

MINORITIES, DALITS AND MEDIA

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The subject of human rights is as best vast and at its voluminous worst, unfathomable. This paper seeks to delve into end in the context of Dalits and minorities. Instead it picks on experiences from the field to understand the position of the Indian media within the limits of the writer's experiences as a journalist.

The great diagnostic merit of journalism lies in revealing the maladies of one's own understanding, the roots of one's own frenzies. First time I confronted my, self-congratulatory, pro minority reporting happened while covering the aftermath of the Batla house encounter in Azamgarh, a small town that was believed to be home to many of the (still unverified) terrorists. Day were spent talking to the families, friends and neighbours of the young boys who were either killed in the encounter or were believed to have absconded as they were part of larger terrorist work. The 'quotes' came from sources which other media friends had been tapping-sources which had turned on auto mode(as is wont to happen in a case of media deluge) and could answer routine/typical questions before they were asked. It was then that a young boy asked me why I was weakening the case of the community to comment on the boys, why was I not attempting to get the version of neutral third parties who had spent time with the boys?

The pro Dalit test I failed at an election rally of BahujanSamaj Party. Interviewing a group of educated young man, I was asked why the fact of being Dalit had to be red flagged in story. Why could the media not report that the young had made a conscious decision to vote for the party because there were no other viable political option? And why could the Dalit identity not be a footnote to the other attributes of my subject?

While the overarching validity of these encounters might be debatable there is no taking away from the vicarious persistence that the media displays in chronicling shock and/or stereotypical elements of the Dalit/minority world. Sample these random headlines: Two dalits burnt alive after clash over dog,(Times of India, 23 April,2010), Dalits Houses burnt in UP village for celebratingHoli(India Today, 22 March, 2011), Indian Muslim Unhappy over their leaders weak response to terror(Times of India, September 5, 2011), A Strategy to Combat Islamic Terrorism in India (The Hindu, August 17, 2011). There is no taking away from the vitality of news such as this, but it is the obsession with only such news that offers a limited palette to paint the Dalit/minority world.

Two factors have been traditionally held responsible for putting this cloud of grey on the mainstream media's coverage of Dalit/minority issues. The first: a negligible non Hindu component of the news room work force, the second: the humdrum problems of news gathering.

The often cited, first piece on the absence of Dalit journalists in the mainstream media was written by BN Uniyal in 1996 in Pioneer Uniyal, upon being asked by a foreign correspondent to be put in touch with a Dalit journalist, realised that neither he (Uniyal) nor any of his friends from a three decade long journalistic career had encountered one.

A further probing into the Press Information Bureau's list of accredited journalists also yielded a naught. That journalist Kenneth J Cooper went on to write: "India's 4000 daily newspapers publish in nearly 100 languages, but one voice is largely absent in the press of world's largest democracy: that of lower castes, which account for more than 70 percent of the country's 934 million people." (Washington Post September 5, 1996)

Later Chandra Bhan Prasad was pick on this piece to ponder on the question of where in Dalit journalist were? He linked the absence to the traditional exclusion of the Dalit from the varna order and an inability of Dalits to break in to what Prasad labelled the 'zealously guarded fortress of the media world'.

A July 2006 study by the Centre for the study of Developing Societies, Delhi widened the scope to gather from a survey that "of the 315 key decision-makers surveyed from 37 Delhi-based (English-Hindi) publications and television channels, almost 90% of decision-makers in the English language print media and 79% in television were.... From 'upper caste'". That effectively renders minorities and Dalits invisible.

It is however, too simplistic to assume that the quality and quantity of coverage of Dalit/minority issues, will automatically increase if there is greater diversity in our newsrooms. Those timeless debates which have plagued journalism: is absolute objectivity possible, who sets the agenda for the news, where does one draw the definitive line between journalism and activism, how much weightage is allowed for the economic imperative of catering to the largest possible audience, what is an ideal code of ethics for journalists and like, assume larger proportions when it comes to dealing with minorities and their rights.

There is also that nagging problem of developing an accepted vocabulary for reporting on minority rights. For instance when a migrant does become a victim? It is doubtful that a Dalit/minority journalist is in a better position to report on issues of concern communities in question. I have often heard young Muslim journalist complain that they are immediate choices for covering madarsas and wakf boards, even though neither their education nor their socio-cultural background offers them any special insights into matters, just as my background offers me no advantages to cover Hindu fundamentalism.

Hasan Suroor, refers to his own reporting experience to drive the point. He writes "The most irritating experience for a 'minority' journalist is to be cast in role of spokesperson for his or her community. And I know some who have become just that, not because they are sectarian but because they genuinely believe that they owe it to their community to voice its 'concerns'. In other words, if they don't 'stand by' it, who else will? 'Stand by', yes But to what end? To join in the demand for a ban on a book just because it suits the political agenda of some community leaders?...To turn educational institutions into ghettos in the name of giving them a 'Muslim character'?"

And again: "The trouble with being a journalist who happens to be a Muslim is that whatever you say or write is seen through the prism of your religious identity and dubbed the 'Muslim viewpoint' rather than a personal opinion."³

This burden of religious identity will come hang on most non-religious of us if we choose to make careers in journalism. Thus as a Hindu reporter, who rarely visits a temple, I am pressed hard to record the 'Muslim' viewpoint in my regular visits to Ayodhya. As a high caste Hindu, I feel obliged to cover the Dalit dominated villages which face intimidation in casting their votes in elections (even though the poor elsewhere might face the same threats and coercion) solely to prove my secular credentials in the mainstream media. Such reporting cannot be only marginally more balanced than that which blatantly promotes an agenda or a bias.

Community specific media efforts will not necessarily serve the community they are targeted at Editor of The Pioneer ChandanMithra writes: "To an extent, Urdu newspaper of Delhi, working as a single entity... have only played a negative role in their lives. As far as the electronic media is concerned... these channels give way to misunderstanding about Muslims.... It seems that there is no respite for common Muslims."⁴

Amitabh Bhatt draws a similar conclusion for Dalit newspapers alleging that these do not "consider issued in their entirety...Its role in transforming the mainstream media in limited. Hence it is necessary that Dalits must become players in the mainstream media, to remove the biases that exist against the Dalits there in."⁵

The remedy also does not lie in creating separate spaces for minority/Dalit reporting (as in the Pioneer's Dalit Diary) within the mainstream for this is a perpetuation of the 'we/them' distinction. Also, a separate space naturally means the Dalit perspective in only the prerogative of a few and that to understand or express it you need to necessarily be a Dalit. Such deliberate and defined boundaries do not serve the cause of journalism for good stories cannot have religions or castes.

SiddharthVardarajan point out that what passes for minority reporting is often only a mirror of the political climate and by promoting the biases of mainstream politics, Indian media is guilty of "low intensity communalism". The example Varadarajan uses is the coverage of Sikhs, as a minority community, in the 1980s in the context of Punjab agitation. He writes: "If you actually read some of the writings of the newspapers and their identification of Sikhs with extremism, it is clear that provocative material was being written on community in 1984.... The media was then reflecting the biases and the political imperatives of party in power, the Congress....the media reflected this and was complicit in it".⁶

Inadequate representation within the media room is compounded by common limits of the news gathering experience. The first of these is an over reliance on the police and bureaucratic machinery for information which in turn colours news with its own inbuilt caste hierarchies and religious demographics. where the man on the street become the source of information, the man is more likely to be more accessible and voluble only because of a dominant social position and pressure of time will often not permit, even a well-intentioned journalist to seek alternative voices.

Often when the required investment in time and resource is not made a reverse form of discrimination will occur with the media. An interesting insight is offered by the media's initial patchy coverage to the growth of the BahujanSamaj party's political rise and Mayawati's subsequent cold shoulder to the media.

Ajoy Bose attempts an explanation at what has caused this acrimony. He writes..."part of the problem emanated from ordinary bias, particularly in Hindi language media, dominated as it was by orthodox upper caste Hindus who were appalled at the rise of the lower castes. In this

respect, the BSP leader's constant refrain about a biased manuvadi media was an accurate description. But the abrasive personal styles of both Mayawati and Kanshi Ram also compounded and deepened the mutual suspicion and hostility. They also made little attempt to network with the media and pander to the giant egos that Indian journalists tend to nurse. And unlike many other political leaders who backed up sweet talk with some serious sops and junkets to keep the media happy, these were either not forthcoming from Mayawati or too crudely packaged".⁷

Today being a journalist in Uttar Pradesh offers neither ease of access nor cordial interactions with either members of the ruling party or the bureaucracy. To quote a very recent incident, the government refused to send a representative for a media programme on the Right to Education, only because newspaper have been critical of the government's performance on the score.

To break into the minority/ Dalit space great investments in time and not mere "touch and go" of "scoop" journalism. I have often experienced that the best stories will come when the media spotlight has moved on from a place, when we are less pressed to display our nationalistic credentials... when we realize that it is good journalism to question the "official theory".

Advances in technology have meant that more information is now available and is available rapidly, with minimal time lags between an event and transmission of its happening. The rise of citizen journalism and social networking has begun to influence what is considered news worthy at a given time. Channels increasingly cater to a particular state and will pick up their news from leads offered by viewers, often displaying contact details of local reporters to share these. This is a still evolving situation and has created problems of verification, especially for the print media. Alternatively as the visual appeal of news increases, that without visual content is bound to get killed.

A surge of information also means that news will be rapidly moved off public consciousness to make way for that which is more 'trending'. Thus while the hunger and desperation of Badwar, a remote village in Bundelkhand, will make news during the annual budget of elections, it will not be offered the consistent coverage of say, the off and on field antics of our cricket team. Even within human rights news, the Gujarat riots and the aftermath will receive more coverage than the rape of a Dalit minor by a politician in Banda.

Yet the print news space now offers never before opportunities to write longer, detailed pieces on the struggles of the oppressed. With news being offered 24X7 the print space (in the elite English media) is freed to offer longer narrative pieces. A growing convergence of information systems and greater access to news resources from around the world has meant that the Indian media is more responsive to a global audience that seeks news on issues such as deprivation, marginalization. Also as the media appropriates for itself a more activist role, actively promoting and fighting for individual and social justice, groups and bodies promoting Dalit/minority rights are pushing for their issues to find more space in mainstream story telling.

This is in conformity with the global trend. To quote from a 2002 report of the International Council on Human Rights Policy, "Human rights have become increasingly prominent in recent years. Government and political leaders refer to international human rights standards more frequently, both in formal definitions of policy and in public speeches. Public awareness has similarly evolved. Human rights are understood to be near the heart of many international news issues... Coverage of human rights in the media is therefore likely to continue

to grow – and it is appropriate increasingly to expect journalists and broadcasters to report them accurately”⁸.

The rise of NGOs, social activists and large, the world’s greater sensitivity to the problems of human rights has increased reporting on human rights in the Indian media. Yet the Indian media has to traverse a long distance to become truly representative of the country and its struggles.

SuhasBorker makes an attempt to look into the future.

“We know about BPL-Below Poverty Line- But let us also know about Below Media line- BML. The poor, oppressed, marginalised millions in this country are Below Media Line. If the media does not look at 840 million Indians who do not have more than Rs.20a day or in not concerned about their future, it is abetting a “Second Partition”. Which will burst forth like a tsunami of agony and pain, engulfing the whole country. It will be more dehumanising than the one 70 years ago”⁹

The relationship between Dalits, minorities and the media is multi layered and complex. But the time to look for answers is now.

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