

# Beyond the Solid Structure: Re-Evaluating Caste Dynamics in the Era of Liquid Modernity

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**Abstract:** *The caste system has traditionally been one of the most prevalent social institutions in India, determining the population's social hierarchy, access to resources, and other factors. Even though globalization, urbanization, and digitalization have changed many aspects of Indian society, caste does not seem to disappear with time. Instead, it sees adaptations, which allow it to survive in the new environment. The present paper seeks to explore this phenomenon further, using Zygmunt Bauman's theory of Liquid Modernity as the framework for investigation. By analyzing the information from the provided articles and performing secondary research, one can come to the conclusion that even though the caste system's presence in the digital space is no longer absolute, it still shapes people's interactions and opportunities significantly. With the current trend of using the internet as a tool for finding marriage partners, members of the higher caste still benefit from the system, albeit in a different way. The article combines the theory with the empirical data to show how the system fits into the modern social landscape, gradually moving towards liquid caste system, which better suits the changed environment.*

**Keywords:** Caste, Liquid Modernity, Digital sociology, social stratification, digital inequality, algorithmic bias, endogamy

## 1. Introduction

**Turn in any direction you like, caste is the monster that crosses your path."**

The caste system has been an important institution in India from the standpoint of regulating the distribution of resources, the social hierarchy and the interaction patterns of the population. In recent years, the phenomena of globalization, informatization and digitalization have changed human life and interpersonal relationships drastically and the caste system is no exception. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the peculiarities of the functioning of the caste system in the context of liquid modernity. Zygmunt Bauman invented the term liquid modernity, a concept that indicates social change and a dynamic process of transformation. In this paper, the author will examine the relation between caste system and modernity, and will present arguments for why the former does not disappear with the processes of globalization.

First of all, Zygmunt Bauman's theory of liquid modernity claims that modern society and social relations are constantly changing and unstable. With people's lives now so deeply integrated with information technologies and digitalization of everyday interactions, human connections are more fluid and volatile than ever before. Seen from the perspective of liquid modernity, it is clear that social hierarchies and power structures are constantly being recontextualised in small and inventive ways. Taking the caste system as an example, it can be assumed that technological development, especially informatization and digitalization, has allowed lower castes to avoid the constraints of the caste system and to enjoy more social mobility. The dominant groups in the hierarchy have managed to adapt their dominance to the changing conditions through new technologies while the lower castes have clung on to their social privileges.

But, as the paper argues, globalization and liquid modernity have been beneficial for the production of new social

hierarchies and discrimination practices which are deeply ingrained in the structures of online platforms and digital technologies. The caste system is still relevant in the 21st century, morphing and re-morphing through the use of new online technologies. The paper argues that the traditional caste system, which used to be explicit and visible, has become more elusive and sophisticated in the modern environment of informatization and digitalization. Today, the caste system is not regulated by state legislation but is performed through social media and other online platforms. Hence, the author concludes that the study of caste system requires further empirical research and theoretical progress as its study is of importance for the understanding of social discrimination and social inequalities. This paper establishes that caste system continues in the context of liquid modernity and conforms itself to the conditions of digital modernity through new technologies of social media.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### Understanding Caste through the Liquid modernity

The theoretical framework utilised for the purpose of the investigation into how and why caste persists in modern India is Liquid Modernity by Zygmunt Bauman. Although Bauman's concept cannot be used in a strict theoretical sense, as the Polish sociologist paid little attention to the caste system, his ideas on the transition of modernity from solid to liquid provide a valuable foundation of reasoning that enables a better understanding of why traditional institutions do not disappear after the advent of digital technology.

According to Bauman, the modernity transitioned from solid to liquid due to the changes in the social order that took place throughout the 20th century. Solid modernity refers to the period of post-feudal stability that lasted until roughly the end of WWII. The key characteristic of this era was the institutionalisation of social roles and relations. Put another way, each person had their place in the social hierarchy

determined by their occupation, familial ties, and other relations.

The institutions held at the top of the social hierarchy were the family, religion, and the state. All three determined the position of an individual within the hierarchy, and there was little reason to argue about the status that one was born into. Stability, order, and lasting arrangements were the key characteristics of the solid modernity.

The liquid modernity is the result of the process of globalization and technological advancement, which has rendered many of the traditional ties and institutional barriers obsolete. Individuals now have much greater power in shaping their identity, and one's social category is no longer dictated by one's father. One could say, that social life has moved from rigid institutional control to more fluid, digital interactions.

Although Bauman's ideas primarily concern the changes that took place from the 1950s onward, they can be useful in examining the modernity in another sense, as the Polish sociologist demonstrated that both continuity and change are integral aspects of any society. This perspective has much in common with the approaches of B.R. Ambedkar and M.N. Srinivas who both spoke about caste as a system and a social institution.

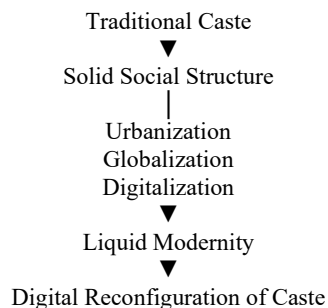
By examining caste through the lens of continuity and change, it becomes possible to gain a better understanding of its role in the liquid modernity. Srinivas' theory of the 'graded castes' and Sanskritization demonstrates that the caste system, its principles, and its social relations have remained the same even after decades of globalization and liberalization. Ambedkar's perspective adds to the discussion by demonstrating how caste functions in the realm of politics.

It could be argued that caste is disappearing under the pressures of digital modernity. The internet and the rising level of individual freedoms allow people to interact with each other outside of the rigid social categories and achieve their goals irrespective of their social status. Bauman's ideas, however, demonstrate that the basic principles of society have not changed. Although the technological advancement and digital revolution may have diminished the importance of many institutions and social roles, they have not disappeared altogether. Institutions such as religion still exert a great level of influence, and people are still divided into categories according to their profession, gender, and other characteristics.

The same principles can be applied to the caste system when attempting to analyse why it continues to exist in the digital era. In many online spaces, the social hierarchy is replicated in a way that resembles the traditional caste system. In some ways, the caste system itself is beginning to exhibit characteristics described by Bauman as typical for liquid modernity. For example, the social hierarchy is no longer dictated by one's family but is rather chosen by the individual and is much more fluid.

At the same time, the existence of the caste system in the digital space is much more concealed. One may not suspect that one's social media account or a dating application one uses is powered by an algorithm that utilises the principles of the caste system. Online dating apps, matrimonial sites, and other platforms have digitized the caste system, incorporating its basic principles for the purposes of profit.

The main point is that the social order in the digital space resembles the traditional caste system more than one might expect. The system no longer dictates the terms of engagement but rather conceals them, making it difficult to understand how one's choices are constrained by the social hierarchy. The existence of caste in the digital space is now much more subjective and depends on the person and the context. Overall, its basic principles still exist but are now hidden behind layers of digital interactions. As such, Bauman's concept of liquid modernity is an effective theoretical framework that allows a better understanding of the persistence of caste after the advent of digital technology.



### 3. Methodology

The present research involves a qualitative and interpretive study aimed to investigate the transformation of caste under the paradigm of digital modernity. Instead of collecting primary data for the research, this paper will make use of data from various secondary sources, including books, journal articles, reports, and other relevant literature on the topic of caste and modernity.

In particular, the study will focus on Zygmunt Bauman's Liquid Modernity to provide a conceptual basis for interpreting the emergence and development of the caste system in modernity. The theoretical framework will be completed by the perspectives of B. R. Ambedkar and M. N. Srinivas on caste, its historical development, and its ability to adapt to changes. The research will involve an analysis of the relevant literature to explore the ways in which caste manifestations in the digital space impact its perpetration in society. The analysis will include online matrimonial services, social media, and other means of virtual communication.

This methodology has been selected because it allows to complete a conceptual analysis of the manner in which liquid modernity impacts the functioning of caste without resorting to quantitative studies. By design, the research will attempt to discover the ways in which the caste system and its'

manifestations are adapted by society to persist within the limits of digital modernity.

#### 4. Re-evaluating Caste Dynamics in the Era of Liquid modernity

##### *Caste as a Solid Social Structure*

The caste system has traditionally been one of the most stable and regulating phenomena in Indian society. It has provided a framework for social identity, occupation, marriage, and access to resources, and simultaneously significantly limited these aspects of life due to a person's social status and the restrictions that come with it. Thus, the caste system created a relatively stable hierarchy based on the principles of the distribution of status at birth.

BR. Ambedkar interpreted caste as 'graded inequality', emphasizing the endogamy principle that dictated the interaction between different castes and the restrictions on food, resources, and other factors. His perspective emphasizes the oppressive aspect of caste relations and the suppression of different groups' equality. M. N. Srinivas' perspective complements the first one, highlighting the regulatory aspect of caste and the ways it shapes relations between different groups. He emphasized that caste was indeed a rigid social structure but noted several phenomena that made it relatively flexible.

The concept of graded inequality and regulation of social interactions suggest how caste relations can be related to Zygmunt Bauman's solid and liquid modernity. The traditional caste system is an example of solid modernity because it imposed a binary opposition on the relationships between different groups of people. Under the caste system, people fell into rigid categories that dictated almost all aspects of their lives, from marriage and occupation to social interactions in general. Community social life was characterized by isolation and control through coercion, and social roles were fixed for life. Thus, the caste system was a paradigm of solid modernity because it did not allow social roles and interactions to change.

Nevertheless, the processes of globalization, migration, urbanization, education, and technological development have begun to dissolve some of these structures and hierarchies, changing some aspects of caste relations. However, they did so by making them more elusive rather than eliminating them altogether. The next section will explore how these factors shaped the modern fluidity of caste relations and how they fit into Bauman's liquid modernity.

#### 5. Applying Liquid Modernity to Contemporary Caste: The Digital Recasting of Social Hierarchies

##### **Digital Dating Services and Endogamy**

Marriage has always been at the center of the caste sociology as it allowed one to reproduce one's caste community.

Although the digital matrimonial services claim to help the bride-searchers to find a partner beyond the reach of the local community, the opportunity to discriminate on the basis of caste, sub-caste, religion, and other factors only demonstrates how technology complies with social norms. Therefore, the liquid modernity theory explains how the principles used to be applied on a communal level start operating on an individual level with the help of technology.

##### **Networks and Social Capital in Liquid Modernity**

Dating services and online social networks aim at helping one to connect with people who share similar interests or social capital, for instance, one's professional network or alumni. Various online tools and resources, including alumni directory services, WhatsApp groups, and others, allow one to build virtual communities and social networks. However, doing so only replicates the social divisions because they are based on one's social capital that allows one to attain social capital from specific groups. In other words, networks and tools appropriate historical social control mechanisms to ensure that the principles of "the favor of the superior" remain relevant in the modern workplace and society.

##### **Social Media as a Space of Identity Negotiation**

As a result, social media allows one to negotiate one's caste identity because the individual has an opportunity to decide whom to follow in social media. Moreover, as one interacts mostly with people of similar backgrounds but can negotiate their social capital at the workplace without knowing their caste backgrounds, the fluidity of the virtual connections helps to reproduce social divisions based on caste.

##### **Virtual Communities as a Mechanism of Discrimination**

One of the ways in which the digital age facilitates discrimination is that it hides it under the digital umbrella, meaning that the principles of discrimination are encoded in the logic of specific online tools and resources. Therefore, the concepts of exclusion and inclusion operate via recommendation algorithms, communities, and networks, as particular tools and resources hide the ways in which society reproduces itself. The fact that the technologies of discrimination are hidden does not eliminate discrimination; instead, they change its' mechanisms. In other words, discrimination encoded in the logic of technological solutions makes caste invisible, but its' effects are evident on the level of society.

##### **Solid and Liquid Caste**

Although the article examines how the caste system is reproduced in the modern workplace and society with the assistance of digital technologies, it is important to note that such tools and resources are built on the principles of communal life. Therefore, despite making the mechanisms of social exclusion liquid, technology does not erase caste discrimination. Instead, the social hierarchy manifests itself through informational technology and social media. As a result, the principles of social exclusion change, but they remain, influencing the way people connect, get married, and build networks. In other words, the social order does not

disappear with individualism; instead, it changes its' shape and remains prevalent in society.

## 6. Discussion

The discussion section will demonstrate how the claims made in the paper relate to the theories developed by Zygmunt Bauman, as well as Ambedkar and Srinivas. In particular, the analysis will show how the principles of exclusion operate in the digital age, thus demonstrating that they are still integral to society despite globalization and individualism. In other words, while Ambedkar's ideas explain how discrimination persists in India after the country's economic development, Srinivas's theory of graded society demonstrates why it continues to exist. Therefore, the discussion section will elaborate on how Bauman's liquid modernity theory is the best framework for examining the role of discrimination in society, as it allows one to understand why society follows the principles of exclusion, such as caste and money. In particular, the discussion section will demonstrate how technology-enabled discrimination fits into the framework of liquid modernity, thus proving that caste is a social institution that persists in technological solutions.

## 7. Conclusion

The present research aimed at examining the phenomenon of caste through the framework of liquid modernity to identify how this social institution continues to exist despite attempts to eradicate it. The research has shown that although social structures, such as the caste system, have been altered by modernity and globalization, they still influence the way individuals interact. Moreover, technology enhanced the effect of caste by altering its' mechanisms, thus making it more difficult to detect but not less detrimental. Therefore, the study has demonstrated that caste is a social institution that persists, surviving on the actions of individuals, and taking advantage of technology and individualism of the digital age. The research utilized the concepts of Srinivas, Ambedkar, and Bauman to elaborate on the persistence of caste discrimination to highlight its' characteristics in modern society. Further research on the topic could be conducted to examine how other social institutions affect discrimination, as well as how digital anthropology can aid in understanding the mechanisms of discrimination.

## 8. Limitations and Future Research

The current research has limitations due to the theoretical nature of the presented information, which is based on secondary sources. The article does not contain any user data related to the caste system. Therefore, the future researchers should continue the work on the topic of liquid modernity and caste system.

The next step for the research would be conducting qualitative and quantitative studies among the users and professionals in the field in order to find how caste discrimination affects

people in terms of society. It is suggested to continue the research in an interdisciplinary perspective in order to discover the effects of new technologies, such as matrimonial websites, on social inequality.

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