

Breaking the Spiral of Silence: An Analysis of the Newspaper Coverage of Deepa P Mohan's Hunger Strike

Communication &
Journalism Research
Jan - Jun 2024 | 13 (1) pp 177-187
©The Author(s) 2024
Reprints and Permissions:
masscomhod@uoc. ac. in
ISSN: 2348 – 5663
DOI:10.5281/zenodo.12534073

Kishor K*

Research Scholar, Department of Mass Communication & Journalism, Kannur University.

P P Shaju

Associate Professor & Head, Department of Journalism, Mary Matha Arts & Science College, Mananthavady

Abstract

Elisabeth Noelle Neumann's spiral of silence theory states that individuals may not express differing views in a community due to fear of social exclusion and isolation. The theory is applied in the context of caste discrimination experienced by students belonging to Dalit and backward caste in academic institutions. Deep-rooted institutional casteism poses challenges, besides silencing students from these castes. Resisting the dominant discourse happens rarely. A female Dalit PhD scholar from Mahatma Gandhi University launches an indefinite hunger strike against institutional casteism. The print media coverage of the strike is analysed in the background of the spiral of silence theory. The fear of isolation and social exclusion are set aside by the researcher in her fight against caste discrimination. Her differing viewpoints gradually become the dominant narrative. The study demonstrates a clear reversal of the spiral of silence theory.

Keywords: *Institutional Casteism, Spiral of Silence, Caste Discrimination*

Introduction

Noelle Neumann's (1974;1993) seminal Spiral of Silence theory proposes that if a majority agrees on an opinion, a lone opposing viewpoint is ignored and isolated to the extent that the individual with opposing viewpoint silences themselves and becomes introverted. The dynamics, intensity, obstacles, and

* Correspondence: kishorkrishna.06@gmail.com

rationale of this communication hypothesis have been investigated across various levels of gender, nationality, religion, socio-economic status, and professions. In today's globalised world, we can observe the spiral of silence and fear of isolation almost everywhere (Jin & Ye, 2018).

An individual's opposing viewpoints are interpreted as deviations, and pressure builds up on such persons, preventing them from articulating their opinions. As a result, such individuals either deny their existence or, fearing a schism caused by the minority position, join the majority while silently distancing themselves (Neumann, 1974; Kennamer, 1990; Moy et al., 2001). This finding has been further revalidated by research at the micro and macro levels. Although individuals have clear views on a system or an incident, they will evade debates or discussions to avoid being ostracised by the majority.

The social standing in India, specifically the upper caste–lower caste hierarchy can be analysed in the background of the spiral of silence theory. The caste system is one of the oldest and still active centres of social power in the country. The power structure of the caste system is divided into four levels. Brahmins, Kshatriyas, and Vaishyas acquire social, economic, and cultural power through caste hierarchy. Power and resources are controlled by these castes. Shudras, the lowest caste, survive due to their skilled labour (Srinivas, 2003). Dalits, comprising the oppressed caste and tribe (SC & ST), do not fall into the caste system and are deemed untouchables, separated from the rest of society. Untouchability was criminalised after the enactment of the Indian Constitution, and reservations were legally mandated for scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. However, social, cultural, and economic imbalances that persisted for generations under the caste system continue to endure, resulting in an uneven social equilibrium. The literacy rate among the Dalits is low as they continuously face institutional and caste discrimination. Consequently, a large number of Dalits abandon their education halfway through. If Dalits resist conforming to their traditional jobs and practices, they often face widespread societal boycotts and physical abuse. Fearing ostracisation and retaliation, Dalits fall in line with the dominant caste structure both at the micro and macro levels.

The dominance of the upper caste is almost complete in all spheres of government such as the legislature, executive, judiciary, administration, and law enforcement. Academic institutions, including schools, colleges, universities, and other certification-issuing bodies for government services, largely discriminate against Dalits. For example, OBC, SC, and ST form nearly 75% of

the Indian population, but faculty from these categories make up barely 9% in Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) and 6.1% in Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs) (Sharma, 2019). Similarly, ST made up 2.1% of PhD students at the Indian Institute of Science in Bangalore (IISc) while SC and OBC students made up 9% each from 2016 to 2020. In the PhD enrollment in IITs, ST accounted for 1.7%, SCs 9%, and OBCs 27.4% (Kumar, 2021). The dropout rate among the students of these categories is also very high. A similar tendency can also be seen in academic positions in colleges and universities (Raveendran, 2022).

Visible and invisible caste discrimination in academic institutions has taken a toll on Dalit students. In 2010, Dalit student Balmukund from UP committed suicide in his AIIMS hostel. Unable to bear racial slurs such as "sarkari bacha" and "quota student," he ultimately ended his life (Deshpande & Zacharias, 2013). The suicide of Dalit research student Rohith Vemula on January 17, 2016, at Hyderabad Central University had emerged as a hot topic of debate across the nation. Vemula was isolated and sidelined by the administration and a section of the student organisations for voicing his opinions. The apathy from the administration and repeated caste discrimination caused him severe mental strain, leading him to hang himself and leave a suicide note that read, "...my birth is my fatal accident" (Vemireddy, 2019). Fathima Latheef, a 19-year-old student from Kerala, hanged herself in her Madras IIT hostel after writing a suicide note condemning the faculty for discrimination and causing her profound mental anguish (Nath et al., 2019). In 2019, Payal Thadvi, a Dalit postgraduate gynecology student at Nair Hospital in Mumbai, also committed suicide after detailing numerous caste-based atrocities, including upper-caste students using her bedsheets to wipe their legs (Kamble, 2019).

Fear of isolation, despair, and helplessness in the overbearing caste structures lead several students from Dalit and backward communities to backtrack from their academic pursuits. Resisting the dominant caste hierarchy and hegemony is rarely questioned due to the fear of isolation, further reinforcing the spiral of silence theory. However, there are instances of challenging dominant discourses. One such example is Deepa P Mohan, a Dalit PhD scholar from Mahatma Gandhi University in Kottayam, who valiantly fought against caste discrimination by the authorities.

Breaking the Spiral of Silence

There is a widespread belief that atrocities and discrimination based on caste are rare in Kerala. According to statistics, Kerala is far ahead of other Indian states in several development indices, including those related to SC, ST, and OBC status. However, both visible and invisible caste violations are rampant in Kerala, and many such cases do not receive media attention. The indefinite hunger strike by Deepa P Mohan, a Dalit PhD research scholar, in front of Mahatma Gandhi University in 2021 was a notable exception.

Deepa, a postgraduate medical microbiologist, joined Mahatma Gandhi University's Inter-University Centre for Nanoscience and Nanotechnology (IUCNN) in March 2011 to pursue her MPhil. She was supervised by two IUCNN joint directors. As per her narration, she had to face caste discrimination and partisan remarks from one of her upper-caste supervisors. She never retaliated initially due to her insecurity caused by her gender and caste. During the second phase of her MPhil project, three Dalit students, including Deepa, were forced to complete their project at another institute, while other students completed their research at IUCNN. With her GATE score, she was admitted to PhD programme in IUCNN in 2015. Deepa faced a series of discriminations from the same teacher while her PhD work was progressing. She filed a complaint at the university and it was not fairly redressed by the university. She approached the media and shared her grievances. She also utilised digital media to air her grievances. She forwarded complaints to the Scheduled Caste/Tribe Commission, Kerala State Women's Commission, District Collector, District Superintendent of Police, and High Court, alleging violence against women and caste discrimination. An investigation launched under the supervision of the university syndicate recommended action against the erring teacher (Mohan, 2016; John, 2021; Sabith, 2021).

Student organisations chose to stay away from the caste and gender discrimination faced by Deepa. However, her Facebook (2016) post was picked up by one of Kerala's most popular media outlets, bringing widespread attention to her case. Deepa staged numerous solo protests, prompting the university to form committees to investigate the issue. These committees recommended retaining the accused faculty and allowing Deepa to continue her PhD programme. Nonetheless, she stood firm in her demand that the accused faculty be dismissed from service. Deepa convened a news conference at Kottayam Press Club and announced her plan to launch an indefinite hunger strike in front

of the Mahatma Gandhi University campus on October 29, 2021. She demanded the dismissal of the accused faculty and the right to complete her research. Her lone hunger strike lasted for 11 days (October 29 to November 8, 2021). The protest garnered massive support as days passed. Increasing media coverage including digital campaigns generated favourable public opinion. The university authorities were ultimately forced to find an amicable resolution, accepting most of her demands. Consequently, Deepa called off the strike on November 8.

The spiral of silence theory suggests that when a majority agrees on an opinion, opposing viewpoints are ignored and isolated, often leading individuals with dissenting views to silence themselves. However, Deepa P Mohan's hunger strike serves as a reversal of this theory, where a lone opposing viewpoint gains traction and becomes the dominant opinion. This investigation examines newspaper coverage of the hunger strike to assess how a minority opinion is transformed into a dominant viewpoint.

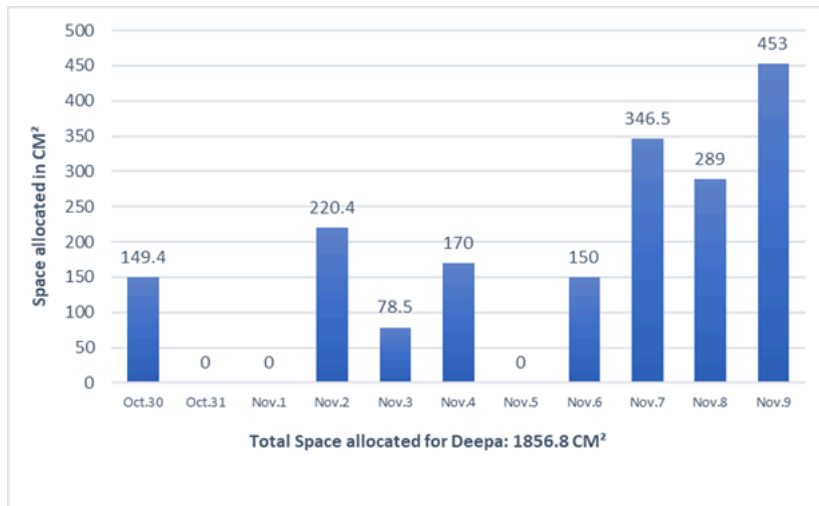
Method of Study

The research method employed was content analysis. The researchers analysed the space dedicated to covering the strike in selected newspapers, considering all news reports and photos related to the strike as units of analysis. Four newspapers were selected for the study. Two newspapers, *Malayala Manorama* and *Mathrubhumi* were selected based on their circulation. Third newspaper, *Mangalam*, was chosen based on the popular newspaper of the locality. The fourth newspaper, *Deshabhimani*, was chosen as it largely allied with the University authorities.

Period of study

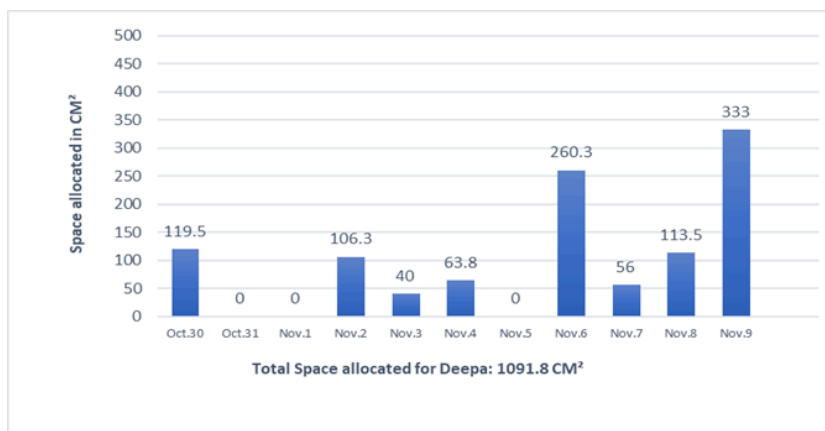
Deepa launched the hunger strike on October 29 and ended on November 8, 2021. Hence reports/photos appeared in the selected newspapers from October 30, 2021 to November 9, 2021 were considered for the study.

Analysis of *Malayala Manorama*



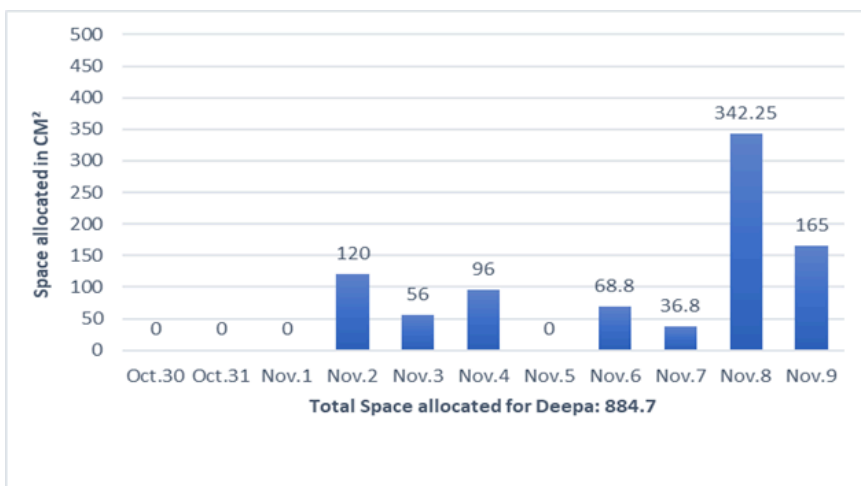
Malayala Manorama devoted the largest space to cover the event, consistently printing reports and photos on its third page. The report on October 30 was 8.2 cm x 15 cm news item accompanied by 8 cm x 3.3 cm photo. From the beginning, the newspaper paid close attention to the issue, with a gradual increase in the allocated space. On November 9, *Manorama* featured 17 cm x 21.5 cm report and 12.5 cm x 7 cm photo on the centre page. In total, *Manorama* allocated 1,722.5 cm² for news reports and 134.25 cm² for photos to cover the strike.

Analysis of *Mathrubhumi*



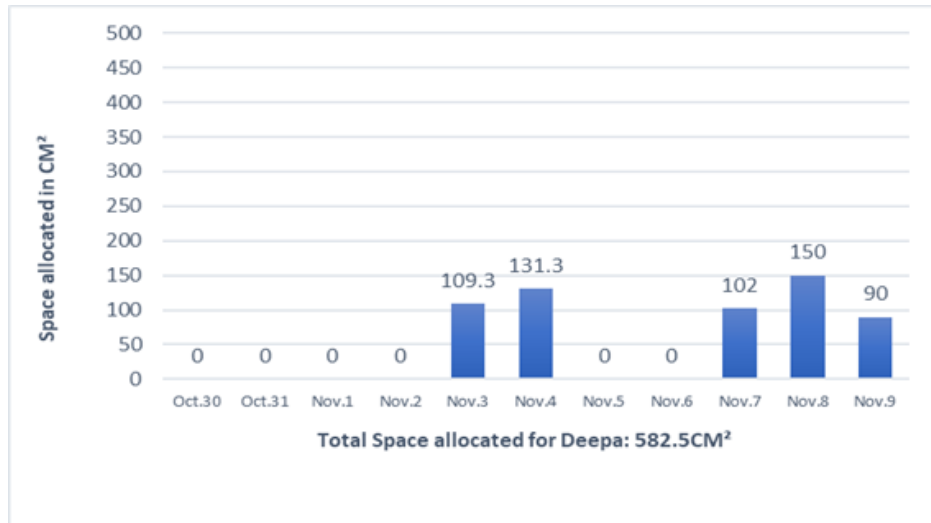
Mathrubhumi, the second-largest circulated newspaper in Malayalam, allocated a total of 1,091.79 cm² of space to cover Deepa P Mohan's hunger strike. The photo space for the 11-day strike was 79.74 cm. As the protest gained momentum, the volume of space dedicated to the event gradually increased. 12.5 cm x 7.5 cm news item was printed on October 30, in the local page along with 7.8 cm x 3.3 cm photo. The culmination of the strike was reported on November 9 with 12 cm x 5 cm news item, and 21 cm x 13 cm article was published on page 8.

Analysis of *Mangalam*

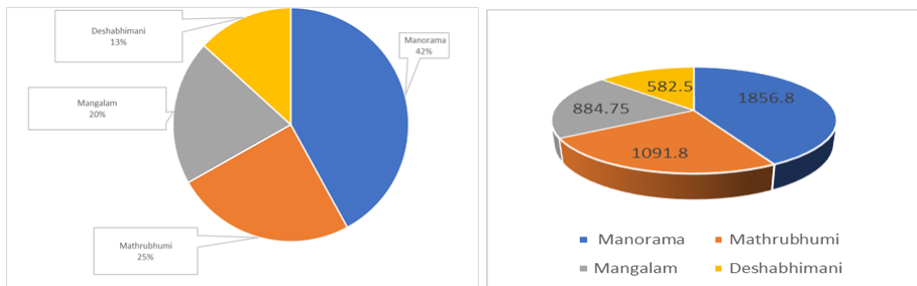


Mangalam's first report of the strike measuring 12 cm x 10 cm was published on its second page on November 2. As the event gained more attention, regular news reports followed. A 15 cm x 11 cm report was featured on the front page on November 9 when the strike was called off. In total, 884.74 cm² was allocated for the coverage of the strike.

Analysis of *Deshabhimani*



Deshabhimani largely supported the University and presented the issue from the perspective of the authorities. Unlike other newspapers in the study, *Deshabhimani* first reported the event on November 3, allotting a space of 11.5 cm x 9.5 cm. On November 8, the newspaper published two separate reports justifying the University authorities. In total, *Deshabhimani* dedicated 582.5 cm² of space to the strike during the period.



Consistently, *Malayala Manorama*, *Mathrubhumi*, and *Mangalam* provided extensive coverage of the hunger strike, playing a pivotal role in shaping favourable public opinion towards the issue. In contrast, *Deshabhimani* allocated the least amount of space for covering the strike. Between October 30 and November 9, *Malayala Manorama*, *Mathrubhumi*, *Mangalam*, and

Deshabhimani dedicated 1856.75 cm², 1091.8 cm², 884.75 cm², and 582.5 cm² of space, respectively, for reporting the strike.

Conclusion

In the realm of education, Dalit students consistently encounter discrimination, spanning from schools to universities. The discrimination permeates various aspects of campus life including classrooms, laboratories, canteens, and hostels. Many Dalit students refrain from speaking out against caste-based discrimination by faculty, administration, and peers due to fear of ostracisation from the majority. However, Deepa P Mohan's hunger strike serves as an example of overcoming this fear of isolation. The majority of newspapers examined in the study played a crucial role in breaking the silence surrounding institutional casteism. Even the newspaper that initially allocated the least space for covering the strike eventually joined the bandwagon. This highlights how a dissenting opinion can gain momentum and become the dominant viewpoint. The findings of this study suggest the potential for a reversal of the spiral of silence hypothesis.

References

- Deshpande, S., & Zacharias, U. (2013). *Beyond inclusion: The practice of equal access in Indian Higher Education*. Routledge & CRC Press. <https://www.routledge.com/Beyond-Inclusion-The-Practice-of-Equal-Access-in-Indian-Higher-Education/Deshpande-Zacharias/p/book/9781138660342>
- Jin, X., & Ye, Q. (2018). *Spiral of silence: A powerful perspective of understanding the public opinion*. <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.22187.69920>
- John, H. (2021, November 3). Kerala PhD scholar Deepa Mohanan's hunger strike is about casteism in academia. *The News Minute*. <https://www.thenewsminute.com/kerala/kerala-phd-scholar-deepa-mohanan-s-hunger-strike-about-casteism-academia-157233>
- Kamble, A. (2019). Mumbai: Medical student commits suicide after casteist slurs by seniors. <https://www.mid-day.com/mumbai/mumbai-news/article/mumbai-medical-student-commits-suicide-after-casteist-slurs-by-seniors-21008175>

Kenamer, J. D. (1990). Self-serving biases in perceiving the opinions of others: Implications for the spiral of silence. *Communication Research*, 17(3), 393 - 404.

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/009365090017003006>

Kumar, R. (2021). SC, ST, OBC representation in Indian education is dismal, upper-caste nexus persists. <https://theprint.in/campus-voice/sc-st-obc-representation-in-indian-education-is-dismal-upper-caste-nexus-persists/627217/>

Mohan, D. P. (2016). Deepa P Mohan caste atrocity. Deepa P Mohan, FB Post, 20th January 2016 .

<https://www.facebook.com/100002842848384/posts/768006213304133/>

Moy, P., David, D., & Stamm, K. (2001). *The spiral of silence and public opinion on affirmative action*. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/254120343_The_Spiral_of_Silence_and_Public_Opinion_on_Affirmative_Action

Nath, A., Lobo, S., & Udayakumar, G. R. (2019, November 15). IIT Madras student Fathima Lateef death case: All you need to know. *India Today*. <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/iit-madras-student-death-fathima-lateef-1619357-2019-11-15>.

Noelle-Neumann, E. (1974). The spiral of silence: A theory of public opinion. *Journal of Communication*, 24(2), 43–51. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1974.tb00367.x>

Noelle-Neumann, E. (1993). *Spiral of silence 2e: Public opinion--Our social skin* (2nd edition). University of Chicago Press.

Raveendran, O. (2022). *Pothu vidyabhyasa rangathe swakarya kolanikal* (3rd ed.). Vayalaata.

Sabith, M. (2021). Kerala Varsity removes Prof accused of casteism from post, PhD scholar calls for expulsion. *The Wire*. <https://thewire.in/caste/casteism-kerala-deepa-mohan-an-hunger-strike>

Sharma, K. (2019, February 13). Diversity deficit in IIMs, IITs—Just 23 STs and 157 SCs in 9,640 faculty posts. *The Print*.

<https://theprint.in/india/education/diversity-deficit-in-iims-iits-just-23-sts-and-157-scs-in-9640-faculty-posts/191246/>

Srinivas, M. N. (2003). An obituary on caste as a system. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 38(5), 455–459.

Vemireddy, N. (2019, July 13). The price of India's caste system: The case of Rohit Vemula. *AIF*.
<https://aif.org/the-price-of-indias-caste-system-the-case-of-rohit-vemula>