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Stereotyping of the Marginalised in Media

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Abstract

This study critically examines stereotyping of marginalized communities in Indian media across film, television, news and digital platforms. By incorporating secondary qualitative analysis of existing research, it explores how media representations continuously disgrace image, reinforce caste and gender hierarchies and shape public attitudes, which contribute to systemic exclusion. Findings reflect dominance of upper-caste voices in media framing. Hence, meaningful changes should include reforms in media production and ownership.

Keywords: #Stereotyping #Dalits #Adivasis #marginalisedrepresentation #Indiannewspapers #womenstereotyping #castediscrimination #Indiaincinema

Introduction

Stereotyping in media is regarded as a complex and pervasive issue that includes far-reaching consequences on societal attitudes, identity and representation. Preservation of stereotypes is attributed to various factors such as historical context, cultural influences and power dynamics. History of media stereotyping is deep-rooted into the past of traditional media itself. In fact, media has been playing a substantial role in forming perceptions and cultural attitudes from early days to present. Historically, media depends on stereotypes to rapidly convey cultural backgrounds or character traits, simplifying multifaceted identities into tropes that are easily recognisable. However, in recent age, mainstream media in India is often controlled by upper-caste elites, which has historically marginalised voices of Dalits, Adivasis and women, particularly from these sidelined groups. This research article aims to analyse the stereotyping nature of the marginalised in media.

Scope:

This study critically examines how various forms of media such as films, television, news media and digital platforms, which can portray marginalised communities through reductive or stereotypical representations. It focuses on how these portrayals influence the existing social hierarchies and systemic inequalities.

Literature Review

Studies have shown that portrayals of Dalits, Adivasis, and women in Indian media have historically reinforced social hierarchies. Early newspapers and cinema frequently depicted these communities in negative or stereotypical ways (Chakravorty et al., 2025; Charmaraman et al., 2022). Films such as *Sujata* (1959) and *Article 15* (2019) highlighted caste issues, though mainstream Bollywood has often continued to rely on stereotypical narratives.

Historical Overview of Marginalised Representation in Indian Media:

Portrayal of demoted groups in Indian media, especially Dalits, Adivasis (indigenous peoples) and women is deeply influenced by social hierarchies rooted in caste, gender and class (Chakravorty *et al.* 2025). In 19th century, Indian newspapers such as “The Hindu” and “The Indian Mirror” were established and operated by upper-caste editors and writers. They portrayed Dalits and other relegated communities negatively and reinforced entrenched caste biases by depicting them as criminal or intellectually inferior (Charmaraman *et al.* 2022). Since 20th century, Bollywood followed these patterns of stereotyping and Dalit and lower-caste characters were depicted as caricatures of victims, comic relief or villains. Upper-caste characters were portrayed as cultured and sophisticated, which emphasised social hierarchy through cinematic tropes. However, *Sujata* (1959) addressed caste issues sympathetically and recently, *Article 15* (2019) highlighted caste discrimination, which revealed entrenched stereotypes about marginalised communities (Kureel, 2021). Emergence of parallel cinemas on social realism and critique was driven by pioneers like Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak and Mrinal Sen. They deliberately moved away from formulaic or commercial narratives that dominated popular cinema (Chakravorty *et al.* 2025).

Stereotyping in Different Media:

Stereotypes in mass media are overgeneralised beliefs about downgraded groups of people that can lead to prejudices. Indian cinema, especially Bollywood appear Dalit characters in stereotypical roles either as victims of oppression or peripheral figures without agency. Upper-caste characters are mostly shown as protagonists (Ahuja & Pundir, 2022). Adivasi women also face misrepresentation in these movies that emphasise vulnerability or hyper-sexualisation. For example, *Lagaan* (2001) exemplified dehumanising nature of Savarna (upper- caste) people. Early-age Indian cinema rigidly defined gender roles and subsequently confined female characters to a narrow set of stereotypes like dutiful wife, tragic heroine or rebellious woman (Mukhopadhyay & Banerjee, 2021). For example, *Mughal-e-Azam* (1960) and *Pakeezah* (1972) illustrated idealised and passive woman, which embodied elegance in women slightly. From the perspective of religious minority stereotypes, Muslim genre cinemas during 1950s-early 1980s focused on Islamic culture. However later, it deteriorated to stereotypical representations that reduced Muslims portrayal to feudal landowners, villains and gangsters, anti-national or anti-social characters (Wheatley, 2024, p. 2). On a contrary note, Sikhs are conventionally stereotyped as brave warriors and Christian women as archetypal fallen woman.

Theoretical framework

Intersectionality Theory postulates that social identities such as caste, gender, race, ethnicity and class intersect to create unique experiences of oppression. In context of Indian media, this theory helps to analyse how downgraded groups like Dalits, Adivasis and minority women face stereotypes that cannot be understood in media representations (Monk 2022). In addition, “Gramsci’s theory of cultural

hegemony” elucidates how dominant social groups maintain power through the cultural institutions, media. This broadcasts dominant upper-caste and patriarchal values, making them appear natural and thereby reinforce social hierarchies (Sardar, 2024). Indian media serves as a tool that perpetuates current situation of caste and gender inequality through stereotyping.

Gaps in Existing Research

Dominance of upper-caste journalists, editors and media owners shape media contents. They bypass marginalised voices and issues related to caste discrimination. There remains a lack of in-depth research on stereotyping experiences of social identities in Indian media.

Research Methodology

Research approach: This study incorporates secondary qualitative research methodology, which involves analysis of the existing qualitative data and literature. This data collection method is convenient rather than collection of primary data (Cheong *et al.* 2023). Secondary qualitative approach in this research allows for rich and in-depth insights into stereotyping of marginalised groups in Indian media. Previously gathered materials re utilised here such as academic journal articles, media content analyses, case studies and reports. Hence, this approach is useful for examining complex social phenomena and understanding the characteristics of historical and contemporary media.

Collection of data: Various types of secondary qualitative data sources are used in this research. Peer-reviewed academic articles, journal articles and books focused on media representation, stereotyping and marginalisation are crucial components here (Chong and Plonsky, 2024). There are many qualitative case studies and ethnographic studies related to marginalised identities in Indian media contexts, which are also helpful.

Selection criteria: Secondary data is collected in form of journal articles and literature reviews from scholarly databases such as Google Scholar, JSTOR, ProQuest, ScienceDirect and ResearchGate along with university libraries. The sources are relevant to the research topic of media stereotyping and marginalised groups in Indian context and were published within last 4 years.

Data analysis: Subject analysis method is incorporated here to identify recurring themes, narratives and patterns related to stereotyping in different media forms (Braun & Clarke, 2023).

Findings and Discussion

Social media platforms now offer some opportunities for these communities to challenge stereotypes and engage in counter-narratives (Majumdar et al., 2022). Dalit media is emerged as a significant force recently, as they provide a platform so that marginalised voices are to be heard. Dalit-centred media outlets such as Dalit Camera and “Round Table India” played critical role in creating consciousness about caste-based discrimination (Ashfaq, 2023, p. 3). Indian movies are derived from a large realm of Bollywood or regional cinema industries like Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Bengal and so forth. Although female representation is increased, inherent sexism has been cultivated. In older cinemas, female characters or leads were typically romantic interest, wife of male leads or mother. The concept of adding “beautiful reliefs” in difficulties and real-life struggles faced by heroes, was raised later (Mukhopadhyay

& Banerjee, 2021, p. 256). Stereotypes catalyse issues with social exclusion, as they perpetuating negative perceptions that mark marginalised groups as inferior, impure or criminal. Different terms like Bhangi and Chamar, are used as disgraces that reinforce derogatory identities. In Indian media, stereotyping discourse normalises gendered and ethnic hierarchies, as they depict marginalised groups through humiliated tropes such as menial labourers or victims (Dev *et al.* 2023). For this reason, persistent negative stereotyping damages self-esteem and identity of relegated individuals. Due to being constantly portrayed as inferior, they experience internalised oppression, psychological distress and diminished self-worth (Makwana & Elizabeth, 2022). Ultimately, these contribute to discriminatory practices that restrict educational and employment opportunities for marginalised groups.

Across multiple media forms such as cinema, television, news outlets and digital platforms, media representations reproduce harmful stereotypes that avoid the complexities of realities of these communities' lives. This discourse further reflects how media functions as a reflector of systemic inequalities (Vaghela *et al.* 2022). Indian media was highly dominated by upper-caste elites and they controlled narrative production, which made them sustaining patriarchal power structures through hegemonic cultural narratives. Indian TV serials also depict women in limited roles such as daughter-in-law, mother-in-law, as home-wreckers or caste with physical or mental complexities, which reinforce these stereotypes (Ahuja & Pundir, 2022). Recently, social media platforms including Twitter, Facebook and Instagram also allow marginalised groups like Dalits, Adivasis, women, LGBTQ+ individuals and religious minorities to circumvent traditional media barriers (Majumdar *et al.* 2022). Through this, they can directly engage with a broader audience, as these platforms have facilitated the organisation of movements.

Conclusion

Stereotyping of marginalised communities in Indian media is considered as an inescapable issue that reflects enduring influence of caste, class and gender hierarchies. Portrayal on TV serial, television, digital media and cinema from different genres strengthen social exclusion, stigmatisation and systemic inequality. This research has demonstrated that theoretical viewpoints such as intersectionality and cultural hegemony are crucial for understanding persistence of harmful stereotypes. It is necessary to make effective change in media ownership, newsroom diversity and storytelling practices. Dependence solely on secondary data collection limit research findings.

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