

Voices Unchained: The Proliferation of Dalit Print Culture in Post-Independence India

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Abstract

The proliferation of Dalit print culture in colonial and post-independence India marks a significant yet overlooked chapter in the history of India's social movements. This paper examines how Dalit intellectuals, inspired by leaders like Swami Achhutanand, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and the Adi Hindu movement, harnessed the power of the printed word to break centuries-old chains of Brahmanical domination. Beginning in the early 20th century, pioneering figures like Swami Acchutanand, Babu Ramcharan, and Chandrika Prasad Jigyasu established presses and periodicals that gave a voice to the voiceless. These publications were more than news outlets; they were instruments of consciousness-raising and resistance. Despite constitutional promises of equality, Dalits faced continued discrimination and exclusion, which fuelled their determination to create independent spaces of expression. Small presses and locally published booklets proliferated across Uttar Pradesh, with cities like Kanpur, Agra, Aligarh, and Lucknow emerging as hubs of Dalit journalism. These publications critiqued the failures of the Indian State, recorded atrocities, demanded protective discrimination, and offered alternative narratives of India's nationalist history. Yet, this print culture also suffered from systemic neglect: mainstream archives failed to preserve these materials, government support was negligible, and Dalit communities themselves often underestimated the long-term value of their publications. Despite these constraints, the Dalit print sphere carved out an alternative public space where caste consciousness could flourish and new identities could be forged. Through a close reading of newspapers, booklets, and the histories of local presses, this paper argues that the Dalit print movement was a radical assertion of selfhood and community that challenged dominant narratives and democratized public discourse. By tracing its evolution and the challenges it faced, this study highlights the urgency of recovering, archiving, and recognizing this neglected history for a more inclusive understanding of India's intellectual and social landscape.

Keywords: Dalit press, print culture, caste, alternative public sphere, Ambedkarite movement, Uttar Pradesh, popular booklets, social history.

*Ab Zamana Vah nahi hai,
Zulm jati mat saho,
Tor do Zanzeer zakri,
Kyon gulami me raho?*¹

The world has changed,/ Do not tolerate
atrocities on [your] community,/ break the
suffocating chains,/ why live in slavery?²

Before independence, Dalits were governed by Brahmanical traditions and religious customs. The attainment of independence brought a significant change in their position. After the enforcement of the Constitution of India in 1950 they were all citizens of India. There was a hope that now caste Hindus would accept them on the basis of the *rights* provided by the Constitution. Equality, fraternity, and freedom would be new values of new country. But this could not be. Discrimination, persecution and exploitation of Dalits increased despite constitutional safeguards.³ Even Jagjivan Ram pronounced in 1952 at All India Scheduled Castes Legislators and Workers' Convention in Nagpur that, "though, there are now laws in several States lifting all social and civic disabilities under which the SCs have been suffering, these have mostly remained a dead letter and have not been put into actual practice."⁴ This continuation in atrocities stimulated the Dalits into giving vent to their feelings in the popular print media. Such an intervention in the public sphere brought about a significant shift and their voice gradually became more confident and vigorous with time. Before independence, the primary engagement of the Dalit intellectuals was to spread awareness regarding their backwardness and the importance of their status as the original inhabitants of India among the Dalit folks. They were convinced that the reasons for their degraded status were not God's creation, rather it was a conspiracy of Brahmanism. After the so-called independence in 1947, they were still slaves of caste Hindus. There were numerous instances of caste discrimination against Dalits after independence.⁵

¹ Pamphlet of the Second All India Jaiswar Grand Conference, 21-22 May, 1949.

² Translation mine from Hindi

³ Dalits have been guaranteed under the very Preamble of the Constitution equality of status and of opportunity. In view of their backwardness in various fields in the corporate life of the nation, they have also been guaranteed other fundamental rights. Untouchability has been abolished and there is prohibition of discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth.

⁴ Ministry of Home Affairs – Public – File No. 74/124/52, All India Harijan legislators and Workers' Convention in Nagpur on 1/11/52-Resolution adopted therein, NAI, p. 31

⁵ Bhadant Dr. Anand Koshalyayan; *Manusmriti Jalai Gai Kyon? (Why Manusmriti was burned?)*, Lucknow: Cultural Publishers, 1981, pp. 4-12

In the post-independence period, Dalit popular booklets expressed disillusionment with the Indian State due to the unfulfilled promises made at the time of Independence. Dalit intellectuals often recorded their resentment towards State policies in the 'Preface' and 'Introduction' of their booklets. Although, they did not write exclusively about government policies in separate booklets yet they have clearly pointed out the failure of government in various sectors. At the same time, paradoxically, the growing consciousness among them was also due to various efforts made by the State to make them aware of their rights and their share in the development projects launched by the State. Whereas the State was creating a self-awareness among the Dalits, it failed miserably to fulfill their growing aspirations and desires. According to Badri Narayan, "the single coherent elite version of nationalism, which the State had been feeding the people through its various media channels, was ruptured by the creation of alternative Dalit narratives about the role of lower caste heroes in the nationalist movement. They also started demanding protective discrimination in the form of reservations in education and jobs. The logic posited by them was that earlier they had been the ruling communities but the conspiracies of the upper castes had deprived them of their historic glorious status. They had also made a significant contribution towards freeing and building up the nation but this has been overlooked after Independence by the upper castes who deliberately kept them backward."⁶

The Adi Hindu movement and later on Ambedkar's movement inspired many people to establish printing presses for the publication of Dalit literature. Babu Ramcharan in Lucknow (1920); Swami Acchutanand in Kanpur (1925); Munshi Hariprasad Tamta in Almora (1934); Jatav Vir Manikchand in Agra (1936); Chandrika Prasad Jigyasu in Lucknow (1957); and Lalayee Singh Yadav in Jhijnjhak (1958) established printing presses. It was the result of their arduous initiatives that many more newspapers/magazines were launched both before and after Independence from various places in UP. Some important newspapers and magazines have been listed in the following table.⁷

⁶ Badri Narayan; *Women Heroes and Dalit Assertion in North India: Culture, Identity and Politics*, New Delhi: Sage Publication, 2006, p. 56

⁷ This table is based on researcher's interviews with the Dalit writers and publishers and Sheoraj Singh Bechain's *Hindi ki Dalit Patrakarita Par Patrakar Ambedkar ka Prabhav* (1997).

Table: 1

Newspaper/ Magazine	Place of Publication	Years of Publication	Editor
Nishad Samachar	Lucknow	1920-? ⁸	Babu Ramcharan
Shri Jatav Mahasabha	Agra	1920 to 1921 ⁹	Sundarlal Sagar
Acchut	Delhi	1923 to 1924 ¹⁰	Swami Acchutanand
Jatav	Agra	1924 to 1926 ¹¹	Master Hetram
Adi Hindu	Kanpur	1925 to 1933 ¹²	Swami Acchutanand
Samta	Almora	1934 to 1984 ¹³	Munshi Hariprasad Tamta
Yadav Kshatriya	Bulandshahar and Aligarh	1936 to 1938 ¹⁴	Pratap Bhanu Singh Yadav
Jivan	Agra	1936 to 1947	Jatav Vir Manikchand
Adhikar	Bareilly	1935 to 1940	Dharam Prakash

⁸ Personal interview with Nand Lal Verma, Grandson of Babu Ramcharan, (age 78), Lucknow on 25 February, 2008 at 5.00 pm

⁹ Ramanarayana Yadavendu; *Yaduvansh Ka Itihaas, (History of Yaduvansh)* Agra: Navyug Sahitya Niketan, 1942, p. 201

¹⁰ Its first edition, dated April, 1923, is available in the personal library of Guru Prasad Madan, Allahabad. For more details see Guru Prasad Madan; *Swami Acchutanand Harihar: Jivan Aur Krititva, (Swami Acchutanand Harihar: Life and Works)*, unpublished manuscript, Allahabad, 1969

¹¹ This newspaper was started by Bohare Khemchand in 1924. He appointed Master Hetram as editor and Dr. Dhan Singh as manager of newspaper. (Yadavendu; 1942, p. 201)

¹² Available edition of this paper is dated October 1927. Its mentioned that on the front page that 'year 2 and No. 1', which infers that it was started two year ago i.e. 1925. (For more details, Guru Prasad Madan; *Swami Acchutanand Harihar: Jivan Aur Krititva, (Swami Acchutanand Harihar: Life and Works)*, unpublished manuscript, Allahabad, 1969

¹³ Last available edition of newspapers. (Bechain, 1997, p. 255)

¹⁴ This fortnightly newspaper was started from Bulandshahar. After one year it was published from Aligarh in a new look. (Yadavendu; 1942, p. 202)

Dinesh	Delhi	1938 to 1939	Balwant Soni
Dalit Prakash	Aligarh	1947 - ?	Lakshmi Shankar & Shri Lalit
Parivartan	Aligarh	1950-?	Swami Ajudhyanath Dandi
Manav Kalyan	Delhi	1952 to 1962	Dharam Prakash
Sihnaad	?	1957 to 1985 ¹⁵	Advocate Sundarlal Sagar
Zameen Ke Tare	Aligarh	1962 to 1967 ¹⁶	Mewaram Mahashay
Republican Times	Aligarh	1962 to 1990 ¹⁷	Raghuveer Singh “Rahee”
Shoshit Pukar	Bulandshahar	1966- ?	Balveer Singh Azad
Bheem Sainik	Meerut	1970 to 1992 ¹⁸	P.S.Maurya
Samta Shakti	Meerut	1972 to 1973	Mohandas Naimisharay
Raka Toofan	Agra	1974 to 1976	B.S. Raka
Nirnay	Kanpur	1977 to 1978	Dr. Kawaldhari
Nirnayak Bheem	Kanpur	1978 to 1983	Dr. Kawaldhari
Nidar	Aligarh	1978 to 1982	Om Prakash ‘Nidar’

However, many were short lived. The idea was to make an entry into the realm of journalism which was monopolized by caste Hindus. However, there was no acceptance of

¹⁵ Last available edition of newspapers but there is no information of its publication place. (Bechain, 1997, p. 254)

¹⁶ This newspaper was close down in 1967 but it was restarted in 1993 on the eve of hundred-birth anniversary of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. (Bechain, 1997, p. 257)

¹⁷ Personal interview with A.R. Akella, (age 60) Dalit writer and publisher, Aligarh on 5 June, 2008 at 3.00 pm.

¹⁸ Last available edition of newspapers (Bechain, 1997, p. 256)

these journals in the mainstream public sphere because they expressed the ideas and views of the deprived sections of society who had never expressed their dissent. Usually, mainstream newspapers and magazines ignored Dalits and their news. This attitude played an important role in introducing their own newspapers and magazines where they could find their appropriate place in every sphere.¹⁹ Agra, Kanpur, Aligarh were some of the prominent publication centers for Dalit journals. Many of these newspapers/journals were deeply concerned about raising their caste consciousness. *Shri Jatav Mahasabha*, *Jatav*, *Jivan*, *Dinesh*, *Adhikar* were started for the upliftment of the Jatav community in Agra, Delhi and other surrounding regions whereas *Acchut*, *Adi Hindu*, *Samta*, *Manav Kalyan*, *Republican Times*, *Shoshit Pukar*, *Raka Toofan* were dedicated to the cause of the Depressed Classes.

It is interesting to know that in the post-independence period, there were more than a hundred publication centers throughout UP. Small villages and *bastis* (colonies) were the major publication centers; however, they were not able to establish their own presses due to economic hardships. Some of the major publication centers were Bahujan Gyan Prakashan in Ajuha, Allahabad; Bahujan Gyan Prakashan, Bailly Goan, Allahabad; N.L. Jaiswar Seva Sadan, Pustak Bhandar in Rajapur, Allahabad; Hans Prakashan in Allahabad; Parbuddha Prakashan in Sanjay Gandhi Puram, Lucknow; Jai Bhim Sahitya Matth in Kuli Bazar, Kanpur; Samiksha Pustakalaya in Chowk, Kanpur; and, Bharti Prakashan in Mathura.

In addition to this, many Dalits were personally engaged in the publication of their booklets. Ravidasi, Kabirpanthi sants, and Buddhist monks also made a useful contribution in the publication of the Dalit literature. Some of the names included were Swami Gulzardas Ji, Bhajanik Panchayati Ravidasa Mandir from Ayodhya, Faizabad; Pathik Sahayak Sangh from Agra; Dr. R.B. Singh from Ajuha, Allahabad; Hubba Lal Azad from Bhansara, Jhunjhak, (Kanpur); Ram Balak Singh from Korka, Fatehpur; Swami Bhagat Singh, Adi Niwasi Ravidaspanthi from Benajhabar, Kanpur; Shri Saddharam Pracharak Kabir Sabha in Kanpur; Ramadhar 'Prasad' from Jaunpur; Bhikshu G. Pragyanand from Risaldar Park, Lucknow; Amar Singh from Village Malhupur, Allahabad; Pustak Mandir in Mathura; Babu Malkhan

¹⁹ Personal interview with Bhagat Singh Raka (editor of Raka Toofan newspaper), from Agra, 25 February, 2008.

Singh from Topkhana, Jalaon; Bhawani Prasad from Mauja Haripur.²⁰ Dalits were inclined to these faiths because they believed in equality, freedom, and brotherhood which were unimaginable in Hinduism.

The following table shows decade-wise availability of booklets from the teens to the seventies.²¹

Table: 2

Decade	Number of Publication
1911-20	1
1921-30	11
1931-40	12
1941-50	24
1951-60	62
1961-70	71
1971-78	79

The table shows a continuous growth over the decades. In the post-independence period the publication of Dalit booklets increased rapidly. Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism played a crucial role in increasing publication by inspiring many Dalit and Buddhist (monks and laymen) intellectuals to write. There were more than a hundred publication centers in the UP. However, the total number of available booklets is 227 in the table. This is not a big number. But it has a history of neglect. There were many reasons for the small number of Dalit booklets. First, there was no preservation of Dalit literature in UP State Archive, Lucknow, in the Nehru Memorial Library and Museum, in the National Archives of India or in the Sahitya Academy, New Delhi. In these institutions, there is abundant material available on mainstream or 'national' movement but there is very little

²⁰ These persons and publication centers have been traced during my field visits to Lucknow, Kanpur, Allahabad, Agra, Aligarh, Bareilly, Fatehpur, Koshambi and Unnao districts of UP from February 2007 to May 2011.

²¹ Source: Ambedkar Buddha Shoudh Sansthan, Allahabad; Dalit Resource Centre, Govind Ballabh Pant Social Science Institute, Allahabad, and publications from Bahujan Kalyan Prakashan, Lucknow and Ashok Pustakalaya, Kanpur.

material on non-Brahman movements. Secondly, there was no government support for writing Dalit literature as only mainstream Hindi writers were awarded with prizes and honours. Thirdly, Dalit writers themselves were unaware of the importance of their literature. They understood their purpose as being directed only at the present generation. Its long term importance was lost on them. There are many community libraries in India (like the Marwari Library, Delhi) where communities preserved their history along with the mainstream material relating to the 'national' movement. But Dalits remained different in this regard. Singular instances of such endeavours by the Dalits can be traced to Cawnpore, Lucknow,²² and Allahabad²³ but these remained just reading rooms only with no permanent traces left whatsoever.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, the growth of Dalit print culture was not merely about publishing newspapers or booklets; it was a determined act of reclaiming voice, history, and dignity in a society long structured by exclusion and silence. By establishing independent presses and circulating counter-narratives, Dalit intellectuals carved out an autonomous space that exposed the gap between constitutional promises and social realities. Despite facing financial constraints, archival neglect, and lack of mainstream recognition, this print sphere sustained the spirit of resistance and community building. Today, revisiting and preserving this legacy is crucial not only for Dalit communities but also for Indian historiography, which continues to marginalize non-Brahmanical voices. The story of Dalit print reminds us that the struggle for representation is as much about memory and preservation as it is about immediate dissent. It calls for a renewed scholarly and social commitment to safeguard these fragile yet powerful testaments of the fight for equality.

²² The Pioneer (English, Lucknow); Sunday, December 20, 1936, p. 4 (the newspaper reported the annual election of office bearers in the Adi Hindu Library at Lucknow in 1936.)

²³ Badri Narayan; *The Making of the Dalit Public in North India: Uttar Pradesh, 1950-Present*, New Delhi: Oxford University, Press, 2011, p. 78 (The Ambedkar Library in Allahabad was opened in 1935-36)