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Digital Rhetoric, Digital Divide and Subaltern Spaces in New Media

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Abstract:

Digital rhetoric by the subaltern has a number of overlapping meanings. The present paper includes, the study of the strategies for the effective representation of the subaltern, methods to overcome the digital divide, the use of indigenous language written or spoken, methods to inform and to create a subaltern space. The paper further discusses the potential of new media to represent subalterns as it makes visible of their plight from the marginalised point of view. An article/idea/thought/discourse shared in the new media, whether it is from the main stream or subaltern, circulated through, facebook, twitter blogs and websites together that highlights the bias within that piece or offers an alternate reading. In that context subaltern spaces act as a sort of counter- public sphere. Earlier, Subaltern spaces have been neglected and discriminated by the mainstream media. Even after the digital divide policies by the existing hegemonic structure, new media acts as an object that considers digital rhetoric as a medium to extend the power of rhetoric to not just digital arts but to global spaces.

Keywords: Digital divide, new media, digital rhetoric, subaltern, multiple discourses.

The present paper includes the study of the strategies for the effective representation of the subaltern, the use of indigenous language written or spoken, methods to inform and to create a subaltern space. The paper further discusses the potential of new media to represent subalterns as it makes visible of their plight from the marginalised point of view. Subalterns have found a means of exchanging ideas with each other thereby creating a counter hegemonic movement. Thus new media creates a platform for the invisible subalterns to communicate with the people in the first world and to have negotiation with the global capitalist regime. It also discusses the realities of digital divide in India. Digital rhetoric spreads the ideas beyond disciplines and this interdisciplinary quality itself serves as a product of a global culture by arranging and connecting diverse subaltern discourses in the pursuit of theoretical questions and practical applications. Digital rhetoric is a space for discourse and debate into the range of new ideas and thoughts, conversations, and activities that inform and persuade an action in the audience through media and spread it, this altogether constitute the work of digital rhetoricians; whether they are the dominant or subaltern. Digital rhetoric has not yet become established as a dominant channel of discourse. An additional consideration is that digital rhetoric draws its theory and methods of representation first and foremost from the tradition of rhetoric itself, and this

poses a dilemma because rhetoric is both analytic and critical and can be structured as a kind of meta-discipline. Kenneth Burke's commentary on the scope of rhetorical practice is:

> Wherever there is persuasion, there is rhetoric. And wherever there is "meaning," there is "persuasion." Food, eaten and digested, is not rhetorical. But in the meaning of food there is much rhetoric, the meaning being persuasive enough for the idea of food to be used, like the ideas of religion, as a rhetorical device for statesmen. (172–73)

An article/idea/thought/discourse shared in the new media, whether it is from the main stream or subaltern, circulated through, face book, twitter blogs and websites together that highlights the bias within that piece or offers an alternate reading. In that context subaltern spaces act as a sort of counter- public sphere. Discourse topics related to this counter space can be like the following: Does subalternity also exist in digital space? If it does, what constitutes the subalterns in digital space? Are the concerns on domination and oppression merely transferred into its digital spatial form in a way that follows the mere imitation and copying from old media to new media, from analog discrimination to digital discrimination? Moreover, these questions become more crucial considering the recent epistemological shift from the culture of humanism to that of post humanism. This idea about resistance in protocol, consequently, returns us to the idea of subaltern space.

The idea of subalternity is in close relation to the idea of resistance, because it is the fight for a space, to be more specific, a counter space. In fact, the establishment of the Subaltern Studies as a genre itself emerges as a resistive movement against the existing dominant elite counter spheres at the top of hegemonic structure. Earlier, Subaltern spaces have been neglected and discriminated by the ideologies of mainstream media. Meanwhile, new media provides new spaces for them that range from social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter or My Space to collaborative sites like Wikipedia or Flickr. Their development and functioning is based on the collective creation, there by the output of a collective conscience of the subaltern and sharing of content, manageable forms of self-publishing, and social networking and this in turn leads to the involvement of all those who can access digital media despite of class/gender/caste discrimination. Consequently, along with the main stream, subaltern are now dynamically networking and communicating through text, video, blogs, pictures, on social networks sites and microblogs such as Twitter. Digital media is no longer about programming, systems, controlling and calculating but they are a gateway for communication and cultural activities across the world.

The different spaces of the digital media encourage not only more meaningful individual rhetoric of the subalterns but also a more egalitarian discourse. Increased participation and discourse on divergent topics enhance the prospects of successful mobilization against the existing social structure. Digital media might strengthen the subaltern rhetoric in two ways: Firstly, the new media supports an unrestricted and equal access to information; secondly, the digital media provides the opportunity for creation of a subaltern space and interaction with the world. Access, space and interaction are fundamental for voicing the voiceless and the formation of new ideologies that support the margins.

"Consequently fostering subaltern public spheres reflects the potential of the Internet in expanding the democratic inclusiveness" (44).

In *Digital Rhetoric: Toward an Integrated Theory*Zappen provides a brief review and synthesis of work that he sees contributing to the establishment of digital rhetoric as an integrated theory focusing on four major areas:

> … the use of rhetorical strategies in production and analysis of digital text, identifying characteristics, affordances, and constraints of new media, formation of digital identities, potential for building social communities (319).

These four elements cover most of the work done by scholars from all streams, often the subaltern being replaced with synonyms like the working class, the common mass, and the oppressed, that rests on an obvious paradox whose work might be categorized as digital rhetoric. The subaltern speak and write through the new media; the archives of the world are filled not only with the political tracts of their parties and organizations, but there are literary texts, newspapers, films, recordings, leaflets, songs, even the very chants that accompany spontaneous and organized protests all over the world. In the subaltern spaces in new media, there is speaking and writing always and everywhere and even more where there is resistance to exploitation and oppression. Ideas shared through the digital rhetoric, are drawn from a range of disciplines and fields, including communications, literacy studies, sociology, cultural studies, anthropology and social issues. Hence it draws theories and methods from multiple disciplines and fields while remaining true to its foundation in rhetoric. But here the question arises, whether the subaltern does found a space of their own in the first world but whether it is possible for them to have rhetoric of their own. It is a question similar to Woolf's famous statement about the necessity to have a room of one's own for the females. That is, what we take to be the subaltern speaking may in fact be determined to be only the appearance of their speaking, if our theory and system deems it impossible for them to speak. Such existential questions thus necessarily produce a distinction between appearance and reality: whether it is an actual space they created for them in the first world or whether it is a mirage substituted for the actual space they need.

Warnick, after establishing her theory on digital rhetoric, as the development of a medium-specific approach to the web as rhetorical space, focused on "five elements of the communication process- reception, source, message, time, and space" (27). When we place the subaltern in digital space, all these five elements are being used as a way to find space in the first world by the fourth world representatives. One among the primary aspects of digital rhetoric addressed in the theory is ethos. To examine the subaltern ethos is problematic for the rhetorical analysis of a digital text because the authorship details and expertise are often missing or difficult to find. Especially when it is a community blog, subaltern representation might be sometimes through anonymous texts. Additionally, the co-authored, distributed, mass communication environment of the web presents some challenging questions about message credibility and absurdity in authorship.

Digital rhetoric often shifts focus to interactivity, than that of the classical rhetoric, where it links to Burke's articulation of rhetoric as a vehicle for identification of spaces, which works particularly well if the object of study is political discourse or some socially relevant issue. Warnick makes a distinction between interactivity as "an attribute of technological functions of the medium, such as hyperlinking, activating media downloads, filling in feedback forms, and playing online games" (69) and user-to-user or text-to-user interaction. Warnick defines interactivity as

> …communication that includes some form of reciprocal message exchange involving mediation and occurring between [an organization] and users, between users and the site text, or between users and other users," emphasizing the contingent transmission of messages back and forth as well as text-based interactivity (75).

In India, most of the communication has been elite oriented and upper class monopolized in the field of all communication mediums. So a large effort has to be put to make the voices of those who are in the margins to be heard by the media space. In the new media reciprocal messages are not mandatory and hence it is a better platform for the fourth world representation. And hence it is a global platform, first world is definitely aware of these new spaces even though they try to ignore such spaces. The use of first person narration, the use of photographs, and other sensitive elements like live interviews of the people from margins communicate a greater sense of engaging presence to the new media users. This sense of interactivity, particularly the notion of digital text- based interactivity by the subalterns seems to elide the differences between dialogic communication, in mass media interaction and interactivity.

In Warnick's theory on digital rhetoric, she considers the role of intertextuality in digital discourse, primarily using political parody and mock ads as examples. Theoretical effort is to identify strategies used by digital texts and subaltern authors drawing upon intertextuality as a resource to represent them and to consider the probable roles of web users as readers when they interpret and are influenced by the texts and spaces they encounter. Digital rhetoric and meanings can be read and re-read along with the concept of intertextuality by Kristeva and dialogism by Bakhtin. Like intertextual references in subaltern writing, dialogism recognises the multiplicity of perspectives and voices in subaltern text. It is double- voiced or multi-voiced so the rhetoric does not logically unfold an ideology but rather, interacts and finds its own space. This makes digital platform of subalterns a lot more objective and realistic than their monological counterparts in mass media.

> In the end, Warnick argues that because "the nature of Web-based texts is in many ways very different from that of print texts and monologic speech, many of the models that have been conventionally used by rhetorical critics and analysts will need to be adjusted for the Web environment (121).

There are certain elements of digital rhetoric, in which can bring in the idea subaltern spaces in new media. The conventions of new digital genres that are used for everyday

discourse, as well as for special occasions, in average people's lives can contribute a lot for the creation of a subaltern space. Public rhetoric, often in the form of political messages from government institutions is represented or recorded through digital technology and disseminated via electronic distributed networks. This will touch all dimensions of the social structure including the marginalised. And they will in turn retaliate through the new media. The emerging scholarly discipline concerned with the rhetorical interpretation of computer-generated media as objects of study will definitely help the subaltern spaces to emerge as a part of the first world studies and major disciplines of the first world. Studies about digital rhetoric involve examining ideologies:

> … about concepts like 'freedom' or 'honesty' that are in turn shaped by factors like national, linguistic, theological, or disciplinary identity; societal attitudes about ownership and authorship; and cultural categories of gender, race, sexuality, and class" (56)

Hence they are decoded into new digital genres and forms of digital text, thereby creating a digital space for subalterns.

The current interest in finding the digital spaces of subaltern also prompts to deal with the digital divide, a threat faced by the people in margins of all walks in the globalized liberalized world. Digital divide refers to the gap between individuals, households, businesses and geographic areas at different socio-economic levels with regard both to their opportunities to access information and communication technologies. The reality of digital divide is complex. The digital divide is a global phenomenon. Haves and have nots, exist not only in economically poor countries but also in the developed countries, between countries and also inside any single given country. Hargittai in her research paper says:

> In addition to relying on basic measures of access to a digital medium, we need to consider the following more nuanced measures of use: Technical means (quality of the equipment), autonomy of use (location of access, freedom to use the medium for one's preferred activities), social support networks (availability of others one can turn to for assistance with use, size of networks to encourage use), experience (number of years using the technology, types of use patterns) These four factors together contribute to one's level of skill. Skill is defined as the ability to efficiently and effectively use the new technology. Here, I consider these five components which should guide our analyses of digital inequality at the individual user level (10).

Various studies and surveys have underlined that there remains an ever widening chasm between the rich and the poor between the developed and the developing and the underdeveloped countries. Digital space offers the liberating possibilities of people in margins constructing new identities which free them from the imposed classifications of caste, class, gender, ethnicity and educational levels with material space and place. Also the anonymity in digital mode of communication creates opportunities to invent alternative versions of one's· self and to engage in untried forms of interaction. In this way, it is believed that information technologies offer prospects of greater opportunities for self-representation,

challenging orthodoxy and meeting like minds and constructing one's own identity in the global scene. But in the context of digital divide the possibilities for the representation of marginalised seems bleak. In India digital divide is a reality; India has stepped into the parlour of the developed countries and joined the global Information Technology Agreement (ITA). What is more interesting, is the fact that the digital divide is not restricted to less developed states like Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Orissa with traditionally weak infrastructure, but also is found in the new IT states like Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh. A recent e-readiness assessment prepared by the Union government ranks the states based on six parametres such as: network access, network learning, network society, network economy and network policy. This study found that none of the four states which rank high in information technology such as Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Maharastra, ranked very high in network access. Also it was found that Assam, Jarkhand, Bihar, Jammu Kashmir, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Manipur are the least achievers in information technology.

Digital divide also arises from population categories and the relevance of content designed to these population categories. These would include divides arising from parameters like caste, class, urban-rural mix, gender and education. On the whole we understand that within a region there are several dimensions of digital divide. People are already divided on the basis of income, race/caste, education, age group, gender and ethnicity. The access to information technology further divides them. One of the special justice concerns is caste system which operates at different levels; discriminating people and dividing society. In his column, 'Dalit Diary' Charidrabhan Prasad asks, "Is information technology turning into another Sanskrit?" He quotes, a senior IAS officer told Dalit writers in a meeting, IT is turning into another Sanskrit. Sanskrit predestined Dalits/ subalterns exclusion from knowledge. This barred Dalits from intervening in the thought- process practiced by traditional society. The road to IT revolution goes via English and computers. This deadly combination has created a social context where the subaltern absence is pre-destined. This reveals how the subalterns are victims of this digital divide.

In this light, the dominant groups in the hegemonic structure control the information and communication revolution and will become the greatest beneficiaries of this new media. Some marginalised groups have the potential to benefit from digital technologies, and theirs are the voices we hear. But coming to the tribals and other lower class groups, there are still unheard, non-representative voices. The marginalised groups, who can afford the digital technologies and found a space in the new media, work for bridging the digital divide. Through community blogs and other social spaces, they try to bring out the unseen and unheard. But at the same time they may discuss their structural inequalities that cripple their ability to participate in digital revolution in the global world.

Internet as alternative media for Subaltern Researchers have conducted only a few studies specifically on Dalits and their access to internet and the digital divide Dalits face in the rural India. The census of India 2011 report shows that rural population in India is 68.84% and the urban population is 31.16%. Since the arrival of digital technology in India

till now, the percent of internet user in rural India always remained low. The report on the usage of rural and urban internet usage make the point crystal clear: digital divide persists in India. Subalterns who are mostly residing in villages are succumbed to digital divide. In recent research papers on subalterns shares the idea about the existence of significant opportunity that information technology in particular, provides to dalits, the most marginalized community of India to take part in the national discourse of civil society and to have discourse among themselves and to the first world. Through these openings a small but vigorous group of Subalterns are using digital technologies to transcend barriers of caste and class hierarchy in ways not possible before, and thus to take advantage of democratic opportunities that can lead to breaking through the barriers and the ritual walls to share understandings and interests with each other and to the world, those who have previously been beyond their reach.

Chopra (2006) in his study on virtual identity in online Dalit discourse, talks about the digital technology which has enabled the emergence of a new mode of representing collective identity which he calls it as, global primordiality. He goes on to say that one of the main reasons as to why the number of subalterns found online remains very low is the domination of the dominant groups and their ideologies in the digital technology. Though there exists digital divide among those at the bottom of the class system, there is significant number of individuals, social and transcendental who has got accessibility to digital paltforms and through them digital rhetoric takes shape. The potential of internet to make subalterns visible leads to the creation of new space. Only a fraction of this vast socially disenfranchised urban and rural community has little presence in the public sphere, that too through the digital rhetoric, hence we can call this new digital space as a counter public sphere. Now this new media acts can stand on par with the mainstream media and can offer a counter–hegemonic representation of subalterns. Thus, internet has become a tool for the marginalized class to utilize it as an alternative media hence creating a counter public sphere. Studies have provided evidence of the contribution of internet in educating, empowering and strengthening the subaltern community they serve. Even after the digital divide policies by the existing hegemonic structure, new media acts as an object that considers digital rhetoric as a medium to extend the power of rhetoric to not just digital arts but to global spaces by creating a   subaltern space in the first world through digital media. The acceptance of subaltern digital rhetoric in the first world is still a question but counter spaces often make their own pages in history.

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