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Caste Narratives in Social Media

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A B S T R A C T

The intersection of social media and casteism is a critical area of study, particularly in understanding how algorithmic bias perpetuates inequalities in the digital public sphere. The aim of this study is to identify the Instagram handles of caste groups in Tamil Nadu. This article examines how dominant castes in Tamil Nadu linguistically and rhetorically construct, circulate, and normalise caste narratives on Instagram. This study employs a netnographic data collection method, incorporating participant observation specifically directed toward online fieldwork. The posts with hashtags #yadavar, #nadar, and #thevar were analysed using thematic approach. The reviewed database ascertained that caste narratives of three dominant castes, i.e, Yadavar community, Nadar community, and Thevar community, are visibly active on the Instagram platform. The findings reveal that technological advancement and digital connectivity do not inherently erase social stratifications. Instead, the digital age provides highly visible architectures for dominant castes to normalise caste narratives under the guise of cultural identity preservation.

Keywords: Caste identity, dominant castes, caste names, narratives

Introduction

Caste identity is given by birth itself. Caste identity is hereditary, as individuals inherit their caste status from their parents. Society is constructed on the basis of caste by us. Caste groups determine our reputation in society even after we die. Caste parties cultivate an attitude of caste fanaticism through social media groups. This leads to increased inequalities, violence, and hatred among other castes. Multiple political parties have been founded to represent single castes. The core objective of all these parties is the same: to cultivate and celebrate caste superiority. However, their ideologies remain subjective. These caste narratives influence audiences to promote and perpetuate casteism.

Social media and casteism represent a critical area of study, especially regarding how algorithmic bias perpetuates digital inequalities. This research envisions studying how social media algorithms contribute to the spread and normalization of caste narratives. As digital technologies and social media platforms have become widespread, caste structures have also extended into the digital realm. Social media has become a platform for projecting caste pride, where individuals from diverse backgrounds assert the superiority of their caste over others. Furthermore, caste narratives on social media often lead to hostility and confrontation in digital spaces between different caste groups, largely because these platforms offer the affordance of anonymity. Caste groups spread fake propaganda against rival caste leaders, exploiting the fact that these platforms lack adequate regulations. Additionally, social media caste groups cultivate young minds to believe in their caste's superiority over others. Hate speech within these social media groups is not based solely on caste; it is also driven by religion, race, and gender. These groups exploit platform affordances such as searchability, visibility, and shareability to deploy rhetorical strategies. Caste-dominant communities use these strategies to construct two main components: 1) that their caste belongs to the lineages that ruled this land, 2) that their caste culture deserves a superior status. These profiles' digitally mediated discursive strategies contribute to the marginalisation of lower castes by normalising caste cultures, strengthening caste networks, reinforcing caste discrimination, and diminishing anti-caste measures (Nayana & Shagun, 2025).

Review of Literature

Caste is a hereditary social group with its own traditional rules, its own organisation and its own leadership (Senart, 1909). Such a group will have a head or a council to look after its own affairs and will often come together at festivals of a religious or social nature. Membership of a caste will be linked to a particular occupation and to a number of social restrictions (especially in respect of marriage, food and the practices of purity and pollution). Senart saw the concept of pollution as a key one in the understanding of the caste system. Ambedkar also pointed out that the caste system was not created by Manu. It had already existed in India long before Manu. He did not create the caste system. He simply accepted the system as it was and described it and codified the rules of caste and the duties of caste. That is to say Manu's contribution was to give form to the system which was already in existence (B.R. Ambedkar,1919).

Despite the existence of the Constitution, the various reforms and the various social movements which have been launched over the years in the interest of equality, caste still has a very real and tangible impact on Indian society. Its roots are in history and religion and it has been a factor in the lives of people across generations. It still affects all aspects of social life in India today, from political involvement through to economic opportunities, access to resources and the nature of the relationships we have with each other. So, to understand the nature of the continuing problems of social inequality, of discrimination and of social justice in India we have to understand caste (ibid).

Beyond its economic aspects, the connection between hierarchy, caste, and religion also deserves brief consideration. Hierarchy is often regarded as central to Hindu ideology, with Brahmins at the top and kings following in the second position. This structure rests on the purity-pollution concept, which derives its legitimacy from Hindu religious writings (Kolenda, 2006). In post-independence India, amid various transformations noted earlier, this hierarchy has been steadily eroding. Srinivas observes that the notion of hierarchy has lost legitimacy both at the national and state levels. He further suggests that terms like "horizontal stretch" and "idea of difference" better capture contemporary caste discussions than hierarchy does. This viewpoint aligns with Gupta's (2006) contention that the notion of a single caste hierarchy founded on one cultural factor is questionable. Rather, multiple hierarchies exist, shaped by different variables, and their ideological importance has diminished considerably. The earlier exploration of caste-occupation links makes it clear that economic stratification endures and continues to appear in caste form, albeit in an altered way (Trivedi, 2007).

More recently, Anandha Raman and Ratnamala (2022) examined how caste identities are expressed and reinforced through Facebook, particularly through the use of caste-related hashtags, surnames, community pages, profile names, and symbolic representations. Their study highlights how social media platforms have increasingly become spaces where dominant caste communities publicly express their caste pride and strengthen a shared sense of identity. These practices raise important questions about the extent to which caste identities and titles have actually disappeared from public life, despite the influence of the Dravidian movement and its emphasis on social equality and the rejection of caste-based distinctions. *E. V. Ramasamy* popularly known as *Thanthai Periyar*, strongly criticised the caste system, arguing that it was fundamentally incompatible with equality, dignity, and self-respect. Although *Periyar's* social reform movement contributed significantly to the promotion of social justice in Tamil Nadu, the continued visibility of caste identities on social media suggests that caste-based identification remains relevant in contemporary society. Anandha Raman and Ratnamala (2022) therefore draw attention to the possibility that Facebook may contribute not to the dismantling of caste, but to the strengthening of caste solidarity and community consolidation. Their discussion focuses on three prominent caste communities in Tamil Nadu: the *Nadar*, *Thevar*, and *Vanniyar* communities. By examining how these communities represent them online, the study explores the complex relationship between historical experiences of caste discrimination, aspirations for social advancement, and the contemporary reproduction of caste identity through digital platforms.

According to social media ethnographies of south India, the use of modern digital media does not automatically dissolve traditional socio-cultural structures; instead, these platforms serve as extensions where offline stratification is actively renegotiated. In Tamil-speaking digital spaces, user networks frequently mirror localized caste and kin divisions. Users deploy identity markers—such as localized memorial banners, clan designations, caste-coded emojis, and endogamous marriage appeals—to transform everyday digital interactions into spaces of communal consolidation and competitive identity assertion (Venkatraman, 2017).

Caste-based animosity on digital platforms often relies on targeted online harassment, descent-based humiliation, and hate speech that mirrors offline exclusion, even though platforms operate global content moderation infrastructures. Computational hate speech filters frequently fail to interpret vernacular idioms, regional slurs, and culturally specific caste markers. The persistence of this language creates hostile digital environments for marginalized communities, exposing structural inadequacies in how both platforms and domestic legal frameworks regulate caste-motivated digital violence (Sajlan.D, 2021).

During the turbulent 18th century after the decline of the Mughal Empire, martial groups and mercenary bands (such as the early Maratha and Sikh polities) used military success to establish sovereign dynasties and claim Kshatriya status, demonstrating that political conquest routinely reorganized caste boundaries. Gorringe's ethnographic documentation of intermediate and dominant OBC groups (such as *Thevars, Vanniyars, and Kongu Vellalar Gounders*) demonstrates how regional groups repurpose mass communication tools to fashion hyper-masculine "warrior" lineages (*kula perumai*). These scholars argue that dominant-caste youth mobilise visual cues, localised flags, traditional proverbs (*pazhamozhikal*), and honorific prefixes online to legitimise social dominance, directly countering Tamil Nadu's Post-Periyar secular consensus (S. Anandhi, 2017; H. Gorringe, 2018).

Alha (2018) challenges the neoliberal claim—put forward by thinkers such as Francis Fukuyama, Gurcharan Das, and R. Vaidyanathan—that caste serves as positive social capital by fostering trust, self-restraint, and reducing transaction costs in market economies. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's framework and critiquing James Coleman's rational choice model, Alha contends that caste is fundamentally a hierarchical, relational institution rather than an isolated, horizontal category.

Methodology

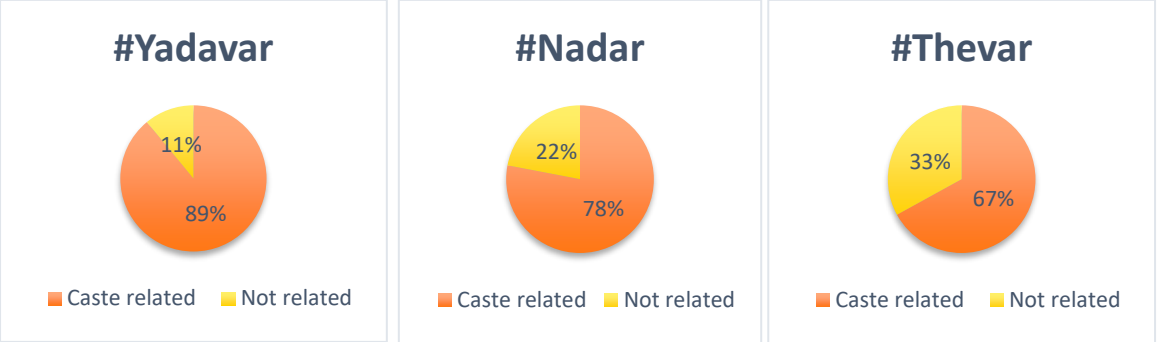
This paper employs a qualitative research approach and collects information from Instagram caste profiles. This study utilises a netnographic data collection method, incorporating participant observation specifically directed toward online fieldwork. Netnography is a form of ethnographic research, adopting the participant-observational approach and taking online interactions as its fieldwork (Kozinets, 2010).

Netnography applies ethnographic research methods to the study of cultures and societies that emerge as a result of computer-mediated communication, allowing the researcher to investigate what is publicly accessible on the internet. We began by familiarising ourselves with caste-focused conversations on Instagram.

A search for caste-related hashtags on Instagram revealed a high number of posts associated with the *Yadavar*, *Nadar*, and *Thevar* castes. A total of 300 posts featuring three caste-related hashtags were collected and analysed in this study; they are in the public domain and are therefore publicly available. However, to protect privacy and preserve anonymity, the authors de-identified comments within the results and discussion section. This study employs Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis. A Reflexive Thematic Analysis is a qualitative research method that emphasises researcher flexibility, subjectivity and the active construction of meaning-based themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The data have been analysed using a thematic approach, resulting in the identification and analysis of three themes.

Results and Discussion

A total of 300 posts containing three caste hashtags were gathered for this study on Instagram. Among these, 234 posts were found to be caste-related. This means that 78% of the 300 posts dealt with caste narratives.



Caste-related posts featuring the hashtags *#Yadavar*, *#Nadar*, and *#Thevar* constitute 78% of the content. Consequently, caste-related information has attracted significant attention from Internet and Instagram users. *Yadavar*, *Nadar*, and *Thevar* are three castes in Tamil Nadu that have historically experienced caste discrimination. They are now all wealthy, but in recent years, these castes have been discriminating against Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Caste-related posts on Instagram using hashtags like *#yadavar #nadar* and *#thevar* are frequently criticised by other castes regarding manipulation of history and caste proverbs.

Caste Purity

Most of the posts are connected to caste purity, caste superiority, who we are, and whom we should marry; there were few comments that directly addressed caste purity. *Eezhavarkalukkum illathu pillaimargalukkum endha thodarpum illai*

(https://www.instagram.com/reel/DcJBsQ3pwhI/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link); konarum yadavarum ondru illai

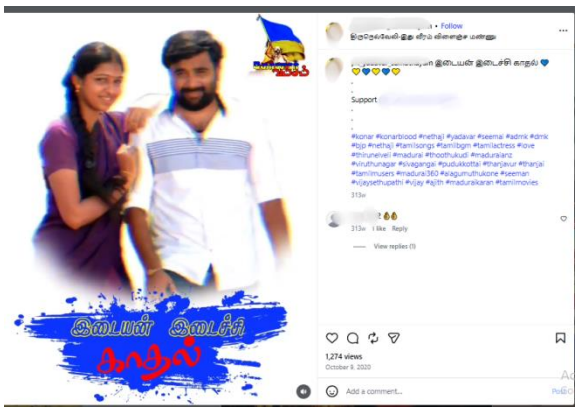
(https://www.instagram.com/reel/DdrTabCyzd1/?vrfl=MXB4MDhqYTE4MTluNQ==); Maravan Maraththi kadhal

https://www.instagram.com/reel/DKEmtdFSmRJ/?psln=dnVucWh2a3ZnNW1q) furthermore,

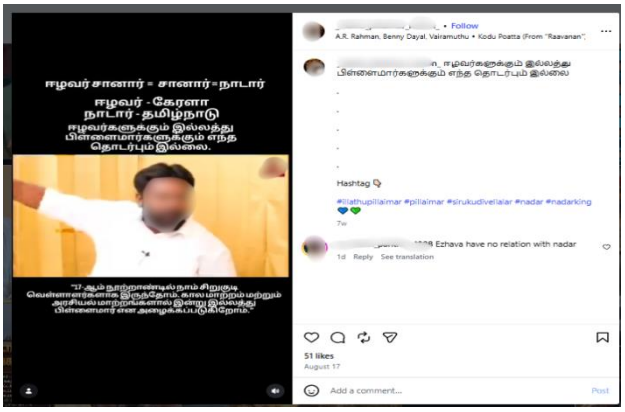
Instagram posts reveal that we should marry a man of our own caste. According to these caste narratives, dominant castes believe that a caste becomes impure if the members of the caste marry outside the caste group.

The single trait that can be termed as the essence of caste and the only characteristic that is unique to caste is endogamy (B.R. Ambedkar, 1909). Inter-caste marriage is frowned upon by the public. Endogamy is one of the most important ways to maintain a caste. Endogamy is a type of marriage in which people can only marry other members of their own family (Dzimiri, 2014). What do we learn about the castes in the later Vedic literature? We already find here a developed caste system of which the characteristics are heredity, common occupation, and restriction on inter-marriage. But although there are clear distinctions made between the castes, there is as yet little trace of impurity neither communicated by the touch of or contact with members of inferior castes; nor is there as yet any evidence showing that to take food from an inferior caste was forbidden as destroying purity (Macdonell A.A., 1914).

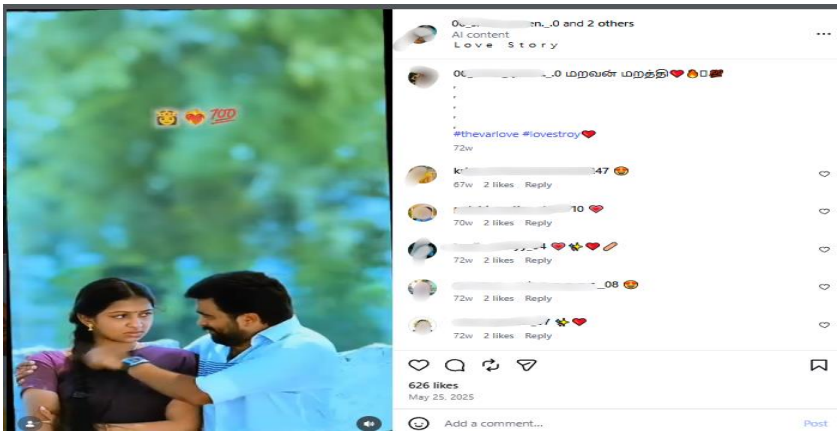
Sociological and feminist critiques highlight that women function as the critical gateways through which the purity-pollution axis of the caste system is preserved. Strict community policing of female sexuality and endogamous marriage rules are structurally tied to ancestral land ownership, ritual purity, and patrilineal inheritance. Traditional Marxist approaches historically relegated gender and caste to mere super structural reflections of an economic base, while early feminist frameworks frequently treated patriarchy as an independent structure detached from caste stratification (Trivedi, 2007).



Picture 1



Picture 2



Picture 3

Figure I: Narratives on caste purity through film characters and songs.

Above-stated Figure I, Picture 1: It glorifies the lovers from the *Yadavar* community through film characters and songs. Picture 2: It insists that the *Eezhavar (Nadar)* and *Illathu pillaimar* castes are not the same. It also reveals their caste purity and seclusion. Picture 3: It glorifies the lovers from the *Thevar* community through film characters and songs.

Although most remarks or types of abuse connected to caste centred on who we are, there were a few comments that directly addressed the community's seclusion. The segregation of other castes is discussed on the basis of their numbers, including growth. *naama ellam vera; nama ellarum vonriyanum; namala namathan aalanum* (As cited); furthermore, numerous Facebook posts state that we must govern our people since we are unable to live in any other caste. The root of homogeneity, according to Ambedkar, is cultural uniformity, which causes caste conflict (Anandha Raman & Ratnamala, 2022).

Caste Superiority

Instagram has become an important space in Tamil caste people's lives. Instagram has a tremendous reach in the digital world, but it also creates several conflicts. In the context of caste, history plays an important role. All three castes claim that their caste belongs to lineages that ruled this country. All of them are claiming that their ancestors were *Pandyas*, one of the rulers of three dynasties (*Chera, Chola and Pandya*) in Medieval Tamil Nadu. Also, they claim that their caste culture deserves a superior status over others. There were few comments that directly addressed caste superiority.

Ella puranangalalum potri kondadapadukira kulam yadavar kulam (https://www.instagram.com/reel/C3phmr9v-l-/?rpxt=YWVna3p0MTRxeTIx);

vellakaran kaalathulaye kodi katti paranthom (https://www.instagram.com/p/CPFpSzYBNZL/?obrf=aXpmOWRwbGhsbzk5);

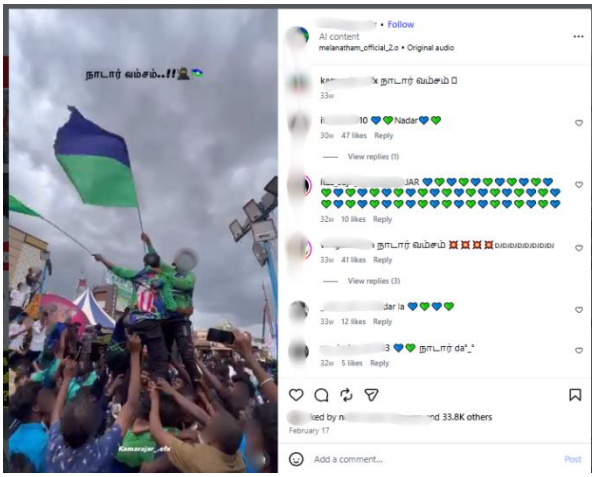
Thekku thisai aanda mannar inam (https://www.instagram.com/p/CJU9PjXBAvB/?mdxt=Nnh2OTIzMjFsMWxy).

Colonial India saw the production of four dominant modes of discourse in understanding Indian history and culture: 1) an imperial discourse in which race and Western superiority were assumed; 2) a Brahmanical discourse mainly rooted in the idea of divinity, an outright trust in textual traditions, and a politics opposed to imperial interpretations; 3) a Marxist/socialist discourse mainly associated with economic interpretations; and 4) a non-Brahmanical discourse displacing the above three. Many of the Indian discursive processes under the colonial conditions were distinctly marked by a Brahmanical dominance located in a political context of nation and nationalism. Brahmanical hegemony produced metanarratives of a nationalist imagination rooted in an intellectual politics of homogenised precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial Indian traditions (Y.S. Alone, 2020).

These folks culturally expose their identity by putting stickers on their bikes, tying caste-colour ropes, wearing caste colour on their foreheads, and celebrating caste-related rituals, which they then publish on Facebook. The ruling caste members practise the aforementioned customs on purpose. Their rituals are a way for them to display their caste to others. Furthermore, nothing was spared, even social media. People reveal their identities in real life after photographing them and posting them on social media. As a result, their ancient rituals are migrating to the digital realm. Members of the dominant caste are creating a video with arrogant and aggressive lyrics to promote it online. It causes a schism between members of the ruling caste and those of the lower caste. The kid boasted about his 'upper-caste' status, declaring, 'We are the governed people.' It is not incorrect to speak about caste pride, but it is incorrect to speak to someone who does not understand what caste pride represents. The Scheduled Castes are now suffering from caste oppression, as they are currently suffering from caste oppression and suffering as a result of it, and they are advocating freedom (Anandha Raman & Ratnamala, 2022).



Picture 1



Picture 2



Picture 3

Figure II: Narratives on caste superiority in terms of their caste-coloured flags.

Above-stated Figure II Picture 1: A person who climbs on a bus and waves the flag of the *Yadava* caste to showcase their caste superiority. Picture 2: Two persons who wave the flag of the *Nadar* caste to showcase their caste superiority. Picture 3: A person who waves the flag of the *Thevar* caste to showcase their caste superiority.

Assertion of caste identity

Caste identity is given to us by birth. It is hereditary, meaning individuals inherit their caste identity from their parents. Society imposes this identity reconstruction on us through caste structures. The assertion of caste identity is increasingly emerging on street name boards, through the painting of caste colors on electricity poles, bridges, and by the erecting of flex banners proclaiming caste superiority in public spaces, even as the government takes measures to remove these caste markers. There are few comments that directly insist on asserting caste identity.

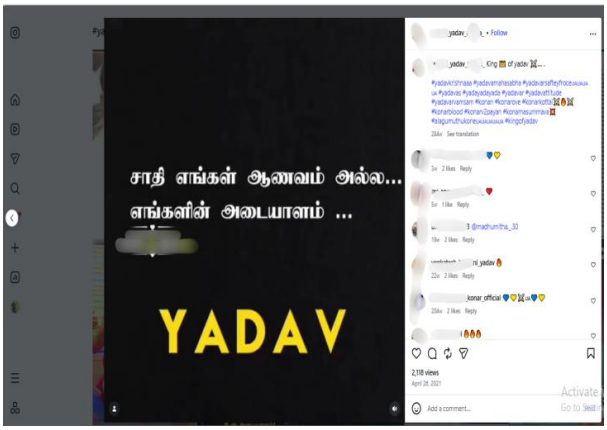
Saathi engal aanavam alla engalinadaiyalam; (https://www.instagram.com/p/COIfWABBCfu/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&obrf=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==&srtk=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==) ;

Pandiyarkal maravarkal porkudi (https://www.instagram.com/p/DcdvD1DTPiZ/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&xtok=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==&srtk=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==);

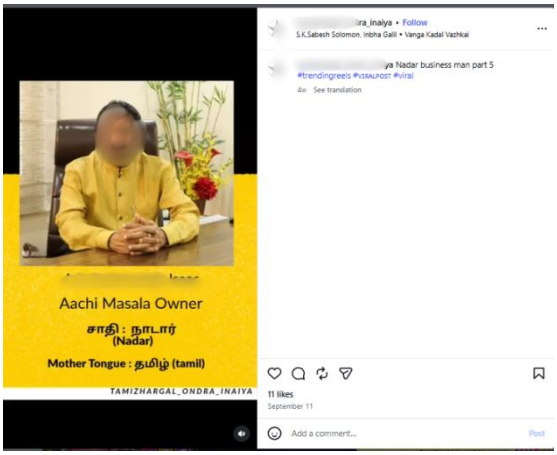
Naanum nadar thanla (https://www0.instagram.com/reel/Dc-OjgquwWb/?dlrf=MWQ0Z3c3MDBxdjBxYQ==)

These narrative strategies help caste people to assert caste identity in online as well as offline spaces.

It is crucial to highlight that surname discrimination occurs at the conceptual level. In India, caste is not a hidden or invisible social structure; it is evident through traditional behaviour, lifestyle, profession and most importantly, self-declaration. A surname is the most convenient way to compare and contrast social position, financial strength, religion, culture, caste and other qualities for various purposes (Mishra.N, 2018).



Picture 1



Picture 2



Picture 3

FIGURE III: Narratives on caste identity in terms of various forms of posts.

Above stated Figure III Picture 1: This post is asserting caste identity through the phrase ‘caste is not arrogance to us, but identity to us’ by the *Yadavar* caste profile.

Picture 2: This post reveals the caste identity of the *Aachi masala* owner and asserts the caste identity of the *Nadar* caste through these kinds of posts.

Picture 3: This post states the sub-castes of the *Thevar* Caste and insists that all these sub-castes did not belong to separate kingdoms. They could have had a close relationship with rulers or kingdoms. It asserts the caste identity of the *Thevar* community by making their sub-caste list available in the online space.

During the period when caste prejudice was more prevalent, the nickname was also seen in large numbers, but because of *Periyar’s* outstanding efforts, the caste nickname has been abolished, mostly in Tamil Nadu. The caste name, on the other hand, is now often utilised on social media. People who express their views on social media are frequently connected with their caste. The leaders of the *Nadar*, *Thevar* and *Vaniyar* Castes emphasise the importance of putting a surname behind their community members’ names. Nowadays, all youngsters are obsessed with their community leaders, yet their leaders continue to adopt a caste name as their surname. They would participate in an online battle if someone from another caste publishes something disparaging about their caste on social media (Anandha Raman & Ratnamala, 2022).

Conclusion

As a result, this article found how three dominant castes are asserting their caste identities while showcasing their caste superiority and purity on Instagram. It will also demonstrate how Instagram enables caste solidarity and consolidation through hashtags. Caste-related content has garnered significant attention from internet and Instagram users alike. Furthermore, communication within the Instagram network reveals evidence of persistent biased comments in this study. Although all three castes historically faced discrimination and struggled to achieve socio-economic upliftment, they have

undergone significant changes. These three groups, the *Yadavar*, *Nadar*, and *Thevar* communities experienced discrimination similar to other castes in Tamil Nadu. Today, however, each community leverages Instagram to promote caste purity, assert superiority, and reinforce caste identity.

Furthermore, the migration of physical caste markers (flags, coloured ropes, vehicle stickers) into curated online content illustrates a deliberate reconstruction of historical narratives. Instagram has essentially become a virtual battleground where caste pride is openly flaunted, and historical rivalries are weaponised through cinematic glorification and aggressive rhetoric. These findings reveal that technological advancement and digital connectivity do not inherently erase social stratifications. Instead, the digital age provides highly visible architectures for dominant castes to normalise caste narratives under the guise of cultural identity preservation. Addressing this modern manifestation of casteism requires recognising digital platforms not merely as neutral communication tools, but as active ecosystems where deeply ingrained prejudices are systematically sustained, rebranded, and passed on to a new generation of users.

Acknowledgements

None

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