

The Politics of Portrayal: Media & Caste Based Violence in India

Mitinam Siram

PhD Scholar

Abstract

Caste-based violence in India remains a persistent and deeply entrenched issue, exacerbated by the intersection of historical prejudices, socio-political dynamics, and media portrayals. This paper delves into the intricate relationship between media representation and the perpetuation of caste-based violence, examining how media narratives shape public perceptions and contribute to the normalization of caste-based discrimination and violence. Media, as a powerful tool of shaping public opinion, plays a crucial role in framing incidents of caste-based violence. However, the portrayal of such violence often reflects the biases and perspectives of dominant caste groups, perpetuating stereotypes and deepening societal divides. By sensationalizing certain incidents or downplaying others, media outlets inadvertently contribute to the erasure of caste-based discrimination from public discourse, hindering efforts towards meaningful social change. Furthermore, the politicization of media coverage adds another layer of complexity to the issue. Political agendas and affiliations often dictate the tone and content of media narratives surrounding caste-based violence, leading to selective reporting and distorted representations. This not only obscures the root causes of caste-based violence but also impedes efforts to hold perpetrators accountable and provide justice to victims. Moreover, lack of diversity and representation within mainstream media outlets perpetuates the marginalisation of voices from oppressed caste communities. The absence of authentic representation further reinforces existing power structures and hampers efforts to challenge caste-based discrimination effectively. Addressing caste-based violence in India therefore necessitates a critical examination of media portrayals and their role in shaping public perceptions.

Keywords: Caste-based Violence, media portrayals, media narratives

Introduction:

The caste system in India is a hierarchical system of social stratification that has been an integral part of Indian society for thousands of years which also has an intense impact on all the aspects of an Indian society including employment, politics and education (Ashfaq, 2023).

The caste system divides society in the Indian subcontinent into mutually exclusive, hereditary groups called castes, ranked by ritual status. Traditionally, South Asians believed that a man's social capacities were known from the caste into which he was born, and his caste prescribed the occupations that he could enter. The most distinctive features of caste ideology are the emphasis on the innately polluted state of the lowest ranked castes, formerly known as untouchables, and the strict exclusiveness of the so-called clean castes in relation to marriage. There is virtually no mobility of individuals across caste groups. Nothing quite like the caste system has evolved in other parts of the world. (Hoff, 2016). The caste system divides people into distinct social classes based on their birth, with the highest caste, the Brahmins, at the top and

the lowest caste, the Dalits, at the bottom. It has also been the subject of intense debate and criticism, both within India and internationally. The media has a powerful role to play in shaping public opinion, and its portrayal of caste issues can have a significant impact on the way people think and act. The media has the potential to promote social justice and equality, but it can also perpetuate caste-based discrimination and stereotypes. In this research paper, we explore the complex relationship between the caste system and Indian media, and the challenges and opportunities facing the industry in addressing caste-related issues (Ashfaq, 2023).

Caste System in India: A Historical Overview:

The caste system or stratification system in India is also a prevalent case in other South Asian countries like Pakistan, Nepal and Bangladesh as well. The caste system has been a defining feature in the Indian society for marriage, education and occupation. Deeply intricate into the society the caste system. It has been a defining aspect for occupations and marriages mostly, in the Indian caste system people are classified into different groups based on their birth and ancestors. In the stratification Brahmin who were traditionally scholars and priest stands at the highest and next to them are Kshatriyas who were rulers and warriors, then the Vaishyas who were traders and merchants and the Shudras who were artisans and laborers. And outside of the caste system were the untouchables who were considered lowest in the strata and were subjected to discrimination.

In spite of efforts put together by government to eradicate the caste system, it strongly continues to persist specially in the rural areas. Hence the Indian media also has a role to play in highlighting biases, caste based violence and thus promoting the representation or misrepresentation of minorities.

Objectives of The Study:

- Analyze the discourse of news on caste based violence
- How narratives are formed on print media
- Examine the words and languages used for both minorities and upper castes

Review of Literature:

(Walby, 2013) stated that “Violence matters. It wrecks and shortens lives, causes pain and suffering, and is often part of rapid social change. The field of violence encompasses war, terrorism, securitization, ethnic ‘cleansing’, domestic violence, violent crime and hate crime. It has increasingly become a matter for public debate and intervention by states and other actors.”

Violence has probably always been part of the human experience. Its impact can be seen, in various forms, in all parts of the world. Each year, more than a million people lose their lives, and many more suffer non-fatal injuries, as a result of self-inflicted, interpersonal or collective violence. Overall, violence is among the leading causes of death worldwide for people aged 15–44 years. Although precise estimates are difficult to obtain, the cost of violence translates into billions of US dollars in annual health care expenditures worldwide, and billions more for national economies in terms of days lost from work, law enforcement and lost investment (Organisation mondiale de la santé, 2002) in the book “World Report on Violence and Health” Edited by Etienne G. Krug, Linda L. Dahlberg et al. The nature of violence can be physical, sexual, psychological, deprivation or negligence.

Caste and class structure existing in the society is carried over in the media also (Vilanilam, 2002). Available literature suggests that the Dalits in India have long been ignored by the media as a reflection

of their status in the society. The exclusion of Dalits from the mainstream media coverage and their representation in the newsroom was highlighted by Media scholars (Anand (2005), Uniyal (1996), Prasad (2002) and Jeffrey (2000)). They authenticated the presence of caste in the Indian media and also discussed about the least importance given to the coverage of caste issues in the Indian media. An attempt is made to explore the Dalits perceptions on the media coverage of Dalit issues in India (Ratnamala).

Dalit are not minorities in India as their population is 201,378,372 (2011 census) which is around 16.6 percent of Indian population. But they are marginalized in Indian society; economically and socially. Reservation policy of government of India meant to improve their social and economic status is not efficient enough to give the due social status deserved by Dalit in human civil society (Singh, 2019).

“Dalit seek equality, dignity and self-respect, which is denied to them in the circumscribed modernity embraced by the middle class”. (Thapar, 2001) Dalits are not only denied of their social and economic status but also no one cares to listen to their voices reflecting their longing to a society that doesn't care for them. Similar pattern is shown in media content also as media platforms have failed to listen to their voices.

Research Questions and Propositions:

This paper is intended to study and identify the content and coverage of news about the “Hatharas” case of Uttar Pradesh on 14th September 2020 in India. Therefore, the enquiry questions for this research are:

1. Did the media give enough coverage as the victim belonged from the minority community?
2. How did the media portray the case?

Most of the paper I tried to look up concluded that the minority were underrepresented of which there could be many possible reasons as the Indian society is already divided into caste and affecting a greater lot in the day-to-day functioning. The underrepresentation of minorities in the Indian media has been in observation for only a few decades now whereas the discrimination has been there for hundreds of years now if not more than that. Based on the questions on this study my prepositions are such that:

1. Either the minorities and marginalized lower caste of the Indian society were unaware of the media representation as they aren't media consumers
2. Owing to low literacy rate and rural backgrounds the lower caste of the Indian society was unaware of the choice of words and languages used to portray them in the media.

Methodology:

This is a Critical Discourse Analysis study based on news articles published about the “Hatharas” case that occurred on the fateful day of 14th September 2020. For the study I collected news articles from the internet for a period of 1 month from the date of occurrence of the Incident. The research work by various scholars and media person which I collected is based on topic of ‘caste based violence typically related to Dalit. The study is done by analysing articles and research published on the subject, discussions on the subject, results and conclusions drawn in different media studies.

The effects and influences of media messages have been studied and numerous researches have been done considering content as independent variables keeping effects influences and impact audience as dependent variables. (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996) Media content effects are read and debated but what shapes the media content is often neglected. Media contents are studied qualitatively also to understand the view, the way of representation and slant of coverage, fairness and unfairness about an event or trail or stereotyping of images. Media content researches failed to give several answers related to Dalit coverage in India.

The purpose of this study is to examine the choice of words and languages that the media used while covering the issues of minorities specially Dalits. Specifically, this study asks how often, and what are the external and internal forces attempt to influence the content of newspaper and their coverage. To answer this question, this study examined and analysed various research papers and interviews of journalist to examine how extra and intra media and administrative forces of the media organizations influence news content and coverage decisions.

The study is based on theories given by Pamela J. Shoemaker and Stephen D. Reese in their book 'Mediating The Message: Theories of Influences on Mass Media Content' to understand how the content of Indian newspaper and its coverage of Dalits is governed by the organisational structure of media house and social structure.

Current Scenario of Caste & Indian Media:

In a country like India where majority of the population resides in rural areas caste-based problems happens to be a debatable problem. Moreover, it's impact is seen vividly in the coverage of Indian medias as well. Even though there are continuous efforts for greater and wider representation, the inclusion of marginalized communities in the Indian media be it electronic or in print media still faces noteworthy challenges that needs to be addressed. A study conducted by the Media Foundation in 2016 found that Dalits, Adivasis, and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) made up only 6% of newsroom staff in the top ten Indian newspapers. The lack of media persons from the marginalized community in the Indian newsrooms can possibly be result in sparse coverage on caste-based violence and penetration of biases and stereotypes. Dalits are more than often portrayed in stereotypical roles. In spite of cases where media is fighting well against stereotypes and biases, the marginalized communities still remain in danger.

Nonetheless with the coming of the Internet and specially availability of social media in the present generation, it has been a boon for not only Dalits but every minority and marginalized communities as well as individuals as it provides a platform to share grievances and lacunas of the experience and difficulties they face. Caste has been a persistent issue in Indian society, with stereotypical representations of lower-caste characters and limited representation of diverse voices and perspectives.

Case Study: Examples of Representation & Misrepresentation

Hatharas Case: For the purpose of this research the case of "Hatharas" was taken and the online articles of Times of India which is India's leading newspaper was studied for a period of 1 month from the date of occurrence of the Incident.

Findings from The Case Study

Over the study of the case for a span of month from the date of the incident on the official website of Times of India, it was found that the incident was not covered right after the incident happened on 14 September 2020. The initial idea of taking up the course of 1 month from the date of occurrence was because it was expected that materials would be found. Firstly, only after the death of the victim did The Times of India start following up on the news regularly.

Secondly, it was also found that Priyanka Gandhi Varda, the Congress General Secretary then among few who called out the incident publicly which could be because of political rivalry as Uttar Pradesh is a BJP dominated state.

Thirdly, the overuse of the word Dalit girl on the issue of Times of India in covering the “Hatharas” case could have been lessened as it signifies that portrays the victim in a less important matter as the Indian society has always been divided by caste and the lower caste issues been downplayed. The media portrayal of women victims’ background impacts the importance of the news.

Limitations of The Study:

There are certain limitations in the current study which are identified as:

1. The case was just starting to garner media and public attention; thus, studying the discourse of the paper for only a month has less contribution to the quality of the study.
2. This paper conducts only qualitative research only and the inclusion of quantitative methods could have added more calibre.
3. Also, instead of analyzing the discourse of a single newspaper, taking up more newspapers and cases could possibly be more noteworthy and interesting.

Conclusion and Suggestion:

In conclusion, the relationship of caste-based violence and caste-based related problems and the media remains a complex one. The media being the fourth pillar of democracy has a poignant role in bringing about changes in mindset and shaping the opinion of public and promote a more just and equitable society. The way forward for the Indian media is to better the inclusivity of diversity in newsrooms from minority and marginalized background as well as greater sensitivity in portrayal of caste-based violence related issues so that it can bridge the gap of under coverage. All the contents published by the media houses are directly or indirectly politically connected and influenced by numerous internal and external affairs. The possibility of the issues and challenges of caste-based violence being downplayed by the Indian media is because of lack of representation of minorities from the lower caste in the Indian newsrooms; as the Indian society in general has always ignored the voice of the lower caste in the society and the second reason could be the economic status of the minorities belonging to rural backgrounds thus causing them to be media illiterate and from being unable to keep with the ever changing technology. This research is a qualitative study thus it has limitations at certain level. However, this research can be explored more minutely conducting quantitative measures at a larger level.

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