Media, Caste, and the Reconfiguration of Moral Authority in Contemporary India

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how contemporary media in India participate in the reproduction and reconfiguration of caste hegemony by reshaping moral authority and ethical sensibilities. Drawing on sociological theories of hegemony, symbolic domination, and caste as a moral order, the article analyses mediated narratives—primarily contemporary Tamil cinema—as a sociological archive through which caste is depoliticised and rendered morally ordinary. It argues that media no longer function as a site of collective critique or emancipatory imagination but increasingly operate as a pedagogical apparatus that individualises suffering, normalises social cruelty, and withdraws moral responsibility from structural forces. By recoding upper-caste moral withdrawal as realism, maturity, and authenticity, the media contributes to the cultural reproduction of caste hierarchy without explicitly naming caste. Situating media within broader processes of moral regulation, the article contributes to sociological debates on caste, media, and domination in contemporary India.

Keywords: *Caste; Media; Moral Authority; Hegemony; Symbolic Violence; India*

Introduction

Over the last two decades, popular media in India have undergone significant transformations in their narrative forms, moral orientations, and political imagination. Across visual and narrative media, there is a discernible movement away from collective critique and emancipatory politics towards representations that individualise suffering, normalise social cruelty, and withdraw moral responsibility from structural forces (Boudieu 1991, Gramsci, 1999). These transformations are often celebrated in public discourse as signs of aesthetic maturity, realism, and narrative sophistication. Yet, from a sociological perspective, they raise a more fundamental question: what happens to caste as a structure of domination when the media ceases to name inequality and instead renders it morally ordinary?

This article argues that contemporary media plays a crucial role in reconfiguring caste hegemony by reshaping moral authority. Rather than explicitly legitimising caste hierarchy or denying its existence, the media increasingly sustains domination through depoliticisation. Structural inequalities are displaced into narratives of individual failure, psychological complexity, or tragic inevitability, while collective responsibility and moral accountability are systematically withdrawn (Gramsci, 1999). Media thus functions not merely as a site of representation but as a form of moral pedagogy, cultivating dispositions of resignation, ethical distance, and acceptance of inequality.

Sociological analyses of caste have traditionally focused on institutions, occupations, political mobilisation, and legal frameworks. While this body of work has been crucial in documenting the persistence and transformation of caste inequality, it has paid comparatively less attention to the moral and affective dimensions through which caste is

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reproduced in everyday life. Caste does not endure solely because of economic exclusion or political power; it persists because it organises moral sensibilities, defining what is considered pure and impure, respectable and degraded, deserving and disposable (Ambedkar 1936, Guru 2009). These moral distinctions are increasingly mediated through cultural forms rather than enforced through overt social sanctions.

The media occupy a central place in this process. Popular media does not simply mirror social reality; it actively shapes ethical orientations by teaching audiences how to interpret suffering, violence, and injustice. Through repetition, narrative framing, and affective cues, the media establishes the limits of empathy and the boundaries of moral concern. In contemporary India, this pedagogical function of media has become particularly significant as overt caste discourse is increasingly viewed as politically inconvenient, socially uncomfortable, or culturally regressive. Media offers a way of sustaining caste-coded norms without naming caste itself.

This shift is especially visible in narrative-driven visual media, where claims of realism and authenticity have gained unprecedented cultural authority. Realism is often mobilised to justify the absence of structural critique: suffering is presented as "how life is," violence as unavoidable, and inequality as beyond moral intervention (Foucault 1980, Hall 1997). Such narratives appear politically neutral, yet they are deeply ideological. By refusing explanation and redistribution, realism becomes a mode of moral withdrawal. The audience is invited to witness suffering but discouraged from demanding justice.

Historically, popular media in South India particularly cinema played a very different role. Dravidian cinema, emerging alongside non-Brahmin political movements in the mid-twentieth century, functioned as a cultural arena where caste oppression was explicitly named and morally contested. The cinematic hero operated as a collective moral figure, confronting injustice and restoring dignity to marginalised groups (Kretchmer, 2021). While these narratives were not free from contradictions, they nevertheless foregrounded caste as a structural problem and positioned media as a site of moral accountability. Media was imagined as a tool of social transformation rather than moral resignation.

The erosion of this tradition marks not merely an aesthetic shift but a deeper transformation in moral imagination. Contemporary media narratives are characterised by fragmented subjectivities, anti-heroes, and unresolved endings. Suffering is depicted with intensity, yet stripped of political meaning. Caste appears, if at all, as background texture rather than organising structure. This does not signal the decline of caste but its ideological sublimation, a process through which caste hierarchy is reproduced by rendering it unspeakable and morally unremarkable.

This article situates these transformations within a broader sociological understanding of caste as a moral order and media as an institution of cultural power. Drawing on theories of hegemony, symbolic violence, and moral regulation, it examines how contemporary media reorganises ethical sensibilities in ways that align with dominant caste norms while appearing inclusive and apolitical. Upper-caste moral dispositions, detachment, restraint, emotional control, and ethical withdrawal are recoded as narrative maturity and realism, while expressions of collective anger or political demand are framed as excessive or regressive.

The analysis draws primarily on contemporary Tamil cinema as an empirical archive. Tamil cinema is treated here not as a regional cultural artefact but as a sociologically productive site where changing configurations of caste, morality, and media power become visible with particular clarity. The argument, however, extends beyond cinema to the broader media ecology, where similar moral logics circulate across television, digital platforms, and popular discourse. In this sense, cinema serves as a concentrated lens through which to examine wider processes of mediated caste regulation.

This article builds on emerging sociological work that examines how caste hegemony in contemporary India operates through everyday moral discipline rather than overt coercion. Just as food practices, ritual observance, and respectability politics have become sites where caste-coded norms are internalised and naturalised, media narratives now play a crucial role in shaping the moral limits of critique and compassion. By analysing media as a site of moral

regulation, the article extends caste studies beyond questions of representation and identity to the domain of affect, ethics, and moral authority.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section outlines a sociological framework that conceptualises caste as a moral order and media as a hegemonic apparatus. The subsequent sections analyse the shift from emancipatory to depoliticised media narratives, focusing on realism, moral withdrawal, and the normalisation of cruelty. The concluding section reflects on the implications of mediated moral regulation for understanding caste power in contemporary India.

Media, Caste, and Moral Regulation: A Theoretical Framework

This article conceptualises caste not only as a system of social stratification but as a moral and epistemic order, one that regulates conduct, sensibility, and legitimacy in everyday life. To analyse how contemporary media reproduces caste hierarchy, the article draws on three complementary theoretical traditions: Ambedkar's understanding of caste as a moral system, Gramsci's theory of hegemony, and Foucault's analysis of power, knowledge, and governmentality. Together, these frameworks enable an examination of how caste domination is sustained through mediated moral regulation rather than overt coercion.

Ambedkar's sociology of caste remains foundational for understanding caste as a form of moral enclosure. For Ambedkar, caste was not merely a division of labour but a division of labourers, sustained through ritual hierarchy, endogamy, and everyday moral discipline. Caste endures because it structures social intimacy, ethical valuation, and bodily conduct, producing graded forms of respectability and exclusion. Importantly, Ambedkar emphasised that caste operates through internalised norms rather than continuous external enforcement. This insight is crucial for analysing contemporary forms of caste power, which increasingly rely on consent, self-regulation, and moral justification rather than explicit exclusion (Ambedkar, 2014).

Gramsci's concept of hegemony provides a framework for understanding how such moral orders acquire legitimacy. Hegemony refers to the process through which dominant groups secure consent by embedding their values and worldviews within everyday common sense. Media plays a central role in this process by shaping cultural norms, affective dispositions, and moral expectations. Rather than imposing ideology directly, hegemonic power works by making certain social arrangements appear natural, inevitable, and beyond contestation. In the context of caste, this means that domination is reproduced not through constant assertion but through the normalisation of caste-coded values as universal cultural norms.

While Ambedkar and Gramsci illuminate the moral and ideological dimensions of caste power, Foucault's work enables a more precise analysis of how power operates through discourse, knowledge, and self-regulation. Foucault's central insight that power is productive rather than merely repressive is particularly relevant for understanding contemporary media. Power, in this view, does not simply prohibit or exclude; it produces subjects, norms, and regimes of truth. Media functions as one such regime, generating knowledge about what is normal, desirable, respectable, and realistic.

Foucault's concept of power/knowledge highlights the inseparability of moral authority and epistemic legitimacy. What counts as realistic, mature, or authentic in media narratives is not a neutral aesthetic judgment but a form of knowledge shaped by power relations (Foucault, 1976). When media presents individualised suffering without structural explanation, it produces a particular truth about society one in which inequality appears natural and political intervention seems unnecessary or futile. In this sense, media does not conceal caste; it actively reorganises how caste can be known and spoken about.

Discourse, for Foucault, is not merely language but a structured field of statements that delimit what can be said, by whom, and with what authority. Contemporary media discourse often renders caste unspeakable by framing explicit critique as politically outdated or narratively crude. At the same time, caste-coded norms—such as restraint, emotional

control, moral detachment, and acceptance of hierarchy—circulate freely as markers of realism and sophistication. This discursive displacement allows caste power to operate without naming itself, aligning domination with cultural maturity rather than social hierarchy.

Foucault's concept of governmentality further deepens the analysis by shifting attention from external regulation to self-governance. Governmentality refers to the ways in which subjects are encouraged to regulate their own conduct in accordance with dominant norms. Media plays a key role in this process by cultivating ethical dispositions rather than issuing direct commands. Through repeated exposure to narratives that normalise suffering and moral withdrawal, audiences internalise limits on empathy, critique, and political imagination. Individuals learn not only how to behave but how to feel and, crucially, what *not* to demand.

In the context of caste, media-driven governmentality produces subjects who accept inequality as a matter of fate, character, or circumstance rather than as a structural issue. Moral responsibility is redirected inward, while systemic critique is displaced. This form of power is particularly effective because it operates through freedom rather than force. Subjects appear to choose resignation, restraint, or detachment, even as these choices are shaped by a narrow field of acceptable moral possibilities.

Taken together, Ambedkar, Gramsci, and Foucault allow for a sociological analysis of media as a site where caste hegemony is reproduced through moral regulation, discursive control, and self-governance. Caste domination in contemporary India does not rely solely on prohibition or exclusion; it operates through the cultivation of moral sensibilities that render hierarchy ordinary and critique unnecessary. Media emerges as a central institution in this process, not by denying caste but by reorganising the terms through which caste can be perceived, evaluated, and endured.

This theoretical framework enables the article to move beyond questions of representation to examine how media reshape ethical life itself. By analysing narratives of realism, suffering, and moral withdrawal, the article demonstrates how power operates through mediated consent, producing a cultural environment in which caste hierarchy persists through normalisation rather than silence.

From Emancipatory Media to Moral Withdrawal

Media has not always occupied its current position as a site of moral withdrawal. Historically, popular media in South India particularly cinema functioned as a space of moral confrontation and political articulation. Emerging alongside anti-caste and non-Brahmin movements, media narratives played a critical role in naming social injustice, dramatising structural oppression, and producing collective moral identification (Donnelly, 2018). These narratives were not merely reflective of political change; they actively participated in shaping a moral universe in which caste hierarchy was rendered visible and contestable.

From a sociological perspective, this earlier phase of media can be understood as emancipatory not because it resolved caste inequality, but because it foregrounded moral responsibility. Media positioned social suffering as a product of unjust structures rather than individual failure. The narrative figure of the hero operated as a moral agent, embodying collective conscience and ethical obligation. While such representations were often simplistic or melodramatic, they nonetheless insisted on the legitimacy of moral outrage and political intervention. Media thus functioned as a counter-hegemonic space, contesting dominant caste norms and unsettling moral common sense.

This emancipatory orientation was consistent with Gramsci's understanding of cultural struggle as a battle over moral leadership. Media did not merely entertain; it sought to produce a different ethical horizon, one in which injustice demanded response. In Ambedkarite terms, such narratives disrupted the moral enclosure of caste by refusing to naturalise hierarchy. They rendered inequality ethically intolerable, even if symbolically rather than materially resolved.

The contemporary media landscape marks a decisive departure from this orientation. Over the past two decades, media narratives have increasingly abandoned the language of collective critique in favour of realism, ambiguity, and

individualised experience. This shift is frequently framed as aesthetic progress, a movement away from ideological cinema towards authenticity and narrative complexity (Bollyky & Bown, 2022). However, from a sociological standpoint, this transition represents a reconfiguration of moral authority rather than its disappearance.

Contemporary media does not deny social suffering; instead, it reframes it. Violence, exclusion, and deprivation are depicted with striking intensity, yet they are detached from structural explanation. Suffering is no longer seen as a social injustice but as a personal tragedy, a psychological condition, or an inevitable feature of life. This narrative strategy produces what can be described as moral withdrawal, a condition in which the media invites spectatorship without responsibility, empathy without obligation, and recognition without redress.

Foucault's insights into power/knowledge are particularly useful here. By claiming realism, contemporary media produces a regime of truth in which the absence of critique is itself legitimised. Structural explanations appear excessive or outdated, while individualised narratives are framed as honest and mature. This is not a neutral epistemic shift but a productive form of power: it shapes what can be known, felt, and demanded. Media thus reorganises the field of moral intelligibility, narrowing the space for political imagination.

Discourse plays a central role in this transformation. Explicit references to caste are often absent, not because caste has ceased to matter, but because it has become discursively inconvenient. Caste appears, if at all, as background texture rather than organising structure. This discursive displacement allows caste-coded norms, such as endurance, restraint, and acceptance of hierarchy, to circulate as universal human conditions rather than socially produced inequalities. In this sense, caste domination is sustained through silence that is neither accidental nor neutral, but actively produced through narrative form.

The erosion of the heroic figure exemplifies this shift. The hero, once a bearer of collective moral responsibility, is replaced by anti-heroes, passive observers, or figures trapped in cycles of suffering. These characters do not confront injustice; they endure it. Their narratives do not demand transformation; they invite resignation (Kretchmer, 2021). This shift reflects not simply a change in storytelling but a deeper alteration in moral pedagogy. Media teaches audiences that intervention is futile, resistance naive, and suffering inescapable.

From the perspective of governmentality, this transformation has profound implications. Media no longer disciplines subjects through explicit moral instruction but through the cultivation of ethical dispositions. Audiences learn to regulate their expectations, to limit their demands, and to internalise social boundaries. Moral responsibility is redirected inward towards personal resilience, psychological adjustment, or ethical detachment, while structural critique is displaced. This form of power is particularly effective because it operates through freedom: individuals appear to choose resignation even as the field of possible moral responses is tightly constrained.

In caste terms, moral withdrawal represents a significant ideological achievement. Caste hierarchy no longer needs to be defended; it needs only to be endured. By withdrawing moral outrage and political imagination, the media enables caste domination to persist as an unspoken backdrop of social life. Inequality ceases to be a problem to be solved and becomes a condition to be managed.

This transition from emancipatory media to moral withdrawal does not signal the decline of ideology but its refinement. Where earlier media confronted caste through overt critique, contemporary media governs through subtle moral regulation (Chatterjee, Mahmood, & Marcussen, 2021). The shift marks a movement from symbolic confrontation to symbolic exhaustion, from moral mobilisation to moral fatigue. Media thus emerges as a central institution in the contemporary reproduction of caste hegemony not by asserting hierarchy, but by rendering resistance ethically unnecessary.

Media, Realism, and the Depoliticisation of Caste

The contemporary valorisation of realism occupies a central place in the moral and epistemic authority of media. Across narrative media forms, realism is widely celebrated as a marker of authenticity, seriousness, and ethical maturity. However, from a sociological standpoint, realism is not a neutral aesthetic choice but a discursive strategy through which power operates. This section argues that realism functions as a key mechanism through which caste is depoliticised, rendered unspeakable, and normalised within mediated narratives.

Realism derives its authority from its claim to truth. By presenting narratives as unembellished reflections of social life, media disarms critique in advance. What is shown appears not as an interpretation but as an inevitability. Foucault's concept of power/knowledge is particularly instructive here: realism produces a regime of truth in which certain social arrangements are rendered self-evident, while alternative explanations are excluded as ideological or artificial. In this epistemic frame, structural analysis appears excessive, moral intervention naïve, and political imagination misplaced.

In the context of caste, realism enables a profound ideological displacement. Social suffering violence, humiliation, deprivation is depicted with striking intensity, yet systematically detached from caste as a structural force. Instead, suffering is attributed to fate, personality, circumstance, or interpersonal conflict. Caste thus disappears not because it is irrelevant, but because it has been rendered unnecessary for explanation. This disappearance is itself a form of symbolic power, one that sustains hierarchy by dissolving its visibility.

Discourse plays a crucial role in this process. Contemporary media discourse often treats explicit references to caste as politically sensitive, narratively clumsy, or morally outdated. At the same time, caste-coded values of endurance, restraint, emotional control, and acceptance of hierarchy circulate freely as universal human virtues. This discursive asymmetry allows caste power to operate without naming itself. As Foucault reminds us, power is most effective when it defines the conditions of speech itself, when certain questions no longer appear legitimate to ask.

The depoliticisation of caste through realism is further reinforced by narrative form. Contemporary media frequently adopts fragmented storytelling, unresolved endings, and morally ambiguous characters. These formal strategies are often praised for resisting simplistic moral binaries. Yet sociologically, they function to diffuse responsibility. When injustice lacks a clear agent, accountability dissolves. When suffering lacks a cause, redress becomes unimaginable. Moral ambiguity thus becomes a technology of governance, regulating ethical response by narrowing the scope of moral judgment.

From a Gramscian perspective, realism contributes to the consolidation of hegemony by aligning dominant caste sensibilities with cultural common sense. Upper-caste moral dispositions, detachment, emotional restraint, and scepticism towards collective action are recoded as realism and sophistication. In contrast, expressions of moral outrage, protest, or collective demand are framed as excessive, sentimental, or politically immature. Media thus reorganises moral hierarchy by redefining what counts as a reasonable, mature, and legitimate response to injustice.

Ambedkar's insight into caste as a moral system is crucial here. Caste survives not merely by enforcing hierarchy but by shaping ethical evaluation. Realist media narratives participate in this process by teaching audiences how to interpret inequality not as a violation of justice but as an unfortunate condition of existence. Caste domination is thereby sustained through ethical resignation rather than ritual prohibition. The moral language of realism replaces the moral language of hierarchy, even as the social effects remain intact.

The claim to realism also enables media to evade political responsibility. By presenting narratives as mere representations of social reality, media absolves itself of moral accountability. This is particularly significant in a context where media increasingly function as a primary site of public pedagogy. When realism is treated as truth rather than interpretation, the ethical consequences of representation are displaced. Media becomes a witness rather than a participant, even as it actively shapes moral perception.

Foucault's concept of governmentality helps explain how this process extends beyond representation to subject formation. Through repeated exposure to realist narratives, audiences learn to govern their own moral responses. They are trained to endure rather than resist, to empathise privately rather than mobilise collectively, and to interpret inequality as personal misfortune rather than structural injustice. This self-regulation is central to contemporary forms of power, which operate through freedom rather than force.

In this mediated moral environment, caste hierarchy no longer requires overt defence. Its reproduction is secured through the normalisation of suffering and the evacuation of critique. Realism thus emerges as a powerful instrument of depoliticization not by denying caste, but by rendering it irrelevant to moral judgment. The media participates in the reproduction of caste hegemony by reorganising the conditions under which inequality can be recognised, felt, and contested.

The depoliticisation of caste through realism does not represent the end of ideology but its refinement. Where earlier media confronted injustice through moral confrontation, contemporary media governs through ethical distance. This shift marks a transformation in the cultural logic of domination: from visible hierarchy to invisible normalisation, from political contestation to moral accommodation. Media, in this sense, becomes a crucial site where caste power adapts to contemporary conditions, operating through narrative truth claims rather than explicit authority.

Moral Pedagogy and the Normalisation of Cruelty

A defining feature of contemporary media narratives is the systematic normalisation of cruelty. Violence, abandonment, humiliation, and premature death are depicted not as moral ruptures demanding response but as routine features of social life. Such representations do not merely reflect an increasingly unequal society; they actively shape the moral sensibilities through which inequality is apprehended and endured. This section argues that contemporary media functions as a powerful form of moral pedagogy, training audiences to accept cruelty as ordinary and to withdraw ethical expectation from social life.

Media pedagogy does not operate through explicit instruction. Unlike earlier forms of ideological messaging that sought to persuade audiences through moral clarity or political exhortation, contemporary media teaches by repetition, affective modulation, and narrative restraint. Cruelty is shown repeatedly, but without moral commentary or resolution. The absence of outrage, explanation, or redress is itself pedagogical. Audiences learn not what to think, but how to feel or more precisely, how *not* to feel too much.

Foucault's conception of power as productive rather than repressive is crucial for understanding this process. Power does not simply prohibit moral response; it produces subjects who regulate their own ethical reactions. Through repeated exposure to narratives that frame suffering as inevitable and resistance as futile, the media cultivates dispositions of endurance, emotional containment, and moral fatigue. These are not imposed from above; they are internalised as reasonable and mature responses to reality.

Cruelty, in this pedagogical framework, is stripped of its political content. Violence appears as interpersonal conflict, social decay, or tragic misfortune rather than as the outcome of structural inequality. This narrative strategy is particularly significant in relation to caste. When humiliation, exclusion, or disposability is depicted without reference to caste relations, cruelty is severed from its historical and social causes. What remains is suffering without injustice, pain without perpetrators, endurance without accountability.

The moral pedagogy of media thus reorganises the ethical field. Sympathy is permitted, but only as a private emotion. Collective outrage, political demand, or moral judgment are subtly delegitimised. Characters who express rage or seek justice are often portrayed as excessive, unstable, or destructive, while those who endure silently are framed as realistic and dignified. In this way, the media produces a hierarchy of moral responses that mirrors caste-coded values of restraint and submission.

From an Ambedkarite perspective, this normalisation of cruelty represents a profound reassertion of caste morality. Caste has historically relied on the routinisation of suffering making humiliation appear deserved, inevitable, or invisible. Contemporary media updates this logic by aestheticising suffering and stripping it of moral urgency. Cruelty no longer requires justification; it requires only representation. Its repetition, devoid of critique, renders it ethically unremarkable.

Gramsci's notion of hegemony further illuminates how such pedagogy secures consent. By aligning endurance with maturity and resignation with realism, the media embeds dominant moral values within common sense. The audience is not coerced into acceptance; it is guided into ethical accommodation. The very capacity to imagine alternative justice, redistribution, and collective action is gradually eroded. What remains is a moral horizon narrowed to survival and adjustment.

The figure of the suffering subject is central to this pedagogy. Contemporary media often foregrounds characters who absorb violence rather than resist it. Their suffering is portrayed with emotional intensity but without political context. These subjects do not mobilise others; they withdraw inward. This narrative emphasis produces what can be described

as ethical individualisation, a condition in which moral responsibility is located entirely within the self, while social structures fade into the background.

Foucault's concept of governmentality is especially relevant here. Media-driven moral pedagogy governs not by issuing commands but by shaping conduct through norms. Audiences learn to govern their own expectations, calibrate empathy, and accept limits on what can reasonably be demanded of society. Cruelty becomes a condition to be managed rather than a violation to be challenged. This form of governance is effective precisely because it operates through freedom: individuals appear to choose resignation even as the moral field is tightly constrained.

The normalisation of cruelty also has temporal effects. Repetition dulls ethical response. What once provoked shock or outrage becomes familiar, even banal. This process of desensitisation does not eliminate empathy, but it redirects it into passive consumption. Suffering becomes content something to be witnessed, discussed, and moved past. Media thus produces what might be described as a culture of moral spectatorship, where engagement replaces responsibility and awareness substitutes for action.

In caste terms, this moral spectatorship is deeply consequential. It allows caste hierarchy to persist without confrontation. Inequality is acknowledged but not interrogated; suffering is visible but politically inert. Media thus sustains caste domination by cultivating subjects who are ethically responsive yet politically disengaged, capable of feeling, but not of demanding.

The normalisation of cruelty through moral pedagogy does not signify a collapse of ethics but a transformation of ethical life. Media does not promote indifference outright; it promotes contained empathy, emotion without obligation, recognition without responsibility. This ethical containment is central to the contemporary reproduction of caste hegemony, where domination operates not through denial but through managed acknowledgement.

In this sense, moral pedagogy is not an accidental by-product of media narratives but a central mechanism of power. By regulating affect, narrowing moral horizons, and individualising responsibility, the media participates in the governance of social inequality. Cruelty becomes ordinary not because it is unnoticed, but because it is rendered ethically tolerable. The reproduction of caste hierarchy thus proceeds not only through silence but also through the careful orchestration of moral endurance.

Media and the Reproduction of Caste Hegemony

The preceding sections have demonstrated how contemporary media reorganises moral perception by depoliticising caste, aestheticising suffering, and normalising cruelty. This section advances the argument by showing how these processes collectively contribute to the reproduction of caste hegemony under contemporary conditions. Rather than sustaining caste through overt assertion or ritual enforcement, media operates as a diffuse cultural mechanism that secures consent by reshaping ethical common sense.

Caste hegemony in the present moment does not rely primarily on explicit ideological claims. Instead, it functions through what Gramsci describes as the alignment of dominant values with everyday common sense. Media plays a crucial role in this alignment by embedding Brahmanical moral assumptions, restraint, endurance, purity, and self-discipline within narratives that appear secular, realistic, and universally human. These values circulate not as caste norms but as markers of maturity, civility, and moral credibility.

One of the most effective ways the media reproduces caste hierarchy is through erasure. Caste rarely appears as an explicit category of analysis or conflict. However, its absence does not signify decline; rather, it marks a shift in the mode of domination. Structural inequalities persist in narrative form through the disposability of lives, the normalisation of humiliation, and the moral valuation of endurance, but are detached from their caste origins. This disarticulation enables caste to function invisibly, as a background structure rather than a named system.

Media realism is central to this process. By presenting social suffering as an inevitable outcome of circumstance rather than as a consequence of caste power, media narratives foreclose political interpretation. Realism operates here not as a truthful representation of social life, but as an aesthetic discipline that limits what can be imagined. In this narrative universe, caste injustice appears too ordinary to question and too complex to challenge.

The reproduction of caste hegemony also occurs through the moral calibration of characters. Those who conform to dominant ethical norms, self-restraint, sacrifice, and acceptance are portrayed as morally legitimate, even when they occupy positions of social marginality. In contrast, characters who express rage, refusal, or political consciousness are often depicted as disruptive or excessive. This moral sorting subtly reinforces caste hierarchy by delegitimising forms of resistance historically associated with anti-caste movements.

From a Foucauldian perspective, this process exemplifies the operation of power through subject formation. The media produces subjects who internalise dominant moral norms and regulate their own conduct accordingly. Caste domination is thus maintained not through external coercion but through internalised ethical discipline. Individuals come to govern themselves in ways that align with hierarchical social arrangements, experiencing submission as choice and adjustment as realism.

Governmentality is particularly visible in how the media manages aspirations and expectations. Rather than promising collective transformation, narratives emphasise personal survival, moral compromise, and limited mobility. Structural critique is replaced by therapeutic endurance. This redirection of aspiration away from collective justice toward individual adjustment stabilises caste hierarchy by neutralising its political threat.

Importantly, the media does not need to promote caste pride or explicitly valorise upper-caste identity to reproduce caste power. Instead, it universalises upper-caste moral frameworks while rendering non-dominant caste practices morally suspect or invisible. Practices associated with marginalised communities, assertion, collective resistance, and refusal of moral containment are either excluded from representation or framed negatively. Caste thus persists not as an identity openly defended, but as a moral order quietly enforced.

The affective economy of media further reinforces this hegemony. Sympathy is permitted, but only in depoliticised forms. Audiences are invited to feel sorrow, not anger; compassion, not responsibility. This affective regulation mirrors caste logic, which historically permitted charity while resisting equality. Media thus revitalise an old moral hierarchy under new cultural forms.

In this sense, the media function as a cultural apparatus of caste governance. It extends moral authority beyond traditional institutions such as temples, kinship structures, or caste councils into everyday consumption practices. Through repeated exposure, viewers learn what kinds of lives are grievable, what kinds of suffering are tolerable, and what forms of resistance are unreasonable. These lessons do not require belief; they require only habituation.

The reproduction of caste hegemony through media is therefore neither accidental nor merely representational. It is a structural process embedded in narrative form, aesthetic choice, and moral framing. By reshaping how inequality is perceived, felt, and evaluated, the media sustains caste hierarchy while appearing neutral, progressive, or even critical. Caste survives not because it is defended, but because it is rendered ordinary.

This form of domination is especially resilient because it operates below the threshold of explicit politics. It produces subjects who recognise inequality but lack the moral language to collectively contest it. Media thus participates in what may be described as the post-political management of caste, in which injustice is acknowledged but stripped of transformative potential.

In sum, contemporary media reproduces caste hegemony not by repeating its traditional symbols, but by reinventing its moral logic. Through realism, moral pedagogy, and affective regulation, caste is sustained as an ethical background condition of social life. Understanding media as a site of caste reproduction, therefore, requires moving beyond representation toward an analysis of how moral authority itself is reorganised under conditions of cultural power.

Conclusion

This article has examined contemporary media as a crucial site through which caste hegemony is reproduced, reconfigured, and rendered morally ordinary in present-day India. Moving beyond representational analyses of media, the study has foregrounded the role of media in reshaping moral authority, ethical perception, and everyday common sense. By analysing media narratives through a sociological and Foucauldian lens, the article shows how caste power persists not through explicit ideological assertion but through subtle processes of depoliticisation, moral pedagogy, and self-regulation.

Central to the argument has been the claim that the media no longer function primarily as a space of emancipatory critique. Instead, it increasingly operates as a pedagogical apparatus that shifts moral responsibility from structural arrangements to individual conduct while intensifying ethical judgment at the level of individual conduct. Caste is not denied in these narratives; rather, it is displaced, absorbed into stories of personal suffering, endurance, and moral compromise that foreclose political interpretation. Inequality is acknowledged, but stripped of historical causality and collective accountability.

Drawing on Foucauldian concepts of discourse and governmentality, the article has demonstrated how the media produce subjects who internalise dominant moral norms and govern themselves accordingly. Power operates here not through prohibition or censorship, but through normalisation. Media narratives define what is reasonable, realistic, and morally legitimate, thereby shaping the limits of political imagination. Resistance is not suppressed directly; it is rendered excessive, immature, or implausible.

The analysis further reveals how media realism functions as a disciplinary aesthetic. By presenting social suffering as ordinary and inevitable, realism transforms structural violence into a background condition. This aesthetic strategy is particularly effective in sustaining caste hierarchy because it renders inequality both visible and unchallengeable. Viewers are encouraged to empathise with suffering without recognising it as a product of caste power. Compassion replaces critique; endurance substitutes for justice.

Importantly, the article has argued that contemporary media reproduces caste hegemony precisely by erasing its explicit markers. Brahmanical moral values circulate as universal ethical norms, while non-dominant caste practices are marginalised, pathologised, or rendered invisible. This process allows caste hierarchy to persist under the guise of secular realism and moral neutrality. Caste survives not as an overt identity to be defended, but as an ethical order quietly enforced through everyday cultural consumption.

The implications of this analysis extend beyond media studies. By locating caste reproduction within moral and affective regimes, the article contributes to broader sociological debates on power, hegemony, and governance. It suggests that caste domination in contemporary India must be understood not only through institutions, policies, or identities, but through the subtle reorganisation of ethical life. Media emerges as a key mechanism through which this reorganisation is achieved.

At a moment when caste is often declared to be in decline or transformation, this study demonstrates its continued vitality in cultural form. Media does not merely reflect social reality; it actively participates in shaping the moral conditions under which inequality is interpreted and endured. Recognising this role is essential for any serious engagement with caste in the contemporary public sphere.

In conclusion, the article argues that the persistence of caste in modern India cannot be understood without attending to the cultural technologies that sustain it. Media, as a powerful site of moral instruction and affective regulation, plays a central role in this process. By rendering caste ordinary, depoliticised, and morally justified, the media ensures that hierarchy endures not despite modernity, but through it.

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