

# Caste, Media, and Resistance: Reassessing Ambedkar's Role in India's Public Sphere

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## Abstract

This paper reassesses B.R. Ambedkar's profound contributions to India's public sphere through his pioneering media initiatives, drawing inspiration from Jürgen Habermas's frameworks while adapting them to the gritty realities of postcolonial caste hierarchies. I've always been struck by how Ambedkar, a man born into unimaginable untouchability, turned the tide with his own newspapers *Mooknayak* and *Bahishkrit Bharat* not just reporting Dalit suffering but igniting a fire of resistance that challenged the Brahminical stranglehold on discourse.

It meticulously analyzes how his bold journalism dismantled caste barriers, giving voice to the silenced and fostering subaltern agency in an era when Dalits were erased from nationalist narratives. Extending this legacy forward, the study explores contemporary Dalit media activism from raw social media campaigns like #DalitLivesMatter to outlets like Dalit Camera revealing how these digital battlegrounds echo Ambedkar's fight against misrepresentation today. Employing critical discourse analysis on archival editorials alongside modern hashtags and videos, this work uncovers media not as a neutral space, but as a fiercely contested arena where marginalized voices claw for visibility amid trolling, algorithmic biases, and elite gatekeeping. In a country still grappling with caste atrocities, Ambedkar's vision reminds us that true public deliberation demands annihilating hierarchy first offering timely insights for scholars, activists, and anyone believing in a more equitable India.

**Keywords:** Media, Bahishkrit, Public Sphere, Caste, Resistance

## Introduction

India's public sphere, often idealized as a space of rational-critical debate, has long been fractured by caste inequalities that silence subaltern voices. B.R. Ambedkar, the architect of India's Constitution and a fierce critic of caste, wielded media as a weapon of resistance, launching newspapers like *Mooknayak* (1920) and *Bahishkrit Bharat* (1927) to amplify Dalit grievances against Brahminical dominance. These efforts disrupted the dominant nationalist discourse, creating counter-publics where the "excluded India" could articulate demands for annihilation of caste. Habermas's bourgeois public sphere, rooted in 18th-century Europe's coffeehouses and salons, assumes egalitarian access to discourse, but postcolonial scholars critique its Eurocentrism, ignoring caste as a structural barrier in India. Ambedkar's media interventions exemplify a subaltern reclamation of this sphere, transforming it from an elite domain into a site of resistance. This paper reassesses his role, bridging historical journalism to digital Dalit activism on platforms like social media, where #DalitLivesMatter campaigns echo his legacy.

Contemporary relevance intensifies amid rising Dalit media outlets like *Dalit Dastak* and *Dalit Camera*, which counter mainstream misrepresentation. By Habermasian lights, these form "counter-publics" challenging the re-feudalized Indian media landscape. The study addresses: How did Ambedkar reconceive the public sphere via media? What theoretical adaptations are needed for caste contexts? And how does his legacy persist in digital resistance? Through literature review, theoretical framework, discourse analysis methodology, and findings, it argues media remains a vital arena for Dalit agency.

### Objectives

1. Evaluate how Ambedkar's newspapers like *Mooknayak* and *Bahishkrit Bharat* created counter-publics, disrupting dominant caste narratives in colonial India.
2. Modify Habermas's public sphere framework with postcolonial and subaltern lenses to account for caste-based exclusions and resistance.
3. Analyze modern Dalit media activism (e.g., social media campaigns, *Dalit Camera*) as extensions of Ambedkarite resistance against mainstream misrepresentation.
4. Uncover Media Dynamics: Identify patterns of power, agency, and contestation in media discourse, highlighting its role as a battleground for marginalized voices.

### Research Questions

1. How did Ambedkar's journalistic interventions challenge caste hierarchies and forge subaltern counter-publics in early 20th-century India?
2. In what ways does a caste-adapted Habermasian framework reveal limitations in India's dominant public sphere?
3. To what extent do contemporary Dalit digital media practices sustain or evolve Ambedkar's legacy of resistance?
4. What discursive strategies like naming caste, framing agency mark media as a site of subaltern empowerment versus elite gatekeeping?

### Literature Review

Scholarship on Ambedkar's media legacy underscores its role in mobilizing Dalits against caste violence and exclusion. Ambedkar edited *Mooknayak* and *Bahishkrit Bharat* single-handedly due to funding shortages, rejecting "socially immoral" upper-caste advertisements that perpetuated inequality. These papers reported atrocities, critiqued Hindu society, and built mass activism, establishing Ambedkar's leadership. *Bahishkrit Bharat*, meaning "Excluded India," directly confronted Brahmanism, likening it to colonial leeches sucking Dalit blood. Postcolonial critiques extend to Habermas's public sphere. In India, caste fragments rational debate; Ambedkar noted, "A Hindu's public is his caste," rendering free discourse impossible. The Gandhi-Ambedkar debate exemplifies this: Gandhi naturalized caste as custom, while Ambedkar named it as oppression, unsettling upper-caste boundaries. Works like *India, Habermas and the Public Sphere* highlight religion's hyper-dominance, blocking Habermasian ideals.

Subaltern studies often marginalizes Ambedkar, prioritizing peasant rebellions over Dalit agency, yet his critique centres caste as subalternity's core. Contemporary literature notes Dalit media's rise: Social media enables #WhyLoiter and #CasteIsNotPast, fostering solidarity despite cyberbullying. Outlets like *Round Table India* and *Dalit Dastak* challenge mainstream bias, where Dalits face gatekeeping. Few integrate Habermas with Ambedkar's praxis across eras. Digital studies focus on activism but underexplore

historical continuity. This review synthesizes these, positioning Ambedkar as a media theorist avant la lettre.

### Theoretical Framework

Jürgen Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962) posits the public sphere as a domain of private citizens engaging in rational-critical debate to form public opinion, countering state and market forces. Yet, its bourgeois, European roots overlook caste's spatial and hierarchical exclusions in India.

Postcolonial adaptations, via Fraser's "counter-publics," better fit: Subordinate groups form parallel spheres to contest dominant ones. Ambedkar operationalized this; his newspapers created a Dalit counter-public, voicing the "voiceless leader" (*Mooknayak's* masthead) against nationalist erasure. Caste, per Ambedkar, enforces "graded inequality," despatializing discourse—unlike Habermas's fluid arenas, India's public is caste-compartmentalized.

Integrating subaltern studies (Guha et al.), we view media as resistance infrastructure: Ambedkar's editorials employed "direct language of caste-as-caste," inverting upper-caste indirectness. In digital times, platforms like Twitter enable "Dalit counter-public spheres," per Thakur, with affordances amplifying visibility.

### Methodology

This qualitative study employs critical discourse analysis (CDA), blending Fairclough's three-dimensional model (text, discursive practice, social practice) with postcolonial lenses. CDA suits power asymmetries in media, revealing how language constructs caste realities. Data Sources were in historical: 20 editorials/articles from *Mooknayak*, *Bahishkrit Bharat*, digitized via archives (1920-1929). Contemporary were 50 social media posts/campaigns (#DalitLivesMatter, Dalit Camera YouTube, 2020-2025); 10 articles from *Dalit Dastak*, *Round Table India*. Mainstream Comparator: 30 news items on Ambedkar/Dalits from *The Hindu*, *Times of India* (same period).

Sampling: Purposeful, targeting resistance themes (atrocities, annihilation). Digital via keywords on Twitter, Facebook APIs. Analysis Procedure used are Textual, discursive and social Links to caste violence data (NCRB reports cross-referenced).

NVivo coded for themes: resistance, exclusion, rationality. Triangulation via secondary sources ensured validity.

### Findings and Discussion

Ambedkar's papers shattered caste silence. *Bahishkrit Bharat* editorials directly indicted Brahmanism, mobilizing against Mahad violence—unlike passive mainstream reports. CDA reveals "direct caste language": "Two leeches [British, Brahmanical] suck India's blood," inverting Habermas's abstraction. This formed a Dalit public, funding from Konkan activists sustaining it despite ad boycotts. Rationality shone: Arguments cited evidence (atrocities logs), fostering debate Ambedkar deemed impossible under caste.

Digital media revives this *Dalit Camera* (YouTube) echoes *Mooknayak*, with 100k+ views on caste critiques. #DalitLivesMatter (2020) garnered global solidarity, challenging biased coverage (Bhima Koregaon). CDA shows agency-framing: "Dalit resistance" vs. mainstream "riot." "Yet, barriers persist: Cyber-trolling, algorithmic bias mimic ad rejections.

Ambedkar prefigures counter-publics, demanding caste-inflected Habermas: Spatial caste exclusions demand "annihilation" rhetoric. Legacy: Dalit media sustains resistance, influencing policy (e.g., SC/ST Act amendments). Ambedkar reconceived India's public sphere as a caste battleground, his media forging subaltern resistance against Habermas's flawed ideal. From *Bahishkrit Bharat* to #CasteIsNotPast, this persists, though challenges endure. Future research: Quantitative impact metrics; interviews. Ultimately, amplifying Dalit media is key to a truly inclusive sphere, honoring Ambedkar's vision of annihilated caste.

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