the so-called 'untouchables' in the Indian society. At the outset of the phenomenal growth of blogs, this proposed paper reviews on how the genre of internet, weblog, is the mouthpiece of the marginalized and suppressed segment of the Indian society like Dalits.

Introduction

Since the turn of the millennium weblog, a new genre of internet has gained a lot of interest. Weblog is one of the most dynamic concepts to touch the human civilization in the 21st century. Weblog has unleashed the power of communication in the true sense. Its advent has not only fuelled the business and scientific research domain, but also brought about drastic changes in how people share their experiences. It has opened avenues which were thought to be unachievable. Blogs use is generally a journal or diary metaphor. The user makes a post instead of making a page and those posts are most often ordered by date. Posts can also be ordered by other criteria, such as user-defined categories (McGovern.G, 2004). The new media scholar S. Pankaj (2002) in his book "*the world of internet*" describes that blog is basically a journal that is available on the web. In short, one could say that a blog is a special kind of website which is updated frequently with new postings and published in reverse chronological order. To a reader, a blog is a webpage but to the author, a blog is an authoring system that allows them to create a webpage without knowing HTML or other web technologies and without needing special software. A weblog is usually maintained by an individual with regular entries of commentary, descriptions of events, or other materials such as graphics or video (Wikipedia, 2012).

Weblog is concerned with a special programme called RSS (Real Simple Syndication). Since the programme is freely available, anyone with the internet connection can create his own blog of interest and thus publish a weblog. It is this feasibility that made possible for thousands of blogs in existence today. Through weblog one starts with dissemination on the internet. In blog the author writes something and

publishes it for others to read. There will be readers varying from few to thousand. And blogs allow readers to post their comment on the written entries, makes it possible for a conversation between the reader and the blogger. Blogs are a popular way to share personal journals, discuss matters of public opinion, and pursue collaborative conversations, and aggregate content on similar topics. Blogs also disseminate new content and novel ideas to communities of interest.

Blogs engage people in knowledge sharing, reflection, and debate, they often attract a large and dedicated readership. Blogs are becoming an important component of the Internet landscape, providing authors and readers with an avenue for unedited expression, reaction, and connection, without the censorship of mediated chat rooms or formal media outlets. The simplicity of creating and maintaining blogs means that open discussions can be established almost immediately, making blogs an ideal venue for far-reaching discussions among the Internet community on new or timely topics. Blogs foster the growth of communities, and the dynamics of collaborative filtering and recommending/referring may provide new ways to evaluate, vet, and critique student-created knowledge (Thomas, 2005).

There are a number of blog hosting sites which allow an individual or a community to create a blog. These hosting sites provide, for each blog, a web feed which contains the latest entries (or posts) that have been published in the blog. Web feeds are done through RSS software. Internet users can subscribe to web feeds of their favorite blogs in order to get updates whenever new content is published. However, not all web feeds originate from blogs. Various other content producers and aggregators, like web forums and online newspapers, also make their content available through web feeds (Cha.M, 2009).

Prominent blogger Dan Gillmor (2008) tells that the communication network itself will be a medium for everyone's voice, not just the few who can afford to buy multimillion-dollar printing presses, launch satellites, or win the government's permission to squat on the public airways. At first sight blogging, publishing on a blog, seems merely a way to show one's own opinions and ideas. What is different from a blog in comparison to traditional home pages on which people share their interests and hobby's, is that from a communicative perspective a weblog not only transmits information through the internet, but also takes on a receiving role. Many bloggers give their readers the opportunity to respond to the different postings and get involved in conversations through a weblog. That makes a blog a different way to communicate with others than traditional web pages do (Wijnia.E, 2004).

Blogging has become a significant part of today's Internet culture. Throughout the blogosphere, millions of people share their thoughts with the world and present their viewpoints about diverse topics like technology, music, politics, and travel. In addition, another area for which blogs are created is speaking for the social causes like child labour, education, eradication of castiesm, racism, etc.

Origin of Weblog: An Overview

The current format of blogosphere has developed from humble beginnings. The early weblog community consisted of a small number of technically-minded individuals who were familiar with HTML (Blood, 2002). Personal publishing got a boost with the

advent of *Geo Cities*, which eliminated the need to know HTML or understand FTP. Much as they did in the early days of Aldus Page maker, novice writers and designers enthusiastically embraced the new technology, creating communications that made classically educated communicators and designers shudder; they then ceased up-dating the sites when the newness faded. When Yahoo group purchased Geo Cities in 1999, it hosted 3.5 million individual Web sites (Blood, 2002).

It was not until the appearance of the first weblog tools and hosting services such as *Blogger* in 1999 that the 'big bang' occurred (Bausch *et al*., 2002). These tools allowed users to create a weblog easily and introduced features such as automatic archiving and a choice of multiple templates. The first weblog tools and hosting services such as *Blogger* in 1999 that was about the 'big bang' occurred (Bausch *et al*., 2002). Blog tools allowed users to create a weblog easily and introduced features such as automatic archiving and a choice of multiple templates. Once weblogs became accessible to more people, the original weblog community fragmented. Derek Powazek (2002), an author with long experience of creating community sites, describes the process by which weblog communities are formed:

> Any weblog with comments can quickly turn into a community of one, attracting a small group of people who are interested enough to follow along and participate. And if each of these readers then starts a weblog of his own, with comments that the others take part in, you wind up with a giant, interconnected, ever-evolving community (Powazek, 2002).

When we would compare blogs to something that happens in the real world, we could perhaps best compare them to 'Speaker's corner' in London. This is a corner of Hyde Park where people can meet up and discuss things that matter to them (Wikipedia, 2012). What usually happens is that someone climbs on a box, starts talking about a subject and other people, passers by, can start a discussion with the person speaking. The place is freely accessible; anyone can start and join a discussion regardless of education or origin. Looking at blogs we could say that by blogging someone climbs on a virtual box to tell a story. This story attracts the attention of passers by on the internet, for instance by using a search engine. People read the weblog just as passers by at Speaker's Corner can stop for a while and listen to what is being said. People who are interested can react on the things that are written through a comment function or by writing about the topic on one's own blog.

Role of blogs in Society

Media is not only a mirror of the society but also an instrument of social change. It must inform and educate the society and also act as a medium of communication between various organs of the society…..It must expose social evil and help in their eradication. It is its responsibility to critically examine facts and project them in an objective manner without fear and favor (Aggarwal, 2002)

One of the aims with which the media was started in India is to abolish social evil practices that are deep rooted in the Indian society. But the media industry has turned into a big business house. Both print media and electronic media have become tools in the hands of market force that are using them for earning more and more profit. The print medium is no more a mission to uproot evils. Since 1990, media monopoly and

ownership has become predominant. Therefore, the responsibility of bring social change was totally neglected and space in the media occupied only for personal gains of few. It is in this scenario, worlds one of the most admirable *World Wide Web* came into being.

Tim Berners Lee who invented the *World Wide Web* explains the vision he had in his mind when he devised it;

The vision I have for the Web is about anything being potentially connected with anything. It is a vision that provides us with new freedom, and allows us to grow faster than we ever could when we were fettered by the hierarchical classification systems into which we bound our-selves." (Berners-Lee & Fischetti, 1999)

According to Habermas theory, blogs offer a platform for "'ideal speech situation." Conditions for the ideal speech situation are that everyone has equal access to the communication, that there are no power differences between the participants and that the participants act truthfully towards each other. Thus, we can say that blogs offer freedom of expression and one is interested in talking for the cause of the oppressed and suppressed in the society without any fear or favour and people who are of the same mind can share their views among themselves and tell them to the world too. Similar to mainstream medium, Weblogs too have immense power in dissemination of information to the society. Therefore it is apt to call blogs as open source journalism.

Allowing people to speak and write for themselves without a filter which happens in mainstream media, is one of the triumphs of blogging. Today blogs have become essential sources of information on topics - from women's issues to sexual orientation, dating rituals to human rights - routinely shunned by channels for official propaganda. Blogs are of great help and they create an opportunity to access to information about issues of interest and concerns to them. It also offers the opportunity for them to reach out and make connection with the people in the society. There they get the chance to express them and gain emotional and practical support the need.

Blogs are a medium that perpetually generates hearsay and fact gathering or collaboration. We have heard and shared thoughts from all over the world regarding people, ideas, concepts, gossip, politics, religion, science, journals, and insights. The effect of a Blog helps accelerate influence and curves enthusiasm depending upon the content, source, readers, and bloggers (writers). Blogs allow people a common interface to communicate immediately and offer a brief instance of tapping into one's beliefs and interests.

Blogs: A Voice for Dalits

"Dalit" (Oppressed) is the name which the people belonging to those castes at the very bottom of India's caste hierarchy have given themselves. Formerly, they were known as Untouchables, because their presence was considered to be so polluting that contact with them was to be avoided at all costs. The official label for them has been Scheduled Castes, because if their caste is listed on the government schedule, caste members become eligible for a number of affirmative action benefits and protections.

In India, caste system is based on a certain hierarchical status according to Hindu religious beliefs. Traditionally, there are four principal castes which are further divided into many sub-categories. Dalits do not fall in any of the category of people and thus they fall outside the caste system. As members of the lowest strata of Indian society, Dalits face discrimination at almost every level: from access to education and medical facilities

to restrictions on where they can live and what jobs they can have. The discrimination against the Dalits is significant because of the number of people affected; according to the census 2011 there are approximately 170 million Dalits in India, constituting over 16 percent of the total population (Dwivedi, 1997)

Dalits have chosen the "Dalit" label for themselves for at least three important reasons. First, the label indicates that the condition of the Dalits has not been of their own making or choosing; it is something which has been inflicted upon them by others. Thus, secondly, there is an element of militancy built into the label; Dalits seek to overcome the injustices and indignities forced upon them so as to gain the equality and respect hitherto denied them. "Dalit" also indicates that all these castes (Pariahs, Chamars, Mahars, Bhangis, etc.) share a common condition and should therefore unite in a common struggle for dignity, equality, justice and respect under a common name.

According to the report of National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR)

- 27 atrocities against Dalits every day
- 13 Dalits murdered every week
- 5 Dalits homes or possessions burnt every week
- 6 Dalits kidnapped or abducted every week
- 3 Dalit women raped every day
- 11 Dalits beaten every day
- A crime committed against a Dalit every 18 minute

For decades we have been witnessing a shift in the perception of the news coverage by media houses, with news becoming more of profit-oriented. Dalits who form more than 20 percentages of total populations are tzotally neglected and no space is available in the main stream media to their problems. In this scenario, the New Media with social networking sites, blogs and forums offers lots of space to give voices for the Dalit issues. It facilities all the like-minded people across the globe come together as one network and share their views and ideas constructively. In a recent survey conducted on the usage of internet as an alternative media by the Dalits in India, the following table shows the reasons for Dalits to access Dalit websites and blogs.

Table 1

Frequency Distribution of reasons for accessing Dalit blogs

Reasons for accessing Dalit websites and Blogs	Yes		No		Total
	Count	%	Count	%	
I am also a Dalit	151	71.90	59	28.10	210
Interested in Dalit issues	149	70.95	61	29.05	210
Want to issues being discussed	113	53.81	97	46.19	210
Share experience	83	39.52	127	60.48	210
Post articles	51	24.29	159	75.71	210
Educate	72	34.29	138	65.71	210
Get associated	90	42.86	120	57.14	210
Express oneself	72	34.29	138	65.71	210
Get updated	93	44.29	117	55.71	210
Make new friends	58	27.62	152	72.38	210
Seek advice	55	26.19	155	73.81	210
Give advice	50	23.81	160	76.19	210
To know others think	93	44.29	117	55.71	210

Post pictures/Videos	30	14.29	180	85.71	210
Others	**9**	**4.29**	**201**	**95.71**	**210**

The table 1 elucidates the reasons behind accessing Dalit blogs by the respondents. 72% of the respondents cite their community identity i.e Dalit as the reason for accessing Dalit blogs. 71% of the respondents cite their personal interest in Dalit issues as the reason for accessing Dalit websites and blogs. 54% of the respondents access Dalit blogs to know the issues being discussed. From the table it is also understood that 44% of the respondents participate in Dalit Blogs for getting updated on Dalit issues and to know what others think, 43% of the respondents for getting associated with Dalit activists and 40% of the respondents for sharing their experience. The reasons like posting articles/videos/pictures, education, expressing one self, making new friends, seeking and giving advice occupy the average of 20% each. So, the table makes it very easy to conclude that only respondents' Dalit identity and their interest in Dalits issues makes to access Dalit Blogs as it secures the highest percentage. Another factor that intrigues them to access Dalit websites and blogs is the interests to know about what issues are discussed in Dalit websites and blogs, followed by the need for sharing their experience with rest of the world. (Kumar. S, 2013)

As Habermas tells in his theory Blogs are like "ideal speech situation". Anyone can access to the information posted in the blog and can even give ones opinion about the content. There are thousands of blogs, one can find in the internet giving their voices for the upliftment of the discriminated segment of the Indian society. In the situation where space in main steam is neglected, blogs provide as much as place for the issues and problems that need to be addressed to the public. In some cases blogs have brought to the fore the events that were not covered in the main stream media. Though blogs function effectively in speaking out for the cause of marginalized and out casted people, some of the works it does is praiseworthy. They are

- Providing fact revealing exclusive news stories
- Educating the Dalit population on their fundamental rights.
- Initiating advocacy
- Readers literacy
- Instigating campaign

Blogs are acting as an alternate media for the voiceless people. The Main stream Media has many commercial notions and it has class character. They always keen to preserve the interest of the elite community. Blogs are providing space for the neglected people and initiate advocacy for the excluded people. Today Blogs have vehemently exposing the atrocities of the Dalits to the world. Renowned Dalit activists are managing separate websites and Blogs. Many of them are actively involved in social networking. They are keen to expose the evils of Dalits. Blogs are trying to mobilize the suppressed people through the network. They are carrying all information's in the blogs. The above three stories were posted in different blogs and any of them did not appear in any of the newspaper on that particular day's issue. Likewise a number of news and article relating to Dalit are being shared among the blogger and readers in thousands of weblogs every day. Day by day the prominence of blogs is growing by and large.

Conclusion

Since the evolution of blogosphere, nontechnical writers have been utilizing this platform. It is evident from the number of blogs that there are people vibrant and active in the web platform. Day by day, the growth of blogging seems to be peaking. A situation may arise where blogs will be on par with the mainstream media. If this happens, then there will be a free flow of information. Already there are a number of blogs speaking for the voice of the voiceless- Dalits. With this growth the message of eradication of social evils like caste system can be sent across the globe.

Main stream Journalism slowly losing its credibility and reshaping its character. Information monopolies in the media outlet are devastated by the blogs. Over 250 million people worldwide suffer from caste discrimination, which is an obstacle to the fulfillment of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights (BBC, 2005). The fact that millions of people in the 'global village' live with no human dignity is not a joke and it sounds an utter stupidity to continue taking it as lightly as we have so far. Therefore, in this information age marked by so many advocacies on human rights, it would always be relevant to stress the need of information dissemination against the practice of caste untouchability—the most embarrassing issue of the age of information revolution.

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