

Mirroring the Marginality: A study on coverage of caste in Indian press

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Abstract

The ownership of Indian media, be it print or electronic, has been in the hands of mostly 'merchant castes' or 'communities' (such as Birla, Jain, Bania in North India and Elazav, Ediga, or Vaishyas in Southern India). As a result of this, merchant castes not only emerged powerful but also established their hegemony over the media sector in the country. The dominance of any particular caste or community would certainly play a pivotal role in prioritizing the issues to be 'covered' or to be 'killed' in the media. In the process of constructing a 'social reality', media follows somewhat an exclusionary approach and thereby tries to impact the world affairs of communities on an everyday basis. The present paper intends to explore the way 'caste' functions in the media sector and often marginalize the communities that have lesser access to the media. By taking some examples of media reportage in print, the study would make an attempt to understand the portrayal of Dalit communities and shaping popular perceptions about these socially excluded groups through various elements of news.

Keywords: *Caste, Media, Inequality, Democracy*

Introduction

Once upon a time, in a village, a dog called Sheru was brought up in a Rajput family. But it was kicked out of home for eating a roti from Sunita, -a woman who belonged to Jatav, an untouchable caste. The previous day, Sunita was serving the meal to her husband, a farm

laborer in the field, and there was a leftover 'roti' from lunch, which she fed to Sheru the dog that belonged to Rampal Singh, a Rajput. Seeing it, Rampal started scolding the woman "cobbler woman, how dare you feed my dog with your roti?" Then, he took his dog Sheru and tied it to a pole in the dalit colony and he called village panchayat to demand a compensation of Rs.15000/ for 'polluting' his dog by feeding it 'their' (Jatav) roti. After hearing the Rampal's complaint, the village panchayat decided that Sheru-the dog would now has to live with Sunita and her family has to pay the fine of Rs.15000/ as demanded by Rampal.

Had it been a short story, it wouldn't have appeared in the dailies such as *Times of India*, (*Dog cast(e) away after dalit touch*, reported on 24th September 2010), news portals like hindi.webdunia.com (*Dalit^{ij} ki roti khakar kutha achut*, 22nd September, 2010) or an international media like BBC (*Row over 'untouchable' Indian dog*, 24th September 2010). The above incident took place in Manikpur village, in Morena of Madhya Pradesh in the month of September 2010. In this case, not only the life of the dog got worse but the life of the Dalit family became worst and had gone through public humiliation. However, the story does not end there. It starts from here when Sunita and her brother Nahar Singh Jatav are outraged and rushed to Sumanwali police station to seek police intervention. But they were directed to take the matter to the SC/ST Atrocities police station in Kalyan. "When we went there, the officer asked us why we fed the dog," recalls Nahar. (*Times of India*, 24th September 2010).

In India, the discriminatory and cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment of Dalits is being reported every day in the media. And dominant castes justified it on the basis of caste hierarchy. Thus, caste is a social tool that not only controls human movement but it has representative features that are determined by one's birth into a particular caste, irrespective of the belief practiced by the individuals/communities.

So, caste divisions in India are seen in several forms. Be it housing, marriage, employment, and general social interaction divisions that are reinforced through the practice and threat of social ostracism, economic boycotts, and physical violence. The newspapers publish 'crime against Dalits almost every day in all Indian regional newspapers. Suicides, rape against Dalit women, caste killing over entering into public places such as temples, teashops, and flour mills, fetching water from public water wells, contaminating the drinking water with cow dung, sometimes with human excreta, putting up flex banners, urinating in the fields, touching water pots, water containers, boycotting the food prepared by Dalit cooks, for attending the school, entering colleges, getting good results, for incorrect pronunciation, carrying marriage processions, falling in love with upper caste members, over land disputes, contesting elections, over seeking haircut from a barber, not tolerating moustache and good lifestyle, getting a government job, overtaking vehicles, killed for 'good looks' ...list goes on.

Media plays an important role in any society that adopts freedom of the press. Apart from performing its fundamental functions-informing, educating, and entertaining, media often influences the way people perceive world affairs and try to change their views. Historically it has been proved how communities received the information and responded to it. Media scholars, conducted studies to understand the impact of media content on the social relationship of communities. In a larger context, media content shapes public opinion and makes people act accordingly. In some cases, the media claims that it mirrors what it witnesses in society or represents reality. However, in the process of 'shaping' the societal images, it reconfirms certain existing narratives about communities and makes economic benefits out of it. For instance, the way Black communities are portrayed in the popular media of the United States of America or the manner in which women, Dalits, Adivasis, and Muslims are represented in the Indian media are often debatable issues.

To conceptualize the way Dalit issues are reported in media, this paper would apply the approaches offered by Paul Hodkinson, a media scholar and author of the book “Media, Culture and Society” (2017). According to Hodkinson, it is not an easy task to apprehend the “role of media in relation to these various features of the broader social and cultural environment in which we live” (p.4). So, to trace this interlink between mass media content and society, as Hodkinson suggests, there are three important approaches that are crucial to apprehending the media's constructed reality. In the first approach-I) Media as a constructor or shaper, one can argue that the content that it distributes has the power to influence people and affect the future of society, in the second II) Media as a mirror approach, it is argued that media does not lead but it follows and reflects the society. It is to reflect back to us events, behavior, social relations, identities, or values that are already important. Under the third approach III) Model of representation and influence, the media representations (through content) are selective and manufactured.

To conceptualize the “press-made” images of Dalit communities and their representation in the Indian media, this paper intends to apply Hodkinson’s third approach -The model of representation and influence. The cases to study the same have been selected through simple random sampling from the available online media portals, social media platforms, and published newspapers.

‘Covering’ the caste by Indian Media

Media scholars (Bechain 2009, Jeffery, 2010, Mondal, 2017, Kumar, 2018) have traced a substantial absence of Dalits in the history of Indian journalism. When B.R. Ambedkar with all financial uncertainties launched his magazine *Mooknayak* in 1920, it faced systematic prejudice that affected its regular operations. Before launching it, even Ambedkar had requested Bal Gangadhar Tilak-a nationalist who was editing the *Kesrai*-a Marathi publication, to carry

a paid advertisement about the launching of *Mooknayak*, but Tilak refused to publish it. Although, *Mooknayak* did not give competition to any existing publications “both nationalist newspapers like *Kesari* and *Bombay Chronicle* became the vocal opponents of Ambedkar and his politics”. (Pol, 2020). And in the 1970s, the journalistic legacy of Ambedkar influenced the young writers from Dalit communities in Maharashtra to form the iconic Dalit Panthers organization.

In the post-Emergency decades, the ownership of Indian media, be it print or electronic, has been in the hands of mostly ‘merchant castes’ or ‘communities’ (such as Birla, Jain, Bania in North India, and Ezhava, Ediga, Kammas or Vaishyas in Southern India). As a result of this, merchant castes not only emerged powerful but also established their hegemony over the media sector in the country. The dominance of any particular caste or community would certainly play a pivotal role in prioritizing the issues to be ‘covered’ or to be ‘killed’ in the media.

In 1996, when BN Uniyal, a reporter for *The Pioneer*, tried to locate a Dalit journalist in Delhi, he was disappointed because, despite a protracted and exhaustive search, he could not locate a single one. Reasons for this, as it has been proved time and again that they have no necessary “cultural” and “economic” resources to conduct a daily newspaper that could be supported by a large general readership. Whereas, according to Robin Jeffery, in the USA Black communities had a strong support system such as religious and educational institutions that supplied necessary resources for Black Press. (Jeffery, 2010).

As per the second edition of Oxfam India-Newslandry’s Report ‘*Who tells our stories matters: Representation of Marginalised Caste Groups in Indian Media*’ it was found that “around 90% leadership positions in print, TV and digital media are occupied by General

caste groups with no Scheduled Caste (SC) or Scheduled Tribe (ST) heading mainstream media outlets” (Oxfam report, 2019). As a result, the media in India failed to adopt diversity within its workplace.

Who says? What? To whom? And with what motto?

For instance, in the above-mentioned media report on a dog disowned by its owner because it had roti from a woman belonging to an untouchable caste, a Hindi daily (Image 1), carried the story with the headline “*Dalit ki roti khakar kutha achut*”-dog turned untouchable after eating roti from Dalit. In this report, it appears that the primary concern of the reporter who composed it was more about the plight of the dog rather than the distressing condition of people who had to face social and economic implications. Apart from mentioning “Chamar”- the sub-caste of woman and “Rajput” the caste name of the dog’s owner, it also used a random image of a dog which is evidently an insensitive way of writing a report. The same story was reported by BBC with the headline “Row over 'untouchable' Indian dog” on 24th September 2010, but BBC didn’t mention the word ‘Dalit’ in the headline, and it published the real photograph of the woman with the dog. The intro is made on the economic implications of the panchayat’s decision to fine the family to pay Rs.15000/. BBC’s report is more credible, balanced, and decent than the Hindi news. It is a very common practice among the language press, especially Hindi news media, which often sensationalizes the news pertaining to Dalit communities and uses offensive language.



Image.1 A report in a Hindi newspaper published from Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh.

Source: Internet.

In 2016, the Delhi High Court heard a plea that was seeking a direction to restrain media houses from using the word 'Dalit' in news articles. And it stated that "Crime is a crime and can be committed against or by any community and thus cannot be treated on a different footing compared to crime committed by or against the people of the general community, especially when people from the Scheduled Caste are involved," (Harad, 2016). Hence, Public Interest Litigation claimed that the word "Dalit" creates "inequality" in society and it should not be used in media reporting. As a result, the High court directed the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting to verify 'whether there is any law that prohibits the use of the word

‘Dalit’’. Later, the Broadcasting ministry issued a circular and directed all media houses in India not to use the word ‘Dalit’ in the reporting. But newspapers continued using the word ‘dalit’ as an identical term for ‘Scheduled castes/Scheduled tribes’.



Image 2. Collage of reports published on Dalits in English dailies

In the above collage of newspaper reports, *Times of India*, in the headline uses “Dalit girl” and writes an intro with a mention of a group of upper caste members beating up the family of a 16-year-old Dalit girl for attending the school’. In the second report, *The Hindu* newspaper carried a story with the headline “Dalit student dies after

beaten by teacher". In the intro, it has highlighted that the Dalit boy who was assaulted by the class teacher for writing wrong answers dies at the hospital. In the third report, *Indian Express* wrote a headline mentioning the word 'Dalit' and carried an intro "*Eight men from the Jat community allegedly abducted a 25-year-old Dalit man, assaulted him and forced him to drink their urine in Rajasthan's Churu district earlier this week, police said Saturday*". Here it mentions the caste identity of the perpetrators and the location where the incident took place. According to the guidelines issued by Press Council of India, 2018, Press Council of India, under *Caste, Religion or Community References* (PCI, 2018, 28),

i) In general, the caste identification of a person or a particular class should be avoided, particularly when in the context it conveys a sense of attributes conduct or practice derogatory to that caste.

ii) Newspapers are advised against the use of the word 'Harijan' which has been objected to by some, and shall use the word Schedule Caste as per Article 341.*

iii) An accused or a victim shall not be described by his caste or community when the same does not have anything to do with the offense or the crime and plays no part either in the identification of any accused or proceeding if there be any". The guideline is clear. But when we conduct an empirical survey, it is evident that the Indian press does not follow any of these PCI journalistic norms and they try to 'normalize' the caste discrimination and attacks on Dalits by exaggerating the caste identities. Theoretically, the media is claiming that they are just mirroring the way society is and reflecting back to the people involved in the social action or behavior.

To cite an example from the paper *Indian Media and Caste: of Politics, Portrayals and Beyond* by Pranjali Kureel (2021), when reporters visit rural spaces for reporting, most of the time their

version of information about caste discrimination, attacks on Dalits, atrocities remains one-sided. They rarely look at the power dynamics and oppression and operation of caste in a village setup. “Dalit people, whose faces are often not even blurred, are treated as if they are just objects of what is called the ‘victim porn.’ S. Anand (2005) names this biased reporting ‘Visible Dalit, invisible Brahmin’ where covering caste is equated with writing only about Dalits, mostly located in the rural areas – their experiences, their social condition, atrocities such as murders, rapes, etc.” (Kureel, 2021,100). According to Robin Jeffery (2022), recent surveys revealed that every three out of four anchors (among a total of 40 anchors in Hindi channels and 47 in English channels) of debates are representing an upper caste. “Not a single one of them a Dalit, Adivasi, or OBC for over 70 percent of their primetime debate shows, news channels draw the majority of the panelists from the upper castes” (*The Hindu*, October 24, 2022). Further, in the print media, no more than 5 percent of all articles in English newspapers are written by Dalits and Adivasis and in Hindi newspapers, the representation is fared slightly better at around 10 percent.

Conclusion

To tentatively conclude this paper, as observed by Arvind Kumar Thakur in his study on *New Media and the Dalit Counter-public Sphere* (2020), compared to print media, it has been observed that the online media have offered new avenues of political expression for the Dalit communities apart from facilitating them to emerge as an ideological counter publics and make their voices heard. As Thakur writes that “Online media are providing the means for subaltern communities to express lived experiences of systematic injustice, thereby enabling Dalit activists to articulate counter-meaning making practices” (371.p). Hence, this paper concludes that the mainstream Indian media, especially print and electronic media, is completely

hegemonised by the upper castes and for them the vast majority of people are only subject to news to be covered.

Whether ‘art imitates the life or life imitates the art’ in the case of the Indian press, it definitely imitates the social structure of the society which always is basically discriminatory and engaged in producing victimhood. Media plays an instrumental role in spreading the social and political agenda of dominant groups by using shreds of evidence very selectively and uncritically. When media constantly produce a social image of community that is historically portrayed in a very ‘negative’ way and reconfirms those existing narratives makes it more problematic. Because, even after the advent of social media, the organisational structure of mainstream media has not changed. And those kinds of hegemonic versions would definitely have an impact on the way reports are written. News is after all a structurally constructed reality that will not only reflect the societal realities but also expose the media institutions which are mainly controlled by upper-caste communities.

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^[i] The word “Dalit” comes from the Sanskrit origin ‘*dal*’ and means “downtrodden”, “suppressed”, “crushed”, or “broken to pieces”. It was used by the 19th-century social reformer, Jyotiba Phule, in his writings in Marathi. But the word is not just a caste name, it is a political identity denoting a group of castes, especially former untouchable castes. See JYOTIRAO PHULE: A Revolutionary Social Reformer Author(s): Jagannatham Begari, in *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 71, No. 2 (APR. - JUNE, 2010), pp. 399-412 and *(Re)Looking at “Dalit” Conceptualization* by Antara Ray, Journal of the Department of Sociology of North Bengal University Vol. 6, 31 March 2019.

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