

Digital Social Networks in India: Caste, Tribe, and Religious Variations – An Anthropological Perspective

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Abstract- This study examines the transformative impact of digital social networks on the traditional social structures of caste, tribe, and religious identities in India. By adopting an anthropological perspective, the research explores how these digital environments both reflect and reshape social dynamics and cultural practices. The study delves into the role of digital platforms in maintaining caste-based social networks, highlighting how these platforms facilitate socialization, support, and digital activism, particularly among marginalized groups like Dalits. It assesses the impact of digital inclusion initiatives on tribal communities, revealing how improved digital literacy and internet access empower these populations, promote cultural preservation, and enhance social and economic opportunities. The research also investigates the influence of digital platforms on religious social networks, demonstrating how online religious communities and virtual services have adapted to the digital age, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the study analyzes the Intersectionality of caste, tribe, and religion in digital spaces, uncovering the complex interactions and new social movements that emerge at these intersections. The findings suggest that while digital platforms can reinforce traditional social hierarchies, they also offer powerful tools for advocacy, cultural preservation, and inclusivity. This research highlights the potential of digital networks to foster a more equitable and connected society in India, providing valuable insights into the broader socio-cultural changes shaping contemporary Indian society. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for addressing social challenges and promoting inclusive development in the digital age.

Keywords: Digital social networks, Caste, Tribe, Religion, Anthropology

I. INTRODUCTION

Digital social networks have revolutionized how individuals and communities interact in India, a country known for its intricate social fabric woven from caste, tribal affiliations, and religious identities. An anthropological perspective on digital social networks reveals how these traditional structures adapt to and are transformed by new digital environments, influencing social dynamics and cultural practices. India's social structure has historically been shaped by caste, tribe, and religion, each playing a critical role in determining social interactions and community organization. Traditional social networks were largely based on physical proximity and kinship ties, reinforced by cultural practices and rituals. The advent of digital technology has disrupted these conventional patterns, introducing new ways of connecting and interacting.

Caste remains a deeply entrenched social institution in India. The digital age has seen the emergence of caste-specific online communities, where members share resources, information, and support. These digital communities often reflect offline hierarchies but also provide a platform for marginalized voices. For example, Dalit activists use social media to highlight caste-based discrimination and mobilize support for social justice causes. Tribal communities have historically been marginalized and isolated from mainstream society. Digital technologies offer new opportunities for these communities to connect, access resources, and promote their cultural heritage. Initiatives aimed at improving digital literacy and internet access in tribal areas have empowered these communities, enabling them to engage with broader networks and advocate for their rights.

Religion plays a pivotal role in shaping social networks in India. Digital platforms facilitate the formation of virtual religious communities, allowing individuals to practice their faith, share religious content, and participate in online services. This digital shift has been particularly significant during the COVID-19 pandemic, which saw a surge in online religious activities as physical gatherings were restricted. Digital social networks have not only reflected traditional social structures but also brought about significant transformations. Social media platforms have provided a voice to historically marginalized groups, enabling

them to share their stories, highlight issues, and mobilize support. This has been particularly evident in the context of caste-based activism, where digital platforms have been used to challenge discrimination and advocate for equality. Digital platforms offer tools for preserving and promoting cultural heritage. Tribal communities, for example, use social media, blogs, and YouTube channels to document and share traditional practices, languages, and folklore. This not only helps in cultural preservation but also raises awareness about tribal issues among a broader audience. The digital age has introduced new forms of social interaction that transcend geographical and social boundaries. Online forums and groups facilitate connections based on shared interests, beliefs, or experiences, fostering a sense of community among diverse populations. This has led to the formation of new social networks that are more inclusive and dynamic.

The intersection of caste, tribal affiliations, and religious identities with digital social networks in India offers a rich field of study for anthropologists. These digital environments not only reflect traditional social structures but also have the potential to transform them, creating new forms of social interaction and community organization. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for comprehending the broader socio-cultural changes in contemporary India.

II. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE PRESENT STUDY

The study aims to explore the dynamics of digital social networks in India, focusing on how these networks interact with and transform traditional social structures of caste, tribe, and religious identities. The specific objectives of this research are:

- Examine the Role of Digital Platforms in Caste-Based Social Networks
- Assess Digital Inclusion and Its Impact on Tribal Communities
- Investigate the Influence of Digital Platforms on Religious Social Networks
- Analyze the Intersectionality of Caste, Tribe, and Religion in Digital Spaces

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital social networks have profoundly impacted various social dimensions globally, including in India. In a country marked by intricate social stratifications such as caste, tribe, and religion, the adoption and use of digital social networks reveal significant variations and implications. This literature review examines these variations by analyzing existing scholarly work on how caste, tribe, and religious identities influence the usage patterns, benefits, and challenges associated with digital social networks in India.

Caste remains a potent social determinant in India, influencing digital behavior. Research indicates that higher castes (Brahmins, Kshatriyas) are more likely to have better access to digital technologies compared to lower castes (Dalits, Adivasis) due to socioeconomic disparities (Banaji, 2017). Lower castes often face digital exclusion due to limited access to internet infrastructure and digital literacy (Kurian & Munusamy, 2019). For marginalized castes, digital social networks can be empowering tools. They provide platforms for social mobilization and activism. Studies highlight how Dalit communities use social media to challenge caste-based discrimination and to mobilize for social justice (Nayar, 2017). Despite the empowering potential, there are significant challenges. Digital platforms can perpetuate existing social hierarchies and caste-based discrimination. Instances of online harassment and casteist abuse are reported, highlighting the persistence of social biases in the digital realm (Thorat & Neuman, 2012).

Tribal communities in India face unique challenges regarding digital access. Geographical isolation, economic disadvantages, and lower literacy rates contribute to limited digital adoption among tribes (Mitra & Chatterjee, 2020). However, where access is available, it often plays a crucial role in preserving tribal languages and cultures (Mishra, 2019). Digital social networks offer tribes opportunities for cultural preservation and advocacy. They facilitate connections within and across communities, allowing for the sharing of cultural practices and traditions. Digital platforms have been used to document and promote tribal arts and crafts, providing economic benefits (Jain & Jain, 2020). The digital divide is stark among tribal populations. Limited access to technology and internet services exacerbates social exclusion. Additionally, the digital representation of tribal issues often lacks authenticity and sensitivity, sometimes leading to cultural misrepresentation (Mishra, 2019).

Religious identities significantly shape digital behavior in India. Research shows that different religious communities use digital networks to strengthen communal bonds and promote religious activities (Balsari et al., 2020). For instance, Muslims and Christians have developed robust online communities to discuss religious issues and organize events. Digital social networks enable religious groups to foster a sense of community and belonging. They serve as platforms for religious education, spiritual guidance, and community support. During the COVID-19 pandemic, digital networks were instrumental in continuing religious practices through virtual gatherings (Saldanha, 2021). Digital platforms also amplify religious tensions. There are instances of religious hate speech and communal propaganda spreading rapidly through social media. The role of digital networks in inciting violence and spreading misinformation has been a significant concern, highlighting the need for regulatory measures (Pal, 2020).

The intersection of digital social networks with caste, tribe, and religious identities in India presents a complex landscape. While these platforms offer significant benefits in terms of empowerment, cultural preservation, and community building, they also reflect and sometimes exacerbate existing social inequalities and conflicts. Future research should focus on developing strategies to enhance digital inclusivity and address the challenges of online discrimination and misinformation.

IV. METHODOLOGY

This paper has been meticulously compiled by reviewing the extensive work of various experts in the field. To achieve the proposed objectives, the current researchers have dedicated significant time to examining primarily project findings, research studies, and survey results. In preparing this manuscript, the authors adhered to the Desk Review methodology, with data analyzed through narrative analysis. This paper is based on secondary data from direct sources.

V. RESULT & DISCUSSION

V.I. ROLE OF DIGITAL PLATFORMS: CASTE-BASED SOCIAL NETWORKS

V.I.I. FORMATION AND MAINTENANCE OF CASTE-SPECIFIC ONLINE COMMUNITIES

Digital platforms, such as social media sites (Facebook, Twitter), forums (Reddit), and dedicated community websites (like caste-based portals), have become crucial in forming and maintaining caste-specific online communities in India. These platforms facilitate interaction among members, providing a space for cultural exchange, support, and networking. For instance, WhatsApp groups and Facebook pages dedicated to specific castes serve as forums where members share news, organize events, and discuss community issues.

- Facebook groups dedicated to specific castes have high engagement rates, with members actively participating in discussions about caste-based issues, cultural practices, and community events.
- WhatsApp groups serve as immediate communication channels, allowing for rapid dissemination of information related to community gatherings, religious ceremonies, and emergency support.
- Dedicated caste-based websites facilitate networking for professional opportunities within the community, providing job listings and business directories.

V.I.II. IMPACT OF DIGITAL ACTIVISM ON CASTE-BASED ISSUES

Digital activism has significantly influenced caste-based issues in India. Platforms like Twitter and Facebook are used to mobilize support, raise awareness, and advocate for social justice. Activists leverage hashtags, online petitions, and virtual campaigns to draw attention to caste-based discrimination and violence. Prominent examples include the use of #DalitLivesMatter, inspired by the Black Lives Matter movement, to highlight atrocities against Dalits.

- Twitter campaigns using specific hashtags can reach millions, bringing national and international attention to local caste-based issues.

- Online petitions on platforms like Change.org have successfully pressured authorities to take action on cases of caste-based violence.
- YouTube and Instagram influencers from marginalized castes use their platforms to share personal stories, educate others about caste issues, and promote solidarity.

V.I.III. USE OF DIGITAL MEDIA IN MAINTAINING TRADITIONAL CASTE PRACTICES

Digital media has also been used to maintain traditional caste practices, such as caste-based matrimonial searches. Websites like Shaadi.com, BharatMatrimony.com, and community-specific portals provide platforms for caste-conscious matchmaking. These platforms allow users to filter potential partners by caste, sub-caste, and other traditional criteria, thereby reinforcing caste boundaries in marriage.

- Matrimonial websites have specific sections dedicated to different castes, with a significant percentage of users actively seeking partners within their own caste.
- Mobile apps for matrimonial searches are increasingly popular among younger generations, maintaining traditional practices while offering modern conveniences.
- Social media groups for matrimonial purposes help community members connect with potential matches, sharing profiles and organizing matchmaking events.

Digital platforms play a multifaceted role in the lives of caste-based communities in India, facilitating the formation and maintenance of online communities, enabling digital activism, and preserving traditional practices. These platforms offer both opportunities for empowerment and challenges that reflect ongoing social dynamics. Further research is essential to understand these impacts deeply and develop strategies to enhance positive outcomes while mitigating negative ones.

V.II. DIGITAL INCLUSION: IMPACTS ON TRIBAL COMMUNITIES

Initiatives to Improve Digital Literacy among Tribal Communities

Efforts to improve digital literacy and internet access among tribal communities in India involve both government and non-governmental initiatives. These programs aim to bridge the digital divide and promote socioeconomic inclusion.

Government Initiatives: The Ministry of Tribal Affairs, in collaboration with organizations like the National Informatics Centre, has launched several programs to enhance digital literacy. For instance, the “Digital Tribal India” initiative focuses on setting up internet kiosks in remote tribal villages, providing training sessions, and distributing affordable smartphones and tablets.

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs): NGOs such as Pratham and Barefoot College are actively involved in digital literacy campaigns. Pratham's digital initiative, "Pratham Digital," includes mobile learning labs that travel to tribal areas to provide hands-on training. Barefoot College focuses on training women from tribal communities as solar engineers who also act as digital literacy trainers.

Public-Private Partnerships: Collaborations between tech companies and the government aim to improve infrastructure and access. For instance, partnerships with companies like Google and Microsoft provide training programs and resources. Google's "Internet Saathi" program has been expanded to tribal regions to empower rural women through digital literacy.

V.II.I. PRESERVING AND PROMOTING TRIBAL CULTURAL HERITAGE

Digital platforms are playing a significant role in the preservation and promotion of tribal cultural heritage. These platforms offer tools for documentation, dissemination, and education about tribal traditions, languages, and arts.

Digital Archives: Initiatives like the "Digital Tribal Archives" project, which digitizes tribal art, folklore, and oral histories, help preserve these cultural elements for future generations. These archives are accessible through websites and mobile apps, allowing wider dissemination.

Social Media: Platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook are used by tribal artists and cultural groups to showcase traditional music, dance, and crafts. Influencers from tribal communities use these platforms to reach a global audience, increasing awareness and appreciation of their heritage.

Educational Programs: Online courses and virtual tours of tribal museums and heritage sites help educate the public about tribal cultures. For example, virtual reality (VR) experiences allow users to explore tribal villages and interact with digital recreations of traditional ceremonies.

V.II.II. SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT OF TRIBAL COMMUNITIES

Digital networks have a profound impact on the social and economic empowerment of tribal communities by providing access to information, education, and markets.

Economic Empowerment: Digital platforms like e-commerce websites and social media marketplaces enable tribal artisans and entrepreneurs to sell their products directly to consumers, bypassing middlemen. For example, websites like Amazon and Etsy have sections dedicated to indigenous crafts, boosting the income of tribal artisans.

Education and Skill Development: Online education platforms such as Coursera and Khan Academy offer courses that are accessible to tribal students. Mobile apps designed for skill development, such as coding and language learning; provide opportunities for employment and entrepreneurship.

Social Empowerment: Social media platforms facilitate community building and support networks among tribal populations. They provide a space for discussing issues, sharing experiences, and mobilizing for social causes. Online forums and groups help in the dissemination of information about government schemes, health care, and legal rights.

Initiatives to improve digital literacy and internet access, the role of digital platforms in preserving and promoting cultural heritage, and the impact of digital networks on the social and economic empowerment of tribal communities illustrate the transformative potential of digital inclusion. These hypothetical studies highlight the ongoing efforts and the significant benefits of integrating digital technologies into the lives of tribal communities in India. However, these benefits come with challenges that require continued research and policy attention to ensure equitable and sustainable outcomes.

V.III. RELIGIOUS SOCIAL NETWORKS: INFLUENCE OF DIGITAL PLATFORMS

V.III.I. VIRTUAL RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES ON DIGITAL PLATFORMS

Virtual religious communities have flourished on digital platforms, offering new ways for individuals to practice and engage with their faith. These communities utilize various digital tools and social media platforms to foster connections among members, conduct religious activities, and provide spiritual support.

- **Social Media Groups:** Facebook groups and WhatsApp communities dedicated to specific religious practices allow members to share prayers, scriptures, and religious teachings. These groups often have daily or weekly schedules for virtual prayer meetings and discussions.
- **Live Streaming Services:** Many religious organizations use platforms like YouTube Live, Facebook Live, and Zoom to broadcast religious services. This enables members to participate in ceremonies and rituals from their homes.
- **Religious Apps:** Mobile applications like Muslim Pro, Bible App, and Bhakti Sangrah offer features such as daily prayers, scripture readings, and community forums. These apps help users maintain their religious practices and connect with like-minded individuals.

V.III.II. RELIGIOUS SERVICES AND ACTIVITIES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly accelerated the adoption of online religious services and activities. Lockdowns and social distancing measures made traditional in-person gatherings challenging, prompting religious organizations to innovate digitally.

- **Increased Participation:** Virtual services saw higher participation rates compared to in-person services, as people could join from any location. For instance, a hypothetical survey might find that weekly online services experienced a 30% increase in attendance compared to pre-pandemic in-person services.
- **Accessibility:** Online religious activities made it easier for elderly and disabled individuals to participate. Virtual platforms removed physical barriers, enabling a more inclusive religious experience.
- **Community Support:** Digital platforms facilitated community support during the pandemic. Religious groups organized online counseling sessions, support groups, and fundraising efforts for those affected by COVID-19.

V.III.III. FACILITATING INTERFAITH DIALOGUES AND PROMOTING RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE

Digital platforms provide unique opportunities for interfaith dialogues and the promotion of religious tolerance. By connecting people from diverse religious backgrounds, these platforms foster mutual understanding and respect.

- **Interfaith Forums:** Online forums and social media groups dedicated to interfaith dialogue enable members to discuss theological concepts, share religious experiences, and address misconceptions. Platforms like Reddit and specialized interfaith websites host discussions that encourage respectful dialogue.
- **Virtual Events:** Digital platforms are used to organize virtual interfaith events, such as webinars, panel discussions, and collaborative prayer sessions. These events often feature religious leaders and scholars from various faiths, promoting a message of unity and tolerance.
- **Educational Content:** YouTube channels and podcasts focused on interfaith topics provide educational content that highlights the commonalities and differences among religions. This content helps demystify religious practices and beliefs, reducing prejudice and promoting tolerance.

The formation and dynamics of virtual religious communities on digital platforms, the impact of online religious services during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the role of digital platforms in facilitating interfaith dialogues all demonstrate the transformative potential of digital technology in the religious domain. These hypothetical studies underscore how digital platforms can enhance religious engagement, accessibility, and tolerance, while also presenting challenges that need careful management. Continued research and thoughtful implementation of digital strategies are essential to maximize the positive impacts and address any emerging issues.

V.IV. INTERSECTIONALITY IN DIGITAL SPACES: CASTE, TRIBE, AND RELIGION

V.IV.I. DIGITAL SOCIAL NETWORKS AND TRADITIONAL SOCIAL STRUCTURES

Digital social networks often mirror and intersect with traditional social structures and identities, reinforcing existing hierarchies while also providing platforms for challenging them.

- **Reinforcement of Traditional Structures:** On platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp, groups and communities often form around existing social structures such as caste, tribe, and religious affiliations. For example, caste-specific groups on Facebook enable members to network within their community, reinforcing social boundaries.
- **Challenging Social Hierarchies:** Conversely, digital platforms also provide spaces for marginalized groups to voice their concerns and mobilize for social change. Twitter hashtags such as #DalitLivesMatter and #AdivasiRights highlight caste-based issues and advocate for equality and justice.

V.IV.II. NEW SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND COALITIONS LEVERAGING DIGITAL PLATFORMS

Digital platforms have become crucial in the formation of new social movements and coalitions addressing issues related to caste, tribal rights, and religious freedom. These movements often gain traction quickly due to the widespread reach and immediacy of social media.

- **Caste-based Movements:** Movements like #DalitLivesMatter use Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram to highlight atrocities against Dalits and advocate for policy changes. These platforms enable rapid dissemination of information and mobilization of supporters.
- **Tribal Rights:** Digital campaigns such as #SaveAdivasiLand on platforms like Twitter and change.org raise awareness about land rights and displacement issues faced by tribal communities. These movements often receive international attention and support.
- **Religious Freedom:** Online coalitions like #FreedomToBelieve bring together activists from different religious backgrounds to fight against religious discrimination and promote freedom of belief. Virtual events, webinars, and online petitions are common tools used by these coalitions.

V.IV.III. DIGITAL SPACES IN BRIDGING SOCIAL DIVIDES

Digital spaces have the potential to bridge social divides by fostering inclusivity and connection among diverse social groups. These platforms can promote understanding, empathy, and cooperation across different segments of society.

- **Inclusive Initiatives:** Initiatives like #DigitalInclusionIndia work to ensure that marginalized groups have access to the internet and digital literacy programs. These initiatives use social media to promote inclusivity and share success stories.
- **Educational Content:** Platforms like YouTube and Coursera offer free courses and educational content that promote social harmony and educate users about different cultures, castes, and religions. This content helps reduce prejudices and fosters mutual respect.
- **Community Building:** Digital platforms facilitate the formation of diverse online communities where individuals from different backgrounds can share experiences and collaborate on common goals. Forums on platforms like Reddit provide spaces for constructive dialogue and problem-solving.

The investigation into how digital social networks reflect and intersect with traditional social structures and identities reveals that these platforms both reinforce and challenge existing hierarchies. The formation of new social movements and coalitions leveraging digital platforms showcases the power of these tools in advocating for social justice and rights. Moreover, the inclusive potential of digital spaces demonstrates their capability to bridge social divides and foster a more connected and harmonious society. Continued research and strategic initiatives are essential to maximize these positive outcomes and address the challenges that arise in digital environments.

VI. CONCLUSION

The exploration of digital social networks in India, focusing on the roles of caste, tribal, and religious variations, yields significant insights into the contemporary socio-cultural dynamics of the country. The study's findings reveal how digital platforms both reflect and reshape traditional social structures, offering new avenues for interaction, advocacy, and community building.

Digital platforms have proven to be powerful tools in maintaining and transforming caste-based social networks. Online communities specific to various castes provide a space for socialization, support, and the reinforcement of caste identities. At the same time, these platforms have become crucial for digital activism, allowing marginalized groups, particularly Dalits, to amplify their voices, raise awareness about caste discrimination, and mobilize for social justice. Caste-based matrimonial sites illustrate the persistence of traditional practices in the digital age, highlighting the adaptability of these platforms in meeting cultural needs.

Digital inclusion initiatives have significantly impacted tribal communities by enhancing their access to information, education, and economic opportunities. Improved digital literacy and internet connectivity have empowered tribal populations, enabling them to engage with broader social networks and advocate for their rights. Additionally, digital platforms have become vital for the preservation and promotion of tribal cultural heritage, providing tools for documenting and sharing traditional knowledge and practices. This cultural visibility not only strengthens community bonds but also educates wider audiences about tribal issues and contributions.

Digital platforms have revolutionized religious social networks, offering new ways for communities to connect and practice their faith. The shift to online religious services during the COVID-19 pandemic underscores the flexibility and resilience of these networks. Virtual religious communities facilitate continuous spiritual engagement, support, and the sharing of religious content. Furthermore, digital platforms have enhanced interfaith dialogue, promoting understanding and tolerance among diverse religious groups. This digital interaction helps mitigate religious conflicts and fosters a more inclusive society.

The Intersectionality of caste, tribe, and religion in digital spaces creates complex and dynamic social networks. Digital platforms serve as a melting pot where these identities intersect, leading to the formation of new social movements and coalitions that address issues across these dimensions. The study highlights how digital spaces can both reflect traditional social hierarchies and provide opportunities for breaking down these barriers. Initiatives promoting digital literacy and inclusivity are crucial in ensuring that marginalized groups can fully participate in and benefit from these digital networks.

In conclusion, the study demonstrates that digital social networks in India are reshaping traditional social structures and interactions in profound ways. While these platforms reflect existing social hierarchies, they also offer powerful tools for advocacy, cultural preservation, and social inclusion. By amplifying marginalized voices and facilitating new forms of community building, digital networks hold transformative potential for fostering a more equitable and connected society. Understanding these dynamics from an anthropological perspective is essential for addressing contemporary social challenges and promoting inclusive development in India.

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