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SILENCED SCRIPTS: DALIT POLITICAL DISCOURSE AND LANGUAGE BIAS IN INDIAN MEDIA

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Abstract

This paper examines how Dalit political discourse is shaped, distorted, or altogether erased by mainstream media through subtle forms of language bias. Despite constitutional promises of equality and freedom of expression, India's media landscape continues to reflect and reproduce deeply entrenched caste hierarchies. Far from being a neutral conduit of information, language in Indian media functions as an active participant in the politics of caste—structuring public perception, framing narratives, and often determining whose voices are heard and whose are silenced.

Focusing on key political flashpoints such as the death of Rohith Vemula, the Hathras gangrape case and Dalit Youth Protest, the paper analyses how editorial choices—ranging from the framing of headlines to the selective use (or omission) of caste markers—serve to dilute the political urgency of Dalit struggles. These incidents not only reveal the discomfort mainstream media exhibits in naming caste violence but also illustrate a broader pattern: the consistent depoliticization of Dalit resistance and the preference for narratives that maintain the status quo. In contrast, the paper explores how Dalit-run media platforms such as *Dalit Camera*, *Round Table India*, and *Velivada* are reclaiming both narrative control and linguistic space. These platforms challenge the upper-caste dominance of traditional media, offering alternative frameworks for storytelling that are rooted in lived experience, oral traditions, and a politics of naming that refuses euphemism.

Drawing on frameworks from Critical Discourse Analysis and Subaltern Studies, this study argues that media language is not just reflective of social bias—it actively participates in the maintenance of caste power. If Indian democracy is to be genuinely inclusive, then the politics of media language must be interrogated, and the voices at the margins must be allowed to speak in their own terms, with their own words, and without translation or distortion.

Keywords: dalit discourse, language bias, Indian media, caste and representation, Critical Discourse Analysis

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1. Introduction

In contemporary India, media functions not merely as a channel for reporting events but as a powerful force shaping public understanding of justice, power, and social identity. Caste, one of the country's most enduring hierarchies, continues to influence everyday life, yet coverage of caste-based injustices remains inconsistent and often biased. Despite claims of objectivity, mainstream journalism frequently reflects the perspectives of dominant social groups, subtly marginalizing the voices of communities facing systemic discrimination. The representation of Dalits—as victims, protesters, or intellectuals—offers critical insight into how language operates as a tool of power and social control.

This study examines three significant case studies that brought caste injustice to the forefront of national discourse: Rohith Vemula's institutional death in 2016, the Hathras gangrape case of 2020, and the Dalit Youth Protests of 2024–2025. Each event received extensive media coverage, yet framing, tone, and lexical choices differed markedly between mainstream outlets such as *The Hindu*, *Times of India*, *Hindustan Times*, and *Indian Express*, and Dalit-run platforms including *Round Table India*, *The MookNayak*, and *Velivada*.

Drawing on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Spivak's theory of subalternity, the study analyzes how media language constructs, distorts, or silences Dalit narratives. Lexical and textual examination of headlines, verbs, adjectives, and framing patterns reveals recurring tendencies in mainstream coverage, including euphemism, depoliticization, and marginalization. In contrast, Dalit-run media actively reclaim narrative space, foreground lived experiences, and restore agency to historically oppressed communities. The findings highlight that journalistic language is never neutral. It shapes public perception, reinforces social hierarchies, and can either marginalize or empower communities. By exposing these patterns, the study advocates for more inclusive media practices and emphasizes linguistic justice as an essential component of democratic communication in India.

The significance of this research lies in its attempt to understand how language choices—verbs, metaphors, and narrative framing—reflect power relations. It demonstrates how linguistic silence can perpetuate social silence. The paper also connects this discussion to broader debates on democracy, freedom of expression, and linguistic justice in India.

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The main objectives are:

1. To examine how Dalit issues are linguistically represented in mainstream and Dalit-run media.
2. To identify ideological patterns in the use of language through CDA.
3. To understand how Dalit media reconstructs identity and resistance through counter-discourse.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do word choices and framing devices in media coverage reproduce caste hierarchies?
2. How do Dalit-run platforms challenge these dominant narratives through linguistic strategies?
3. What implications does this have for inclusive and democratic media practice in India?

2. Literature Review

Scholarly work on language, power, and caste in India has developed across three major traditions: Critical Discourse Analysis, Postcolonial and Subaltern Studies, and Dalit Media Studies.

2.1 Critical Discourse Analysis and Power

Norman Fairclough (1989, 1995) established CDA as a framework for examining how power operates through everyday language. He argued that discourse is both shaped by and shapes social structures, making linguistic analysis a political act. Fairclough's three-dimensional model—text, discursive practice, and social practice—reveals how institutional power is embedded in communication. In the Indian context, this framework helps uncover how caste hierarchies are reproduced through "neutral" journalistic language.

Van Dijk (2008) similarly highlighted the ideological function of news discourse, emphasizing that word choice and syntactic structure reflect elite dominance. Fowler (1991) demonstrated that news is not simply a reflection of reality but a construction shaped by ideology. These insights align closely with Dalit studies, where caste-based power manifests not only socially but also linguistically.

2.2 Postcolonial and Subaltern Perspectives

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Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988) argued that marginalized groups are systematically denied the means to represent themselves within dominant discourse. Her concept of epistemic violence—the silencing of subaltern voices through elite representation—offers a powerful lens to analyse caste-based exclusion. In the Indian context, the Dalit voice often remains mediated by elite-language journalism, echoing Spivak's claim that the subaltern is spoken for, not heard.

Homi K. Bhabha's (1994) ideas of hybridity and cultural negotiation are also relevant, as Dalit media creates hybrid spaces of resistance where traditional forms of authority are questioned through new linguistic and digital tools. This cultural hybridity enables marginalized voices to reconstruct identity in their own linguistic terms.

2.3 Dalit Media Studies and Counter-Discourse

The emergence of Dalit-run media—such as *Dalit Camera*, *Round Table India*, and *The Mooknayak*—has redefined Indian journalism by centering the subaltern experience. Scholars like Paik (2014), Teltumbde (2017), and Jha (2020) have noted that Dalit journalism refuses the language of pity or victimhood, focusing instead on assertion, dignity, and structural critique. These platforms embody what Fraser (1990) called "counter-publics"—alternative discursive spaces where marginalized groups debate and define their political interests.

Recent work by Kandasamy (2021) and Kumar (2023) has shown that while mainstream English media tends to "de-caste" social issues through euphemism, Dalit platforms consciously "re-caste" them—naming caste to restore historical truth. This study extends these findings by using CDA to empirically compare linguistic framing across three major events that define the Dalit experience in 21st-century India.

3. Theoretical Framework

This research is grounded in the intersection of Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis and Spivak's Subalternity Theory, both of which view language as a site of power struggle.

3.1 Fairclough's CDA

Fairclough's (1995) three-tier model—textual, discursive, and social analysis—allows for a comprehensive examination of how journalism both reflects and constructs social inequality. CDA exposes how "common sense" language can reproduce ideology. In this study, textual

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features such as verb choice, headlines, and thematic focus reveal how mainstream media often normalises caste hierarchies through linguistic neutrality.

3.2 Spivak's Subalternity

Spivak's question, *"Can the subaltern speak?"* guides the study's moral and epistemological foundation. The Dalit subject, historically excluded from mainstream representation, remains trapped in systems that speak for them. Applying Spivak's perspective, this research investigates whether Dalit-run media platforms allow the subaltern to "speak" in their own voice, challenging elite mediation.

3.4 Integration for This Study

By combining Fairclough and Spivak, the framework recognizes both linguistic form and historical marginalization. CDA identifies textual patterns of bias, while Subaltern Studies interpret their ethical implications. Together, they reveal how the Indian media functions as a contested discursive field—where hegemonic neutrality competes with subaltern assertion.

4. Methodology

This study uses a qualitative and comparative approach grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The data consist of media texts from both mainstream and Dalit-run outlets.

Data Sources

Mainstream National Media: *The Hindu*, *Times of India*, *Hindustan Times*, *The Indian Express*.

Dalit-Run Media: *Round Table India*, *Velivada*, *The MookNayak*, *Dalit Camera*.

Case Study Selection

The following three cases were chosen due to their national significance and diversity of discourse:

1. **Rohith Vemula's institutional death (2016)**.
2. **Hathras Gangrape Case (2020)**
3. **Dalit Youth Protests**
4. **Analytical Tools**

- **Critical Discourse Analysis:** Examined headlines, verbs, adjectives, and framing to uncover silencing and othering.

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- **Lexical Analysis:** Identified biased or euphemistic terms and recurring metaphors.
- **Comparative Analysis:** Compared representation of Dalit vs. upper-caste issues; regional vs. national coverage.

Justification for CDA

CDA is particularly suited for this research because it links linguistic features to broader ideological structures. It exposes how "neutral" language masks inequality and helps uncover how marginalized voices reconstruct identity through counter-discourse. The analysis is interpretive, not statistical, and aims to understand meaning within its socio-political context.

5. Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings of the study through a detailed Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of media language in three major case studies: the death of Rohith Vemula (2016), the Hathras gangrape case (2020), and the Dalit Youth Protests (2024–2025). Together, these events highlight how Indian media constructs, filters, and sometimes distorts Dalit political discourse through linguistic framing, lexical choice, and selective visibility. The analysis compares mainstream national media with Dalit-run platforms such as *Round Table India*, *The Caravan*, *Velivada*, and *The Mooknayak* to examine how different forms of power operate through language.

5.1. Critical Discourse Analysis Framework

The analysis follows Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA model:

1. Textual analysis (study of words, syntax, and tone),
2. Discursive practice (how news is produced and circulated), and
3. Social practice (how language reflects and maintains social hierarchies).

It also draws upon Gayatri Spivak's concept of subalternity, focusing on whether Dalit voices can "speak" within dominant discursive systems. Across the three case studies, recurring patterns of silencing, euphemism, and depoliticisation were identified in mainstream coverage, while Dalit-run platforms attempted to restore agency and identity.

5.2 Case Study 1: Rohith Vemula

The coverage of Rohith Vemula's death in January 2016 provides a clear example of how mainstream media language often normalises structural violence. Headlines from *The Hindu*, *The*

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Times of India, and *Hindustan Times* used emotionally neutral or ambiguous terms such as "suicide," "death," or "personal decision," without consistently framing it as institutional discrimination. For example, *The Hindu*'s headline — *"Rohith Vemula's suicide a personal decision, says the Centre"* — reduces a collective issue of caste bias in academia to an individual act, subtly supporting official narratives.

In contrast, Dalit-run media like *Round Table India* and *Velivada* explicitly used politically charged and ethical terms such as *"institutional homicide"*, *"systemic Brahmanical ramifications"*, and *"Who killed Rohith Vemula?"* These choices reject the neutrality of mainstream reporting and demand accountability.
From a CDA perspective, the lexical difference reflects a power struggle between dominant and subaltern narratives. While mainstream outlets prioritised bureaucratic balance, Dalit platforms emphasised *naming* as a political act — reclaiming Vemula's identity as Dalit and exposing caste bias as an institutional reality.

Over time, especially after the 2024 closure report that claimed "Rohith Vemula was not Dalit," the mainstream media's tone shifted toward bureaucratic distance. By repeating official claims without critique, they contributed to what Fairclough calls the "reproduction of ideology" — where the language of state institutions becomes naturalised as fact. Conversely, *Round Table India* continued to highlight the epistemic violence behind this denial, reaffirming Spivak's concern about how the subaltern's truth is often overwritten by elite discourse.

5.3 Case Study 2: Hathras Gangrape Case

The 2020 Hathras gangrape case exposes how mainstream journalism struggles to name caste-based violence. Headlines from *The Hindu* and *Indian Express* varied between factual updates — *"CBI takes over probe"* — and emotionally charged titles like *"Brutality of Hathras crime has shamed us all"*. However, a closer look at linguistic patterns shows that caste was often omitted in the early coverage. Terms like "victim" or "woman" replaced "Dalit woman," thus erasing caste identity from the narrative.

In *The Times of India* and *Hindustan Times*, verbs like "dies," "succumbs," or "was gang-raped" present the event in the passive voice, detaching perpetrators and systemic factors. This grammatical choice diminishes agency and responsibility. Moreover, the focus on sensational

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details — such as the alleged "chopping off of the tongue" — turned the tragedy into a spectacle rather than a moment of political reflection.

By contrast, Dalit-run media reframed the case within a language of justice and collective mourning. *Round Table India*'s and *The Caravan*'s articles positioned the Hathras case as part of a long continuum of caste atrocities. Headlines like *"From Khairlanji to Hathras – Do Dalits Have Access to Legal Justice?"* and *"Dalit Lives Matter!"* made explicit the link between caste, gender, and state neglect. Here, CDA reveals that lexical repetition of terms such as "justice," "atrocity," and "Dalit dignity" constructs an alternative discourse of resistance.

Furthermore, the mainstream framing of Prime Ministerial responses — *"PM Modi calls for strict action"* — reinforces state authority, diverting focus from the victim's community and their lack of agency. Dalit media instead foregrounded the voice of the family, with direct quotations and emotional testimony. This inclusion of personal voice functions as an act of discursive restoration, allowing the subaltern to "speak" in their own words.

Overall, the Hathras case shows how the language of sympathy without political depth in mainstream coverage contrasts sharply with the language of accountability found in Dalit-run journalism.

5.4 Case Study 3: Dalit Youth Protests

The wave of Dalit youth protests across India between 2024 and 2025 represents a new phase of political assertion. However, the framing of these protests in mainstream media again revealed deep linguistic and ideological bias. Headlines such as *"Dalit, Adivasi bodies take to streets"* (*The Hindu*) or *"Dalit agitation took an ugly turn"* (*The Times of India*) framed protest in terms of disorder and disruption rather than legitimate democratic expression. The use of verbs like *"erupt"*, *"boil"*, and *"turn ugly"* metaphorically linked Dalit anger to chaos, echoing centuries-old stereotypes of Dalit bodies as unruly and dangerous.

Mainstream coverage also relied heavily on police or official sources, turning political struggles into administrative stories. The absence of activist voices and historical context reflected what Fairclough calls the "ideological filtering" of discourse. Even when caste was mentioned, it was often framed as a backdrop rather than the core issue.

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Dalit-run media, on the other hand, transformed these protests into stories of self-respect and assertion. *The MookNayak* reported on symbolic acts such as *"With Pot Around His Neck and Broom on His Waist…"*, connecting these gestures to Ambedkarite resistance. *Round Table India*'s coverage of the *protests against the attack on CJI Gavai* explicitly linked the event to caste pride and institutional prejudice, thereby creating a counter-hegemonic narrative.

Comparative lexical analysis shows that Dalit media used active verbs such as *"assert," "reclaim," "demand,"* and *"mobilize"*—verbs of empowerment that foreground agency. Mainstream outlets, however, maintained a descriptive and detached tone, often using passive constructions that obscured causality.
This linguistic divergence mirrors broader social hierarchies: one side speaking from power, the other speaking against silence.

5.5 Comparative Patterns across the Three Cases

Across all three case studies, three main patterns emerge:

Analytical Dimension	Mainstream Media	Dalit-Run Media
Lexical Choice	Neutral, bureaucratic, or euphemistic; often omits caste	Direct, assertive, and politically charged
Voice Representation	Relies on official or elite sources	Centers voices of victims, families, and activists
Framing	Episodic and event-based	Structural, historical, and justice-oriented
Ideological Role	Reinforces caste invisibility and state legitimacy	Challenges hegemony, reclaims Dalit agency

Mainstream discourse functions as a language of containment — it manages caste tensions without confronting their roots. Dalit-run media, however, uses language as resistance, breaking the silence and reconstructing caste as a political category rather than a social identity.

6. Language, Power, and the Dalit Public Sphere

Through CDA, it becomes evident that the politics of naming, tone, and omission shapes how caste is perceived in India's democratic imagination. The erasure of caste markers in

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mainstream media does not signal neutrality; it signals complicity. The privileging of "objectivity" becomes a linguistic strategy that conceals power.

Dalit-run media platforms counter this by reintroducing moral and historical context into their reporting. They refuse euphemism, reject bureaucratic passivity, and situate individual suffering within collective oppression. This linguistic reclamation is central to what Spivak calls the "subaltern's act of speaking." Thus, the analysis across these three cases confirms that the struggle for Dalit justice is not only fought in courts and streets but also in words, grammar, and headlines. Language, as Fairclough reminds us, is both a medium of ideology and a site of resistance. In the Indian media landscape, the future of caste discourse—and indeed of democracy itself—depends on whose language is allowed to define the truth.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study demonstrates that the language of the media is far from neutral; it reflects and reinforces existing power hierarchies in Indian society. Across the three case studies—the Rohith Vemula suicide, the Hathras gangrape, and the Dalit youth protests—mainstream Indian journalism frequently employed bureaucratic, euphemistic, or passive language that diluted the realities of caste discrimination. In contrast, Dalit-run platforms exemplify how language can function as an act of resistance, transforming silence into speech and invisibility into identity. The research highlights that mainstream media often use specific linguistic strategies, such as omitting caste identities, employing passive verbs, and emphasizing official statements, which collectively obscure structural injustices. Conversely, Dalit-run media foreground the victim's community, utilize active verbs that emphasize resistance, and contextualize individual suffering within systemic oppression. The ideological bias of mainstream journalism is not merely political but grammatical: subtle differences, such as using "was killed" instead of "they killed," signify the difference between erasure and accountability. Persistent euphemistic framing constitutes a form of discursive violence, echoing Spivak's concept of epistemic silencing.

The implications of this study have important implications for language and democracy in India. True democratic health depends not only on protecting free speech but also on whose voices are heard and whose are ignored. Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis shows that changing the way we use language can change social relationships, while Spivak reminds us of the moral responsibility to ensure that marginalized voices are recognized and amplified. Together, these

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ideas highlight the need for greater visibility of Dalits in media language, which can serve as a marker of a mature and inclusive democracy. This study calls for rethinking Indian journalism—not as a neutral transmitter of information, but as a space of ethical responsibility where words themselves become tools for justice, empowerment, and social change.

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