

From Shore to Story: Mobility and Media Representations in Subaltern Contexts

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Abstract

This essay seeks to investigate the degree of (im)mobility accorded to subaltern populations in popular media narratives. It analyzes the mediated representations of “untouchables” or Dalits, who remain at the bottom of the social and caste hierarchy in India. Within communication scholarship, conceptual, empirical, or descriptive analyses of this marginalized population are largely missing because they require “extensive contextual explanation that journals do not have the patience for” (George and Karyotakis, 2023). In essence, this is a symptom of a broader problem in the study of communication: the inherent centering of media at the expense of the sociological scaffolding that binds any real-life phenomenon. Building on the work of scholars such as Morley (2008) and de Sousa Santos (2007), my essay underscores the importance of cultural and contextual analyses for a holistic understanding of underserved populations, particularly in the Global South.

My study offers a “symptomatic reading” of the (im)mobility discourse on a subaltern fisher in “The Science of the Seas” multimedia feature series in *The Wire Science*, a popular science magazine in India. Symptomatic reading, according to Best and Marcus (2009), constitutes a mode of interpretation that assumes that “a text’s truest meaning lies in what it does not say.” In such interpretations, it is therefore crucial that we situate the text within its cultural and historical context. I pay close attention to the representational context of the “The Science of the Seas,” including the ways in which caste structures, either directly or indirectly, ascribe various occupational roles in the Indian society—the fisher in the feature series, for example, hails from a lower caste and the writer from the highest caste. I demonstrate further that through its storyline and strategic exclusions, “The Science of the Seas” promotes the stereotypes of mobility based upon caste power: while the writer is presented as someone who travels internationally, the fisher is shown to remain near and preoccupied with the sea and the locale. The essay concludes by highlighting that it is only by understanding the historical and cultural baggage of social discrimination—rather than by remaining fixated on media as a principal object of study—that communication and cultural studies scholars can truly understand the lived experiences of marginalized populations in the Global South.

Keywords: Representations, subaltern, caste, non-Western media, global south, mobility

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BIO

Subin Paul is Assistant Professor of communication at IE University, Spain, where he specializes in cultural analyses of media. His research builds on ideas from communication and “area studies” to examine mediated practices and phenomena in Asia. He also engages in conversations surrounding the impact of interdisciplinary knowledge on communication scholarship. His work has appeared in venues such as the *International Journal of Communication*, *Digital Journalism*, *Journalism: Theory, Practice & Criticism*, *Journalism History*, and *Modern Asian Studies*. He has won awards/grants from the International Communication Association and the South Asia Institute at Columbia University.