

# Write back in anger

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The Indian Express

Written by [Dipti Nagpaul](#) | Updated: January 31, 2016 2:49 pm



In Delhi, a protester holds up an Ambedkar photo against police barricades. (Source: Express photo by Tashi Tobgyal)

In a blue striped shirt, a red bag strapped to the back and a Canon camcorder trained on the goings-on at the Hyderabad Central University (HCU) campus, Dharmateja LV is like a shape-shifter in the 2,000-strong crowd. As the “Chalo HCU” march begins, he stands in a corner that allows him a good view of the protesters demanding justice for [Rohith Vemula](#), the Dalit student who committed suicide on campus on January 17. Within minutes, Dharmateja has melted into the melee, only to emerge when the rally comes to an end. Over the next two days, 31 videos are uploaded on the YouTube channel, Dalit Camera. Shot by Dharmateja, the lone volunteer from Hyderabad with the platform, they are a mix of footage from the January 25 march and testimonies of the protesting Dalit students, who speak of their experience of discrimination in educational institutions, “the kind that pushed Vemula to end his life”.

“Mainstream media picks and chooses which atrocities against Dalits they want to highlight. Rohith’s case is perhaps of interest because of the direct involvement of a [BJP MP](#),” says Dharmateja, who studied engineering in Coimbatore. Currently working in Hyderabad as a software engineer, he volunteers with Dalit Camera on weekends, when he chronicles cases of discrimination, interviews scholars on caste and shoots book launches and poetry readings that address the subaltern.

Ever since news of Vemula’s suicide broke, caste has been at the centre of the narrative on news and social media — despite Union minister for human resource and development [Smriti Irani](#) initially objecting to the events that led to the death being ascribed to caste conflict. The ministry eventually went on to set up a judicial panel to investigate if discrimination pushed the PhD student to end his life or if the decision was driven by other factors, such as his role in student politics, the financial setback he faced with his stipend being withheld since July, or possible “depression” at being suspended from the university.

But in a small section of media on the internet, the Dalit scholar didn’t become news after his death. Portals and platforms such as the Dalit Camera, Round Table India and Ambedkar’s Caravan, had been discussing the expulsion and ostracism of Vemula and four other students since August — when an inquiry was set up against them after a clash with members of the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP). In fact, the news of his suicide began to circulate on Twitter handles and [Facebook](#) pages of the forums on January 17, before the media caught up the following day.



image of Rohith Vemula on a poster. (Source: Express photo by Tashi Tobgyal)

On these platforms, the suicide isn't being viewed in isolation. Instead, they focus on how Vemula's is another name in the long list of suicides by Dalit students in educational institutions, a result of unending discrimination based on caste. Functioning as blog sites, portals, discussion forums or Facebook pages, the platforms are not just helping the voice of the Dalit-Bahujan community to be heard but also disrupting mainstream narratives and ideas about what it is to be a Dalit in India.

Take, for instance, Round Table India, which features a mix of news, views and testimonials on caste-based atrocities and bias. Founded in 2009 by Kuffir Nalgundwar, Anoop Kumar and Anu Ramdas, among other Dalit activists, it is one of the more popular "information portals" that finds followers even among the upper caste or savarnas. Their Twitter handle @ROUNDTABLEIN has over 2,200 followers.

The founders of the forum declined to be interviewed for this story. They do not speak to the "mainstream media", which they believe either rations the space given to the Dalit-Bahujan voice and twists "the 'Hindu problem' into a 'Dalit problem'". "Round Table India shall function as an uniquely Dalit-Bahujan media actor that perceives through their eyes and ears, and speaks through their voice (sic)," reads an excerpt from their introduction.

A regular contributor to the forum, Mumbai-based Pradnya Mangala, reiterates the view. The forums take root, she says, in the need to communicate with those with similar experiences of discrimination. "Even when seeking opinions or organising debates, the mainstream rarely features Dalit ideologues. Mostly, it is Left-liberals working in the field of caste, such as Arundhati Roy, who represent us," says Mangala, a writer with Savari (dalitweb.org), a reputed and popular writers' collective of Adivasi, Dalit and Bahujan women. "But the discrimination based on caste is so deep-seated and nuanced that it isn't visible to the naked eye and will be understood only by a person who has witnessed it himself," she says.

Many also believe that when it finds space in the mainstream, the Dalit voice is inevitably diluted and hijacked. "The mainstream isn't radical enough to address Dalit issues because it cannot question Brahmanism, or its practice in the media, which is dominated by the upper caste and Brahmins. It talks about discrimination and atrocities, without focussing on itself," says Mangala, who has been with Savari for over two years. "We want to articulate our own problems instead of having the Dalit issue and its leaders appropriated by others," she adds. Traditional media, most activists say, swears by a Left-liberal ideology, and does not understand the Ambedkarite thought that drives the Dalit cause. As a result, it also doesn't question the upper caste leadership of the Left. This is indicative of the long-standing

ideological clash between the Ambedkarites and the Left, which led to the fragmentation of the latter in the 1970s. The former believe that the Left chooses to overlook caste while attempting to bridge the class divide.



Dalit Camera volunteer Dharmateja; and a poster of Dalit Women Fight platform

Maharashtra has been home to Dalit reformists including Savitribai Phule and Dr BR Ambedkar. Yet, until the 1960s, Dalit writers in the state had no space in mainstream publications. Their contributions, in poetry or prose, would be returned with a letter of thanks. At such a time, the writers turned to a Marathi magazine, titled *Asmita*. Brought out from Aurangabad, it would allow the Dalit voice to flourish. The barriers would collapse further with the growth of the little magazine movement, which democratised publishing. Some of the magazines brought out at the time were little more than a bunch of cyclostyle sheets stapled together. From such literary ferment arose the angry voices of writers such as Daya Pawar and Namdeo Dhasal.

The literary movement fuelled the politics that gave birth to the Dalit Panthers, giving a boost to Dalit literary voices across India. Tamil writers Bana and Sivakami wrote landmark autobiographies while Gaddar became a known Telugu balladeer. The literary group Virasam, led by Revolutionary Writers' Association in (former) Andhra Pradesh, printed the popular magazine *Srijana* while the Dalit Panthers' brought out *Aakrosh*. Over decades, similar efforts have nourished the subaltern literature in India.

Since the movements emerged at different times in different places, the chronicling of Dalit history remains largely fragmented. However, the cultural, linguistic and communication

divide is now being bridged by technology. “Earlier, one needed literary flourish to be heard. But the internet is immensely democratic. I can be in any part of the world, write in any language and still find people who will connect with what I say,” says Pradeep Attri, who is the founder of the portal Dr Ambedkar’s Caravan.

Currently pursuing a course in business studies from London, Attri felt the need to have an information portal dedicated to Ambedkar, which would help Dalits engage and connect, when he was an engineering student at NIT Jalandhar, Punjab. “I am from a village in Hoshiarpur. When I joined college, my lack of fluency in English gave away my Dalit origins,” recounts 30-year-old Attri who says he faced “nuanced” discrimination at the hands of both faculty and students. “It is tough to point out what it was like but after some time I realised I was interacting only with Dalit students or I would be looked down upon for my views on reservation. And although the name of the institution was Dr BR Ambedkar National Institute of Technology, they hardly employed any Dalit teachers,” he says. At such a time, he found refuge in the teachings of Ambedkar but realised there is very little on him in textbooks, “as if Dalit history had been wiped out from popular consciousness”.

The founder of Dalit Camera, 34-year-old Ravichandran Bathran, says that such platforms often play a critical role in a Dalit student’s life. “Often, Dalit students are the first generation of a family to go to college. They are at the receiving end of discrimination both inside and outside the campus. It is the on-campus bias that leads to a lot of pressure,” says Bathran, a Tamilian who studied at English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad, where the experience of discrimination led him to join student politics. “Despite working hard, Dalit students are given less marks or failed as they aren’t considered meritorious enough. But they cannot reveal this to their parents either, for the expectations from home are often high. There is a huge loan that the family will have taken to send them to a good institution. In such a scenario, they seek comfort in voices like theirs or by joining organisations like the Ambedkar Students’ Association (ASA), which Rohith was also a part of,” he says.



A protest in Delhi against the University of Hyderabad's handling of Rohith Vemula's suspension and death.

Eventually, Bathran's bitter experience of student politics prompted him to launch Dalit Camera. Beaten up by ABVP members in public while students "for whom I had worked hard" looked on in 2008, Bathran, the son of a sanitation worker, decided he needed to chronicle caste-based atrocities. His first video was that of a Dalit panchayat leader in Tirunelveli district who had been similarly assaulted. "I started to see parallels in our narratives," he says.

Currently, a research student in Shimla, Bathran's Dalit Camera functions with help from volunteers like Dharmateja, who says that they accept and post only unedited videos — but from anyone who may witness a case of discrimination.

The strength of the platforms lies in the fact that they aren't seeking traction or numbers, that their sole purpose is to chronicle the history and culture of violence against Dalit-Bahujans. It is for this reason that Round Table India recently released a selection of essays and debates conducted by the portal in the form of a book, *Hatred in The Belly*. With a loyal readership, the portal, known for its radical views, also allows members of the community to contribute pieces that dissect popular culture from the Dalit perspective.

The platforms, undoubtedly, also serve as tools to mobilise the Dalit youth and create awareness when an issue arises. For instance, last year, when IIT Madras banned the Ambedkar Periyar Study Circle (APSC) over their demand to have beef and pork served in

the canteen, a wave of dissent broke on social media. “As a result, mainstream media gave the issue attention, leading the institute to revoke the ban,” says Akhil, a member of APSC. By factoring in the reach of the internet that cuts across geographical boundaries, the platforms are also able to muster support and solidarity from the Dalit community and international human rights groups.

For instance, platforms such as Dalit Women Fight have been focussing on highlighting how women are often made the target of caste violence through rape and honour killing as in the Khairlanji massacre in 2006 in Maharashtra.

Working in tandem with Delhi-based India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch, Dalit Women Fight also organised a Dalit Women’s self-respect march last year in a number of states across the US — in a way, attempting to draw a parallel between casteism and apartheid. Started alongside Round Table India as a Facebook page, Savari, now a portal, aims to create the space to talk about the double subjugation of women. It also highlights the strong history of Dalit and Adivasi women activists, such as Baby Kamble and Tarabai Shinde.

Bathran believes that the Dalit movement has a lot to learn from the feminist movement. But evoking Khairlanji, where the members of the Kunbi community attacked Dalits, he points out that the Dalit-Bahujans have yet not reached a stage where they can discuss violence by the SC/ST/OBC communities. “The violence or oppression on Dalits is no more carried out only by the Brahmins or upper caste people. As in Khairlanji or even in my case, where I was beaten up by SC/ST members of ABVP, it is carried out by others from lower castes. But this discussion hasn’t become a part of the Dalit discourse yet.”

He does see a hope in the current emerging scenario where the various online platforms have been able to unite the Dalit fragmented voice. But is it a movement yet? Akhil, who has been at the forefront of the APSC group that benefitted from the trend, believes it isn’t so. “But there is potential. And if it does emerge as a movement, this time, it won’t be fragmented as it was in the 1970s, taking place one region at a time. This movement will be nation-wide.”