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TITLE OF THESIS : PRINT MEDIA AND DALIT ISSUES : A
STUDY OF SELECT ENGLISH AND
REGIONAL LANGUAGE NEWSPAPERS IN
TAMILNADU (2000 to 2007)

ABSTRACT

Keywords : Dalits, media, Tamilnadu, atrocities, newspapers

Democracy , more than being about universal franchise and free elections, is really about voices, free and equal, in a shared nation space. Analysts point to the existence of a free and vibrant mass media as an index of a healthy democracy, precisely because it is through media-space that one can see a ‘democratic public space’ at work. Unfortunately, left-out of the media net and out of the national mind-space are the Indians who comprise 72.2 per cent of the country’s population, and live scattered in nearly six lakh villages.

The term “Dalit” appears in Indian newspapers and news channels in different contexts. Dalits have traditionally occupied the lowest place in the caste system of Hinduism. They are classified in the Indian Constitution as “Scheduled Castes.” They were called “untouchables” because they were considered to be outside the confines of caste by so-called high-caste Hindu *Brahmins*, the priestly class, thousands of years ago. Their impurity is derived from their traditional occupations, such as the taking of life and the treatment of bodily effluvia. India’s Dalits remain on the margins of society and face discrimination. Atrocities on Dalits meted out by higher-caste Hindus are common place in the country, mainly in rural areas.

The Dalit scene in Tamil Nadu is one of progress, oppression and suffering, resistance and change. Hugo Gorringer¹ analyses this complex process. He has an apt description of the

¹ Gorringer H, *Untouchable citizens : The Dalit Panthers and Democratisation in Tamilnadu*,, 2005, Sage, New Delhi

sense of exclusion that Dalits still experience in spite of the legal inclusion that they have in independent India. "The exclusion of Dalits from the main body of society is symbolised on many fronts. Physically the *cheris* are located outside the main village; semantically they are referred to as 'Untouchables'; spiritually, Dalits are denied access to temples, told that they are impure... ; materially Dalits are alienated from resources and land; culturally their skills are demeaned; and socially they are served in different receptacles in restaurants" (*Untouchable Citizens*, page 73). And since these are as much the Dalit reality today as they were in the distant past, Dalits are "at the same time inside and outside the system" (*Untouchable Citizens*, page 306). If they are to become realistically inside the system, what must they do? Kodyankulam (1995), Gundupatti (1998), and the Tirunelveli massacre (1995) can be cited as notorious examples of police repression against Dalits.

This study has attempted to study the extent of coverage of Dalit issues pertaining to Tamilnadu in selected newspapers in English and Tamil. It was found that media as opposed to civil society organisations are more focussed on information gathering in place of a sustained and systematic campaign which can influence policy decisions. Today there are so many different sources of information that the position of one newspaper or channel is not going to make a difference. Nevertheless, the newspapers end up ignoring concerns which affect a group of individuals such as the Dalits who form a significant part of the population. There is a small percentage of the media which works at transforming society, but it may be insignificant. The combination of media accuracy with the avoidance of bias are central to the functioning of the news media in the Indian democracy.

This study is descriptive and analytical by making use of primary and secondary sources. The primary sources comprise books, research papers, newspaper and web articles. The secondary sources include the actual newspaper clippings obtained from the newspapers selected and scanned for this study. The English and Tamil dailies chosen for this work were scanned to determine the coverage of Dalit issues based on their occurrence between 2000 and 2007, clippings prepared and it is this work that provides the central theme and content around which this thesis has been constructed.

The thesis begins with an introduction followed by the first three chapters which describe the background, method and literature of this study respectively, with the remaining chapters each presenting analysis of data. The first chapter gives a broad overview of media and society with the second chapter providing an idea of the manner in which Dalit issues are being covered by the Indian media, both national and vernacular. In chapter three, the Dalit situation in Tamilnadu and some of the significant Dalit issues and atrocities in the state have been discussed. Chapter four presents a description of the issues selected for the study and their classification based on the parameters used for selection. This also includes an analysis of the coverage observed in the clippings obtained from the selected newspapers. In the final chapter (five), the findings and conclusion of this study have been presented along with a few suggestions to improve the situation.