



## NEWS COVERAGE OF CASTE DISCRIMINATION IN TSUNAMI RELIEF AND REHABILITATION: AN INVESTIGATION INTO AGENDA SETTING, FOCUSING EVENTS AND POLICY CHANGE

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### **Abstract:**

*The concept of “focusing events”-sudden, catastrophic, vivid events that disrupts routine news such as natural disasters has gained traction in growing body of research on the agenda setting function of media in the context of disasters (Birkland, 1998). This research approach aims to understand disaster events and explain policy changes through a combination of factors, such as issue characteristics, news media coverage, stakeholder activities and policy makers’ responses. This paper is based on an empirical investigation into the issue of caste discrimination in the aftermath of 2004-tsunami informed by the approach of focusing events. Using qualitative media and document analysis, the study examines selected online news media coverage of discrimination against Dalits (a marginalized group in India), to map the interaction between regional civil society organizations who acted as primary news source and news media. The main conclusion is that interest groups representing marginalized communities and news media interacted in complex ways to co-created the discourse on caste discrimination and were able to successfully influence the policy agenda to bring corrective actions*

**Keywords:** *Online News, Tsunami, Dalit, Discrimination, Agenda Setting*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Disasters constitute a significant moment in individual lives. Very few can escape the direct or indirect influence of disasters. Apart from the tragic loss of lives and properties, major disasters can subject a country’s social, economic political system to stress test. In the aftermath of 2004-Tsunami, many nations in Asia were pushed to the limits of their coping capacities prompting governments to take concrete actions for relief and rehabilitation. In this process, there were considerable shift in international, national and regional policies to incorporate the emerging insights on disaster risk management best practices into their overall national disaster policies. Disaster management policies became a national priority and a social calling.

What is it about 2004-tsunami, that made them critical for policy making? In the past thirty years, there has been a literature from agenda setting and policy making raises questions over the importance of catastrophic events on policy making process. This paper provides a micro-analysis of how discrimination against the marginalized Dalit communities was brought to policy agenda using the framework of focusing events (Birkland, 1998). What processes,

modalities and strategies where adopted by different stakeholders to draw attention to continuing discrimination in disaster relief and rehabilitation efforts? Specifically, this paper focuses on the role of news media coverage focusing events and its policy consequence.

This study depends on the concept of “focusing events” as presented in John Kingdon in his classic book *Agendas, Alternatives and Public Policies* (1995) and extended by Birkland through his empirical studies (**Birkland, 1998; Birkland, 1997; Birkland, 2006a; Birkland, 2006b**). Focusing events are unexpected major news events that cause major stakeholders-bureaucrats, officials, experts, civic society activist, survivor communities, media and, the general public, to pay intense attention to the underlying problems revealed by the catastrophic events. These events can induce collective action, political pressures from interest groups and thus lead to policy change. Despite the obvious significance of focusing events, there has been little systematic effort to understand and formulate empirical questions to test the features of focusing events and their subsequent impact.

The massive destruction caused by December 26, 2004 tsunami waves has been on an unparalleled scale incomparable to any other natural disaster in the recent past. For millions of survivors, a way of life that centered on their familiarity with the seas was severely disrupted. The Tsunami has not only wrecked the livelihood of families who depended on the sea, but it has also brought into sharp focus some of the long-standing issues about caste discrimination, poverty and human rights as well as the role of the media in informing, aiding and managing relief operations<sup>1</sup>.

The study aims to ascertain the influence of media coverage in driving caste related issues too policy agenda in the post-tsunami. We conducted online research using the Google News Archive. Google news achieves a publicly accessible news-specific search engine. The objective of the online study is to a) ascertain the media response to Dalit issues during post-tsunami relief and recovery phase. b) to identify key themes and critical issues relating to discrimination c) to examine the news sources used in media reports and 2) to examine the interaction between civil society organizations and news media in constructing discrimination. The overall purpose is to investigate the dynamics through which news media interact with news sources during disasters to bring focus to specific issue constituency.

The research underscores the importance of media in disaster risk reduction by encouraging journalists to consider covering disaster-related issues even during the pre-disaster phase. By sustaining the coverage of the disaster-related problems during ‘normal’ periods, news media can influence millions of citizens to be more concerned about disaster risks in their community and thus adopt appropriate mitigation or preparedness measures (**Mohahan and Ettinger, 2006**). In this context, it is critical to examine how disaster rehabilitation and restructuring programs have covered by news media.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

How we perceived natural disasters and the way we respond to these challenges would depend in no small extent on the information, we received. News media plays a significant role in shaping our perceptions and reactions to natural disasters. News media plays a critical role in providing essential hazard-related information to the public and policymakers. In doing so, the media sets the personal and political agenda for creating a culture of preparedness. “Media coverage can affect large populations in ways that extend deeper than mere beliefs, by

influencing how policies and agendas are developed and implemented” (**Mohahan and Ettinger, 2006**).

Focusing events such as 2004 Asian tsunami, stimulate public and special interest groups to pay closer attention to the issues lays at the root of major vivid natural and human-induced disasters. At the heart of focusing events are agenda setting processes, competitive politics, news media routine and logics and civil society activism. Focusing events are not the one cause of policy changes, but contributes to it serving as a catalyst. Further, **Mohahan and Ettinger (2006)** note that ‘news coverage has the capacity to generate national and international attention and catalyze financial and material aid support during disasters’ by focusing on specific deep-rooted issues such as inequality. However, due to its unpredictability, the role of focusing events in policy making has been under studied.

The question of the media's role during the aftermath of tsunami and the subsequent rescue, relief, and rehabilitation has been the subject of much controversy. On the one hand, we have seen that media coverage of the disaster was phenomenal. Print, TV, Radio and the Internet played an important role in creating awareness about the extent of damage, relief operations, government and civil society initiatives. The media supported aid to flow to the affected people, indirectly through disseminating information to the broader population and directly by setting up relief funds through Trusts, etc.

However, several concerns were raised about by the media coverage of the Tsunami. Through the support of the media during relief and rescue operations was phenomenal and included several exceptional practices, media portrayal of the tsunami was sensationalized, and exaggerated, producing a distorted perception of reality and risks involved. Questions concerning what issues were presented and what issues were not presented, the standards that one should expect for public understanding of scientific and environmental issues are also being raised.

There is a universal acknowledgment of the media's power and influence in disaster perception and management, as well as the continuing dilemma of their role in either preventing or ameliorating these disasters. Public perceptions of risks involved in various disasters are the key to disaster preparedness and substantially contributes to a reduction in damage to lives and property. The role of the media in conveying a precise and accurate perception of the risks involved to the public is being debated since the public's understanding of the dangers has a direct bearing on their evacuation preparedness and disaster mitigation. News media do not (or need not?) set out to reduce disaster risk. However, it is often through communication, that these issues reach the public sphere, gain political support and sustain policy interest (**Birkland ,1997**).

**Birkland (1997)** defines potential focusing events as “an event that is sudden, relatively rare, can be reasonably defined as harmful or revealing the possibility of potentially greater future harms, inflicts harms or suggests potential harms that are or could be concentrated on a definable geographical area or community of interest, and that is known to policy makers and the public virtually simultaneously (**Birkland ,1997**).

**Kingdon (1995)** developed a model of focusing events based on the metaphor of “streams”. His work identified three streams i). state of politics and public opinion termed political stream , ii). potential policy solutions to the problem terms policy stream and, iii). the attributes of problem, its trends, its evolution, termed problem stream. During normal course of policy development, these three streams act autonomously despite close interactions. However,

when a major, vivid, catastrophe events breaks into news, the three streams tend to merge, creating a window of opportunity for policy change. For **Zahariadis** (1993) streams approach useful not just for agenda-setting opportunities but also for decision opportunities: “a *decision* to make new or change existing policy may be more likely when the streams come together.” Paul Sabatier's Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) proposes a similar stream model to understand policy change process, through advocacy works of civil society organizations.

Interest groups become a kind of policy entrepreneurs and enlist news media to promote their cause. News media's mandate to fill the “news holes”, its competitive environment and profit motivation further leads to their cooptation. Through selection of sources and issues, through claims making, news media address critical uncovered topics in disaster situation. As **Mohahan and Ettinger** (2006) argue “Media and public narratives centered on blame reinforce the perceived need to assign culpability as part of the larger response to a disaster event, which can in turn be a hindrance by diverting media and public focus from other aspects of the response that might benefit from additional attention and other resources”.

In this way, NGOs acting as policy entrepreneurs and news media acting as amplifiers create conditions for government, policy makers and relief workers to respond to the emerging discourse. Partly to as a necessity to act on complaints and protest, and partly to avoid taking moral responsibility the decision makers respond to these issues. Thus, the politics of focusing events leads to change in public policy in the context of disaster management. This paper illustrates this dynamics using issues of discrimination Dalits during tsunami relief and rehabilitation.

## **METHOD**

This study draws on the methodological assumptions and guidelines for qualitative media analysis based on the work of **Altheide** (1996). The research strategy focuses on how the accounts given by media are influenced by the sources and jointly engage in the politics of focusing events outlined above. We searched news archive to from December 24, 2004, to July 1, 2007. For a combination of keywords relating to discrimination with specific reference to Dalits. To assess the relative emphasis given to Dalit issues in news media, we compared the search hits with several combinations of keywords about closely related issues of social discrimination such as women, gender. These comparisons served as an approximate indicator of emphasis given to Dalits specific problems in the relief and rehabilitation phases.

First, we analyzed the number of hits produced by each of the keywords with their alternative uses. The search results serve a rough indicator of coverage given to Dalit issues concerning overall Tsunami coverage. Of the 13,300-article referring to Tsunami and India, we find that 1320 news articles related to women and 107 items explicitly mentioned "gender." We also find that 211 articles referred to "caste." The corresponding figures for "scheduled castes" and "scheduled tribes" within Tsunami related articles are nine and ten respectively. We also find 72 articles referring to "Dalits" in their coverage. Also, we found 173 articles referring to "discrimination" After removing duplicates and broken links we selected thirty articles for qualitative content analysis.

From the data, it is clear that Dalit issues have received comparatively less coverage than "gender" related issues. To identify the key themes, we carried out keyword in context analysis. The online news sites carried few reports about discrimination against Dalits. From the

preliminary analysis of the news reports we identified civil society reports and documents that was mentioned in these reports. Reports produced by civil society organizations were collected for the document analysis. These included reports by NGOs, Reports of public hearing, documents of International NGOs, press releases. These reports were examined for news items mentioned or quoted. In this way, we were able to examine the mutual dependency of news media reports and sources for the micro-analysis. The results are presented in a narrative form to capture the emergent consensus view on discrimination against Dalits and government responses.

## **RESULTS**

### ***Analysis of Reports by Civil Society Organizations***

Discrimination against Dalits in the aftermath of the tsunami was brought to the local, national and international attention of the public through reports by the NGOs such as National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights, based on their first-hand observations in fact-finding missions<sup>ii</sup>. NCDHR' clarion call to take "cognizance of the plight of Dalit victims in the tsunami-hit areas and to ensure Dalits get adequate attention and access to all relief and rehabilitation measures." A statement issued on January 9, 2005, identified six different forms of discrimination by the fisher community against Dalits, and fifteen forms of discrimination or negligence against Dalits on the part of the government officials and police. The statement also pointed to nine forms of discrimination against Dalit workers forced to engage in the relief operations<sup>iii</sup>. It provided case studies of discrimination and made an appeal "to all actors in the field, including the Government machinery, to focus their personal and immediate attention to caste issues." This appeal received significant local, national and international attention. The National Public Hearing held in Chennai in August 2005, eight months after the tsunami, concluded that <sup>iv</sup>"there is no equitable distribution of resources in the process of relief and rehabilitation works to [non-Caste fishers] Tsunami victims since Dalits are in the degraded position on the caste hierarchy... it is evident that the government focused [on] the [caste] fishers in distributing the relief materials and compensation during tsunami... the relief operation of the government of Tamil Nadu has widened the division between the Dalits and non-Dalits<sup>v</sup>."

The tsunami hit three mainland Indian states: Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, and Kerala, as well as parts of the Union Territory of Pondicherry and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. India's Ministry of Home Affairs put the death toll at 12,405 (as of May 25, 2005)<sup>vi</sup>. The hardest hit region was Nagapattinam, which recorded the highest number of deaths. Most of those killed were from the coastal-dwelling caste fishermen community (known as Meenavars or, in some Catholic areas, as Fernando or Mukkuvars). An estimated 175 Dalits died<sup>vii</sup>. Dalit losses – such as small, unregistered log-boats (kattamurams), small quantities of nets, bicycles, containers, painting equipment or stored shells destined for limestone production – were less visible<sup>viii</sup>.

In many cases, the livelihoods of the non-ocean fishing communities were also interrupted for far longer than those of the caste fishermen<sup>ix</sup>. A preliminary inquiry in the post-Tsunami scenario has revealed that caste-based conflicts continue to manifest in relief, rehabilitation and restructuring programs. The entrenched discrimination based on caste prevalent in these village societies was visible during the relief operations<sup>x</sup>. "Various fact-finding teams reported that Dalits were denied food aid because of low death count<sup>xi</sup>. According to these reports, the beneficiary list contained only names of the dominant members of the fishing community<sup>xii</sup>.

### *Analysis of Online News*

Online news media reports selected for analysis focused on extensive damage to Dalit households and property in all the five districts including Nagapattinam. Rediff news site<sup>xiii</sup> citing a United Nations study conducted in conjunction with the Asian Development Bank and the World Bank estimates, reported that twenty percent of the tsunami-affected people are not fishermen, but engaged in agriculture and small and micro enterprises. Most of them were Dalits. According to the IPS News report, Dalit livelihoods have been destroyed and water sources contaminated by seawater. There were cases of unidentified bodies being buried close to Dalit settlements despite the availability of land elsewhere. Restoration of drinking water, roads, public health services, communication facilities, etc. were done faster and more efficiently in fisher areas while Dalit areas were neglected<sup>xiv</sup>. Many Dalit families have not received compensation for death because they were not in the first list drawn up after the tsunami struck which entitles victims to receive payment and prepared on Dec. 27 and 28<sup>xv</sup>. According to these reports revenue officials generally took the view that fishermen communities were not the only ones that were financially destroyed by the tsunami. In the case of Dalits, who are equally dependent on the coastal economy and environment and who suffered just as much as the fishermen the losses could not be easily quantified<sup>xvi</sup>. The complexities of caste issues in relief and rehabilitation were explored in reports by international media such as BBC<sup>xvii</sup>.

IPS News further reported that the extrication of bodies was done only by manual scavengers who are exclusively Dalits. For this, 'safari karmacharis,' were brought in from neighboring municipalities and corporations. They had to work without proper protective clothing like gloves, face masks, etc<sup>xviii</sup>.

The Hindu reported that Hundreds of Dalits and other lower-caste families have remained excluded from relief that has been distributed by the state or the central government, by political parties or non-governmental organizations, by local churches or community associations<sup>xix</sup>. Mostly poor and illiterate, they cannot document their economic and property claims and so have remained excluded from compensation and relocation schemes<sup>xx</sup>. There were reports that suggested that only fishers have received help from the government and non-governmental organizations<sup>xxi</sup>. The lower castes members claimed that they have not been allowed to share emergency shelters with others and denied access to community toilets Asia News site reported.<sup>xxii</sup>

Aid-India website reported several stories of Dalits losing their livelihood and income.. Many of these stories prompted response from national and international NGOs. For example, Oxfam took the initiative to provide training to fifty women on coir making which proved useful. Similarly, Asian Media Forum reported many cases of caste discrimination.<sup>xxiii</sup> Human Rights Watch followed up on these reports and confirmed them in their reports and press releases. They pointed out that some higher-caste fishing communities refused to share emergency shelter and rations with the Dalits<sup>xxiv</sup>.

The news reports often triggered follow-up actions by government agencies and NGOs. Many of these investigations confirmed the validity of the claims. For example, M. Solomon Bernard Shaw of the National Service Scheme, a semi-autonomous program under the University Grants Commission carried out an investigation which revealed that "there was roughly fourteen square meters shelter, for a family of six to ten members, are made of poor-

quality cardboard sheets. Many say their plastic roofing has long blown away in the strong wind and rain while asbestos sheets make the shanties unbearably hot during summer<sup>xxv</sup>.

The news reports recorded several cases protest against of explicit discrimination<sup>xxvi</sup>. For example, one resident Maria a participant in the government public hearing said that "We have approached the government now, as they have not given us adequate relief. We had protested against the attitude, and we had met the collector, and given a petition<sup>xxviii</sup>". Issues faced by salt cultivators are another example of discrimination reported by the media. Salt fields were completely submerged, filled with saline water and sand and would take resources to clean and rebuilt them<sup>xxviii</sup>. Info Change India reported the case in February 2005 which was followed by an investigation by a team of activists<sup>xxix</sup>.

Many reports provided a detailed assessment of the impact of Tsunami on Dalits.<sup>xxx</sup> But were dependent on NGOs and activist for their sources. Rediff reported Medha Patkar (a prominent social activist of the Narmada Bachao Andolan and the National Alliance for People's Movement) as saying : "Even though majority of those affected by the tsunami are fishermen, the administration also has to address the needs of hundreds of Dalits who are indirectly connected to the fishing industry and whose lives have been adversely indirectly affected by the tragedy.' In the same report, she said 'Many Dalits who make fish baskets for a living, or transport fish from one place to another or do manual work in ports and boats, have also been deprived of their livelihood, which the government has not taken into consideration.<sup>xxxi</sup> The report that carried the Medha Patkars statement also reported that The National Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes intends to monitor such discrimination and point out the particular requirements of Dalits in these affected areas so that their livelihood needs are met.

### ***Discrimination in Relief Camps***

Several stories focused on discrimination in relief camps, during six months following tsunami, The tsunami destroyed 1914 Dalit homes<sup>xxxii</sup>. The Dalits were not able to stay in the relief camps that sheltered non-Dalits and the Dalit relief camp had to be set up several kilometers away from their former dwellings.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Several news stories on relief camp mentioned discrimination.<sup>xxxiv</sup> For example, many reports mentioned evident of discrimination even in temporary relief camp, from the location and the quality of the material provided to them.<sup>xxxv</sup> In many places, relief camps were organized along caste lines, with separate fields for Dalits, with aid distribution in the camps often erratic. Indian Express consistently reported discrimination against Dalits.

**Mz Jayanthi**, the coordinator of the South Indian Fish workers Society, said in a news report published in Reuters: "Dalits are facing discrimination in all relief camps where they are present. However, society does not want to raise the issue, as it would complicate things further. Without making it public, we are opening separate facilities exclusively for Dalits<sup>xxxvi</sup>" India Together another popular news site also reported a UNICEF official as saying that although the government, relief agencies and aid workers do not discriminate against Dalits, the caste issue exists.

The officials were slow to respond since the Dalits did not come under the definition of 'affected person as reported in Indian Express<sup>xxxvii</sup>'. The rehabilitation policy of the State was focused on property loss, and that it did not have account for people with no capita. According to these reports the overall implementation of relief process to the Dalits and tribals should be

monitored closely<sup>xxxviii</sup>. Thus the consequence of these stories was to compel the policy makers to pay more attention to discrimination in relief and rehabilitation.

### ***Impact on Dalit Livelihood***

Outlook reported several stories on livelihood after the tsunami<sup>xxxix</sup>. "The NCHDR estimates the loss to agriculture and livestock in India at over \$37 million<sup>xl</sup>. For each such "tsunami-hit" area and family, there are five surrounding "tsunami-affected" areas where people were supporting the fishing community - carpenters, traders, shopkeepers, cleaners, craftsmen, farmers and farm workers, ice plant owners, fishnet and boat menders - have lost their sources of income. Dalits have engaged in fishing in backwaters. They are also employed as crew, as loaders and unloaders, in vending fish and manufacturing and selling salt. Dalits are engaged in the collection of seashells and conches. Dalit and tribal communities are also known to participate in and depend on fisheries in various ways<sup>xli</sup>. This report was widely covered in news media<sup>xlii</sup>.

There was a call for the government to enlarge the scope of the definition of affected people and also extend the same concessions to them - such as the construction of houses as are being given to fishers<sup>xliii</sup>. The fishermen were given subsidy for buying new boats, and other affected Dalit groups should also be provided with various means of livelihood. Ilango another Dalit Activist who served as a key source for many news media<sup>xliv</sup>. Activists reported that assessments of Dalit loss of property were underestimated as the Dalits did not own pucca houses, unlike the fishermen community which was comparatively better off<sup>xlv</sup>.

### ***Dalit and Gender Discrimination***

Several reports addressed gender dimensions of the Dalit discrimination<sup>xlvi</sup>. For example, APWLD a development news site reported that "Dalit shelters are usually set up near graveyards or garbage dumps without sanitation and electricity. The toilets and washrooms, or rather lack of them, are still a primary concern in camps. Women are afraid to go to nearby bushes for fear of rape and molestation. The relief supplies were handed to men who spend the money on alcohol leading to increased domestic violence. Dalit women face increased violence inside as well as outside the temporary shelters<sup>xlvii</sup>."

Many news reports reported cases of women, who have lost their husbands and were not recognized as heads of household thus denied access to rehabilitation and relief assistance. They are not eligible for government support<sup>xlviii</sup>.<sup>xlix</sup>. Another news site reported that "Dalit women earn their living by catching prawns, snails, crabs, and fish in the backwaters!" As a consequence, their livelihood has been thoroughly damaged by tsunami<sup>li</sup>.

### ***Government Responses to Discrimination***

The news media also carried the perspectives of the government through Nagapattinam Sub Collector<sup>lii</sup>. The government argued that the separation of people belonging to different communities in relief camps was a conscious decision and a practical one. "There are the real divisions and distrust among the communities... a crisis like this is no time to experiment with casteist and religious amity... The Government could not risk putting them up altogether<sup>liiii</sup>." The news media asked what the risk was, but Umanath declined to comment. The report said that the

government is reinforcing the old divides and hatreds. Until the tsunami, they could at least tolerate each other<sup>liv</sup>.”

The government has denied allegations that relief distribution is being carried out along caste lines, and says it is providing relief to every tsunami-affected family. "There is no intention of closing down any camps, and we are providing relief to each family. We will provide temporary shelter as these relief camps are getting overcrowded," said Veerashanmugha Moni, Nagapattinam's senior government administrator to *The Hindu*<sup>lv</sup>”.

The media also reported many who actively refused many complaints of discrimination. "Those doing the discriminating brush all this aside. Says Chellayya, a Meenavar fisherman at a Tharambagadi camp: ‘These Dalits have been playing mischief, going back to the villages and looting houses. That is why we do not want them around here<sup>lvi</sup>’.”

In response to the criticism that Dalit discrimination is on the rise in the post-tsunami period. *The Hindu* reported that: "Adi Dravidars in the backward Cauvery delta region of Nagapattinam district have started replacing their huts with tiled houses or small concrete houses in about 250 to 300 sq. areas on their own intending to overcoming difficulties during rainy and flood situations. Several Dalit families, especially in the tsunami-hit coastal villages, are now taking advantage of free financial assistance of Rupees one lakh being provided by a non-governmental organization that came forward to help the Dalits and other most backward community families in the district to build their own homes following the suggestion made by M. Jayaraman, Collector, recently<sup>lvii</sup>." Government took longer to investigate caste discrimination issue, as more information becomes available to officials and policy makers. As more information on information were made available in public domain, it became imperative for the government to respond. As a consequence, news media, with sources from civil society organization were able to jointly create a collation of pressure groups to affect policy change.

## **SUMMARY OF MAJOR FINDINGS**

The present study found that online news media provided reported discriminatory practices, specifically related to relief and rehabilitation. A focused synthesis of key messages conveyed the online news reports and civil society documents suggest the following consensus view. During the immediate relief phase, Dalits were not registered as victims of the tsunami, because their community did not experience the direct loss of life and property, like the fishing communities. Since the disaster, there has been systematic discrimination against Dalits seeking emergency relief. Since many Dalits were indirectly dependent on fishing communities for their livelihood, they were affected by Tsunami. Further, since many of the Dalits are below the poverty line, the effect of loss of livelihood has had a severe impact on the individuals and facilities.

Discrimination was reported in relief camps. These practices were in line with traditional forms of caste discrimination. The government and the NGOs working in relief camps segregated relief camps based on caste as they felt that cast-mixing in relief camps would increase social tensions. Thus, separate quarters, water, food, cash were provided to Dalits victim, reinforcing discrimination.

Dalit communities were more vulnerable than other groups due to pre-existing debts, low savings, poor quality settlements, lack of assets, low social status, dearth of social capital in the

form of useful organisations and ability to 'plug into' media and social networks, lack of adequate political representation, and their reliance on daily wage labor. Despite the minor loss of life and property. Dalits have suffered significantly more than other groups as a result of their relative vulnerability, poverty, and invisibility.

Dalits experience discrimination in the allotment of housing for long-term rehabilitation. Few Dalits have lost their homes from the direct impact of the tsunami. However, since many Dalits have lost their livelihood, they were forced to sell their valuables to make for the lost income. This phenomenon pushed them into ineptness as news media analysis revealed.

Discriminatory practices were also systematically related to gender and age. Women felt particularly vulnerable as many were employed in part-time jobs linked to fishing communities and their income provided a valuable supplement at men's earning in a typical household. They were denied clothing, food, and cash for the same reasons-since they did not lose anything directly from Tsunami; women were excluded from benefits. Many NGO and few government agencies sought to address the issue, but by and large, they view such discrimination as a continuation of preexisting social stratification instead of the result of Tsunami. While it is true that the roots of caste discrimination are steeped in the social, political and cultural history of the region, such discrimination has been exasperated during Tsunami. In recognition of this problem, the government has introduced several programs, schemes, policies to mitigate conditions of the Dalits. However, caste tensions continue to manifest in the implementation of government programs and policies as several communities compete for scarce government resources like subsidies and reservations. Discrimination was and is inherent in many societies, with disasters often magnifying the problem. Dalits continue to be marginalized in disaster management and mitigation. In line with **Birkland** (1996) we can conclude that public institutions are "constrained by their rules, procedures, and folkways, and often cannot react as rapidly as the news media. Indeed, it is often news media coverage in the immediate aftermath of an event that impels government to take up the issue." This has been the case with discrimination against Dalits in the aftermath of tsunami.

## **CONCLUSION**

According to **Mohahan and Ettinger** (2006), "The media hold great power in shaping how the public will make sense of what happened, who should be responsible, and the manner in which officials should be responding". Content analysis of online news from Google news archive mentioning the essential terms tsunami, discrimination, caste, and Dalits. The search yielded 72 news stories relevant to the topic. Keyword in context and thematic analysis of the news articles enabled the researcher to identify the significant dimension of reported caste discrimination.

This study had provided an illustration of this thesis. Online news media provided anecdotal evidence of continuing discrimination against Dalits during mass emergency situations. Several inquiries were conducted, mostly by NGOs, to ascertain the prevalence of discriminatory practices in the aftermath of Tsunami. These fieldworks were in turn based on several news media reports that provided anecdotal evidence for such practices. The content analysis reveals that media carried out a small, but significant coverage on Dalit discrimination. Regional, national and international NGOs later compiled these reports. They further examined the coverage using field-based inquiry into discriminatory practices. Following Tsunami, several

media organizations and journalists have begun to recognize the intricacies of reporting on issues such as natural disasters.

This research concludes that quality disaster reporting makes a difference in policy debates. It can prevent great harm and save lives. It can empower the citizens to make informed choices on disaster preparedness and risk perception. By accurately reporting disaster risks, media can encourage appropriate preparation and the vulnerable help section of the population to evolve a sound evacuation or coping strategy. Media can also sensationalize the threat and create panic and unrest. Journalists, thus have a professional obligation for reporting disaster risks accurately by providing the readers the right context. **Birkland** (1997) argues that ‘the extent to which this immediate attention to near-term costs of a disaster translates into more systematic and comprehensive responses to the underlying causes’ needs to be closely examined.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>i</sup> CERD (2006). Alternate Periodic Report of India. The Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR) India.

<sup>ii</sup> The Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD), National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR) India, International Dalit Solidarity Network, Human Rights Law Network (HRLN), Social Watch-Tamil Nadu, Centre for Budget and Governance Accountability (CBGA), Institute of Development Education, Action and Studies (IDEAS), Indian Institute of Dalit Studies (IIDS), Safai Karmachari Andolan, Sakshi Human Rights Watch(Andhra Pradesh), Centre for Dalit Rights (CDR, Rajasthan) Indian Social Institute (ISI, New Delhi).

<sup>iii</sup> Manoharan, Vincent. (2005). Report on The After Effects of the Tsunami on Affected Dalit Communities. National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights. Press Release. 12, Jan. 2005.

<sup>iv</sup> People’s Watch Tamilnadu (2005). Tamil Nadu Tsunami Response Last Update On 26.9.05 Prepared By M.Louis Special Coordinator People’s Watch-Tamilnadu

<sup>v</sup> Manoharan, Vincent. (2005). Also, quoted in People Watch Tamil Nadu tsunami Response Reort, 2005

<sup>vi</sup> Peoples Tribunal (2006) Voices of the most marginalised. Tsunami survivors for whom justice is still a distant dream! People’s Tribunal Report on Housing Rights, headed by Miloon Kothari, United Nations Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing, organised by Kadaloraval Makkal Padugaphu Kulu (Coastal Community Protection Committee-CCPC). Books for Change

<sup>vii</sup> ‘Disaster Management in India’ (Status Report) of the Government of India, August 2004, on which the Government of Tamil Nadu has acted

<sup>viii</sup> Gill, Timothy (2007). Making things worse how ‘caste blindness’ in indian post-tsunami disaster recovery has exacerbated vulnerability and exclusion. Dalit network netherlands (dnn). Support of people’s watch tamilnadu

<sup>ix</sup> National Dalit Watch (2007). Report on NCDHR Monitoring Disaster Response and Preparedness for Inclusion and Equity. National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights

<sup>x</sup> IFRC report on Disaster and Discrimination 2007

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