



FROM SILENCE TO SCREEN: TELUGU SUBALTERN VOICES IN DIGITAL SPACES

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Abstract

Telugu subaltern narratives have traditionally found little space in cultural production or hegemonic literary canons. Voices from Dalit, tribal, rural labour and working poor communities have either been silenced or told through the voices of others for centuries in Telugu society. However, as digital media began rapidly expanding access in the last decade, the marginalized and oppressed began finding ways to speak for themselves. YouTube videos, Facebook posts, Instagram feeds, blogs and podcasts allow Telugu subaltern voices to speak from a position of loud visibility rather than silenced obscurity. Through what framework and to what effect do these voices present themselves in digital spaces? This paper seeks to explore digital spaces as alternative spheres of expression for Telugu subaltern voices. How do people represent their lived experiences, social realities, cultural practices and daily negotiations through digital media? How do these differ from previous iterations of mediated subaltern voices in print literature or mainstream media? This paper will use a lens of Subaltern Studies and media studies to interpret selected Telugu digital narratives in conversation with one another. Though technology does not erase material disparities of caste, class, etc. Within societal structures, digital media provides opportunity for meaningful self-representation, engagement and community formation. This paper argues that digital media is now a relevant site of contemporary expression for reframing Telugu subaltern narratives.

Keywords

Telugu Subaltern Voices, Digital Media, Marginalized Communities, Self-Representation, Cultural Resistance, etc.

Full Article

Introduction:

Indian culture, as well as its literary expression, has historically been conditioned by notions of caste, class and power hierarchies. In Telugu society as well, narratives of Dalits, tribal groups, rural labourers and working poor have long been absent from literary and cultural representations. If present at all, they were mediated through upper caste, upper class lenses. Opportunities for subaltern voices to speak for themselves were few and far between. Subaltern Studies initiated an important intervention into Indian academic circles to revise our understanding of the past by locating agency amongst the subaltern classes and groups. Dalit writing, protest poetics, autobiographies and people's movements have similarly enriched Telugu literary discourse by centring lived experience and critiquing caste power structures. Yet when it came to publishing a book or having one's work read by others – and particularly by crossing that threshold into



institutions of official accreditation – opportunities were limited. Digital media has changed the rules of the game. Online spaces are unprecedentedly open and allow individuals to share their experiences without needing to ‘publish’ their writing in the traditional sense. The time lapse between speech and reception is dramatically shortened. Marginal voices can speak in non-literary Telugu, in their regional dialects, and in other informal modes of speech. Through close readings of Telugu language social media posts, this paper analyses how subaltern voices are being renegotiated in digital spaces. How are these voices able to see, speak and resist in ways that were not possible for earlier representations of the subaltern? How does Telugu fit into larger questions of voice and power in the digital age?

Literature Review:

Discussion around the notion of the subaltern has primarily been a product of Subaltern Studies, an effort to excavate narratives from below. Ranajit Guha talks about how important it was for historians working on this project to analyze social processes ‘from below’ while Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak points towards questioning the politics of who can speak and how far. These viewpoints eventually transformed literary and cultural studies in India. Attention towards subaltern voices and lives in Telugu literary studies has come through engagement with Dalit writing, autobiographical writing, protest poetry and the people’s movements these cultural forms were engaged with. Telugu Dalit writers brought the question of lived experience (before ideologies, pedagogy and literary knowledges) to the forefront of literary cultural production. Scholarship around these texts tried to read them as resistant acts, attempts to speak back to oppressive hegemonies. However, the larger share of this scholarship remains preoccupied with print cultures of resistance. In media studies and cultural studies scholarship cinema and popular culture eventually widened the argument on margins and media beyond text. Work on Telugu cinema too points towards instances of stereotyping, silencing marginal voices and communities. While this scholarship accounts for visual culture as a site of popular power, it still largely remains wedded to examining commercially regulated spaces. Only recently have we started seeing scholarship that accounts for the democratic potential of digital media spaces in digital media studies, a few works around online activism and digital storytelling efforts in India show us how participation levels on digital media also ensures lesser gatekeeping than older mediums allowed for. However, close academic reading of Telugu digital subaltern lives is still wanting. This study attempts to begin the conversation between subaltern theory and digital practices.

Objectives of the Study:

- ✓ To study the digital medium as a counter space for the Telugu subaltern voices.
- ✓ To investigate the modes of self-representation being produced in Telugu cyberspace.
- ✓ To research ways in which the Telugu digital narratives subvert hegemonic ideologies of literature and culture.
- ✓ To delve into the politics of voice/power visibilization.
- ✓ To look into the limits/opportunities presented by digital medium for subalterns.

Methodology:

The study uses a qualitative interdisciplinary lens drawn from Subaltern Studies, cultural studies and media studies. Digital media content is treated as cultural text. Primary sources include select Telugu language digital media content such as YouTube videos, blogs, podcasts and social media posts created by individuals who identify with the communities under study. The purposive selection of materials centre around themes such as caste discrimination, labour and migration, rural life worlds, identity etc. The secondary sources include academic works on subalternity, Telugu literary studies as well as those on digital media culture. Methods used range from textual



analysis and discourse analysis to understand their use of language, thematic concerns and narrative strategies. Comparison is used as an analytical tool to highlight differences between elite print centric forms of representation and self-representation of marginalized communities in digital media. Ethical Care was taken to use only materials that were publicly available and identities are not revealed.

Analysis and Discussion:

Telugu digital stories open up new spaces that shift and expand modes of address. They allow people from marginalized backgrounds to speak with their own voice, accent, and dialects and bypass gatekeepers to a certain extent. There's less filtration of who gets to speak and speak for themselves when using digital storytelling as a medium. Their stories often centre around their quotidian lived experiences. Topics range from caste atrocities in rural areas to daily-wage labourers' rights; migration for employment and first-generation learners' experiences. These stories are told through largely conversational Telugu, disrupting literary Telugu and elitist notions of art aesthetics. New digital spaces also open up avenues for dialogue. Comments and replies introduce new voices to the conversation. These create kinships between storytellers and listeners as people often express, "I have gone through the same experience." Thus digital spaces become counter-publics where subaltern voices are seen and heard. Digital storytelling is also conditioned by closures. Digital divides based on class, differential digital literacy, and platform architecture influence who is seen. Stories go viral based on likes and engagement rather than social relevance. However, overall digital media allows for more agency than previously existing cultural spaces. Telugu digital stories have disrupted the connection between voice and power. Digital spaces have not ended social inequalities but enabled significant spaces for venting, voicing, and challenging them.

Conclusion:

The paper analyzed the role of digital media in reframing Telugu subaltern narratives. It argued that digital media has provided subalterns with new opportunities and spaces for unmediated expression of self. Marginalized communities in the Telugu public sphere are finding newer ways of recording everyday experiences around caste, labour, migration and rural life on digital media. Self-narratives are renegotiating mediated representations of yesteryears and privileging lived experiences. Communicative acts in the digital space give individual experiences a collective character thereby allowing communities to come into being as well as offer resistance. The paper recognized the many issues around digital inequalities and platform hegemonies which control online spaces. Despite such concerns digital media offers newer ways of claiming visibility and agency. Digital media is thus an important site for the negotiation of Telugu subaltern voices today.

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Article Received:11/06/2026

Article Accepted:03/07/2026

Published Online:30/09/2026

To Cite the Article: *Kottacheruvu, Nagendra and Godavarthi, Govindaiah. "From Silence to Screen: Telugu Subaltern Voices in Digital Spaces."* *Literary Cognizance: An International Refereed/Peer Reviewed e-Journal of English Language, Literature and Criticism*, Vol.-VII, Issue-2, September, 2026, 04-07. www.literarycognizance.com

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