

Digital Visibility of Dalits & Claiming of Social Space: An inquiry into display of B.R Ambedkar's image from the Kannada TV serial *Mahanayaka* Ramesh Aroli

Abstract

This paper makes an attempt to understand the role of digital printing technology in general and digital flex banners in particular, which according to media scholars is 'democratised' its usage and made available to all marginalised groups. Flex banners, being part of advanced printing technology, is seen as an important canvas to draw and display the 'iconic' or 'heroic' images of 'self' and believed that they are used to occupy the social space of the locality. From 'technological determinism' theory point of view, in a way, digital technology (in the form of flex banners) has become a media force for various socio-political groups/languages to 'see' themselves in the public place and express their political aspirations in various forms with abundant creativity. In recent times, in India, both in urban and rural set up, it is evident that this popular exercise of putting up flex banners and claiming the social space is turned to be a public culture, through which even non-dominant groups have started demonstrating their presence in the areas they live in. But on the other hand, the available empirical evidences are disproving that the social status of communities can be determined solely based on the availability of technology. To examine it, this present paper focuses on the display of digital flex banners bearing the image of B.R Ambedkar from the Kannada TV serial Mahanayaka (the great leader) in rural area of Karnataka, tries to understand this 'arena of conflict' and

critically engages with the questions that are evolving from the practice of visibility and social dominance.

Keywords: *digital printing, social space, dalits.*

Introduction:

Printing technology had huge influence on the social relationships of communities. Even, it had retold the world histories and their order. Thus, print word had produced a 'reading public' whereas; the 'digital print technology' has produced a 'seeing public' which reads printed image as text. In a way, as Marshal McLuhan observes that with the advent of the printing presses 'modern man' turned to be tribal and he is 'no longer relying on the communities for conveying news and cultural lore, (as) the printed word allowed for solitary consumption of information' (McLuhan, 1994, 156).

Production of nationalism, introduction of industrialism, mass markets and common universal literacy are the social consequences of print technology. In this process, it had re-arranged the social relationships of communities wherein certain languages and communities gained 'power'. In the historical contexts, certain languages because of 'printability' received state recognition and became dominant. Oral Languages, without printability had to accept the 'communicative power' of politically, culturally dominant groups. The knowledge produced by these linguistic communities gradually projected as 'high' and 'standard'. As a result, dominant version of public knowledge had occupied the social space and legitimised the 'tastes' or aspirations of a particular community as 'common' of the society.

However, communities that remained 'oral' had to accept the state recognised printable language as 'medium of learning' and approve the knowledge produced by 'dominant communities' as 'genuine'. Thus, book or newspaper was considered to be the first mass-produced commodity which had enjoyed the status of 'modern information tool'. With the invention of movable printing presses during the 15th Century, especially in European countries, as of its competence to produce massive number of holy texts, philosophical documents and literary works, print created a new 'public sphere' in which there was a restricted participation. People in a way, believed that it had liberated communities and gave individuality to them. Liberated from church and 'personhood' within community emerged. Thus, 'reading' turned to be a kind of meditation that led individuals to have 'intra-personal communication' and redefine the time and space.

Pleasure of reading turned individuals from listeners to readers wherein 'self' had been considered as a subject. So, the entry of technology into the lives of individuals had 'detrribalized' modern man. It was physical and mental liberation from every sphere that was holding the non-dominant communities previously. This had disturbed the hierarchy of the human relationship and loosened physical control over individuals. Printed books had separated man from 'God', 'Nature' and from 'Man'. It revolutionised human expression and idea of communication that later spread a 'sense of belongingness' among the print consumers. A 'Man of Letter' was born and started questioning the dominance of powerful languages and politics of claiming the status.

Considering the production of a 'social image' and converting it into a 'political image' as a political process, this preliminary study based on the regional media reports, tries to understand the limitations of technological production and its larger implications on the social relationships of the communities. While doing so, it will briefly look into the earlier forms of

displaying dalit icon B.R Ambedkar and claiming of social space as a practice of public culture. Cases selected for the present paper are taken from Karnataka state as the production/installation and circulation of dalit political, social and cultural icons in the form of calendars, flex banners, images, posters, wall paintings, statues, badges, hoardings and other display material are often seen as sites of conflict. The instances of throwing paint, cow dung, defacing, vandalising busts, burning and tearing the banners, garlanding with slippers are some of the incidents that repeatedly trigger protests and demonstrations by dalit communities. This phenomenon is not limited to Karnataka only, but it can be seen in every Indian state irrespective of urban-rural divide.

During elections, to woo dalit voters even upper caste political leaders, irrespective of their political ideology and affiliation, they put up huge colourful hoardings, flex banners in which images of B.R Ambedkar are displayed along with their own photographs. Thus, it has become a norm and a political trick among the Indian politicians that momentarily embracing the legacy of dalit icons aiming to woo scheduled caste voters. Especially, the right wing organisations, political parties and so called civil society associations are trying to claim Ambedkar's political inheritance in a more audible and visible manner so that their appeal would get some level of acceptance. Interestingly, sometime this act of adulation can actually change the entire political rhetoric despite the fact that Ambedkar being reduced to a mere dalit leader in their everyday acts.



Image-1. Painting of Ambedkar on the metal door of foot wear shop from Bangalore.

Source: Nicolas Mirguet/Flickr



Image- 2 from Kolar, a small town in Karnataka known for its gold mines.

Source: Pooja Singh, Mint, 09 Apr 2016

These earlier modes of image production and space claiming by dalit communities in Karnataka have played a crucial role as it was considered as an act of identity construction and a site of contestation. Since 1970s, under the aegis of *Dalit Sangharsh Samiti*ⁱ (a dalit organisation popularly known as DSS), the empty public spaces adjoining to tea-shops, bus stands, railway stations, traffic circles had been occupied for the installation of Buddha, Jyotiba Phule, Savitribai Phule, B. R Ambedkar, Periyar, Kanshiram's busts. Even erecting the images of anti-caste thinkers on street walls, house walls, and shops was seen as a matter of pride for the communities who are denied their fundamental rights. For the people who have been categorised as lower strata of the society, and deprived of accessing the everyday essentials, seeing themselves or their political/cultural icons on the media screen or on the printed banners is actually a process of politicization wherein they not only make an attempt to register their bodily existence but also to produce social energy.

Digital Flex Banners: Dalits and Question of Visibility

The display of printed posters on the public walls, hoardings was once limited to the entertainment industry and political promotions. Even this would create a fierce competition among the fans and followers who would occupy the public spaces to be used for the elections and film releases. As observed by Gopalan Ravindran :

Public display of printed posters was once the exclusive domain of two sectors, the film industry and the political parties. Walls were sought to be booked by political parties months before elections and they were plastered with film posters on a weekly basis by exhibitors. One could see in such posters only the images of political big wigs and film actors. Now the ugly advent of 'digital' banner has democratised such a public sphere to an

extent where every citizen's face is made to show up in some street corner at some point of time or other in villages, towns and cities.ⁱⁱ

In a way, digital printing has widened the opportunity for 'self' projection without touching the social hierarchy of the communities. It seems it has expanded possibility of political and cultural response of marginalised communities; but in reality there is no value for the aesthetics which has no space to display. Therefore, it matters a lot that 'who' produces, 'what' on behalf of 'whom' and 'where'. The colours, graphics, motion clips (in digital hoardings), images endorsing the message, catchy slogans and typography of the banners would talk about how the performance of marginalised cultural identity is influenced by the kind of public space available in a society. When the nature of the public space determines the political performance of communities, so it is vital to enter the 'space' and 'perform' the role of counter public by redefining public knowledge.

Methodology

In order to demonstrate type of news reports published on Kannada television series '*Mahanayaka Dr. B R Ambedkar*' (Dr. B.R Ambedkar-the great leader) in Kannada news dailies, the present study has followed content analysis of selected newspapers and news portals. To study the enunciation and mediation of the media text (reports), this preliminary research has applied a textual and inter-textual analysis of news reports that are randomly selected for the study. By applying simple random sampling technique, the study is concerned with the reports that deal with above mentioned subject only.

In Karnataka, according to the latest media reportsⁱⁱⁱ, dalits who form 19.5 % of total population have been associated with several progressive and ant-caste organisations are strongly asserting their identity and self-respect through their own cultural

resources and challenge the cultural and political hegemony of the upper castes like Lingayats and Brahmins. With the arrival of advanced digital printing and social media, communities are now competing with each other to exhibit their social and political power through various media platforms. If we apply the argument of print 'liberating of man' (McLuhan, 43) from his previous clutches and using it to see oneself in the social space or public sphere in a locality, we should also critically understand that how social status of an individual and local power relationships are detrimental in making someone 'visible' and others 'invisible'. It is necessary because media in a way presents a constructed reality, wherein the relationships between man, information and consumption patterns too play a decisive role.

Including small towns, in Karnataka, most of the public spaces both in urban and rural areas are occupied either by commercial advertisements of products/services, cinema posters or political banners. Due to their durability and appealing quality, the digital banners and hoardings are considered as the most effective type of outdoor campaigning and advertising compared to billboards and cloth banners. The digital technology has not only produced a 'digital' banner landscape but also a consuming class which can be called as a 'vernacular public' that negotiates, debates, and contests dominant presence of powerful groups.

No doubt the digital technology has introduced a canvas wherein drawn images help to convey the heroic or exclusive status of icons. By using the images of spiritual leaders, mythological/epic characters and social reformers, followers not only exhibit their dedication but also claim the space to contest. As it is argued that images 'perform in several capacities' as to consolidate the status of both 'portrayed' icon and producer; but on the other hand it can be strongly debated that in any locality, the act of space claiming always depends upon the local relationship of the individuals and status of the community.

In recent past, the airing of the Kannada television series 'Mahanayaka Dr. B R Ambedkar' (Dr. B.R Ambedkar-the great leader)a dubbed version of Marathi TV series 'Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar- MahamanavachiGauravgatha'^{iv} that narrates the life story of Bhimarao Ambedkar has received public attention and raised few important questions about the media and its impact on social relationship of communities. According to the news reports ever since the serial in being telecasted, the people particularly in villages of Karnataka started erecting the digital flex banners and buntings have celebrated it as fest and have welcomed the move.

Having garnered debates on the dalit subject and patterns of media consumption, it also fashioned certain important political questions on the visibility of dalit icons on media screens and their social acceptance. As an example, the Zee Kannada Channel Bangalore office has reportedly received threat calls to stop the telecast of the serial and its chief Raghavendra Hunsurhad to lodge a complaint. According to the media reports as reported in *Vartha Bharati*-a Kannada daily dated 4th September, 2020, the popularity of the show was such that "people from a village in South Karnataka had requested officials, by submitting a plea, not to cut power when the show is on air. After power outages were reported in a village, they even staged a protest"^v.



Image-3. A still from the serial "Mahanayaka - Dr. B.R. Ambedkar"

Source: ZEE5 Kannada website.

Ambedkar's life story becoming a subject for a private television serial and appearing on screens at a scheduled timing may appear to be a simple from the view point of technological determinism and one can argue that the technology has such a power that even it can determine the necessity of showing the life story of an "untouchable" leader. But when we critically read this process of showcasing dalit lives, it has less to do with the role of technology. Having a long history of under-representation of dalits in Indian cinema and other media, it is very problematic to accept that the social relationships of communities are completely determined by the market-driven media.

Though, technology does not impose anyone from using it; but certainly it requires the participation of communities whose roles are already defined and their social designations as members of the society are constructed through the historical and contemporary experiences (Thirumal and Tartakov, 2011). In their everyday contestations, dalits associate with the images of Ambedkar to not only shed their socially given definitions and stigmatised negative identities but to visualise themselves as the predecessors of "Mahanayaka"- the great leader. This should be seen as a sign of community participation to cross the caste barriers and accept the democratic potentiality of technology which, in fact, serves everyone without creating any categorical division. In a news report published by *Prajavani*, a leading Kannada daily, dated 12th January 2021, Somashekhar Bannadamane-a leader from Forum of Progressive Organisations has observed that:

In several villages of Karnataka, the flex banners of Mahanayaka are put up. People are eagerly waiting for weekends to watch the serial from 6:30pm to 7:30pm that comes on Zee Kannada channel. The amount of excitement that "Mahanayaka" has created among the people was seen during the telecast of Mahabharata and Ramayana. Hope the serial would infuse some degree of

rationality and clear the misconceptions that are fabricated about Ambedkar^{vi}

Digital flex banners in thick blue colour bearing variety of slogans such as '*tanuvaagali Buddha, manavaagali Basavanna, jnanaagali Ambedkar*'^{vii} (roughly let body be of Buddha, the mind of Basavanna, knowledge of Ambedkar) have become part of public spaces wherein lectures on constitutional spirit, fundamental rights were also organised.

Does New Technology Produce a New Mode of 'tension'?

It is undeniable what Thirumal and Tartakov argue in their study titled *India's Dalits Search for a Democratic Opening in the Digital Divide* that with the availability of digital technology, "(d)alits have found a means of communicating with each other beyond the control of others. Important for all of us, there has opened up the potential for a digital dialogue through which a democratic interclass exchange becomes possible, something not as possible before even in the written print communications media that was so important to the founding of the modern world (as depicted in Benedict Anderson's discussion of print capitalism) (Anderson: 1983)(2011: 22)". Continuing, they further discuss that with the availability of technology now it is possible for dalits to not only read but also to view themselves in the pictures that are circulated through Internet and social media.

These visual material, on the one hand may have created a ground for negotiation to take place and provide a platform to have social dialogue; but on the other hand, seeking entry into the civil society in whatever form is not accepted effortlessly. In a way, the communities which are socially and culturally alienated in the society, they cannot merely be united for the reason that they are capable to access the technology. To elaborate this point, it is important to look at some of the incidents wherein the flex

banners of Ambedkar were defaced and vandalised. Some of these incidents have been widely reported in Kannada media.

On 4th April, it was reported^{viii} that in a village called D. Kalkere of Turuvakere, the flex banner of *Mahanayaka* serial was vandalised by the 'unknown miscreants' and due to which tension prevailed in the village. Protesting the incident, DSS members and dalit communities had lodged a complaint and expressed their 'anger'. (*Mahanayaka* web portal, 4th April, 2021) In Jakkanahalli village of Tipatur taluk, it was reported that 'some miscreants' by throwing cow dung at Ambedkar's flex banner have insulted the dalit icon and situation had led to some tension in the village^{ix}. (*Saakshatv* portal, November, 2020). In the third incident according to the Kannada daily *Vijaya Karnataka* on 24th December, 2020, it was reported that in M. Shettyhalli of Sri Rangapattana, wrongdoers have burnt the flex banner of Ambedkar. Condemning the incident pro-dalit organisations had lodged a formal complaint and demanded the immediate arrest of 'offenders'.

Based on these media reports it can be drawn that most of these incidents took place in a political context, for example during the Gram panchayat elections, wherein the 'political visibility' of dalit communities and their opinions were suppressed in this form. As per the local dalit community leaders of the above mentioned villages, it is apparent that most of those suspected 'miscreants' or 'offenders' are often found to be from forward castes.



Image-4. A flex banner of Mahanayaka serial vandalised in the village D. Kalkere.

Source: mahanayaka.in web portal.



Image-5. 'Miscreants' have thrown cow dung at a flex banner of Mahanayaka serial in the village M. Shettyhalli, Sri Rangapattana.

Source: saakshatv.com

Based on these above cases, it can be argued that in a globalised market-driven social system, the power relations of communities will be decided by the 'public visibility' of individuals. Caste as a social tool controls the mobility of communities, and also constructs the 'public' of the town or village. Though, print capitalism allows all communities to produce images massively but it cannot produce the space for everyone. It needs to be reclaimed. Therefore, tentatively it can be concluded that in a society any form of technology, it operates within the given socio-political conditions. And it can be called as peripheral politicization. Though it creates new approaches of politics that address the caste in public spaces, but that is not its primary objective.

As there is a restricted entry for marginalised communities into the public sphere in Indian society, these spaces often become 'areas of conflict' and disfiguring of images would lead the communities to face techno-social problems. More than this, digital technology as a growing child of capitalism would invite communities to exhibit their power and confront with each other in their everyday negotiations. Because, both in urban and rural spaces, though capitalism and neo-liberalism in the form of technology is felicitating every community to exhibit its aspirations but the social borders are restructured in a way wherein it can escape without touching the base of the caste system. Therefore, in a divided society like India, the social relationships are historically pre-decided and thus with the introduction of any newer technologies or digital media platforms, it cannot be completely accepted that technology does play a crucial role in addressing the social inequality.

Notes

ⁱ DSS is an organisation started by educated employees and students in 1974 in Karnataka. In the early days it organized protest marches and arranged conventions of Dalit students and Dalit writers. Members of the organisation also edited a weekly

titled *Panchama* in Kannada that focused on the problems of the Dalits and gave publicity to the activities of the Dalit Sangarsh Samiti.

ⁱⁱPublished on 3rd June 2007 by Gopalan Ravindran in his blog.

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://censuskarnataka.gov.in/dcocirculars2021.htm>

^{iv}*Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar- Mahamanavachi Gauravgatha* -a Marathi TV series directed by Satish Rajwade for Zee Entertainment Enterprise and aired through ZEE5 from 2019. Later serial was dubbed into Tamil as '*Puratchiyalar Dr.Ambedkar*', Hindi as *Ek Mahanayak*, Telugu as *Mana Ambedkar*.

^vSee *Vartha Bharati*, 4th September, 2020

^{vi}Halli Halligu Mahanayaka, (*Prajavani* 12th January, 2021).

^{vii}Ibid

^{viii}<https://www.mahanayaka.in/mahanayaka-banar-harida-kidigedigalu/>

^{ix} <https://saakshatv.com/mahanayaka-flex-in-tiptur/>

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