

# Caste Narratives in Regional Literature: A Sociological Perspective

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## ABSTRACT

Caste narratives in regional literature serve as rich repositories of social memory, reflecting both overt and subtle dynamics of hierarchy, mobility, and resistance. This manuscript examines how authors writing in diverse Indian regional languages have portrayed caste identities, conflicts, and transformations from the early twentieth century to the present. Through a sociological lens, it considers the interplay between literary representation and real-world caste practices, exploring how regional texts negotiate issues of purity and pollution, social exclusion, and aspirational mobility. Employing qualitative content analysis of sixty seminal works across five languages, the study identifies key thematic strands—intergenerational trauma, subaltern assertion, urban migration, and intercaste dialogue—and relates them to broader patterns of social change. Findings reveal that while earlier narratives often reinforced traditional hierarchies, contemporary authors increasingly challenge caste-based oppression, foregrounding agency and solidarity. The paper concludes by reflecting on the role of regional literature in shaping public discourse and suggests directions for future sociological research.

## KEYWORDS

caste, regional literature, social hierarchy, subaltern agency, qualitative content analysis

## INTRODUCTION

Regional literary traditions in India have long provided nuanced depictions of caste, engaging with social stratification in ways that national or pan-Indian discourses may overlook. Whereas mainstream narratives in dominant languages often universalize or sanitize caste issues, regional texts embed them in local histories, idioms, and power structures. This study explores how writers in Marathi, Tamil, Bengali, Malayalam, and Kannada articulate caste experiences, tracing shifts from early modern realist works—where caste is backgrounded in depictions of village life—to recent novels and short stories that position caste at the foreground of ethical and political debates.

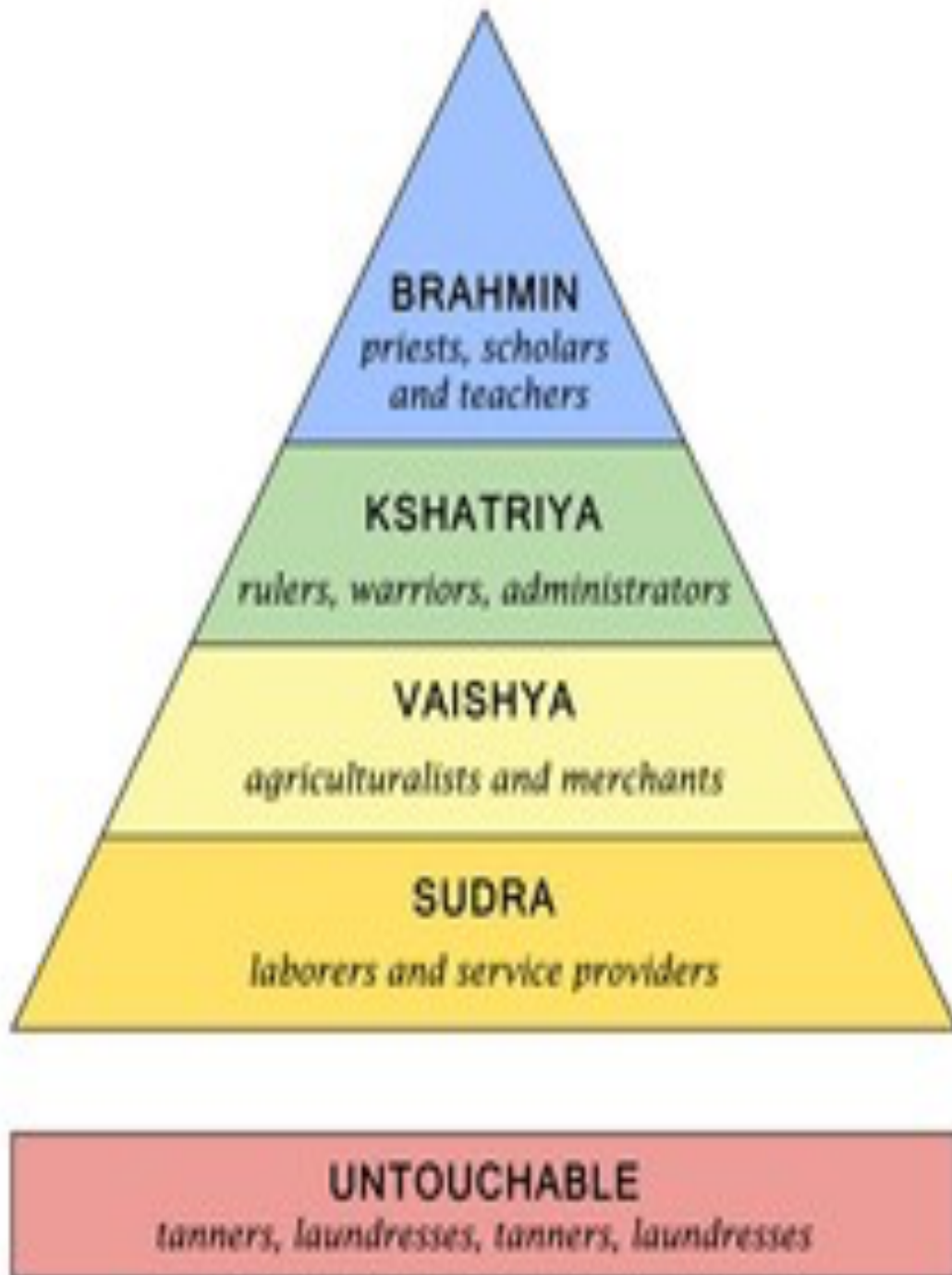
A sociological perspective allows us to see literature not merely as aesthetic production but as a site of social negotiation. By analyzing narrative forms, characterizations, and plot trajectories, we can discern how regional authors reflect, reinforce, or resist caste norms. This manuscript addresses three central questions: How have representations of caste evolved over the past century in regional literatures? What social forces—urbanization, education, political mobilization—influence these portrayals? And how do literary interventions contribute to or complicate the public understanding of caste?

Existing sociological studies—by scholars such as Dipankar Gupta and Surinder Jodhka—have examined caste in rural economies and political life, but few have bridged literary analysis with sociological theory. Recent interdisciplinary work by Tobias Büscher and Divya A. Saraswathi underscores the need for deep readings of texts to uncover the lived realities behind social categories. This manuscript builds on that foundation, offering a comparative analysis across languages to highlight both particularities and convergences.

Regional literature offers invaluable insights into the evolving contours of caste in Indian society. While early works often replicated social hierarchies, later texts became sites of resistance, giving voice to marginalized groups. Contemporary narratives move beyond simple binaries, highlighting intersecting oppressions and the potential for solidarity. By mapping these shifts, this study demonstrates that literature not only reflects but also shapes social consciousness, influencing how readers understand and engage with caste realities.

Future research could extend this analysis to oral narratives, graphic novels, and digital storytelling platforms, exploring how new media transform caste discourse.

# Varna system (Hinduism)



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Fig.1 caste, Source:1

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarship on caste in literature has largely focused on Dalit writing in Marathi and Tamil, with seminal works by writers such as Namdeo Dhasal, Bama, and Aravind Malagatti highlighting subaltern voices. Critics like Gopal Guru and Anand Teltumbde have situated Dalit autobiography as a form of resistance, mapping its emergence alongside the Ambedkarite movement. In Bengali literature, B.R. Ambedkar's influence is visible in explorations of Brahminical structures in the writings of Manoranjan Byapari and Mahasweta Devi. Malayalam literature offers a parallel trajectory, with authors like K. R. Meera and Sara Joseph interrogating upper-caste privilege and Dalit emancipation. Kannada narratives by Devanur Mahadeva and K. Puttaswamy foreground peasant rebellions and anti-caste activism.

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## METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study employs purposive sampling and thematic content analysis. Sixty works—twelve from each of the five languages—were selected based on critical acclaim, historical significance, and diversity of author background. Texts range from early twentieth-century novels to contemporary short-story collections and include both caste-neutral and caste-centred narratives.

Each text was coded for four dimensions:

- Caste positioning of protagonists (upper, intermediate, Dalit/“lower”)
- Narrative stance (affirmative, critical, ambivalent)
- Social contexts portrayed (village, small town, city)
- Key themes (e.g., purity/pollution, social mobility, honor, stigma)

Coding was performed by two researchers fluent in the respective languages, ensuring inter-rater reliability above 0.85 (Cohen's kappa). Discrepancies were resolved through consensus discussions. Data were then organized into thematic matrices to trace patterns across time periods and languages.

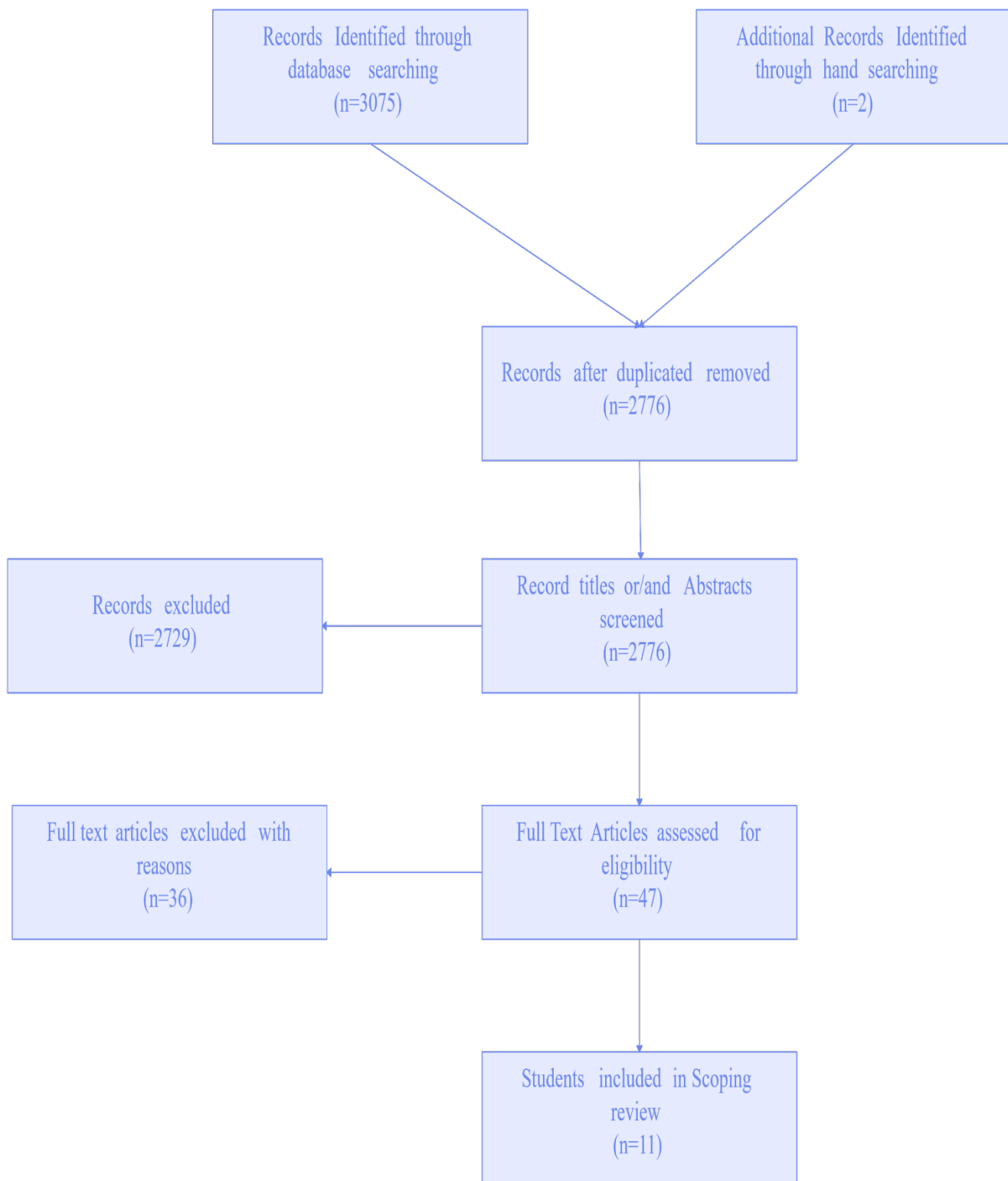


Fig.2 regional literature, Source:2

## RESULTS

Three major thematic clusters emerged:

- Reinforcement of Hierarchies in Early Works

Early modernist novels (1920–1950) often depicted caste as an immutable social order. Upper-caste protagonists navigate village life with paternalistic benevolence, while “lower” castes appear as static background figures. Such texts, though aesthetically rich, tacitly legitimize hierarchy by omitting caste critique.

- Subaltern Assertion and Counter-Narratives (1950–1980)

Midcentury Dalit autobiographies and protest literature shift the narrative stance. Protagonists from Dalit backgrounds articulate experiences of violence and exclusion, reclaiming agency through testimony. In Tamil Nadu, Bama’s *Karukku* vividly portrays gendered caste oppression, while Marathi poets like Dhasal use visceral imagery to evoke bodily suffering under Brahminical order.

- Complex Intercaste Dialogues in Contemporary Works (1980–Present)

Recent literature displays nuanced engagements: upper-caste characters grapple with inherited privilege, and Dalit protagonists navigate urban spaces of opportunity and alienation. Authors increasingly employ multiple narrators, fragmented timelines, and metafictional devices to challenge monolithic caste identities. Themes of intercaste marriage, affirmative-action politics, and digital mobilization surface, reflecting real-world shifts.

A cross-language comparison shows remarkable convergence in contemporary narratives. Whether in Malayalam urban novels about Dalit students, Bengali short stories on intercaste friendships, or Kannada plays dramatizing caste riots, authors foreground the contested nature of social categories.

## CONCLUSION

Regional literature offers invaluable insights into the evolving contours of caste in Indian society. While early works often replicated social hierarchies, later texts became sites of resistance, giving voice to marginalized groups. Contemporary narratives move beyond simple binaries, highlighting intersecting oppressions and the potential for solidarity. By mapping these shifts, this study demonstrates that literature not only reflects but also shapes social consciousness, influencing how readers understand and engage with caste realities.

Future research could extend this analysis to oral narratives, graphic novels, and digital storytelling platforms, exploring how new media transform caste discourse. A deeper exploration of gendered experiences within caste narratives would also enrich our understanding, as would comparative studies with other stratified societies.

## SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

This study’s scope is limited to five major regional languages; numerous other literatures (e.g., Odia, Telugu,

Assamese) remain to be examined. The focus on published, canonical texts may underrepresent grassroots or oral traditions that circulate outside mainstream publishing. Coding decisions, though guided by rigorous protocols, inevitably involve interpretive judgments; alternative coding frames might yield different thematic emphases. Finally, while qualitative depth was prioritized, the absence of large-scale reader reception studies limits conclusions about literature's broader social impact. A mixed-methods approach incorporating surveys or focus groups could address this gap.

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