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FROM PUBLIC SPHERE TO FRAGMENTED PUBLICS: A HABERMASIAN CRITIQUE OF CASTE-BASED EXCLUSION IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Abstract
This article critically examines the applicability of Jürgen Habermas's concept of the public sphere in the Indian context, focusing on caste-based exclusion. While Habermas envisions the public sphere as an inclusive domain of rational-critical debate among equal citizens, the deeply hierarchical structure of Indian society challenges this normative ideal. Drawing on critical theory and Dalit scholarship, this paper argues that the Indian public sphere is not a unified space but a fragmented terrain shaped by caste inequalities. It explores how structural inequalities, social power, and digital transformations shape access to discourse and participation. The study concludes that a reconceptualization of the public sphere—incorporating counter-publics and intersectional exclusions—is necessary to understand democratic practices in India.

Keywords: *Public sphere, caste, exclusion, Habermas, Dalit, India, counter-publics, democracy*

Introduction

The idea of the public sphere occupies a central place in democratic theory. Jürgen Habermas conceptualized it as a space where private individuals assemble to engage in rational-critical debate, independent of state and market influences (Habermas, 1989). This sphere, ideally, is inclusive, egalitarian, and governed by reason rather than status.

However, the empirical realities of societies marked by deep structural inequalities challenge this ideal. India, characterized by its enduring caste system, presents a particularly compelling case. Despite constitutional guarantees of equality, caste continues to shape access to resources, opportunities, and social recognition. Consequently, participation in the public sphere is uneven and exclusionary.

This paper interrogates whether the Habermasian model can adequately explain the functioning of the public sphere in India. It argues that rather than a unified domain of deliberation, India exhibits fragmented publics, where caste-based exclusions produce multiple, unequal arenas of discourse. By engaging with Ambedkarite thought and contemporary scholarship, this paper seeks to reconceptualize the public sphere in the Indian context.

Theoretical Framework: Habermas and the Public Sphere

Jürgen Habermas's theory of the public sphere emerged from his analysis of eighteenth-century Europe, particularly the rise of bourgeois democratic culture. He identified institutions such as coffee houses, salons, and print media as important spaces where private individuals gathered to discuss public issues through rational-critical debate (Habermas, 1989). In this framework, democratic legitimacy depends not merely on elections or state authority, but on the quality of public deliberation among citizens. The public sphere thus acts as an intermediary space between the state and civil society, where public opinion is formed through reasoned discussion.

Central to Habermas's model are three assumptions: inclusivity, equality, and rationality. First, all citizens are assumed to have equal access to participation in public debate. Second, existing social hierarchies such as class or status are temporarily suspended, allowing individuals to interact as equals. Third, arguments are evaluated on the basis of reason rather than power, wealth, or social identity.

However, critics such as Nancy Fraser (Fraser, 1990) have argued that even the European public sphere was deeply exclusionary. Women, workers, and marginalized groups were often denied meaningful participation, while bourgeois men dominated public discourse. These criticisms become even more significant in postcolonial societies like India, where caste continues to shape social relations and access to public spaces. In India, caste hierarchies fundamentally challenge the assumption of equality,

raising doubts about whether communicative rationality can function in a society marked by structural inequality and social exclusion.

Caste and Structural Exclusion in India

The caste system represents one of the most enduring and deeply entrenched forms of social stratification in India. It is not merely a social hierarchy but a system that regulates access to power, dignity, and resources. B. R. Ambedkar famously described caste as "not a division of labour, but a division of labourers" (Ambedkar, 1936/2014), emphasizing its oppressive and exclusionary character. Caste determines social status, occupational opportunities, and patterns of social interaction, thereby profoundly shaping participation in public life and democratic discourse.

Historically, Dalits and other marginalized communities were denied access to education, literacy, temples, and public spaces. Such exclusion prevented them from participating equally in intellectual and political life. Although constitutional safeguards and affirmative action policies have improved representation, caste-based inequalities continue to persist in contemporary India in both overt and subtle forms. Limited access to quality education, underrepresentation in media and political institutions, and continuing social stigma create barriers to meaningful participation in public deliberation.

These structural inequalities undermine the democratic ideal of an inclusive public sphere. When marginalized groups lack equal opportunities to speak, be heard, and influence public opinion, democratic deliberation becomes unequal and exclusionary. Thus, caste remains a major obstacle to realizing a truly participatory and egalitarian public sphere in India.

Fragmented Publics: Beyond the Unified Sphere

Given these deep social inequalities, it is more accurate to describe the Indian public sphere as fragmented rather than unified. While liberal democratic theory often assumes the existence of a common arena in which all citizens can participate equally, the Indian experience demonstrates that access to public discourse is highly uneven. Different social groups inhabit distinct communicative spaces shaped by caste, class, gender, religion, language, and region. As a result, public debate in India does not occur within a single shared sphere but through multiple overlapping and unequal publics.

The idea of a unified public sphere, associated with Jürgen Habermas, assumes that citizens engage in rational-critical debate as equals. However, this assumption becomes problematic in societies marked by entrenched hierarchies such as caste. In India, upper-caste dominance in education, media institutions, bureaucracy, academia, and political leadership has historically limited the participation of marginalized communities in mainstream public discourse. Even when constitutional democracy formally guarantees equality, social exclusion often prevents equal communicative participation.

In response to these limitations, Nancy Fraser (Fraser, 1990) introduced the concept of subaltern counter-publics. Fraser argued that marginalized groups create parallel discursive arenas in which they can formulate and circulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and experiences. Rather than viewing multiple publics as a sign of democratic weakness, Fraser suggests that counter-publics are necessary in unequal societies because subordinated groups cannot easily express themselves within dominant public spaces.

The Indian context provides numerous examples of such counter-publics. Dalit movements, Bahujan intellectual traditions, regional newspapers, independent digital platforms, student organizations, feminist collectives, and grassroots social movements all function as alternative public spheres. These spaces enable marginalized communities to articulate experiences that are frequently ignored or distorted within mainstream discourse. Dalit literature, for example, has emerged as a powerful medium for expressing histories of humiliation, resistance, and dignity that upper-caste literary traditions often excluded. Similarly, social media platforms have allowed marginalized activists to bypass traditional gatekeepers and directly challenge dominant narratives surrounding caste violence, discrimination, and representation.

These fragmented publics serve two major democratic functions. First, they operate as spaces of resistance. Counter-publics challenge hegemonic narratives that normalize caste privilege and social inequality. Through protest movements, independent journalism, and alternative intellectual traditions, marginalized groups expose the exclusions embedded within dominant institutions. Movements inspired by B. R. Ambedkar, for instance, have consistently questioned the moral legitimacy of caste hierarchy and demanded substantive social equality rather than merely formal political rights.

Second, counter-publics contribute to identity formation. They provide marginalized communities with spaces to construct collective consciousness and political solidarity. Shared experiences of exclusion become transformed into organized social and political identities capable of mobilizing resistance. In this sense, fragmented publics are not merely reactive spaces but also creative and transformative arenas where alternative visions of democracy and justice are developed.

However, despite their importance, these counter-publics often remain structurally disadvantaged. Mainstream media, elite universities, corporate platforms, and state institutions continue to be disproportionately influenced by upper-caste and economically privileged groups. Consequently, the voices emerging from marginalized publics frequently struggle to shape national discourse or policy outcomes. Their concerns may be dismissed as "identity politics" or confined to the margins of public debate. Thus, while fragmented publics expand democratic participation, they also reveal the unequal distribution of communicative power within Indian democracy.

Therefore, understanding India's democracy requires moving beyond the ideal of a singular public sphere and recognizing the existence of multiple, unequal, and contested publics. The fragmentation of the public sphere is not simply a sign of division; it is also evidence of ongoing struggles for recognition, representation, and democratic inclusion.

Ambedkar and the Critique of Public Reason

B. R. Ambedkar's critique of caste offers a powerful framework for understanding the structural limitations of the public sphere in India. While Jürgen Habermas conceptualized the public sphere as a space of rational-critical debate among equal citizens, Ambedkar argued that such equality cannot exist in a society deeply structured by caste hierarchy. According to Ambedkar, caste is not merely a social division but a system of graded inequality that fragments society and denies the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity essential for democratic life. In his seminal work Annihilation of Caste, he contended that caste prevents genuine social interaction and collective solidarity, thereby making democratic participation unequal from the outset.

Ambedkar's argument directly challenges the Habermasian assumption that rational deliberation can occur independently of social structures. Habermas imagined the public sphere as a domain where social status could be "bracketed" in favour of reasoned discussion. However, Ambedkar demonstrated that in caste society, status cannot simply be set aside because it shapes access to education, literacy, economic resources, and social dignity. Marginalized communities, particularly Dalits, historically faced exclusion from public institutions, temples, schools, and even common social spaces. As a result, participation in public discourse has never been equally accessible. Communication within such a society is therefore deeply influenced by power relations rather than neutral deliberation.

Furthermore, Ambedkar believed that political democracy could not survive without social democracy. In Constituent Assembly Debates, he warned that India was entering a life of political equality while continuing to live with profound social and economic inequality. This contradiction, according to him, threatened the foundations of democracy itself. His emphasis on fraternity is especially significant because fraternity represents the moral basis for inclusive public participation. Without social recognition and mutual respect, democratic dialogue becomes exclusionary and dominated by privileged groups.

Ambedkar also stressed the necessity of institutional safeguards to counter structural inequalities. Unlike Habermas, who emphasized communicative rationality and deliberative consensus, Ambedkar recognized that oppressed communities require concrete protections and representation within state institutions. Measures such as reservations, constitutional rights, and legal safeguards were designed to ensure political participation and social justice for historically marginalized groups. These interventions acknowledge that formal equality alone cannot dismantle entrenched hierarchies. Therefore, democracy requires active state involvement to create conditions for substantive equality.

In the contemporary Indian context, Ambedkar's critique remains highly relevant. Public discourse continues to be shaped by caste privilege, unequal access to media, and social discrimination. Dalit movements, alternative media platforms, and caste-based counter-publics have emerged as spaces where marginalized voices can articulate their experiences and challenge dominant narratives. These developments suggest that the public sphere in India is not a singular, inclusive arena but a fragmented and contested space shaped by historical inequalities. Ambedkar's insights thus provide a crucial corrective to universalist theories of democracy by foregrounding the relationship between social justice, representation, and democratic participation.

Media, Digital Spaces, and New Publics

The rise of digital media has fundamentally transformed the character of the public sphere in contemporary India. With the rapid expansion of internet access, smartphones, and social networking platforms such as Facebook, X, YouTube, and Instagram, communication and political participation are no longer limited to traditional institutions such as newspapers, television, or formal political organizations. Digital platforms have created new spaces for interaction where individuals can share opinions, mobilize support, and participate in public debates in real time. In this sense, digital media has expanded the boundaries of the public sphere and altered the ways in which democratic engagement takes place in India.

One of the most significant consequences of digital media has been the emergence of alternative voices from historically marginalized communities. Groups that were often excluded from mainstream media representation—such as Dalits, Adivasis, women, religious minorities, and other oppressed communities—have increasingly used digital platforms to articulate their experiences and challenge dominant narratives. Dalit activists, in particular, have utilized social media to expose caste discrimination, document incidents of violence, and organize movements for social justice. Through online campaigns, hashtags, blogs, podcasts, and independent digital journalism, marginalized communities have developed what may be understood as "counter-publics," spaces that contest upper-caste dominance within mainstream discourse. These digital counter-publics play an important role in democratizing communication by enabling voices from the margins to participate in national conversations.

Digital media has also transformed the nature of political mobilization and collective action. Unlike traditional forms of activism, which often depended on physical organizations and institutional networks, online platforms allow rapid dissemination of information and decentralized forms of protest. Hashtag movements and viral campaigns can quickly draw public attention to issues of caste violence, gender discrimination, or state injustice. In many cases, digital activism has pressured mainstream media and political institutions to respond to marginalized concerns that would otherwise remain invisible. Thus, digital platforms have become crucial tools for resistance, awareness-building, and identity formation among oppressed groups.

However, despite these democratic possibilities, digital spaces are not inherently inclusive or egalitarian. Existing social inequalities frequently reappear and intensify within online environments. Access to digital technology remains uneven across class, caste, gender, and rural-urban divisions. Large sections of marginalized communities continue to face barriers such as poverty, lack of digital literacy, inadequate internet infrastructure, and limited access to smartphones or computers. This "digital divide" restricts equal participation in the online public sphere and reproduces broader social inequalities within digital communication.

Moreover, the structure of social media platforms themselves contributes to unequal visibility and representation. Algorithms often prioritize sensational, dominant, or commercially profitable content, which can marginalize minority perspectives and critical voices. As a result, upper-caste and majoritarian narratives frequently receive greater amplification than those emerging from oppressed communities. In addition, online spaces have become sites of harassment and intimidation. Dalit activists, feminist scholars, journalists, and women often face casteist abuse, trolling, hate speech, and threats on digital platforms. Such hostility discourages open participation and undermines the democratic potential of online communication.

Therefore, the digital public sphere in India represents a contradictory space where processes of democratization coexist with exclusion and domination. While digital media has undoubtedly opened new opportunities for marginalized communities to challenge hegemonic structures and create alternative narratives, it has not eliminated the structural inequalities embedded within Indian society. Instead, the online sphere reflects and sometimes intensifies the fragmentation of the public sphere along caste, class, gender, and ideological lines. Consequently, understanding the digital public sphere in India requires a critical approach that recognizes both its emancipatory potential and its structural limitations within a deeply unequal society.

Democracy and the Crisis of Deliberation

The fragmentation of the public sphere has profound implications for the functioning of democracy, particularly in societies characterized by deep social inequalities and historical forms of exclusion. Jürgen Habermas's theory of the public sphere is based on the assumption that rational-critical deliberation among citizens can produce democratic consensus and political legitimacy. According to this framework, individuals participate in open discussion as equals, setting aside social status and private interests in order to arrive at reasoned agreement on matters of common concern. However, this idealized conception becomes difficult to sustain in societies where structural inequalities shape access to communication, representation, and participation.

In the Indian context, the possibility of a unified and inclusive public sphere is complicated by the persistence of caste hierarchy, religious polarization, class inequality, linguistic diversity, and regional divisions. Social identities strongly influence political participation and public communication, making consensus difficult to achieve. Rather than functioning as a neutral arena of rational debate, the public sphere often reflects existing relations of power and exclusion. Communities that historically possessed social, economic, and cultural privilege continue to dominate mainstream institutions of communication, while marginalized groups struggle for visibility and recognition.

One of the major features of contemporary Indian democracy is the increasing fragmentation of public discourse along identity-based lines. Political communication frequently relies on caste identities, religious sentiments, and populist narratives to mobilize electoral support. Instead of encouraging inclusive democratic deliberation, political actors often appeal to specific communities through emotional and symbolic forms of communication. Electoral politics thus becomes centered on identity-based mobilization rather than broader public reasoning. In this process, caste continues to function as a major organizing principle of political behavior, influencing voting patterns, leadership structures, and representation. Consequently, the public sphere becomes a contested site where multiple social groups compete for recognition, legitimacy, and political power.

The role of media institutions further intensifies this fragmentation. Television debates, partisan news channels, and sensational forms of political reporting often prioritize conflict over meaningful democratic dialogue. Rather than facilitating informed discussion, media platforms frequently amplify polarization and ideological division. Similarly, digital platforms and social media have transformed communication by creating highly segmented spaces of interaction. Algorithm-driven platforms tend to expose users primarily to information and opinions that reinforce their pre-existing beliefs, creating what are commonly described as "echo chambers." These echo chambers reduce opportunities for engagement across social and ideological differences, thereby weakening the possibility of collective democratic deliberation.

At the same time, digital media has created new opportunities for marginalized communities to challenge dominant narratives and construct alternative publics. Dalit activists, feminist organizations, minority groups, and regional movements increasingly use online platforms to articulate their experiences and resist exclusion from mainstream discourse. These counter-publics play an important role in democratizing communication by making visible the perspectives of historically oppressed communities. However, such participation is often accompanied by online harassment, hate speech, casteist abuse, misinformation, and organized trolling, which limit the democratic potential of digital spaces. Thus, while digital media expands participation, it also reproduces existing inequalities and conflicts within society.

The fragmented character of the Indian public sphere therefore challenges the Habermasian assumption that democratic legitimacy emerges through rational consensus within a unified public arena. In reality, Indian democracy consists of multiple overlapping and competing publics shaped by caste, religion, gender, language, and class. These publics do not always interact

on equal terms, nor do they possess equal access to institutional power and representation. The existence of competing publics demonstrates that democratic discourse is deeply shaped by historical and structural inequalities.

This situation raises several important theoretical and political questions. Can deliberative democracy function effectively in a society marked by entrenched social inequality? How can marginalized communities gain equal participation within mainstream public discourse? To what extent can democratic communication overcome structures of caste domination and exclusion? Addressing these questions requires moving beyond the universalist assumptions of Habermasian theory and incorporating perspectives from critical theory, subaltern studies, postcolonial scholarship, and Dalit thought. These approaches emphasize that democracy cannot be understood solely in terms of rational deliberation but must also address questions of social justice, power, representation, and historical exclusion. In the Indian context, an inclusive democratic public sphere can only emerge through the recognition of structural inequalities and the active inclusion of marginalized voices within processes of public debate and political decision-making.

Toward an Inclusive Public Sphere

The concept of an inclusive public sphere requires a critical re-evaluation of democratic communication within the Indian social and political context. Classical theories of the public sphere, particularly those proposed by Jürgen Habermas, are grounded in the idea that citizens participate in rational-critical debate as social equals. According to this framework, democratic legitimacy emerges through open discussion in which individuals exchange arguments freely and arrive at collective understanding through reason. However, the Indian experience reveals that access to public participation is not equally distributed. Historical and structural inequalities continue to shape who can speak, whose voices are recognized, and which forms of knowledge are treated as legitimate within public discourse.

Indian society is deeply influenced by intersecting structures of caste, class, gender, religion, and region. These hierarchies affect not only material conditions but also symbolic power and communicative authority. Marginalized communities such as Dalits, Adivasis, women, religious minorities, and economically disadvantaged groups have historically been excluded from institutions of education, media, governance, and cultural representation. As a result, their participation in the public sphere has often remained limited or mediated through dominant social groups. This reality challenges the Habermasian assumption that social status can simply be "bracketed" within democratic deliberation. In practice, social inequalities continue to influence whose opinions carry authority and whose experiences are dismissed or ignored.

The persistence of caste hierarchy is particularly significant in understanding the limitations of the Indian public sphere. B. R. Ambedkar argued that democracy cannot survive without social equality and fraternity. For Ambedkar, political democracy based solely on constitutional rights remains incomplete unless accompanied by social democracy grounded in dignity, justice, and equal recognition. His critique demonstrates that formal legal equality does not automatically create equal participation in public life. Structural barriers such as caste discrimination, economic deprivation, and social stigma continue to prevent marginalized communities from fully engaging in democratic discourse. Therefore, an inclusive public sphere requires addressing these structural inequalities rather than assuming the existence of already equal participants.

Building an inclusive public sphere also demands recognition of multiple forms of knowledge and communication. Dominant public discourse often privileges elite languages, institutional expertise, and upper-caste cultural norms while marginalizing subaltern experiences and local forms of expression. In this context, alternative publics created by Dalit movements, feminist organizations, tribal communities, and regional groups become crucial spaces of democratic engagement. These counter-publics challenge dominant narratives and provide marginalized communities with opportunities to articulate their identities, experiences, and political demands. Rather than viewing such fragmentation as a threat to democracy, it can be understood as an essential process through which excluded voices gain visibility and representation.

The role of media and digital communication is equally important in the construction of an inclusive public sphere. While digital platforms have enabled greater participation and alternative forms of activism, they have also reproduced existing inequalities through algorithmic bias, online harassment, and unequal access to technology. Consequently, inclusion in the public sphere cannot be reduced to mere access to communication platforms. It also requires institutional safeguards, ethical media practices, digital literacy, and protection against discrimination and hate speech. Democratic communication must ensure not only the freedom to speak but also the conditions necessary for marginalized groups to participate safely and meaningfully.

An inclusive public sphere therefore requires moving beyond narrow liberal assumptions of neutrality and formal equality. It demands a model of democracy that acknowledges historical injustice, power relations, and structural exclusion. Inclusion must be understood not simply as the presence of diverse voices but as the creation of conditions in which all communities can participate with dignity and equal recognition. In the Indian context, this involves strengthening social justice, expanding access to education and media, protecting minority rights, and fostering democratic institutions that encourage dialogue across social divisions.

Ultimately, the idea of an inclusive public sphere points toward a more substantive understanding of democracy. Democracy cannot be confined to elections or constitutional procedures alone; it must also involve the democratization of social relations and public communication. A truly inclusive public sphere emerges only when historically marginalized communities are not merely allowed to participate but are recognized as equal contributors to the collective shaping of democratic life.

Recognizing Structural Inequalities

The idea of the public sphere as a neutral and universally accessible arena becomes problematic in the Indian social context because participation in public life has historically been shaped by caste hierarchies and unequal power relations. While liberal democratic theory assumes that all citizens can engage equally in public deliberation, Indian society demonstrates that access to education, literacy, media, and political representation has never been equally distributed. The caste system institutionalized forms of exclusion that denied marginalized communities, particularly Dalits and Adivasis, access to spaces of knowledge production and civic participation. As B. R. Ambedkar argued, caste is not merely a social division but a system of graded inequality that structures power and social relations. Consequently, democratic participation cannot be understood independently of these structural inequalities.

Historically, upper-caste groups occupied dominant positions within institutions of education, administration, and cultural production. This dominance enabled them to shape public discourse according to their social interests while excluding subaltern experiences and perspectives. Even in contemporary India, this imbalance continues to influence the functioning of media organizations, universities, bureaucracy, and mainstream political debates. Marginalized communities often remain underrepresented in decision-making spaces, and their issues are frequently framed through the perspectives of socially privileged groups. As a result, the public sphere reflects unequal relations of power rather than an ideal condition of equality.

The persistence of structural inequalities also affects the quality of democratic deliberation. When certain groups possess greater cultural capital, economic resources, and institutional authority, they gain disproportionate influence over what is considered legitimate knowledge or acceptable public opinion. Voices from marginalized communities are often dismissed, stereotyped, or silenced through social discrimination and symbolic violence. Therefore, recognizing structural inequality is essential for any meaningful understanding of democracy in India. Without addressing caste-based exclusion and unequal access to public institutions, the ideal of participatory democracy remains incomplete and exclusionary.

Valuing Counter-Publics

The fragmentation of the public sphere should not necessarily be interpreted as a weakness of democracy. Instead, alternative publics created by marginalized communities can serve as important sites of democratic resistance and social transformation. Political theorist Nancy Fraser introduced the concept of "subaltern counter-publics" to describe discursive spaces where subordinated groups formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and social experiences. These counter-publics emerge because dominant public spheres often fail to represent marginalized voices adequately.

In the Indian context, Dalit movements, feminist organizations, regional literary traditions, student activism, and grassroots social movements have played a crucial role in creating such alternative spaces of communication. These counter-publics provide marginalized communities with opportunities to articulate experiences of caste oppression, gender discrimination, economic exploitation, and social exclusion that are often ignored within mainstream discourse. Dalit literature, for example, challenges upper-caste narratives by foregrounding lived experiences of humiliation, resistance, and dignity. Similarly, feminist movements have exposed patriarchal structures embedded within both society and democratic institutions.

Counter-publics also contribute to the democratization of knowledge by challenging dominant definitions of culture, history, and citizenship. They enable marginalized communities to develop collective political consciousness and mobilize for social justice. In recent decades, digital media platforms have further expanded the possibilities for such alternative publics. Social media, independent digital journalism, and online activism have allowed marginalized voices to bypass traditional gatekeepers of communication and reach wider audiences. Movements against caste discrimination, gender violence, and social injustice increasingly use digital spaces to organize resistance and create solidarity networks.

Rather than weakening democracy, counter-publics strengthen democratic life by broadening the scope of public debate and exposing hidden forms of inequality. They challenge the assumption that there exists a single unified public sphere and instead reveal democracy as a contested process shaped by multiple voices and experiences. An inclusive democracy therefore requires recognition of these alternative publics as legitimate and necessary components of democratic participation.

Institutional Interventions

The creation of an inclusive public sphere requires not only social awareness but also active institutional intervention. Formal equality guaranteed by constitutional democracy is insufficient to overcome centuries of caste-based exclusion and structural discrimination. Historically marginalized communities continue to face barriers in accessing education, employment, media representation, and political participation. Therefore, democratic inclusion depends upon policies and institutions that actively address social inequalities.

One of the most significant institutional measures in India has been the policy of affirmative action and reservation. Inspired by the vision of B. R. Ambedkar, reservation policies in education, public employment, and political representation were designed to provide historically oppressed communities with opportunities for participation in public life. These measures seek not merely to provide economic benefits but to democratize institutions that were historically monopolized by dominant castes. Educational access, scholarships, and social welfare programs are similarly important in enabling marginalized communities to participate effectively in democratic discourse.

Inclusive media representation is another essential requirement for a democratic public sphere. Media institutions often reproduce dominant caste and class perspectives due to unequal representation within journalism and cultural industries. Expanding diversity in newsrooms, publishing institutions, and cultural platforms is necessary to ensure that public debates reflect a wider range of social experiences. Independent journalism and community media can also play a significant role in amplifying marginalized voices.

Legal and constitutional protections are equally important for safeguarding democratic participation. Marginalized communities frequently face hate speech, social intimidation, and violence when asserting their rights in public spaces. Strong legal frameworks against caste discrimination, gender violence, and hate speech are therefore essential for ensuring equal participation in democratic deliberation. Public institutions must create conditions in which citizens can express opinions without fear of exclusion or retaliation.

Ultimately, an inclusive public sphere requires the transformation of democratic institutions so that participation becomes genuinely accessible to all sections of society. Democracy cannot survive merely through procedural elections; it depends upon the continuous expansion of equality, representation, and social justice within public life.

Intersectional Approach

An intersectional approach is essential for understanding the limitations of the public sphere in India. Social exclusion cannot be explained solely through caste, because individuals experience marginalization differently depending on the interaction of caste with gender, class, religion, region, language, and other social identities. The concept of intersectionality, first articulated by scholars such as Kimberlé Crenshaw, highlights how multiple structures of oppression operate simultaneously and shape unequal experiences within society. (Crenshaw, 1989) In the Indian context, this framework becomes particularly important in analyzing access to democratic participation and representation.

For instance, Dalit women often experience a distinct form of exclusion that differs both from Dalit men and upper-caste women. While Dalit men may face caste discrimination, Dalit women encounter the combined effects of caste oppression and patriarchy. Similarly, upper-caste women may face gender discrimination but still retain caste privilege in social and institutional spaces. This demonstrates that inequalities are layered and interconnected rather than isolated. Consequently, participation in the public sphere is deeply influenced by these overlapping identities, affecting who can speak, whose voices are heard, and whose experiences are recognized as legitimate knowledge.

An intersectional perspective also reveals how economic inequality and regional disparities shape public participation. Marginalized communities in rural areas, linguistic minorities, religious minorities, and economically disadvantaged groups often face barriers to education, digital access, media representation, and political visibility. These structural inequalities limit their ability to engage equally in democratic discourse. Therefore, the ideal of a universally accessible public sphere remains incomplete unless these intersecting forms of exclusion are acknowledged and addressed.

To create a genuinely inclusive public sphere, democratic institutions and public discourse must move beyond formal equality and recognize the realities of social hierarchy and structural disadvantage. Policies promoting representation, inclusive media practices, affirmative action, and access to education and communication technologies are necessary to ensure broader participation. An inclusive democracy must therefore create spaces where diverse identities and experiences are not merely tolerated but actively represented and valued. Only through such an intersectional and socially conscious approach can the public sphere evolve into a truly participatory and democratic space committed to social justice and equality.

Conclusion

The Habermasian concept of the public sphere provides an important normative framework for understanding democratic deliberation and citizen participation. According to Jürgen Habermas, the public sphere refers to a space where individuals come together as equals to engage in rational-critical debate about matters of common concern. In theory, such a sphere promotes democracy by enabling free discussion, public reasoning, and the formation of public opinion independent of state or economic control. The idea remains valuable because it emphasizes dialogue, participation, and accountability as essential components of democratic life. However, the applicability of this framework to the Indian context remains limited because it assumes a level of social equality that does not exist within deeply hierarchical societies shaped by caste, class, gender, and religion.

This paper has argued that the Indian public sphere is not a unified or universally accessible arena but rather a fragmented space structured by social inequalities. Historically, marginalized communities such as Dalits, Adivasis, and other oppressed groups were denied access to education, literacy, public institutions, and spaces of political participation. These exclusions continue to shape contemporary forms of communication and representation. Mainstream media, academia, and political institutions are still disproportionately dominated by socially privileged groups, resulting in unequal visibility and authority in public discourse. Consequently, the experiences and voices of marginalized communities often remain underrepresented or misrepresented within dominant public debates.

The critique of caste-based exclusion becomes particularly significant through the writings of B. R. Ambedkar, who challenged the assumption that democracy could function meaningfully without social equality. Ambedkar argued that political democracy cannot survive in a society marked by deep social and economic hierarchies. His analysis of caste demonstrates that exclusion is not merely economic but also cultural and symbolic, affecting dignity, representation, and the ability to participate in public life.

From this perspective, the Habermasian model appears insufficient because it overlooks the structural barriers that prevent equal participation in deliberative spaces.

The concept of counter-publics further helps in understanding the Indian public sphere. Marginalized communities have often created alternative spaces of communication and resistance through Dalit literature, independent media, social movements, student organizations, and digital activism. These counter-publics challenge dominant narratives and provide platforms for articulating experiences that are ignored within mainstream discourse. Rather than viewing fragmentation as a weakness, the existence of multiple publics can be understood as a reflection of social realities and democratic struggles for recognition and equality.

Ultimately, the challenge is not to reject the ideal of the public sphere altogether but to reconstruct it in a more inclusive and socially grounded manner. A democratic public sphere in India must recognize historical injustices and address structural inequalities that limit participation. This requires greater representation of marginalized communities in institutions of knowledge and communication, wider access to education and resources, and the protection of spaces for dissent and alternative voices. Only by acknowledging the realities of caste and other intersecting forms of exclusion can the public sphere become a meaningful foundation for substantive democracy and social justice in India.

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