

## Representation of Caste Identities in Digital Banners of Tamil Nadu

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### Abstract

*Tamil Nadu is known for its digital banners of various advertisements, political campaigns, publicity and promotion of new movies and also common man's celebrations, functions and festivals. The digital banners are the popular street media of Tamil Nadu and also a democratic space for all. In this article, the researcher explores how the common man is accessing digital banners. Further, the researcher explores the nuances of representation of caste identities in the digital banners and how it leads to caste conflicts in Tamil Nadu. Case study method is employed in this study. Three case studies of caste conflicts through digital banners is studied.*

**Key Words:** Digital banners, Street Media, Case Study, Caste identities, Caste conflict

### Introduction

Tamil Nadu is known for its digital banners of various advertisements, political campaigns, publicity and promotion of new movies and also common man's celebrations, functions and festivals. The digital banners are the popular street media of Tamil Nadu and also a democratic space for all. Those banners have a huge publicity in the society and it facilitates common man's self-promotions, self-advertisement, political campaign, to exhibit their economic status and caste pride.

### What they say worldwide

According to Marshall McLuhan (1964) *The Medium is the Message* which speaks for itself. He gave more importance

to the medium itself rather than the message. For example, the electric light is pure information. It is a medium without a message, as it were, unless it is used to spell out some verbal ad or name. This fact, a characteristic of all media, means that the 'content' of any medium is always another medium. The content of writing is speech, just as the written word is the content of print and is also the content of the telegraph. By placing all the stress on content and practically none on the medium, we lose all chance of perceiving and influencing the impact of new technologies on man. So it is very pertinent to study the impact of new technologies including digital banners on the society.

Harold Innis(1951) in his book *The Bias of Communication*, ventures into a

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broad exploration of the historical relationship between a society's predominant means of communication and prevailing patterns of knowledge and power. Before the ninth century, the kings were noticed for success and fame and their achievements written in the stone. Especially, the kings had written the borders ruling, dams, city name, castle, and temples etc., engraved and set with stone cuts. The stones were given some information about the message or information from the inscription that's called space biased communication. The space biased communication which means the message was given a place of standard expression that we could not move anywhere, due to heaviness and durability (such as stone). We have seen thousand - year -old stone cuts in this century also. After fifteenth century we have used manuscripts to keep the records, and used to exchange the message from one place to another place. The manuscripts were used to transfer military secrets from one place to another. This is called time biased media. The time biased media can be easily taken anywhere but its life times is too short and that is why these are called time biased media. Here the digital banners can be called as time biased media.

Street media is an integral part of media in our daily lives. Ecology of street media includes a vibrant array of individual communication. But in the commercial area of city bus stop, street shops and another place one particular people tolerance one other (Rekha, 1996).

Public spaces are one of the very important things in street media, the person and political life of a society, offering sites of significant communication and serving as sources for news, information and dialogue. Public space and place include plazas, parks, street, shops, and malls.

To Lefebvre, the street brings "all the elements of urban life" together, and serves, among others things, as "a communication space". Spaces are most important according to Henri Lefebvre (1972), and the urban space of the street is a place for talk, given over as much to the exchange of words and signs. It is a place where speech becomes writing, a place where speech can become "savage" and by escaping rules and institutions, can inscribe itself on walls. So here digital banners can be called as street media.

Tamil Nadu's public space is dotted with images in various shapes, sizes and genres displaying a blown up imagery of the state's main political leaders and movie stars. This culture of display is an evidence of the long-standing intimate relationship between the region's film industry and its political parties. Most actors and others working in the state's movie industry have pursued political careers in the state. These images have been central to the political process in which populist, person- centered politics has shaped a particular caste of long-ruling politicians, whose personality is also central to politics, and the images produced by the party workers contribute to the image as well as the production of

political leaders in Tamil Nadu. (Roos, 2008).

Carey's (2009) in *The Communication as Culture: Media and Society*, explains that communication is not just the act of imparting information, but also the representation of shared beliefs and common experiences. So it is very relevant to discuss about Caste as it determines culture in India.

According to Vilanilam, the socioeconomic environment is an important determinant of mass communication activities and media institutions. The media enforce as well as reinforce social norms. The socio-economic, religious and communal interests of media controllers may cause them to emphasize certain norms in the media and enforce them through repetition which can be a dysfunction (Vilanilam, 2005).

The Media is operating in the social setting. It will reflect the social reality. Several studies confirmed that caste is present in the media. A number of articles in the newspapers and magazines written by reputed journalists like Sainath, Siddharth Varadarajan, Kalpana Sharma, Anand and the reportage of S.Viswanathan in the Frontline magazine are authenticated observations on the caste matters in the Indian media. Caste is present in the media representation (Ambedkar, 1943) (Jeffrey, 2000) (Prasad, 2004) (Vanamamalai, 2009). Caste is also considered as an important factor for the recruitment of Media persons. (Jeffrey, 2000) (Balasubramaniam, 2011).

Dalits have been ignored by the media similar to the society. Dalits have appeared unworthy of coverage expect when trapped in crises or conflicts. The available literature and research confirm the exclusion of Dalits from the mainstream media coverage. The coverage of Dalits in the media is inadequate or nonexistent. But nowadays the Dalits are expressing their thoughts and views through the new media, like Facebook, digital posters and banners. B.R.Ambedkar fought against untouchability. The people of scheduled caste in southern districts use his photo in their banners to specify that they belong to that caste. The mainstream media would not help Dalits. Still they are fighting with upper castes people for evicting the B.R Ambedkar statues. However, people can display his images through banners in cities. So it is very relevant to study the representation of caste in digital banners.

### **Objectives of the study**

1. To study the nuances of representation of caste identities in the digital banners
2. To explore how the representation of caste identities in the digital banners leads to caste conflicts in Tamil Nadu.

### **Method**

Qualitative research method is employed for the research work. Case Study and Observation method is employed for data collection in this study. Case study research excels at bringing us

to an understanding of a complex issue or object and can extend experience or add strength to what is already known through previous research. Case studies emphasize detailed contextual analysis of a limited number of events or conditions and their relationships. Researchers have used the case study research method for many years across a variety of disciplines. Social scientists, in particular, have made wide use of this qualitative research method to examine contemporary real-life situations and provide the basis for the application of ideas and extension of methods. Researcher Robert K. Yin defines the case study research method as an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used (Yin, 1984).

### **Digital Banners and Caste Identities**

The review of literature reveals that caste is omnipresent in mainstream media. The Dalits has little space in the mainstream media. The beauty of the digital banners is it is used and accessed by all irrespective of caste and creed. We can call it a democratic space. But this space is also not neutral. But this democratic space is also used for the publicity of their caste identities and caste pride. The people are using their caste symbols, figures, personalities in any kind of digital banners which they exhibit for marriages, village festivals and family functions.

The banners are mostly used for family functions. Particularly it is used for marriage functions. The reason is because there are two families involved in the wedding and both the families keep separate banners on their behalves. Also their friends keep banners on their side too. So marriage functions involve many banners. Similarly there are lot of functions like Ear boring ceremony, Illa vizha, Vasantha vizha, Moi vizha, House warming ceremony, Puberty ceremony, Temple fair and many more which involves the tradition of keeping banners. The banners are used depending on the importance of the function. Blown up images of the bride and bride groom and the photos of the family members are printed in the banners. The photos of the friends are also printed. In all these banners they include their religious and caste identities through symbolic representation through these banners. They also include the identity of political party to which they belong to. Today the banners have become the board to announce the caste identity. In Tamil Nadu there are separate political leaders for each caste. Today, most of the Tamil films come out based on caste. So people celebrate the character which reparation a particular community of the film as caste identify. Tamil cinema has influenced the banner culture for the past one decade. We could also study their economic status through the number of gold chains worn by their children. Similarly we could see the children in ear boring ceremony banners and also we could identify the caste to which they belong.

Today, the banners have become the board to announce the caste identity. In Tamil Nadu, there are separate political leaders for each caste. Muthuramalinga Thevar, the leader of All India Forward Block in Tamil Nadu, was born in Pasumpon on October 30, 1908. He is considered as the leader of Mukkulathor. This includes the three sub castes Kallar<sup>1</sup>, Maravar<sup>2</sup> and PiramalaiKallar<sup>3</sup>. They use his photographs in the banner to specify that they belong to this caste. Babasaheb B. R. Ambedkar was born on April 14, 1891 in Madhya Pradesh. He fought against untouchability. The people belonging to the Scheduled Castes in southern districts use his photo in their banners to specify that they belong to that caste. V.O.Chidambaram (Kappalottiya Thamizhan) was born in Tuticorin and he was a freedom fighter. The man who rode the ship for Independence is now seen in the banners specifying the vellalar caste. They also use the photos of his sons which make the caste very clear. Kamaraja Nadar was the former chief minister of Tamil Nadu and was born in Virudhunagar. Today he has become the iconic identification of Nadar caste people. They use his photo in all their functions.

The banner designers design the banners with caste representations. Thevar community people have the image of lion in their banners and Dalit people use the image of cheetah in their banners. Sometime back, Usilampatti was placed under 144 and has restrictions to use the caste symbols in the banners. The people who consider their caste as pride and

design banners that hurt the feeling of other people of the caste are frequently warned by the police and because these communal clashes are to be kept under control.

### **Caste Conflict through Digital Banners**

#### **Case Study 1:**

*Dinamalar*<sup>1</sup> reported on April 20, 2014 that Ambedkar's birthday was celebrated throughout India on April 14, 2014. In 2014, on Ambedkar's birthday and on the occasion of the Silver Jubilee of Viduthalai Siruththaikal party' (VCK), the same day its supporters displayed the banners all over Tamil Nadu. In Theni district, an incidence took place between two castes that led to caste riots. Vadugappatti is a village in this district, where group of people kept their banners on the occasion of Ambedkar's birthday and silver jubilee of Viduthalai Chiruththaigal party. On the night of April 15, few banners were ripped off by some people in one of the areas. The next morning auto drivers and some of the villagers resorted to road blocks in that area. Another group of people said that it happened due to the torrential rain the previous day and no one tore the banners. But the first group argued how the rain could tore banners vertically. They suspected that the banners were torn using a blade. Subsequently, the police rushed to the spot and persuaded the two sides to make peace. After Saturday night, again an argument took place between these two groups about the incident. Following that incident, the first group people in this case

blocked the road again. Two persons had already been arrested by the police. But the first group of people argued that the police had arrested their men with bias and without consideration of their complaint. Soon, the banner issue turned into a caste conflict between two groups in that area.

### **Case Study 2:**

In 2011, a boy was slaughtered in Paramkudi. The main reason behind for this murder was a wall maps (murals), near the Paramakudi bus stop wall Muthuramalingam Thevar's murals were drawn. The boy was urinating on the image of Muthuramanliga Thevar and this was noticed by some Thevar community people. They thought that the boy insulted the community by doing such an activity, and killed the boy. (Dinathanthi, 21/09/2015) In September 2015, in Narikudi, a village of Aruppukkottai taluk, Virudhu Nagar district, an incident happened at Narikudi village bus stop some people had kept Marudhu brothers drawn board. On the night of September 19, 2015 unidentified persons hung their shoes at the top of the painting. A particular group of people felt extreme shock, and resorted to road blockades and shops were closed due to increased tension in the area; while, Narikudi people suspected the Pallapatti people and took weapons to attack them. Someone informed the police, about the impending attack and two persons were arrested.

### **Case Study 3:**

Digital banner which was displayed in Alangulam, Tirunelveli district was torn by some unidentified persons. A digital banner was kept for a wedding in Alangulam. Two politicians from two castes attended the wedding and there was a grand procession with the party members and the relatives of that family. So, the party followers kept many banners in the highway. In these case, unidentified persons torn and damaged the banners. Later, it was learned that the banners were damaged by another dominant caste group. This led to a caste conflict between Yadav and Nadar caste of that region.

### **Conclusion**

People use banners to inform the people belonging to the other castes silently. It has also been observed that some persons belonging to certain castes use the images of weapons like knife and rude lion to frighten the members of other castes. In retaliation, other people also display a banner to record their protest silently. The symbols of weapon, caste leader's photo and lion metaphorically represent that the particular caste is dominant. How much ever the world becomes technological and modern, it seems difficult to erase the caste shades. Same is the case with digital banners and the contents therein.

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