



# Caste-Based Hate Speech and Online Political Mobilisation: A Comparative Study of Digital Campaigning in India

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## Abstract:

The digital platforms have fundamentally transformed the politics of mobilization in India, but have also turned out to be the medium through which highly rooted social hierarchies have found their way through. This paper discusses how caste-based hate speech works in the context of electioneering, with an emphasis on the 2024 General Elections. The research will explore the question of casteist language shifting to the periphery of social interactions to the normalized instrument of digital campaigning by using a discourse analysis of Facebook and WhatsApp content. The results indicate that although Facebook is the location of high-visibility majoritarian rhetoric, WhatsApp is a dark social space where dehumanizing casteist slurs and misinformation can be spread without reprisals. This normalization is a great danger to the democratic participation of Dalit, Bahujan, and Adivasi (DBA) communities, who are marginalized.

**Key Words:** Hate Speech, Caste Politics, Political Mobilisation, Digital Campaigning, India

## 1. Introduction: The Digital Frontline of Caste.

The meeting point of the old social structures and new digital architecture has provided a precarious situation to Indian democracy. With political parties becoming more dependent on social media in campaign budgets, there has been a change in the form of political "persuasion." Raised no longer within the realm of policy debates, digital mobilization is often based on the polarization of identities. The core of this polarization is the continuous and changing caste-based hate speech.

The use of casteist language in the election discourse is not novel, but the digital form of the same is somehow perilous. Digital platforms do not require a moment of physical assembling (rally) to spread vitriol, which is easily and is usually anonymous, and can be disseminated widely (in scale). This article discusses the ways in which caste-based hate speech is deployed not only to disparage individuals, but as a

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political strategy to a vote-bank by dominating caste, to claim to be socially superior and demonize the constitutional rights of the marginalized groups.

## **2. Hypothesis: The normalization of Hate.**

One of the key questions of digital sociology today is whether hate speech is being normalized. Normalization is the condition of inflammatory and exclusionary rhetoric becoming a common aspect of a society's life, and losing its shock value, becoming a normal political speech.

It is a shift in policy to identity: the shift at the heart of the radicalization of the American experience.

A change towards Varna (caste/identity) over Vikas (development) has been recorded in digital messaging in the context of Indian elections. Coded or overt casteist slurs by political actors indicate to their supporters that they will preserve the status quo in which they are placed. This rhetoric is frequently based on the merit vs. reservation argument and in which affirmative action is an assailment on the rights of the meritocratic upper castes.

### **Algorithmic Amplification**

Social media such as Facebook have an engagement-based algorithm that Favors high-arousal content. The nature of hate speech is that it causes strong emotions, anger, pride or fear. As a result, casteist information tends to get greater exposure as compared to neutral political information. This becomes a cycle of feeding itself with political campaigners having an incentive to create increasingly polarizing content to cut through the digital noise.

## **3. Procedure: Discourse Analysis during Election window**

In this research, a Qualitative Discourse Analysis (QDA) approach is employed to figure out the subtleties of this phenomenon. The data collection was conducted in the most active period of elections (April-June 2024), and two different digital spaces were considered:

1. Facebook: A publicly available platform upon which official party pages and fan groups exist.
2. WhatsApp: A closed, encrypted space, in which IT Cells and local neighbourhood communities share unverified information.



The discussion revolves around the use of so-called dog whistles (codic language that seems to be neutral to the outsiders but has a certain meaning to the target audience) and open slurs against Dalit and Bahujan leadership.

#### **4. The Body of Caste-list Election Discourse.**

Casteist languages during elections will largely be in three categories:

- i. Dehumanization: Likening the marginalized groups to animals or filth to help justify their disenfranchisement.
- ii. Criminalization: The Dalit-Bahujan political mobilization is framed as anti-national or criminal, and a threat to state stability.
- iii. The "Merit" Trope: Dismissing the legitimacy of leaders with marginalized backgrounds with the language of intellectual superiority.

In the 2024 election year, such tropes were often used to discredit the Save the Constitution narrative that was being popularized by opposition parties. When DBA groups began to invoke their constitutional rights, the online reaction of the traditional castes of dominance tended to go back to the traditional beliefs of pure and pollution, tailored to a 21st century audience.

#### **5. Comparison Public Square vs. Platform. The Dark Social**

These architectural variations in Facebook and WhatsApp determine the censorship of caste-based hate speech, its consumption, and regulation. Although owned by the same company (Meta), both platforms have different sociotechnical logics of utility in the political mobilization.

Theories of communication  
Theories of social interaction  
Theories of social change  
Theories of textual production/culture

Facebook operates as a "semi-public" square. Since content can be more visible to broader networks, hate speech in this case is often defined as one with a strategic ambiguity or dog-whistling. Political actors employ coded words as opposed to the direct slurs that may attract community standard breaches or AI-driven censoring filters.

The "Freebie" Discourse: In the 2024 elections it was common to see terms such as revdi (freebies) or khata-khat (instant benefits) being used on Facebook to specifically target welfare schemes that were



directed at Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST). The discussion of social justice as an economic cost of unproductive communities economically launders casteist prejudice using the rhetoric of fiscal conservatism.

Visual Rhetoric: Facebook is based on video and memes that enable the spread of visuals that ridicule the look or cultural habits of Dalit-Bahujan leaders. The unstable areas on Facebook contribute to the normalization of caste hierarchy by the normalization of the use of various trolling tactics and mass publicity of DBA-centric pages, in the form of the comment sections of mainstream news pages.

### **WhatsApp: the Dark Social Infrastructure.**

WhatsApp is the realm of political mobilization that is private. Due to end-to-end encryption, researchers and moderators make it a black box. It is the main instrument of casteist violence and disinformation as it has no supervision.

The "IT Cell" Architecture: Political parties use hierarchical WhatsApp groups, with war rooms on the state level and groups in the booths. Within these closed spaces the language changes to coded political criticism but to dehumanizing slurs. Leaked or archived WhatsApp data has been analyzed to show a great rate of classic caste-based insults which would otherwise be prohibited in a real-life setting.

False History: WhatsApp is the locus of historical revisionism. There is a lot of propagation of messages which assert that the Constitution was not drafted by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar or that reservation policies were a conspiracy to ruin the nation. These stories are frequently framed as forwards by a reputable member of family or local community and this gives the hate speech an aspect of social validity that cannot be achieved in the social media.

### **6. The Merit Argument, or Use of Merit as an Exclusionary Tool**

A weaponization of the idea of merit is one of the strongest tools of normalized casteist speech in online campaigning. This rhetoric has been a lightning rod in the 2024 election discourse, in which the discussion of a national caste census came up.

On the online platforms, the proportional representation (the so-called Jitni Abadi, Utina Haq slogan) was welcomed with the flood of content that placed the so-called General Category in the role of victimized minority. This narrative of Savarna Victimhood is an online mobilization strategy to imply that merit is dying when marginalized castes are included in the labor force or the legislature.



This discourse supports the natural capacities of the system of exclusion as the consequence of biological or intellectual superiority and promotes the structure of stratification in the Varna. It is a type of hate speech that has been intellectualized and circumvents the old-fashioned moderation since it does not contain any bad words, but it can fulfill the same purpose: the marginalization of a particular protected group.

## **7. Gender Casteism Online**

One of the key results of discourse analysis of the election period is that the hate speech towards women representing the marginalized communities is intersectional. Dalit and Bahujan women politicians are subjected to a two-sided sword of abuse which is Genda-Casteist.

**Sexualized Vilification:** When a woman with DBA background claims to be political, online reaction will tend to be sexualized threats or remarks about her purity. This is a virtual continuation of the historical right that the dominant castes have to the bodies of Dalit women.

**Silencing via Harassment:** DBA women are forced out of online spaces by organized dogpiling, in which hundreds of accounts all attack one individual, all at once. It is a strategic, politically demobilizing move, guaranteeing that even the online populace will continue to be a place of privilege of upper caste male voices.

## **8. Influence on Political Psychology and Voter behaviour**

This is the language which has a tremendous psychological effect on the electorate as it is normalized. To the elite castes, this kind of rhetoric makes them more vulnerable to populist mobilization by exposing them to such rhetoric all the time, instilling a sense of entitlement and threat. To the marginalized, the online world turns into a hostile place that does not encourage political actions.

### **8.1 The "Chilling Effect"**

Caste-based hate speech normalizes, which forms a chilling effect as DBA individuals will censor themselves to prevent digital lynching or other consequences in real life. These imbalances the online portrayal of popular opinion, which gives the impression of a consensus: around dominant-caste narratives. This may result in silencing of issues such as land rights, manual scavenging and atrocities during elections as these issues are overshadowed by the din of identity-based polarization.



## **9. Laws and Regulatory loopholes.**

The spread of caste-based hate speech in the 2024 elections revealed some serious loopholes in the Indian legal and regulatory framework. The nominal framework offered by the Indian Penal Code (since 2023, Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita) and the IT Rules, 2021, can be usually ineffective against the sheer scale of digital casteism.

### **9.1 The Statutory Gap**

The IPC (since amended in BNS) 153A and 295A criminalize the promotion of enmity between groups, as per caste or religion. The legal burden of incitement is, however, tough, and in many cases it must be shown that there is a direct connection to physical violence. Digital casteism often works by dehumanizing and social excluding--the harms of system but not always leading to riots on the spot. Moreover, the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act has not managed to adjust to the public view prerequisite of the web media. Would a post on a private WhatsApp group of 500 members be regarded as being in the public view? Much ambiguity in judicial interpretation on this issue has seen many of the perpetrators get away with it.

The IT Rules, and in particular, the 9.2 Intermediary Liability.

The platforms must as be mandated in the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021, take down the content that threatens to divide, disrupt, or jeopardize the unity, integrity, or security of India or fosters enmity between communities. Nevertheless, implementation is still discriminatory. In the 2024 election cycle, social media sites such as Facebook were accused of shadow-banning Dalit-Bahujan activists and not flagging high-reach accounts that post casteist false information. The use of AI-based moderation systems that have been mostly trained on English-language data does not tend to pick up regional slurs and the culturally specific context of caste-based dog-whistling.

## **10. Digital Resistance and Counter-Speech.**

Dalit, Bahujan, and Adivasi (DBA) groups have devised advanced types of online resistance in response to hate normalization. This counter-speech does not passively respond to it, but is an act of reclaiming digital narratives.

## **10.1 Reclaiming the Constitution**

The Save the Constitution (Samvidhan Bachao) movement was a characteristic of the 2024 mobilization. Images of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and the Preamble were used by the digital activists as the graphic response to the rhetoric of majoritarianism. By putting the Constitution on the centre stage, they transformed the debate on merit to the debate on rights and had to take a linguistic turn in the election discourse.

Online grassroots have also been created to bust the casteist myths. When WhatsApp is flooded with fake news about the quotas of the reservations or historical facts, such activists share the evidence-based infographics and videos there too. Such fact-checking as resistance is essential in rupturing the echo chambers that political IT cells form.

## **11. Conclusion: The Way ahead**

The quality of normalization of caste-based hate speech in online campaigning is a step backwards in the democratic process in India. Casteist language as a political mobilization tool does not merely win votes, but rather destroys the social fabric, and deprives marginalized citizens of their right to a safe and inclusive public space.

As can be seen in the comparison between Facebook and WhatsApp, there has been a two-fold attack on DBA identity: the discourses of publicity that construct the legitimization of their existence as merit which is delegitimized and the discourses of the dark social that construct the dehumanization of their existence. To fight this a multi-faceted approach is needed:

- i. Platform Accountability: Tech giants should invest in language moderation in the region that is sensitive to caste.
- ii. Legislative News: The Online Hate Speech (Prevention) Bill, 2024, and other frameworks should directly outline caste-based online atrocities to help close the gap of the public perception.
- iii. Digital Literacy: The ability of voters to identify and dismiss identity-based misinformation is a critical element to the democratic sustainability in the long run.

Finally, until it has been de-casted the digital square cannot be ever truly democratic. The 2024 elections were a wakeup call: otherwise, the "normalization of hate will be the new blueprint of surviving in digital politics.



## **12. Online Spaces, Digital Infrastructures, and the Ghettoization of Online Spaces**

Caste-based mobilization has caused so-called digital ghettoization, in which social media algorithms form reinforced silos, which are reminiscent of old caste segregations. It is this structural fact that renders the discourse of election-period especially poisonous, in that little space is given to cross-caste discourse or the critique of biased accounts.

### **12.1 The Echo Chamber Effect**

On social networking sites such as Facebook and WhatsApp, the users tend to be members of groups whose content is organized by caste associations or the local influential leaders. The hate speech along the lines of caste is not only condoned in these spaces but also reinforced by social validation. When a user posts a casteist meme when there is an election, they get likes, shares and positive comments among others of their peer group, a behavior that strengthens the habit. This forms a spiral of silence among those few who may dissent since the social cost of going against casteist narrative within the very group of their community is prohibitively large.

### **12.2 Visual Culture and Casteist Memetics**

The 2024 elections experienced a boom in visual media usage, namely, reels, TikTok-style shorts, and AI-generated images, to spread caste-based stereotypes. Since visual media avoids the textual filters of platform moderators, it has been used to convey hate speech.

**Quota Candidate Trope:** SC/ST students or politicians are frequently portrayed in memes as being incompetent in comparison with representatives of the General Category. Through the humor and satire, the hate speech behind the mask is more acceptable and is therefore easier to spread to younger, more digitally native voters who would otherwise avoid blatant bigotry.

**Symbolic Appropriation** In many instances, the dominant-caste communities take to digital space to co-opt Dalit symbols (the color blue, statues of Ambedkar) in order to undermine or satirize them. Such symbolic violence is one of the main aspects of online political mobilization, which serves to demoralize the opposition base.

### **13. AI-generated Bias and the Silencing of DBA Voices**

One of the main elements of the functioning of caste hate speech is the bias that is inherent in the algorithms that control our online life. Platforms are never neutral observers but its technical setup often makes it easy to suppress the voices of the marginalized.

#### **13.1 Selective Moderation and Language Barriers**

The majority of social media have automated systems of moderation, which are competent in English but not in the Hinglish or local dialect (such as Bhojpuri, Marathi or Tamil) where casteist epithets are most common. Moreover, a great deal of caste-related insults are situational. Even a seemingly innocent word in a general dictionary may be a very vile slur in a localized rural or political situation. Since platforms do not employ enough human moderators who have experienced the Indian caste system, the nuances are lost, and the hate speech will continue to exist throughout the election. Shadow-banning and reporting campaigns are campaigns established to address the issue of fake news (Pivek, 2020).

Mass reporting is a tool employed by organized political IT cells. When a DBA activist/politician posts material claiming their rights, IT cells use hundreds of accounts to report the post as violating community standards. Social media platforms will react by shadow-banning the account, cutting off its reach without informing the user, or banning it outright. This brings an unequal ground playing field where hate speech of the dominant caste succeeds under technical oversight, and DBA resistance is stifled under technical manipulation.

### **14. Case Study: 2024 Election Discussion on Caste Census**

The need to have a national caste census was one of the most debatable issues of the recent election and it provides a perfect example of how hate speech is applied in political mobilization.

**Online Mobilization Against Data:** The critics of the census mobilized on social media to make the data collection process appear divisive and anti-national. The discussion soon degenerated into hate speech, and posters indicated that the census was a weapon to punish the hardworking upper castes.

**Weaponizing Economic Anxiety:** WhatsApp campaigning that aimed to capitalize on the fear that a census would cause more reservations, and thus rob the young people of dominant castes of their jobs. This economic fear was invoked to cause the violent and exclusionary language to be used against DBA communities, which were seen as encroachers of national resources.



## **15. The Political Leadership and the role of political leadership in normalization.**

Caste hates speech does not just become normalized on a bottom-up basis; it is oftentimes fuelled by the rhetoric of political leaders. By coded language or not denouncing casteist assaults by their allies, high-ranking officials give the common people a moral license to act in the same manner.

### **Silence as Sanction**

The lack of an inter-party consensus on digital casteism makes it thrive. With such high competition in Indian elections, the winning at any cost mentality may cause parties to ignore hate speech created by their respective IT cells. This institutional silence is perhaps the greatest aspect of normalization of casteist discourse. The political class supports the notion that caste-based vilification is an acceptable aspect of democracy by turning hate speech into a by-product of the mobilization process, instead of a human rights violation.

## **16. Conclusion**

A number of conclusions are inevitable to be drawn when studying the 2024 election period. To begin with, caste-based hate speech has ceased to be a low-level whispering, but it is now a digital campaign that is high in volume. Second, social media sites such as Facebook and WhatsApp offer the structural means of this speech to evade social and legal filtering in the form of algorithms and encryption. Lastly, the institutionalization of this language has altered the political terrain, with identity-based polarization becoming the standard form of online interaction.

The internet has the potential to bring about democracy in the name of equality and freedom of expression but instead, it is being corrupted by the very hierarchies it was supposed to destroy. Beyond a complete change in the governance of platforms, and a reaffirmation of constitutional values online, caste-based hate speech will remain the future of Indian political mobilization.

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