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Casteist Remarks on Social Media and Education: A Critical Examination

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Abstract

Caste-based discrimination, although constitutionally prohibited in India, continues to manifest in multiple spheres of public life. With the expansion of digital technologies and widespread access to the internet, social media platforms have emerged as significant sites where caste prejudice is articulated, reinforced, and circulated. This chapter critically examines the rise of casteist remarks on social media and their implications for the education sector in India. Drawing on theories of digital public spheres, symbolic violence, and critical pedagogy, the chapter analyses how caste-based hostility online affects learners' identity formation, academic participation, and psychological well-being. Through case studies, legislative review, and institutional analysis, it highlights the urgent need for inclusive digital citizenship and educational reform. The chapter concludes by offering recommendations for educators, policymakers, and technological platforms to counter online casteism and foster socially just learning environments.

Introduction

Caste remains an enduring social reality in India, shaping the everyday lives, opportunities, and identities of millions of people. Despite constitutional safeguards and various reform movements, caste-based discrimination continues to exist both explicitly and implicitly. With the digital revolution, this deeply rooted social

hierarchy has entered new terrains—particularly social media. Platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube have become spaces where individuals express opinions, share information, and build communities. However, these spaces have also become fertile grounds for casteist rhetoric.

The rise of caste-based hate speech online indicates that caste prejudice has simply adapted to contemporary technological environments. Derogatory remarks targeting Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), and Other Backward Classes (OBC) communities are common in comment sections, memes, trolling cultures, and digital discourse. These expressions not only inflict psychological harm but also shape how individuals interact within educational institutions. Students from marginalised communities frequently encounter casteism in academic group chats, virtual classrooms, and institutional digital spaces.

This chapter explores the dynamic relationship between casteism on social media and the education system. It begins with a historical overview of caste-based exclusion, followed by an analysis of social media as a contemporary public sphere. It then examines the forms and effects of online casteism, its impact on educational spaces, legal frameworks addressing digital hate, and institutional responsibilities. Finally, it outlines pedagogical interventions and policy recommendations to combat casteist remarks online.

Historical Background of Caste and Social Exclusion

The history of caste in the Indian subcontinent is deeply intertwined with the evolution of its social, economic, and religious structures. The caste system, often described as one of the world's oldest forms of social stratification, has shaped identities, occupations, and relationships for centuries. Its origins are complex and have developed through layers of myth, ritual, custom, power, and politics. While contemporary India has made substantial progress through constitutional reforms and social movements, understanding the historical background of caste is crucial to analysing the continued realities of social exclusion.

The earliest references to caste-like divisions appear in the Rig Veda, particularly in the PurushaSukta, which describes society as divided into four varnas—Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra. Although scholars debate whether these categories were rigidly practiced during the Vedic period, the hymn symbolically le-

gitimised a hierarchical social order by linking it to divine creation. Over time, this broad four-fold varna system evolved into thousands of jatis or birth-based communities, each associated with specific occupations and rituals. This transformation marked the gradual shift from a fluid social structure to one rooted in heredity, purity, and pollution.

During the later Vedic and early classical periods, caste became more systematically codified. Texts such as the Manusmriti provided detailed prescriptions regarding duties, rights, and prohibitions for each caste. The ideology of purity and pollution played a central role, determining who could share food, enter temples, or engage in certain occupations. These prescriptions became the moral and legal basis for institutionalising exclusion, particularly for communities considered "untouchable." Such groups, later known as Dalits, were denied access to public spaces, education, and religious practices. Through these mechanisms, caste became not only a cultural identity but also a tool of social control.

With the rise of urban centres, trade networks, and state formation, caste adapted to new economic and political realities. The Maurya and Gupta empires, for instance, formalised administrative structures while simultaneously reinforcing caste-based occupational roles. In many regions, caste also intersected with tribal identities, assimilating diverse communities into the hierarchical order. At the same time, various religious movements attempted to challenge caste inequalities. The Buddhist rejection of ritual hierarchy and the Bhakti saints' emphasis on devotion beyond caste offered alternate visions of social equality. However, these movements, though influential, did not entirely dismantle caste-based practices.

The medieval period saw the growth of regional kingdoms and a flourishing of local jati systems. Occupational groups such as weavers, potters, and barbers developed caste councils or panchayats to regulate social behaviour within the community. Inter-caste mobility remained restricted, and endogamy—marriage within the caste—became a defining marker of caste identity. Social exclusion remained pervasive, particularly for Dalit and Adivasi communities who faced segregation in settlement patterns, employment, and social rituals.

Despite the emergence of syncretic cultures under the influence of Sufi and Bhakti movements, hereditary hierarchy continued to dominate everyday interactions.

The advent of British colonial rule marked another significant phase. The British administration, through its census operations and legal frameworks, attempted to classify Indian society into fixed categories. Colonial ethnographers, by emphasising caste as the fundamental social unit, inadvertently strengthened rigid identities. Policies such as land settlements and recruitment for the army often favoured specific castes, creating new inequalities. At the same time, colonial modernity opened avenues for critique. Reformers like JyotiraoPhule, SavitribaiPhule, B.R. Ambedkar, and leaders of the Dalit Movement challenged caste discrimination at ideological, political, and institutional levels. They argued that caste was not merely a social arrangement but a system designed to enforce inequality and restrict human freedom.

Ambedkar's critique was particularly transformative. He argued that caste-based exclusion was rooted in religious sanction and required structural change. The struggle for equality culminated in the formation of a modern, democratic republic that sought to abolish caste discrimination. The Constitution of India (1950) introduced provisions for equality, reservation policies, and safeguards for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Legal reforms, including the Protection of Civil Rights Act (1955) and the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act (1989), were enacted to combat caste-based violence and exclusion.

Despite these constitutional guarantees, the legacy of caste continues to influence social relations, access to resources, and opportunities. Social exclusion manifests in multiple forms—educational marginalisation, economic deprivation, residential segregation, and discrimination in employment markets. The rigidity of endogamy remains a powerful force, shaping marriage patterns and reinforcing caste identities. In rural areas, land ownership and occupational structures still reflect historical inequalities, while in urban spaces, subtle forms of discrimination persist in housing, workplace interactions, and social networks.

The historical evolution of caste—spanning ancient ritual hierarchies, medieval occupational systems, colonial redefinitions, and modern legal reforms—demonstrates its resilience and complexity. Caste has adapted

to changing political and economic contexts, yet it has repeatedly reproduced systems of privilege and exclusion. Understanding this background is essential to addressing contemporary challenges of inequality. The ongoing efforts of social reform movements, civil society organisations, and policymakers reflect the recognition that dismantling caste-based exclusion requires not only legal measures but also sustained social transformation.

The caste system has shaped Indian society for centuries. Dumont (1970) argues that caste is framed around the principle of hierarchy based on purity and pollution. Ambedkar (1936), however, defines caste as a system of graded inequality, wherein different castes are positioned within a rigid social structure that denies equality and dignity to marginalised communities. Srinivas (1962) highlights how social processes like Sanskritisation reconfigure caste dynamics but do not dismantle the hierarchical structure.

Historically, education has been a key domain where caste-based exclusion has manifested. While upper-caste communities enjoyed privileged access to learning, lower castes were systematically denied literacy and formal education. The introduction of affirmative action policies after independence aimed to correct historical injustices. However, discrimination persists today in classrooms, hostels, peer interactions, and teacher attitudes. With the increasing use of digital technologies in educational settings—especially during and after the COVID-19 pandemic—caste prejudice has found a new platform for expression.

Social Media as a New Public Sphere

According to Habermas (1989), the public sphere is a space where individuals come together to discuss and debate social issues. In the digital age, social media platforms have become new public spheres, where discussions unfold instantaneously and reach wide audiences. Castells (2012) describes these spaces as "networked publics," shaped by interactions between individuals, technologies, and political processes.

However, social media does not function as an ideal democratic space. The architecture of these platforms—driven by algorithms prioritising engagement—often amplifies controversial or hateful content. Anonymity allows users to express prejudiced opinions without fear of repercussions. Virality ensures rapid

dissemination of discriminatory posts. Furthermore, algorithmic biases may reinforce inequalities by exposing users to divisive content.

These structural features make social media a breeding ground for various forms of casteist speech, whether explicit or subtle.

Nature and Forms of Casteist Remarks on Social Media

Casteist remarks online appear in multiple forms, ranging from overt abuse to covert microaggressions. The major categories include:

1. Explicit Hate Speech

This includes the use of caste-based slurs to directly insult marginalised communities. Such remarks are intended to degrade and dehumanise individuals based on caste identity.

2. Meritocracy Narratives

Criticism of affirmative action policies often manifests in statements that portray reservation beneficiaries as undeserving or less capable. These narratives delegitimise structural disadvantage and reinforce upper-caste privilege.

3. Stereotype Reinforcement

Online discussions and memes frequently associate specific castes with stereotypes such as impurity, manual labour, or intellectual inferiority.

4. Humour and Memes

Casteist jokes and memes normalise discrimination by disguising prejudice as humour. This trivialises the lived experiences of marginalised communities.

5. Trolling and Cyberbullying

Dalit activists, scholars, and public figures often face coordinated digital harassment intended to silence their voices and discourage activism.

6. Denialism

Some users deny the existence of caste discrimination altogether, framing discussions of caste oppression as unnecessary or exaggerated.

These forms reveal how digital platforms replicate and sometimes intensify offline caste-based hierarchies.

Psychological and Social Impact of Online Casteism

Exposure to casteist remarks can have profound psychological and social consequences:

1. Emotional Trauma

Victims often experience feelings of fear, anxiety, alienation, and humiliation. Repeated exposure can lead to chronic stress or mental health issues.

2. Withdrawal from Online Spaces

Students may distance themselves from online academic platforms, group discussions, or peer interactions to avoid harassment.

3. Identity Suppression

Learners from marginalised communities may choose to conceal their caste identity, surname, or reservation status in digital settings.

4. Internalised Casteism

Sustained online prejudice may lead individuals to internalise negative stereotypes, affecting self-esteem and academic confidence.

5. Normalisation of Hostility

When casteist remarks go unchallenged, they create an environment where discriminatory behaviour is normalised.

Impact on Marginalized Communities

Casteist remarks on social media have a profound and multidimensional impact on marginalized communities, particularly Dalits, Adivasis, and other historically oppressed caste groups. Unlike offline discrimination,

online casteism operates continuously and invasively, often reaching victims within their personal and private spaces. The effects are psychological, social, cultural, and structural in nature.

a) Psychological and Emotional Consequences

Repeated exposure to casteist slurs, derogatory stereotypes, and humiliating comments leads to emotional distress, anxiety, fear, and depression among members of marginalized communities. Social media harassment often involves public shaming, which intensifies feelings of worthlessness and social inferiority—a condition Dr. B. R. Ambedkar described as the internalization of caste stigma. The permanence and shareability of online content worsen trauma, as victims are aware that abusive remarks can resurface at any time.

b) Normalization of Caste-Based Humiliation

When casteist remarks circulate unchecked, they contribute to the normalization of discrimination in digital culture. Jokes, memes, and sarcastic comments trivialize centuries of oppression and make caste prejudice appear socially acceptable. This normalization discourages victims from speaking out and emboldens perpetrators, reinforcing existing caste hierarchies even in supposedly “modern” digital spaces.

c) Silencing and Self-Censorship

Marginalized users often respond to online casteism by withdrawing from digital participation. Fear of trolling, abuse, or targeted attacks leads to self-censorship, especially when individuals express opinions related to politics, education, or social justice. This silencing results in the exclusion of marginalized voices from public discourse, undermining the democratic promise of social media.

d) Impact on Educational and Professional Aspirations

Casteist remarks directed at students, researchers, and professionals damage self-confidence and academic motivation. Derogatory comments questioning merit, reservation policies, or intellectual ability reproduce stereotypes that affect performance and aspirations. For first-generation learners, such hostility can lead to digital disengagement, limiting access to academic networks, opportunities, and knowledge-sharing platforms.

e) Reinforcement of Structural Inequality

Online casteism does not exist in isolation; it mirrors and reinforces offline social inequalities. Social media becomes a tool through which dominant caste narratives are amplified, while marginalized perspectives are delegitimized. This reinforcement sustains power imbalances by denying oppressed communities equal representation, credibility, and influence in digital public spheres.

f) Collective Trauma and Community-Level Impact

Beyond individual suffering, casteist remarks generate collective trauma within marginalized communities. Viral incidents of abuse serve as reminders of systemic oppression and historical violence. Such incidents cultivate a shared sense of vulnerability and insecurity, particularly among young users who are still forming their social and political identities.

g) Resistance and Resilience

Despite these challenges, marginalized communities also demonstrate resilience and resistance. Many users reclaim digital spaces to assert identity, share experiences, and challenge casteist narratives. However, the burden of resistance often falls unfairly on victims, highlighting the urgent need for institutional support and systemic interventions.

In sum, the impact of casteist remarks on social media extends far beyond individual offense. It shapes mental health, restricts participation, reproduces inequality, and threatens the inclusivity of digital spaces. Addressing this issue requires not only legal and technological solutions but also ethical awareness and social responsibility.

Casteist Remarks and the Education Sector

Digitised learning environments have become central to academic life. However, they are not immune to societal biases.

1. Discrimination in Virtual Classrooms

Teachers or peers may make derogatory comments about students' caste backgrounds, either directly or indirectly.

2. Exclusion in Academic Interactions

Marginalised students may be excluded from study groups or collaborative projects, impacting their academic performance.

3. Teacher-Student Power Imbalance

Instances of teachers posting casteist content on social media or showing bias in digital interactions create hostile learning spaces.

4. Institutional Inaction

When institutions fail to address online casteism, students may hesitate to report such incidents.

5. Impact on Educational Outcomes

Caste-based hostility can affect concentration, participation, and academic success.

Case Studies and Contemporary Incidents

Case Study 1: Digital Harassment of Dalit Scholars

Activists and scholars who engage with caste-related issues frequently face targeted online harassment from troll networks.

Case Study 2: Exclusion in Classroom WhatsApp Groups

Reports have highlighted that marginalised students are sometimes mocked or removed from virtual academic groups.

Case Study 3: Viral Anti-Reservation Memes

Memes targeting reservation policies often spread widely, reinforcing casteist narratives.

Digital Policies, Laws, and Regulatory Framework in India

Several laws address caste-based digital hate speech:

SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989: Addresses caste-based insults and intimidation.

Indian Penal Code Sections 153A, 295A, 503, 505: Cover hate speech and criminal intimidation.

Information Technology Act, 2000: Regulates misuse of digital platforms.

IT (Intermediary Guidelines), 2021: Holds platforms accountable for harmful content.

Despite these mechanisms, challenges remain in enforcement, grievance redressal, and platform transparency.

The Role of Educational Institutions in Countering Online Casteism

Educational institutions play a central role in addressing caste-based digital discrimination.

1. Strengthening Anti-Discrimination Cells

Institutions should empower SC/ST and Equal Opportunity Cells to handle digital discrimination complaints.

2. Digital Grievance Mechanisms

Anonymous portals and reporting systems can encourage students to report online casteism.

3. Awareness and Sensitisation

Workshops, seminars, and campaigns on caste, digital safety, and constitutional rights can foster inclusion.

4. Faculty Development Programmes

Teachers must be trained in caste sensitivity and ethical digital conduct.

5. Clear Institutional Policies

Colleges should craft explicit guidelines on acceptable online behaviour and consequences of casteist acts.

Pedagogical Interventions for Inclusive Digital Citizenship

1. Critical Digital Literacy

Curricula must teach students how to recognise hate speech, understand algorithms, and navigate social media responsibly.

2. Curriculum Reform

Incorporating topics on human rights, caste equity, and media ethics can foster informed citizenship.

3. Counter-Speech Strategies

Students should be encouraged to respond to hate with informed, ethical, and empathetic dialogue.

4. Dialogic Pedagogy

Classroom discussions on caste can help debunk stereotypes and build empathy.

5. Community Engagement

Partnerships with social justice organisations can extend learning beyond classrooms.

Recommendations

Establish dedicated national helplines and digital portals for reporting caste-based online harassment.

Introduce compulsory digital citizenship courses in higher education institutions.

Strengthen collaboration between tech companies and civil society to regulate caste-based hate speech.

Promote interdisciplinary research on caste and digital cultures.

Encourage student-led inclusivity initiatives within campuses.

Provide mental health support for students affected by online discrimination.

Develop AI-based detection systems for casteist content across Indian languages.

Conclusion

Casteist remarks on social media reveal how deeply entrenched caste hierarchies continue to shape contemporary Indian society. As educational spaces increasingly integrate digital technologies, online casteism poses serious threats to equity, dignity, and academic participation. It is imperative for policymakers, educational institutions, and social media platforms to collaboratively address this form of discrimination. At the same time, the digital sphere has enabled counter-narratives and resistance movements that challenge caste dominance and assert marginalized identities. However, the responsibility to combat casteist remarks should not rest solely on victims and activists. Educational institutions, social media platforms, policymakers, and civil society must play a proactive role in fostering ethical digital environments.

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