



The Economics of Exclusion in the Indian Mass Media

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ABSTRACT

The Indian mass media has always discriminated certain sections of the society. This paper tries to identify the major groups which have been excluded by the mainstream media. It also tries to find the reasons from an economist's point of view.

KEYWORDS

Indian Mass Media, Exclusion, Dalits, Marginalisation

A welfare-oriented democratic state, if it has to exist requires a free and independent media. The mass media acts as with dual purposes of creating awareness among masses and also highlighting the problems in administration. The first can be termed as 'educative objectives', while the latter can be termed as 'watchdog objectives'. Prabash (2005) views that media has a therapeutic value in a democracy. But, it can be seen that the Indian mass media gives no space in reporting news concerning Dalits, minorities and women. There is also a perceived urban-rural bias as well, all of which can be seen more in the visual media as well as the social media. One can see that commercialization of mass media can also be blamed for such marginalisation. For instance, the Indian Premier League (IPL) gets more coverage compared to the Ranji Trophy even though the latter has more local players and local flavour. The recently concluded 35th National Games never got the coverage it required in the mainstream English newspapers compared to India's preparation to the cricket World Cup.

The paper is divided into two sections. The first section tries to substantiate the fact that the Indian mass media has ignored the coverage of issues concerning the marginalised groups. The second section tries to reason why this is so. The last section discusses some recommendations in light of the reasons for this marginalisation.

INDIAN MASS MEDIA AND MARGINALISED GROUPS

Before we understand the dynamics of marginalisation by the media, we should the groups which are marginalised. The first group which has been effectively marginalised by the Indian mass media is the Dalits. For example, the states of Tamil Nadu and Odisha saw lots of movements against the prevailing untouchability and access to temples. The Dalits entering the temples where they have never entered for generations and all never entered into the main pages of our newspapers or in the prime time of our news channels as well. On the other hand, isolated protests by certain sections against reservations held in New Delhi were widely covered. So it implies that there is not just lack of coverage on Dalit issues but also a biased reporting against them.

The second group which never occupied any place in the Indian media was the tribals. The issues covering them regarding like mining, development induced displacements; malnutrition, forest rights, livelihood issues etc never occupied any centre-stage in our mass media. The tribes doesn't constitute the majority and nor they are their audience.

The third major group which also feels let down by the mass media is women. The issues facing women like inequality, crimes, marginalisation etc are never highlighted in the media.

The case started improving recently when media started to report the crimes against women especially in the urban centre. Here one also needs to understand the fact that many a times the victims in such urban crimes against women are from middle or upper-middle class. This bias can be seen when the recent Uber case in Delhi which occupied lots of media space for a long time but same such crimes against Dalit women in rural areas were never reported much.

The fourth group which is conveniently excluded is labour. The capitalist production system aims at earning profit through maximizing revenue and minimizing cost. The Cobb-Douglas production function is a typical case of such a system. In the conflict between capital and labour when it comes to cost-reduction, the labour is always at a disadvantaged position. The media being part of the capitalist system also sides with the capital in such issues. This can be substantiated by the lack of reporting on issues related to workers like strikes, retrenchment, working conditions etc. Such issues are never reported because they conflict with the interests of the capital which many times even owns the media. The concentration of capital in some fields also leads the media to exclude other.

ECONOMICS OF EXCLUSION IN MASS MEDIA

The Indian mass media can be textbook case of oligopolistic market in India. One can see the presence of very few players in this sector who control substantial share of viewers in the total market. For example, let us take the case of English print and visual media.

The news or information has all the feature of a public good. It has both the features of non-excludable and non-rivalrous in that individuals cannot be effectively excluded from use and where use by one individual does not reduce availability to others. The increased presence of corporate sector in media leads to its transformation as a private good or as Thakurata (2014) points out 'commodification' of news. The recent year also saw India's biggest company going on to control India's biggest media group. This was the decision taken by the Reliance Industries Limited (RIL) to take over full editorial and managerial control over the Network18 group. This take over will give the Reliance group increasing ability to influence public opinion through media and thereby strengthening its control over the political system. The government has also not come up with any solid policy proposals on cross-media ownership. This has led to companies like RIL to consolidate its position among all types of media leading to the strengthening of oligopolistic market structure. This also has other social impact like the space for criticizing and critically evaluating the Indian corporate sector would shrink further. The main victims of corporate exploitation like tribals, Dalits, women etc would

have lesser space in the mainstream media.

The social awareness, level of education and standard of living are some of the major social indicators which increase the effectiveness of mass media. The marginalised groups' exposure to media is limited by their increased cost in accessing the media. For example, the chances of a tribal having a TV in a remote hamlet are minimal. The women, especially those in the marginalised groups hardly have any say or understanding the information disseminated via mass media. Hence, the media also to certain extent limit the covering of news reports on this section of the society.

The media is driven by the advertisement revenue from the corporates. Most importantly, the media sector even though is considered essential for the smooth functioning of democracy still works fully in market principles of increasing revenue and decreasing cost. The Television Rating Points (TRP) determines the advertisement revenue earned by a media house. The advent of new media or internet has limited the pricing element of news and increased the accessibility of international and other alternative news providers among the audience. As Thakurata (2014) says, 'a large volume of media content is available for free to internet users'. For example, an internet user doesn't need to subscribe the entire newspapers, but can go through the content of not only domestic but also international newspapers. This scenario has led the media to depend fully on the finances from corporate sector in the form of advertisements. The mad rush to increase TRP led to the visual media to manufacture high decibel newsroom discussions or programmes which promote superstition and also news which affects its majority of the audience who are normally the middle and upper-middle class. As mentioned earlier in the paper, crimes against women in urban areas get more coverage than same crimes in rural areas.

Another reason also is due to the fact most of the marginalised groups are there in rural villages which are remote and inaccessible. To send fact-finding teams or journalists to investigate the news require cost and also there is no guarantee that this will increase the TRP. And most important such fact

finding teams always comes with conclusions which might not go well with the ruling and corporate class. The ruling class is important because most of the vernacular press is owned by politicians like in Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka etc.

Finally, a main reason for the non-reporting of news on marginalised groups is the lack of Dalit journalists in the Indian media. A reason for increase in the news reports on crime against women in urban centres can no doubt be attributed to the rise in the number of women journalist in mainstream media. The case referred by senior journalist BN Uniyal in 1996 points to this issue. A foreign correspondent wanted to speak to a Dalit journalist for a story and asked Uniyal to help him find one. Uniyal contacted editors, friends and went through the list of journalists accredited to the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting but failed to reach to a single one. The lack of Dalit journalists is also one of the reasons for non-reporting of their issues in the mainstream media.

CONCLUSION

Even with shrinking space for news on Dalits, poor, women and other marginalised groups, the emergence of new media has to some extent has tried bridging the information gap made by the mainstream media. The effective use of social media, blogs, you-tube etc have influenced public opinion and tried to make the sounds of marginalised groups heard in the society. But, the internet connectivity and penetration has limited the use of these new alternative media among the society. There is an urgent need to democratize internet and related technology because one can see the developed world already trying to control the contents in the cyberspace as well. Almost two decades after Uniyal tried to find a Dalit journalist in Delhi, now the situation has improved even though slightly. Now the representation of Dalits in journalism and media has improved though it is not enough. The caste-based discrimination itself can be seen in studios and newsroom. This is the single major reason for the Dalit journalist to leave media and try finding jobs in other related avenues.

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