

The Entwined Nexus: Television, Caste, and Media Capital in the Telugu States

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Abstract: *This article critically reviews Srinivas Panthukala's Media Capital: The Political Economy of 24/7 Television News in the Telugu States (2025) examines how television news in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana evolved into a sophisticated political and commercial institution.*

The book argues that the rise of 24/7 television news in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana cannot be understood merely through media liberalization or market competition. Instead, the regional media landscape is structurally shaped by caste hierarchies, capital accumulation, and party-political strategies.

Panthukala demonstrates that dominant agrarian-capitalist castes, particularly Reddys, Kammas, and Velamas channeled surplus capital into television news following economic liberalization in the 1990s. Media ownership thus became embedded within caste-political patronage networks, transforming news channels into instruments of ideological consolidation rather than autonomous watchdog institutions. Through detailed institutional mapping, the study highlights ownership structures, party alignments, and patterns of vertical and horizontal integration that reinforce media capture. The book further contends that sensationalism, polarized debates, and personality-centric programming are not merely products of commercial competition but serve partisan and caste interests. By tracing the shift from Doordarshan's monopoly to competitive satellite broadcasting, Panthukala connects broader transformations in Indian media to the consolidation of regional bourgeois power. Although limited by its temporal scope, which ends around 2014, the study offers a foundational regional political economy framework. It demonstrates how television news in the Telugu states functions as a hegemonic apparatus reproducing caste dominance, political legitimacy, and capitalist accumulation.

Keywords: Caste Capital; Political Economy of Communication; Telugu Media; Media Ownership; Hegemony

Srinivas Panthukala's *Media Capital: The Political Economy of 24/7 Television News in the Telugu States* (2025) examines how television news in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana evolved into a sophisticated political and commercial institution. The core argument is straight forward yet analytically rich: the Telugu television news industry is not merely an outcome of media liberalisation, technological change, or market competition. Rather, its emergence and everyday functioning are inseparable from regional caste hierarchies, capital accumulation and party-political strategies.

Panthukala demonstrates that the entry of 24/7 television news in the post-1990s period coincided with the consolidation of regional capitalist groups aligned with the dominant caste political elites. Television news, in his reading, became a strategic extension of caste capital and political influence rather than an autonomous 'fourth estate'. His central claim is clear: media in the Telugu region functions as a terrain of political economy shaped by caste power, not simply as a neutral public communication sphere (Panthukala 2025). This critical interpretation situates Panthukala's findings within the broader theoretical frameworks of media power and influence. In fact, this work was primarily produced as a PhD thesis submitted to the Department of Communication, The English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU), and has now been turned into a book. (Panthukala, 2014)

The book's argument aligns with the political economy of communication tradition (Mosco, 2009), which emphasises ownership, control, and power relations as determinants of media content and structure. This also resonates with Herman and Chomsky's (2002) 'propaganda model', which suggests that media in capitalist democracies tends to align with elite interests through ownership patterns, advertising dependence, and political ties.

However, Panthukala extends these frameworks by foregrounding caste capital, echoing Damodaran's (2008) argument that caste networks have historically mediated Indian capitalism. In doing so, the book dialogues with South Asian political sociology, which views caste as a material and ideological force shaping accumulation and power (Jaffreot, 2003; Kothari, 2010). Drawing on Gramsci's (1971) concept of hegemony, Panthukala's insights can be better understood in this context. In the Telugu states, dominant caste elites do not depend exclusively on coercion or electoral power. Rather, their dominance is reproduced by controlling cultural institutions such as the media, thus shaping what Gramsci terms

'common sense'. This makes the media sphere vital for the continued propagation of hegemony and the construction of ideological legitimacy in China. This layered theoretical grounding strengthens the interpretive framework through which this review evaluates the book.

Historically, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana witnessed the rise of powerful non-Brahmin agrarian capitalist groups such as the Reddys, Kammas, and Velamas. Scholars have documented how these groups leveraged land control, education, and later real estate and construction capital to capture regional political institutions (Gundimedda, 2017; Jaffrelot, 2003). Building on this backdrop, Panthukala situates the media boom within this evolving sociopolitical landscape. With economic liberalization in the 1990s, surplus agrarian and real estate capital increasingly flowed into the media sector, particularly television. This shift coincided with the professionalisation of party politics, high-stakes electioneering, and the rise of personality-centric leadership in the country. The book persuasively demonstrates that media ownership in the Telugu region became an extension of caste-political patronage networks, with newsrooms operating as sites of political mobilisation, propaganda and ideological consolidation. This dynamic has been especially apparent in the post-2000 era, when regional parties consolidated rival political blocs, supported by media houses.

The book comprises six chapters that trace the progression of Indian television from its origins to a contemporary empirical analysis. It begins by examining the monopoly of *Doordarshan* and the transformative impact of private satellite channels after the reforms of the 1990s. The discussion then shifts to the cultural politics of television, asserting that broadcasting in local languages fosters region-specific identity politics. Furthermore, the text surveys the scope of media studies in India, noting a relative lack of focus on South Indian regional media within the existing scholarship. A detailed mapping of the historical and political backdrop of Andhra Pradesh follows, highlighting how regional political elites, cinema, and media ownership intersect. The political economy of Telugu news is scrutinised, providing concrete examples of how media power intertwines with caste and political affiliations. Finally, the book reflects on the changing media landscape, addressing current political transitions and their consequences for media pluralism and for democratic accountability. Chapters four and five stand out for their clear empirical grounding and detailed institutional mapping. They provide descriptive and analytic depth on ownership structures, party alignments, and caste profiles that shape the Telugu media ecosystem.

Panthukala convincingly argues that the dominant castes in the Telugu region strategically invested in the media to maintain political power. The rise of channels such as Sakshi TV (aligned with the YSR Congress and Reddy caste interests) and ABN Andhra Jyothy (historically linked to the Telugu Desam Party and Kamma networks) exemplifies this nexus (Chatterjee & Reddy, 2018). Similarly, T-News is aligned with the Telangana Rashtra Samithi and Velama elites. Channels originally launched with left-leaning editorial ambitions (such as 10TV) eventually shifted ownership toward business groups aligned with the political elites (Chatterjee & Reddy, 2018). These cases underscore a key

finding: media consolidation in the region mirrors the long-standing caste-political hierarchies. This echoes Herman and Chomsky's (2002) first filter of ownership, but with caste as an additional axis of power. Panthukala's analysis uses a powerful analogy to describe the functional compromise of the press: the noble and traditional *'watchdog'* position of the media is reduced to a *'pet-dog'* style of journalism. This transformed role is dedicated solely to the protection and promotion of the hegemonic political interests of dominant non-Brahmin communities (pp.180- 186). This compromised journalistic integrity is not simply a matter of individual failure but a structural outcome enabled by an inadequate regulatory environment.

The failure of Indian regulatory agencies to effectively prevent both the vertical and horizontal integration of media houses constitutes a clear danger to the freedom and impartiality of the Fourth Estate (Bourdieu, 1998). Vertical integration, which provides control over content creation, production, and distribution, combined with horizontal integration across various media formats, maximizes the reach and impact of proprietary political narratives. This structural consolidation renders genuine journalistic independence practically unattainable, solidifying the *'pet dog'* function where the commercial and political objectives of 'media capital' inevitably supersede the media's necessary social and democratic role.

A major strength of Panthukala's analysis lies in his treatment of sensationalism: he shows that the competitive logic of 24/7 television encouraged dramatic formats, aggressive panel debates, and conflict-based programming. Driven by rating pressures and commercial revenue, channels sacrifice nuance for emotional and polarised content. This resonates with global critiques of neoliberal media, where entertainment logic colonises news formats (McChesney, 2008). Yet, Panthukala nuances this by showing how sensationalism in Telugu media serves partisan and caste-political goals — shaping public perception around leaders, movements, and community identities. This interplay between entertainment logic and caste-political dynamics is reinforced by Panthukala's robust methodological approach. The book utilises qualitative interviews, archival materials, and a review of the media content. Although the approach is mainly qualitative, the richness of the data enables robust sociological inference. The selection of media practices, political events, and ownership narratives offers a strong triangulation. One methodological limitation, mentioned later, is the lack of audience studies or digital ethnography, which may be due to the book's limited temporal focus.

The strengths of this analysis are threefold: it offers an original regional political economy lens by situating media within caste-capital networks, demonstrates meticulous empirical detail through mapping ownership, editorial tendencies, and political linkages, and provides significant historical depth by linking *Doordarshan*-era public broadcasting to the commercialisation of media in the post-liberalisation period. The book significantly expands the literature on Indian media, which has historically privileged national media and North Indian case studies. It also advances the study of political communication by showing how the regional bourgeoisie shapes public discourse through media infrastructure, which aligns with Gramsci's

hegemony thesis.

The main limitations of this study are both temporal and medium-specific. The analysis ends around 2014, when social media and digital platforms began to reshape political communication in the Telugu region. Consequently, developments after 2019, such as intensified digital propaganda networks, influencer-media hybrid ecosystems, and WhatsApp-based political mobilisation, are not covered in the book. Additionally, there is an absence of digital media analysis, which remains especially significant given the rapid digital electoral mobilisation in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, making this a promising area for future studies. However, these limitations reflect the study's conceptual roots as a PhD thesis completed in 2014, rather than an oversight in analytical focus.

Future research building on Panthukala could include mixed-method audience studies to examine how caste shapes media perception and trust, digital ethnography tracing caste-political influence on YouTube, Telegram, and WhatsApp networks, and quantitative ownership-content correlation analysis across channels. Such extensions would deepen and contemporize Panthukala's foundational insights.

Media Capital is a timely and necessary intervention in media studies and South Indian political sociology. It foregrounds how capitalist media structures in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana cannot be understood without examining the caste-political networks. Panthukala's synthesis of media economics, caste sociology, and political analysis makes this book an essential resource for scholars of media studies, South Asian politics, and critical caste studies. This work deepens our understanding that the media in regional India is not simply a business or cultural institution. Instead, it acts as a hegemonic apparatus that consolidates caste power, political legitimacy and capitalist accumulation. As democratic institutions face crises of credibility and increasing polarisation, this study provides valuable insights into how media capture and caste power influence public discourse.

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