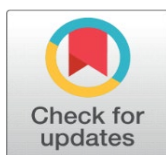


FRAMING PUBLIC SANITATION: AN ANALYSIS OF NEWSPAPER COVERAGE OF PUBLIC SANITATION ISSUES IN REGIONAL NEWSPAPERS OF TAMIL NADU

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ABSTRACT

Public sanitation remains an underexplored domain in Indian media coverage despite its significance to public health and development. This study examines how Tamil-language newspapers frame sanitation-related news. Using Entman's framing theory and agenda-setting principles, a content analysis was conducted on 186 news articles from three major regional newspapers. Findings reveal dominant reliance on responsibility and sensationalist frames with limited use of environmental or advocacy-oriented narratives. The research suggests a need for more constructive journalism, highlighting community voices and long-term policy implications.

Keywords: Sanitation, Environmental Communication, Tamil Nadu, Newspaper Framing, Media Agenda-setting, Framing Theory

1. INTRODUCTION

Environmental degradation manifests not only in large-scale phenomena like climate change but also in localized challenges such as inadequate public sanitation. In India, sanitation continues to be a critical development issue, affecting health, dignity, and environmental well-being. According to the 2011 Census, over 50% of Indian households lacked access to basic toilet facilities—a stark indicator of infrastructural inequity. The Government of India's Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (Clean India Mission), launched in 2014, aims to address these challenges by improving sanitation infrastructure and promoting behavioral change.

While such efforts mark significant progress, the role of media in sustaining public engagement and accountability remains underexamined. This study seeks to explore how regional newspapers in Tamil Nadu portray sanitation-related issues. Grounded in framing theory and agenda-setting principles, the research offers a systematic analysis of Tamil-

language newspaper articles to identify dominant frames, neglected perspectives, and editorial tendencies in sanitation coverage.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Framing theory posits that how issues are presented in the media influences how audiences perceive them (Goffman, 1974; Entman, 1993). Tuchman (1978) emphasized the “constructedness” of news, arguing that editorial decisions shape the public’s understanding of what is real and important. In parallel, agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) establishes that frequent media attention increases an issue’s perceived significance.

Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) identified five common frames—responsibility, conflict, economic, morality, and human interest. Applied to environmental and health reporting, these frames define whether issues are portrayed as systemic failures, isolated incidents, or moral imperatives. Nirmala and Aram (2018) observed that Tamil-language newspapers predominantly use responsibility and political frames when discussing environmental matters, often neglecting scientific or community-based perspectives.

Empirical studies demonstrate a gap in sustained sanitation coverage. Showkat (2016) analyzed English-language newspapers and noted that sanitation policies are reported episodically, lacking contextual depth. Abhilasha (2017) examined Kannada media and reported a similar deficiency in investigative and community-focused coverage. Dutt et al. (2013) found that among Indian dailies, environmental issues such as sanitation rarely receive front-page priority, reducing their potential to shape public discourse.

International parallels bolster these findings. Arku and Fiasorgbor (2013) found Ghanaian newspapers largely silent on sanitation in rural areas, while Mateu (2021) highlighted the drift of Indian newspapers toward conflict-driven environmental narratives. Kashia and Gangwar (2019) emphasized the need for inclusivity and intersectionality in sanitation reporting, especially in rural India.

Constructive journalism offers a promising alternative. Sanal and Aram (2025) advocated for solution-oriented reporting that avoids sensationalism and empowers public participation. Bala and Kumar (2019) highlighted the potential of social media to amplify public health messages when content is visual, localized, and shareable.

Effective communication also depends on cultural and emotional resonance. Kreuter et al. (2003) and Airhihenbuwa et al. (1995) recommended tailoring public health messages to local values and beliefs. Lee and Kotler (2011) further emphasized social marketing as a strategy to shift public behavior through media. Mukhopadhyay (2023) demonstrated that such strategies can enhance the effectiveness of sanitation campaigns.

Varghese et al. (2025) and Aarya (2024) advocate for framing sanitation as both a human right and a development issue. Their work underscores the importance of narrative framing that acknowledges caste, gender, and income inequality as deeply intertwined with access to sanitation.

Together, these studies reveal a critical disconnect between the scope of India’s sanitation problem and the media’s framing of it. To bridge this gap, journalists must adopt inclusive, evidence-based, and advocacy-driven approaches to public sanitation reporting.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research employs a mixed-method content analysis grounded in framing theory (Entman, 1993) to investigate how Tamil-language newspapers portray sanitation-related issues. Both quantitative and qualitative approaches were adopted to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the data.

4. DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The sample includes 186 articles published between January and February 2025 from three major Tamil-language newspapers: Dinamani, Dinamalar, and Daily Thanthi. Articles were retrieved using targeted keywords such as sanitation, sewage, cleanliness, and Swachh Bharat.

5. CODING PROCEDURE

Each article was coded for type, tone, source attribution, topic category, and dominant frame. Framing categories were adapted from Semetko and Valkenburg (2000), including:

- Responsibility Frame
- Sensational Frame
- Environmental Frame
- Political Frame

Two coders performed initial pilot coding to ensure consistency and inter-coder reliability (Cohen’s $\kappa = 0.81$), indicating strong agreement.

5.1. ANALYTICAL APPROACH

Descriptive statistics were used to quantify the presence of various frames and topics, while qualitative thematic analysis was conducted to interpret how stories were constructed and contextualized.

6. RESULTS

The analysis revealed substantial variation in how sanitation is portrayed across the three newspapers. The key findings of the analysis are tabulated below.

Table 1 Distribution of Articles by Newspaper

Newspaper	Frequency	Percentage
Dinamalar	84	45.1
Daily Thanthi	68	36.6
Dinamani	34	18.3
Total	186	100

Figure 1

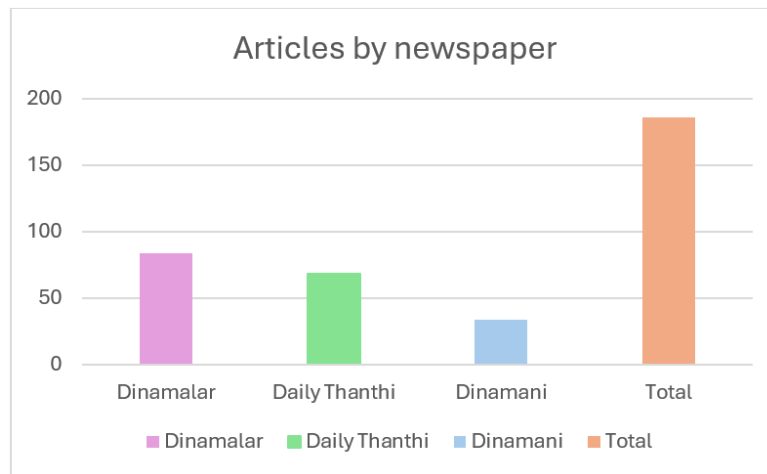


Table 2 Distribution of Articles by Type of Story

Article type	Count	Percentage
News Report	134	72
Editorial/Opinion	41	22
Feature Story	11	6

Total	186	100
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Figure 2

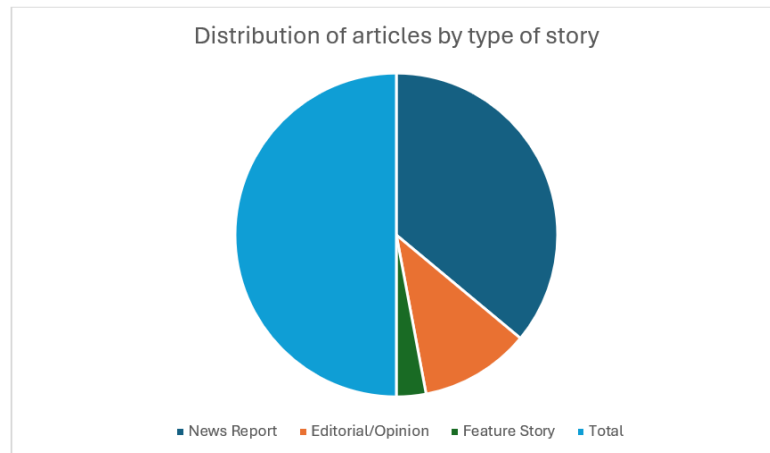


Table 3 Distribution of articles by topics covered

Article type	Count	Percentage
Sewage/Waste Management	81	44
Water Sanitation	61	33
Swachh Bharat Campaign	24	13
Open Defecation	18	10
Waste Segregation	2	1
Total	186	100

Figure 3

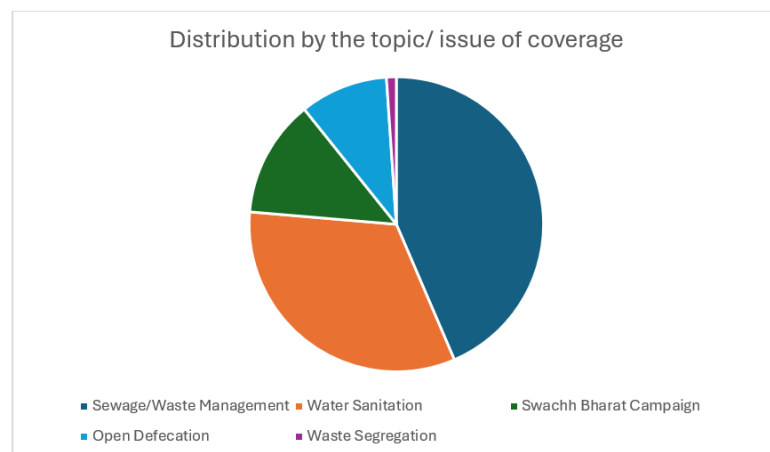
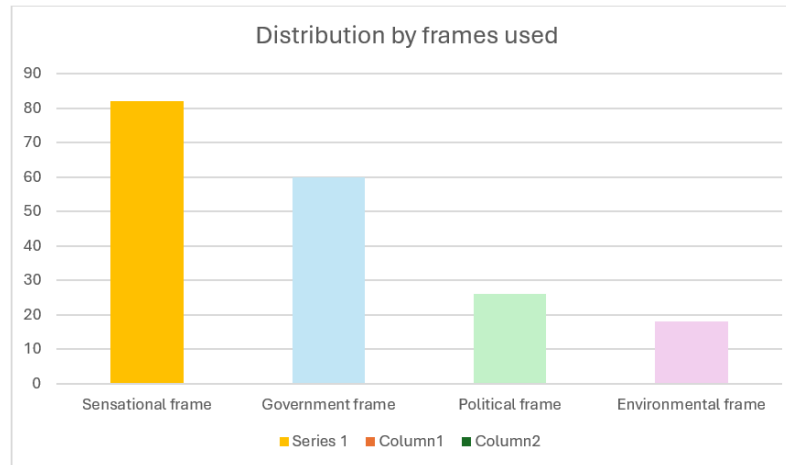


Table 4 Distribution of articles frames utilized

Type of frames	Count	Percentage
Sensational frame	82	44
Government frame	60	32
Political frame	26	14
Environmental frame	18	10
Total	186	100

Figure 4

These figures highlight an overwhelming dependence on sensationalism and government-focused narratives, with limited emphasis on environmental context or community perspectives.

7. DISCUSSION

The results reveal a significant overrepresentation of sensational and event-based framing in Tamil-language newspapers, echoing what Mateu (2021) described as a “crisis-driven environmental narrative.” With 44% of articles relying on sensational frames and only 10% employing environmental frames, coverage leans toward immediate incidents rather than systemic insight. This not only limits public understanding but also constrains solutions-focused conversations.

The dominance of government-centered framing (32%) aligns with observations made by Nirmala and Aram (2018), wherein sanitation is portrayed largely through top-down administrative action. Editorial and feature content, which could provide critical reflection or amplify marginalized voices, comprised only 28% of the sample—further underlining a gap in depth-oriented journalism.

These findings also support broader academic concerns. Kashia and Gangwar (2019) emphasized the neglect of rural sanitation framing in Indian media, while Sanal and Aram (2025) argued for a shift toward constructive journalism. Without such transformation, sanitation will remain framed as a policy checkbox, rather than a lived and urgent public health concern.

8. CONCLUSION

This study highlights critical shortcomings in how sanitation is framed within Tamil Nadu’s popular newspapers. Despite governmental initiatives and the urgency of sanitation as a development priority, media coverage remains sporadic, sensationalized, and institutionally focused. The findings urge media organizations to adopt more community-inclusive, environmentally grounded, and solution-oriented frames.

To move toward such change, media houses should invest in training journalists in environmental health reporting, diversify the range of voices in coverage, and embrace evidence-based, longitudinal reporting strategies. In doing so, journalism can become a vital driver of public awareness, civic engagement, and long-term behavioral change in the sanitation sector.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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