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Media, Caste and Representation: A Critical Analysis of Newspaper Coverage on Dalit Rights

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the discriminatory discourse practices in the coverage of caste violence in regional newspapers. It focuses on an incident in the Jaunsar region of Uttarakhand, Northern India, where an upper-caste mob attacked a small group of lower-caste activists attempting to enter a temple. Given the similarity of social structures, such tendencies are likely to reflect patterns across the wider North Indian press. Existing scholarship has already documented the negligible presence of lower-caste journalists in Indian newsrooms, where upper-caste journalists predominantly staff editorial desks. This structural imbalance has contributed to the under-representation of caste-based discrimination in the media, which is often reluctant to spark debate on uncomfortable social issues. The paper critically examines how mainstream newspapers represented the violence perpetrated by upper-caste Hindus against Dalit activists, highlighting the inability of even lower-caste parliamentarians to foreground discrimination or defend constitutional rights. By analysing both regional and national newspapers, this study unravels the contrasting approaches adopted in

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the framing of caste violence, thereby exposing the subtle but significant biases within media practices.

Keywords: (Caste violence; Media bias; Temple entry; Uttarakhand press; Caste discrimination; Critical analysis)

Introduction: Media, Elitism, and the Question of Caste

The media in India is largely elitist and tends to preserve the status quo. Since the caste system is deeply embedded in Indian society, it is often reflected in the practices of journalists and media owners. Although there is limited evidence to suggest that the neglect of caste violence or the lack of adequate coverage of lower-caste concerns is part of a deliberate conspiracy by the upper castes, structural biases are evident. Kancha Ilaiah, an expert on caste discrimination, argues that Brahminical forces dominate and control the Indian media. According to him, this reflects a long-standing pattern of ignoring Dalit reformers and leaders who fought for their communities' rights. He emphasizes that figures such as Narayan Guru, Mahatma Phule, and Periyar were also systematically sidelined by the media, which has historically been influenced by upper-caste dominance. This, he argues, is one of the reasons why incidents of violence against Dalits are underreported or trivialized.

At the same time, the rise in literacy has also brought about an increase in caste consciousness. Lower-caste communities are now asserting their rights as equal citizens in every sphere of public life. Social structures, entrenched prejudices, and the absence of Dalit voices in positions of decision-making have contributed to their continued marginalization. A counterargument suggests that it may be unrealistic for any media organization to mirror the caste and regional diversity of India in exact proportion to its population. Nonetheless, many scholars maintain that media houses should conduct caste audits to assess the representation of lower castes and minority groups within their institutions ("Media Manthan – Dalit, Minority and Media," 2016).

It is widely accepted that when communities and their concerns are excluded from media representation, it can lead to social unrest, as society is denied opportunities to address systemic problems. The first step toward ending discrimination and bringing social change is an open and critical dialogue on exclusionary practices in collective life. Once society develops the courage to acknowledge these issues, solutions are more likely to emerge. However, a striking gap remains between the demographic composition of Indian society and that of newsrooms. Consequently, the media is often accused of showing a disproportionately low level of sensitivity toward incidents of violence and discrimination against Dalits.

The Caste System and Legal Framework in India

Traditionally, the caste system has been regarded as a division of society into four hierarchical sections based on birth. At the top of this order were the Brahmins, followed by the Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras. Each caste was assigned fixed roles, and upward mobility was not permitted. The Brahmins were the intellectuals, teachers, and priests; the Kshatriyas were warriors; the Vaishyas formed the trading, merchant, and business class; while the Shudras occupied the lowest rung of the hierarchy as the service class.

The caste system is extremely rigid and influential (Shepherd, 2019). It functions as a closed order of stratification determined solely by birth. It imposes inescapable restrictions on social status, access to privileges, wealth, and resources for individuals and families (Sekhon, 2000). Dr. B. R. Ambedkar strongly rejected attempts to portray the caste system as a mere division of labor. Instead, he emphasized that it represents a division of laborers into watertight compartments, permanently closing doors to mobility in the social hierarchy. He argued, "In order to achieve equality, the sense of religious sanctity behind caste and varna must be destroyed, and the sanctity of caste and varna can be destroyed only by discarding the divine authority of the Shastras" (Ambedkar, 1968).

Caste structure not only governs the personal lives of Hindus but also extends into the collective life of society. It deeply shapes both individual and collective consciousness. The system not only assigns roles to each caste but also imposes preordained limitations on the abilities and potential of lower-caste communities. This widespread practice even fostered false notions among the oppressed themselves, who often internalized the belief that caste-based inequality was a natural outcome of differences in human capability.

The upper-caste-centric understanding of caste is still widely prevalent, but such interpretations fail to capture the full essence of its nature and functioning. To truly understand caste, it must be studied from the perspective of the majority who have historically suffered its discriminatory practices. Although the rigidity of the caste system has declined due to economic reforms and modernization, significant asymmetries remain in the distribution of wealth and power. The system is now under "tremendous pressure. The mode of production and ideological basis on which it has developed for a long time are now strongly affected by widespread market relations and by the political manoeuvring nurtured by fifty years of universal franchise" (Racine & Racine, 1998). Despite globalization and liberalization, traditional cultural structures are disintegrating only gradually.

The Constitution of India unequivocally rejects caste-based discrimination

and explicitly bans untouchability. Article 17 clearly declares: “Untouchability is abolished and its practice in any form is forbidden. The enforcement of any disability arising out of untouchability shall be an offence punishable in accordance with law” (Bakshi & Kashyap, 1982). Similarly, Article 15 prohibits discrimination on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth (Laxmikanth, 2016). Legislative reforms were subsequently enacted: in 1955, the Untouchability Offences Act was passed to penalize the preaching and practice of untouchability; in 1976, the Protection of Civil Rights Act extended this law from intent to enforcement; and in 1989, the Prevention of Atrocities Act was introduced, establishing a National Commission and Special Courts for the trial of offences against Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) (Vallabhaneni, 2015).

Before independence, “the legal system in British India supported certain aspects of the caste order” (Galanter, 1969). With the rise of civil society movements and caste consciousness after independence, the state introduced various measures to eliminate caste-based discrimination, including reservations in government jobs and educational institutions. However, despite these interventions, the constitutional promise of equality has yet to be realized fully across Indian communities, even within their cultural and social groups.

Media and Dalit Representation in India

Human rights continue to be denied to Dalits in the practice of Hinduism, as they are still prevented from entering many public places of worship across India. Although such practices are unconstitutional, they remain prevalent. For instance, the harassment of Dalits attempting to enter a temple in a coastal village of Odisha was widely covered by the media (Dash, 2013). Ideally, every segment of society should have the opportunity to articulate its own perspective, ensuring that the media reflects a plurality of voices. Yet, those at the top of the social hierarchy enjoy far greater opportunities to project their worldview, while those at the margins—such as Dalits—seldom have the chance to narrate their lived realities. Consequently, Dalits have largely been excluded from mainstream media coverage, and their representation within newsrooms remains negligible (Balasubramaniam, 2011; Jeffrey, 2012).

The media frequently reproduces Brahmanical ideology. The segmentation of media products often aligns with particular cultural sensibilities, privileging upper-caste perspectives (Patil, 2011). Coverage of caste-based violence against Dalits is often neglected or trivialized (Ratnamala, 2012). Caste is embedded deeply within the structure of Indian society—even the list of billionaires reflects caste divisions, with most belonging to the Vaishya community (Roy, 2017). Affirmative action has made members of oppressed classes visible in

government offices across India, but their presence in films, politics, sports, culture, and especially in media remains disproportionately low compared to their population. This underrepresentation has been well documented by scholars both nationally and internationally.

After more than a decade of studying Indian-language newspapers—including twenty weeks of travel to twenty towns, visits to dozens of newspaper offices, and interviews with over 250 people—Vitali (2004) noted that he did not encounter a single Dalit journalist working for a mainstream publication, much less as an editor or proprietor. Similarly, veteran journalist B. N. Uniyal recounted in 1996 that after contacting editors, columnists, and reviewing the list of journalists accredited to the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, he could not identify a single Dalit journalist (Ashraf, 2013).

This absence has consequences: the stories of nearly 25 percent of India's population (Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes) remain largely unknown, unreported, or underreported (Jeffrey, 2012). While there are signs of gradual change, with more members of marginalized groups entering media and communications, their numbers remain disproportionately low. By 1996, Uniyal found no Dalit journalists, but today more than a dozen are working in Delhi alone, and a few others have openly disclosed their caste identity (Panneerselvan, 2013).

Nevertheless, the ideological imbalance continues. Newspapers produced without Dalit participation often reinforce stereotypes and social inequalities. They portray Dalits primarily as poor, naive, ignorant, victims, or even perpetrators of violence—rarely as full citizens who travel, marry, or engage in modern lifestyles (Jeffrey, 2001). This selective representation perpetuates the material and ideological marginalization of Dalits in Indian society.

Methodology and Analytical Framework

Framing can be understood as the shaping of narratives on issues by altering or emphasizing certain news elements. Its purpose is often to reinforce the dominance of the power elite, and its method is to either underplay or overemphasize selected aspects of an event. Frames in the news influence learning, interpretation, and evaluation of issues and events. By highlighting some aspects while neglecting others, frames offer readers a specific lens through which to interpret an event or controversy (De Vreese, 2005). Individuals actively classify, organize, and interpret life experiences to make sense of them, and frames enable them to locate, perceive, and label social realities. People interpret the world around them through their “primary framework,” which is considered primary because it is taken for granted by the user (Goffman, 1974).

Gamson and Modigliani (1994) define a frame as a central organizing idea or storyline that provides coherence and meaning to unfolding events. A frame links issues together and highlights what the controversy is essentially about. Frames are therefore both expressions and instruments of power, shaping how the social world is understood (D'Angelo & Kuypers, 2010). As Gamson (1989) observed, facts have no intrinsic meaning; they acquire significance only when embedded in a frame or narrative that organizes them. Thus, news should be viewed less as "information" and more as storytelling about the world, albeit with factual elements.

Frame-building refers to both intrinsic and extrinsic factors influencing how news is framed, including journalists' personal orientations and the pressure exerted by external groups to promote specific frames (Kaid & Holtz-Bacha, 2007). Framing possibilities are immense in any given event: "In every context other framings are possible, depending on the actor/s and what is at stake. Nevertheless, actors are limited in their ability by the cultural, social, personal, professional, or organizational interpretive repertoires at their disposal" (van Hulst, Siesling, van Lieshout, & Dewulf, 2014).

News texts represent interpretations of events shaped by multiple actors. While they reflect the perceptions of individual journalists, they are also influenced by proprietors, regulatory frameworks, ideological leanings, and societal pressures. Journalists often act as cogs within the larger gatekeeping machinery, with limited autonomy to frame stories outside prevailing ideological boundaries. As a result, news stories in mainstream media often reflect a simplified version of events, filtered through rigid ideological structures. Journalists who conform to these frameworks find their work readily published, while those attempting to challenge the dominant ideology struggle to have their perspectives printed, particularly in India.

Framing studies have demonstrated significant influence on public perception and policy-making. For example, framing gender conflict in news coverage polarizes audiences along gender lines (Han & Federico, 2018). Similarly, public support for EU integration has been shown to depend heavily on how national media frame the issue (Lecheler & De Vreese, 2010). Framing of depression-related news has also provided insights into how media coverage increases symptom salience among college students in China (Jin, Zhang, Lee, & Tang, 2018). Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) identify five dominant frames commonly used in media: conflict, human interest, economic consequences, morality, and responsibility. Of these, the responsibility frame attributes the causes or solutions of problems to individuals, groups, or governments. Levin, Schneider, and Gaeth (1998) further distinguish risky choice framing, attribute framing, and goal framing.

This study examines the coverage of caste-related violence in the print media of Uttarakhand. Eight newspapers were selected for analysis based on circulation and their space dedicated to regional news. Many national English newspapers circulated only national or northern editions in Uttarakhand at the time of the incident and did not allocate significant space to regional stories. Therefore, the Hindi dailies Hindustan, Dainik Jagran, Amar Ujala, and Rashtriya Sahara were selected, along with four English newspapers—Times of India, Hindustan Times, The Pioneer, and The Tribune—which had dedicated space for regional reporting.

All the newspaper articles used for this research were published between 22–25 May 2016, following the incident of violence in the Jaunsar Bawar region. After examining the coverage in these eight newspapers, four framing categories were identified: non-participative approach, human rights approach, biased mode approach, and unresponsive approach.

Non-Participative Approach: Neutrality as Silence

Several newspapers adopted what can be described as a non-participative approach, whereby no value judgment or moral positioning was attached to the incident. Such coverage avoided assessing the actions and reactions of the parties involved, even when injustice was clearly perpetrated by the dominant group against the marginalized. In cases of discrimination, both acts of commission and omission shape how events are framed for public consumption. By refraining from taking sides, newspapers implicitly supported the status quo—an indirect way of legitimizing the oppressor over the oppressed.

If newspapers emphasized the accounts of the Dalit community alongside the perspectives of upper-caste Hindus without interrogating the claims made by the perpetrators of violence, their coverage was marked as non-participative. The Indian Constitution prohibits discrimination of all forms on the basis of caste, color, religion, race, or place of birth, and legal remedies are available under Article 32, which allows individuals to appeal directly to the Supreme Court. These rights extend not only against the state but also against private individuals in matters of access to public places. Thus, there is no constitutional or philosophical justification for caste discrimination in modern India (Basu, 1982; Laxmikanth, 2016). Yet, without communication and public discussion, struggles for social justice and emancipation remain incomplete. As Amartya Sen (2005) emphasizes, “Voice is a crucial component of the pursuit of social justice.”

Reporting caste-based discrimination as if it were merely an accident devoid of social context can be seen as an attempt to evade meaningful public

debate on uncomfortable issues. When news stories fail to underline the right of Dalits to enter temples, their framing reflects a non-participative or “neutral” stance. However, neutrality in such contexts carries negative connotations, as it implicitly suggests that discriminatory incidents have no broader significance beyond their immediate locality. Half of the newspapers in this study reflected this tendency. The Pioneer, Hindustan Times, Hindustan (Hindi), and Amar Ujala displayed non-participative framing, with the first two also showing signs of biased framing.

The case of BJP MP Tarun Vijay, former editor of the RSS mouthpiece Panchjanya, who was attacked by an upper-caste mob, illustrates this silence. No political party has seriously challenged the customary ban on Dalit temple entry. The political class in Uttarakhand, particularly mainstream leaders, remain hesitant to address such issues openly, as taking sides risks alienating voters. Unlike in other regions of India, politicians in Uttarakhand cannot secure electoral victories solely on the strength of lower-caste votes. As a result, politicians avoid igniting debates on temple entry bans and remain largely silent.

The Pioneer typified the non-participative approach. While it covered the incident factually and without omissions, it did not show any inclination toward social change or the abolition of caste discrimination. Notably, the paper chose to discontinue coverage by the third day, despite the emergence of new developments such as national-level Dalit organizations rallying in support of the victims. This decision to ignore follow-up stories reinforced its neutral stance.

Hindustan Times reported that “upper-caste villagers allegedly threw stones at the BJP MP and other members of the Dalit community.” However, the coverage downplayed the cruelty, discrimination, and hatred reflected in upper-caste violence. By failing to foreground the victims’ rights and experiences, the paper displayed both non-participative and biased tendencies.

Hindustan (Hindi) condemned the incident but simultaneously diluted Dalits’ demands for temple entry by highlighting examples of temples where Dalits serve as priests, suggesting that customs vary and restrictions exist across contexts. This framing attempted to balance the gravity of discrimination with examples of inclusion, thus reflecting a mix of non-participative and biased approaches.

Amar Ujala reported that most men in the temple’s locality had fled after the incident, fearing police action. This report could be interpreted in two ways: either the men fled because they were complicit in the attack and feared arrest, or they left because the police were indiscriminately harassing innocent

upper-caste villagers. The article left these interpretations open-ended, offering no analysis or investigation. By elaborating on events without contextualizing or scrutinizing them, Amar Ujala too demonstrated a non-participative approach.

Human Rights Approach: Media as Conscience Keeper

This approach can also be described as the “change is desirable” approach. It emphasizes that the media has a duty to stand against injustice and discrimination. Newspapers cannot take refuge in the notion of mere objectivity when reporting on violations of human rights. When the dignity of citizens is compromised, the media is morally obligated to highlight such injustices and awaken the conscience of society.

Media serve as agents of social change and act as the conscience keepers of society. Just as human rights activists expose uncomfortable truths and point out societal shortcomings, the media must also take on this role. In cases such as temple-entry bans, the media ideally should act as an advocate for protecting the rights of all citizens. For the media, there is little personal stake in such activism apart from contributing to the larger good of society. Yet, activism for human rights is often dismissed as a threat to the unity, integrity, and security of the state. Human rights activists are frequently accused of being foreign agents working with international funding. However, when it comes to caste-based discrimination, such arguments hold little weight. On this issue, the media is unlikely to face serious ideological opposition even from corporate owners.

Out of the eight newspapers analyzed in this study, only The Times of India (TOI) adopted a human rights approach. TOI elevated the incident from a local matter to national news. It was the only newspaper that reported on how, following the entry of Dalits into the temple, priests and upper-caste members held a nine-day “purification ritual,” as they believed the temple had been desecrated by Dalit presence. While most other outlets reported denials from upper-caste Hindus and priests, suggesting that Dalits were never barred from entering the Silgur Devta temple and dismissing allegations as smear campaigns, TOI challenged this narrative. Through its prominent coverage of the purification ritual, TOI directly exposed the discriminatory practice (Azad, 2016).

In contrast, other newspapers largely echoed the public statements of upper-caste community members and priests. They failed to interview Dalits living in the region who endure everyday discrimination and humiliation. In this case, TOI acted as the conscience keeper of society. It was unafraid to confront the vested interests of elites who benefit from maintaining the status

quo. Its coverage can thus be classified as following a human rights approach. All of TOI's reports on the incident conveyed the undertone that caste-based discrimination has no place in modern society, and its framing strongly aligned with a human rights perspective.

Biased Approach: Diluting the Narrative

When incidents of caste-based discrimination and violence cannot be outrightly justified, denial often becomes the only option. News reports that attempt to dilute the seriousness of such incidents or create moral equivalence by balancing upper-caste perspectives with official statements, while ignoring victims' voices, fall under the biased frame.

Interestingly, some newspapers failed to report the views of Dalits affected by the temple-entry ban and other discriminatory practices. Instead, they focused on statements made by priests and upper-caste residents, emphasizing that there was "no cause for alarm." By downplaying the incident and propagating the status quo, such coverage perpetuated bias. If the media ignores the victims and privileges the narratives of aggressors, then the framing can be categorized as biased.

Hindustan Times did not even use the word "Dalits," opting instead for the term "backward community." The difference in weight between these terms is significant, and such usage reflects an attempt to soften the issue. Its coverage, therefore, reflected both non-participative and biased tendencies. Dainik Jagran covered the events in a straightforward manner, producing features without passing explicit judgment. However, it did highlight the silence of political parties and their leaders, running a headline that read "Silence of politicians is disturbing." The report noted that upper castes constitute nearly 60 percent of the local population, compared to 40 percent for lower castes, offering a demographic explanation for political inaction.

Nevertheless, Dainik Jagran displayed contradictory narratives, likely reflecting the fragmented contributions of multiple journalists on the editorial desk. One report insisted there was no ban on Dalit entry into temples, while another highlighted demands from upper-caste groups that such campaigns be stopped immediately. In the absence of Dalit counter-narratives, Dainik Jagran's coverage leaned toward a biased frame.

Unresponsive Approach: Silence as Denial

The unresponsive approach is characterized by newspapers either ignoring the incident altogether or covering it with aloofness and detachment, without acknowledging its inhuman context or broader significance. In such

framing, caste-based violence is either minimized or stripped of its relevance, reducing it to a mere law-and-order issue.

The Tribune limited its coverage to the state government's official response. On the second day, it merely reported that a CBCID inquiry had been launched and provided no further updates. Given the Tribune's relatively limited presence in Uttarakhand, its coverage can only be described as unresponsive.

Rashtriya Sahara dedicated the least amount of space to the incident among the Hindi newspapers. Its coverage was confined to reporting the initiation of the CBCID inquiry by the state government. On the third day, when most newspapers carried stories about the inquiry, Rashtriya Sahara attempted to link the incident to the absence of a police station in the area. It also raised questions about the motives of the BJP leader spearheading the campaign for Dalit temple entry and hinted at the role of the local MLA in contributing to poor law-and-order conditions.

Overall, Rashtriya Sahara downplayed the incident, aligning with the perspectives of upper-caste Hindus in the area. It argued that Dalits were not prevented from entering the temple and that the clash occurred only afterward, framing the event as a law-and-order disturbance rather than caste-based discrimination. By portraying the violence as manufactured dissent driven by political motives, Rashtriya Sahara's coverage fits within both the non-participative and unresponsive approaches.

Conclusion

Caste undeniably plays a significant role in the Indian media (Varadarajan, 2006). This study does not attempt to generalize the entire landscape of newspaper reporting, but instead seeks to critically reflect on coverage of the incident through the lens of human rights principles enshrined in the Indian Constitution and the UNHCR Declaration, which states that "all men are born free and equal" (Lauterpacht, 1948).

Discrimination has no place in a democratic society. In the 21st century, all social groups are striving to assert their rights in the public sphere. However, meaningful solutions can only emerge if these issues are openly discussed. The media is expected to play a vital role in enabling such conversations. In this particular case, while victims of discrimination highlighted the persistence of caste-based exclusion, another section of society denied its existence. If the media refuses to take a clear stand, the status quo will inevitably prevail.

It is also worth noting that even within the same newspaper, reports often reflected different values and tones. This variation could be attributed either to the differing approaches of individual journalists or to editorial decisions

aimed at presenting paradoxical perspectives. English and Hindi newspapers are often considered different in their style and temperament, yet in this case, their approaches were largely similar, except for The Times of India, which adopted a more campaign-like stance. A key difference was that English newspapers, constrained by space, devoted less attention to regional news, while Hindi newspapers with dedicated local editions offered more detailed coverage.

National newspapers appear less constrained by regional vested interests, allowing them to adopt stronger positions against caste-based discrimination and the silence of mainstream politicians. However, the skill set and educational background of individual reporters also strongly influence how events are framed. Corporate-controlled media organizations are unlikely to issue directives to downplay such regionally confined issues, nor are they likely to discourage strong editorial positions against caste prejudice.

Ultimately, the coverage of social issues, such as caste discrimination, largely reflects the discretion of local editorial teams. While it is difficult to brand a newspaper as entirely biased categorically, it is evident that caste structures find subtle representation in media practices. Within a single newspaper, it is not uncommon to see two stories written by different journalists expressing contrasting attitudes and values toward caste in India.

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