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Between Margins and Mainstream: Dalit Women in India's Media Discourse

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Abstract

This paper interrogates the representation of Dalit women in Indian mainstream and digital media through an intersectional framework that foregrounds caste, gender, and class as co-constitutive structures of domination. It employs a mixed-methods design that combines qualitative discourse and content analysis of high-profile cases with quantitative evidence drawn from NCRB statistics, CSDS newsroom surveys, and United Nations reports to map patterns of coverage of caste-based violence against Dalit women. The analysis demonstrates that caste-patriarchal media institutions, shaped by upper-caste concentration in ownership and editorial decision-making, routinely sensationalize exceptional incidents while obscuring the structural and everyday nature of caste and gendered violence. By contrast, Dalit-led alternative media and digital platforms operate as critical counterpublics that document lived experiences, contest hegemonic frames, and assert narrative agency, even as they remain constrained by algorithmic devaluation and gendered online harassment. The paper argues that substantive democratization of Indian media necessitates structural reforms, enhanced representation of Dalit women in newsrooms, caste-sensitive reporting protocols, and institutional accountability, positioning Dalit women as epistemic agents and producers of media knowledge rather than merely as objects of representation.

Keywords

#Dalit women #Intersectional media representation #Caste–gender regime #Dalit feminist media praxis #Digital counter publics

Introduction:

India, a rapidly developing country known for its diversity in culture and lifestyle, still regulates a 3000-year-old human segregation or divide system. The Hindu community is divided into 4 parts: Brahman (teachers and priests), Kshatriyas (warriors and kings), Vaishya (traders and merchants), and Shudras (workers and servants). This hierarchy is believed to originate from Brahma, the god of creation, and this division represents different parts of his body. The caste system in India is deeply rooted in social hierarchy, which influences many aspects of everyday life. The caste system benefits the so-called upper classes, who are also capitalists, so it was shaped significantly over time by politics and bureaucracy.

The British Raj reshaped the caste system according to their needs; they classified based on occupation, social status, and local custom, resulting in multiple castes and subcastes. This rank was often based on

colonial bureaucratic viewpoints and racial oppression. Administrative and government jobs are assigned mostly to the upper class, promoting privilege and inequality. They also segregated untouchables as a 'depressed class,' which conditioned them to do jobs that most people find disgusting. The British Raj converted a traditional caste system into a strict, officially defined social hierarchy that equally worsened social divides.

In Indian society caste-based violence and oppression have been inevitable since ancient times and still exist today. For marginalized sections, especially women, caste blame is the most justifiable weapon for their endurance of every kind of injustice. In a capital where 50% of its population is filled by the systematic silence, denying them respect and safety, their surviving as women with the lower-caste level seems like a triple burden- gender, poverty, and caste. Being a woman, every woman feels like a burden to their family; they are not safe in their homes, outside, at school, or in this patriarchal system. Families choose to send their sons over daughter for education. Upper-class men treat lower-class girls as their property to decorate and abuse. Lower-class people systematically lack education and economic stability, which fuels child trafficking and bonds them as slaves. A Dalit Woman's life is shaped by gender discrimination and caste in addition to economic slowdown.

Media plays an important role in shaping society and mirrors the society. Be it digital media or traditional media, it often focuses on sensationalism, and that's how media also becomes an accomplice to the injustice by staying silent.

Mainstream media in India, including films and television news, has historically been dominated by the capitalist upper-caste perspective, which results in getting stereotyped or erased from narratives.

Films and TV shows portray lower-caste characters as poor, uneducated, criminal, and anti-national and often promote racism.

News media often downplay or misinterpret or misrepresent caste-based violence and discrimination. Media ownership and leadership are dominated by the upper caste, which controls the angle of the story. Social media and alternative media platforms raise awareness till it is not accepted by a large number of people because of the personalized algorithm.

This media taught us to look at Phoolan Devi as a criminal, murderer, and monster, but it failed to teach that she is a survivor, fighter, and woman who refused to be a victim.

Objectives:

- To understand how Dalit women are presented in the media (print, broadcast, and digital).
- To talk about the effects of sensationalism and underreporting on caste-based crimes against Dalit women.
- To learn about the systemic barriers in the newsroom.
- Applying social media as an alternative platform for Dalit reporting.
- To talk about the difficulties in the digital sphere for Dalit reporting.

Literature Review:

- 'Dalit Feminist Standpoint' written by Sharmila Rege (2006) Writing caste and writing gender help us understand the representation of Dalit women in media and literature. Rege argues for a Dalit feminist standpoint, which not only shows oppression but also provides moral philosophy for social science and media studies. Her work highlights how both mainstream feminism (Savarna)

and Dalit politics silence Dalit women's voices, which in media creates a caste-based gap that is well designed in caste patriarchy.

- Uma Chakraborty's 'Conceptualizing Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India' (1993) explains how caste hierarchy is sustained through women's sexuality and labor. This helps to understand media's erasure of caste in reporting oppression and crime due to caste hierarchy. The media's silence here is not neutrality; it is an extension of Brahminical power hiding behind social structure.
- Gopal Guru (1995) describes the Dalit women as "victims twice over": first, they lived in violence, and second, they lived in exclusion of representation. This led to the Dalit women being portrayed mainly as victims or criminals, never as intellectuals.
- Stuart Hall's (1980) theory of encoding and decoding and politics of representation helps to understand the caste-media analysis. Media does not objectively reflect reality; it is systematically constructed. In India, upper-caste editors encode stories while downplaying caste oppression, while audiences decode stories differently depending on their social hierarchy. This helps to understand why caste violence cases are reported as law and order issues instead of systematic violence, reflecting the public viewpoint.
- A 2019 study by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) found over 85% of decision-making in Indian newsrooms was occupied by upper-caste members; women were especially deleted and were almost entirely absent. This lack of representation led to misinformation and misinterpretation at the editorial level.
- Ravikant Krishna (2015) observes that the Dalits in popular visual entertainment media are invisible and stereotypically presented as criminals, laborers, or helpless victims and are rarely shown as leaders, intellectuals, or professionals.

Methodology:

This study presents a content analysis approach, supported by both qualitative and quantitative methods. Qualitative analysis includes a close reading of media coverage of cases: the Balarampur massacre (2020), the Guna case (2021), the Sagar rape case (2022), and the Banda atrocity (2022). Coverage in mainstream newspapers, television debates, and digital platforms

Quantitative context is from NCRB crime data, CSDS newsroom composition reports, and UN Special Rapporteur documents, which provide statistical data of caste-based crimes and systematic neglect.

Comparative analysis led mainstream media coverage with Dalit-led platforms such as Dalit Camera and Khabar Lahariya, showing how narrative differs when marginalized voices control the discourse.

The erasure of Dalit voices is not accidental but structurally caste-patriarchal control over newsrooms and media representation by analyzing case studies, media trends, and emerging Dalit-led digital platforms. The study highlights both the failures and possibilities of Indian media. Ultimately, this paper calls for media reform and inclusion of Dalit feminist voices as essential to Indian democracy.

Discussion:

The fourth pillar of democracy, which is ruled by capitalists, rarely discusses caste-based problems and violence in visual entertainment media. Lower-class people are portrayed as evil and antinationalist, which leads to less representation of them, leaving them in an underdeveloped state.

India has strict laws against caste-based violence, yet caste-based crimes against women are frequently underreported due to gender bias, police bias, political interference, and systematic neglect.

Dalit women are mainly represented in the wrong and unfair way. Mostly movies and TV and news show them as poor, weak, victims, too emotional, too superstitious, and criminal. But in real life, Dalit women face a lot of things; they go to school, work hard for their survival, and take part in politics to challenge the systematic oppression. Also, in big media houses, most of their bosses are upper-caste individuals. Firstly, it is very hard to get a job as Dalit women journalists share their ideas and become leaders while they face disrespect from upper-caste people, sometimes even from their own Dalit male colleagues.

Dalit women are chosen out to “teach a lesson” to their families or communities through sexual violence as a form of social punishment. Cooperation by the state and police is demonstrated by forced cremations, caste angle denial, and FIR delays. Media reporting either minimizes it by referring to it as a land or love dispute or sensationalizes it by showing bodies and graphic details. Alternative voices in social media and Dalit activists serve as crucial in ending silences.

For a long time, movies in India did not show Dalit women in a fair or respectful way. They were mostly shown as weak, poor, or always suffering. Many films made by upper-caste directors showed Dalit women only as victims, not as strong people with dreams and courage.

For example, very old movies like *Achhut Kanya* (1936) showed Dalit women as helpless and sad, without any power to change their lives.

But slowly, things started changing. In the last few years, new directors like Pa. Ranjith, Nagraj Manjule, Mari Selvaraj, and Neeraj Ghaywan started making films where Dalit women are shown as strong, brave, and independent.

Movies like *Pariyerum Perumal*, *Sairat*, *Masaan*, and *Geeli Pucchi* tell stories of Dalit women who fight against unfair treatment, stand up for themselves, and dream of a better life. These women are not shown only as victims—they are also shown as leaders and fighters.

Thanks to OTT platforms (like Netflix and others), more such movies are being made now, where Dalit women are shown as real people with different feelings, choices, and strengths.

Still, problems remain. In many big Bollywood films, Dalit women are either missing or still shown in old, negative ways. The film industry is still mostly controlled by powerful groups, which makes it harder for Dalit women to get fair representation.

The violence faced by Dalit women in India is not surprising; it is systematic and deep-rooted, yet mainstream media rarely represents the everyday forms of humiliation, harassment, and sexual exploitation they face in villages, fields, schools, and homes. National media only gave a damn when its brutality was too gruesome to ignore. The silence is not broken by journalistic responsibilities but by the pressure of public outrage and social media activism. In this way, only the suffering of Dalit women gets acknowledgement in some aspect. Indian media does not consider Dalit women's oppression a matter of everyday newsworthiness. The media presents selective cases while erasing everyday violence- sexual exploitation of Dalit women as agricultural laborers by upper-caste landlords, harassment of Dalit girls in schools, and humiliation of being denied entry to temples or being conditioned to do degrading forms of labor. None of this matter gets discussion in prime-time debates or national headlines. In this way mainstream media becomes a gatekeeper of caste hierarchy rather than being a watchdog of society.

Case studies:

1. *Khairlanji Massacre* (2006): In Maharashtra, four members of the Bhotmange family, including two Dalit women, were stripped, paraded, raped, and murdered by dominant-caste men. Initial mainstream media coverage was none. Only after Dalit protests does the case gain limelight. Even

then, many reports avoided the word “Dalit,” presenting it as a law-and-order issue rather than caste violence. This silence revealed media bias in protecting caste privilege.

2. Badaun Case (2014): Two teenage Dalit cousins were gangraped and found hanging from a tree in Uttar Pradesh. The media firstly sensationalized the issue with graphics of the bodies but failed to sustain focus on the systemic caste-based angle. Instead, political blame games started dominating the coverage. The victims' voices and community struggles were silenced.
3. Unnao Rape Case (2017): A Dalit woman accused a BJP MLA of rape. For months, there's no media coverage, reflecting both caste and political biases. When she attempted to take her own life in front of the Chief Minister's residence and her father died in police custody, the case finally drew national attention. This shows how Dalit women must endure extreme suffering before their voices are listened to.
4. Hathras Case (2020): A 19-year-old Dalit woman was gang raped and fatally injured by upper-caste men. The police cremated her body in the dead of night without family consent. Firstly, mainstream media reported denying rape. Social media activism, especially from Dalit platforms, forced wider attention. This case shows the growing role Of alternative media in challenging dominant systematic silences.
5. Balrampur, Uttar Pradesh (2020): Just days after the Hathras case, a 22-year-old Dalit woman in Balrampur was abducted while returning from college, gang-raped, tortured, and left in critical condition. She died before reaching the hospital. Though arrests were made, the case quickly slipped out of the headlines once the Hathras outrage dominated. Shows how multiple Dalit women can be brutalized within the same news cycle, but only one case is allowed to remain visible in limelight
6. Guna, Madhya Pradesh (2021): A Dalit woman was raped by a dominant-caste man who filmed the assault and circulated the video. Instead of protection, she faced humiliation and social boycott from her community. Shows how digital tools are weaponized to justify caste-gender violence beyond the act itself into public shaming.
7. Sagar, Madhya Pradesh (2022) A 19-year-old Dalit woman was gang-raped by four men, including the upper-caste accused. She was threatened with death if she filed a complaint. Only after Dalit organizations protested did police register the case under the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act. This proves of forced silence until strong collective intervention.
8. Banda, Uttar Pradesh (2022): A Dalit woman was gang-raped inside her home by men from the dominant caste. The local police initially refused to file an FIR and pressured the family into compromise. National coverage was low, with caste either ignored or described vaguely. A typical case of systematic neglect led to justice being delayed.
9. Delhi Cantt Case (2021): A 9-year-old Dalit girl was raped and murdered near a crematorium in Delhi. The accused, all upper-caste men, forcibly cremated her body to destroy evidence. Her

mother testified that police and priests pressured them to stay silent. A clear urban reminder that Dalit women and girls are unsafe even in the capital, and caste is systematically erased in coverage.

10. Angul, Odisha (2023): In Odisha's Angul district, a Dalit woman was paraded naked through her village after being accused of theft. Videos went viral, showing her humiliation while onlookers remained mute. The police acted only after outrage on social media, portraying the public spectacle of caste violence against Dalit women and how "justice" often arrives only when images circulate online.
11. Jharkhand (2023): A 17-year-old Dalit girl was abducted, gang-raped, and murdered in Dumka district. Her body was found in a field, but the initial reporting focused on her caste identity. Only Dalit activists and smaller portals named the systemic bias. A classic case of erasure in mainstream media framing.

According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB 2021), at least 10 Dalit women are raped daily in India, though actual numbers are likely higher due to underreporting.

A CSDS-Lokniti study (2019) found that Dalits hold virtually no senior editorial positions in mainstream Indian newsrooms; 88 percent are controlled by upper-caste men.

The UN Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues (2018) also highlighted that caste-based sexual violence is systemic and rarely prosecuted due to police bias and political interference.

The selective silence of mainstream media shows whose lives matter the most and whose stories are disposable in contracts. Social media platforms shout about marginalized voices and demand accountability; however, these platforms also remain vulnerable due to trolling, upper-caste-made algorithms, and political manipulation.

'*Dalit Women Talk Differently*' (1995) by Guru Gopal highlighted the silencing of Dalit women within both Dalit politics and upper-class feminism. According to the book, Dalit women are often spoken for by others but not really given space to represent their experiences themselves.

The role of media in shaping social reality is well documented in communication studies. In the Indian context, media reflects the patriarchal society. Dalit women are rarely allowed to represent themselves; they are mostly invisible or represented through the gaze of upper-class journalists and editors.

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Ravikant Krishna (2015) observes that the Dalits in popular visual entertainment media are invisible and stereotypically presented as criminals, laborers, or helpless victims and are rarely shown as leaders, intellectuals, or professionals.

Against all odds, Dalit feminist voices created alternative spaces of media representation; digital platforms like **Dalit Camera**, **Round Table India**, and the women-led rural media collective **Khabar Lahariya** challenge mainstream silence by reporting caste-based violence, representing Dalit women's voices.

On social media, Dalit women have found new ways to speak for themselves. Mostly, big newspapers and TV channels mostly ignored their voices, stories. But now, with phones and the internet, they can share their own stories. Groups like Khabar Lahariya (a newspaper run by rural women), Equality Labs, and activists like Kiruba Munusamy use Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram to tell the world about caste violence

and daily struggles. Through posts, videos, and reels, they keep records of what happens, spread awareness, and connect with others across India.

But this power also comes with problems. Many Dalit women, who speak out online, face bullying, abuse, and trolling are common features for them. Sometimes their posts about violence are removed or hidden by the platforms, which say the content is “too violent” to show even though these are real stories that need to be told. At the same time, funny or light entertainment videos are given more importance by the apps, while serious stories are pushed aside. This means Dalit women are seen online, but not always in a safe or fair way. Their voices are louder than before, but still under risk, because the internet is also controlled by rules and systems that often repeat the same unfairness found in the real world.

Social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter have become crucial alternative spaces for Dalit women, helping them to share their narratives, document violence, and organize communities independently of mainstream media's traditional denial or misrepresentation of their stories. Collectives like Khabar Lahariya, for example, use YouTube to share the voices of rural Dalit women with audiences across the country and the world, while individual creators like Kiruba Munusamy and Thenmozhi Soundararajan use Instagram and Twitter to expose societal bias, criticize casteist policies, and inform audiences about gender oppression based on caste. Thus, social media serves as a counter-public space where Dalit women restore control over the conversation.

The empowerment of Dalit women through social media has its limits, as algorithms often prioritize entertainment and sensational content over caste-related issues. This leads to posts about caste-related disputes being less visible and frequent bans and suspensions, particularly affecting Dalit women activists who endure constant online harassment. Hence, while social media offers platforms for expression, it also fuels existing inequalities, transforming caste into new challenges that Dalit women must navigate everywhere, every day.

In India, the media (like newspapers, TV news, and social media) often shows Dalit women in an unfair way. This is not just because of one or two people being unfair, but because the whole system is controlled by powerful upper-caste groups. Very few Dalits get to be editors, anchors, or decision-makers in newsrooms. That is why the problems and voices of Dalit women are either ignored, shown only as sad stories, or told from someone else's point of view.

How can this change?

1. More Dalit women in newsrooms – If Dalit women themselves become journalists, editors, and anchors, and then news will include their real experiences.
2. Rules for fair reporting – Just like there are rules for reporting about children or gender issues, media should have rules for writing about caste. Reporters must not hide caste, must not describe violence in a dirty or sensational way, and must allow Dalit women to tell their own stories.
3. Better education for journalists – Journalism schools should teach about caste and gender together. Students should learn from Dalit feminist thinkers like Sharmila Rege and Uma Chakravarti, who explain how caste and patriarchy work together.
4. Safer social media – On platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter, Dalit creators often face harassment. Their posts about caste violence are sometimes deleted, while hate speech is allowed. These companies should make fair rules, talk to Dalit rights groups, and protect creators from online attacks.
5. Support Dalit-led media – Groups like Khabar Lahariya (a news outlet run by rural women) show that fair journalism is possible when Dalit women lead. They should get funding, fellowships, and partnerships to grow stronger.

6. Laws and audits – Just like big companies check how many women or minorities they employ, media houses should also be checked for caste diversity. Also, laws like the SC/ST Act can be used against caste-ism reporting.
7. Awareness among people – Readers and viewers (like us) should ask: Why doesn't the news mention caste? Why are Dalit women's voices missing? Why do stories about them disappear after one day? Learning to question like this is called media literacy

To stop bias against Dalit women in media, we need change at many levels – in who runs the newsroom, in how stories are told, in how social media works, in the laws, and in how people read news. Only then can the media be truly fair and democratic

Conclusion:

Dalit women survive a triple amount of oppression in India. Their systematic neglect from media reflects the broader caste-patriarchal hierarchy that shapes Indian democracy. Every case reveals that mainstream media either silence their stories or reduce them to caste disputes.

True democratization of Indian media requires structural reform. Inclusion of the Dalits especially Dalit women, in newsrooms with caste-sensitive reporting ethics and systematic accountability is much more needed. Dalit feminist media initiatives must be recognized and supported in a broader aspect.

Only when Dalit women are not just subjects of reporting but rather narrators of their own stories can Indian media claim their credibility. Talking about them with them is about the justice of their systematic operation and erasure reshaping the media's viewpoint.

Newsrooms have to adapt caste- and gender-related covering guidelines for when or why two names are castes, survivor anonymity, paid fellowships for Dalit women reporters outside of cities, and follow-through protocols while tracking case progress.

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