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Newsroom diversity, a far cry in Kannada Journalism

Dr. Sathyaprakash M R

Associate Professor and Chairman, Dept. of Journalism and Mass Communication, Kuvempu University, Jnana Sahyadri, Shankaraghatta- 577451, Shivamogga, Karnataka, Ph: 9886836660

E-mail: mrsathyaprakash@gmail.com

Dr. B. K. Ravi

Vice- Chancellor and Professor, Koppal University, Ph: 9448271938, E-mail: bkravibu@gmail.com

***Abstract:** Mainstream news media is an integral part of modern day public sphere. It goes without saying that the news media needs to critically examine the issues pertaining to leadership, governance, policies of the incumbent government both at the center and the state level. Ideally, the mass media should not only advocate people's concerns but also disseminate their diversified voices to the decision makers. But, it appears that the mainstream mass media, have failed to reflect the concerns of the ordinary people belonging to various communities. Pluralism in news and diversity in the newsrooms are two of the biggest challenges existing in the media industry. Keeping these concerns in mind, this article presents a critical analysis of diversity in Kannada journalism.*

Key words: Newsroom diversity, Pluralism, Inclusiveness, Kannda journalism, Dalits, Adivasis.

Introduction

Mainstream news media is an integral part of modern day public sphere. It goes without saying that the news media needs to critically examine the issues pertaining to leadership, governance, policies of the incumbent government both at the center and the state level. As and when the party in power assumes invincibility and the opposition parties become weak, it is left to the mass media to question the government on behalf of the people. Ideally, the mass media should not only advocate people's concerns but also disseminate their diversified voices to the decision makers. It is here that the public discourses determine the fate of the larger society. Being a critical part of the democratic system, media is expected to perform its role as the fourth estate of the state. In fact, the press or the news media should act as an eternal opposition party in order to make the democracy work.

But unfortunately the mainstream mass media, a very powerful tool influencing the public opinion, have failed to reflect the concerns of the ordinary people belonging to various communities. The Indian subcontinent is home to hundreds of tribes and communities who are not yet part of the mainstream society. Voices of the tribes living in the hilly regions and jungles, nomadic communities of the plain land, Dalits and Adivasis, women, minorities, LGBT communities etc., are not represented in a proportionate manner. Pluralism in news and diversity in the newsrooms are two of the biggest challenges existing in the media industry. But the media organizations have not shown keen interest to tackle the issue.

Lack of diversity in newsrooms

The first step towards finding out viable solution to the problem is to acknowledge the lack of diversity in the newsrooms. It is not easy to build a diverse news room, given the socio-political and financial pressures

operating in the process of hiring. Financial pressure is a big threat as more and more professionals are being reduced to mere content writers. For example, one of the reputed media houses in Karnataka has stopped regularizing the services of working journalists in order to avoid the payment of salary as per the recommendations of Majithia Wage Board, which is accepted by government of India in 2011. Another reputed English national daily has shown scant respect for the groups mentioned in the government order, by removing existing designations and replacing with generic names like "content developer," "content writer" etc.,

Barring few exceptions, media houses in India have so far failed to produce the reportage on diverse communities with historical context. As a result the trust on the mainstream media is slowly eroding and many are bypassing traditional media to tell their stories on their own terms in media of their choosing. The transparency that journalists often expect from their sources should also apply to their news room operations. One cannot advocate media diversity without gathering and analyzing the data from the field. In fact, news media organizations should voluntarily take up such activities on their own in order to develop strategic priorities to attract new audiences and subscribers.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has advocated for media pluralism as a necessary condition for the public to have access to different facts, debates and views. In order to do achieve that developing sustainable community media is significant. Writing about Dalit representation in news media Robin Jeffrey (2012), terms the under-representation of scheduled caste and scheduled tribes as a calamity for three reasons. "First, it means that the constitution is not being lived up to... second, a fitting presence in newsrooms, and the varied coverage it brings, mitigates the resentment of people who are ignored and discriminated against and third... a genuine media cannot robotically overlook a quarter of a population,"

Studies on newsroom diversity

Lamenting on the absence of Dalits in media, Jeffrey (2012) says that the Dalit absence from the media has been focused on sporadically since 1996. That's when Kenneth J. Cooper, the *Washington Post* correspondent, himself an African-American, tried to find a Dalit media person in New Delhi. Cooper wrote about his failure to do so, and B.N. Uniyal publicized Cooper's inquiries in the *Pioneer*. "Suddenly, I realised," Uniyal wrote, "that in all the 30 years I had worked as a journalist I had never met a fellow journalist who was a Dalit; no, not one." Since the time he published *India's Newspaper Revolution* in 2000, Jeffrey notes that nothing had changed by 2006 when a survey on the 10th anniversary of the Cooper-Uniyal inquiry found not a single SC or ST among more than 300 media decision-makers. Jeffrey offers two suggestions to incorporate Dalits into mainstream media. "To begin with, the Editors' Guild could commit itself to carrying out an annual census of newsroom diversity of the kind that the American Society of News Editors (ASNE) began in 1978. Secondly, Dalits need a publication that looks at the world from their perspective- bottom up, not top down. A first-class publication- like an *Ebony* or an *Essence*, two of the glossy magazines of Black America that report achievements as well as outrages.

Aijaz Ashraf (2013) writing on 'Dalits in media' says that Dalits in media feel the sting of caste discrimination. His study has found out that caste-based discrimination was ranked as the principal factor why Dalit journalists want to leave the media. Discrimination in its most severe form was experienced in the Hindi media and other languages. Shivnarayan Rajpurohit (2014) notes that the conscious or unconscious exclusion of Dalits from the Indian media has given way to a lopsided public sphere which hardly manages to generate comprehensive debates. Corporate interests have aggravated this malaise, given the indifference of the corporate sector towards fomenting a diverse media, cutting across caste, religious and class lines.

Sharing his personal experience, S. Anand (2005) says, "The advantages of being born in the 'right caste', I think, equally helped me with my other jobs, as also in other spheres of my life, sometimes without my being aware of these advantages." Siddharth Varadarajan (2006), the former editor-in-chief of *The Hindu*,

highlighted the pernicious role played by caste in media. Focusing on caste diversity in media industry, Siddharth Varadarjan (2006) says, there are no official or industry statistics but every journalist is aware of the extent to which forward castes dominate the media. He goes on to state that, one is not saying the absence of Dalit or OBC journalists is the product of conscious discrimination though that factor cannot be ruled out.

Diversity, a far cry in Kannada journalism

Kannada journalism has a rich history of over 150 years. Throughout its journey mainstream Kannada journalism was dominated predominantly by upper castes. Major editors like D V Gundappa, M Venkatakrishnaiah, T S Ramachandra Rao, Mohare Hanumantha Rao, Y. N. Krishnamurthy among others belong to upper caste. Virtually there were no representation from the backward classes. Situations did not change drastically in the recent past. However, it should be noted here that the aforesaid journalists were progressive and inclusive in their outlook and were in favour of Dalits and backward classes. In fact, M. Venkatakrishnaiah was among the first mainstream journalists to provide opportunity for Dalits to enter into journalism profession. Post 1970s many journalists belonging to backward classes did enter Kannada journalism, and ushered a new dimension to news writing and analysis. But so far, no research study has been undertaken to trace the contributions of backward and Dalit communities to Kannada journalism.

A strong and independent news media is an essential pillar of a healthy democracy. In order create such an atmosphere, media should have representation from all sections of the society. It is rather unfair if a very few communities are represented in mainstream media houses, especially at the top ranks. Affirmative policies are the hallmarks of Indian constitution. Be it, political, social, educational and economic aspects. A similar action is required in media also, albeit on a voluntary basis, to balance the all important news media. UNESCO has advised governments across the world to achieve equality of diversified voices by 2030. The onus is not just on the government, but on the companies and networks engaged in the news media industry to initiate the affirmative action in their newsrooms.

But the situations doesn't seem encouraging even today, as the mainstream newspapers in Kannada are presently led by upper caste journalists. The top editorial posts are taken by the journalists belonging to upper castes in leading newspapers such as Vijayavani, Vijaya Karnataka, Prajavani, Kannada Prabha. Apart from editorship, even the major chunks of top echelons in the newsrooms are occupied by the upper castes. It is rather disheartening to note here that not a single Dalit journalist has occupied the editorship of any of the newspapers in the history of Kannada journalism so far. Kannada journalism has seen women heading newspapers, but not a Dalit. Even the newspapers with inclusive editorial policies have implemented the same only in coverage but not inside their newsrooms. When the opportunities were there, managements have chosen to overlook the merits of Dalit journalists and gone for upper caste journalists to lead their respective newspapers.

There have been successful experiments by the minority communities in Kannada journalism. Janavahini, a newspaper was brought out by Janamadyama publishers, from Mangalore during the early 2000. Headed by Samuel Sequeira, Janavahini was quite popular and it was known for its secular outlook and beautiful page design. But unfortunately, the newspaper couldn't sustain for too long and was closed down. Vartha Bharathi, is another important newspaper brought out by The Community Media Trust and headed by Abdussalam Puthige. Started in 2003, B. M. Bhashir is the news editor of the newspaper, which is doing quite well with market presence across Karnataka. Unlike Christians and Muslims, Dalits do not have a luxury of starting their own daily newspaper and sustaining it. However, Samvaada, a monthly magazine, started during early 2000s, still continues to be relevant as a credible political magazine, is published by Spoorthidhama Trust and edited by Indudhara Honnapura, senior journalist and a well known Dalit leader. Barring, these honourable exceptions, diversity is still a far cry in Kannada journalism.

Last word

Countries like United States, United Kingdom, Norway, South Africa among others are striving hard to create a strong and diverse news media. India, home to multicultural communities, needs to follow suit. Mass media is a critical component in a contemporary world, where ideas, agendas, viewpoints are created, built and sustained. Given the elite nature of mainstream media, the voices of oppressed classes are hardly heard. Regional language news media is no exception to this. Hence, the proportionate representation of Dalits in mainstream Kannada journalism is a way forward. Nevertheless, it is time for the news media organizations that advocate diversity and inclusiveness to look within and initiate policies of inclusiveness in recruitment, a key measure in providing voice to the voiceless. This will in turn, act as a fillip in strengthening democratic institutions and practices in the county.

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