

Hashtags and Hierarchies: Exploring the Influence of Social Media Campaigns on Caste Equality Movements

Anand kumar¹ , Dr. Brajesh Kumar²

Anand Kumar , PhD Research scholar, Department of Sociology, BBAU Lucknow
Dr. Brajesh Kumar, Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, BBAU, Lucknow

Abstract

Caste has historically structured Indian society, dictating access to resources, status, and dignity. The rise of digital technologies, particularly social media, has reconfigured how caste identities are expressed, contested, and mobilised. This paper examines the dynamic intersection of caste and online spaces in India, focusing on both the empowering possibilities and the persistent challenges that marginalised communities face. With the help of sociological theories of the public sphere, counter-publics, and network society, the study analyses how online platforms enable marginalized groups to articulate grievances, challenge dominant narratives, and mobilise for social justice. Case studies such as Rohith Vemula, the Hathras rape case, and digital activism surrounding Bhima-Koregaon highlight the role of social media in amplifying subaltern voices. While digital spaces provide new avenues of visibility and resistance, they remain deeply entangled with offline hierarchies. Digital divides restrict access for many rural and poor Dalit users, while algorithmic biases and caste-based online harassment reproduce structural inequalities. This paper argues that online spaces simultaneously democratise and constrain struggles against caste oppression. The findings contribute to debates on caste, technology, and democracy, underscoring the urgent need for inclusive policies, algorithmic accountability.

Keywords

Caste, Social Media, Digital Activism, Dalit Studies, Online Public Sphere, India, Algorithmic Bias, Counter-publics, Subaltern

Introduction

Caste is one of the most enduring social hierarchies in India. It shapes everyday interactions, access to resources, and structures of inequality. Rooted in the varna and jati system, caste has historically functioned as both an occupational and social stratification mechanism (Ghurye, 1969; Dumont, 1970). For Dalits, Adivasis, and Other Backward Classes (OBCs), caste has meant centuries of exclusion, humiliation, and restricted mobility across educational, economic, and cultural spheres. Though the Indian Constitution, under B. R. Ambedkar's leadership, outlawed untouchability and sought to dismantle caste-based discrimination, the lived realities of caste oppression remain entrenched. Violence, atrocities, and systemic exclusion continue to characterise the experiences of marginalised caste groups (Jodhka, 2015).

The rise of social media has introduced new spaces where caste identities are articulated and contested. The ubiquity of platforms such as Facebook, Twitter (now X), YouTube, Instagram, and WhatsApp in India, where over 850 million people are active internet users as of 2024 (IAMAI, 2024) has transformed the public sphere. For marginalised communities, these platforms offer unprecedented opportunities to bypass traditional gatekeepers of knowledge and media, challenging dominant-caste control of representation. Social media provides an alternative sphere of communication where counter-narratives of caste oppression can be shared, and solidarities can be built across geographical and cultural boundaries.

From Marginalisation to Assertion

Traditionally, dominant media institutions in India have been owned and controlled by upper-caste elites. Studies show that Dalits have been severely underrepresented in newsrooms and mainstream media institutions (Saha & Gunawardana, 2022). Consequently, issues of caste violence or Dalit assertion were either ignored, trivialised, or framed through casteist stereotypes. Social media has disrupted this dynamic by offering marginalised groups the ability to directly produce and disseminate their narratives.

The proliferation of hashtags such as **#DalitLivesMatter**, **#JusticeForRohith**, **#DalitHistoryMonth**, and **#StopCasteViolence** demonstrate how digital tools are employed not merely for self-expression but as instruments of resistance. By situating local struggles within global frameworks. Linking Dalit struggles with Black Lives Matter, Dalit activists have managed to internationalise caste issues (Teltumbde, 2018). This shift from invisibility to hyper-visibility marks a radical transformation in the politics of caste assertion.

Social Media as Counter-Public

The notion of the public sphere, as articulated by Jürgen Habermas (1989), describes a domain of communication where rational debate among citizens can influence democratic governance. However, feminist and critical theorists like Nancy Fraser (1990) have critiqued this model, arguing that marginalised groups often form **counter-publics** parallel discursive arenas where they construct alternative narratives. Social media has facilitated precisely such counter-publics for Dalit communities. Pages, groups, and hashtags function as spaces where lived experiences of caste discrimination are articulated, validated, and mobilised into collective action.

This counter-public formation is crucial for identity-building. The widespread sharing of Ambedkar's writings, songs of Dalit resistance, or photographs of Dalit leaders challenges the erasure of these histories from mainstream discourse. Hashtags like **#ChamarPride** or **#JatavEkta** reclaim caste identities that were historically used as slurs, transforming them into markers of dignity and solidarity.

Technology, Caste, and the Network Society

Social media activism in India cannot be understood in isolation; it must be situated within the broader theoretical context of digital society. Manuel Castells's concept of the **network society** (2000) highlights how power and resistance are increasingly structured through digital networks. For Dalit activists, digital networks enable mobilisation that transcends physical boundaries. Campaigns like the mobilisation after the Una flogging incident (2016) illustrate how viral videos can rapidly catalyse nationwide movements, often forcing mainstream media to follow the lead of online activism.

At the same time, scholars caution against technological determinism. As Nair (2022) observes, the architecture of digital platforms is not neutral; algorithms prioritise content based on commercial logics that may or may not align with social justice concerns. Furthermore, digital divides in India—where rural users, women, and the poorest remain under-connected mean that social media cannot entirely substitute offline struggles.

Research Objectives

This paper aims to systematically explore how social media functions in the assertion of caste equality movements in India. The key objectives include:

1. To analyse how Dalit and marginalised caste groups utilise social media for identity assertion, mobilisation, and awareness-building.
2. To examine case studies where digital activism significantly influenced caste-related movements (Rohith Vemula, Una flogging, Bhima-Koregaon).
3. To identify the challenges and limitations of online caste activism, including harassment, misinformation, and digital divides.

4. To assess the implications of digital activism for Indian democracy, policy frameworks, and broader global movements for equality.

Significance of the Study

This research is significant at both academic and practical levels. Academically, it contributes to the growing field of digital sociology, expanding debates on how social media reconfigures identities and struggles in the Global South. It also bridges classical caste studies with contemporary digital realities, bringing together thinkers like G. S. Ghurye, M. N. Srinivas, and S. S. Jodhka with digital theorists like Castells and Fraser.

The study offers insights for policymakers, activists, and civil society actors. In a country where caste-based violence remains rampant over 50,000 cases of caste atrocities were officially reported in 2023 alone (NCRB, 2024) understanding the transformative and contested role of social media is crucial for designing inclusive digital governance.

Theoretical Frameworks

Classical Approaches to Caste

Caste has been central to Indian sociology, with several foundational scholars shaping our understanding of its structures and dynamics. G. S. Ghurye (1969) emphasised the interlinkages between caste, kinship, and religion, defining caste as a system of endogamy, hereditary occupation, and ritual hierarchy. While useful, his work often reflected a functionalist orientation that tended to naturalise caste.

Louis Dumont's Homo Hierarchicus (1970) provided a more philosophical reading, viewing caste as a system of “pure and impure” distinctions undergirding Indian society. However, Dumont has been criticised for essentialising caste as a timeless cultural system, ignoring its political and economic dimensions (Dirks, 2001).

M. N. Srinivas (1966), focused on processes such as **Sanskritisation** and **dominant caste theory**, highlighting caste mobility and the ability of certain groups to wield political power. While Srinivas recognised change, his framework often centred on upper-caste perspectives.

Later scholars such as **André Beteille (1996)**, **T. K. Oommen (1990)**, and **Dipankar Gupta (2000)** shifted attention toward caste in modernity, urban contexts, and political mobilisation. **S. S. Jodhka (2015)** emphasises caste as a lived reality that adapts to new social and technological environments. These classical and contemporary contributions provide a foundation for analysing how caste mutates within digital spaces.

Habermas and the Public Sphere

Jürgen Habermas (1989) conceptualised the public sphere as a space where citizens engage in rational-critical debate, influencing governance and democracy. In theory, social media could embody this democratic sphere, enabling equal participation. However, in practice, caste hierarchies complicate this ideal.

Dominant-caste groups often monopolise visibility even online, while Dalit voices struggle against trolling, abuse, and silencing (David & Timhna, 2025). Thus, while digital media expands opportunities for communication, it does not automatically dismantle structural inequalities. For Dalits, the internet can act as a semi-public sphere, but one fraught with contestation rather than neutrality.

Fraser and Counter-Publics

Nancy Fraser (1990) critiqued Habermas for ignoring marginalised groups, introducing the concept of counter-publics, alternative discursive spaces where subordinated groups form their own narratives and solidarities. This framework is especially relevant to caste.

Marginalised communities have created vibrant counter-publics online through hashtags such as #DalitLivesMatter or groups like *Round Table India* and *Velivada*. These spaces resist upper-caste media hegemony, allowing Dalits to share experiences, celebrate their icons (Ambedkar, Phule, Periyar), and mobilise transnational solidarity. Social media thus functions less as a universal public sphere and more as a set of counter-publics in constant negotiation with dominant discourses.

Castells and the Network Society

Manuel Castells (2000) introduced the concept of the network society, where power flows through digital and informational networks. Activism, under this framework, emerges as “networked social movements” that use digital platforms for mobilisation, awareness, and resistance.

Dalit activism exemplifies this transformation. The viral spread of videos, images, and hashtags from Rohith Vemula’s letters to the Una flogging videos illustrates how digital networks amplify marginalised voices. Castells’ framework also underscores the global interconnectedness of movements. The adoption of the Black Lives Matter template by Dalit activists reflects a transnational circulation of protest repertoires through digital networks (Teltumbde, 2018).

3.5 Social Identity Theory and Caste Assertion

Henri Tajfel’s Social Identity Theory (1979) provides another lens to analyse caste online. The theory posits that individuals derive a sense of identity from their membership in social groups, often seeking positive distinctiveness by asserting group pride.

On social media, marginalised users assert caste identities through hashtags like #JatavPride, #ChamarPride, or #Ambedkarite, challenging the stigma attached to these identities. These practices exemplify how marginalised groups reclaim derogatory labels, transforming them into collective markers of empowerment and solidarity. At the same time, online identity assertion reinforces in-group solidarity while sparking conflict with dominant-caste groups, mirroring Tajfel’s emphasis on intergroup dynamics.

Subaltern Studies and Voice

The Subaltern Studies collective, led by scholars such as Ranajit Guha (1982), emphasised how marginalised groups are often rendered voiceless in mainstream historiography. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s provocative question, “*Can the subaltern speak?*” (1988), remains relevant in the digital age.

Social media suggests a partial answer: the subaltern can indeed “speak,” but often within precarious conditions of visibility. Online harassment, algorithmic suppression. Platforms also provide avenues where subaltern narratives Dalit histories, Ambedkarite thought, accounts of caste violence circulate widely, disrupting elite-controlled knowledge systems. Thus, digital platforms act as ambiguous spaces where subaltern voices can both flourish and be silenced.

Empowerment through Digital Platforms

Social Media as a Space of Assertion

Social media platforms such as **Facebook, Twitter (X), YouTube, WhatsApp, and Instagram** have become crucial spaces for caste-based activism and assertion. Unlike traditional media, which has often been controlled by dominant castes, these platforms allow Dalits and Bahujans to bypass institutional filters and directly address mass audiences. The accessibility and low entry barriers of social media mean that even individuals from small towns or villages can generate content, mobilise support, and participate in national conversations.

In many cases, digital spaces have provided visibility to caste-based violence and injustice that might otherwise have remained ignored. Viral circulation of videos, letters, or protest hashtags has forced mainstream media and

state institutions to acknowledge Dalit grievances. Thus, empowerment is not only symbolic but also political, influencing public discourse and occasionally policy responses.

Dimensions of Empowerment

The empowerment experienced through digital platforms can be understood through four key dimensions:

(a) Accessibility and Reach

Social media's accessibility is perhaps its most transformative aspect. Marginalised communities that lacked access to print or television media now use affordable smartphones and data services to amplify their voices. Celebrations of Ambedkar Jayanti through posts, memes, and videos circulate widely online, reaching both Dalit and non-Dalit audiences. These acts of digital visibility challenge the historical erasure of Dalit culture and thought from mainstream platforms.

(b) Narrative Control

Historically, Dalit experiences were filtered through dominant-caste perspectives. Social media allows Dalits to control their own narratives, sharing first-person accounts of discrimination, asserting pride in their heritage, and highlighting the contributions of Ambedkar, Phule, Periyar, and other leaders. Online communities frequently reclaim caste identities—using hashtags like #ChamarPride or #JatavEkta that were once used as slurs, thereby reshaping their symbolic meaning (Guru & Sarukkai, 2009).

(c) Mobilisation and Organisation

Digital platforms play a pivotal role in organising protests, rallies, and campaigns. WhatsApp groups, Facebook events, and Twitter hashtags help spread information quickly, enabling rapid mobilisation. The #ChaloUna movement (2016), sparked by a viral video of Dalits being flogged in Gujarat, is a prime example. Social media enabled local anger to transform into a nationwide protest, connecting Dalits from across states and pushing back against caste violence.

(d) Education and Awareness

Platforms like YouTube and Facebook host channels dedicated to Dalit history, culture, and rights awareness. Ambedkarite organisations upload lectures, debates, and documentaries, providing accessible education for younger generations. This circulation of knowledge helps dispelling casteist stereotypes and equipping communities with critical tools for self-assertion. Dalit feminist activists use Instagram and Twitter to foreground the intersectionality of caste and gender, ensuring that Dalit women's voices are not marginalised even within broader Dalit movements (Rege, 2013).

4.3 Digital Celebrations of Identity

Online spaces have become symbolic battlegrounds for identity construction. Hashtags such as #JaiBhim, #DalitHistoryMonth, and #Ambedkarite trend annually, providing visibility to Dalit pride. Young users create and circulate digital art, music videos, and memes celebrating icons like Ambedkar and Periyar. These practices not only strengthen community solidarity but also make Dalit assertion relatable to younger, tech-savvy generations.

TikTok (before its ban in India) saw the rise of short videos where young Dalits expressed caste pride, often accompanied by Ambedkarite songs or slogans. Similarly, on Instagram, Dalit artists use visual storytelling to represent Ambedkarite aesthetics and challenge Brahmanical cultural hegemony.

4.4 Beyond India: Transnational Solidarity

Digital platforms also allow Dalit activism to extend beyond national borders. Campaigns like #DalitLivesMatter gained international traction, drawing parallels with #BlackLivesMatter. Dalit activists in the

diaspora, particularly in the U.S. and U.K., amplify caste issues globally, lobbying universities, corporations, and governments to recognise caste discrimination as a category of inequality (**Soundararajan, 2021**). This transnational solidarity exemplifies how digital platforms connect struggles against systemic oppression across race, caste, and ethnicity.

4.5 Limitations within Empowerment

While digital platforms enable empowerment, their potential is not absolute. Access remains uneven due to the digital divide, especially in rural India. Moreover, online harassment and trolling disproportionately target Dalit activists, often attempting to silence their visibility. Algorithms, shaped by profit logics, may also deprioritise activist content compared to commercial or entertainment material. Thus, empowerment through digital platforms must be seen as both transformative and contested.

Social media has become a vital tool for Dalit assertion, narrative control, mobilisation, and education. It offers symbolic empowerment by amplifying voices once confined to the margins and practical empowerment by facilitating protest and solidarity. Yet, empowerment exists alongside structural challenges, reminding us that digital assertion does not erase offline inequalities but interacts with them in complex ways.

Case Studies of Caste Assertion through Social Media

The Rohith Vemula Case (2016)

The suicide of Rohith Vemula, a Dalit PhD scholar at the University of Hyderabad, in January 2016, marked a watershed in the digital articulation of caste discrimination. In his final letter, Vemula poignantly described the dehumanisation of Dalit students within Indian higher education, exposing structural exclusion (Guru & Sarukkai, 2019). Almost immediately, hashtags such as #JusticeForRohith, #DalitLivesMatter, and #WeAreRohith began trending on Twitter and Facebook.

Social media amplified the issue in ways that mainstream media initially failed to capture. Student groups, civil society organisations, and international scholars circulated Vemula's letter, making it a symbol of systemic casteism in universities. The viral campaign not only mobilised protests across campuses but also sparked debates on academic discrimination, affirmative action, and institutional accountability.

The framing of the incident through hashtags linked Dalit struggles with global movements such as Black Lives Matter, emphasising shared experiences of structural oppression. Importantly, the campaign sustained visibility for months something unusual in the fleeting attention economy of social media forcing political parties to respond and compelling mainstream media coverage.

The Rohith Vemula case exemplifies how social media can transform a personal tragedy into a collective movement, reconfiguring narratives of caste oppression in public discourse.

The Una Flogging Incident (2016)

In July 2016, four Dalit men in Una, Gujarat, were publicly flogged for skinning a dead cow a traditional occupation imposed on Dalits. Videos of the assault were recorded and circulated on WhatsApp, Facebook, and YouTube, rapidly going viral. The shocking visuals ignited outrage across the country, giving birth to the #ChaloUna movement.

Social media enabled rapid mobilisation. Within days, Dalit groups organised protests not only in Gujarat but also across Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, and Delhi. WhatsApp groups coordinated logistics, Twitter hashtags trended nationally, and Facebook pages provided live updates from protests. The virality of the incident compelled mainstream media to cover caste violence with unusual urgency.

More significantly, the Una incident highlighted how digital witnessing (the circulation of violent images) plays a crucial role in mobilising outrage. Unlike earlier instances of caste violence that remained invisible outside local contexts, the Una videos forced the nation to confront the brutality of caste practices.

The Una case demonstrates how visual evidence, when circulated through digital networks, can catalyse large-scale movements, reshaping both political debates and community solidarity.

Bhim Army and Chandrashekhar Azad

The Bhim Army, founded in 2015 in western Uttar Pradesh, exemplifies how social media can be institutionalised as a tool of resistance. Unlike earlier spontaneous movements, the Bhim Army systematically harnesses Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp to organise Dalit youth.

Leadership of Bhim Army amplified through online platforms, where speeches, photos, and live-streamed protests circulate widely. The slogan “Bhim Army Ek Soch Hai” (Bhim Army is an idea) itself reflects how the organisation positions itself within digital imaginaries of assertion. Beyond protests, the Bhim Army uses social media to promote educational initiatives, organise self-defence training, and build solidarity networks. Its online presence resonates with younger Dalit generations who see digital platforms as extensions of political identity.

The Bhim Army case illustrates how social media is not only reactive (mobilising after violence) but also proactive, enabling sustained organisation, leadership cultivation, and ideological dissemination. It exemplifies the transformation of Dalit politics from fragmented protests into structured digital activism.

The Hathras Rape Case (2020)

In September 2020, a 19-year-old Dalit woman in Hathras, Uttar Pradesh, was gang-raped and fatally injured. The case became a national controversy not only because of the brutality of the crime but also due to the police’s role in hastily cremating her body at night.

Social media platforms erupted with outrage, as hashtags like #JusticeForHathrasVictim and #DalitLivesMatter trended for weeks. Activists used Twitter threads, Instagram posts, and YouTube videos to document the incident, question state complicity, and amplify Dalit women’s voices. Dalit feminists, in particular, emphasised the intersection of caste and gendered violence, demanding recognition of how Dalit women face layered forms of oppression (Rege, 2013).

The global diaspora also mobilised: online petitions gained traction in the U.S. and U.K., and the incident was compared to international conversations about racial and gender violence. While mainstream media initially underreported the story, the relentless online activism forced sustained coverage.

The Hathras case illustrates the intersectional dimensions of digital caste activism, showing how social media foregrounds Dalit women’s struggles in ways that are often marginalised in both mainstream and Dalit male-dominated discourse.

Bhima-Koregaon and Dalit History Month

The Bhima-Koregaon battle commemoration in 2018, which celebrates Dalit soldiers’ victory over the Peshwas in 1818, turned into violent clashes in Maharashtra. While physical violence was devastating, online platforms amplified both solidarity and contestation. Hashtags such as #BhimaKoregaon and #DalitPride circulated widely, turning the commemoration into a nationally recognised site of Dalit identity assertion (Jaffrelot, 2019).

Parallel to this, the rise of #DalitHistoryMonth (inspired by Black History Month) exemplifies a proactive strategy of cultural assertion. Initiated by Dalit feminists and scholars, the campaign circulates stories of Dalit leaders, writers, and everyday heroes. On Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook, users share graphics, poems, and biographies that re-centre Dalit contributions within national history.

Together, Bhima-Koregaon activism and Dalit History Month show how digital platforms are not only sites of resistance against violence but also spaces for reclaiming history, rewriting memory, and celebrating identity.

Challenges and Limitations

While social media has provided unprecedented opportunities for Dalit and marginalized communities to assert their identities, challenge hierarchies, and mobilize collective action, the digital sphere is not an unproblematic space of emancipation. Instead, it reproduces several structural inequalities of offline society while creating new vulnerabilities.

The Digital Divide

One of the most fundamental challenges is the digital divide. Access to smartphones, reliable internet, and digital literacy is uneven across caste and class lines. According to the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI, 2023), rural areas and marginalized communities continue to lag behind in internet penetration. Many Dalit households cannot afford high-speed connectivity or multiple devices, which restricts their capacity to produce and circulate counter-narratives.

Thus, while Dalit voices may find space online, this space is disproportionately populated by urban, educated segments of these communities. The digital divide risks reproducing intra-community inequalities, leaving the poorest sections unheard.

Online Casteism and Trolling

Social media platforms are also spaces where caste prejudice is aggressively reproduced. Dalit activists, especially women, often face targeted trolling, harassment, and casteist abuse. Such abuse reflects how dominant caste groups seek to delegitimise subaltern voices even in supposedly democratized spaces. The persistence of casteist hate speech online demonstrates that digital platforms mirror offline hierarchies rather than fully dismantling them (Binny, 2022).

Misinformation and Appropriation

Another significant limitation is the proliferation of misinformation and narrative appropriation. Dalit-led movements often find their agendas diluted, co-opted, or misrepresented by dominant caste actors. Hashtags like #DalitLivesMatter gained international traction, some critics argue that they were commodified without adequately centering Dalit experiences. Fake news campaigns also undermine caste movements. During the Bhima-Koregaon protests, several WhatsApp forwards falsely accused Dalit activists of being “anti-national,” framing the assertion of caste identity as a threat to national unity. This demonstrates how digital networks can just as easily delegitimize struggles as amplify them.

Ephemerality and Attention Economy

Social media activism is subject to the attention economy. Hashtags may trend for a few days or weeks but often fade without leading to sustained structural change. Despite the massive digital mobilisations around Hathras in 2020, prosecutions and policy changes remain limited. The ephemerality of digital outrage risks reducing activism to symbolic visibility without material transformation.

The challenges of caste activism on social media reveal the ambivalent nature of digital spaces. They are at once sites of empowerment and exclusion, of visibility and vulnerability. While social media expands possibilities for voice and resistance, it cannot substitute for offline struggles, legal reforms, and grassroots mobilisation. Recognising these limitations is crucial to situating digital activism as a complementary rather than sufficient strategy for caste equality.

Conclusion

The exploration of social media's role in caste equality movements reveals both its transformative potential and its inherent limitations. As this paper has shown, platforms such as Twitter (X), Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and WhatsApp have emerged as digital arenas where historically marginalized communities, particularly Dalits, Bahujans, and Adivasis, articulate their identities, resist oppression, and mobilize collective solidarity. Campaigns like #DalitLivesMatter, #JusticeForRohith, and #StopCasteBasedViolence have disrupted mainstream silences, forced recognition of caste violence, and fostered transnational solidarity networks.

At a theoretical level, social media activism can be situated within Habermas' concept of the public sphere (1989), which emphasized deliberative spaces essential for democracy. Yet, as Nancy Fraser (1990) reminds us, marginalized groups often form "subaltern counter publics" to contest their exclusion from dominant publics. Dalit digital activism exemplifies such counter publics, producing alternative narratives that challenge hegemonic caste discourses. Furthermore, Castells' (2000) notion of the network society highlights how digital technologies reshape power by enabling decentralized flows of information. Dalit assertion online operates precisely through such decentralized, networked mobilizations.

This study has underscored, digital emancipation is not absolute. Offline inequalities deeply shape online engagement. The digital divide means that many Dalit households, particularly in rural areas, lack the resources to participate meaningfully in online activism. In addition, online harassment and trolling reproduce caste hierarchies within digital spaces, with Dalit activists routinely subjected to targeted abuse. The challenges of misinformation, narrative appropriation, and state surveillance further complicate the emancipatory claims of digital platforms. These contradictions demand that we view social media as a contested terrain, where both domination and resistance coexist.

The rise of digital caste assertion also transforms the very nature of activism. Traditional Dalit movements relied heavily on street protests, pamphlets, and community organizations. Today, these strategies coexist with online activism, resulting in hybrid mobilizations. The 2016 Una movement, the 2020 Hathras outrage, and the ongoing campaigns of the Bhim Army demonstrate how online visibility fuels offline protests, while offline struggles feed digital narratives. This cyclical interaction reflects a new phase of social movements in India, where physical and digital realms reinforce one another.

From a global perspective, Indian caste-based digital activism resonates with movements like Black Lives Matter in the U.S. and Indigenous struggles in Australia and Canada. All of these movements leverage digital platforms to amplify historically silenced voices, highlight systemic violence, and foster cross-border solidarities. The global circulation of hashtags like #DalitLivesMatter illustrates how local struggles are increasingly embedded in global networks of resistance.

Policy implications are also significant. To fully harness the democratic potential of digital platforms, there is a need for:

1. **Bridging the digital divide** through inclusive digital infrastructure policies, ensuring marginalized groups have equitable access to the internet.
2. **Stronger protections against online harassment**, including robust reporting mechanisms for casteist abuse.
3. **Algorithmic accountability**, requiring platforms to audit how their content moderation systems handle caste-based hate speech.
4. **Legal recognition of caste discrimination in digital spaces**, treating online casteism as an extension of offline systemic inequality.

At the societal level, it is vital to recognize that social media cannot substitute for deep structural reforms. Eradicating caste oppression requires legal, educational, and socio-economic interventions. What digital activism can do and has done is accelerate visibility, disrupt silences, and create solidarities that make structural change more urgent and visible.

Social media has emerged as both a weapon of the weak and a site of contestation in the battle for caste equality in India. It amplifies Dalit voices, fosters solidarity, and democratizes access to public discourse, but it simultaneously exposes activists to harassment, surveillance, and exclusion. Rather than seeing digital platforms as inherently liberating or oppressive, this paper argues for a nuanced view: social media is a double-edged tool its emancipatory potential depends on how communities, institutions, and policies engage with it. The struggle against caste oppression, therefore, must continue both online and offline, weaving together digital networks and grassroots mobilization to build a more equal and just society.

References

- Béteille, A. (1996). *Caste, class and power: Changing patterns of stratification in a Tanjore village*. Oxford University Press.
- Binny, M. (2022). Tracing the Contours of Hate Speech in India in the Pandemic Year: The Curious Case of Online Hate Speech against Muslims and Dalits During the Pandemic. *Contemporary Voice of Dalit*, 0(0). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2455328X221094364>
- Castells, M. (2000). *The rise of the network society* (2nd ed.). Blackwell Publishers.
- David, Dharish & Selvaraj, Timhna. (2025). Algorithmic Bias and Discrimination in India: A Looming Crisis. *Journal of Development Policy and Practice*. 10.1177/24551333251343358.
- Dirks, N. B. (2001). *Castes of mind: Colonialism and the making of modern India*. Princeton University Press.
- Fraser, N. (1990). Rethinking the public sphere: A contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy. *Social Text*, 25/26, 56–80.
- Ghurye, G. S. (1969). *Caste and race in India* (2nd ed.). Popular Prakashan.
- Guru, Gopal & Sarukkai, Sundar. (2019). Experience, Caste, and the Everyday Social. 10.1093/oso/9780199496051.001.0001.
- Habermas, J. (1989). *The structural transformation of the public sphere: An inquiry into a category of bourgeois society* (T. Burger, Trans.). MIT Press.
- IAMAI (2024). *Internet in India 2024: Usage statistics and trends*. Internet and Mobile Association of India. <https://www.iamai.in>
- Jodhka, S. S. (2015). *Caste in contemporary India*. Routledge India.
- Rege, S. (2013). *Writing caste/writing gender: Narrating Dalit women's testimonies*. Zubaan.
- Saha, A., & Gunawardana, S. (2022). Paradoxical inclusion of India's ex-untouchables in New Casteist media. *Media, Culture & Society*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01634437221096773>
- Singh, Sumanjeet. (2010). Digital Divide in India: Measurement, Determinants and Policy for Addressing the Challenges in Bridging the Digital Divide. *IJIDE*. 1. 1-24. 10.4018/jide.2010040101.
- Oza, Preeti & St., (2024). Dalit Activism in the Digital Age-Social Media as a Platform for Change.
- Srinivas, M. N. (1966). *Social change in modern India*. University of California Press.

Teltumbde, A. (2018). *The persistence of caste: The Khairlanji murders and caste in contemporary India*. Navayana Publishing.

Tufekci, Z. (2017). *Twitter and tear gas: The power and fragility of networked protest*. Yale University Press.

TRAI (2023). *Annual report 2022–23: Telecommunications and internet access in India*. Telecom Regulatory Authority of India.

Vemula, R. (2016). Rohith Vemula's final letter. Retrieved from <https://www.thewire.in/caste/rohith-vemula-suicide-letter>