



Review Article

Shaping public understanding of organ donation: A thematic analysis of media representations and sociocultural narratives in India

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Abstract

This study examines the discursive landscape of organ donation in India by analysing media representations through a thematic framework. Employing thematic analysis, the research identifies four key conceptual themes: Biopolitics and Governance, Structural Inequalities, Ethical and Moral Debates, and Altruism and Social Recognition. The findings indicate that while policies such as the Transplantation of Human Organs Act (THOA) regulate organ transplantation, enforcement gaps persist, leading to inequities in access to transplants. Structural inequalities, particularly those based on gender and socioeconomic status, continue to influence donor-recipient dynamics, further reinforcing disparities. Ethical concerns, including the prevalence of illegal organ trade, complicate public perceptions and policy discussions, exposing tensions between altruism and market-driven incentives. Additionally, media narratives play a crucial role in shaping public attitudes toward organ donation, often emphasizing altruism and social responsibility through awareness campaigns and celebrity endorsements. However, these narratives frequently overlook financial constraints and limited access to transplantation facilities, particularly in rural India, thereby reinforcing existing socio-political hierarchies. Through a sociological and policy-oriented lens, this study critically assesses how media discourse both mirrors and perpetuates systemic inequalities, ultimately influencing public engagement and organ donation practices in India.

Keywords: Organ donation, Media, Market, Organ transplantation, Gender, Inequality.

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1. Introduction

Despite being a crucial component of contemporary healthcare systems, organ donation remains a relatively novel concept in terms of public awareness and understanding. In India, numerous studies have extensively documented this knowledge gap in their research findings.¹⁻⁴ Since this phenomenon is not well understood, people often interpret it by drawing comparisons with familiar concepts based on their everyday experiences. These familiar concepts frequently appear in media content and awareness campaigns, contributing to the production and reproduction of ideas about organ donation.

Examining these media portrayals is essential, as they serve as subtle yet powerful tools for meaning construction. They influence both public perceptions and policy discussions by shaping mental representations of organ

donation, even in the absence of direct personal experiences notes.⁵ In other words, media coverage not only disseminates information about medical advancements and legal frameworks but also constructs and reinforces socio-cultural understandings of organ donation. Given the media's role as a key institution of socialization, its representations shape public perceptions in various ways by positioning organ donation as a medical necessity, a moral obligation, or a practice fraught with ethical concerns and so on.

With this broader perspective, this paper aims to critically analyse how media-driven information is conveyed to audiences and how it generates new meanings surrounding the organ donation process in India. Additionally, through a thematic exploration, it shows how media narratives reveal deeper social and structural issues, moving beyond the common-sense perception of organ donation as merely a biomedical procedure. The thematic analysis has been

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categorised in four key conceptual themes keeping the recurrence of themes in the newspaper articles. These are: Biopolitics and Governance, Structural Inequalities, Ethical and Moral Debates, and Altruism and Social Recognition. Through a sociological and policy-oriented lens, this study broadly explores how media discourse not only reflects existing socio-political hierarchies but also plays an active role in shaping them. In doing so, it seeks to provide a deeper understanding of how organ donation is constructed within Indian public discourse, revealing its intersections with governance, morality, inequality, and biomedical ethics.

1.1. The background and context of study

The study of social representations has long fascinated scholars in the social sciences, particularly in sociology, leading them to explore how reality is depicted and constructed through everyday meanings shaped by social actors. In this context, the term "social" is understood not as a distinct characteristic of an object but rather through the meanings it holds for individuals in relation to that object. The very process of generating meaning, ideas, and concepts is inherently social, as it involves interactions with others. Thus, social representations can be understood as a gamut of collectively created sets of meanings, maintained through social interactions and various societal practices. As Moscovici formulated, they reflect a "universe of opinion" about objects in the social environment.⁶

People's actions and practices are therefore largely shaped by their shared understandings of the world. The theory of social representation centres on how objects appear as socially constituted entities in different societies. In the words of Wagner, a social representation is a cognitive concept shaped by social interactions and discussions, with its core meaning being collectively understood and shared by individuals within a group, culture, or society.⁷

Social representations are constructed not only through interpersonal communication but also through mass media channels. In the contemporary mediatized world, these representations are often amplified across various platforms, such as newspapers, television, films, and social media, given their ability to reach large audiences. According to Viswanath, these interfaces not only provide information or entertainment but also play a crucial role in shaping individuals' worldviews, knowledge, and behaviours as social factors.⁸ However, not all information conveyed through mass media contributes to the formation of social representations. For instance, Wagner suggested that such phenomena must possess an "aesthetic appeal", meaning they should resonate with existing social knowledge—either by complementing it or by challenging prevailing understandings.⁷ In this context, analysing media content along with its structural components becomes crucial to understanding social representations. Examining these representations helps to reveal how particular issues are

portrayed across different media discourses and how they contribute to public perceptions in India.

From a sociological perspective, it is essential to understand how these representations contribute to the construction of social reality. Moscovici stated that once formed, these representations become powerful entities that can supersede individuals' direct experiences.⁶ Consequently, scholars have examined the role of language in media narratives, highlighting how linguistic choices shape public discourse.

Maloney and Walker, in their longitudinal qualitative study explored the development and evolution of two conflicting ideas about organ transplants.⁹ Similarly, Lauri conducted an empirical study in Malta, revealing key challenges in debates on organ donation.¹⁰ The study examined metaphors associated with bodily integrity and participants' perspectives on the country's opt-out policy. Van Dijk also provided an in-depth analysis of how language is used in news media to frame the concepts of legal and illegal immigration, demonstrating how discourse shapes public perception.¹¹ Emphasizing the media's role in shaping representations, Morgan argues that through the use of metaphor, hyperbole, "us versus them" language, and other rhetorical devices, the media does not merely reflect reality but actively constructs powerful mental images that can provoke societal reactions.¹² Such representations can shape public attitudes in ways that may seem incomprehensible to those not exposed to media coverage of a given issue.

In the Indian context, media depictions of organ donation-related issues deserve particular attention, as in recent years, public awareness has been increasingly shaped by various media campaigns and related narratives. While these efforts have not yet sparked widespread public debate within the country, they have served as significant precursors to scholarly discussions across multiple disciplines, including sociology, public health, ethics, and media studies. Existing literature highlights the intersection of biomedical advancements, policy frameworks, socio-cultural perceptions, and ethical concerns surrounding organ transplantation.

One of the primary areas of research focuses on the legal and institutional frameworks governing organ donation. A widely studied aspect is the Transplantation of Human Organs Act (THOA) of 1994, which scholars have analysed in terms of its role in regulating organ transplantation, preventing illegal trade, and promoting cadaveric donation. Some scholars have also identified gaps in these policies through ethnographic studies.¹⁴ Despite the contributions of legal perspectives, these studies offer a limited understanding of the lived experiences of individuals involved, leaving a gap in knowledge regarding how these laws are implemented in practice and how media narratives reflect public engagement with these policies.

Another significant area of research revolves around socio-cultural belief systems. For instance, Vincent, in an empirical study, highlights how religious beliefs regarding death, the afterlife, and funeral rites create tensions and ambiguities in decision-making about organ donation.¹⁵ Kute et al., examine the gendered dynamics of organ donation, revealing disparities between male and female donors. However, these studies exhibit limited engagement with how media discourses reinforce or challenge these socio-cultural norms.¹⁶

Ethical and moral concerns regarding organ donation have also garnered scholarly attention. Bharadwaj, through an empirical study, explores how organ donation in India relies on the imagery of “gift” and “altruism” and is propelled by appeals to virtuous deeds.¹⁷ Similarly, Scheper-Hughes, examines the global trade of organs and body parts, emphasizing how these transactions frequently take illegal routes involving multiple stakeholders, including donors, doctors, hospitals, intermediaries, and patients.¹⁸ He argues that the growing demand for body parts must be understood within the context of a neoliberal world order, which has created an artificial scarcity, leading to the commodification of human organs.

Despite these ethical explorations, the role of media in constructing and amplifying these concerns remains largely under examined. Furthermore, few studies have engaged in qualitative analyses of media texts, audience reception, and the socio-political construction of organ donation narratives. This study aims to address this gap by situating the issue within broader frameworks of altruism, biopolitics, structural inequalities, and ethical debates.

2. Methods of the Study

The research methodology in this study employs a systematic epistemological approach to the collection, screening, analysis, and categorization of data concerning organ donation in India. The data collection phase utilized digital ethnographic methods, primarily through an extensive online search using Google and archival sources. The selection of specific keywords, such as “organ donation India” and “organ transplantation in India,” reflects a constructivist approach to knowledge production, acknowledging the discursive framing of organ donation in digital and journalistic spaces. This process yielded a total of 188 news articles, forming the empirical basis for further sociological inquiry.

Subsequent data screening and selection were guided by methodological rigor to ensure source validity and relevance. Through critical content evaluation, duplicate or irrelevant articles were removed, resulting in 180 articles that met the selection criteria. These articles initially covered 77 codes, which were then consolidated into 15 sub-themes and

subsequently grouped under four conceptual frameworks: Biopolitics and Governance, Structural Inequalities, Ethical and Moral Debates, and Altruism and Social Recognition.

The sources analysed included major Indian newspapers such as *The Hindu*, *The Times of India*, *The Indian Express*, and *The Wire*, alongside digital platforms contributing to the discursive landscape. Given the role of media as a social institution, the inclusion of diverse sources aimed to capture both dominant and alternative narratives, ensuring a holistic representation of the socio-political dimensions of organ donation.

For data analysis, thematic analysis was employed to identify and report patterns and themes within the dataset.¹⁹ This method has been recognized as a valuable tool for investigating public perceptions, particularly among social science scholars.²⁰ Citing Joffe’s work, Cain et al., argue that “thematic analysis has the ability not only to work with the explicit textual content in the data but also to tap into the more implied or inferred meaning around an issue”.²¹

The analysis followed the step-by-step process suggested by Braun and Clarke¹⁹ for thematic analysis:

1. The dataset was carefully read multiple times to develop familiarity with the content.
2. Key points were identified and labelled, initially resulting in 15 codes.
3. These codes were grouped into broader themes, which were further refined into the four main conceptualizations of organ donation.

This structured sociological approach enables a critical examination of how organ donation is mediated within Indian public discourse, revealing its intersections with biopolitics, morality, and socio-economic stratification. By integrating these analytical dimensions, the study situates organ donation within broader socio-cultural and policy frameworks, uncovering how media discourse reflects, reinforces, or challenges prevailing ideologies.

While a longitudinal or cross-sectional analysis could have provided a more comprehensive approach, this study selected a feasible sample size due to time and practical constraints. Online searches were conducted using predefined keywords, retrieving content and articles related to organ transplants and donation narratives. A tabular representation of the research methodology is presented below (**Table 1**).

Table 1: Research methodology framework

Research Component	Description
Epistemological Approach	Systematic approach focusing on data collection, screening, analysis, and categorization related to organ donation in India.
Data Collection Method	Digital ethnography using online searches via Google and archival sources.
Keywords Used	Organ donation India, Organ transplantation in India (constructivist approach recognizing discursive framing)
Total Articles Collected	188 news articles.
Data Screening & Selection	Duplicate and irrelevant articles were removed.
Categorization Process	77 initial codes identified. Codes categorized into 15 sub-themes, Further grouped under 4 conceptual frameworks: Biopolitics and Governance, Structural Inequalities, Ethical and Moral Debates, Altruism and Social Recognition.
Sources Analyzed	Major Indian newspapers (The Hindu, Times of India, Indian Express, The Wire, etc.) and digital platforms to ensure diverse perspectives.
Analytical Method	Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).
Thematic Analysis Steps	1. Familiarization with data through multiple readings. 2. Identification and labeling of key points into 77 codes. 3. Grouping codes into 15 broader themes. 4. Refining themes into 4 main conceptualizations of organ donation.
Key Conceptual Frameworks	Biopolitics and Governance (state regulation and policies), Structural Inequalities (disparities in access to organ transplants), Ethical and Moral Debates (legal and moral dilemmas in organ donation), Altruism and Social Recognition (media narratives on donation as an act of goodwill)
Purpose of Analysis	To examine how media discourse reflects, reinforces, or challenges prevailing ideologies about organ donation.
Limitations	Lack of longitudinal or cross-sectional analysis due to time constraints, Online searches restricted to organ transplantation and donation-related keywords.

Table 2: Classification of organ donation themes under these four conceptual frameworks

Thematic Framework	Merged Themes	Description with Relevant Articles
1. Biopolitics and Governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Policy and Legal Framework -Government and Institutional Initiatives -Organ Transport and Infrastructure -Medical and Technological Innovations 	The governance of organ transplantation in India is shaped by legal policies such as the Transplantation of Human Organs Act (THOA), which regulates donation and prevents illegal trade (Article 101, 161, 176). However, enforcement gaps remain a major issue. The government has introduced public-private partnerships to improve transplant accessibility (Article 163). Additionally, medical advancements, such as dual kidney transplants and bilateral hand transplants, highlight technological progress (Article 152, 167). Infrastructure improvements, including the use of green corridors and airlifting for organ transport, have expedited organ delivery to recipients (Article 23, 46, 97).
2. Structural Inequalities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Gender and Socioeconomic Disparities - Financial Aspects of Organ Donation & Transplants - Challenges in Organ Donation & Transplantation -Organ Waste & Mismanagement 	Organ transplantation is marked by gender and socioeconomic disparities, with women donating organs more frequently, while men remain primary recipients (Article 26, 34, 43, 80, 112, 138, 140, 188). Financial constraints limit access to transplants, disproportionately affecting lower-income patients (Article 117, 137, 141, 171). The shortage of donors, coupled with inefficiencies in organ allocation, results in wastage and mismanagement of viable organs (Article 123). The structural barriers, including geographic disparities in healthcare access, further exacerbate inequalities in organ transplantation (Article 145).

Table 2 Continued...

3. Ethical and Moral Debates	-Ethical and Social Issues in Organ Donation - Illegal Organ Trade & Ethical Concerns -Cultural and Religious Perspectives	The commodification of human organs has led to a thriving black market, where vulnerable populations are exploited for illegal transplants (Article 107, 108, 114, 118, 120, 124, 126, 127, 139, 143, 175, 186, 187). The debate on presumed consent versus informed consent is ongoing, with some advocating for an opt-out system to increase donations (Article 40, 50, 178). Ethical concerns arise around financial incentives for organ donation, as critics argue that such practices reinforce social hierarchies and economic exploitation (Article 187). Religious beliefs also play a role in donation decisions, influencing donor registration rates (Article 14, 19, 33).
4. Altruism and Social Recognition	-Awareness and Perceptions of Organ Donation -Organ Donation Awareness & Public Perception -Organ Donation Trends & Statistics -Impact of Organ Donation on Patients and Families	Media representation plays a crucial role in shaping public perceptions of organ donation. Celebrity endorsements and awareness campaigns have positively influenced donation rates (Article 53, 72, 89). However, misconceptions and myths persist, deterring potential donors (Article 91, 96). Personal narratives in media reports highlight the emotional and psychological impact on donor families, portraying donation as an act of moral virtue and social duty (Article 157, 173, 184, 185). Trends indicate that certain regions are more active in organ donation, with government initiatives recognizing donors through state honours and incentives (Article 155, 166, 168).

3. Study Findings

The objective of this analysis is to examine how ideas regarding organ transplants and donations have been communicated to the public in India through newspaper content over the past two to three years. In social science research, qualitative data are often managed through content analysis, where items are reviewed for their content and coded into categories for the statistical recording of frequencies. This method tends to prioritize surface-level content over the deeper meanings of media messages conveyed to the audience. Rouquette criticized this approach for depicting individuals as passive participants in the communication process.²²

Therefore, a descriptive and thematic analysis was conducted to explore how information is portrayed to readers, with thematic categories emerging as the analysis progressed. The search for these themes in Indian newspaper articles and images produced hundreds of articles and stories in the purposefully selected newspapers.

The results of the analysis are presented as narratives, describing how information about organ donation and related issues has been conveyed to the public and contextualizing its discursive framework. For representational purposes, relevant quotes have been included to illustrate key points.

The predominant themes identified in the study can be broadly classified into four thematic frameworks, drawing reference from a similar study conducted by Molony and Walker.²³ These four broader themes encompass ten overlapping subthemes, which will be discussed in

subsequent sections. The following table provides a classification of organ donation themes under these four conceptual frameworks (**Table 2**).

3.1. Biopolitics and governance

Newspaper reporting on organ donation within the framework of biopolitics and governance discourse focuses on the critical issues of organ shortages, medical advancements, policy regulations, and ethical concerns. News articles often highlight the disparity between organ supply and demand, emphasizing the rising number of patients awaiting transplants and the medical interventions needed to address this crisis. Reports frequently cover government policies and legal measures, including amendments to organ donation laws, ethical dilemmas in organ procurement, and enforcement challenges in preventing illegal trade. For example, *The Indian Express* brings to light a kidney transplant racket operating in NCR Delhi, where a syndicate, led by a Delhi surgeon, used forged documents, fake family trees, and a diagnostic lab that are non-existent, to promote illegal transplants. This 10-member group operated with the aid of fabricated seals and “official” stickers, exposing the scale and brazenness of such rackets.²⁴ In a related story, another national daily highlights how criminals are exploiting social media networks to facilitate their illegal organ trade. The accused reached out to potential donors from underprivileged families via social media, offering them Rs. 5-6 lakh per kidney writes *The Economic Times*.²⁴ In a separate ground-breaking report, *the Indian Express* documents how Police have taken a doctor to its custody from a known Hospital in Delhi, charging her with involvement in an organ trafficking network operating

between Bangladesh and India.²⁵ *The Hindu* reports on an investigation into irregularities in the harvesting of organs from brain-dead individuals in 2018, and highlights how these organs were also being transplanted on a priority basis to foreigners.²⁶ In another story, *The Times of India* reports the story of Prasad, who was initially a potential kidney donor before becoming a key figure in an organ trade racket. His involvement in the illegal trade began during pandemic, where he allegedly used social media networks and donor association websites to connect with potential donors.²⁷ In response, policymakers have called for stricter monitoring and revisions to the existing legal framework to curb these practices.

Additionally, newspapers report on breakthroughs in transplantation technologies, such as AI-driven donor matching, regenerative medicine, and innovations in organ preservation. News coverage in this regard frame organ donation as a strictly clinical and technical procedure, emphasizing the surgical dimensions of organ retrieval and transplantation. In these narratives, the human body is depicted as an ‘objectified entity’, highlighting the medicalization of the process. The body is portrayed not as a whole, living being with intrinsic value, but as a collection of parts to be harvested for transplantation. For example, a story in *The Deccan Herald* describes a kidney transplant in Assam, calling it the ‘first-ever successful cadaveric kidney transplant’. The article also highlights how the patients who received the transplant are recovering well.²⁸ Doctors are depicted in many of the news coverage as heroes performing life-saving surgeries, often in exceptional cases. *The Indian Express* refers to it as ‘The Rare and Challenging Transplant’ by a group of doctors.²⁹ *ETV Bharat* depicts a liver transplant surgery performed by doctors in a hospital situated in Secunderabad as innovative, as the surgical techniques used by the doctors were minimally invasive.³⁰ The role of hospitals, transplant coordinators, and logistical measures, including the establishment of green corridors for faster organ transport, is also widely covered. Similarly, there has been stories of how advancements in medical technology are improving the efficiency and success rates of organ transplants in India. Reports in *The Indian Express* detail the growing use of AI-based organ-matching systems, which help reduce transplant rejection by improving compatibility between donors and recipients. Additionally, hospitals have adopted improved organ preservation techniques which extends the viability of donated organs. For example, *Hindustan Times*, in a story about a kidney transplant, praised the heroic act of a dual kidney transplant, informing the audience about the first-ever such transplantation performed in India.³² In another story, *Times of India* shares that how the doctors in Surat achieved the rare feat of retrieving organs from a small infant who was barely only four-day-old and was brain-dead.³³ Through this discourse, newspapers shape public awareness, influence policy discussions, and reinforce the need for ethical and transparent organ donation practices in India.

3.2. Structural inequalities

Organ donation is deeply embedded within broader societal and cultural structures, shaping both individual decisions and systemic practices. These too are being conveyed in media reporting patterns. *The Indian Express* publishes a report highlighting on the data on living donors by gender and raises concerns about the existing gender disparities.³⁴ Most of these disparities are caused by values related to women’s guilt, a sense of sacrifice and financial dependency on male members writes a national online newspaper *Scroll*.³⁵ On the other hand *The Quint* shares a story of a girl on line and narrates how women’s choices with regard to organ donation is constrained by social structure of patriarchy.³⁶

Addressing how gender and the patriarchal system shapes the act of organ donating and receiving, *The Times of India* writes under the headline “Why Is The Burden of Organ Donation Largely on Women in India?” that “more than 80 percent of donors are women, while four out of five men receive organs from their wives, daughters, or mothers”.³⁷ Similarly, another article in *The Times of India* discusses how the traditional “breadwinner” image of men often leads to women being more likely to be donors than recipients in India.³⁸ *The New Indian Express*, in an article based on data from Kerala, India’s top state with a robust educational system, notes a similar instance of gender disparity for recipients of these organs. Citing official data from State of Kerala, the article states that the percentage of women are quite high in Kerala such as nearly 63% or 64% with respect to live kidney donation. It also mentions that the irony is that the majority of the recipients still remain as men.³⁹

Gender gaps, along with heart-warming stories from local dailies, also deserve mention as they highlight the gendered dynamics that influence the medical process of organ donation. A news article sheds light on this gender-based discrimination, featuring a true story of a mother and daughter. *Ahmedabad Mirror*, citing the case of a mother-daughter duo, presents the compelling headline: “Daughters May Find a Place in the Heart, But Kidneys Are More Likely to Go to Sons”. The story recounts the experience of 39 years old Varsha Hada, who wanted to save her 14-year-old daughter from a kidney-related disease by donating her own kidney but was discouraged by family and friends, who told her that it wasn’t worthwhile to give an organ to a daughter. The story quotes her words: “You have a younger son to take care of and you are also quite young; why are you giving your kidney to your daughter? Let her remain on dialysis”.⁴⁰

The sample data also highlights how news coverage addresses the financial dimensions and accessibility challenges of organ transplants, emphasizing affordability, economic barriers, and policy gaps. Media reports frequently examine the high costs associated with organ transplantation, which often place a significant financial burden on patients and their families, particularly those from lower-income backgrounds. Under the compelling title “India’s organ

transplant system is skewed against the Poor”, *The Scroll* discusses how government hospitals often struggle to identify potential organ donors for patients, while on the other hand, private hospitals demand exorbitant fees for transplantation costs. It highlights the case of Ram, a patient at a private hospital, who was able to receive an organ more quickly but is now burdened with a massive hospital bill.⁴¹ Similarly, *The New Indian Express* highlights the facilities in a rural hospital of Karnataka, to perform low cost transplantation procedure for people from lower economic backgrounds.⁴² Articles also explore the role of medical tourism, where international patients seek transplants in India due to comparatively lower costs, sometimes at the expense of access for local patients. *Outlook* highlights this growing trend bringing India as a favourite destination of low cost medical tourism.⁴³ By engaging with these themes, newspapers contribute to public discourse on the economic disparities in organ transplantation and the need for more inclusive and equitable healthcare policies.

Additionally, media reports often recognize donor families for their contributions, reinforcing the idea that their loss is transformed into hope for others. For instance, *India Today* covered a government-organized event where donor families were publicly honoured, receiving certificates and appreciation from officials. This not only validated their decision but also encouraged others to consider organ donation as a noble act. The report illustrates a state government's decision to grant full state honors during the funerals of organ donors. The article presents this act as both heroic and selfless, stating, “State honors will include a 21-gun salute, wrapping the corpse in the Tricolor, and other formalities associated with it”.⁴⁴ In another story, concerning a boy from the same state, it is noted that “the donor was given a guard of honor by the state police in Bhubaneswar before his cremation”.⁴⁵ Further stories highlight the government's efforts to encourage organ donation by offering “official recognition” and providing support to the donor's family, such as transportation and financial assistance for last rites.⁴⁶ Reports also detail how these acts of recognition are presented to grieving families, with the donors being honoured at their funerals with floral and musical tributes. Their families are also honoured for making such a decision.⁴⁷ However, these narratives are paradoxically accompanied by warnings regarding the potential risks involved. For example, *The Times of India*, reporting on a case of living organ donation, raises concern about the challenges and dangers involved. The Times of India reports the tragic story of 33-year-old Archana, a woman lecturer from Bengaluru, who suddenly died after donating a portion of her liver to one of her relatives who was a 63-year-old female relative with a medical condition. Although the organ retrieval procedure itself was successful, the patient in this case developed complications after her surgery which ultimately led to her death.⁴⁸ Through such emotionally compelling narratives, Indian newspapers construct organ donation as more than just a medical

procedure—it is presented as a selfless act that turns personal grief into societal good. By showcasing the personal experiences of donor families, media stories create a powerful discourse that encourages others to see organ donation as a deeply meaningful and transformative decision.

One of the most pressing concerns in India's organ transplantation system is the gap between demand and supply. Media reports frequently highlight the struggles of patients on waiting lists, emphasizing how the shortage of organs leads to preventable deaths. A common representation of these challenges involved expert commentary that explored the root causes of organ shortages, shedding light on systemic issues within the healthcare sector. *The Times of India*, quoting the Union Ministry of Health, stated in an article that the real cause of the disparities in organ availability is the failure of hospitals to identify and certify cases of brain-dead individuals.⁴⁹ In a similar instance, *India Today* raises concerns over the lack of well-trained staff to retrieve organs or perform transplantation procedures in India, highlighting an acute scarcity of healthcare facilities.⁵⁰ *Dewan Herald* highlights the relatively poor performance of public hospitals in comparison to private hospitals in undertaking transplantations or in collective viable organs for life saving treatments.

The successful execution of organ transplantation depends on a well-functioning logistical network. A key development in this area is the establishment of “green corridors,” which enable rapid organ transport by securing dedicated routes for ambulances and flights. *The Decan Herald* writes how two green corridors facilitated transport of a donor heart to save the life of a woman in another city.⁵¹ In another story, *The Times of India* reported how organ transport through the green corridor routes saved lives of eight patients who were waiting for a transplantation.⁵² However, infrastructural challenges persist, especially in rural areas where hospitals lack the necessary facilities for organ retrieval and preservation. An E journal named *Free Press Journal* in a report raises concern over wastage of the valuable organs causing India to stand behind western advanced countries.⁵³

3.3. Ethical and moral debates

A recurring theme in news coverage is the issue of illegal organ trade in India and its associated ethical dilemmas. The coverage of these organ trade and associated ethical concerns in newspaper articles underscores the increasing complexities surrounding black-market organ transactions, state interventions, and the systematic exploitation of marginalized communities. Media reports highlight how illicit organ networks operate, exposing the involvement of intermediaries, medical professionals, and recipients in bypassing legal frameworks. *The Indian Express* brings out the instances of brazen involvement of highly qualified professionals, hospitals in organ trades.⁵⁴

Additionally, government crackdowns on these unlawful practices are frequently documented, revealing both the challenges of enforcement and the persistent loopholes that allow such activities to continue. *Hindustan Times* cites the case of organ transplant racket which was getting operated internationally through Bangladesh.⁵⁵

A recurring theme in news coverage is also the disproportionate impact on vulnerable populations, including economically disadvantaged individuals who are coerced or misled into organ sales. In a story by *Outlook*, cites a case where the Delhi police received information about an illegal kidney trade operation which was done from a private laboratory in Hauz Khas, a posh neighborhood in South Delhi. The gang behind the racket used to offer a few lakhs of money to homeless individuals in exchange for their kidneys⁵⁶ in a similar story *The Indian Express* brings out the vulnerabilities of rural people in financial distress with regard to the trafficking of organs.⁵⁷ These narratives collectively shed light on the ethical dilemmas, socio-economic inequalities, and policy gaps that shape the discourse around organ trafficking in India.

Although these accounts may seem discordant with the idealized portrayal of donating one's organs as a compassionate or altruistic action on the part of the donor, but they nonetheless also reflect shifting societal ethos, evolving relationships, marketization of society as we explore the interrelated aspects of it. These discrepancies and contradictions can be viewed as "representational field", revealing a shared reality that is shaped by inconsistency, tension, or contradiction, as effectively argued by Rose et al.¹

3.4. Altruism and social recognition

Media coverage in India frequently highlights organ donation as an altruistic and socially responsible act, often framed within the broader discourse of cultural beliefs, religious perspectives, and public awareness initiatives. News reports emphasize how misconceptions and traditional beliefs influence people's willingness to donate organs, with many articles focusing on efforts to dispel myths surrounding the process. For instance, *Times of India* quotes the views of religious leader who urged people to take care of their bodies and donate their organs for others while giving examples from mythological stories.⁵⁹ Another similar story by *The India Today* highlights government's plans to bring together top spiritual Gurus to dismiss the religious myths about donation and also to popularise it by breaking the barriers regarding it.⁶⁰ Similarly, *The Hindu* has reported on awareness initiatives on organ gifts while in another report it urged for more awareness campaigns in rural or semi-rural areas where people mostly have misconceptions regarding this process.^{61,62} *The Tribune* published a report showcasing educational initiatives in schools and colleges that aim to increase awareness among the youth, emphasizing organ donation as a humanitarian duty.⁶³

Celebrity endorsements act as key agents of socialization, shaping public discourse around various issues. Same is true in the context of donation drives for transplantation in India. Newspapers often endorse stories of big celebrity figures taking pledges to donate their organs. *Hindustan Times* publishes a report on world organ donation day to highlight how certain Bollywood celebrities are taking oath for organ donation.⁶⁴ However a word of caution needs a mention here. High-profile pledges by celebrities contribute to the normalization of organ donation, reinforcing its moral legitimacy to donate. Media campaigns of such events no doubt create awareness but also may run the risk of commodifying this process. They often oversimplify the ethical dilemmas associated with donation. The symbolic capital of celebrity endorsements can lead to increased donor registrations but may not necessarily translate into widespread systemic change unless other issues are also being fixed.

The patterns of organ donation reflect broader socio-economic and healthcare disparities, shaped by access to medical resources, cultural perceptions, and policy interventions. Trends in organ donation reveal regional variations, gendered disparities, and the ongoing tension between deceased and living donations, highlighting how social structures influence biomedical practices have appeared as major themes in newspaper stories. For instance, *The Patriot*, a local daily highlighted how urban centres with advanced medical facilities and strong state-led initiatives report higher organ donation rates, while rural and underdeveloped regions face infrastructural and logistical challenges.⁶⁵ The presence of specialized transplant hospitals, green corridor systems, and government incentives often determines regional success in organ donation programs it added. Despite overall growth in organ donation, newspapers also report persistence of significant regional disparities, influenced by healthcare infrastructure, awareness campaigns, and cultural attitudes. Similar account has been of owing to lack of infrastructural facilities in her home country. In another report Business Standard focuses on the disparity by noting that there exist lower cadaver donors in India comparatively to USA.⁶⁶

Demographic trends in organ transplantation further illustrate these systemic inequities. Studies indicate that men are more likely to receive organs, while women disproportionately serve as donors, reflecting gendered expectations of care and sacrifice.⁶⁷ Similarly, socioeconomically privileged individuals have better access to transplant services, as they can navigate hospital systems, afford post-transplant care, and benefit from advanced medical interventions. In contrast, the poor continue to face difficulties at every stage, from registration to transplantation and post-operative care. Hence, *the Scroll* write that this process still favours rich in India denying equal access to poor.⁶⁸

Indian newspapers frequently highlight organ donation through deeply personal and emotional narratives, framing it as an ethical and compassionate act that transcends individual loss. These stories often focus on the grief and resilience of donor families, portraying their decision to donate organs as a way to give meaning to their tragedy. By emphasizing the emotional and moral dimensions of organ donation, media coverage plays a crucial role in shaping public attitudes toward this life-saving act. For example, *The Deccan Herald* reports on the family of 45-year-old painter Raj Kumar, who expressed their gratitude to the late Meena Mehta, an educator who passed away in January this year.⁶⁹ They noted that it was her 'dying wish' for her organs to be donated. *The Times of India* covers the story of a young girl, just 18 years old, who was involved in a road accident and declared brain dead. Her parents then decided to help those in need by donating her organs. The newspaper vividly describes how the donor family honoured the deceased person's wishes to save lives and pursue her dream of becoming a doctor. They found 'solace' in this decision, knowing it aligned with her goal of helping others.⁷⁰ *The Indian Express* also presents organ donation as a life-saving gesture, exemplified by the family of a 9-year-old child declared brain-dead. In the story titled "Organ Donation: Family of 9-year-old, declared brain dead, helps save 6 lives", it is reported that how parents of young children are taking decisions for organ donation while citing the story of the parents of a nine-year-old boy in Surat who suffered severe head injuries from a fall leading to a situation of brain-death.⁷¹ Similarly, depicting another story of a 54-year-old resident from Badarpur, Delhi, *The Times of India* highlighted this act as a powerful example of "selflessness and compassion".⁷² Among living donors, narratives often emphasize individuals who donate organs, focusing on extraordinary acts of compassion and familial connection, while contrasting them with stereotypical depictions of relationships marked by conflict. For instance, a story in *The Indian Express* centers on the bonds shared between sisters-in-law, a relationship commonly portrayed as one of rivalry in traditional Indian family structures. The story unfolds as: "Family dramas often depict tensions between sisters and their brother's wives, or even take a playful jab at such relationships". However, this real-life story demonstrates the strength of these bonds, as one woman donated her own kidney to the wife of her brother-in-law selflessly.⁷³

4. Discussion

From a sociological standpoint, the discourse on organ donation in India encapsulates the intricate intersections of biomedical, socio-cultural, and political dimensions. Media narratives construct organ donation as both a medical and social phenomenon, deeply embedded within normative structures, collective consciousness, and institutional governance. Drawing upon Durkheim's conceptualization of law as a moral function, media representations emphasize legal frameworks, policy amendments, and regulatory

mechanisms governing organ transplantation. These legal discourses reflect broader societal efforts to institutionalize ethical medical practices, reinforcing shared moral values that may be seen to be under crisis considering the invading intrusion of market forces. Consequently, organ donation is frequently framed as an altruistic and moral imperative. This image is largely visible in media discourses in India.

Beyond merely reflecting reality, media coverage actively constructs social realities. Althusser's notion of media as an ideological state apparatus is particularly relevant in analysing how dominant narratives on organ transplantation shape public discourse. The emphasis on state intervention in organ transplantation highlights the government's role in regulating biological life. However, this regulatory approach must be critically examined, as it risks reducing the discourse to purely biomedical considerations, side-lining broader socio-political concerns. Critical perspectives on state power and its limitations in addressing organ shortages remain largely peripheral within mainstream media representations.

Media's role as a key agent of socialization is clearly visible with its extensive coverage on, awareness campaigns and its coverage of strategic involvement of public figures. These endeavours results in construction of organ donation issues as an act of selflessness and social responsibility. However, such portrayals are often endorsed by celebrities and high profile personalities making it appear a class affair obscuring structural challenges, including inadequate healthcare infrastructure, economic disparities, and regulatory inefficiencies. Similarly, media representations frequently construct organ donors as "heroes" as discussed in news reporting. But it fails to adequately acknowledge the financial constraints and geographic limitations that hinder equitable participation of people, particularly in rural India. Therefore, a more responsible journalism need to highlight this aspect of the discourse too.

Investigative journalism in India has also exposed the darker realities of organ donation, shedding light on organ trafficking networks and the commodification of human bodies within a globalized market economy. These revelations not only highlight critical ethical dilemmas, challenging the delicate balance between individual rights and collective welfare but also highlights increasing marketization of society led by capitalist market logic.

Within a Foucauldian biopolitical framework, state intervention in organ donation reflects broader mechanisms of institutional control over biological life mirroring his concept of biopower where the state not only regulates human bodies through legal instruments but also influences the public perception of ethical and moral responsibility through ideological apparatus such as media, education and religion. For Foucault, Biopower refers to "the set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy, of a general

strategy of power”.⁷⁴ State projection of organ donation as a moral duty of individuals from this perspective may act counterproductive to the ideals of health for all by ignoring the structural problems associated with it.

Media narratives on transplantation in India also invoke themes of scientific progress, governance, and state regulation, reinforcing a technocratic approach to healthcare. This is clearly visible in media coverages. Advancements such as AI-driven organ matching, regenerative medicine, and improved transplant logistics are therefore being often framed as solutions to organ scarcity. This idea aligns with Weber’s notion of rationalization of society where bureaucratic efficiency and technological innovations primarily shape decision-making processes. However, we need to understand that organ donation is not merely a bureaucratic or scientific issue but also a deeply socio-economic and political concern.

Among these structural inequalities, gender and economic stratification emerge as recurring themes warranting further scholarly and policy attention. Gendered patterns in organ donation indicate significant disparities, with women disproportionately serving as donors while men are overrepresented as recipients. This dynamic though is being widely covered but may yet reimpose the idea that women need to always come forward as donors when one sees donation of body parts as ‘gifts’ to the close ones leading to symbolic violence in the conceptual frameworks of Bourdieu. Citing his argument in the context of gift exchange Topper writes:

Bourdieu urges that although gift exchanges may appear as symmetrical personal relations devoid of power and domination, they may also operate as a form of what he provocatively calls “symbolic violence,” a “gentle, invisible violence.”⁷⁴

These forms of violence are gentle and are often invisible forms of violence that exist in our society through gendered structures. News reporting of organ donor’s statistics need to be therefore analysed before publishing.

Economic inequalities further exacerbate these disparities; as marginalized populations often face systemic barriers to accessing transplant procedures. The privatization of healthcare intensifies these inequities, rendering life-saving procedures contingent upon financial resources rather than medical need. While some national newspapers engage with these socio-economic concerns, such coverage remains limited to select publications, leaving critical discussions on inequality largely absent from mainstream discourse.

Through these theoretical lenses, media narratives on organ donation in India highlight broader sociological concerns related to social control, institutional power, and structural inequalities. The discourse surrounding organ transplantation is shaped by the convergence of legal

frameworks, cultural ideologies, and public engagement, positioning it as both a biomedical necessity and a socio-cultural challenge. As media representations continue to influence public perceptions, a more critical engagement with the biopolitical, ethical, and socio-economic dimensions of organ donation is essential for fostering equitable and inclusive healthcare policies in India.

5. Conclusion

Social representations are dynamic and continuously evolving constructs shaped by contextual and societal influences. This study reveals a complex and multifaceted nature of organ donation discourse in India by extending the discourse beyond the realms of health care concerns to encompass broader socio cultural, ethical and political dimensions. By employing a thematic analysis, the research categorizes media representations into four key themes—Biopolitics and Governance, Structural Inequalities, Ethical and Moral Debates, and Altruism and Social Recognition—revealing the ways in which governance structures, social hierarchies, and moral frameworks shape public perceptions of organ transplantation.

The findings indicate that while media narratives play a crucial role in raising awareness and can act as a vehicle to promote body parts donation as an act of social responsibility and moral act of altruism, they also reinforce existing inequalities and overlook critical structural barriers by glamorising the biomedical aspect of it. For instance, too much emphasis on altruism and moral obligation can be counterproductive by obscuring the economic constraints and systemic disparities within the society that influence an individual’s ability to participate in organ donation, whether as a donor or recipient. Furthermore, ethical concerns surrounding commodification and illegal organ trade complicate the discourse further, exposing the tensions between altruistic ideals and market-driven realities.

Ultimately, this study underscores the role of media as a powerful institution in shaping public engagement with organ donation, simultaneously reflecting and reinforcing socio-political structures. Future research should further explore these dynamics by incorporating longitudinal or cross sectional studies by incorporating diverse media sources, public opinion studies, and policy analyses to develop a more comprehensive view of the socio-political landscape surrounding organ donation.

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