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## Indian Vernacular Blogs and its Usage as an Alternative Media for Dalits - A Critical Discourse Analysis

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### Abstract:

*It has been argued that blogs, as an extension of the mass media have become an important form of alternative media. Blogs have greater potentials to achieve social equity and empowerment to the marginalized community of India - Dalits. Indian mainstream media has utterly failed in bringing to the fore injustice meted out by Dalits in the hands of caste Hindus. In this scenario, the emergence of internet has become a boon to a number of Dalit intellectuals to proclaim to the rest of the world the issues confronting Dalits. The focus of the paper is to analysis the Dalit blogs that either act as platform for raising issues pertaining to Dalits or try to provide alternative views to the mainstream media.*

**Key words:** Blogs, Alternative Media, Dalits and internet

### Introduction

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood. Despite efforts being made to cast away discriminations, minorities continue to

suffer silently under different forms of secerment all over the world. In India, Dalits are at risk of human right violation on the basis of caste based discrimination, a form of discrimination that impinges on the civil, political, religious, socio-economic and cultural rights. They are discriminated in all spheres of their life – worship, education, housing, land ownership, use of common property such as well and village water taps, roads, buses and other public places. Notwithstanding the unprecedented growth in various fields, it seems paradoxical that a portion of population, the so-called “Dalits”, continues to undergo the caste hegemony, apartheid of segregation and aggression in India. In transforming such kind of scenario, mass media organizations are powerful weapons of persuasion and an agent of social change because they reach a large number of geographically and culturally dispersed people in a short period of time. Mass media can be a reflector of dominant values and at the same time as a reinforcer of dominant values. Mass media can be also designed to change the attitude and behavior of individuals. Needless to say, in most of the circumstances media only remained a mute spectator.

More than one-sixth of Indian population, live in precarious existence, shunned much of society because of their rank as “untouchables” or Dalits literally meaning “broken” people- at the bottom Indian caste system. Dalits are discriminated against, denied access to land, forced to work in degrading conditions, and routinely abused at the hands of police and of higher-caste groups that enjoy the state’s protection. This fact is not of the past that existed in our country; rather it still continues to be prevalent even today. Atrocities and discrimination on Dalits have been imposed since ancient times based on social, historical and economical reasons. They continue even today despite progress and development in various arenas and torment the minority Dalits leaving no space for their progress. Incidents of Crimes and segregation against Dalits in the past were shunned away from

the mass media as it was purely owned by the higher caste Hindus. Mainstream news media maintain a gatekeeping function that serves to control the flow of information to audiences. Some claims find it harder to gain media access or to receive coverage (Jacobs 2000). This statement is very much applicable to the Dalits living in India who get least coverage on issues confronting them in the Indian media.

The situation has quite changed now with the emergence of internet which is on par with the mainstream media. The internet has transformed popular culture by providing a virtual forum in which different communities and groups can produce a “presence” that might have been otherwise denied to them in the “real world.” This presence can be obtained in cyberspace by appropriate use of one’s voice to articulate the specific narrative and discourses about one’s group and subculture. (Mitra A, 2004) Blogs which is an integrated part of internet have the potential of acting as an alternative media which provides virtual space to discuss, share and inform not only to the marginalized people of India and also to the world.

### **Defining Blog?**

Although it is difficult to pinpoint the exact origin of the blog, most seem to agree that the term *weblog* was coined by weblog writer John Barger in 1997 (Blood, 2000). According to Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable a blog is a personal website, often in the form of a journal, containing the author's observations and comments and it links to other websites and blog postings. Blogs are generally updated with postings so that the most recent additions appear at the top of the page, and many are set up to enable readers to leave comments on the original posting. The word blog was first recorded in 1999 and it is an abbreviation of ‘web log’; (Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable, 2009). Wikipedia defines a blog as a discussion or

informational site published on the World Wide Web and consisting of discrete entries ("posts") typically displayed in reverse chronological order. Blogs, it seems, are everywhere. Like few media phenomena, and certainly like no media form since the emergence of the World Wide Web itself, blogs seem to have captured the public imagination. Indeed, the very term "blog" itself was chosen as Merriam-Webster's word of the year 2004. (Bruns.A & Jacobs.J) Merriam-Webster defined blog as a Web site that contains an online personal journal with reflections, comments and often hyperlinks.

The blog, like other components of the internet, offers the opportunity for people to use their own voice, through the texts and discourse they create, to produce the identity of the blogger who is located in a specific and unique place. Eventually, the readers of blogs move into the space created by the blogger when they read a blog. To many readers, finding this space is particularly critical because the spaces created by the blogs could be ones that the reader was once familiar with but has perhaps become distant from, for instance, through a process of migration (Mitra A, 2008). A typical blog structure consists of posts and related comments, where posts are arranged in a chronological order (latest post at the top), allowing the readers to easily access the latest information. The posts are archived monthly, making it easy for the readers to search for a post from a particular month.

Lexis-Nexis database shows the first press to mention the word blog was in 1998, and by 2002 over five hundred articles appeared referencing blogs. It appears that blogs originated as a method to share information of interest. These early blogs had three primary features: they were chronologically organized, contained links to sites of interest on the web, and provided commentary on the links. The early bloggers were Web savvy individuals, generally designers or programmers working in the technology industry. Not only did they have to be able to locate information on the Web before

search engines became as accessible as they are today, but they had to be able to code their own HTML pages. (Miller.C & Shepherd.D, 2004)

## **Conceptualization of alternative media**

According to the definition of Wikipedia, Alternative media are media which provide alternative information to the mainstream media in a given context, whether the mainstream media are commercial, publicly supported, or government-owned. It further tells that an alternative media differs from mainstream media as its content, aesthetic, modes of production, modes of distribution, and audience relations differ from that of mainstream media. "Alternative Media" is a slippery term fraught with multiple meanings. Ranging from community radio to fan zines to news websites, it covers a wide gamut of media forms that challenge the status quo. In its most expansive and popular use, the term "alternative media" includes all media that are somehow opposed to or in tension with mainstream media (The Encyclopedia of Media and Politics, 2007). Fackson Banda (2006) explains that alternative media become a source of organizing people to initiate localised and particularised responses to forms of marginalisation brought about by the often unintended consequences of the liberalisation, commercialisation, privatisation and internationalisation of mainstream media. While talking about alternative media Chris Atton argues that Alternative media...are crucially about offering the means for democratic communication to people who are normally excluded from media production. According to various definition put forward by scholars alternative media allow those who are most often under- or misrepresented in mainstream media to tell their own stories through their own media. According to Atton, this media democratization process is indicated by several qualities, including non-commercial sites for distribution; transformed

social relations, roles and responsibilities; and transformed communication processes. (Pikard V, 2007)

By way of definition, then, an alternative medium is one that answers to the following features:

- Individual citizens and minority groups have rights of access to media and rights to be served by media according to their own determination of need.
- The organization and content of media should not be subject to centralized political or state bureaucratic control.
- Media should exist primarily for their audiences and not for media organizations, professionals or the clients of media.
- Groups, organizations and local communities should have their own media.
- Small-scale, interactive and participative media forms are better than large-scale, oneway, professionalized media.
- Certain social needs relating to mass media are not adequately expressed through individual consumer demands, nor through the state and its major institutions.
- Communication is too important to be left to professionals (Lewis 1993).

### **Blogs- an alternative media for the marginalized**

Participation in public discourse and the community identity has always been limited for marginalized groups in society. Exclusion from the public discourse has led many marginalized groups to find alternate way to sustain themselves as a community and engage in democratic society. Forms of communication often change to accommodate positionality and lack of access to communication technologies. As new media technology expands it is increasingly important that research

takes into account the perspectives of the media users/producers being studied and the interconnectedness between internet and life-world in which it is situated (Baym, 2009). The Indian media is one of the biggest media in the world. But the Dalit community does not have this important instrument on its own and also does not have an access to the Indian mass media which inherently is prejudiced and biased reflecting the caste based divisions of the society at large. In a situation such as this one, the blogosphere provides a platform for marginalized groups to seek and sustain voice in a democracy (Catherine Knight Steele, 2011).

John Downing, radical media theorist terms alternative media as media often aim to challenge existing powers, to represent marginalized groups, and to foster horizontal linkages among communities of interest. Alternative media often aims to challenge existing powers, to represent marginalized groups, and to foster horizontal linkages among communities of interest. This view is very well suited to blogs which is an alternative media. Fackson Banda (2006) in his study on the transformative power of the alternative media identifies four types of alternative media in the life of African people. One of the alternative media he talks about is the blogosphere. In a study of the political role of “web-blogging” in Johannesburg, Goldfain and Van der Merwe (2006, page 120) concluded that, although blogs are not well established in countries like Africa, their function is “to provide citizens with an alternative source of news, add more perspectives to the events and issues of the day, and initiate conversation.” A “blog” (a periodic and often continuously updated website that posts the thoughts and observations of a single writer and often the responses to those observations) serves as “an aggregator of information that encourages dialogue and participation in a society that is flooded with information dispersed by authoritative voices. It is a media platform and has the potential to give minorities a voice.”

## **Methodology**

Critical Discourse analysis is based on the understanding that there is more happening on when people interact than simply the transfer of information. It is not only an effort to point out the literal meanings; rather it is the investigation of what language does or what individuals or cultures accomplish through language. In addition, a critical discourse analysis looks at discourse from a politically motivated level. An analyst in this field will identify a topic for analysis, and then collect a corpus of texts, before finally analysing it to identify how language is used to reproduce ideologies in the text (Van Dijk, 1993)

This study is based on the qualitative research methodology of Critical Discourse Analysis of a Tamil blog – *www.sakyagroup.blogspot.in* which exclusively discusses the Dalit issues. For this study the author collected the blog post written from 1<sup>st</sup> September, 2012 to 30<sup>th</sup> September, 2012. The author reviewed totally 154 blog posts as well as the comments from readers for each post in the blog. One of the reasons as to why this blog has been chosen for the study is the activeness of the blog and this blog is regularly updated with more than two posts per day. Furthermore, it was noticed from the other Dalit blogs that they invariably relied on the news on Dalits from the mainstream media source for the information. Apart from discussing openly on various issues on Dalits in India, in *sakya* blog also updates several information and news on day today issues pertaining to Dalits.

## **Analysis**

The Dalit blogosphere is indeed a large discussion space where a variety of issues confronting the marginalized community are discussed. Among them are minority blogs that talk about their identity and presence, those dedicated to feminist issues, and



numerous personal blogs in which people share their experiences, thoughts, and feelings. Since it is quite impossible to present a comprehensive statistical analysis of Dalit blogging activity concerned with a number of issues, a case study of a single blog seems the most reasonable means of providing precise information in the Dalit blogosphere.

Thus, I restrict my examination to a case study of *www.sakyagroup.blogspot.in*, one of the most active and regularly updated blog among Dalit blogger community. The blog deals with a varied number of issues like Dalit history, self-realization of Dalits, Dalit identity, human rights issues, Dalit language, religion, criticism on current politics and politicians, protection of Tamil rights, the status of Dalits, etc.. The blogger in the blog calls himself in pseudonym as *SakyaMuni*. Other than the name with the photograph of Dr. Ambedkar<sup>1</sup> no personal information is available in the blog.

Speaking about the general appearance and layout of *sakya* blog which is hosted by Blogspot.com, the blog is divided into two columns: the largest column is allotted for the main content - the posts- and the other narrow column is for the chronological archives of blog posts. The blog's appearance as shown in Figure 1., behind the text *sakya*, it can be notice a black and white picture of a magazine called "*Pariyan*", a Dalit weekly magazine launched by Rettamalai Srinivasan<sup>2</sup> in 1893. The language used in the *sakyablog* is informal and it does not use formal modern standard Tamil; rather, *sankyamuni's* posts are almost entirely written in informal slang. In this blog it can be found that mostly Tamil language being employed to post

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the man behind the drafting and formation of the Indian Constitution, was not only a learned scholar and an eminent jurist but also a revolutionary against social evils like untouchability and caste system.

<sup>2</sup> Diwan Bahadur R. Srinivasan (1860–1945), also known as Rettamalai Srinivasan was a Dalit activist, politician and freedom fighter from the Indian state of Tamil Nadu. He is a Dalit icon and Mahatma Gandhi's close associate remembered today as one of the pioneers of the Dalit movement in India.(Wikipedia, 2012)

issues. It is interesting to note that some of the posts are in English as well. English language is mostly employed when the blogger is faced with a question on his post in English and justification is provided on his views on an issue in the same language.

Patterson. A, (2006) while talking on satirical writing<sup>3</sup> says that the nature of satire perplexes people with an urge to pin things down. Thus, apart from providing voice to Dalit issues, historical perspective into Pali<sup>4</sup> language and Tamil issues, this blog's content come under the category of satirical writing which openly criticizes the current politicians, political parties' failures and their existence for fame, etc., under the banner title *sakyablog*.

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<sup>3</sup> Satire, is primarily a literary genre or form, although in practice it can also be found in the graphic and performing arts. In satire, vices, follies, abuses, and shortcomings are held up to ridicule, ideally with the intent of shaming individuals, and society itself, into improvement. Although satire is usually meant to be funny, its greater purpose is often constructive social criticism, using wit as a weapon. ( Wikipedia, 2012)

<sup>4</sup> Pali is one of ancient Indic languages, spoken in the Middle period. The Buddhist Canon in Sri Lanka is written in Pali, so the language is still used as a sacred one in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. But its homeland is India. Later together with Buddhism it spread within the South Eastern Asia, and many scientific, religious and literature works were written in it already when in India it was forgotten. ([indoeuro.bizland.com/tree/indo/pali.html](http://indoeuro.bizland.com/tree/indo/pali.html))



Fig 1: Screenshot of sakyagroup.blogspot.in post of October 14, 2012.

Writing about the objective of the textual discourse of the web, Mitra and Cohen (1999) say “to move beyond an analysis of the volume of text and its content to the level of understanding the affectivity of the text and what it says of the community of people who produce and consume the texts. Further, they also identify three factors that textual analysis considers: the formal aspects of the text and its signifying strategies (semiotic analysis and structural analysis); the way in which a single text is connected with other similar texts (intertextuality); and the role of the various readers of the text who, through their reading, make the text meaningful. In this context, an analysis of the discourse analysis of *sakyablog* is helpful for understanding the construction of blogs, and to what extent, blogging can create spaces for writing on various social issues.

The content of *sayka* blog is guided by the following questions for conducting the research on usage of Blogs as the alternative media platform for discussing Dalit issues.

- What are the major issues that *sakya* blog talks about?
- What kind language and vocabulary is used in the blog?

- What kind of pictures is used in this blog? And what is the significant of those pictures to the discourse?
- What is the nature and significance of the discussions that occur between readers as it is reflected by their comments on the posts?

As the first step of discourse analysis, the topics covered in the blog were identified. *Sakyamuni* blog is organized by posts that are time stamped, dated and sometimes titled. Usually, *Sakyamuni* makes one post on one topic per day, but sometimes, he makes multiple posts per day, which take the form of brief comments of different issues and people. In some cases, the post of the blog is accompanied by the photographs. Each post has an option for his readers to write comments and those comments are displayed after the main posting of the blogger. Unlike the majority of blogs that depend on the mainstream media to provide content for their blog, surprisingly, we cannot find any external link to the blog.

### **Topics of the blog**

Table 1 shows the kind of issues that *sakya* blog has dealt with in the month of September, 2012. A topical analysis of the blog posts indicates that the *sakya* blog has discussed several issues pertaining to Dalit issues. In Table 1, thirteen major themes that *sakya* blog raises and discusses which range from Criticism on Hindu religious organizations and Caste-Hindus, Sakyas<sup>5</sup> as Dalits, Tamils in Sri Lanka, satirical comments on political leaders, Dalit leaders like Pandit Iyothee Thass<sup>6</sup> and Pali language. Blogger *Sakyamuni* also evinces his interests on writing about caste issues, laws related matters, Kudankulam

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<sup>5</sup> The Śākya people, the ethnic group of which Gautama Buddha, the founder of Buddhism was a member.

<sup>6</sup> Pandit C. Iyothee Thass (1845-1914), a renowned practitioner of the Siddha form of native Tamil medicine, and also a pioneer of the Tamil Dalit movement.

issues<sup>7</sup> giving wake up calls to Dalits and criticizing some of the well known political parties in Tamil Nadu.

**Table -1 Topic of the blog entries**

Post Topics	Number of posts	
	September 2012 (154 posts)	
	No. of posts	No. of comments
Criticism on Hindu religious organizations and caste Hindus	05	1
Sakyas as Dalits- the aboriginal race in India	02	0
Personal Thoughts	30	0
Tamil issues	05	2
Satirical comments on political leaders	43	0
Pandit Iyothee Thass	02	0
Pali language	11	15
Criticism	15	0
Dalits as Sakya	02	1
Wake up call to Dalits	08	0
Caste system	29	0
Koodankulam issues	02	0

Analyzing the discourse of the *Sakya* blog, we can notice thirteen categories of topics evolving out of the blog. The phenomenon of Hindu religious organization and the caste Hindus receive strong condemnation from blogger. He tells to the readers in his blog in a colloquial Tamil,

“Don’t worry a day will come when we will wipe them out”  
(posted 30<sup>th</sup> September, 2012)

*Sakya* blog upholds the view that Dalits also called as *Paraiyars* are the aboriginal race in India even before Dravidian and Aryan came to India. He sarcastically counters to the statement of an anonymous who said Tamil race is the

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<sup>7</sup> Kudankulam is a place in the Tirunelveli district in Tamil Nadu, India. It is situated 24 km north-east of Kanyakumari, 36 km from Nagercoil and about 106 km from Thiruvananthapuram. People in that area are agitating against government to close down the plant owing to health issues.

original race in India. In order to prove his point he writes in his blog quoting pandit Iyothee Thass,

“For those say that Dravidians are the native people of India and not the sakyas, refer what pandit Iyothee Thass says- even before Sanskrit and Tamil came into existence, it is the Sakya community who spoke in the Pali language in India” (posted 29<sup>th</sup> September, 2012)

*Sakyamuni* doesn't stop there alone. He also continues to discuss a number of issues which are in the form of advice. It can be known from the very fact that that he has posted 30 posts out of 154. For example,

“Waiting patiently is also another tactic of revolution. So let's wait till the appropriate time comes. When one such time arrives we should immediately jump into the field. Or else our trace will be completely erased”. (Posted 27<sup>th</sup> September, 2012)

Comparing atheism and sakiyam, the blogger writes in his blog, “Denial of the existence of god without having the virtues of conduct, love, mercy and kindness is atheism and speaking with good conduct, love, mercy and kindness is sakiyam” (posted 23<sup>rd</sup> September, 2012)

In general, the climate and tone of discourse in the blog can be characterized as denunciatory; in other words, the blog denounces and expresses a critique in a derogatory way about the way the political parties and politician in Tamil Nadu are functioning. The blogger has posed 43 posts out 154 to criticize the political leader activity. Among other number of posts, this category occupies the highest number of posts. *Sakyamuni*'s language usage in commenting on some of the Dalit parties and their leaders is very harshly both directly and indirectly.

“Oh Dalit political leaders, take all of the tigers (party people) to Sri lanka and sacrifice all of them there.” (posted 19<sup>th</sup> September, 2012)

Condemning the attack on Sri Lanka pilgrims who came to India to visit temples by the Dalit political party members, the blogger writes:

“You Tamil leaders, display your bravery to the dominant caste dogs. Don’t show to the innocents who came with their children to worship. You have proved that much worse than the caste and race hysteric Sinhala.”(posted 5<sup>th</sup> September, 2012)

Not only is the satirical writing used on Dalit parties in Tamil Nadu. But the blogger also criticizes the other Dravidian parties. The blogger criticizes the Dravidian parties for taking away the land from the sakyas – Dalits and giving them to the Brahmins. Thus, Dalits are landless today.

It is noteworthy to mention that the blogger often talks about the contribution Pandit Iyothee Thass to the growth and development of Pali and Sakya community. Not only in the category the blogger talks about him, but in other posts too he exemplifies him for the others to follow his footsteps. The blogger reproduces the articles written by Pandit Iyothee Thass on the significance of Pali Language in his blog. Though only 2 posts on Iyothee Thass is posted by the blogger, in several places we find Iyothee Thass mentioned in good manner.

Table 1 indicates that the association between Dalits and Pali language. The blogger is very much convinced that the Pali language was spoken in India and in other Asian countries. The languages we have now are the origin of Pali Language. This can be proved from the hundreds of stone carving scattered all over India. (posted 28<sup>th</sup> September, 2012)

“The Sakyans spoke in Pali, before the so called Tamil and Sanskrit came to India. This is the historical truth. We have all archaeological evidences for this. Most of them quoted by our grandfather Pandit Iyothi Thas. The major evidences were the inscriptions of Asoka. Asoka used Pali language in all his rock edicts (about 80,000 edicts). He used different dialects according to the region from north to south and east to west. This has been deciphered (not just interpreted). This has been

thoroughly tested by historians and internationally accepted and recognized. There is no dispute on the period or language. The language and scripts are in Pali.” (posted 28<sup>th</sup> September, 2012)

In response to the bloggers’ post, we can find 15 comments either supporting his views or pleading to protect the language. Another major topic that very often the blogger talks about is the DK party and its founder Periyar. It is clearly visible from his writing that the blogger has a strong hatred towards the principles of the party. Thus there are about 15 posts in his blogs criticizing Periyar and the DK party can be read in the blog. Sometimes the blogger uses foul language to show his detestation to the activities of the party in the name of atheism. He only blames the Dalits for their current state of slavery by posting a photograph of Periyar and his wife eating in a Dalit house and the posture of Dalit family with their folded hands and bowed position in front of them. He tells in his post “we can never change you” (Posted 24<sup>th</sup> September, 2012)

Caste system has also occupied a major portion in the sayka blog. Totally we find 29 posts on the prevailing caste system in the Indian society. In these posts he speaks about the conditions in which Dalits are living in the society in the name of caste system. The blogger proudly calls himself as “Paraiyar” and says that paraiyar are the native of the land. He tells all the paraiyar to be proud of their identity. He writes

“even before the Aryans and Dravidian, we lived here. Stone carvings witness this truth. Therefore, why should we be pushed aside? Let’s stand together and fight for our rights. (posted 22<sup>nd</sup> of September, 2012)

Thus, the blogger gives wakeup call to all the Dalits. Further, the blogger talks about the partial attitude of the government towards Dalits and their agitation. For this, he talks about the Koodapnkulam issues. He writes “when there is around hundred Dalits agitate for their justice, then shoot out is



ordered to disperse them (refers Paramakudi shoot out). But in Koodankulam hundreds of people are agitating and the government uses only tear gas to disperse them. Is it because that other caste people are also involved in the agitation? Why is this indifference? When Dalits agitate for their injustice, why there are no other caste coming and supporting them? (posted 10<sup>th</sup> September 2012)

## **Conclusion**

Since the scope of the present paper is limited to a case study of a Dalit blog, the researcher cannot generalize my findings from this case to the whole population of Dalit blogs or to blogs as a whole. However, this case study gives a clear picture of what might be discussed in other Dalit blogs as well. Thus, the study *sakya* blog gives rise to the following conclusions. Clearly the blog has succeeded in raising issues and the concerns about which the mainstream media rarely speak, while empowering people who otherwise would be without access to the traditional media or the public sphere. The analysis of the blogs reveals that there is much of anger and frustration in the Dalit community. So, social media such as blogs give the platform for the issues to be talked openly which otherwise will not be talked by the mainstream media. A question may arise that why the blogger has not revealed his identity and writing in the pseudonym. In his blog the blogger states that he has no fear over what he writes and if anyone wants to know him then his complete detail is available in the face book and he tells further that even the police would know his house. Therefore, Dalit blogs provide space for the marginalised not only to pour out their grievances, but also to criticize, to speak about the history of their origin and identity. From the analysis we find that there is relationship between the blogger and the readers in terms of what they discuss. This can be understood from the comments from the readers, who also agree with the principles

and perspectives of the blogger on Dalits issues, political scenario and the history of Dalit community.

It is important to remember that Dalit bloggers are not only working on the Internet. Rather, they also work in the streets and put themselves at risk. This can be concluded from the posts of the sanya blog in which they talk about the problems they faced in the real situation. The Dalit bloggers not only give mere expression of opinion but also take active participation in the real world. As Michael Keren (2004) argues “even if their tone of discourse appears to be cynical and skeptical, the assumption should not be made that political bloggers are as melancholic.

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