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# Caste System and Indian Media: A Complex Relationship

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**Abstract:** *The caste system has been a prominent feature of Indian society for thousands of years, and continues to shape the social, economic, and political landscape of the country. 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. 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. We provide a historical overview of the portrayal of caste issues in Indian media, discuss the current scenario in Indian media with respect to caste-related issues, examine case studies of how caste-related issues have been portrayed in Indian media, and explore the way forward for Indian media in addressing caste-related issues.*

**Keywords:** *Indian Media, Caste System, Social Stratification, Society.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The caste system is a hierarchical system of social stratification that has been an integral part of Indian society for thousands of years. 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. The caste system has had a profound impact on all aspects of Indian society, including education, employment, and politics. 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.



### **Caste in Indian Media - A Historical Overview**

Caste has been a defining feature of Indian society for thousands of years, and its influence can be seen in all aspects of Indian life, including the media. The portrayal of caste issues in Indian media has been a complex and controversial topic, with a long and storied history dating back to the early days of print media in India.

The caste system is a social stratification system that is prevalent in several South Asian countries, including India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. It is a complex and hierarchical system that has been present in South Asia for centuries and continues to impact society in various ways.

In the caste system, people are classified into different groups based on their birth and ancestry. The highest caste is the Brahmins, who traditionally were priests and scholars, followed by the Kshatriyas, who were warriors and rulers, then the Vaishyas, who were merchants and traders, and finally, the Shudras, who were laborers and artisans. Outside of the caste system are the Dalits or the "untouchables," who are considered the lowest in the social hierarchy and often subjected to social, economic, and political discrimination.

The caste system has impacted various aspects of South Asian society, including politics, education, and the economy. It has also led to various forms of discrimination and violence against lower-caste individuals, particularly Dalits. Despite legal efforts to eradicate the caste system and promote equality, it continues to persist in many parts of South Asia, particularly in rural areas.

In India, the caste system is deeply ingrained in the social and cultural fabric and has a significant impact on politics, education, and the economy. While the Indian Constitution provides for affirmative action policies to uplift the lower-caste communities, these policies have not been fully successful in eradicating discrimination and inequality.

In recent years, there has been a growing movement to challenge the caste system and promote equality in South Asia. This movement has been supported by civil society organizations, human rights activists, and progressive political groups. The media has also played a role in highlighting caste-based discrimination and biases, and promoting the representation of marginalized communities.

The early days of Indian print media were dominated by upper-caste writers, who often perpetuated caste-based stereotypes and biases. In the 19th century, newspapers such as *The Hindu* and *The Indian Mirror* were established, which often portrayed Dalits and other marginalized communities in a negative light. This trend continued in the 20th century, with mainstream media often portraying Dalits as lazy, criminal, and intellectually inferior.

In the early days of Indian cinema, the portrayal of caste was often based on stereotypes and caricatures. Upper-caste characters were depicted as sophisticated and cultured, while lower-caste characters were portrayed as brutish and uncivilized. This trend continued through the early days of Bollywood, with movies such as *Sholay* and *Deewar* depicting Dalits as villains or comic relief characters.

However, there have also been examples of media challenging the caste system and promoting social justice. The works of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, who was a Dalit leader and a key figure in the Indian independence movement, played a crucial role in raising awareness about the issues faced by Dalits in India. His writings and speeches were published in various newspapers and magazines, and helped to challenge the dominant narrative of the upper-caste dominated media.



In recent years, there has been a rise in the representation of marginalized communities in Indian media, including the emergence of Dalit media and the development of new platforms for marginalized voices. The mainstream media has also become more aware of the need for diversity and representation, and there have been efforts to increase the representation of marginalized communities in newsrooms and other media outlets.

However, despite these efforts, the mainstream media continues to be dominated by upper-caste voices, and the representation of marginalized communities remains limited. The perpetuation of stereotypes and biases also continues to be a significant challenge, with some media outlets continuing to portray Dalits and other marginalized communities in a negative light.

### **Caste and Indian Media - Current Scenario**

Caste continues to be a contentious issue in Indian society, and its influence on Indian media is no exception. Despite some progress towards greater representation and inclusion of marginalized communities in the media, there are still significant challenges to be addressed.

One of the most pressing issues is the underrepresentation of Dalits and other marginalized communities in newsrooms and other media outlets. 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. This lack of diversity can result in a narrow perspective on caste-related issues and perpetuation of stereotypes and biases.

Another issue is the portrayal of caste-related issues in entertainment media, including films and television shows. While there have been some positive examples of media challenging caste-based stereotypes and biases, there are still many instances of media perpetuating them. Dalits are often depicted as criminals or in stereotypical roles, and upper-caste actors and characters continue to dominate the mainstream media.

Dalit media has emerged as a powerful force in recent years, providing a platform for marginalized voices to share their experiences and perspectives. Dalit-focused media outlets such as Round Table India and Dalit Camera have played a critical role in raising awareness about caste-based discrimination and highlighting the struggles faced by Dalits in Indian society.

Social media has also emerged as a powerful tool for the dissemination of information and advocacy on caste-related issues. Platforms such as Twitter and Facebook have been used to amplify marginalized voices and raise awareness about issues such as caste-based violence and discrimination. Caste has been a persistent issue in Indian television media, with stereotypical representations of lower-caste characters and limited representation of diverse voices and perspectives. Here are some of the ways that caste has impacted Indian television media:

1. Stereotypical representations of lower-caste characters: Many Indian television shows continue to feature stereotypical depictions of lower-caste characters as uneducated, poor, and uncivilized. These representations perpetuate harmful stereotypes and further marginalize already disadvantaged communities.
2. Limited representation of diverse voices and perspectives: Indian television media has historically been dominated by upper-caste voices and perspectives, with limited



representation of diverse perspectives and voices. This has contributed to a narrow and exclusionary media landscape that marginalizes diverse communities.

3. Tokenism and lack of authentic representation: In some cases, Indian television media has included tokenistic representations of lower-caste characters or narratives, without providing an authentic and nuanced portrayal of these communities. This approach can be seen as shallow and exploitative, further perpetuating harmful stereotypes and limiting opportunities for diverse voices to be heard.
4. Underrepresentation of Dalit media: While there has been a growing presence of Dalit media in recent years, it continues to be underrepresented in the mainstream Indian television media. This lack of representation limits opportunities for diverse voices and perspectives to be heard and further marginalizes already disadvantaged communities.
5. Discrimination and exclusion in the television industry: The television industry in India has also been criticized for perpetuating discrimination and exclusion in terms of caste. Upper-caste individuals continue to dominate key positions in the industry, limiting opportunities for diverse perspectives and voices to be represented.

### **Case Studies - Examples of Caste in Indian Media**

There have been many instances of caste-related issues in Indian media, ranging from news reporting to entertainment media. Here are some notable examples of caste in Indian media:

1. Rohith Vemula's suicide: In 2016, Rohith Vemula, a Dalit PhD student at the University of Hyderabad, committed suicide after being suspended by the university administration. His suicide sparked nationwide protests and brought attention to the issue of caste-based discrimination in Indian universities. However, many mainstream media outlets initially downplayed the issue, with some even suggesting that Vemula's suicide was not related to caste discrimination. This led to widespread criticism of the media's handling of the issue and raised concerns about the lack of sensitivity towards caste-related issues in the media.
2. Coverage of caste violence: The mainstream media's coverage of caste-based violence in India has also come under scrutiny, with some critics suggesting that media outlets often downplay or ignore such incidents. The 2018 Bhima Koregaon violence in Maharashtra, for example, which saw clashes between Dalits and upper-caste Marathas, received limited coverage in the mainstream media. Critics argued that the media's reluctance to cover the issue was due to its close ties with the political establishment, which often includes upper-caste leaders.
3. Portrayal of caste in entertainment media: The portrayal of caste-related issues in Indian entertainment media has also been a contentious issue. In the popular Hindi film, *Kabir Singh*, for example, the lead character is portrayed as an upper-caste male who engages in abusive and violent behaviour towards women. Critics argued that the film perpetuated harmful stereotypes and normalized violence against women. Similarly, many Indian television shows continue to feature stereotypical depictions of lower-caste characters as uneducated and uncivilized.
4. Dalit media and social media activism: The emergence of Dalit media and social media activism has provided a platform for marginalized voices to challenge the dominant narrative of Indian media. In 2019, for example, a Dalit woman journalist, Meena Kandasamy, exposed the rampant casteism in the Tamil Nadu media industry through her



Twitter account. Her tweets drew attention to the issue and sparked a wider conversation about caste-based discrimination in the media.

These examples highlight the complex and contentious relationship between caste and Indian media. While there have been some positive developments towards greater representation and inclusion of marginalized communities in the media, there are still significant challenges to be addressed in terms of sensitivity and awareness on caste-related issues.

### **The Way Forward - Addressing Caste in Indian Media**

Addressing caste in Indian media will require a concerted effort from media organizations, journalists, activists, and policymakers. Here are some ways forward to address caste in Indian media:

1. **Increasing diversity and representation in newsrooms:** One of the key ways to address caste in Indian media is to increase diversity and representation in newsrooms and other media outlets. This includes hiring more journalists from marginalized communities, providing training and support for journalists from diverse backgrounds, and ensuring that there are diverse voices represented in news coverage.
2. **Sensitizing journalists and media organizations on caste issues:** Media organizations and journalists need to be sensitized to caste issues and their impact on society. This includes training on how to report on caste-based issues, how to avoid stereotypes and biases, and how to include diverse perspectives in their coverage.
3. **Holding media organizations accountable for their coverage:** Media organizations need to be held accountable for their coverage of caste-related issues. This includes monitoring their coverage, providing feedback and criticism when necessary, and supporting independent media outlets that prioritize diverse voices and perspectives.
4. **Encouraging independent media outlets and alternative narratives:** Independent media outlets that prioritize diverse voices and perspectives can play a crucial role in challenging the dominant narrative of Indian media. Supporting these outlets through funding and other forms of support can help to create a more diverse and inclusive media landscape.
5. **Advocating for policy changes:** Policy changes at the state and national level can also play a role in addressing caste-related issues in Indian media. This includes enforcing laws against caste-based discrimination, ensuring that media organizations are held accountable for their coverage, and providing support for independent media outlets that prioritize diverse voices and perspectives.

Addressing caste in Indian media will require a multifaceted and sustained effort from all stakeholders. By increasing diversity and representation, sensitizing journalists and media organizations on caste issues, holding media organizations accountable for their coverage, supporting independent media outlets, and advocating for policy changes, we can work towards creating a more equitable and just media landscape in India.

## **2. CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, the relationship between the caste system and Indian media is a complex and multifaceted one. While the media has played a significant role in perpetuating caste-based discrimination, it also has the potential to be a powerful tool for social change. The way



forward for Indian media in addressing caste-related issues requires greater representation and diversity, as well as a greater sensitivity and awareness of the issues. Ultimately, the media has a vital role to play in shaping public opinion on caste-related issues, and in promoting a more just and equitable society. While there have been some positive developments towards greater representation and awareness of caste-related issues in Indian media, there are still significant challenges to be addressed. Greater diversity and inclusion in newsrooms and media outlets, as well as more nuanced and sensitive portrayals of caste-related issues in entertainment media, will be crucial in creating a more equitable and just society. The emergence of Dalit media and the power of social media offer some hope for progress in the future.

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