

Digital Voices: The Role of Social Media in the Empowerment of Dalit Women in the Kosi Region of Bihar

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Abstract:

Digital platforms are providing Dalit women with opportunities to voice their opinions, share their stories, and challenge deep-rooted social inequalities. Historically, Dalit women in the Kosi division have faced considerable discrimination based on their caste, gender, and class, resulting in their marginalization across various sectors. This study utilizes a mixed-methods approach to explore their engagement in the digital space. It integrates qualitative methods, such as interviews with Dalit women activists and content analysis from platforms like Twitter and YouTube, alongside quantitative techniques, including surveys and evaluations of online campaign metrics. The research aims to understand not only the types of content produced by Dalit women online but also the frequency of their participation, the challenges they encounter—such as online harassment—and whether social media has fostered a sense of empowerment among them. The anticipated results will suggest that social media serves as a vital platform for Dalit women to assert their identities, enhance their visibility, and connect with others across different regions. However, issues like the digital divide, online harassment, and exclusion from digital spaces persist. The study concludes that while social media alone cannot eradicate deep-seated caste and gender inequalities, it plays a significant role in amplifying the voices of Dalit women and fostering new forms of digital solidarity and resistance. This research contributes to the expanding fields of digital activism, intersectionality, and women's empowerment in the Kosi Division.

Keywords: Social media, Dalit women empowerment, Kosi region

Introduction

In today's world, digital platforms have revolutionized the way communities globally engage with social justice issues. Notably, Dalit empowerment has gained a strong online presence, using social media to confront systemic oppression and push for equity and rights. This article examines the profound impact of social media on the empowerment of Dalit women, highlighting how these platforms serve as a vital tool for change and raising awareness in the fight against caste-based discrimination. Dalit women find themselves in a particularly vulnerable spot in Indian society, facing deep and systemic marginalization that stems from the complex mix of caste, gender, and class discrimination. Their historical journey is marked by exclusion, oppression, and a consistent denial of basic human rights across civil, political, economic, social, and cultural areas.⁹ The Kosi region of Bihar, which is mostly rural and often neglected, adds to these difficulties, making it especially relevant to explore how digital technologies can serve as tools for empowerment. This study aims to carefully examine the impact of social media

platforms on the empowerment of Dalit women in this area, considering both the opportunities they provide for amplifying voices and the risks that reflect existing societal inequalities. At its essence, empowerment is a complex process and outcome through which individuals, groups, and communities gain resources and capabilities that boost their spiritual, political, or socio-economic strengths.⁹ This allows them to have more control over their surroundings and move towards fulfilling their personal or collective goals. It's a community work approach that requires recognizing and breaking down the barriers that prevent marginalized groups from accessing power and community resources. In this setting, digital platforms, often called "digital voices," are crucial in "amplifying" these empowerment initiatives.¹⁷ The amplification process involves equipping individuals and groups with the tools and support needed to express and elevate their voices, thus creating a critical mass of allies necessary for fostering social change.¹⁷

Dalit women in India face a complicated mix of discrimination that is deeply intersectional, arising from their identities as both Dalit and female.² This double vulnerability is made worse by their socio-economic status, often putting them among the poorest in society, which leads to what many refer to as 'triple discrimination.'¹⁴ The obstacles that Dalit women encounter go beyond just direct violence; they also deal with systemic denial of basic rights and opportunities. They struggle significantly to access justice, with a widespread lack of accountability for those who commit violence, especially if the offender is from a dominant caste.¹⁴ Law enforcement often overlooks or outright denies Dalit women their rights to legal and judicial support, and the courts frequently fail to uphold protective laws, effectively allowing impunity to thrive.⁹

In addition to legal options, caste and gender discrimination pose significant barriers to accessing vital services like education, healthcare, water, and sanitation.⁵ Their limited access to land and reliance on dominant castes for jobs and loans keep them trapped in high poverty and food insecurity.¹⁶ Politically, rural Dalit women face even greater marginalization compared to other rural women, often having their voices silenced in local decision-making groups like panchayats, and they encounter backlash and violence when they try to assert their rights.⁵ Despite these tough challenges, Dalit women are coming together and pushing back against their oppression, creating movements that connect on a global scale to advocate for their rights.⁹ Various non-digital initiatives from NGOs and government programs have played a crucial role in these efforts. For example, the Dalit Foundation is a key grant-making organization in South Asia, focusing on empowering the Dalit community. Its programs aim to promote outstanding Dalit leadership, support Dalit art and culture, and specifically develop leadership among Dalit women.⁶

Despite national advancements, a significant digital gap remains between rural and urban areas. In Bihar, for instance, the rural scene has a decent number of internet users, with about 25.37 million people online.¹³ However, the subscriber penetration rate in rural Bihar is only 20.60 per hundred people, which shows that while a lot of folks are using the internet, the number of individual subscriptions is still lower than in cities.¹³ This difference highlights that even though connectivity is growing, fair access and personal ownership are still issues, especially in places like Kosi. Having internet access alone doesn't necessarily mean people are engaging with it effectively. A lack of digital skills significantly hinders tech engagement, particularly in rural communities and among marginalized groups.¹⁸ Many people, especially women, might not have the basic skills needed to navigate online spaces well, like scanning QR codes, entering payment amounts, or understanding privacy settings.¹⁸ This gap in knowledge makes it tough for them to find useful information or take full advantage of

online opportunities.

Various initiatives are working hard to close the literacy gap. For instance, the Rural Future Foundation in Bhagalpur is offering free computer literacy classes and connecting underserved children with teachers through online classes.¹⁴ JEEViKA's digital financial literacy programs in Bihar are also most important, helping rural women understand banking products, services, and safe digital transaction practices using local audio-visual tools.² These initiatives are essential to ensure that better internet access leads to real digital engagement. Social media platforms have become a game-changer for marginalized groups, including Dalit women, enabling them to raise their voices, break through geographical and social barriers, and organise with unprecedented ease and impact.⁶ Movements like #DalitLivesMatter and #CasteIsNotPast have gained a lot of momentum, attracting global attention to ongoing issues of caste-based violence and discrimination. Importantly, social media gives Dalit individuals the power to share their own stories, reclaiming control over their narratives and building a stronger sense of identity and pride.⁹

The imperative to understand the nuanced role of social media in empowering Dalit women in the Kosi region of Bihar is unequivocally clear. Confronted by deeply entrenched intersectional discrimination—a complex interplay of caste, gender, and class—Dalit women stand at a critical juncture where digital technologies offer both immense potential for liberation and significant risks of further marginalization. The aim is to propose actionable recommendations for policymakers and practitioners, ensuring that "digital voices" truly translate into sustainable empowerment and meaningful social transformation for Dalit women in the Kosi region and beyond, ultimately contributing to a more equitable and just digital future. It's crucial to understand the nuanced role that social media plays in empowering Dalit women in the Kosi area of Bihar. Facing deeply rooted intersectional discrimination—a tricky mix of caste, gender, and class—Dalit women find themselves at a pivotal point where digital tech can either liberate them or push them further into the margins. The goal here is to provide practical recommendations for policymakers and practitioners, ensuring that these "digital voices" genuinely lead to lasting empowerment and genuine social change for Dalit women in Kosi and beyond, ultimately contributing to the creation of a fairer and more just digital future.

Literature Review

A new wave of Dalit activists has emerged, leveraging new media, and they often view online platforms as "alternative media" (Kumar and Subramani 2014, 128), utilising them as their primary channels to challenge caste hierarchies.

Dinesha's (2014) research focuses on political reservations at the local level. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment has opened doors for Dalit women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), empowering them to voice their grievances. Yet, in practice, they often find themselves sidelined in decision-making due to various issues, such as caste-based discrimination against Dalit women representatives, which is a common occurrence in certain rural areas. There's also a noticeable bureaucratic indifference towards these elected officials. The same act hasn't guaranteed their effective functioning. The study highlighted that a lack of education has hindered their ability to make informed, independent decisions on numerous matters. Additionally, it's worth noting that in places where Dalit women do manage to operate effectively, they often face the most vulgar and abusive language, along with allegations from their adversaries.

Ashalatha (2013) discusses the status of Dalit women in Indian society. They represent the largest

socially segregated group globally. As a Dalit woman, she is seen as a Dalit among Dalits. She faces triple oppression — due to her gender, her caste as ‘untouchable’, and her class, since she comes from the poorest of marginalized communities. The paper claims that the so-called Hindu religious texts are primarily to blame for their visible suffering. It also points out that globalization has introduced many hardships into their lives, such as mechanization in harvesting and transplantation, which has led to Dalit women losing their traditional roles in agriculture. Extreme poverty has driven them into the sex trade to make a living. Therefore, government intervention is essential to uplift them and their daughters to parity with other women, promoting overall development and alleviating poverty in these communities.

Gopal Guru’s (2000) paper focuses on marginalization. He raises three key questions: Why is marginalization happening among the Dalits? How and why does it persist? Lastly, is it specific to their culture? Among these, political marginalization stands out as the most significant issue, as no political party consistently supports Dalits and their concerns during election campaigns. He also mentions that if Dalits manage to get elected into political positions, they often only receive the more desirable roles. This has been a trend since the time of Dr. Ambedkar. Cultural marginalization forces Dalit students and teachers in educational institutions to act in a ghettoized way, which limits their access to the broader teaching community. He addresses a crucial topic like public employment opportunities, noting that Dalits and Dalit women typically aim for low-status jobs such as sweepers, scavengers, and coolies. In politics, Dalit leaders often mirror this cultural hierarchy, sidelining Dalit women whose involvement in the political arena is neither encouraged nor accepted by the Dalit patriarchy.

Gupta (2016) in *The gender of caste: Representing Dalits in print* points out that media and print are responsible for creating the stereotypical images of Dalit women. They are always represented by their caste identities and not as individuals.

“Digital Activism and Dalit Women”: This paper analyzes how social media platforms, including Dalit websites and blogs, serve as alternative media for expressing Dalit issues in India. It discusses the role of digital media in empowering marginalized Dalits and representing their concerns. (Kumar, S., & Rao, M. (2022).

Research Objectives

1. Dalit women's engagement on social media platforms to encounter the challenges of Social discrimination.
2. To explore the extent of engagement on social media to enhance the voices of Dalit women.

Methodology

This research employs a mixed-methods approach to investigate how Dalit women in the Kosi area of Bihar utilise social media for empowerment. It specifically targets Dalit women aged 18 to 50 who use platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube.

Before collecting the data through an online survey, I gathered secondary data by analysing various research papers, books, articles, websites, and journals. The primary data were collected from respondents in Saharsa, Supaul, and Madhepura districts of the Kosi region, representing varied age groups and different monthly incomes. Participants were chosen through purposive and snowball sampling, meaning we selected women who were active online and encouraged them to refer others. The research was conducted in the Kosi region to highlight the digital divide and the inequalities faced by women in that area. All responses were kept confidential, and the women provided their consent to

participate in the study. Care was taken to ensure that no one was harmed or put at risk during the research process.

Key Campaigns and Their Impact

Digital campaigns and voices have transformed the landscape of Dalit advocacy, enabling marginalized individuals to bypass traditional media hurdles and connect with global audiences in a matter of minutes. Initiatives such as #DalitLivesMatter, #WhyLoiter, and #DalitWomenFight have leveraged social media to shed light on caste-based violence, public harassment, and systemic exclusion, forming online communities that amplify Dalit viewpoints (O'Connor, 2019).

Platforms like Round Table India and Dalit Camera serve as alternative media outlets, offering forums, articles, and visual stories that challenge mainstream narratives (Kumar & Rao, 2022). This digital voice movement empowers Dalits—especially women—to reclaim their stories, challenge stereotypes, and showcase their resilience, thereby strengthening their identity and agency (Das & Singh, 2021).

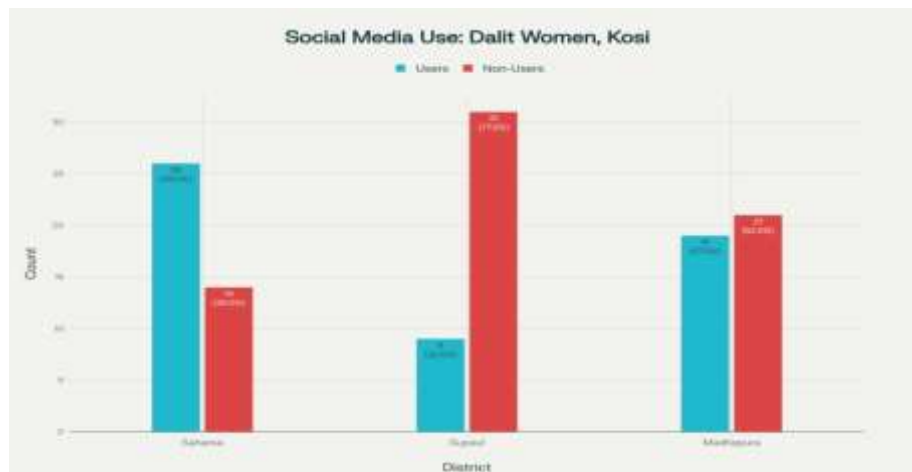
Data Analysis

This research investigated the influence of social media on the empowerment of Dalit women in the Kosi region of Bihar, utilizing a purposive sample of 120 Dalit women from the districts of Saharsa, Supaul, and Madhepura. The primary data for this study were gathered exclusively from Dalit women through interviews that included 15 questions. Conversely, secondary data were obtained through the examination of various journals, literature, and articles that guided the analysis of this research. A significant number of respondents were from rural areas, where the absence of formal education and poverty are prevalent obstacles. Numerous women indicated low literacy levels, which hindered their capacity to read, write, and confidently navigate digital platforms. This digital divide was particularly pronounced between younger, more educated women and older women with minimal or no formal schooling.

Access to smartphones was relatively common; however, economic difficulties such as inconsistent income and high data costs frequently limited women's regular internet usage. The adoption of social media was inconsistent; WhatsApp emerged as the most widely used platform due to its user-friendliness and support for local languages, followed by YouTube and Facebook, while Instagram was the least utilized. Women residing in rural areas and those with lower educational attainment faced greater challenges in fully benefiting from these platforms compared to their urban or better-educated counterparts. These are some important questions:

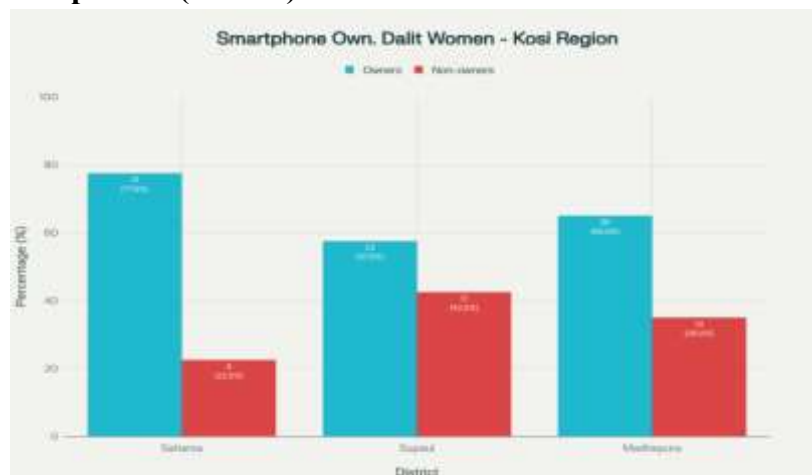
1) What social media platforms do you frequently use? (Choose multiple options: WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter.)

The survey conducted with 120 Dalit women across three districts in the Kosi region shows significant variations in social media usage patterns. The results indicate that 55% of the participants (66 women) do not use any social media platforms, while 45% (54 women) are actively engaged with digital platforms.



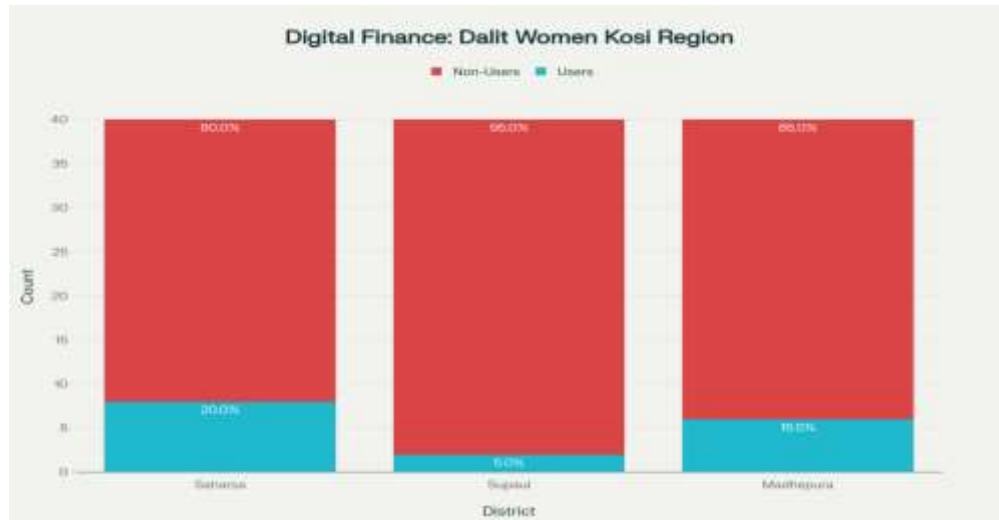
The analysis of data specific to each district highlights significant differences in digital engagement rates. Saharsa district emerges as the leader with a social media adoption rate of 65% (26 out of 40 respondents), indicating a relatively higher level of digital infrastructure and literacy. On the other hand, Supaul district shows the lowest engagement rate at only 22.5% (9 out of 40 respondents), with a remarkable 77.5% of women reporting no social media use. In the middle, Madhepura district has a 47.5% adoption rate (19 out of 40 respondents), which is in line with the overall regional average

2) Do you have a smartphone? (Yes/No)



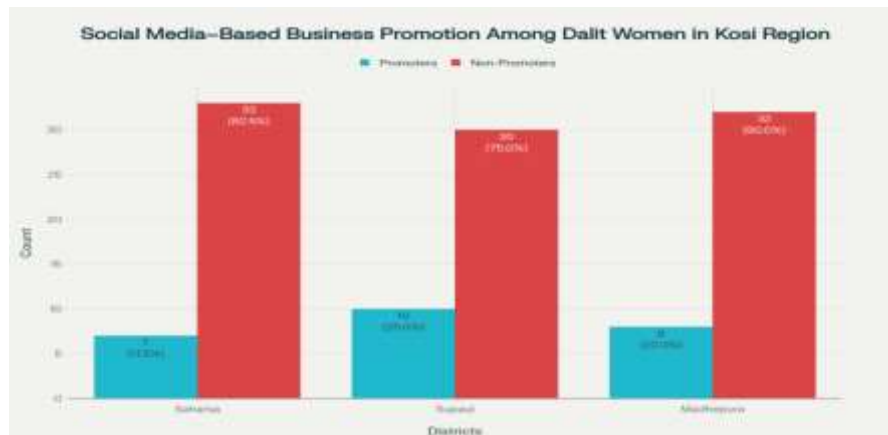
Saharsa district exhibits the highest rate of smartphone ownership at 77.5% (31 out of 40 respondents), suggesting comparatively favourable economic conditions and infrastructure that facilitate the acquisition of digital devices. In contrast, Supaul district has the lowest ownership rate at 57.5% (23 out of 40 respondents), with a significant 42.5% of women lacking access to smartphones, which indicates possible economic limitations and insufficient digital infrastructure. Madhepura district is positioned in the middle with a 65% ownership rate (26 out of 40 respondents), which is closely aligned with the overall regional average.

3) How comfortable are you with performing financial transactions through mobile apps? (Very comfortable, Comfortable, Uncomfortable, Never tried)



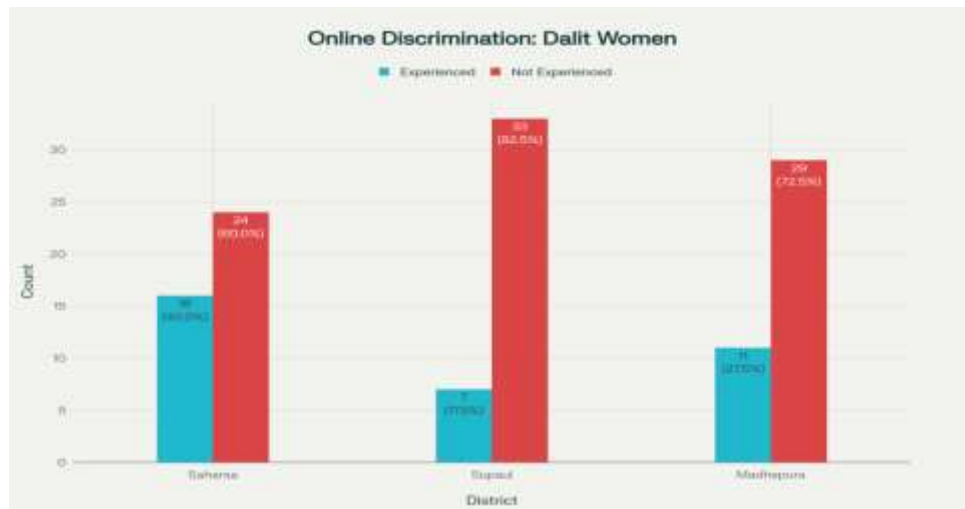
A study on the use of digital financial transactions by 120 Dalit women in the Kosi region shows a remarkably low participation rate in mobile app-based transactions. Only 13.3% (16 women) reported using these applications, while a substantial 86.7% (104 women) stated that they have never tried to use them.

4) Have you used social media platforms to promote any business or income-generating activity? (Yes/No)



The results of the survey conducted among 120 Dalit women in the Kosi region regarding business promotion through social media indicate a low level of entrepreneurial involvement. Only 20.8% (25 women) reported using social media to promote their businesses or income-generating activities, while 79.2% (95 women) do not participate in such efforts. The difference of 11.5 percentage points between the highest engagement rate in Supaul (25%) and the lowest in Saharsa (17.5%) shows a minor variation, yet the overall adoption remains limited. This suggests possible challenges such as a lack of digital marketing skills, restricted network outreach, or financial constraints.

5) Have you ever faced caste and gender-based discrimination on social media platforms? (Yes/No)



The survey on online discrimination shows that 28.3% (34 out of 120) of Dalit women have reported experiencing both caste and gender-based abuse, while 71.7% (86 women) did not report such incidents. The 22.5 percentage point difference between the highest level of reported discrimination in Saharsa (40.0%) and the lowest in Supaul (17.5%) highlights a notable geographic disparity in online hostility. The overall rate of social media usage among those who face discrimination suggests that even a small number of active users are vulnerable to intersectional online abuse. These findings underscore the importance of specialised digital safety training, effective reporting systems, and supportive peer networks in protecting Dalit women in online environments and promoting safer digital spaces.

Conclusion

Social media has emerged as an essential platform for Dalit women in the Kosi region of Bihar to assert their autonomy, confront deep-rooted caste and gender inequalities, and foster solidarity at both local and global scales. Although they continue to face challenges such as the digital divide, limited digital literacy, financial barriers, and the risk of intersectional online harassment, platforms like WhatsApp, YouTube, and Facebook have empowered Dalit women to share their stories, advocate for social justice, and connect with support networks that reach beyond geographical boundaries. Nevertheless, the disparity in access to smartphones and data services in Saharsa, Supaul, and Madhepura underscores the urgent need for targeted initiatives to bridge infrastructural gaps and enhance digital skills among marginalized women. To convert 'digital voices' into lasting empowerment, policymakers and civil society need to focus on providing affordable internet access, relevant digital literacy training, strong online safety measures, and accountability from social media companies. Only through such comprehensive strategies can the true potential of social media be harnessed as a catalyst for significant social change and the equitable inclusion of Dalit women in the digital era.

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