



Indian Mass Media's approach towards Dalits in India

Dr. C. Suresh Kumar

Assistant Professor Department of Visual Communication Pondicherry University

ABSTRACT

Dalits are those who are beneath the entire caste system – and are therefore literally 'outcaste' as well as 'untouchable' – call them-selves 'Dalits'. The word "Dalit", meaning "broken" or "ground down", is used by 'outcaste' people themselves to describe at the same time their oppression, their identity and their collective power for emancipation. Though Dalits comprise significant percentage of total Indian population, they are still neglected both by the society and the mass media. This paper explores the attitude of mass media to Dalits and their issues in India and the media initiated by the intellectual Dalits as an alternative to the mainstream media

KEYWORDS

Dalits, Mass media, caste system

Introduction

In 1996 Washington Post writes that India's 4,000 daily newspapers publish in nearly 100 languages, but one voice is largely absent in the press of the world's largest democracy: that of the lower castes, which account for more than 70 percent of the country's 934 million people. Not one daily newspaper has made speaking on their behalf its role. Few daily newspaper reporters come from lower castes, and none of the nation's prominent columnists does. (Cooper, Kenneth J. (1996)) In 21st century India, Television, Cinema and Newspaper have been extremely inaccessible media for Dalits issues and Dalit Participation (Guru, 2000). Post-independence mainstream media always bypassed the Dalits and issues and the Indian media, controlled by caste Hindus, ridiculing the demands and politics of the Dalits through cartoons and headlines; the present politics of the Dalits through cartoons and headlines (Tirumal, 2004). In 2007, for example when Mayavati Naina Kumari was elected chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, India's largest state, the election coverage by the mainstream press was very poor. Mainstream media coverage on Dalit also has helped to construct "The Dalit questions" in negative connotation and portrayed them only as the victims. The international media also showed similar attitude when it comes to reporting Dalits. Kanshi Ram, disappointed with the mainstream media started his own media. He was very well aware that the mainstream media's nature of reports on Dalits. He was concerned that stories about Dalit atrocities only focused on how many people were killed or injured. There was rarely follow up to illustrate that fact that the perpetrators always got away with the crime (Mehra, 2008).

Dalits and Media

When K.R. Narayanan, the first Dalit president of India visited France in April 2000, Le Monde described it in its report as "the first untouchable" president of Indian republic. When Dalits, together with tribal, make up nearly 25 percent of the country's population, the National Human Rights Commission found that the media "provides negligible space to their plight/problems. Beyond reports of major instances of violence, there is a lack of any sustained reporting of their problems and their efforts to include their voices. Instead, these communities frequently obtain notice when the discussion is focused on backwardness, population increase, lack of entrepreneurship and productivity, thereby perpetuating caste-based stereotypes (Tirumal, 2008). Saint (2008) in counter-current.org websites opines that the main newspapers are still biased and follow self centered policies and they seldom write about issues which are tarnishing the Indian society and the future of India. Furthermore, the mainstream media outrightly ignore Dalits real issues.

Indian media seem to waiting for an opportunity to see only Dalits are targeted by upper castes. In July 27th 2012, Mayawathi's statue was vandalized all over the state. When the incident was taking place the media arrived on time to cover the issue. The media was well aware about happening of the crime is acknowledged by none other than the media itself. The incident took place minutes after the national president of the group, UP Navnirman Sena told the press reporters at a press conference. Cameramen of some TV channels and a few news photographers who attended the press conference apparently had prior knowledge of such plans as they were on the spot the four of the group members damaging the statues (The Hoot, 2012). Mayawathi was criticized by many media for ruling the state with complete disregard (Mehta, 2008).

Teltumbde (2010) points out that what happened in Khairlanji is yet another incident to prove the attitude of mainstream media. In this incident four Dalits belonging to the same community were killed brutally by high caste Hindus. They were dragged from their hut, paraded naked, tortured, maimed, sexually assaulted and killed. They were taken in a cart around the village and their bodies thrown in different parts of the village. Bhaiyalal, the head of the Bhotmange family, had witnessed the entire incident and escaped to tell the tale to a typically indifferent police. It was only when the mutilated bodies were found the next day that a formal report of the crime was recorded. The news of this massacre did not appear in the mainstream media in any significant fashion. Media started to give coverage to this issue only when violence erupted demanding justice for the victims. And it took a full month before the national media picked up the story and that too in a marginal way 'yes, this too happened'. When Jessica Lall and Priyadarshani Mattoo murder case was closed owing to poor witnesses, the Delhi-based electronic media, took a huge campaign and catalysed a powerful movement of protest against a corrupt police and succeeded in reopening the case, thus sending the culprit behind the bar. But the same media did little for Surekha and Priyanka Bhotmage of Khairlanji.

Dalits in the negative lights

Mainstream portrayal of Dalits in negative light has been criticized by Dalit activists across the state. When Dalits started protests in the form of statewide rallies, the police unleashed terror. Again media did not give the true picture. Instead it started highlighting only the 'nuisance' caused by the agitating Dalits. When Deputy chief minister and home minister alleged that Naxalites behind the agitation, the media too sang in tune with them and sought to establish connection between Dalits and Naxalites.

The anniversary of Ambedkar is observed typically in Mumbai in which millions of people would walk hundreds of miles, braving hardship and hunger. The event is known for the highly disciplined crowd who visit the consecrated ground, the Chaitya Bhomi, in Babasaheb's memory. In 2008, soon after the post Khairlanji incidents, the fiftieth anniversary of Ambedkar was observed. The Maharashtra government anticipated further violence on that day. Though nothing happened on that day, fear of a violent Dalit mob was fueled by news media. The media predicted a siege of the city, warning that Mumbai residents could be potential victims of unruliness and random acts of violence (Rao, 2009). Mumbai's Daily News & Analysis ran a story headlined, "Residents line on Razors's edge" (December 5, 2006) Talking about the nature of Indian media the Keith Hebden in his book Dalits theology and Christian Anarchism says that the State and the media are becoming more powerful and less accountable and Dalits are still excluded from the mainstream media.

Ambedkar, too, suffered a similar treatment from the nationalist media of his time. He criticized the Indian press and said "the untouchables have no Press. The Congress Press is closed to them and is determined not to give them the slightest publicity. They cannot have their own Press and for obvious reasons. No paper can survive without advertisement revenue. The staff of the Associated Press in India, which is the main news distributing agency in India, is entirely drawn from the Madras Brahmins—indeed the whole of the Press in India is in their hands and they, for well-known reasons, are entirely pro-Congress and will not allow any news hostile to the Congress to get publicity. These are reasons beyond the control of the Untouchables" (Ambedkar, 1945).

When Ambedkar argued for a separate nation for Schedule Castes as that of Muslims, he received severe criticism from various media. His criticism of the Congress also seemed unacceptable. An editorial in the National Herald described his speech as a cynical outburst lacking wisdom and foresight. The editorial in Vartman described his speech as 'reactionary and against the ideals of Indian nationalism. When he joined the cabinet the editorial presented him with two choices: either submit to nationalism or quit the cabinet (Anand, 2006).

Maxine Loynd in the book politics without television edited by Nalin Mehta writes about why Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) head Mayawathi do not maintain good relationship with the mainstream media for several reasons. One of the reasons why the Party does not engage with the mainstream media is that the coverage it receives is filtered through bias which is created by the peculiarities of the Indian Hegemonic public sphere and bound by its limitations. Caste composition found in the mainstream media a significant cause for this bias attitude to Dalits. Mostly, all the journalists and editors come from a high-caste background. This fact, combined with the caste and socioeconomic background of the audience that satellite television, in particular, and, many newspapers have, means that mainstream media in UP, both English and Hindi, represent a hegemonic public sphere which articulates an understanding of Indian society that is generally not shared by Dalits (Loynd, 2006).

Observing the attitude of the press towards Ambedkar in the article Anand (2005) says that Ambedkar wanted to a separate nation for Dalits as much as the Muslims. But the Ambedkarite point of view in the mainstream 'nationalist' press is epitomized by an editorial in the Hindu following the Poona pact, which shockingly did not make a single reference to Ambedkar, but praised on Gandhi and his struggle. Such attitude of wishing away caste realities resurfaces even today in what is regarded as India's most 'progressive' English language newspaper, which in its commemorative 125-year anniversary issue (13, September 2003) did not discuss Ambedkar once, used his picture nowhere, but issues an entire special supplement devoted to M.K. Gandhi.

On 30th August 2006, in an open letter to Rajdeep Sardesai,

Editor-in-Chief, CNN-IBN and IBN 7, Ravikiran Shinde, a professional from USA points out the treatment Dalits receive today. He points out specifically about two incidents where media failed utterly in reporting in the mainstream media. The first incident talks about is the Golden Jubilee of conversion to Buddhism at Nagpur. On this day as many as 20, 00,000 people gathered from across the world to mark the 50th year of conversion to Buddhism. He asks, "How many white collar Journalists holding Handy Cams from the leading electronic media turn up, including your own?" further he asks, "Hindu festivals like Ganesh festival or Kumbh Mela gets not only full coverage by the Media but discussions and special features running for hours" but the media ignore such event just because it belongs to Dalits. Another incident he talks about is the Khairlanji massacre. He tells, "News medium is as responsible for these inhuman crimes as the Kheranjali oppressors by just being selective and dishonest". He concludes, "Awake the people on the gruesome caste realities in India. Telecast a half an hour program dedicated specially to Dalit atrocities every week" (Shinde, 2006).

Conclusion

Time and again Dalit activists have been pointing out the negligence of mainstream media in India for the least significance they attach to the feelings and to the deplorable state of Dalits in India. This concern was not only addressed in recent times, but for decades this aspect has been brought to the notice. It is this negligence that gave rise to number of Dalit to initiate own media in the public sphere. The proliferation of internet in recent days has also become a powerful alternative media for the Dalits in India.

Reference

1. Ambedkar, B.R. (1945). Communal deadlock and a way to solve it, address delivered at the session of the All India Scheduled Castes Federation held in Bombay on 6 May.
2. Anand, S. (2006). Fusing Phule and Ambedkar Retrieved on 14 September 2011 from <http://www.outlookindia.com/printarticle.aspx?232803>
3. Cooper, Kenneth J. (1996). Majority Lower Caste Are Minor Voice in Newspaper. The Washington Post. Reg. ed.: A16.
4. Guru, G., & Chakravarty, A. (2005). Who are the country's poor? Social movement politics and Dalit poverty. Social Movements in India: Poverty, Power and Politics, 135-60.
5. Loynd, M. (2009). Understanding the Bahujan Samaj Prerna Kendra: Space, Place and Political Mobilisation. Asian Studies Review, 33(4), 469-482.
6. Mehra, B., Merkel, C. & Bishop, A. P. (2004). The internet for empowerment of minority and marginalized users. New Media & Society, 6 (6, December): 781-802.
7. Saint. (2008). Dalit digital media- shuddering the hinduized news media, Retrieved on 26 November 2011 form <http://www.countercurrents.org/saint150808.htm>.
8. Shinde.R, (2006), An Open Letter to Rajdeep Sardesai, Retrieved on 12th September 2011 from <http://www.countercurrents.org/dalit-shinde311006.htm>
9. Thirumal, P. (2008). Situating the new media: Reformulating the Dalit question. In R. Gajjala and V. Gajjala (Eds.), South Asian technospaces, Digital Formations, 36, New York: Peter Lang Verlag.