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Marginalized in the Media: Analysis of Rape Reporting on Dalit Women in India's Select English-Language National Newspapers

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Abstract

The coverage of Dalits in mainstream media has always been a subject of debate. The mainstream media's coverage is not just insufficient, it is also devoid of balance of opinions (M. Singh, 2019). Dalits are portrayed inaccurately and stereotyped in specific contexts (M. Singh, 2019). The mainstream media seldom devotes focus on Dalit issues and fewer stories about Dalits appear in newspapers (Kambi & Kakade, 2017). A similar pattern extends in news reports on sexual violence, with rape cases sometimes receiving sensationalized and superficial reporting. This study focuses on the significant intersection of these two issues of caste and gender by analyzing how English-language national dailies report sexual violence against Dalit women. The representation of Dalits in the mainstream media as well as rape and sexual violence cases have gained significant academic attention, however, focused analyses of rape reporting on Dalit women remains underexplored.

This research examines how hard news about rape and sexual violence against Dalit women is reported by select Indian English-language national daily newspapers from few quantitative measures and qualitative perspectives by employing qualitative Content Analysis. Quantitatively, the study assesses the visibility and frequency of the news reports. Qualitatively, the study assesses headlines, the framing and narrative of incidents, linguistic choices, the type of photographs featured and whether stereotypes, victim-blaming or sensationalism are present in the English national dailies' news reports. The theoretical framework for this research consists of Erving Goffman's Framing theory and Tuchman's Symbolic Annihilation. This research aims to demonstrate the necessity of ethical journalism, socially conscious and sensitive reporting techniques that give voice to the marginalized and question rather than perpetuate casteist and patriarchal ideas.

Keywords: #Dalitwomen #rapereporting #Indiannewspapers #Englishnationaldailies #rapenews

1. Introduction

The word 'Dalit' is derived from a Sanskrit word '*dal*' which means to crack, open, split, etc. When used as a noun or adjective, the word 'Dalit' means split, broken, downtrodden or oppressed. In Indian culture, the term refers to those who belong to the marginalized groups of the nation, who are denied humanity, whose inherent dignity is denigrated and who experience various forms of untouchability. The Dalits experience an institutionalized form of exclusion in the social, economic and political spheres.

1.1. Background and Representation of Dalit women and sexual violence in Indian Media

The Dalits are the historically deprived who belonged to the lowest stratum in the caste system of India. Dalits have faced systemic exclusion, discrimination and violence since time immemorial. Despite constitutional guarantees of equality and constitutional remedies, caste-based inequalities persist which in turn determine their access to dignity and justice. Due to a rigid caste system, India's 200 million Dalits are among the most marginalized people in the country and are relegated to the lowest social strata (BBC, 2023).

Dalits still struggle with caste-based prejudice and systemic oppression (Human Rights Watch, 2025; M. Singh, 2019). This marginalization further extends to the media, where their representation often reflects their systemic exclusion. The mainstream media's coverage is not just insufficient, it is also devoid of balance of opinions (M. Singh, 2019; (Nwala et al., 2021). The mainstream media plays a significant role in shaping the public opinion on socioeconomic inequality, crime and justice.

One of the preliminary roles of media include establishing a forum for marginalized groups by highlighting their struggles and hardships. However, media narratives are influenced by the prevailing social, political and cultural hierarchies and are not objective. In India, caste continues to influence how communities are portrayed and whose stories are prioritized and represented in public discourse.

The representation of Dalits in Indian media has faced significant criticism from the academic domain for perpetuating caste-based inequalities. Their representation is impacted for a long time by systemic disparities in media organizations. Dalit women experience complex forms of disparities as their social position is influenced by both gender and caste hierarchies. This caste and gender-based disparities impact their representation in the media. Their inclusion in news reports mostly limit to incidents of sexual assault or other atrocities. Such representations diminish their roles as people with agency, disempowering them and reducing them to mere helpless victims and symbols of pain and struggle.

The representation of sexual violence in the news media has a significant impact on how society views the crime and its victims (Ahmad and Shukla, 2020). News reports on rape and sexual violence are frequent in Indian newspapers; however, the coverage of such incidents differ across newspapers. Some rape cases are given considerable attention with constant follow-ups, while others are only covered as one-time reports. The amount of publicity a case receives often determines whether it provokes public outrage, policy discussions or legal debates, and vice versa. Although the rape cases are reported, neither all of them gets the required attention of media and the government, nor the media discourses results in significant reforms and legal amendments, rather most of them are politicized (Niranjana, 2020).

1.2. Significance of the study

This research aims to analyze the news reports about sexual violence against Dalit women in the websites of select English-language newspapers in India. By examining the frequency and visibility, headline framing, representation, framing and narrative, language and tone, and photographic choices, it is evident on how the newspapers shape popular views about the intersection of gender and caste. The analysis of such news reports reveal whether the newspapers uphold its obligation of foregrounding voices that are underrepresented or whether they reinforce the status quo and silence the voices that further diminishes Dalit women's experiences of sexual abuse.

2. Literature Review

Reports on rape are a recurring element of Indian newspapers, with almost every edition consisting of one such report which were usually 200 to 500 words long and they never appeared on the front page (Ahmad and Shukla, 2020). The reporters generally adhere to Section 228A of the Indian Penal Code (now Section 72 in the *Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita*), which forbids disclosing a victim's identity, when covering rape cases. However, in two extremely delicate cases, the rape case in Delhi and the rape case in Kathua, some publications broke this law by disclosing the victims' identities (Ahmad and Shukla, 2020). The news reports tend to highlight the victim's caste when she belongs to a marginalized group, especially Dalits and to add intrigue, they add dramatic elements and sensualize the narrative and the problematic terminologies employed downplay the seriousness of such crimes and support the patriarchal structure of media discourse (Ahmad and Shukla, 2020; Raj and Kumar, 2025). The crime receives most of the coverage, with minor focus on the police's role after the FIR is filed or the reactions of the victim's family and others (Ahmad and Shukla, 2020).

Newspapers' language possesses unique characteristics that differentiate it from other forms, shaping discourse in ways that construct realities aligned with the newspaper's objectives and it can produce several worlds, causing people to view the world in various ways (Biadi and Fallaki, 2023). The normalizing of violence, the denial of women's subjectivity, the "de-responsibilization" of the violent offenders, the episodic narrative of violence and the unequal representation of victims and offenders are some of the themes that are beneficial to society. (Akano and Afolabi, 2024). Most of the focus in the discourse around gender-based violence is on crimes against women, with a particular focus on women and the legal and investigative procedures.

Such framing and representation hides male responsibility and refutes the notion that males are usually the ones who commit violence, abuse and femicide (Akano and Afolabi, 2024). In the Bilkis Banu gang rape case, the *Times of India* reported on the case consistently but the news reports did not focus much on the men accused of the crime and the articles referred to the generic term 'accused,' none giving details on the background of these accused men as the identity of Banu was repetitively foregrounded and this pattern created a clear imbalance in visibility: the survivor's details were made central to the coverage, while those responsible for the assault and the killings were kept unnamed (Fadnis, 2022).

The newspapers majorly conceal survivor identities but still sensationalize the sexual violence incidents (I. Singh, 2022). Further, many narratives challenge the stereotype of perpetrators as strangers, revealing that familiar individuals often commit abuse (Mishra, 2021). Crimes of sexual violence end up in the media discourse and as they have the potential to impact the public, and due to their political capital, they also become politicized for various reasons and are disseminated with dramatization of violence in case of high-profile cases (Niranjana, 2020).

The reviewed literature delves into the representation of Dalits, especially women and rape reporting in media. While literature exists on rape reporting and Dalit representation separately, there is a dearth in literature pertaining to the intersectionality of caste and gender in rape reportage.

3. Aim and Objectives of the Study

The research aimed to analyze the news reports on rape or sexual violence committed against Dalit women in three select English-language newspapers' websites - *The Times of India*, *The Hindu* and *The Hindustan*

Times. The study sought to identify patterns of **visibility**, **language**, **photographs** and **narratives** by emphasizing on how reporting framed such instances. The study also determined whether media coverage of Dalit women's voices is marginalized, sensationalizes trauma or perpetuates stereotypes.

- To quantify and compare the **visibility** of news reports on sexual violence against Dalit women in the three English national dailies.
- To analyze the **headlines** of the news reports on sexual violence against Dalit women in the three English national dailies.
- To examine the **framing and narratives** used in portraying sexual violence incidents against Dalit women in the three English national dailies.
- To examine the **language and tone** of the news reports on sexual violence against Dalit women in the three English national dailies.
- To examine the **types of photographs** used in the news reports on sexual violence against Dalit women in the three English national dailies.
- To detect the presence of **stereotypes**, **victim-blaming** or **sensationalism** in the news reports on sexual violence against Dalit women in the three English national dailies.

4. Research Questions

- I. **How frequently do news reports on sexual violence against Dalit women appear in the three English national dailies?**
- II. How are the **headlines** of the news reports on sexual violence against Dalit women **framed** in the three English national dailies?
- III. What are the **framing and narrative** techniques employed in portraying sexual violence incidents against Dalit women in the three English national dailies?
- IV. What is the **language and tone** employed to report the news on sexual violence against Dalit women in the three English national dailies?
- V. What are the **types of photographs** utilised in the news reports on sexual violence against Dalit women in the three English national dailies?
- VI. To what degree do these reports in the three English national dailies reinforce **stereotypes**, engage in **victim-blaming** or rely on **sensationalism** in their coverage?

5. Research Methodology

This research takes on an interpretative approach and employs qualitative content analysis method and a few quantitative measures to examine how the three select English-language newspapers - *Times of India*, *The Hindu* and *Hindustan Times* - report news on sexual violence against Dalit women on their websites. These three newspapers were selected due to their wide reach among the readers. Qualitative analysis method of the news reports was utilized for a deeper comprehension of the framing, language and tone and the inclination of the news reports.

5.1. Sampling Technique and Data Collection

A total of 50 news articles were scanned from the websites of the *Times of India*, *The Hindu* and *Hindustan Times*, published between 1 March 2025 and 31 August 2025. Articles were chosen using keywords such as 'Dalit,' 'rape,' and 'sexual assault.' Purposive sampling was used to select articles that directly addressed Dalit rape cases to keep the emphasis on the research problem. Data collection covered headline text, body of the news articles, sources cited in the articles and follow-up reports of the same.

An analysis framework was created combining inductive as well as deductive methods. Previous research on the media's portrayal of gender and caste-based violence served as the foundation for the initial categories of analysis. During the analysis of the news reports, more patterns and thematic dimensions were revealed and the framework was refined and broadened accordingly.

5.2. Data Analysis

Erving Goffman's framing theory of 1974 describes how media use 'frames' to represent events. Certain aspects of reality are emphasized while others are minimized in these frames. By determining what is highlighted, ignored or presented as problematic, this framing process in news reporting shapes interpretation and eventually directs how the public perceives events.

The analysis utilized framing theory to examine narrative structures and linguistic choices and to determine whether rape cases associating Dalit women are trivialized, reported as political issues or systemic caste-gender oppression.

Tuchman's Symbolic Annihilation of 1978 claims that oppressed groups are routinely erased, trivialized or stereotyped by the media. This concept provided the lens when analyzing whether Dalit women are portrayed with honour, degraded to nameless victims, or rendered invisible by the erasure of their identity beyond caste.

All 50 news articles were extracted from their respective websites for analysis. The visibility of the news reports on sexual violence against Dalit women was computed across the three newspapers of the mentioned time-period. The articles were thoroughly read to analyze the victim portrayal, caste reference, perpetrator framing, reporting tone, headline focus and inclination.

6. Findings and Discussion

This research was conducted by employing qualitative content analysis and a few quantitative measures through the theoretical lens of 'framing theory' and 'symbolic annihilation' to unearth how newspapers frame rape incidents involving Dalit women. The three newspapers subjected to study were *Times of India*, *The Hindu* and *Hindustan Times* between March and August, 2025.

6.1. Frequency and Visibility

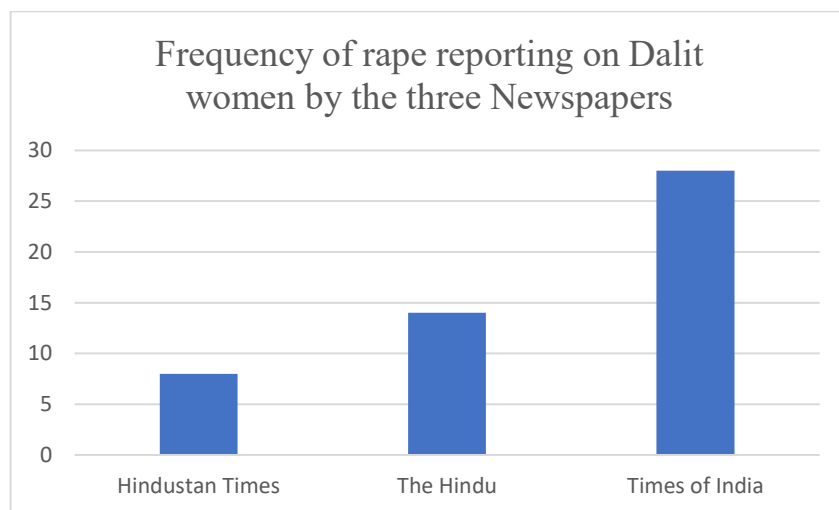


Fig. 1

The study (Fig. 1) revealed that *Times of India* has the highest coverage (28 news reports) of sexual violence against Dalit women with frequent follow-up news, significantly more than the other two. *The Hindu* follows with 14 news reports, while *Hindustan Times* reports the least, with only 8 news reports. This finding is in line with the view of Tuchman's symbolic annihilation as it highlights an uneven visibility of the caste-gender issue across newspapers, thus, signifying differences in editorial practices and framing choices. The *Times of India*'s dominance in reporting rape news on Dalit women and following-up on the incidents highlight its tendency to provide greater coverage, while the relatively lower counts in the other two newspapers reflect selective reporting.

6.2. Headline framing

The analysis of the news reports revealed that the headlines in the two of the three newspapers (*Times of India* and *Hindustan Times*) frequently relied on sensationalism, using words like "horror," "shocker," and "Nirbhaya-like" to increase the dramatic impact of sexual violence cases involving Dalit women. *Times of India* had the highest coverage, however, heavily relied on sensationalism. Headlines like "*Hapur horror: Dalit woman's family fights for justice*" (*Hindustan Times*, March 2025), "*UP horror: 14-year-old Dalit girl raped for 7 months*" (*Times of India*, May 2025), "*UP horror: Dalit teen found hanging from tree was gang-raped*" (*Times of India*, May 2025) reveals the brutality of the incidents but sensationalism minimizes the complex social issues to singular incidents of spectacle.

6.3. Representation

a) Caste mention and Identity of Victims

The victim's identity must be kept confidential to protect their privacy as per the Supreme Court directives on cases related to sexual assault, however, frequently identifying them by only caste and age like "Dalit minor," "12-year-old Dalit girl," "elderly Dalit woman," highlights their vulnerability and reinforces stereotypes of Dalit women as helpless victims lacking agency. In the news reports, the victim's caste

identity was consistently foregrounded while the caste of the perpetrator was mostly erased unless they belonged to a marginalized group or a different religious group.

The narratives of the news reports were also built around the victim's identity in some instances, portraying her as young, vulnerable and marginalized with no agency. The news reports in all three newspapers frequently foregrounded the victim's caste identity and vulnerability with phrases like "Dalit woman was allegedly raped," "Dalit girl has allegedly been raped," "Deaf-mute Dalit girl raped" drawing attention to caste oppression but focused only on individual incidents rather than broader systemic issues like caste hierarchies or failures and delays in justice. Such phrases also position the victims/survivors as the grammatical subject and minimizes the perpetrators and their reported offence. Victim-centric framing and narratives tends to reduce survivors to symbols of pain and suffering. By using several identities like caste, gender, age and disability, to the narrative structure, the resultant representation is likely to reinforce marginalization, rather than challenging it.

b) Perpetrator Framing

Visibility of perpetrators' identities was inconsistent in majority of the news reports, with only revealing their age, name in some instances and negligible mention of their profession. Religion and caste are mentioned only when the victim and perpetrator belong to different caste and religious communities. The structural power dynamics of gender, caste and religion that cause this violence often go unnoticed due to this sort of representation.

6.4. Framing and Narrative

Most of the news reports framed the incidents primarily as matters of law and order, detaching the violence from its broader social context. Many of the news reports highlighted institutional failures such as delays, suspensions, police negligence or administrative lapses, etc., but these were framed as procedural shortcomings rather than result of structural disparity. The news reports prioritised institutional responses, such as police encounters, judicial provisions or political blaming and clashes, shifting attention away from victim's/survivor's voices and positioning the story into controversies.

6.5. Language and Tone

Majority of the news reports relied heavily on sensationalism with unnecessary and dramatized crime details. Several reports displayed subtle forms of victim-blaming, where survivors were implicitly held accountable through linguistic choices. Words that highlighted the Dalit girls' or women's movements, whereabouts, or situation, for example, "had gone out with her fiancé" (*Times of India*, May 2025) or "playing outside her home" (*Hindustan Times*, August 2025), implicitly inferred that she was responsible for the violence. Although it is not explicit, this kind of framing reflects a cultural discourse that examines the behaviour of survivors rather than the perpetrators.

The emphasis of all the news reports were majorly on portraying the Dalit women as vulnerable with no agency.

As stated earlier, the victim's identity is supposed to be confidential to protect their privacy in cases related to sexual assault, however, the omission of survivors' accounts in majority of the news reports in all three newspapers reflect a structural form of silencing that marginalizes their lived experiences and struggles

and denies them narrative agency. Their perspectives are mostly mediated through officials, fathers, husbands or other relatives and secondary sources. This exclusion aligns with Tuchman's (1978) idea of symbolic annihilation.

Institutional failures were frequently trivialised with legal provisions and procedural outcomes using words like "justice," "arrested," "case was registered," and "FIR was registered." However, the reports hardly prioritised situating the crimes in the context of structural gender and caste hierarchies. As a result, the narrative often diverted away from the violence itself toward institutional procedures or political consequences.

6.6. Photographic Choices

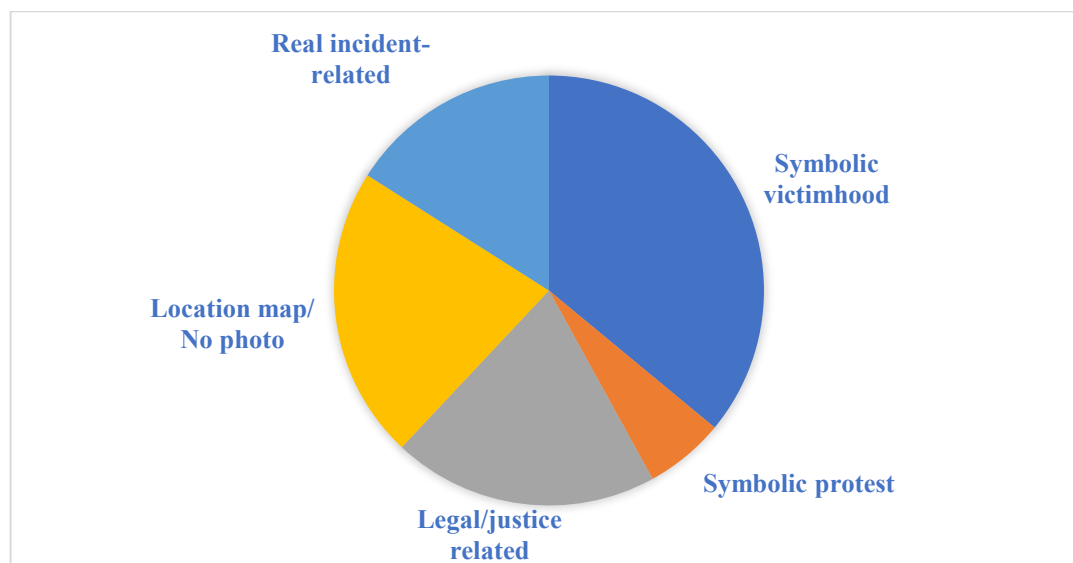


Fig. 2

The analysis (Fig. 2) revealed the photographic choices of the three newspapers for the reports on sexual violence against Dalit women. Most of the news reports utilized images of symbolic victimhood, depicting women as faceless, passive and vulnerable. A minor share of the news reports featured symbolic protest, which does present collective demonstrations but sidelined individual survivors. Legal or justice-oriented visuals focusing on police, courts or crime scenes, used in the news reports directed attention toward state procedures. A major share of the reports employed location maps or did not use any photographs. This contributed to further erasure of the survivor's lived struggles and minimized the perpetrator's offence. News reports rarely included images connected directly to the incident. The above pattern of photographic choices by the newspapers erased the victims/survivors in most of the instances and diminished their identity, hindering proper representation and strengthening Tuchman's Symbolic Annihilation.

7. Conclusion

This analysis focuses on how India's English-language national newspapers like *Times of India*, *The Hindu*, and *Hindustan Times* report rape on Dalit women using sensationalist language in headlines as well as in the body of the news reports. The national dailies frames narratives to draw readers in, however, reduces structural violence to singular impersonal incidents. Dalit women are framed largely as symbols

of victimhood and suffering by emphasizing on their age and vulnerability rather than as autonomous beings. The gender and caste-based power dynamics are also concealed by the frequent downplaying, victim-blaming, and erasure of the perpetrators' identities. Further marginalizing of the survivors is subtly done through absence of their perspectives and the dependence on institutional voices like police, politicians or bureaucrats. The coverage of sexual violence typically prioritizes incidental dramatization, legal procedural details, legal updates, or political blaming and clashes. This exemplifies the symbolic annihilation, the misrepresentation and silence of marginalized groups. The systemic exclusion and social inequality that support such violence are not questioned by these newspapers rather treated merely as commodities served to the public. An ethical approach to reporting cases of sexual abuse would require ruling out sensationalism, adopting sensitive and humane language and framing stories factually in ways that expose systemic injustices. The narratives must focus on the individual incidents along with the broader systemic issues. The media reform is essential to ensure nuanced reporting that challenges both casteism and patriarchy, while assuring dignity and justice for Dalit women.

8. Limitations and Scope

- Focus on select English language national newspapers.
- Restricted sample size (50) and time frame (six months).
- Focus on news reports published on websites only.
- Exclusion of readers' reception.

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