

Media Analysis as a Tool for Indological Research: A Critical Discourse Perspective

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Abstract

An underexplored area in Indology is the potential impact of contemporary media narratives on understanding Indian history and culture. What is portrayed in today's media, including news, films, and social media posts, has the power to significantly shape the Indology of tomorrow. The present study utilizes critical discourse analysis as its methodological framework to scrutinize how language, power, and ideology intersect within media texts, revealing the underlying biases and assumptions that shape public perception and historical narratives. By focusing on three case studies—the Aryan Invasion Theory, the portrayal of Emperors Ashoka and Akbar, and the narratives surrounding Dr. B R Ambedkar and Mother Teresa—this paper explores how historical events and figures are reinterpreted and represented in contemporary media, influencing not only the cultural consciousness and collective memory but also interpretation of Indological sources themselves. The findings suggest that media analysis is not merely a complementary tool but an essential component of Indological studies.

Keywords: Media Representation, Discourse Analysis, Indology, Decolonization, Genetics

Introduction

Indology, the study of Indian history, culture, and languages, heavily relies on textual evidence to reconstruct ancient and medieval Indian societies. However, the field faces significant challenges, including gaps in textual evidence, literary silence on specific issues, philological issues, and varying lenses of analysis, including colonial and Euro-American lenses (Rajendran, 2011; Adluri & Bagchee, 2014).

Decolonization attempts have been made in this regard to segregate *videshi* and *swadeshi* ideologies with varying levels of success (Kannan, 2018). An underexplored area in Indology is, however, the potential impact of contemporary media narratives on understanding Indian history and culture. What is portrayed in today's media, including news, films, blogs, and

social media posts, has the power to significantly shape the Indology of tomorrow. Today's prevalent discourse can potentially become a historical record of the future.

The present study utilizes critical discourse analysis (CDA) as its methodological framework. CDA is used to study the ways in which language, power, and inequality intersect (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000). It examines how discourse shapes, and is shaped by social elements including power relations, ideologies, institutions and social identities (Fairclough, 2013). In media studies, CDA is used to analyze how media content—such as news articles, films, advertisements, and social media—constructs and reinforces societal norms, values, and ideologies (Phelan, 2017).

By focusing on three case studies—the Aryan Invasion Theory, the portrayal of Emperors Ashoka and Akbar, and the narratives surrounding Dr. B R Ambedkar and Mother Teresa—this paper explores how historical events and figures are reinterpreted and represented in contemporary media, influencing not only the cultural consciousness and collective memory but also (re-)interpretation of Indological sources themselves.

The Aryan Invasion Theory (AIT), now known as Aryan Migration Theory (AMT) has been a contentious topic, evolving from colonial interpretations to post-colonial revisions. In popular discourse in India, including textbooks, it is often discussed as fact that Aryans migrated from outside India, and established Vedic civilization. Linguistically this is premised on the idea of a non-European homeland of the Indo-European language family (Elst, 2005). However, significant archaeological evidence contradicts the invasion or migration hypothesis (Singh, 2021).

Some argue that AIT/AMT was shaped by Orientalist discourse on Hinduism and its so-called caste system, and was in fact a reflection of European cultural and intellectual developments (Keppens & De Roover, 2014). Despite being widely refuted, AIT/AMT continues to resurface in different contexts. There have been recent attempts to link AIT/AMT, which is essentially a linguistic theory, to genetics of early Indians as seen in Shinde et al. (2019) and Narasimhan et al. (2019). This study explores how AIT is represented in modern media and its implications for understanding Indian identity and historical continuity.

The portrayal of historical figures like Ashoka and Akbar often reflects broader cultural narratives, imbued with admiration and attributed with modern values. From early works such as Bhandarkar (1925) to recent studies like Lahiri (2015), Emperor Ashoka's greatness has consistently been celebrated without question. Similarly, Mughal Emperor Akbar is

regarded as one of the greatest rulers of India (Eraly, 2003). Both emperors are depicted as visionary statesmen with a secular outlook, a trait their biographers argue is evident in their policies and administration. Prime Minister Nehru, in *The Discovery of India* (1946), praised both Ashoka and Akbar for their leadership and secular outlook:

“Ashoka's pillars of stone with their inscriptions would speak to me in their magnificent language and tell me of a man who, though an emperor, was greater than any king or emperor. At Fatehpur-Sikri, Akbar, forgetful of his empire, was seated holding converse and debate with the learned of all faiths, curious to learn something new and seeking an answer to the eternal problem of man.”

This study examines how anachronistic and Western concepts of greatness and secularism are retroactively imposed on these figures, shaping the perception of their legacies in historical and contemporary contexts.

The portrayal of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and Mother Teresa are complex and multifaceted, as their legacies are relatively recent and are interpreted in various ways by different groups. These interpretations are often influenced by diverse perspectives, including political, religious, caste, and other affiliations, which contribute to a dynamic and sometimes contested understanding of their contributions and significance. Ambedkar, a visionary leader and principal architect of the Indian Constitution, is celebrated for having championed the rights of marginalized communities and striving for a compassionate, inclusive and just society (Keer, 2016). Mother Teresa, the founder of the Missionaries of Charity, is often described as a living embodiment of Christian kindness, having dedicated her life to serving the poorest of the poor with compassion and selflessness (Sebba, 1997). This paper delves into the media representations of Ambedkar and Mother Teresa, highlighting how these figures are instrumentalized within current debates on compassion.

Methodology

This study employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as its methodological framework. The study utilizes secondary data from media sources, including news articles, books, and popular commentaries to analyze how specific usage of terms and ideas, can contribute to the discourse surrounding historical and cultural narratives.

- For the Aryan Invasion Theory, the emphasis is on terms related to cultural continuity and genetics.

- In the context of Emperors Ashoka and Akbar, the study examines the usage of terms like greatness and secularism.
- For figures like B. R. Ambedkar and Mother Teresa, the focus is on the concept of compassion.

The aim is to investigate how language, power, and ideology intersect within media texts, uncovering the underlying biases and assumptions that influence public perception and shape historical narratives. This is in line with van Dijk (2015, p.468), who notes that CDA is expected to look at “the way specific discourse structures are deployed in the reproduction of social dominance, whether they are part of a conversation or a news report or other genres and contexts.”

Results

Aryan Invasion Theory

Cultural Continuity

The Hindi language Bollywood film *Mohenjo Daro* (2016), starring Hrithik Roshan, has the tagline, "Before the British Raj, before the Mughals, before Christ and before Buddha, there was Mohenjo Daro." This is a movie which was supposed to reimagine the grandeur of the Indus valley civilization in a cinematic way. Yet from the tag-line itself, it is evident that the film-makers are re-iterating the old colonial trope of a distinct pre-Hindu civilization, with little in common with later Hindu society. This is of course borne out in the movie itself, whether in terms of high-priests wearing strange bull-like head-gears or a gladiator-like fighting scene.

The portrayal of the eponymous city, its spaces and the events, creates a sense of disconnect between the ancient city and later conceptualization of Hindu society. It reinforces the colonial and western dogma that Harappan civilization was separate from the later historical phase and “a sort of island in time and space, a brilliant realization with no sequel or legacy” (Danino, 2012).

This is despite the fact that numerous studies show cultural continuity between the Harappan civilization and later Hindu society in terms of town-planning, weights, metallurgy, irrigation and numerous religious symbolisms like *trishula*, pipal tree and *swastika*. Even proponents of non-Hindu pre-Aryan Indus civilization like Kenoyer (1995, pp. 214-215) observe that “through careful study of different aspects of material culture, it is possible to isolate specific continuities from the Indus Valley Tradition and input from non-Indus communities.”

The Genetic Question

The current understanding of genotype refers to the specific portions of DNA inherited from an organism's parents, while phenotype encompasses the organism's observable physical and behavioral traits, such as size, shape, metabolic functions, and movement patterns. The direct causal link between genotype (the sequence of DNA bases: A, T, G, C) and phenotype (the expressed attributes) is scientifically untenable (Sapp, 2014; Taylor, 2021).

Language, unlike traits such as blood type, is not inherited through genes (Schulte, 2023). However, popular discourse often conflates genetics with linguistic origins, discussing concepts like Indo-European language roots, Ancestral North Indians and Ancestral South Indians, and Aryan genes (Reich et al., 2009; Joseph, 2021). This perpetuates the misconception that genetics can resolve what are fundamentally linguistic questions, and help trace the origins and evolutions of so-called Aryans (Talageri, 2019).

Emperors Ashoka and Akbar

Greatness

In popular discourse, terms like 'greatest musician,' 'greatest tennis player,' or 'greatest explorer' are frequently used across various fields, with awards often recognizing individuals as the 'best' in their domain. The concept of G.O.A.T (Greatest of All Time) has become widely accepted, particularly in the West. However, is the term 'great' relevant to Indic thought?

Hart's (1978) seminal work, *The 100: A Ranking of the Most Influential Persons in History*, lists influential figures who have profoundly impacted human history, yet includes no Hindu personalities. The only three Indians featured are Buddha, Ashoka, and Mahavira.

Traditionally in India, the focus was on the collective intellectual tradition or the school of thought rather than on individual achievements. While talent was valued and respected, it was not glorified in the same manner as seen in Western cultures. Students often took pride in being part of the lineage of their teachers rather than seeking individual fame. Namelessness and facelessness was not seen as a sign of failure as it is in the west (Mukhopadhyay, 2025). Yet one of the main reasons Ashoka is considered great is that he was the first political figure in the Indian subcontinent to eschew the cloak of invisibility adopted by rulers of yore. With him India transitioned to an age of inscriptions away from the previous era of "faceless rulers" (Lahiri, 2015, p. 3).

Secularism

In popular discourse, secularism is often used interchangeably with pluralism and multiculturalism, though these concepts are distinct. Ashoka and Akbar are attributed with having possessed the secular ideal. They are portrayed as rational actors who rose above the petty politics of religious and sectarian strife, and upheld values of peaceful coexistence and harmonious living.

Historically, however, secularism emerged as the principle of separating church and state, a definition which still holds good today, and is rooted in the so-called Protestant reformation in Christian-dominated Europe (de Roover, 2015). Secularism emerged as a response to the “privatization of religion” and focused on individual emancipation, unlike Catholicism which needed the Church as an intermediary for human salvation (Madan, 1987). It was never intended to be a general and universal framework for all religions and faiths. In contrast, pluralism—characterized by the acceptance and coexistence of multiple belief systems—has been a longstanding ideal in Indian thought.

However, in popular narratives, Ashoka and Akbar are often portrayed as exceptions rather than representatives of this broader tradition. They are retrospectively imbued with modern secular liberal ideals that align more closely with current Western notions of secularism. This anachronistic attribution overlooks the fact that pluralism, rather than secularism in the Western sense, has been a defining feature of Indian cultural and religious history.

Dr. B R Ambedkar and Mother Teresa

In popular discourse, both Babasaheb Ambedkar and Mother Teresa are often seen as compassionate figures who care for the marginalized and downtrodden.

For instance, in the oaths prepared for the 1956 ceremony where Ambedkar led hundreds of thousands of Dalits in converting from Hinduism to Navayana Buddhism, he included a vow stating, “I shall be compassionate to all living beings and I shall nurture them with care.” Elsewhere, Ambedkar cites the Buddha's rejection of animal sacrifices associated with upper-caste Hindus, incorporating animals into broader circles of concern (Cabrera, 2021, p. 22). In fact, in all his vows 1 through 8, he explicitly rejects different facets of Hinduism.

Similarly, Mother Teresa is often regarded as the epitome of compassion, renowned for helping the poor, the dying, and lepers. However, her compassion came at a cost—baptism and conversion. Even people on death-bed were not spared, and asked if they wanted a “ticket to heaven” (Hitchens, 2012). Her approach to compassion was closely tied to

suffering, with a belief that the more one suffered, the better it was in terms of one's love for God (Carlson & Shield, 2008).

“Compassion means trying to share and understand the suffering of people. And I think it's very good when people suffer. To me, that's really like a kiss from Jesus. And a sign, also, that this person has come so close to Jesus, sharing his passion.”

This form of compassion differs from the Hindu concept of *karuna* which includes entire humanity without exception. Gurus and acharyas are often revered as *karuna-sindhu*—oceans of compassion.

In the Indian knowledge traditions, there is a concept of *apta*, or wise person, and one of the requirements to qualify as an *apta* is the compassion to share knowledge. This knowledge is not for specific people but entire humanity. Figures such as Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo, and Sri Sri Ravi Shankar exemplify the *apta* ideal (Mukhopadhyay, 2019).

Yet in popular discourse, such figures—and the thousands of gurus who populate India's intellectual and spiritual landscape—are often dismissed as fraudulent, regressive, or uneducated *babas*, while other narrower forms of compassion are glorified. It is true that fraudulent “gurus” do exist—as they do in other faiths and societies—but critics often end up painting “every institution and religious leader with the same brush” (Bharti, 2017).

Discussion

The knowledge production and consumption cycles have evolved considerably, especially in the last quarter century. Technology has played a central role in impacting the creation, acquisition, and interpretation of knowledge. The rise of Digital Humanities as an evolution of mainstream traditional humanities disciplines has been an indicator of this (Berry, 2012). In the words of Wang (2022, p.28), the rapid and almost revolutionary growth of digital humanities “indicates a shift of paradigm of research, which marks the rise of a new academic paradigm and reading method in humanities studies.”

Indology can be no exception. Digitization of sources and even basic search of Indology primary sources, is still far from complete. However, despite this, other entry points into the digital knowledge lifecycle need not be beyond adaptation. Almost all academic disciplines now use ‘data’ as a cornerstone to create, verify hypotheses, research questions as well as larger conceptualization of theories. The digital knowledge life cycle enables these data driven approaches and is able to create lasting impactful analysis and creates ‘virtuous cycles’ amplifying the impact of a discipline (Voytek, 2016; Yakel et al., 2019).

Indology has to adapt, sooner the better, to make itself contemporary and impactful. In the Indian knowledge traditions, every *shastra* (discipline) is defined not merely by its object of study (*prameya*) or the means of valid cognition (*pramana*), but by its purpose (*prayojana*). *Prayojana* is the transformative telos that motivates inquiry and confers ethical and moral value upon knowledge (Chattopadhyaya & Gangopadhyaya, 1967). Within Indology, the *prameya* has historically referred to texts, inscriptions, linguistic forms, and other objects of analysis, while the *pramana* has consisted of philological, hermeneutic, linguistic, and historical methods. In the emerging digital era, the mode of the *pramana* might be new (digital and data-driven) but this needs to be used to affect the *prayojana* positively, by renewing the relevance of Indic thought in global academic discourse. The illustrations here in this paper are meant to serve as an exemplar.

Conclusion

Media narratives can significantly impact Indological analysis—ideas of greatness, secularism, compassion, genetics can potentially impact interpretation of ancient texts and color past events. There is a need to delink modern meanings from ancient definitions for terms like karma, karuna, dharma etc. as work, compassion and religion. There is also an immediate need to understand how narratives shape interpretations and self-identity. The entire struggle of decolonization is a struggle to unravel and disentangle centuries of reinforcement of carefully designed narratives and institutional as well as individual reward structures to enforce them.

The almost blind belief in science, known as Scientism, is observed in a majority of science powered narratives seen in narrative building in academic settings (Galileo Commission Report, 2019). The Genes narrative, observed powering the continued idea of Aryan Invasion, is another success indicator of Scientism. The “data” powered alternative is, we feel, a complementary trajectory of research and articulation where correctness and causality is undeniable. Speculative hypotheses have damaged the civilizational basis of Bharat for a long time now, and needs a corrective measure.

Media analysis is, therefore, not merely a complementary tool but an essential component of Indological studies. By integrating media narratives into Indological studies, researchers can uncover new dimensions of interpretation, providing a more dynamic understanding of India's past. The inclusion of media analysis in Indological research can uncover brand new avenues for investigating historical personalities, events, and texts. Further, the integration of

the rapidly advancing area of Digital Indology and media analysis can potentially attract a younger demographic, increase inter-generation collaborations, and leverage the ascent of Indian Knowledge Systems as a legitimate challenge to the Western stronghold on Indological narratives.

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