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# THE REPRESENTATION OF CASTE CONFLICTS IN SOCIAL MEDIA: AN ENQUIRY

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**Abstract:**

*The representation of caste conflicts in India after independence has periodically surfaced in the public domain, either explicitly or implicitly. The political parties, social organizations and bureaucracy have been the arena where caste conflicts often found its manifestation. In the contemporary context, the Internet has become an important means of communication, by providing various (virtually social) platforms directly to the citizens. The concept of 'gatekeeping' denotes the act of controlling the opinions of readers in traditional print media. But social media platforms are thrown open to all types of users without any filtration of information and opinion. Consequently, interaction on social media has assumed the form of a battleground for caste identities and their expression. While social media does empower the civil society, its use by citizens is also enabling a divisive discourse about castes. This was observed strikingly during the recent 'Maratha Morcha' and 'Dalit Morcha' in Maharashtra. This study is an empirical analysis of the expression of caste conflicts on Facebook a year before and after these 'morcha's in Maharashtra, India, and the implications of such phenomena with respect to Facebook users in particular and the wider society in general. The study findings reveal that the use of facebook and its extremist expressions of caste conflict are negatively affecting the social fabric and the peaceful coexistence of its citizens.*

**Introduction**

Caste is germane to the Indian society. The system that originated and was developed out of the *Varnashrama* has been determining the social structure and relation of the country for a long time. During mediaeval times, it existed in its crudest form—distressing substantial populations while impoverished and depriving them of basic human rights. As Indian society modernized after the British rule and embarked upon the constitutional era, the inhuman practices like untouchability and related physical violence saw substantial decline, though violence in the name of caste still exists in certain parts of the country in one form or other.

The government enacted certain laws to prevent untouchability and also undertook measures of positive discrimination by providing reservation for scheduled castes and tribes. While the government was going ahead with its own measures, many social movements also contributed in mellowing down the crude caste expressions in public domain. This apparent mellowing-down of caste assumed subtle form in the sub-conscious of the people. It began resurfacing on different occasions and in different form at the socio-political level. The gradual modernization of Indian society, with increasing literacy, industrialization and urbanization, provided a different dimension to caste identities. Caste, thus, became relevant for matrimonial purposes, to avail of

reservations in government colleges, employment in government and public sector and to avail of certain financial facilities from the government. Also, caste played important role in the electoral politics when it came to selecting candidates, where caste considerations remained important. These changing contours of caste expression restructured the nature of caste conflict at every turn. In earlier times, the practice of castism was accepted in principle as a norm, a given of social life. But in modern Indian society it is practiced not only as a social norm but also to assert their existence and to draw essentially economic benefits out of it. The changing economic and technological developments are determining the expression and nature of this conflict.

In continuation of the modernization process, the Internet became a prominent communication platform at the turn of the millennium. The print and electronic media was not interactive, as it was controlled by the respective media organizations, and provided very little scope for readers' or viewers' opinion. The concept of 'gatekeeping' often succeeded in controlling the opinions of readers. But the ICT revolution opened up a new vista of communication-without-barrier for the Indian society. Personal communication through email gradually evolved into social communication at large scale, wherein people began to discuss social and political issues without the restraints of 'gatekeeping'. These platforms came in various forms, like Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter. Initially, the use of these platforms was for small groups and communities where the communication was related to personal or professional matters. As the number of users went on increasing, communities were created online through bonding among people coming together either in terms of friendship or profession. They exchanged pleasantries on the occasions like birthday, anniversaries and shared photographs of different occasion. Simultaneously, they also began to share their opinions about issues of socio-economic concerns. The public opinions diverted from friendship to pouring views about scams, political parties, its leaders, public policies and other controversies.

The criticism and justification resulted into dialogue that often-created conflicting views on public issues and saw the communities dividing on socio-political lines. Unlike any media organization where text and audio-visuals are edited and presented in certain format the social media presented these views in unpolished forms as it lacked any editing and 'Gate keeping' which is the common norm in conventional media. It has wider repercussions in terms of creating public opinions on matters of social/political relevance without any originality and authenticity which has the potential to create social /communal tensions and divisions.

**Methodology**

The content on the facebook was the main source of gathering information for this paper. The content on the Facebook pages created during this period was used for analyzing the extent of conflict. The qualitative analysis of this content showed certain trends of the massages. It was observed how the respective castes were using the symbols of their caste identity to mobilize the support in their stride. The tone and tenure of language used in the slogans indicated that the interest of the content developer is more on sentiment that the logically structured argument. The earlier caste movements were led by leaders who questioned the traditions, practices and exploitative nature of caste system and inequalities generated by it. At every stage of struggle and protest the agenda was put forward and a constitutional remedy was demanded. More than an aggressive posture against the other caste it was the assertion of constitutional and democratic rights that marked these struggles. But the nature of the assertion of caste identity seemed to take a different turn.

In this view, certain Facebook pages were observed and analyzed to understand this changing pattern of caste expressions. The 'Replies' to the statuses and slogans and the 'likes' indicated that these massages were read and seen by the members of respective caste members. This approach, consequently demanded more reliance on qualitative method to discuss the topic.

**Expression of Caste on Social Media**

The expression of political opinion gradually gave space to the underlying social tensions in Indian society. Caste, being the most potent source of conflict naturally found its expression on this emerging media. These expressions came in different forms that included proud about one's caste, criticism of other caste, glorification of their caste icons and an appeal for mobilization and unity of respective caste fraternity. As per the findings of Singh.D (2018)caste-based discrimination is not confined to offline, but becoming prevalent Online too.

The celebration and observation of birth and death anniversary of the caste icons became a routine exercise to enforce these identities. The use of images, portion of speeches or quotes of the icons frequently appeared to substantiate the opinion of the social media user. It soon became a forum to advocate the caste identities.

These expressions revealed that caste identities are still deeply rooted and are just trying to find the vent when given a platform. When people occasionally gather, this kind of open expression of caste identities is not evident. That might have created the feeling that people don't like to discuss caste in public domain, caste discriminations are withering away and there was some kind of anti-caste movement. But social media demolished this myth and in fact facilitated a convenient space where people could express their thoughts on caste and related issues. The reason could be the privacy in

expressing the contentious issues and physical distance from other caste groups and also the reach and extent of the medium is far wide than discussing it in open.

**The potential source of social tension**

Therefore, it becomes pertinent to examine how far caste identities are finding prominent expressions on social media and are becoming a crucial part of public discourse. There is a need to analyze the caste-related content on social media and its related potential to create social tension. In this context the study of castist propaganda of Dalit and Maratha castes in Maharashtra needs some attention. It is essential to observe how these two caste communities used the Facebook to galvanize their caste members to assert their presence and highlight some demands from the government during the year 2017 and 2018.

Over this period, the writing on Facebook by the members of Maratha and Dalit community during the 'Bheema Koregaon' controversy displayed the passionate propaganda that succeeded in getting them followers in the form of 'Likes' and 'Follow'. During this period several Facebook groups were created by members of both the communities. It was intentionally done to mobilize the support of their community and to make an appeal to the caste sentiments. A comparative study was conducted to see which community has formed maximum Facebook groups for the campaign of their cause.

It was observed that the slogans, symbols, and the use of historical personalities as the icons of the respective communities, with an attempt to paint them as the representatives of the castes. An attempt was also made to see if there were some Facebook users who tried to diffuse the tension between these two castes as well. The observation was mainly drawn on the basis of this comparison. The reference of some websites and television news channels helped in gathering certain additional data and information.

As per the survey of PUKAR (Partners for Urban Knowledge, Action and Research) the caste identities are reproduced on social media. It has become significant medium for caste activity and deliberation. This discussion exists in public domain and creates chain of interaction. It also leads toward the formation of different groups and communities based on caste identities. Number of these communities is multiplying day by day. It is evident from the statuses they upload on Facebook and Tweeter several of these are loaded with anger, frustration, aggressiveness and endless criticism of other castes. It is aggravatedly heightened to the point of creating social tension so much so that Government has been forced to issue some orders to regulate the use of social media.

According to Facebook's community standards, "content that attacks people based on their actual or perceived race, ethnicity, national origin, religion, sex, gender or gender identity, sexual orientation, disability or disease" is considered hate speech and disallowed by Facebook. However, Facebook policy states that it would allow "clear attempts at humor or satire" that would otherwise be considered a potential threat/attack.

In the case of 'Maratha Mook morcha' and 'Bharat Mukti Morcha' the Facebook users have not really used hateful language directly against the other caste but it is a powerful assertion about its own identity that having potential to agitate the minds of the community and lead towards the conflict. Asserting the caste identity for demanding constitutional right is one thing and asserting it just for the sake of assertion is another thing. The logical expression of demands, mobilizing support of the

community by using constitutional method through debates and deliberations is an integral part of any democratic support. But using caste identity to show the strength and a mere highlighting of the unity raises question about its intention. In this context it is essential to discuss these two movements having taken place in Maharashtra.

**Maratha Morcha**

The year 2017 saw the massive use of social media to mobilize the masses by the organizers and supporters of 'Maratha Mook Morcha' (Maratha Silent March). The major demand of this Morcha (Procession) was to demand government reservation for Maratha caste. This mobilization didn't have one single leader or a structured organizing committee. In this case, social media was greatly utilized to communicate the message not only in urban 'Marathas' but also its fraternity from the rural areas. To make this event a grand success, the appeal was made on social media using all the injustices done against 'Maratha' caste, its sidelining in economic progress and need to put up a united struggle to achieve the larger welfare for Maratha caste.

From interaction of the people it is clear that in Maharashtra there is a perception in both the caste; Maratha and Dalit that the mainstream media is controlled by Brhamin community and Brhaminical mentality. They believe that news and news features are twisted as per their convenience and suitability. When the first silent march was started in Aurangabad and other parts of Marathawada region of Maharashtra it was not reported seriously on television news channels. It was noted only by some vernacular media outlets, but prominent wings of the media (including television channels, Mumbai-based English and Marathi newspapers) completely ignored the march. Since it was already anticipated by Maratha community it prepared itself to focus on social media. Maratha community formed several Facebook pages to connect with their community and mobilize it. They planned to send the massages to maximum people through social media. And the Maratha audience which they targeted was not only from Maharashtra but across the India and abroad. According to the Bhaiya Patil, a social media expert, the Maratha morcha was a revolutionary event for the community. The people of this caste had never assembled before for any such cause in the past on such large scale. The social media has changed the traditional mindset of the community.

The medieval Maratha king Shivaji and his son Sambhaji are undoubtedly an icon for the Maratha caste, their images were abundantly used on Facebook campaign. The slogan 'Ek Maratha- Lakh Maratha' (One Maratha is equal to a lakh soldiers) became a kind of war cry for Maratha protest. The images like King Sabhaji killing a tiger just using his hands and King Shivaji's images dominated on each of the facebook page.

From the research it is found that more than hundred Facebook pages created to mobilize support for 'Maratha Kranti Morcha'. Facebook pages were created to make district wise, state wide as well as o outside the state campaign wherever the fraternity of 'Maratha' caste is residing. During this campaign a very unique news hit the Facebook pages that went viral on it. A group in Balochistan (Pakistan) declared its support for the Maratha Morcha which surprised many readers. It was later on revealed that this group belonged to the generation of Marathas who were taken as war prisoners of 'Panipat Battale' in 1763. Though they follow Islam, they trace back their roots to Maharashtra and are proud of Maratha blood. Following are some Facebook pages that ran the campaign for 'Maratha' cause. A

Facebook page named as 'Maratha Kranti Morcha' had  38,843 followers and liked by 38,688 people. Maratha Kranti Morcha Maharashtra-  6,945 people liked this and has and followed by 7,000 people Maratha Kranti Morcha, Pune 89,641 people like and 89,935 followers Dr Sanjay Patil Facebook page liked by 10,016 people like with 10,017 followers

The Content on these Facebook pages was not only about the Maratha identity. The campaign was narrowing down to certain demands. It was basically about the economic discontent of the Maratha community. The Maratha caste in Maharashtra constitutes around 34%. Though politics of Maharashtra has always been dominated by Maratha leaders and most of the cooperative institute and educational establishment is controlled by Maratha elites, the majority of its caste population is finding it difficult to survive in today's competitive environment. The reservation is available to SC, ST and OBC class. There seems to be an upward mobility in these sections. Other open caste has already secured its position in the available social structure. The Maratha caste had maintained its dominant position mainly due to its land holding capacity. Over the generations, as the families multiplied and expanded the land also got divided among the generations. Therefore, the size of the land per family became smaller and smaller. It certainly took away an edge Marathas were getting traditionally due to the big size of land.

In addition, Maratha community did not give much importance to education as it found in other castes and found comfort in the possession of land while other backward caste owing to the availability of reservation began occupying posts in government jobs and admission in government educational institutions, mainly medical and engineering. The small land holding coupled with the disturbed pattern of rainfall in last two decades also became a reason for farmers' suicide. Around 60% of the farmers who committed suicide in last five years belonged mainly to Maratha caste. This discontent consolidated its demand for 16 % reservation in the government jobs and institutions. Apparently, even though the identity of Maratha was strongly played on Facebook but the real massage was to demand reservation. Facebook helped the movement in mobilizing and exhibiting its social capital. When these hard realities struck the community through these media, they were shaken up and a need for such organized struggle was imminently felt. But the feeling that mainstream media is in Brahmanical hands led several of its elites to rely heavily on social media. The audio-visual potential of Facebook was obvious, so the pages were created region wise and district wise.

**Bharat Mukti Morcha**

When Maratha community planned to use Facebook to its advantage, the Dalit community simultaneously equipped itself to use the same platform to assert its cause. A movement that became active under the banner 'Bharat Mukti Morcha' is essentially to advocate the Dalit cause. More than sixteen facebook pages about Bharat Mukti Morcha were created. Dr B R Ambedkar, a God like figure for the community and his massage for social justice and liberty were displayed frequently on social media.

But a new dimension in Bheema koregaon controversy in the beginning of the year 2018 was its Kshatriya (warrior) angle. The battle of Bheema Koregaon that took place in 19th century was between the East India Company and the Peshwas (the Brahamin rulers). The later on Peshwas regime is known for its caste discrimination and ill treatment of lower caste unlike King Shivaji. Owing to this

discrimination many of these lower caste members joined the forces of East India Company as soldiers. The company didn't discriminate them on the basis of their position in the social strata. When the Peshwas clashed with the Company forces at Bheema Koregaon in the year 1818 the lower caste army of East India Company played a significant role in humiliating Peshwas and defeating them decisively in the battle. Dr B R Ambedkar decided to commemorate this to celebrate the valor that lower caste displayed. The objective behind it was to motivate the lower caste population for the struggle of social justice in the contemporary context.

The Dalit community already has reservation in government job and institutions. What disturbs them in current social context that the Dalit community faces the challenge of Maratha community owing to their large population and one hand and also, they are skeptical about the role of Brahmin community for its historical role in caste system. They are not ready to accept any assault on its identity and community. A lot of caution is taken to prevent such attack and assert itself in today's politics. Dalit group is aware that politically it is too weak in Maharashtra unlike the Dalits in Uttar Pradesh where they have become politically a potent player.

The young elites in the community have realized the power of social media and they don't want to remain behind while playing out its battle on this platform. The icons, the Dalit community have mainly used on Facebook are Buddha, Mahatma Jyotiba Phule, Dr B R Amebdkar, Saint Surdas, Savitribai Phule and King Rajashri Shahu of Kolhapur who helped Ambedkar for his foreign education and also pioneered reservation in his princely state before independence. The conjured images of all these icons have a collective appeal for the Dalit cause and also a call for social struggle.

**Strong Appeal: Evidences from Social media**

Both the castes have used the audio-visual medium on facebook to add more force in the appeal. The use of icons ranging over the centuries to present era their quotes, bright colours and their images with specific body postures have been deliberately used. These images implicitly signify a call for action and active participation in the movement. Maratha caste appeal attempts to call to realize the dream of King Shivaji through his heroic actions whereas Dalit movement has attempted to make this appeal at national level.

Both the communities have put forth provocative expressions, remarks and answers on different station-based posts. They have been writing posts with the provocative remarks of political, and different pioneers having a place with different ranks and networks. The netizens have been battling with each other with a war of words on the online life. The spread of hate on Facebook was vividly visible before Bheema Koregaon Violence The social tension increased when some enthusiastic socila media users started giving narratives in an amateurish manner. It increased the rift between Marathas and Dalits. The posts on 'Itihasachya Paulkhuna' a Marathi page on Facebook known for posts on history had set the tone of contestations over the history and memory of Bhima Koregaon, much before the conflicts in Pune turned fierce. The provocative updates began pouring in very nearly seven days before the recognition of the bicentenary festivals of Bhima Koregaon in Pune city, detracting from the Dalits their stories of valor. But the users on Maratha side tried to negate and dismiss the role of Dalits in Bheema Koregaon battle. . They claimed that the Mahars had nothing to do with Bhima Koregaon. In their opinion the battle of Bhima Koregaon is concerned with Peshwas and the British,

instead of Mahars. The Dalit cause was very much evident on following Facebook pages. Bharat Mukti Morcha @mulnivasipage liked by 6,119 with 6,139 followers . Bharat Mukti Morcha liked by 3,704 with 3,799 followers. Bharat Mukti Morcha @BMMIndia 6,038 likes and 6,103 followers Bheema Koregaon Shaurya Din Prerna Abhiyan @bhimakoregaon2000 with 9,750 and 10,652 followers Bheema Koregaon Shaurya Din Prerna Abhiyan @bheemakoregaon200 Liked by 9,750 and followed by 10,652 people.

These social media pages tried to prove that nowhere have the British mentioned anything on the role of the Mahar Battalion. But in reality, Mahar soldiers were very much a part of the British Army though the Mahar regiment was not formed until later as per some historians. Since the availability of Facebook is easier than authentic books on history the social media succeeded in spreading half baked truths. Facebook became a platform for alternative narratives of history.  To counter this Maratha narrative the Dalit activists used the Koregaon Memorial as an extremely noteworthy place in the present neo-Buddhist culture. The web and internet-based life stages were used to archive and recognize the Koregaon fight and Ambedkar's visit to it.

The social media analysis also observed an alternative voice that attempted to give advice to both the communities. Its tone was more of pacifism with an appeal to downplay the caste sentiments. It is an attempt to advice both the communities for not falling in the trap of politicians who tries to create a rift in the society by using caste identities. And such voices came from both the communities. But such voices are always a minority voices as per the observation visible on Facebook. There was not a single Facebook page that was created to educate both the communities but only some random individual Facebook users attempted to

## Conclusion and Discussion:

Though both the communities used Facebook page vociferously, the Maratha caste seemed to have an edge in its use mainly because of aggressive use of its symbols and icons and the use of bright colors in its images. It could also be verified from the number of facebook pages created during this period and also the number of followers for the each page. The pages representing the Maratha community outnumbered the pages created for Dalit community. Facebook, along with other social media platform helped them in organizing a statewide protest for its demand of reservation in the consequent months. The number of facebook pages by Maratha community outnumbered the number of the facebook pages operated by Dalit community. The Marathas had more organized way of region wise structure and operation of pages.

After assessing and observing several facebook pages of Maratha and Dalit communities we can assertively say that caste conflict has found a new platform in the form of Facebook. This new media has empowered everyone to voice opinion and express its concern but in the absence of any guidelines and ethical standards it has been thrown open to people who are misusing it to run its narrow agenda and vested interest.  Instead of becoming a unifying force, this new media has become a divisive force when it comes to social issues. The 'Bheema Koregaon protest' and 'Maratha Morcha' propaganda on

facebook has possibly set the example of a new methodology for social conflicts. The colors , font size and the images used for this propaganda are dark, bold and have action oriented appeal.

Conventionally, the caste conflict has been observed in Political parties, voting pattern, bureaucracy and administration where common individual had very little role to play. An individual was the passive recipient of the massage that trickled down from the top. But social media has made him an active source of opinion and massage. A common user becomes an active stakeholder by liking the status or replying to it or even by mere following the page. When a common citizen can start a particular agenda-based campaign on Facebook and mobilize the users for protest and conflict. If certain ethical standards are not set for the use of Facebook and other allied social media platforms it may pave the way for future social conflicts.

The dangers that such groups pose against social harmony and for democracy, in general, have not been fully grasped. For one, many in bureaucracy, politics and news media houses are also part of these groups. Caste groups can become a vehicle for spreading communal hate and inciting violence, it is to be seen if people in the establishment will use social media to stop such incidences or if they will use it to spread the fire for their political gains.

In the process, media, the fourth pillar of democracy itself transgressed the boundaries and violated certain fundamental rights. In several cases media was embroiled creating an ethical dilemma for its own role as the defender of people's rights. Therefore, it would be in the interest of the society, if these institutions perform with the principal on 'Self-Regulation'. An intervention by the agency of government will open up the possibilities unlimited interference by the government agencies narrowing freedom of expression. Also the wiser approach by citizens and watchful eye on these institutions will need minimum laws to govern the society resulting into the maximum use of existing framework. Intervention by the government will be a tricky issue as too much intervention will be perceived as violation of freedom expression and neglecting the unhealthy debate on social media will be like creating social divisions and disharmony. Government need to state a broader framework about the language content and expression in keeping with spirit of constitution and also social leadership will have to create an environment which can set an ethical standard for the positive use of social media. This reproduction of caste identities goes against the constitutional ideal of social equality and has the potential of becoming a hurdle in the creation of egalitarian society. The tone and tenor of the language used by these unregulated users may create more conflicts in the society and may force the government to bring more regulations on social media.

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