



Journalist Fellowship Paper

Caste is not a thing of the past: Bahujan stories from the newsroom floor

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Contents

Introduction	4
A brief overview of caste	5
The Newslaundry Survey	7
Survey overview: Bahujan in the newsroom	8
Othering: ‘You can’t eat that’	10
Isolation: ‘I know one guy’	13
Discrimination: ‘You take the honour killing story’	15
Conclusion	18
Recommendations	18

Introduction

India has one of the most vibrant news media industries in the world. The nation's first newspaper, *Hicky's Bengal Gazette*, was founded in 1780 by an Irishman named James Augustus Hicky. Since then, the number of newspapers, news channels and web publications have grown exponentially. But one thing has remained unchanged: the dominance of upper castes in the news media.

White people may be over-represented in newsrooms in the United Kingdom and United States¹, but their numbers pale in comparison to the dominance of Brahmins in Indian newsrooms. The population of Brahmins – the topmost caste group in India's hierarchical caste system – accounts for less than 4% of the total population, but their representation in English and Indian language media when combined with other higher castes is reported as high as 88%² of all journalists and editors.

Why do newsrooms in India, especially English news media, remain dominated by Brahmins and other upper castes, even though these higher castes form only about 20% of the population?³

This question is important not only from a social justice point of view but also because diversity in a newsroom is a very real requirement if we hope to have reportage that is relevant, objective, accurate and fair for the masses – and doesn't favour one group's interests over another.

¹ <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/race-and-leadership-news-media-2020-evidence-five-markets>

² [Representation of Marginalised Caste Groups in Indian Newsrooms:](#)

<https://www.oxfamindia.org/press-release/who-tells-our-stories-matters-representation-marginalised-caste-groups-indian-newsrooms>

³ Mondal, Sudipto (2017): "Indian media wants Dalit news but not Dalit reporters," Al Jazeera, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2017/05/indian-media-dalit-news-dalit-reporters-17052319404529.html>

A brief overview

India's caste system is a 2,000-year-old institution – possibly one of the most enduring social structures in the world – that both groups and orders an ever-changing hierarchy of identity and classes in India, and its diaspora.

The number of castes runs into the thousands, spread across regions, religions and languages.

These thousands of castes can be very broadly classified into three groups for simpler understanding:

(a) The privileged group of castes, who traditionally possess social, cultural and economic capital owing to their favourable place in the caste system.⁴

In this group, you will find castes like Brahmins, Baniyas, Khattris, Rajputs, Kayastha Prabhus, Syrian Christians, and so on. These castes dominate the media industry.

(b) The middle group consists of a vast number of castes engaged in what might be referred to as “an honest day’s work” in the West: farming, weaving, haircutting, door-to-door selling of wares, fishing, toddy tapping, etc. They face discrimination at the hands of upper castes to varying degrees, and are often educationally and economically disadvantaged.

(c) The third group consists of castes who have historically been classed as “untouchable” by the castes above them – a group subjected to active ostracising and exclusion. They are popularly known as Dalits (Sanskrit for downtrodden). Dalits are forced to do jobs that are considered degrading by

⁴ Bourdieu, Pierre. 1986. “The Forms of Capital.” Pp. 241-258 in Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education, edited by J. G. Richardson. New York: Greenwood Press.

the rest of Indian society such as cremation work, tanning, shoemaking, and sanitation work.

For the purposes of this paper, I will refer to persons belonging to group (b) and (c) as Bahujans from here on.

In the words of Dalit scholar and leader B R Ambedkar⁵: “One need not trouble to remember more than the facts that the Hindus are divided into castes and that the castes form a system in which all hang on a thread which runs through the system in such a way that while encircling and separating one caste from another it holds them all as though as it was a string of tennis balls hanging one above the other.”

⁵ Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches:

https://archive.org/stream/Dr.BabasahebAmbedkarWritingsAndSpeechespdfsAllVolumes/Volume_05_djvu.txt

The Newslaundry Survey

Oxfam India, in partnership with media watchdog Newslaundry, released a report in 2019 titled ‘*Who Tells Our Stories Matters: Representation of Marginalised Caste Groups in Indian Newsrooms*’⁶ containing the results of a sample survey looking at English and Hindi news industries. The findings were damning.

Their key findings:

1. Of the 121 newsroom leadership positions—editor-in-chief, managing editor, executive editor, bureau chief, input/output editor—across the newspapers, TV news channels, news websites, and magazines under study, 106 were occupied by upper castes. (An 88% dominance.)
2. Three out of every four TV debate anchors – from a total of 40 anchors in Hindi channels and 47 in English channels – were upper caste. Not one was Dalit, Adivasi, or Other Backward Classes (a term used in India [OBC] to refer to a person belonging to the administrative category drawn primarily from group [b] mentioned above).
3. Only 5% of all articles in English newspapers were written by Dalits or Adivasis. Hindi newspapers fare slightly better at around 10%.
4. Around 72% of bylined articles on news websites were written by people from the upper castes.

⁶ [Representation of Marginalised Caste Groups in Indian Newsrooms](https://www.oxfamindia.org/press-release/who-tells-our-stories-matters-representation-marginalised-caste-groups-indian-newsrooms)

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Survey overview: Bahujan in the newsroom

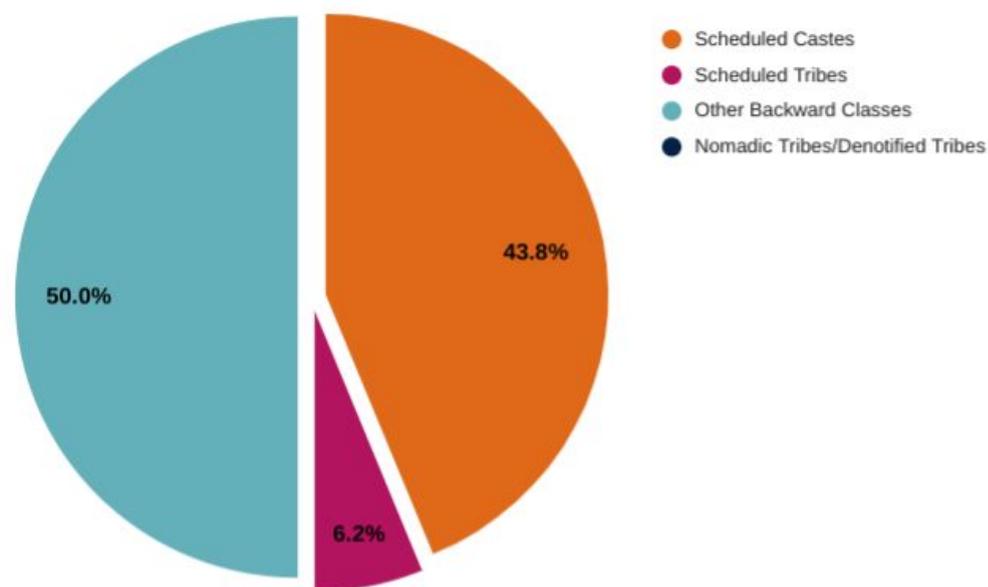
In January 2020, I set out to conduct my own survey on the subject of caste in the newsroom.

I approached 16 journalists working in English media in India: from Scheduled Castes (SC, of which there were seven respondents), Scheduled Tribes (ST, of which there was one respondent, and Other Backwards Classes (of which there were eight respondents).

I prepared a questionnaire that was filled in by these journalists anonymously. I asked the journalists to self-identify their own caste group.

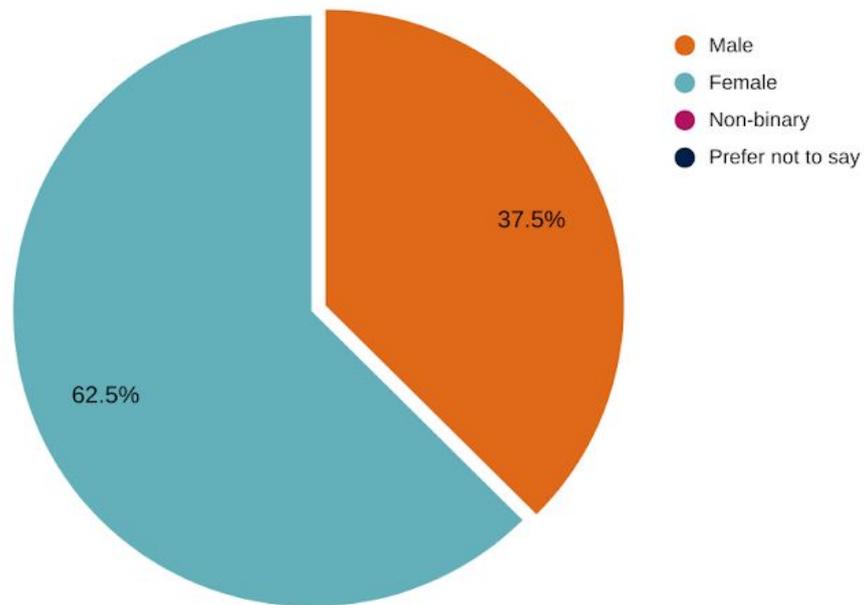
Can you state your caste?

16 responding



More women (10) than men (six) participated in the study and there were no non-binary participants. The age of the respondents ranged from 23 years to 40 years.

Gender
16 responding



The study starkly brought out the challenges faced by Bahujan journalists working in English media. In the discussion below, I focus on a few common themes that emerged from their responses.

Othering: ‘You can’t eat that’

The journalists, at least in the beginning, find it hard to integrate in the newsroom as the newsroom culture is dominated by upper castes. The newsroom floor is dominated by journalists from English-speaking schools who come from well-off families. Working class journalists cannot match their lifestyle. The topics of conversation may also seem foreign to Bahujan journalists.

One respondent from my survey said, “The feeling of alienation is what haunts me the most. Because most journalists are urbanites, they willy nilly pass judgments, maybe unknowingly, for not knowing or having experienced what they consider in trend or necessary.”

The leading English newsrooms are based in the metro cities. The lives of upper caste journalists in these cities revolve around shopping malls, fancy restaurants, coffee shops, bars, clubs, etc. Upper caste journalists also benefit from the cultural capital—in the form of books, art, music, theatre, films, etc—passed down to them from the previous generation.

A working class journalist who moves to the metro city does not have family support; the rent and food costs are extremely high; and the salaries of entry to mid level journalists are meagre. The socioeconomic gap between the upper caste and the Bahujan journalists in such contrasting circumstances is quite big.

One respondent said, “I had very low self-esteem and walking into the newsroom was itself a challenge. Being a first generation English learner, my confidence level was extremely low because of which I worked under constant fear of facing humiliation. My inability to articulate was a huge challenge and I found it difficult to interact with my colleagues and seniors. I had to put in four times the effort when compared to journalists from privileged background to do my work.”

One respondent complained about the lack of social capital and how it affected their work as well as career.

“I began fairly well. In hindsight I feel I lacked a certain network or ability to form a network, which can be helpful in sourcing stories, getting fellowships and generally moving up the ladder.”

Most lower caste journalists are also lower class or lower middle class, and separating class from caste in Indian context becomes almost impossible. A respondent said, “I wasn't politicized in my initial years in journalism. I looked at differential treatment as a class issue then. Having come from a financially poor background, and with very little experience of speaking and writing in English, I found it difficult to adjust in elite newsroom spaces.”

Another issue that often leads to covert and overt confrontations in newsrooms is the issue of food. Many upper caste communities, such as Brahmins and Baniyas, do not eat meat and fish. The scriptural tradition of Hinduism censures eating these food items. Since the religious tradition looks at certain food items as ‘impure’, upper castes consider even their sight and smell as unpleasant. This puts pressure on Bahujan journalists to modify their food habits and give up on their regular diet. In case they fail to do so, they face judgmental looks and rebukes. Since the cow is considered a holy animal by Hindu religious scriptures, eating beef at the workplace is unthinkable.

India’s leading English daily *The Hindu* became the topic of headlines in 2014 after a leaked notice on its no-meat policy in the workplace. A news report in the Scroll⁷ said, “*The Hindu* has had a vegetarian-only policy in its office canteen for a long time, and the notice, prompted by complaints from some employees about the norm

⁷ [Liberal 'Hindu' newspaper reiterates no-meat policy in office. sparks debate on vegetarian fundamentalism](#)

being flouted, was a reiteration of the fact that ‘non-veg food is strictly prohibited’ inside the dining hall. This would mean that if staff members want to eat meat from their own lunch boxes, they would have to eat it outside the dining hall. The logic provided by the organisation was that non-vegetarian food ‘causes discomfort to the majority of the employees who are vegetarian’.”

This issue of routine policing of food habits in news organisations was echoed by one respondent: “To be completely honest, if there was ever a time I was uncomfortable, it was because the editor and most of my colleagues were Brahmin and they discussed things I never understood: food rituals, or even food habits. I am vegetarian myself because of food allergies, but mine is a meat-loving family. Nothing major happened but I never got the hype around vegetarian [...] and how it was difficult to just let it go.”

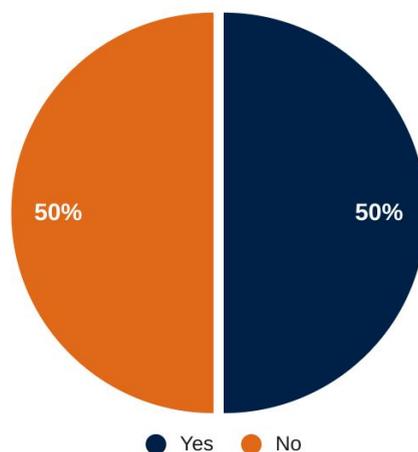
Isolation: ‘I know one guy’

We know from the Oxfam India–Newslaundry survey mentioned above that the number of Bahujan journalists is shockingly small. In my own survey, half the respondents said they did not know a single other Bahujan journalist.

This number is troubling considering Bahujans make up close to 80% of India’s population.

Do you know any other ST, STC, OBC journalists in your newsroom?

16 responding



There is strength in numbers and the minuscule number of Bahujan journalists makes it difficult for the few who are part of the news industry to challenge the cultural bias and caste discrimination they face at their workplaces.

One respondent said, “I found [the] lack of enough DBA [Dalit, Bahujan and Adivasi] folks in the newsroom to be alienating. There was no open discrimination per se, but certain things bothered me. Like some jokes that a lot of people found funny seemed unpleasant just to me because of my caste background. And this might be a stretch (or not) but there are separate microwave ovens for veg and non vegetarian in the cafeteria, which put me off from the very beginning.”

In another example, one respondent shared that they could survive in the industry only because of the help of a Dalit friend.

“[The] first thing one needs to understand is that positions in newsrooms happen only because of connections. Nobody advertises that they have openings. So, when I was struggling to get a job, my teacher had told me that there were openings in this now non-existent newspaper organisation. And I had to struggle a lot because of my poor English which didn't meet the standards of a newspaper. Besides, I didn't know how to report news, initially. So, it was a struggle. Fortunately, I had a Dalit friend, my classmate, who understood my plight and helped me overcome it. I probably would have quit the job if it weren't for him.”

Discrimination: ‘You take the honour killing story’

Caste biases of course creep into day-to-day work too. One respondent shared their experience of facing regular rejections for their story ideas:

“Say for instance, while rejecting my story idea: they will abruptly reject it and will not be given any reason for it. In fact, the way they reject itself will be rude enough to break your confidence.

“But, if [the] same kind of story idea [is] pitched by a Brahmin reporter or an upper caste Mallu reporter is rejected, the whole newsroom will try to pacify, convince and politely tell him that the story will not work out. Most of the time, even the worst [ideas] a Brahmin or Mallu reporter pitches will be approved. Rejecting their stories is rare of the rarest case.”

Reporting on caste-related crimes, such as “honour killings”, has increased in the last decade as the anti-caste movement is putting pressure on newsrooms to take the issues of caste discrimination more seriously. But this sometimes leads to Bahujan journalists being asked exclusively to report on caste issues as they are considered subject experts on this topic – by the sole virtue of their identity.

One respondent recalled two situations like this:

“Once an OBC caste woman was killed by her relatives in an honour killing over marriage, and I was asked to write a comment piece on it for the newspaper I worked at, even though my focus is political economy and I had no prior work on this.

“Once on a office group news call, I was asked to comment/jokingly asked to give my

news opinion on a scamster who was in news at the time and belonged to my caste – again, whom I had no idea or prior information about.”

And that respondent was not alone in that experience. Another survey respondent recalled: “I wasn't as vocal about my caste location in the initial years of my work. But as I began asserting my caste identity and also publicly expressed my politics, I was increasingly looked at as a reporter who only writes on caste issues. There is a certain kind of stereotyping at play. If there is a caste atrocity story anywhere in the country, I become their go-to reporter and am asked to report on the issue.

“I hold a Masters degree in Law, and have covered the judiciary for a long time. Yet, I have not managed to establish myself as a legal expert. On the other hand, reporters from Savarna [upper] castes very naturally get established as subject experts irrespective of their experience. The only subject I have managed to gain expertise in is caste.”

India's affirmative action policy gives reserved seats to SCs (15%), STs (7.5%) and OBCs (27%) in government jobs and college admissions. Upper castes are not shy about expressing their contempt for this policy, which many times translates into resentment towards SCs, STs and OBCs.

The mocking of Bahujans as ‘undeserving’, ‘unmeritorious’, ‘freeloaders’, etc, is common in private sector workplaces, including the news industry, where this policy does not apply.

One respondent spoke of experiencing this backlash in the form of “denying story ideas”, assumptions about their affiliation “with certain political parties”, “overloading with work when compared to others”, and being left out of story discussions.

They continued: “A supervisor who always kept flaunting his *janeu* [sacred thread that can only be worn by upper castes] once went to the extent of saying ‘we (Brahmins) are minorities and you people pushed us out of the state (Tamil Nadu)’.”

Another respondent spoke about the mistreatment they faced as a reporter: “In one of the leading English newspapers in Bangalore, I was told to stop reporting on caste from rural areas or face consequences during [my performance review]. I was sent to cover events to far off places, which would never be published. My stories were held up for weeks without any reasons until the problem was escalated to the higher-ups (editors). When these issues were escalated, I would be called to the desk and humiliated as the story was edited. When my stories were published on page 1 and in national editions, I was asked to concentrate on city beats alone and was given a list of stories that I need to work on while the other reporters were free to suggest stories of their interest. In another leading English newspaper, my supervisor would drop press releases on my desk instead of handing it over to me by hand.”

One respondent mentioned how their lower caste status became an obstacle to them covering a story: “Occasionally while reporting in rural India or rural Nepal, people wanted to know my caste or brought up caste, which was quite infuriating. I left a story once due to the problem of access, where the on-ground coordinator told me upfront that accessing those specific architecturally significant old temples would be a problem because only Brahmins & Kshatriyas are allowed.”

Conclusion

It's not that the news media is not aware that it lacks diversity. Siddharth Varadarajan, founding editor of *The Wire* and former editor of *The Hindu*, wrote in 2006, "One is not saying the absence of Dalit or OBC journalists is the product of conscious discrimination though that factor cannot be ruled out. But the reality of their absence is something the media must have the courage to acknowledge."⁶

It has, perhaps, lacked any real sense of urgency to solve the problem.

India's English media newsrooms remain urban-centric, upper class, upper caste, and ignorant to the realities of vast swathes of Indian masses. The entry of SC, ST and OBC journalists in newsrooms is essential to bring vigour to our output, to make them more representative of Indian society, and to ensure they stick to journalistic values of objectivity, accuracy, and accountability towards people.

Upper castes occupy the majority of white collar jobs in India. They corner the majority of well-paying jobs in the formal sector using their social and cultural capital – with the only exception being the mandatory quotas for lower castes in the public sector. Market, modernity and merit have not managed to change this grim reality. If the will for change is not there, it seems only a measure like reservations will dent the domination of upper castes in India's newsrooms.

Recommendations

As I was reminded during my time at the Reuters Institute: News cannot reflect society unless newsrooms do⁸.

1. The time for self-regulation has passed: news organisations should implement affirmative action policies for lower caste journalists, in the same

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<https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/risj-review/if-your-newsroom-not-diverse-you-will-get-news-wrong>

way the Indian government has devised quotas (reserved seats) for SCs, STs and OBCs.

2. News leaders and young journalists are responsible for educating themselves around these issues. Newsrooms should hold regular workshops on caste and unconscious bias, and there should be a fearless conversation about caste discrimination in their newsrooms.
3. News organisations should frame clear policies forbidding caste discrimination and harassment at the workplace, including the apparatus for complaint, appeal and consequences.
4. Editors and journalists should be expected to know and show their knowledge of existing caste-specific anti-discrimination laws such as Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989.