

Nature and Trends of

# **CASTE-BASED** **DISCRIMINATION** in Nepal's Digital Spaces

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## 1. Introduction

Dalits are a community relegated to the lowest rung of the caste hierarchy and were formerly treated as untouchables. They share 13.4% of the total national population (Census 2021). Dalits have long faced humiliation, social exclusion and violence—and this supposedly ‘digitalized’ era is no different. From casteist slurs to exaggeration of stereotypes, public discourse is frequently weaponized to dehumanize Dalits, perpetuating narratives that stigmatize them and limit their participation online and offline.

Discrimination and hatred based on caste are rising and Dalits are increasingly facing humiliation, social exclusion, and violence. While digital platforms and social media can amplify marginalized voices, they are also being misused to spread casteist slurs, incite harassment, and reinforce deep-rooted stereotypes. Public discourse, including comment sections, online forums, and viral content, is frequently weaponized to dehumanize Dalits, perpetuating narratives that stigmatize them and limit their participation in both online and offline spaces. Dalit women are especially vulnerable, facing intersectional discrimination that compounds gender-based abuse with casteist oppression, often amplified through misogynistic stereotypes and socio-economic marginalization. Such rhetoric not only normalizes caste-based inequality but also erodes the dignity, rights, and inclusion of marginalized communities, creating digital spaces that reflect and exacerbate offline hierarchies.

As of 2025, around 56 percent of Nepal’s population uses the internet, with an estimated 16.6 million internet users and about 14.8 million social media users, accounting for roughly half of the population. However, there is no official data disaggregated by caste or other historically marginalized social groups, including Dalits. This lack of caste-specific data limits understanding of how historically marginalized communities are accessing and experiencing digital spaces.

Social media in Nepal has created a dual reality. On one hand, it enables advocacy, awareness-raising, and collective action, giving Dalit communities a platform to highlight their hardships. On the other, these platforms have become arenas where caste prejudices are amplified, with Dalit users subjected to hate speech, derogatory remarks, targeted bullying and even threats. These experiences reinforce classic social stigma and entrench systemic inequalities.

Resilience and resistance strategies are varied. Some challenge harmful narratives online; others adopt strategic avoidance, while some rely on silent endurance for safety. While these coping mechanisms demonstrate courage, structural and social barriers continue to limit the full exercise of rights and agency among the Dalit community.

Recognizing these dynamics, coordinated action is urgently needed: governments must enact and enforce legal protections against online caste discrimination, social media platforms must implement caste-sensitive moderation policies, and civil society must actively support Dalit-focused digital advocacy. Only through such comprehensive efforts can Nepal foster safer, more equitable, and empowering digital environments that dismantle systemic caste hierarchies rather than reproduce them.

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<sup>1</sup>DataReportal. (2025). Digital 2025: Global Overview Report. Retrieved from <https://datareportal.com>

## 2. Methodology

To examine the nature and emerging trends of caste discrimination in digital spaces, this paper employed a qualitative research techniques. The study begins with a content analysis of major social media platforms—Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, and YouTube—to identify patterns of caste-based hate speech, trolling, and exclusionary narratives. This process involved the systematic collection of posts, comments, hashtags, and viral content to trace recurring caste-related language, imagery, and sentiment.

In parallel, digital ethnography<sup>2</sup> is also applied to observe how caste identities and interactions manifest within online communities and discussion forums. To complement these observations, key informant interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with Dalit activists, journalists, and social media users to gain deeper insights into lived experiences of online discrimination. Some case studies of notable incidents of caste-based cyberbullying or hate speech were analyzed to understand institutional and societal responses to such events.

## 3. Constitutional and legal provisions to address caste hate speech

At the international level, significant strides have been made to recognize and combat caste-based discrimination, including hate speech. In 2002, the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) issued General Recommendation No. 29 on Descent-Based Discrimination<sup>3</sup>, a landmark document that explicitly addresses caste and caste-like forms of discrimination. It calls upon states to take proactive measures against the dissemination of ideas promoting caste superiority or inferiority and to adopt stringent actions against incitement to violence or discrimination, including through mass media and emerging digital platforms. This framework was further strengthened in 2017 when the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) released the Guidance Tool on Descent-Based Discrimination<sup>4</sup>, identifying hate speech as an early warning indicator of potential violence against descent-based communities.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) affirms equality, dignity, and freedom of expression without discrimination, principles that apply equally to online environments. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), particularly Articles 19 and 20, protects freedom of expression while prohibiting advocacy of hatred that incites discrimination or violence, including online hate speech. The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) further guarantees non-discriminatory access to education, cultural participation, and information technologies. UN Special Rapporteurs on Minority Issues, Freedom of Expression, and Racism have explicitly recognized caste or descent-based discrimination as a human rights concern, with mandates that increasingly address online hate, digital exclusion, and algorithmic bias affecting marginalized communities such as Dalits. The UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs) extend these obligations to digital platforms and technology companies, requiring human rights due diligence to prevent and address discrimination and hate speech. Normative instruments such as the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action and the Rabat Plan of Action further clarify that descent-based discrimination constitutes a form of racism and provide standards for assessing and regulating incitement to hatred in online contexts. Gender-specific frameworks, including the Beijing Platform for Action and CEDAW mechanisms, highlight the intersectional vulnerabilities of Dalit women to online violence and exclusion. Complementary digital governance frameworks—such as UNESCO's Internet Universality ROAM Principles, the Global Digital Compact process, and Internet Governance Forum best-practice forums—underscore state and corporate responsibilities to ensure equality, accessibility, and accountability in digital ecosystems. These standards align with the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 10 on reducing inequalities and SDG 16 on inclusive, just, and accountable institutions, reinforcing the obligation to address caste-based discrimination in both offline and digital spaces. At the national level, Nepal has incorporated a legal framework to address caste-based discrimination and hate crimes. The Constitution of Nepal explicitly prohibits caste-based discrimination and untouchability in both public and private spheres, affirming the right of every individual to equality, dignity, and freedom. The Caste-Based Discrimination and Untouchability (Offence and Punishment) Act, 2011 (CBDU Act) criminalizes all forms of caste-based discrimination, including verbal, physical, and structural abuses, while providing avenues for redress and punishment.

<sup>2</sup>Digital ethnography is a research method used to understand how people interact, communicate, and experience social life in digital spaces such as social media platforms, online forums, messaging apps, and other internet-based environments.

<sup>3</sup>United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. (2002). General recommendation No. 29: Descent-based discrimination. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/treaty-bodies/cerd>

<sup>4</sup>Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). (2017). Guidance tool on descent-based discrimination. United Nations. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/publications/guidance-tool-descent-based-discrimination>

Complementing these provisions, the Nepal Dalit Commission Act, 2017 establishes a statutory body tasked with safeguarding Dalit rights, investigating complaints, monitoring implementation of protective measures, and recommending systemic reforms. Collectively, these measures aim to prevent atrocities and structural discrimination while promoting justice, equality, and social inclusion for Dalit communities.

Nepal's legal system also includes provisions that extend to the digital sphere. Section 47 of the Electronic Transaction Act criminalizes abusive behavior through electronic media, while the provision of section 166 of National Criminal Code penalizes online threats, harassment, and defamation. However, these measures remain largely inadequate in addressing caste-based online abuse. Weak enforcement, limited recognition of caste-specific hate speech, and the absence of targeted mechanisms to protect Dalit communities online have allowed digital platforms to become arenas of harassment, exclusion, and intimidation. Without deliberate policy interventions and strengthened monitoring, the internet risks reproducing offline caste hierarchies, undermining the promise of digital spaces as tools for inclusion, representation, and empowerment.

## 4. Digital manifestations of caste hierarchies and discrimination

### Online Hate Speech and Derogatory Remarks

Online hate speech against Dalits in Nepal has become a worrying extension of long-standing caste discrimination. Social media, which should be a space to speak up and be heard, is often used to spread derogatory remarks, caste slurs, and exclusionary narratives targeting Dalit individuals and activists. This kind of digital hostility not only reinforces deep-rooted social hierarchies but also silences Dalit voices advocating for equality and justice. Weak monitoring and limited accountability from both the government and tech companies have allowed this form of cyber violence to grow unchecked.

A striking example is Santosh Pariyar, former chief whip of the Rashtriya Swatantra Party (RSP), who recently left the party, saying there was no environment to advance his political ideas. In the online discussion that followed, very few people engaged with his arguments. Instead, comments reduced him entirely to his caste identity, mocking his "aukat" (status) as a Dalit. This illustrates how caste prejudice continues to overshadow reasoned debate, silencing Dalit leaders and undermining meaningful political discussion.

Tackling such incidents requires a mix of digital literacy, stricter enforcement of anti-discrimination and cyber laws, and close collaboration between civil society, policymakers, and online platforms to make digital spaces safer and more inclusive. However, a separate study is needed to examine how different individuals and groups within the Dalit community are affected by digital violence.

### Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying against Dalits in Nepal's online spaces reflects the persistence of caste prejudice in digital form. Dalit individuals, particularly activists, journalists, and women, are frequently targeted with abusive comments, caste-based slurs, and threats on social media platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, and X (formerly Twitter). For example, when Dalit activists speak out against discrimination or raise issues of caste injustice, they often face coordinated trolling and hate campaigns aimed at discrediting or intimidating them. In some cases, online harassment has escalated into offline threats, revealing how digital abuse reinforces social exclusion and psychological harm. Despite existing cyber laws, limited enforcement and lack of sensitivity toward caste-based online violence have allowed such acts to go largely unpunished, underscoring the urgent need for digital accountability and caste-sensitive cyber governance.



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<sup>3</sup>United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. (2002). General recommendation No. 29: Descent-based discrimination. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/treaty-bodies/cerd>

<sup>4</sup>Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). (2017). Guidance tool on descent-based discrimination. United Nations. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/publications/guidance-tool-descent-based-discrimination>

Consider the case of Rupa Sunar, who posted a video recounting an incident in which a landlord refused to rent her a room solely because of her caste. Her social media accounts were immediately flooded with harassment, including abusive messages, explicit rape threats and defamatory rumors alleging inappropriate relationships with certain donors. She was also subjected to cyberstalking, and multiple fake accounts were created to defame her, further amplifying the online abuse and intimidation.

According to data collected by the Nepal Child Rights Council during FY 2024/25, a total of 7,584 cases of technology-facilitated child violence were officially recorded nationwide. Of these, 30% cases involved Dalit children, pointing to a disproportionate impact of digital violence on Dalit communities. The findings underscore the heightened vulnerability of Dalit children to online abuse, harassment, and exploitation.

## Threats

Beyond harassment and cyberbullying, Dalits in Nepal face direct online threats that show how deeply caste-based hostility has seeped into digital space. Activists, lawyers, and human rights defenders who challenge caste hierarchies or demand justice often receive death threats, sexualised threats, or warnings of physical harm through social media, messaging apps, and comment sections. These threats are intended to silence Dalit voices, discourage advocacy, and preserve the social status quo. Weak investigation and prosecution have created a sense of impunity, emboldening perpetrators to continue their abuse.

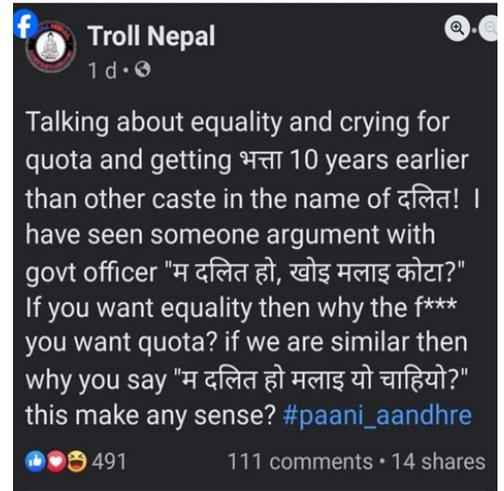
Dalit women are particularly exposed. As seen in the case of Rupa Sunar, women who speak publicly about discrimination often endure waves of abusive messages, threats, and coordinated campaigns from fake accounts designed to intimidate them. Even after filing complaints with the Nepal Police's Cyber Crimes Bureau and pursuing legal action, the harassment frequently persists. Such attacks not only endanger individuals but also send a chilling signal to the wider community, discouraging Dalit women from participating openly in digital spaces. Amnesty International's 2024 report documents that Dalit women and girls in Nepal are at greater risk of caste-based discrimination and violence, including online threats, yet reporting and justice remain limited.

Public reactions to cases like Rupa's also reveal how readily many people defend their own caste identities, often overlooking the underlying prejudice. Even when discrimination is not openly intended, implicit bias still shapes behaviour, reinforcing exclusion in both digital and offline environments. Addressing these patterns requires stronger protections, better platform accountability, and targeted interventions to ensure the safety and agency of Dalits online.

## Exclusion from Online Spaces

Exclusion from online spaces remains a growing yet overlooked form of digital discrimination in Nepal. Even as internet access spreads, caste continues to shape who can participate meaningfully. Many Dalit communities—particularly in rural areas—struggle with limited devices, patchy connectivity and low digital literacy, which curbs their access to online education, jobs and public debate. And even when Dalits get online, they often meet hostility: hate speech, caste-based trolling and an atmosphere that discourages expression. The result is a digital landscape that mirrors offline marginalisation and deepens existing social and economic divides. Tackling this gap demands inclusive digital policies, affordable connectivity and targeted programmes that help Dalit users engage confidently and safely.

Digital technologies have reshaped how information flows. Platforms such as X and Facebook allow individuals to bypass traditional media, mobilise support and publicise injustices in real time. Where once marginalized voices struggled for space in mainstream media, social platforms now offer visibility and immediacy.



<sup>5</sup>According to data collected by the National Child Rights Commission (NCRC, 2024) during FY 2024/25.

<sup>6</sup>Amnesty International. (2024, May 10). "No-One Cares": Descent-Based Discrimination Against Dalits in Nepal. Amnesty International. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/05/descent-based-discrimination-against-dalits-in-nepal/>

A vivid example is the incident in Madhesh, of Satyaendra Ram and Neha Rauniyar's. From different castes and facing family pressure, threats and confinement, the couple fled to India. When authorities sought to bring them back, friends and activists turned to social media, broadcasting updates and urging urgent intervention. What began as a private ordeal became a national debate over the right to choose one's partner. The online pressure compelled authorities to act, helped protect the pair and ultimately supported their reunion and marriage. Their story shows how social media can expose injustice, rally solidarity and play a decisive role in resisting caste barriers.

However, the promise of digital empowerment is not uniform. Patterns of exclusion and hierarchy also appear online. In Nepal, social media engagement remains dominated by individuals from historically privileged groups, whose posts, comments, and shares often reinforce existing biases and cultural influence. Research examining India Members of Parliament found a similar trend: those belonging to "higher" castes occupy more central positions within Twitter networks, maintain more reciprocal connections with colleagues, and are more frequently retweeted—especially by other upper-caste MPs. However, marginalized digital communities continue to reshape discourse by offering counter-narratives and challenging entrenched power structures, much like feminist collectives that have long used online spaces to confront misogyny and mobilize social change.

## Use of Fake Accounts

The use of fake and anonymous accounts has become a troubling weapon against Dalits in Nepal's online sphere. Such profiles are routinely created to spread caste-based hostility, defame activists, or seed misinformation. In some cases, some individuals deliberately create false online profiles pretending to belong to marginalized caste groups and use those accounts to spread hateful or abusive content, misrepresent those communities, and deliberately target others for harm. Dalit journalists, campaigners and public figures are often targeted with manipulated images, false allegations and abusive comments, all delivered from accounts designed to mask the perpetrator's identity. Some of these accounts appear to operate in coordinated clusters, attempting to discredit Dalit-led campaigns or derail conversations about equality and justice. Anonymity makes these attacks both persistent and difficult to trace, limiting the prospects for accountability.

A recent example came from a poster shared by the Dignity Initiative to promote an upcoming discussion. A fake account under the name "Dadalka Recruit" responded by accusing the organisation of handing out "Dollar" and promoting missionary activities under the guise of free meals. The claim was baseless. It reflected a familiar tactic: using fabricated narratives to distract from the issue at hand and to cast suspicion on groups working with marginalised communities. Such manoeuvres not only distort public understanding but also deter organisations and the people they serve from participating openly online.

Research reinforces how damaging these anonymous attacks can be. A 2023 study by the Purple Foundation on gendered political violence found that women from marginalised backgrounds—particularly Dalit women in politics—face frequent threats delivered through fake or pseudonymous accounts. These messages often invoke the risk of harm, creating an atmosphere of fear that limits participation and silences voices before they can be heard. Instead of widening democratic space, digital platforms are too often being turned into tools for exclusion.

In digital spaces, a clear distinction must be made between anonymity and fake accounts, particularly in relation to freedom of expression. Anonymity involves the use of anonymous identities to protect privacy, safety, and the right to express opinions without fear of retaliation, and can be essential for journalists, human rights defenders, and marginalized groups. Fake accounts, however, are based on deliberately deceptive identities created to mislead, manipulate public discourse, or evade accountability.



<sup>7</sup>According to Shalendra Ambedkar, the lawyer representing Satyaendra Ram and Neha Rauniyar, social media played a significant role in giving visibility and attention to the couple's case, helping generate public awareness and pressure that contributed to official action. (Author's interview with Shalendra Ambedkar, 2025).

<sup>8</sup>Vaghela, P., Mothilal, R. K., & Pal, J. (2020). Indian political Twitter and caste discrimination – How representation does not equal inclusion in Lok Sabha networks.

While anonymity can strengthen democratic participation and free expression, the proliferation of fake accounts undermines these same rights by facilitating harassment, misinformation, and coordinated abuse. Policy responses should therefore safeguard legitimate anonymous expression while establishing measures to prevent and address harms caused by fake accounts.

## 5. Challenges

Casteist slurs, derogatory comments, and harmful memes are widespread, normalizing discrimination and creating unsafe environments for engagement. The use of fake accounts and anonymity allows perpetrators to threaten, intimidate, and harass Dalits without accountability. Dalit women experience compounded discrimination, facing both caste- and gender-based abuse that limits their ability to participate freely. Limited digital access, low literacy, and economic constraints further hinder Dalits from engaging meaningfully in online spaces. Weak legal recognition of caste-specific online abuse and ineffective enforcement exacerbate these challenges, turning the digital sphere into a reflection of offline inequalities that silences Dalit voices and restricts their opportunities for empowerment, inclusion, and social advancement. Some other specific challenges are as follows:

- ❁ Social media platforms and digital forums often host casteist slurs, derogatory comments, and memes targeting Dalits. This constant exposure normalizes discrimination, making caste-based abuse seem acceptable and discouraging Dalits from participating freely in online discourse.
- ❁ Perpetrators frequently use fake or pseudonymous accounts to harass, threaten, or humiliate Dalits. This anonymity creates impunity, makes accountability difficult, and intensifies fear among Dalit users, effectively silencing their voices.
- ❁ Dalit women face layered forms of online abuse that combine casteist, misogynistic, and socio-economic biases. Threats of sexual violence, gendered insults, and derogatory caste references severely restrict their ability to participate safely in digital spaces.
- ❁ Structural barriers, including poverty, lack of internet infrastructure, and low digital literacy, limit Dalits' access to online platforms. This exclusion prevents them from fully engaging in social, political, and civic discourse online, perpetuating marginalization.
- ❁ While Nepal has laws addressing caste discrimination and online harassment, existing legal frameworks often fail to recognize caste-specific online hate speech explicitly. Weak enforcement, delayed action, and limited mechanisms to report and redress digital abuse leave Dalits vulnerable to ongoing harassment and threats.

## 6. Conclusion and recommendations

The digital space is increasingly reflecting and amplifying the caste hierarchies and discrimination that persist offline. Biases, stereotypes, and prejudices long embedded in Nepali society are now reproduced online through hate speech, harassment, exclusionary practices, and the proliferation of fake accounts. Social media platforms, comment sections, and digital forums often become arenas where Dalits are dehumanized, ridiculed, or silenced, further entrenching their marginalization and limiting equitable participation. Dalit women, in particular, face intersectional abuse, experiencing casteist, misogynistic, and socio-economic discrimination simultaneously, which diminishes their agency and voice online. Without active intervention, the digital realm risks becoming a parallel space of oppression, normalizing hostility, exclusion, and violence.

Despite these challenges, marginalized online communities play a critical role in shaping digital discourse, providing safer spaces for underrepresented groups, and challenging dominant narratives and power structures. Yet these communities contend with limited visibility, entrenched power imbalances, persistent harassment, and the tension between online engagement and offline realities. Strengthening and supporting these spaces is essential to foster a more inclusive and equitable digital landscape.

Within this context, caste-hate speech has surged across social media, normalizing derogatory language as a tool to humiliate and oppress Dalits. This form of hate requires urgent recognition and must be addressed through international human rights and hate-speech frameworks. Caste-affected countries should incorporate caste-based protections into national legislation, emphasizing inclusion, empowerment, and transparency to safeguard and strengthen Dalit agency.

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<sup>9</sup>Purple Foundation, Research Report on Gendered Violence Against Women and Gender and Sexual Minorities in Politics in Nepal (Kathmandu: Purple Foundation, 2022).

Caste-based slurs, insults, incitements, and degrading insinuations create profound vulnerability for Dalits in both online and offline spaces. For Dalit women, the consequences are even more severe, given the intersectional discrimination they endure. Addressing caste-hate speech is therefore not only a matter of digital rights but also a critical human rights imperative, demanding concerted action from governments, platforms, and civil society to ensure dignity, safety, and equitable participation for all.

In the past, gathering evidence in caste-based discrimination cases was extremely difficult, as incidents often happened behind closed doors or without any formal documentation. Today, however, digital platforms and online spaces have made evidence collection far more accessible. Screenshots, call recordings, voice notes, videos, and social media posts now serve as concrete proof of harassment, threats, and discriminatory behavior. These digital traces not only strengthen legal cases but also empower victims and activists to expose caste-based violence that would have otherwise remained invisible.

Following recommendations are made to make the online space inclusive:

- ❁ Recognize caste as a protected characteristic in national digital, hate speech, and cyberbullying laws to ensure legal accountability.
- ❁ Mandate caste-sensitive community standards on social media platforms, including training moderators to identify caste-based slurs and enforcing country-specific guidelines.
- ❁ Establish accessible reporting mechanisms and rapid redress systems for victims, with time-bound removal of abusive content and dedicated support for Dalit women and activists.
- ❁ Strengthen digital literacy and safety programs for Dalit communities, including privacy management, identifying fake accounts, and safe online activism.
- ❁ Promote accountability for fake accounts and coordinated harassment campaigns, including penalizing impersonation and supporting victims in reclaiming misused accounts.
- ❁ Support Dalit-focused digital advocacy, research, and counter-speech initiatives to monitor caste-hate trends, amplify positive narratives, and empower marginalized voices online.
- ❁ Governments and research institutions should gather and publish data on digital access, usage, and online harassment, disaggregated by caste, to better understand barriers faced by Dalits.
- ❁ Implement targeted programs providing affordable internet, devices, and digital literacy training, especially for Dalit communities in rural and underserved areas.
- ❁ Digital platforms must adopt clear policies against caste-based abuse, enhance content moderation, address algorithmic bias, and provide effective reporting and grievance mechanisms.
- ❁ Encourage collaboration among government, civil society, tech companies, and Dalit communities to create an inclusive digital ecosystem and reduce online caste discrimination.