

22nd EU-NGO Human Rights Forum - The Impact of New Technologies on Human Rights – Ritwajit Das/IDSN

10th December 12.30–14.30 (CET)

Public Thematic Panel: Fundamental Rights and Freedoms in the Digital Sphere Enhancing freedom of expression online whilst fighting disinformation and hate speech.

Thank you, Mr Moderator and all the distinguished speakers who spoke before me, on this panel.

I represent International Dalit Solidarity Network – its members and affiliates in South Asia, Dalit Solidarity Networks in the Europe and International Associates.

Caste discrimination affects more than 270 million Dalits worldwide, but the global discourse around caste is no longer limited to South Asia. Dalits worldwide suffer from the hidden apartheid of segregation, exclusion and discrimination.

The online and digital space has further exacerbated, and fuelled caste hate drivers.

About International Dalit Solidarity Network

Let me briefly talk about International Dalit Solidarity Network, IDSN.

- IDSN – works on a global level for the elimination of caste discrimination and similar forms of discrimination based on work and descent. We link grassroots priorities with international mechanisms and institutions in order to change policies and practices that lead to caste discrimination. Through engagement with the UN, EU and other multilateral institutions, IDSN has had a significant impact globally to ensure caste discrimination is seen as a critical human rights issue which must be addressed.

What is #Caste-Hate Speech?

- Caste-Hate Speech can be defined as Hate speech where it takes the form of communication such as speech, writings and behaviour that incites and perpetuates discrimination. It is often the source of physical, mental and material violence to a person or a group based on caste identity – in particular those who identify as Dalits.
- It works on two levels – one - to uphold the supremacy of the oppressor or dominant caste and two - to reinforce the sub-consciousness of the oppressed caste especially Dalits in accepting their inferior status as the natural order - being suppressed, exploited and dominated.
- Caste-hate slurs, insults, incitements and objectionable insinuations make Dalits extremely vulnerable in socio-cultural situations.
- The ingrained “culture of silence” serves to make Dalits passive, subservient and psychologically powerless, whilst providing social and cultural impunity to perpetrators.
- Dalit women are particular targets as they often encounter misogynistic hate and gendered stereotypes as well as those related to caste and socio-economic status. They are the victims of intersectional and multiple forms of discrimination.

#Caste in Online and Digital Spaces

- Dalits are severely underrepresented in Media and Digital workplaces. There is zero representation of Dalits in any management in print and digital media. HOWEVER, this systematic and systemic exclusion has led to the organic rise and development of alternative Dalit-run media outlets in South Asia. In India for e.g. Dalit Camera and Ambedkar Caravan have more than 50 thousand subscribers to their You Tube and Social Media Platforms. In Nepal, one of our members, Jagaran Media Centre has become a strong force in the national media landscape. These alternative Dalit media houses also cover other significant and mainstream issues with ease
- The Internet is a great equalizer. It exposes the hidden apartheid of Dalits globally. Because of this more and more people are learning about systems of oppression and historic discrimination around caste hierarchies.
- The increase of digital platforms has resulted in a colossal upsurge of Dalit mobilization. The millennials and generation Z Dalits are successfully occupying the space because of low entry barriers like cheap data packages

and affordable smartphones. However, Dalits are still highly underrepresented when compared to other dominant castes users.

- Dalit women, oppressed as a result of both caste and gender, are speaking out on Twitter and Facebook. In India, Dalit Women Fight has emerged as one of the biggest platforms for Dalit Women in the world. They have more than 40 Thousand Twitter followers and numbers increase every day. This model also being replicated throughout South Asia. Dalit Women's representation is on the rise.
- Dalit Human Rights Organizations have recently lobbied some of the largest Social Media Platforms. As a result, caste has become one of the standard guidelines along with race and religion. Even Netflix and Amazon Prime are now using a caste disclaimer for their content. Twitter South Asia has started workshops on Caste inclusions and training programmes.

#Caste-Hate Speech in Online Spaces and its Offline Effects

- Discrimination and abuse of Dalits is reinforced in online and digital spaces. The quantity, veracity, frequency and velocity of hate speech used against Dalits in online space is vast.
- Social media and the online world mirror the offline world, where prejudice and hatred towards Dalits continues to exist. When opinions are voiced against these perpetrators in the real world, it can lead to violence and death.
- While social media has provided an opportunity, it is not a level playing field for the marginalised communities to access. Perpetrators often act with impunity. There is no political or judicial will to protect these most excluded communities.
- Dalit Women routinely face extreme attacks. The online prevalence of caste-hate speech has resulted in real-life atrocities. Dalit women go through character assassination in online spaces, and the perpetrator can easily escape by hiding under perceived caste supremacy.
- Online Hate Campaigns are standard norms against Dalit Sanitation Workers in South Asia. Those involved in manual scavenging - the cleaning of human excreta by hand and sewage workers in Pakistan, India and Bangladesh routinely face online and offline abuses. They are vilified in social media as polluted and 'lesser humans'.
- Targeted online hate campaigns against the reservation system for Dalits in India, Nepal and Pakistan are widespread. In India and Nepal, reservation for Dalits is a constitutional right. Online narratives around merit and caste is a way of maintaining the status-quo by **never** levelling the playing field.
- In some cases, state actions tend to drive hate speech: through discriminatory policies for example, such as blasphemy laws in Pakistan, and anti-conversion laws in India.
- Government officials in South Asia often initiate and encourage hate speech, sparking further online and offline hate. And this reinforces impunity.

Recommendations

- **1. Analyze:** there is a need to measure and detect the prevalence of caste-hate speech in online and digital spaces. There is no system anywhere of collecting such data on caste-hate speech.
- **2. Dialogue:** recognize caste hate speech as a distinct and separate form of hate. International agencies like the EU and the UN along with media and tech companies should involve, consults and engage with Dalit Organizations and Caste-Hate Speech Experts.
- **3. Skill Development and Empowerment:** International agencies should work alongside SMPs to build skills and offer trainings on caste-hate speech for law enforcement and judiciary. Representation in the workplace of the most marginalized groups including Dalits should be ensured.
- **4. Legislative Framework:** States must go beyond ratifying treaties and covenants and should develop national legislations and institutional mechanisms to counter caste-hate speech and ensure implementation of those laws. Non-punitive measures, including publicly countering hateful or incendiary misinformation, strengthening security to threatened populations, and public education should be prioritized. Social media companies and platforms should be held liable if they contravene these protective laws and measures.

- **5. Policy Input:** SMPs should conduct transparent risk assessments of the human rights impact of some of their products. These assessments should be held in dialogue with Dalits and minorities in the context of hate speech. SMPs should implement their own policy protocols on online hate including caste-hate speech.

AND TO FINISH - It is of no doubt that the new technologies have brought unprecedented opportunities. They create a vibrant thriving and informed society. However, technological advances have also brought out the worst in society. What we often dare NOT say in the physical spaces is too often expressed in the online space. This may further exclude communities and peoples who are already at the margins.

Freedom of expression is a democratic and human right. It should not be confused with the undemocratic abuse that is caste-hate speech. We need to build the equality and justice from the bottom-up AND we need to dismantle the structural systems of oppression and privilege.

Above all Dalits and other minorities should be involved every step of the way. Look to the next generation, talk to them and invite them round the table. **Then we can see the difference that togetherness can make.**

Thank you.