

## DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTIONS OF POWER AND NATIONAL IDENTITY: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF INDIAN POLITICAL AND MEDIA NARRATIVES ON OPERATION SINDOOR

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### **Abstract**

*The study examines the discursive creation of Operation Sindoor by the Indian political leaders and the mainstream media using language, symbolism and ideological framing. A review of 35 texts was done using the three-dimensional Critical Discourse Analysis developed by Fairclough and features of the Discourse-Historical Approach in relation to political speeches, and English media reports published in the period between 15 February and 31 March 2025. The results indicate that operation Sindoor was always presented as a moral action of defending national integrity, and India was a peaceful country that had to do it. Both media and political discourses were based on binary oppositions that portrayed Pakistan and militants agents as aggressors and existential threats. The concept of symbolic framing was about the word Sindoor, which uses a gendered and sacred image to compare national defense with that of a sacred wife or mother. Media exaggerated emotionalized rhetoric and reduced controversy, which in many ways reduced opposition to labels of unpatriotism and collaboration with the enemy. In general, the rhetoric upheld the prevailing nationalist, security and integration ideologies.*

### **Keywords**

*Critical Discourse Analysis, Fairclough, Operation Sindoor, Indian media, political discourse, nationalism, ideology; power, identity.*

### **Introduction**

The South Asian conflict, militarization and politics of discourse have been one of the controversial topics of scholarly debate. The example of the Kashmir war has been analyzed through the prism of feminist, decolonial, and critical approaches to communication that demonstrate how the state power, identity, and ideology are reproduced at the time of a crisis. Based on such considerations, the candidate case of discursive tactics employed to create and project nationalism and national security discourses can be considered Operation Sindoor, which is one of the recent armed actions, supported by the Indian political elite and extensively discussed in the national media (Kaul, 2021; Pandit, 2026).

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a useful tool to accomplish the deconstruction of such dynamics. Theorized by Fairclough (2023) and Wodak (2004), CDA lends more emphasis to how the relations of power, ideologies and social practices are building and being built by discourse. It is especially helpful in the analysis of the functioning of political speeches, media coverage and symbolic naming in reproducing hegemonic meanings. In that sense, CDA enables us to go beyond its superficial manifestation of Operation Sindoor and ask about ideological underpinnings, silences and exclusions in political and media discourse.

The recent research of the Kashmir area proves that militarization faces gender, violence, and colonialism. Pandit (2026) emphasizes on the gendered and colonial past of

military occupation in Kashmir, and demonstrates that control and identity are produced through the daily routine practices of militarism. On the same note, Kaul (2021) reveals the veil of econo-nationalism and paternalistic state control by discourses of development and women liberation. One can witness the mobilization of symbolic and gendered images to legitimize dominance in these works, as state narratives are constructed by them. Idrees et al. (2023) demonstrate that the Indian media tends to naturalize the state narratives and undermining human rights issues under the banner of radical nationalism. Additionally, Zahra and Shahid (2025) show the ways in which cross-border conflict was framed by the Indian, Pakistani, and international media and particularly the focus was on propaganda, bias, and emotional narratives. Outside of the India-Pakistan issue, the disinformation literature worldwide has pointed out how rumour, misinformation, and propaganda confuse the trustworthiness of people and legitimacy of governments. Surjatmodjo et al. (2024) refer to it as an information pandemic, in which false news is propagated at an uncontrollable rate through social media and changes the relationships between a state and society as well as resilience. This is especially true to Operation Sindoor, where the narratives in the media and the political speeches were directly connected to disinformation management and narrative control discourses.

In spite of all these endeavors, no evidence has been given specifically on the symbolic aspect of recent Indian military operations. The eponymous title of Operation Sindoor has been significantly symbolic: the name Sindoor (the red vermilion used in the Hindu ceremony of marriage) implies sacrifice, solemnity and cohesiveness within a gendered-nationalist context. Such symbolic uses of cultural and religious imagery can be seen as part of the more general policies in Indian politics, where gendered and religious symbolism are put to work to reinforce the messages of national identity, unity, and moral superiority (Gopal, 2023). Such symbolic aspect has however not been scientifically studied within the context of recent events in peer-reviewed research. Based on the literature review, there are a number of research gaps. First, although the processes of militarization in Kashmir, nationalist media framing, and disinformation have been studied in previous literature, there has been less focus on the use of CDA specifically to analyse Operation Sindoor, as a particular case that combines both political leadership discourse and media coverage, has been conducted. Second, the literature usually focuses on either media framing or political rhetoric and has not investigated the interaction between the two domains to produce dominant ideologies. Third, the multi-modal and symbolic aspects of such discourses, such as operation names, visual representations, and gendered/religious images have also received little attention. Lastly, less research has been done on whose voices are suppressed, like those of opposing politicians, civil society or civilians, and on how perceptions of the populace evolve through the various periods of war.

In order to plug these gaps, the current paper utilizes CDA, based on the three-dimensional model of Fairclough and discourse-historical approach of Wodak, to critically examine how Indian political leadership and mainstream media constructed the narrative of the Operation Sindoor through discourse. The research inquires into the reproduction of dominant ideologies of nationalism and security by means of language, framing and symbolism and the sidelining of other voices.

### **Research Objectives**

1. To critically look at the ways in which Indian political leadership and mainstream media constructed discourses of operation Sindoor using language, symbols and framing.
2. To analyze the process in which these discourses reproduce dominant ideologies of nationalism, security, and unity, while marginalizing alternative voices.

### Research Questions

1. How do Indian political leaders and media outlets use discourse to construct and legitimize narratives of Operation Sindoor?
2. In what ways do these discourses reflect and reinforce ideologies of nationalism, security, and majoritarian identity?

### Literature Review

Theoretical and empirical studies in conflict, media discourse, nationalism, and gender provide important lenses through which Operation Sindoor can be interrogated. This review organizes existing literature under key themes: militarization and coloniality; media framing and nationalism; symbolism, gender, and identity; and disinformation and silencing. It then identifies how these converge (or not) and where Operation Sindoor offers a unique opportunity. Pandit (2025) provides a decolonial and feminist version of militarization in Kashmir that demonstrates the fact that state occupation is not just a security mechanism but a colonial system that has been anchored in the gendered and racialized hierarchies. Pandit demonstrates the stories of normalcy following 2019, which cannot match the lived experiences of daily militarized control. This piece of work highlights the fact that militarization is not only occasional, but it is also constitutive of the colonial relation. This area of research is supported by literature like that of Militarization and Violence against Women in Indian-held Kashmir: An Analysis of International Human Rights Discourse (Raazia and Askari, 2022), which discusses the portrayal of women and the victimization of women specifically female freedom fighters in the international and local human rights literature. This demonstrates that gendered victimization is not only something that is narrated in media/human rights, but also a subject of power relations interactions.

Regional media studies often focus on how the press outlets match state ideology, especially during conflict or crisis. For example, Yousaf et al., (2020) analyze how the Pakistani English press during both dictatorial and democratic regimes frames the Kashmir conflict; they find that despite regime change, media tends to conform to the policy agenda of rulers, particularly around themes like dialogue, national identity, and rights. Other literature examines cross-border relations in a broader way. Urdu press study of Indo-pak relations post 9/11 by Nawa-i-Waqt identified the editorial decisions, use of lexical tools and the use of rhetorical tools that are used to unify ideological views that are based on nationalism. Such researches point out that media is a place of ideological legitimization and consensus construction of state power. Nevertheless, they tend to remain on the general planes of framing and not necessarily go deep into symbolic names and religious or gendered metaphors and how this can be mixed in the discourse of political leadership and media coverage in the recent events. Some research focuses more directly on how identity, gender, and symbolism appear in conflict discourse. Pandit (2025) presented in her work that gender and racism were controlled by occupation and control, and the political speech and media discourse are part of the daily gendered vulnerability.

Also, research on the representation of the roles of women during militarization reveals that women victimization, moral symbolism, and religious identity are stereotypical patterns. As demonstrated by Raazia and Askari (2022), women in Indian-controlled Kashmir are often portrayed as victims in both the human rights and international discourses. Mediated symbolism has also been worked on. Indicatively, an other article in the Global Digital and Print Media Review uses critical discourse analysis on discursive ideologies in the Indian and Pakistani print media on the abolition of Article 370 and 35A (Rahman et al., 2022). That work discloses how media applies symbolic rhetoric (e.g. sovereignty, constitutionalism, identity) to

construct the legitimacy of states and national belonging. The other theme is about whose voices are listened and whose voices are not heard.

An international approach to disinformation is presented in the study of Surjatmodjo et al. (2024), which shows that digital rumor, misinformation and manipulated stories can erode trust in institutions and allow hegemonic voices to become even stronger. Though this study is not about India or Operation Sindoor, the way in which it tackles the issue has provided ways and conceptions to understand how official accounts are addressing the issue of dissent and counter-narratives. In investigating Indo-Pak tensions in media dynamics, there is some preliminary work that indicates that the media reportage largely favours the state and militarized viewpoint and excludes the opposition voice and criticisms of the civil society (Saleem, 2025). The available literature shows that in South Asia, militarization is rooted in coloniality and that it defines identity, gender roles, and life (Pandit, 2025; Raazia & Askari, 2022). Scholars have demonstrated ways in which military discourses are intertwined with larger power and cultural structures, and national security issues are incorporated in social and political identities. Equally, the literature on the topic of media framing, nationalism, and ideological legitimation is extensive, and the literature on how the political communication and press discourses serve to support dominant ideologies and national imaginaries is clear (Youseaf et al., 2020; Rahman et al., 2022).

Alongside these insights, scholarship has emphasized the symbolic and identity-laden dimensions of discourse like constitutional, religious, and gendered particularly in the context of large-scale political shifts, such as the abrogation of Article 370 in Kashmir, and prolonged conflict in the region. Despite these contributions, important gaps remain in the scholarship. Very little peer-reviewed work explicitly addresses Operation Sindoor, particularly the discursive politics of how the operation has been named, framed, and narrated by political leadership and media in conjunction. The literature usually analyses political speech and media news as different fields of analysis, but less literature discusses the interaction between speeches, statements by the authorities, and the media news to co-produce and enact national stories.

In addition, the symbolism in South Asia security discourse has been identified, but the application of religious or gendered metaphors in this operation like employing of Sindoor in this operation and the visual or cultural echoes they evoke has not been examined in detail. The other gap that can be noted is the lack of the study of audience reception and opposing views. The voices of civilians, opposition parties and marginalized groups are mostly left out in the immediate post-operation discussion, and such pictures are not complete on how such narratives are refuted or opposed.

Lastly, the majority of the analyses that have been conducted assume discourse to be static, it does not recognize how it changes over time in phases preceding the event, in the event and in the post event thus missing the changing role and tactics of discourse as a conflict and narrative emerges. The earlier literature provides copious information on militarization, media framing, nationalism, symbolism and disinformation in Indian- Kashmir/Indo-Pakistan conflict. However, the themes are re-contextualized in Operation Sindoor, the context of symbolic language, ideology, power relations and silencing is to be examined, specifically. Commenting on this operation in particular, the given paper will fill the gaps in the field, as on the one hand, the political leadership and media coverage will be discussed, and on the other hand, this dissertation will provide a comment on how the concepts of identity, symbolism and dissent can be built around the discourse throughout the history of time, relying on the critical discourse analysis.

### Materials and Methods

This paper applied a qualitative Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) paradigm, which is based on the three-dimensional model by Fairclough (textual analysis, discursive practice, sociocultural practice) and is complemented with Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) developed by Wodak. The paradigm embraced in the study was that of interpretivism, discourse was considered as a social construction which is ideologically saturated and situated within power relations. CDA was chosen because it enables a logical analysis of the role of language as a way of building a national identity, justifying military action, and dismantling opposing opinions. Purposive method was applied to sample the texts which mentioned specifically Operation Sindoor, 15 February-31 March 2025. The sample size was 10 political texts (speeches and official government statements by the Prime Minister, Defence Minister, Home Minister, and military spokespersons) obtained through official government websites and confirmed news archives as well as 25 media texts (front-page stories, editorial comments and televised briefing by major English-language newspapers and television outlets, including The Hindu, Times of India, Hindustan Times, The Indian Express, BBC and Al Jazeera. English-language media was selected since it influences elite national discourse, it is used as reference points when foreign reporters report on the news, and it often reproduces official discourses. The sources were gathered publicly hence creating a corpus of about 57,000 words. The analysis of the data was done in accordance with the three stages of CDA as suggested by Fairclough. On the textual level, linguistic characteristics were analyzed, such as the nomination strategies, predication patterns, markers of the modality, metaphors, the use of symbols and the use of pronoun, and references to the past speeches, historical facts and religious concepts. The discursive practice level analysis was based on the reproduction, recycling, or reframing of the political texts by the media outlets, the demonstration of the key terms, including the enemy propaganda and sacred defense, through the discourses, and the analysis of the amplification or repression of dissenting views. Sociocultural level involved the analysis of wider ideological frameworks, such as majoritarian nationalism, militarized identity, gendered and religious symbolism, narratives of Indo-Pak conflict and state-led disinformation. NVivo coded data inductively and deductively to create six thematic nodes including Nationalism and Unity (which has sub-nodes Sacred Nation and Civilizational Duty), Us/They Dichotomy (which has sub-nodes Aggressor Labels and Victimhood Construction), Security and Militarization, Religious/Gendered Symbolism (which has sub-nodes Sindoor Metaphor and Motherland Imagery), Disinformation and Narrative Control, and Silencing of Dissent. Cross-checking of the interpretations was used to create consistency and reduce biases of researchers, improving the reliability and openness of the analysis.

### Results

#### Corpus Overview

Thirty-five texts were examined, which included 10 political ones, which are speeches, press conferences, and official releases, as well as 25 media ones, such as news reports, headlines, and editorials. The corpus was composed of about 57,000 words. Official government portals were used to acquire political texts whereas the media texts were retrieved through major English-language sources, such as The Hindu, Times of India, Hindustan Times, The Indian Express, BBC, and Al Jazeera. English-language media were selected because of its impact on elite discourse, as the source of reference in international discourse, and because of their common reproduction of official narratives.

### **Textual Analysis**

#### Nomination and Predication

In both political and media literature, India was always portrayed as a peace-loving country that did not have any other choice all it did was to protect its sovereignty. Pakistan and militant actors, on the contrary, were termed as aggressors, violence perpetrators and an abetter of terror. This kind of naming and predication strategies supported a moral and ideological dichotomy between the us and the them.

#### Symbolic Framing

The name Sindoor was also a codename that was used severally as a metaphor of marital faithfulness and female honor. This visual was often exaggerated through the media texts in which gendered symbolism was related to nationalist and militarized stories. The operation name was an effective instrument to create a cultural, religious, and emotional appeal to the audience.

#### Emotional and Modal Language

The political and the media texts both focused on the idea of soldier sacrifice, families who have lost their loved ones and the sense of patriotic obligation. The most frequent indicators of modality were the words: We must act and India will not tolerate to morally justify the military action and make the operation sound as something imperative and necessary.

#### Intertextuality

There was a lot of reference to historical events, previous speeches and religious symbolism in the texts. This intertextuality supported the continuation of official narratives and validity as well as placed Operation Sindoor into larger historical and cultural contexts.

### **Discursive Practice**

#### Media Reproduction of Political Discourse

Operation Sindoor was popularly portrayed in the media as a defense by the political group and as a righteous operation. State narratives were supported by editorials and news coverage, which made political rhetoric and media coverage consistent with each other.

#### Binary Oppositions

A persistent pattern of binary opposition emerged, framing India as the protector and Pakistan or militant actors as existential threats. This “us vs. them” discourse was central to legitimizing military action and reinforcing nationalist sentiment.

#### Silencing Dissent

The opposition views, the civil societal opinions and other dissenting views were sidelined, discredited and characterized as unpatriotic. Threats of enemy propaganda and fake news were often used in media coverage, making the state the only news outlet that dictated the truth.

#### Framing of Disinformation

The debate of disinformation focused on the role of the state to guard people against false accounts. The idea of enemy propaganda was used to show how the official and media discourse were cooperative in crafting and managing the general opinion.

### **Sociocultural Practice**

#### Nationalism and Unity

The discourses placed India as a morally bound actor who was protecting the integrity of the nation. The ideology of national unity dominated through the use of language, framing and symbolic imagery.

#### Anxiety and Militarization.

The operation was justified by rhetoric that stressed on security requirements and military necessity. The militarized identity and the state power were created as a morally valid force, and the protection of the country was associated with moral and civic responsibility.

#### The Sexes and Religious Imagery.

The symbolism of gender and religion especially the Sindoor metaphor and the imagery of the motherland conceptualized military action as a sacred and protective obligation. Through such symbolism, the meaning of cultural and religious identity was linked to nationalistic and militaristic agendas.

#### Powerful Ideologies and Marginalization.

The discussion, in general, promoted mainstream ideologies of nationalism, security, and majoritarian identity, and marginalized opposition to it in a systematic manner. Other stories were reduced or delegitimized and this shows how language, symbolism and practice of media all combine to ensure hegemonic power.

### **Discussion**

This scholarly article demonstrates that a group of nationalism, rationalizing the possibility of a military intervention, and inciting other perspectives, discursively constructed the political leadership of Indians and the mainstream media Operation Sindoor. These findings are consistent with and add to the existing literature on the challenges of media-nationalism-militarization intersections in South Asia. One of the core themes that were identified during the analysis was the creation of India as a unified and moral subject, which has to defend itself against the external aggression. This is similar to the argument described by Idrees et al. (2023) that Indian media often constructs the idea of human rights abuses in nationalistic terms that justify the use of force by states but not other opinions. On the same note, Zahra and Shahid (2025) established that the media coverage of the 2025 India-Pakistan dispute was based on propaganda, emotional appeal and appeals, which correlates with the current research observation of symbolic framing and rhetorical repetition in political and media language. The pattern of othering that was repeatedly applied to Pakistan and militants emerged as well in the analysis and is widely mentioned in the works of van Dijk (1998) on the ideological discourse and corroborated by the findings of Gopal (2023) on militarized masculinities in Indian settings. Through the presentation of Pakistan as the terror-committer and India as the civilization-defender, discourses of Operation Sindoor had cemented a situation of us versus them. This dualistic frame reflects the views of Pandit (2026) about how militarization in Kashmir is discursively associated with identity and control. The other major discovery is the symbolic use of cultural and religious imagery, especially when it comes to name said Sindoor as a codename. Although this gendered aspect of militarized discourse is not completely new (Gopal, 2023), the current study puts emphasis on the way religiously gendered symbolism was activated with the purpose of serving nationalistic ideology directly. By so doing, it broadens the current research through demonstrating how feminine, marriage, and honor-related cultural metaphors were taken over to make military action worshiped. This is an innovative input, as the symbolic nature of operation names in the Indian discourse of security has not been given much coverage in the scholarly literature. It was also found that the voice of opposition was silenced as opposition politicians, civil society forms and conflict-affected

civilians were mostly overlooked or discredited in the mainstream discourse. The study findings are relevant to the research gap, which Zahra and Shahid (2025) have indicated by stating that a lack of attention has been paid to the discursive marginalization of the marginalized views. Through its demonstration of how dissent was perceived as unpatriotic or support of enemy interests, the study supports Wodak (2015) argument that discourse is a place of ideological struggle in which power is not only exercised by inclusion but it also occurs through strategic exclusion. Lastly, the paper sheds light on disinformation management being discursively created as a legitimizing aspect of the state. The concept of fake news and the so-called enemy propaganda were used in official speeches and media texts that portrayed the government as the keeper of the truth. This coincides with the article by Surjatmodjo et al. (2024) on the dissemination of disinformation and state resilience, but also introduces a context-specific example of how the story of fighting the disinformation itself is a source of power. Combined, these results show that Operation Sindoor discourse was not only used to recount a military operation, but also to support ideological devotion to nationalism, securitization and majoritarian cultural self. Militarization was normalized through the discourses and situated in the context of honor, sacrifice and religious symbolism thus leaving little room to debate or have alternative voices. This study fills in three insights in responding to the research gaps mentioned. To begin with, it offers the initial CDA of Operation Sindoor specifically, which is a gap where there is no case-based study concerning this operation. Second, it is a composite of political and media discourses, which demonstrates the intertextuality of the two in the development of legitimacy. Third, it underscores how gendered and religious imagery is symbolically appropriated in renaming the operations, which is not strongly examined in literature. The consequences are two-fold. Ideally, the research contributes to developing CDA research because it shows how ideology and power are enrolled in operation names and nationalistic imagery. In practice, it brings in question the democratic health of the Indian public discourse where the voice of the opposition is hushed down systematically and militarization is a must that is promoted as a religious obligation.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has critically analyzed the ways in which the operation of Sindoor was constructed discursively by Indian political leaders and mainstream media by using the Frameworks of Critical Discourse Analysis as formulated by Fairclough and Wodak, and found that the operation was not only constructed as a military operation, but also as a discursive occurrence that justified the state, supported nationalist ideologies and suppressed dissent. Political and media discourses put India as a committed moral subject, Pakistan and militants as existential threats, and relied on religious and gendered symbols to sanctify militarization, with disinformation presented as threat that was being addressed by the state to further its position as purveyor of truth. The study, particularly in terms of Operation Sindoor, addresses a considerable research gap as the names of operations and intertextual narratives that create identity and legitimacy are symbolic and, therefore, inform the discourse research, media, and political communication. Simultaneously, it recognizes the constraints in that it is only limited to English-language texts and no audience response is provided to help understand how these stories were consumed by the general public. Research gaps might be resolved in future by including vernacular media, focusing on audience interpretations, and engaging in comparative research in South Asia or other militarized democracies. In general, these results point to the striking nature of discourse as an instrument of conflict, and the establishment of political legitimacy, and the ideological limits of nationalism, security, and dissent in modern India.

### Recommendations

In support of the conclusions made in the current study, it is possible to suggest a number of recommendations to the policy-makers, media professionals, and prospective scholars. First, the government communication and policy departments must introduce open structures that will oversee and control the spread of state discourses in militarized situations and make sure that the state messages do not discriminate against the voices of the opposing sides or the views of the civil society excessively. Second, media entities ought to implement editorial policies that minimize unbalanced binary framing and emotive exemplification of conflicts in media coverage, advocating a critical analysis and varying opinions without violating the principles of journalism. Third, schools and media literacy can incorporate training on critical discourse and symbolic framing so that citizens can be able to detect ideological, gendered, or religious symbolism in political discourse and media reporting. Fourth, the voices of underrepresented groups, especially those of the populations at conflict, opposition actors, and marginalized groups, should be empowered by engaging civil society and advocacy groups to make the discourse more inclusive. Lastly, the effects of audience comprehension of military and political communication, such as vernacular and regional media, and how the symbolic operation names and media framing affect the perception of the population, formation of identity, and legitimization of state activity in various situations in South Asia should be studied. All these suggestions would contribute to addressing transparency, accountability and criticality in the role played by politics, media and militarization at the intersection.

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