

Public Sphere in India: Caste, Class, and Communication

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Abstract

Jürgen Habermas developed the concept of the public sphere. It refers to a 'space' where citizens of a nation critically engage in dialogue on collective interests to 'shape public opinion'. That opinion further influences the government at various levels in managing its subjects. In India, the public sphere is/was not uniform and fully accessible to everyone. It is due to deep-rooted cultural and social inequalities in caste and class structures. that deny access to the public sphere to individuals, citizens, classes and castes. Historically, while colonial-era print culture and social reform movements expanded discursive spaces, they often remained exclusionary towards marginalised castes and lower classes. Advancements in Contemporary communication technologies, especially social media, have created new avenues for engagement to the maximum. But it has also replicated old inequalities through the digital divide, language politics, and class-based access. This article critically examines how caste, class, and communication intersect and shape India's 'public sphere'. It also emphasises the emergence of Dalit counter-publics and alternative media spaces. The analysis also underscores the challenges posed by media ownership, misinformation, and fragmented identities. A reimagined, inclusive communication landscape is essential for fostering a truly democratic and equitable public sphere in India.

Keywords: Public Sphere, Caste, Class, Communication, Digital Divide

Introduction

The concept of the public sphere, popularised by German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, refers to an arena where individuals come together to discuss and debate issues of collective interest, thereby influencing political decisions and public policies. In Western contexts, the public sphere was historically associated with spaces such as coffeehouses, salons, and print media that enabled bourgeois participation in political discourse. However, in a diverse and hierarchically structured society like India, the formation and functioning of the public sphere are profoundly complex. Social stratifications, particularly caste and class, have historically defined who can participate, whose voices are amplified, and whose concerns are sidelined.

In India, the public sphere has never been a homogenous or neutral space. It has been profoundly shaped by entrenched social hierarchies rooted in the caste system and class divisions. The intersectionality of caste and class continues to determine access to education, economic resources, and communication platforms — all of which are prerequisites for effective participation in public discourse. Consequently, the so-called national public sphere is often exclusionary, privileging upper-caste, upper-class perspectives while marginalizing Dalit, Adivasi, and working-class voices.

Communication technologies play a pivotal role in shaping the contours of the public sphere. From colonial-era print culture and nationalist newspapers to the advent of television and digital media, communication has both democratized and restricted participation in the public domain. Language barriers, technological access, and literacy levels further complicate the inclusivity of these platforms. For example, while social media has given rise to counter-publics where marginalized communities assert their identities and grievances, it also perpetuates echo chambers and class-based exclusions due to uneven access.

This article critically examines the public sphere in India through the lenses of caste, class, and communication. It traces the historical evolution of public discourse, identifies structural barriers that hinder equitable participation, and explores how new communication technologies are reshaping — but not necessarily equalizing — the public sphere. By unpacking these intersections, the study aims to contribute to ongoing debates about democratization, social justice, and inclusive communication in contemporary India.

Theoretical Background

Jürgen Habermas introduced the concept of the public sphere in his seminal work *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962). Habermas defined the public sphere as a domain of social life where private individuals come together to engage in rational-critical debate about matters of public interest, ideally influencing state policies and fostering democracy. His model emphasised reasoned dialogue, accessibility, and the separation of public opinion from state control. However, Habermas' framework was derived from the European bourgeois experience and has been critiqued for overlooking inequalities based on race, gender, caste, and class that affect participation.

Feminist scholars, such as Nancy Fraser, challenged Habermas by introducing the concept of “subaltern counter-publics,” which highlights that marginalised groups often form their own parallel spheres of discourse. Similarly, postcolonial scholars have argued that in societies like India, the public sphere is fragmented and shaped by deep-seated social stratifications, particularly caste and class.

In the Indian context, scholars such as Partha Chatterjee argue that the Western ideal of a public sphere does not fully apply. He introduces the notion of “political society,” where marginalised groups engage with the state through informal, often contentious means, rather than through formal deliberation. Dalit scholars, including Gopal Guru, critique the public sphere for being dominated by upper-caste narratives, necessitating the creation of a Dalit public sphere to challenge Brahminical hegemony.

Thus, theoretical perspectives on the public sphere have evolved to accommodate the complexities of non-Western, stratified societies like India, where caste, class, and communication fundamentally shape who speaks and who is heard.

Historical Context of Public Sphere in India

The evolution of the public sphere in India is closely tied to its social hierarchies and historical transformations. In pre-colonial India, the public sphere was fragmented and deeply embedded in caste-based social structures. Communication and participation in societal discourse were largely confined to the upper castes, particularly Brahmins, who controlled access to knowledge, education, and religious discourse. Lower castes and Dalits were systematically excluded from these spaces, both socially and geographically.

With the colonial period, significant changes emerged. The introduction of print media, Western education, and the English language facilitated the rise of a new class of educated Indians who engaged in public debate on social reforms, nationalism, and modernity. Reform movements like those led by Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Jyotirao Phule, and later B.R. Ambedkar challenged existing social hierarchies and attempted to create a more inclusive discourse. Yet, despite these efforts, access to the public sphere remained limited to the upper-caste and upper-class elites.

The nationalist movement further expanded the public sphere by mobilizing mass participation, but even then, the discourse was often mediated by elite leadership. Post-independence, the Indian Constitution laid the foundation for a democratic public sphere, emphasizing equality, freedom of speech, and social justice.

However, the persistence of caste discrimination, economic disparities, and linguistic divides continued to restrict equitable participation.

In contemporary times, the emergence of digital media and social platforms has diversified public discourse but has not fully resolved historical exclusions. The digital public sphere often mirrors offline inequalities, with marginalized communities facing barriers of access, digital literacy, and representation. Thus, the historical trajectory of India's public sphere reflects a continual tension between democratization efforts and the enduring grip of caste and class hierarchies.

Caste and the Public Sphere

Caste remains a central axis of exclusion and marginalization in India's public sphere. Historically, the rigid Brahminical social order restricted education, speech, and public engagement to the upper castes, denying Dalits, Adivasis, and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) access to knowledge systems and platforms of discourse. As a result, the mainstream public sphere developed as an exclusive domain dominated by upper-caste perspectives, particularly in academia, media, and policy-making.

The Dalit public sphere emerged as a response to this exclusion. Spearheaded by leaders like Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Dalits began constructing alternative spaces for dialogue, cultural expression, and political assertion. The Ambedkarite movement, Dalit literature, and organizations like the Dalit Panthers were instrumental in raising Dalit consciousness and critiquing caste oppression. These movements challenged the hegemonic narratives of the mainstream public sphere by foregrounding issues of social justice, dignity, and rights.

In contemporary India, digital platforms have enabled new forms of Dalit assertion. Social media networks like Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook have provided marginalized communities with tools to bypass traditional media gatekeeping. Activists such as Rohith Vemula and movements like #DalitLivesMatter have used these platforms to amplify Dalit voices and mobilize support.

However, the digital sphere also reflects structural inequalities. Online caste-based abuse, trolling, and the underrepresentation of Dalits in digital media industries show that caste discrimination transcends offline boundaries. Additionally, language barriers and digital illiteracy further marginalize lower-caste populations from fully participating in digital dialogues.

Thus, while the Dalit public sphere and digital activism have expanded visibility and agency for marginalized castes, the overarching public sphere in India remains deeply caste-stratified, requiring systemic interventions for genuine inclusivity.

Class and the Public Sphere

Class plays a critical role in shaping access to and participation within the Indian public sphere. Economic inequality dictates who can afford education, technology, and platforms for expression — key prerequisites for meaningful public engagement. The urban middle and upper classes, with better access to education, English language proficiency, and digital infrastructure, dominate public debates in media, policy, and academia.

The urban-rural divide further exacerbates this disparity. Rural populations, often economically disadvantaged, face infrastructural deficits such as poor internet connectivity, limited educational opportunities, and minimal media representation. Consequently, their concerns, such as agrarian distress, labour rights, and rural development, often receive limited attention in national discourse.

Moreover, media ownership in India is concentrated in the hands of wealthy, upper-class elites, leading to class-biased narratives that favour neoliberal policies and urban middle-class concerns while neglecting working-class issues. This has created a skewed public sphere where the struggles of informal workers, slum dwellers, and the economically marginalized are underrepresented.

Social media has provided some avenues for the working class to express dissent, as seen during the farmers' protests and labour rights campaigns. However, the digital divide, defined by affordability of devices, internet access, and digital literacy, limits their effective participation. Algorithms and platform economies further marginalize working-class voices by prioritizing content from more influential or affluent users.

In essence, class divisions in India significantly determine who participates in the public sphere, the visibility of their issues, and the framing of national discourse. Without addressing these structural inequalities, the public sphere risks remaining an exclusive space dominated by economically privileged classes.

Role of Communication in Shaping the Public Sphere

Communication is the backbone of the public sphere, determining who speaks, who listens, and what issues gain prominence. In India, the modes and mediums of communication have evolved from oral traditions and print media to radio, television, and digital platforms, each reshaping public discourse.

Print media in the colonial era was pivotal in social reform and nationalist movements, yet it largely served elite, upper-caste audiences. Post-independence, radio and television expanded reach but remained state-controlled and urban-focused, limiting critical engagement from marginalized communities.

The advent of digital communication, especially social media, has democratized access to some extent. Platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube allow individuals to voice opinions, mobilize support, and challenge dominant narratives. Movements like #DalitLivesMatter and anti-CAA protests leveraged these tools for mass mobilization.

However, significant barriers persist of Language politics: English and dominant regional languages often sideline minority linguistic groups. Next one is of Digital divide: Economic inequality restricts access to devices, internet, and digital literacy, especially in rural areas. And algorithmic biases: Platforms prioritize sensational or elite-driven content, marginalizing grassroots voices. Alternative media outlets, community radio, and vernacular digital platforms are attempting to bridge these gaps, but comprehensive inclusivity remains a challenge. Communication, therefore, is both an enabler and a barrier in India's public sphere, deeply intertwined with social hierarchies and inequalities.

Case Studies / Examples

Several contemporary movements in India illustrate the dynamic interplay of caste, class, and communication in shaping the public sphere: Shaheen Bagh Protests (2019-2020): Muslim women in Delhi protested against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), using public spaces and social media to amplify their voices. Despite minimal mainstream media coverage initially, digital platforms helped the movement gain national and international attention, showcasing marginalized groups asserting their democratic rights. Farmers' Protest (2020-2021): Predominantly rural, lower to middle-class farmers protested against farm laws, effectively using social media, independent journalism, and international advocacy to challenge state narratives. The movement exposed the urban-rural divide in media attention and policy discourse. Dalit Social Media Activism: Movements like #DalitLivesMatter and activists like Rohith Vemula's supporters have used digital platforms to highlight caste-based discrimination in educational institutions and society. These campaigns challenged mainstream media silence on caste atrocities.

These examples demonstrate that while new communication technologies enable marginalized voices to enter public discourse, barriers of caste, class, and access still shape visibility and impact.

Challenges and Emerging Trends

Despite technological advancements, several challenges hinder the formation of an inclusive public sphere in India. The digital divide persists, where socio-economic and regional disparities restrict access to the internet, devices, and digital literacy, especially for rural and lower-caste populations.

Additionally, the proliferation of misinformation, fake news, and online hate speech distorts public discourse and deepens social polarization. Media ownership concentration among elite classes skews narratives in favor of the privileged, sidelining marginalized voices. Emerging trends include the rise of alternative media, community journalism, and Dalit, Adivasi, and minority-led digital platforms, striving to democratize communication. However, algorithm-driven platforms still prioritize sensationalism over substantive, inclusive dialogue. These dynamics reveal that while communication technologies offer potential for greater participation, structural barriers of caste and class remain entrenched.

Conclusion

The Indian public sphere is a complex, contested space shaped by enduring caste and class hierarchies. While the evolution of communication—from print to digital media—has expanded opportunities for participation, it has not fully dismantled the deep-rooted exclusions embedded in society. Caste and class continue to determine whose voices are heard, which issues gain prominence, and how narratives are constructed in both traditional and digital platforms.

The emergence of counter-publics, especially among Dalits, minorities, and the working class, highlights significant strides toward inclusivity. Yet, challenges like the digital divide, language barriers, and elite media control persist, restricting full democratization of discourse. For India to realize a truly inclusive public sphere, deliberate efforts are needed to bridge socio-economic gaps, ensure equitable access to communication technologies, and foster media diversity. Only then can the public sphere serve as a genuine space for democratic deliberation and social justice.

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