

FROM THE MARGINS, A NEW ERA FOR DALIT MEDIA

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(Written by Ashok Das)

‘A Brahmin woman raped’ or ‘A Rajput woman raped’. I often wonder why I don’t read such headlines in newspapers. But, every other day, I come across this headline: ‘Dalit woman raped’. Is it that only Dalit women are victims of rape? No. Why then, in case of rape of a Dalit woman, her community is identified? Who does this?

The character of Indian media, or should I say the Upper Caste Media, is usually hidden in the answer to this question. I am addressing this group as Upper Caste Media because the way in which this media functions, the way they write and present their news reports, often reflects their character. This media identifies the caste of a Dalit rape victim, but when [Mary Kom](#) wins a gold medal at the Olympics, they do not inform their readers about her caste. When Hima Das and Dutee Chand win medals and create world records, no one mentions their caste. This media does not even debate that while [Sachin Tendulkar](#) (a Brahmin), who has received crores from the BCCI for playing for ‘India’, has got a Bharat Ratna, why has Major Dhyhan Chand, the wizard of hockey, a sport that is played in more countries than cricket, not received the honour.

The Indian media’s double standards on these issues show that it looks at Dalits differently. The language used by the Indian media, especially the Hindi media, is often offensive. In newspapers, one often reads the headline, ‘Dabang thrash a Dalit’. Who is the dabang (fearless one) here? The one who tortures a poor, innocent, weak person, bereft of all rights? Is it not right to use the word gunda (hooligan) instead of dabang for such a person? Why glorify a criminal each time?

This character of the Indian media is not just evident in news reports but also inside the newsroom. While the mainstream media has a very small number of Dalits, a few of my Dalit friends who work in big news channels tell me that their colleagues often ask them why they write and report about Dalit issues and raise the same in meetings. They are even accused of being casteist, and most of their reports are dismissed.

In 2006, when I joined the mainstream media after completing a diploma in journalism from one of the country’s most prestigious media colleges, the Indian Institute of Mass Communication, New Delhi, my own experience with caste there was quite bad. From the very first day, people were intent on knowing my caste.

At my second job, with a leading Hindi newspaper in North India, despite being the senior-most person for the job, I was not given a promotion. Questions were raised on my capabilities despite the fact that as a reporter I had been given the responsibility to cover Aligarh Muslim University. If I was incapable, then for the past seven years I would not have edited and published Dalit Dastak, a prominent magazine of the Dalit community which has been written about by both the English media in India and the international media. An invite to attend the prestigious Harvard India Conference just landed in my inbox.

Also, in the media, there are no senior journalists from the community to mentor young Dalits. Numbers prove this. In 2006, the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) had

conducted a survey on the Delhi media. Apart from 37 Hindi and English newspapers, 315 decision-makers at 24/7 news channels were part of the survey. The study revealed that 90 per cent of the decision-makers at newspapers were from the upper caste. At the 24/7 news channels, 79 per cent of the decision-makers were upper castes. Of these, 49 per cent were Brahmins alone. Among the top 315 decision-makers at news channels, there was no one from the Dalit or tribal communities. The OBCs accounted for 4 per cent, while the Muslim representation stood at 3 per cent.

It's important to mention another report here. Oxfam India, in association with NewsLaundry, prepared a report titled 'Who Tells Our Stories Matters: Representation of Marginalised Caste Groups in Indian Newsrooms'. The report studied all major Hindi and English news platforms — newspapers, television channels, news websites and YouTube channels. The report said that among journalists writing for English newspapers, only 5 per cent belong to Dalit and tribal communities. The figure stands at 10 per cent for Hindi newspapers. Twelve leading magazines were also assessed as part of the study. It was revealed that of the 972 stories published on its cover pages, only 10 were related to caste — just 1 per cent.

The Indian media is not on a par with the Western media where, to ensure diversity, people from all communities are given opportunities. If this was the case here, the Indian media would prosper because then news from all communities and sections would be reported without any prejudice, which in turn would create a better atmosphere in the country.

It is this indifference of the mainstream media that has brought Dalits to social media. Many YouTube channels that focus on Dalit-Bahujan issues have lakhs of subscribers and are being run by professional journalists. On such platforms they can speak about the issues of their community in a better manner. Their strength can be gauged from the fact that the Rohith Vemula case came to the fore only because Dalits now have access to social media.

Despite the indifference, Dalits have frequently challenged mainstream media through their small publications. The history of Dalit-Bahujan media is also about to complete a hundred years. Muknayak, the Marathi fortnightly newspaper started by Babasaheb Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar, is set to complete a century in three months — on January 31, 2020. On this occasion, the Dalit Dastak magazine has organised a big programme, '100 years of Ambedkar's Journalism'. Editors and publishers of journals and newspapers from across the country, that focus on Dalit-Bahujan movements, will join the event.

It is the beginning of a new era for the Dalit media.

(Ashok Das is editor of Dalit Dastak, a monthly magazine and YouTube channel. Translated from Hindi by Ankita Dwivedi Johri)

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