

# The Persistence of Untouchability: Working Conditions of Dalit Journalists in India

**Kailash Koushik**, Christ University, Bangalore, India.

**Madhuri D Gupta**, Christ University, Bangalore, India.

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## Abstract

This article can be viewed as an extension of the Oxfam report of 2019, which revealed that Indian news media is dominated by upper castes and the near absence of Dalit and Adivasi journalists. Using critical political economy as a framework, and undertaking qualitative interviews of self-identifying Dalit journalists, their conditions of work in mainstream news media are examined. In addition to the problems faced by journalists in general, this research reveals that Dalit journalists experience considerable psychological stress and extra intensity of work. They tolerate a toxic work environment that results in mental trauma and have to navigate rigid caste networks. Supplementing in-depth interviews with secondary data, the article argues that the conditions within which Dalit journalists function contain all dimensions of untouchability: exclusion, humiliation, and exploitation. The article concludes with a call to end this untouchability, revive the Working Journalists Act to ameliorate the conditions of work of India's fourth estate. Specific legislation is required to ensure favorable conditions of work for Dalit journalists. Further, the article calls for a theoretical revamping of critical political economy to include caste, particularly when analyzing South Asian media.

The 2019 Oxfam report provided much-needed quantitative empirical evidence for a concern that had become common knowledge in the last few decades. Indian media was and is predominantly upper caste and the perspectives it provided were also of the upper castes, thereby benefiting only a few in the world's largest democracy (Rao PV, 2022; Rao P, 2021). The report, titled 'Who tells our stories matters: Representation of marginalized caste groups in Indian Newsrooms', revealed the following:

- Leadership positions in newsrooms of print, television, and online websites were occupied by upper castes. These positions included designations such as editor-in-

chief, bureau chief, and managing editor. Out of 121 newsrooms surveyed, 106 were occupied by upper castes. None of these positions was held by individuals belonging to Scheduled Castes/ Tribes.

- 3 out of 4 news anchors were upper caste. The presence of anchors of marginalized castes is absent.
- Over 70% of panelists invited onto television shows (debates, panel discussions, etc.) belonged to the upper castes.
- Only 5% of articles written in English newspapers and 10% of articles in Hindi newspapers are written by marginalized castes. (Oxfam India, 2019: 6)

Apart from this, the report also stated that the majority of articles written about the issues of marginalized classes were by journalists belonging to the upper castes (Oxfam India, 2019). This article can be seen as a natural extension of the Oxfam report. A collaborative effort by Oxfam and Newslandry, a digital media portal, it revealed that Indian newsrooms were dominated by the upper castes and that a few from the Dalit [1] community who had broken into what seemed to be an exclusive club. In this context, one must understand the working conditions of journalists belonging to the Dalit community and analyze the conditions of work of these journalists through a critical political economy lens. What follows will also reflect on the possible implications of such journalistic working conditions for the democratic ideals of media communication (Hardy, 2014; Mosco, 2009). The article concludes by providing a few suggestions for ameliorating the conditions of work experienced by Dalit journalists and for reimagining the political economy of communication research in India.

In the past three decades, a few researchers have written about the absence of Dalits and Adivasis in the Indian media (Ashraf 2013a; Cooper, 1996; Harad, 2020; Jeffrey, 2007; Mondol, 2017; Prasad, 2002). Research on reporting news relating to marginalized castes is also available (Alam, 2018; Jeffrey, 2007). The working conditions of journalists in India, the professionalization of the vocation, exploitation of stringers, and underpayment of journalists has also been covered (Ramesh, 2018; Koushik, 2018). The working conditions of women journalists have also been an object of inquiry (Pain, 2017). However, there is a lacuna in literature exploring conditions of work of journalists from marginalized castes. Little has been written about the social forces that are at work within the profession—the apparatus of exploitation, the challenges faced by Dalit and Adivasi journalists, and the mechanisms of resistance within an extremely upper-caste media environment. This article fills this gap by reporting on in-depth, qualitative semi-structured interviews of journalists who self-identify as belonging to the marginalized castes. This is supplemented with secondary empirical material from previous project reports and news media articles, suggesting that the practice of untouchability is still prevalent in the Indian news media ecosystem. Untouchability, in this context, is defined as a practice that includes the three dimensions of exclusion, humiliation, and exploitation (Deshpande, 2011). Here, the article suggests ways to include marginalized castes within journalism and improve the conditions of work. Doing so will involve reflections on the political economy of communication approach in regard to research in South Asia.

## Situating Dalits

The caste system has been the primary basis of social hierarchy in India for more than two thousand years (Rao and Mudgal, 2015; Rao P, 2021). Although there are claims about the caste system being a colonial introduction, they have been disproved. Evidence points to the Dalit perspective of colonization as a liberating influence. Thus, the discovery of the sea route to India by Vasco da Gama was a turning point in history as “it triggered the arrival of the ideas of democracy, equality, rule of law; in other words, a new vision, a new worldview, sharply opposed to the *chaturanga* order” (Kandasamy, 2008: 130). In 1935, the British government created a specific schedule that enumerated all the castes which were considered ‘untouchables.’ Communities from all across the country were listed (Jeffrey, 2001). Post-independence, the Constitution of India, ensured the establishment of ideals such as equality and universal suffrage, along with affirmative action for the Scheduled Castes and Tribes (the administrative terms for Dalits and Adivasis) (Paul and Dowling, 2018). Untouchability had been abolished on paper, but in reality systematic exploitation and oppression continues in India, and the government has been unable to stop violence and discrimination against Dalits and Adivasis by the upper castes (Human Rights Watch, 2021). Affirmative action which guarantees education and employment (in the public sector) for marginalized castes, has produced some improvement but the violence against the communities has not been reduced. With over 20 crores (200 million) Dalits in India, excluding Adivasis and other backward communities (OBC), their representation in many sectors of the public sphere, including journalism is minimal or invisible (Paul and Dowling, 2018). A notion exists that caste discrimination exists only in underdeveloped rural areas. On the contrary, evidence points to numerous instances of caste atrocities and discrimination in urban areas too (Deshpande, 2017). Anti-caste activists have been warning about the ill effects of the system on democracy. The presence of caste makes public opinion one-sided, and even dilutes the very idea of ‘public’, as a few privileged castes normalize public space as their own space (Ambedkar, 1936/2014). Rodrigues (2011) has argued that without the abolition of untouchability, it is impossible to form or constitute a public sphere or domain. Many authors have argued that the persistence of untouchability can never allow for a public domain to form, as the deeply Brahminical structure of ‘public’ will deny entry to the majority of the population based on the rigid principles of pollution and purity (Geetha, 2011; Guru, 2011; Rodrigues, 2011).

Reports and surveys conducted by both governmental and non-governmental agencies have repeatedly pointed to the structural disadvantages faced by the Dalits. Dalits have always featured at the bottom of human development indicators, such as literacy and access to healthcare. The community faces discrimination and exploitation in all spheres of society: economic, social, and psychological (RH, 2020). Even in ‘modern’ spaces of multinational corporations supposedly built on ‘merit’, upper caste employees predominate, reinforcing and reproducing caste power relations (Shakti, 2023). Reports by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR) have revealed the social segregation and stigmatization of Dalits in both accessing employment and during employment (ILO, 2022; NCDHR, 2014). Similarly, the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) has also pointed to the minimal space provided by the media for Dalit issues, and the absence of Dalit journalists in the Indian media (CHRGJ-HRW, 2007). We will now investigate these matters.

## Dalits in the media: From then to now

Although the Constitution of India guarantees equality to all, the mainstream news media has completely ignored one-fourth of the national population (primarily Dalits and Adivasis) (Fonseca et al., 2019). According to Dalit journalist Jeya Rani (2016), the fourth estate has crumbled under the pressure of the caste hierarchy instead of fighting for justice for all. The absence of Dalits in the Indian media became a public issue in 1996, thanks to the questions raised by a foreign correspondent in India. Kenneth Cooper, a correspondent for *The Washington Post* observed that the Indian newsrooms resembled the newsrooms of the United States during the 1970s. In the Indian case, newsrooms were dominated by upper castes, Brahmins in particular (rather than white Caucasians) (Cooper, 1996). In a short commentary about *Dalit Voice*, a newsletter published by V T Rajshekar from Bengaluru, Cooper noted that there were hardly any Dalit journalists or columnists in any major newspaper. More than half a century ago, B. R. Ambedkar (1936/2014), architect of the Indian Constitution, had observed that the press along with the news agencies were in the hands of Brahmins and that the untouchables had no media voice. Intrigued by Kenneth Cooper's questions, *The Pioneer's* B. N. Uniyal in 1996 searched the database of the Press Information Bureau (PIB), consisting of 686 journalists, and was unable to identify anyone belonging to the Dalit community (Prasad, 2002). When Uniyal was later asked to write a piece on the same issue, he asked *The Pioneer* to reprint his 1996 article with the following note, which unfortunately still rings true:

The article reproduced above first appeared in *The Pioneer* in November 1996 but was totally ignored by our journalistic establishment. No editor, columnist, or commentator, no professional association like The Editors Guild, and no public organization like Press Council took any notice of it. None felt aghast or alarmed at the situation described in the article. It did not provoke a debate. No one felt there was a need for making special efforts to draw qualified Dalits into the media. (Prasad, 2002: para 5)

Following this, a memorandum was submitted by Chandra Bhan Prasad and Sheoraj Singh Bechain to the Editors Guild and Press Council of India to incorporate diversity legislation similar to that advanced by the American Society of News Editors (ASNE) for India. This gained no traction as the Press Council of India opined that it could not intervene in the affairs of a private business (Balasubramaniam, 2011; Sheth, 2015). In 2006, the Media Studies Group survey found that there were no Dalits in the top 10 positions of 37 national media organizations that were part of the sample (Ashraf, 2013a). Jeffrey (2007) documented the absence of Dalits in Indian newspapers and their complete absence in editorial positions. A quote by a newspaper editor from Jeffrey's study summarizes the state of Dalits in the media: "[Dalits] are not present in the newsrooms, they are not present in press clubs, they are not present in journalism departments. Their issues are not reported or published in the dailies" (Jeffrey, 2001: 229). In 2013, Ajaz Ashraf conducted a similar survey, interviewing Dalit graduates from the Indian Institute of Mass Communication (IIMC), with eerily similar results. He observed that Dalits were present more in Hindi media (where discrimination was nevertheless more pronounced compared to English media) (Ashraf, 2013a). A brief account of discrimination within a premier institute such as IIMC can be seen in Ashraf (2013b). Also, journalists from Dalit communities moved to public sector jobs rather than continuing in journalism because of discrimination and harassment. This reflected the general precarity of media labor (Ashraf, 2013c; Rani, 2016). Mondol (2017) observed that there were more openly queer people in

Indian media than Dalits who were open about their caste identity. Two years before the Oxfam report, Mondol was able to find just eight Dalit journalists working in India's English media. Only two were open about their caste (Mondol, 2017). This concealment of caste identity by Dalit journalists was also observed by Jeffrey (2007).

Framing of Dalit issues in mainstream media is also problematic, as their communities are often typecast and framed. This reinforces upper caste narratives that Dalits are supposed to look downtrodden to be eligible for affirmative action or news coverage (Alam, 2019). Generally, news about Dalits usually concerns brutal violence and/or news about reservations [affirmative action] for them in jobs and education (Jeffrey, 2007). It has been observed that a double standard persists in Indian media. Dalit activists are called 'casteists' when they raise issues about caste, but systematic discrimination against them is neither acknowledged nor contextualized in the media (Nagarajan, 2015).

Alternative media spaces offer much-needed editorial and economic independence to Dalit journalists (Rani, 2016). They have taken up online media spaces to tell their stories instead of struggling in the mainstream media. However, these are information flows only, among interest groups, and issues discussed seldom reach the national agenda, remain (Raza, 2018). Research has similarly shown that citizen journalism and/or public journalism do not benefit Dalits and Adivasis, as such initiatives fail to bring transformative change in the lives of these communities (Paul, 2018). Further, Paul and Dowling (2018) argue that a media space such as *Dalit Camera*, a YouTube channel that records and documents atrocities against Dalits, Dalit movements, meetings, and protests, functions as an archive of realities, rather than a journalistic venture. There has been some academic interest in marginalized castes and their use of digital media (Paul and Dowling, 2018; Thakur, 2019). Paul and Palmer (2022) have highlighted the absence of caste in Indian media research. They have shown that caste dynamics underlie everyday newsroom practices and that these reinforce caste hierarchies both within the newsroom and society generally. Inherently, casteist practices and overwhelmingly upper caste newsrooms also result in self-censorship by journalists while reporting, ignoring, or downplaying issues of caste (Paul and Palmer, 2022).

This article attempts to move beyond surveys to understand the conditions of the daily work of Dalit journalists. Examining the work of these journalists will provide an insight into their multitude of negotiations of space and power within the largely upper-caste work environments of Indian newsrooms.

## **Methodological and ethical concerns**

Critical political economy is employed here both as a theory and method. Any critical political economic examination is characterized by four distinct aspects: history and social change, social totality, moral philosophy, and praxis (Mosco, 2009). These characteristics allow us to study "social relations, particularly power relations, that mutually constitute the production, distribution, and consumption of resources, including communication resources" (Mosco, 2009: 2, para. 3). This article is an attempt to examine the conditions of work of Dalit journalists, within a society defined by the power relations of caste and capital. As background, the previous sections traced the history of research on caste and journalism, while at the same time situating the conditions of Dalit journalists within the Indian social structure and media organizations.

This project utilizes semi-structured, qualitative in-depth interviews, secondary data from previous research and news media articles to ascertain the conditions within which Dalit journalists

work. Qualitative interviews can deliver the perspective and experiences of each individual from their own lived experience (Weiss, 1995). Beginning with personal contacts, and through snowball sampling, a sample of 14 journalists was found. However, only seven of them agreed to take part in the interview. Previous research indicates not only the absence of Dalit journalists in Indian media, but the fact that those who are present do not want to reveal their caste identities. It was thus difficult to recruit journalists for interviews. Following Shaw and Holland (2014), this study employed a purposive sample to capture the experiences of a group that does not have the data of a defined population (selecting a representative sample is therefore difficult). According to P.V. Rao (2022), there are around 50 Dalit journalists (although no evidence is provided for this number). Adopting Emmel's (2013) argument, we have sought to build a convincing case based on detailed information collected from the respondents available. The seven who agreed to be interviewed were open about their caste identities, but it took significant time to locate them and ensure their participation.

Informed consent, both oral and written, was given by the interviewees. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. The identity of the respondents is kept anonymous. When quoting from the seven interviewees, the respondents are referred to as Digital Journalist, newspaper journalists (Newspaper Journalist 1, Newspaper Journalist 2), television journalists (Television Journalist 1, Television Journalist 2, Television Journalist 3) or freelance journalist. Those interviewed were working or have worked in the mainstream news media. The names of the media outlets that the respondents work(ed) for are not revealed. As the research is idiographic, its aim is not to generalize but to explain, describe and interpret, as noted by Gutterman (2015). This study provides an in-depth understanding of what the conditions of work are for an almost invisible set of journalists. The analysis presented in the following sections concerning untouchability at work is based on 'information-rich cases' (Patton, 2014; Abrams 2010). Interpretation is based on the common themes that came in these detailed descriptions provided by the respondents (supplemented by outside accounts previously recorded in book chapters, media articles, and reports by non-governmental organizations such as Oxfam).

It is important to note here that the interviewer belongs to the upper-caste Brahmin community. Acknowledging this is important because there is an inherent power relation present between the interviewer/researcher and respondents/interviewees. The reluctance of many journalists to talk to the researcher might also emerge from this. There exists a cultural hierarchy of knowledge production in India. This space, historically, has been disproportionately occupied by upper-caste Brahmins. Gopal Guru (2002) argues that social sciences in India are exclusionary due to this fact and calls egalitarian reforms by encouraging Dalits to theorize their experience, rather than being an 'object' of theorization for the Brahmins. This study reflects such sentiments. Through feedback from the journalists interviewed, Dalit experiences are captured and then theorized in this study. Further understanding the ethics, morals, and complexities of knowledge production in India can be found in Guru (2002) and Sarukkai (2007).

## **The persistence of untouchability**

Deshpande (2011) defines untouchability as a practice consisting of three dimensions: Exclusion, Humiliation, and Exploitation. They will inform evaluations of Dalit journalists' testimonies.

### Exclusion

Exclusion of Dalits in Indian media happens in two respects: the absence of reportage about Dalit issues; and the exclusion of Dalits themselves from the newsroom, as outlined in the Oxfam report. Within the latter, Dalit journalists face exclusion from hiring, exclusion of their suggested news stories, and exclusion from mobility within the profession. Many Dalits enter the profession of journalism intending to empower the oppressed community and provide missing societal perspective. However, they face rampant discrimination in both vernacular and English language media and most often move to other professions (Ashraf, 2013a).

Journalists face such exclusion and discrimination early in their training and education. One Dalit journalist, while pursuing professional education had written a story for the college journal on the working conditions of Dalit tea estate workers and the systemic violence meted out to them by the state. The student faced possible suspension (Rani, 2016). Similar accounts of exclusion and humiliation in higher education spaces have been documented by Ashraf (2013b).

Once aspiring journalists finish their education, they face the prospect of exclusion in the recruitment process. Thorat and Atwell (2007) have already shown that the process of recruiting in the private sector is not a neutral exercise, with caste and religion influencing the selection of candidates with the same qualifications. Journalism is no different, with caste networks playing a vital role in recruitment. Balasubramaniam (2011) believes that blaming top management is not sufficient, as the whole hiring process in Indian media is opaque. Social-caste hierarchies, familial connections and social networks favor upper-caste candidates. There have been newspapers where the editor's position has been passed on through three generations of an upper-caste family (Sheth, 2015). The domination of the upper castes is reproduced by these family/caste networks of privilege, an advantage seldom available to Dalit journalists (Sheth, 2015). This trend is visible in major cities, but also in smaller cities where journalists are normally from middle-class as well as upper-caste backgrounds (Mullick, 2015). Candidates from marginalized castes express the unavailability of journalist mentors. An experienced Dalit journalist states: "As for us Dalits, we have no patrons, no *mai-baap* [*mother-father*], no one to advocate our case. It is not that we are not given work. We labor hard, but we are denied the opportunity to grow" (Ashraf, 2013a).

The presence of a caste-based labor market is evident in Indian journalism, and this helps already privileged individuals to locate and acquire high-paying jobs (Deshpande, 2011). Candidates from upper castes have more opportunities through the closed caste networks of journalists and editors. They influence the hiring such that Dalits are excluded from the process. A television journalist's quote illustrates this:

So for Dalit people, the problem is they do not have a godfather in the industry. A person who can support us in getting jobs and grow in our career. What happens is the upper castes are privileged with the same caste editor, senior and those who are from their own backgrounds. They help each other, very much, I have noticed it. If there is a job opportunity they can simply call and say 'Hey! there is a job opportunity', so after a level, there is no opportunity, [no] kind of HR process, and it's all about contacts and we people do not have the support from the people of the industry also, because you either become a *chamcha* [an obsequious person] or you are associated with your work, and we are just associated with our work, we are not going there to entertain them, we are going to work, it's a professional engagement, but the caste relations makes it easier to make relation with you. (Television Journalist 1, research interview with K. Koushik, January 19, 2020)

Even the presence of a single connection makes a huge difference for Dalit journalists, as they will be informed about job vacancies, referred to HR departments, and helped in understanding the culture of the newsroom. One journalist explains this situation:

[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 organization. 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. (Harad, 2020: 14)

Concerns regarding the absence of godfathers and dependable connections are prevalent across all kinds of media. As one newspaper journalist said:

The second thing is we don't have anyone to take us in after we finish studying. See, I have Brahmin friends, who as soon as they finished studying there was someone who was ready to take them in. Like my friend knows someone in *PrajaVani*, got in as an apprentice and got a job as a trainee also. They are called Godfathers. But we don't have any, nobody is there to take us in. We might study well, might be good at writing, but we don't have anyone there. So many are like why should we study journalism? We don't have our own newspapers or media organizations. (Newspaper Journalist 1, Research interview with K Koushik, March 1, 2020)

As noted by Yengde (2019), in a capitalist Brahminical market, caste and capital (social and cultural) are rewarded. Ashraf (2013b) has also observed that social networks based on caste played an important role in obtaining media organization jobs and even in switching jobs further in their career. Recruitment through social-caste networks reduces diversity in newsrooms and subsequently disinclines the management to make the hiring process more inclusive (Balasubramaniam, 2011). P.V. Rao (2022), Khan and Haneef (2022) and Paul and Palmer (2022) recognize that upper-caste ownership and dominance of upper-caste editors create barriers to entry for marginalized castes, which diminish opportunities. This kind of exclusion, from the first stage of entry into a journalism career, forces qualified individuals from Dalit communities to look for alternative employment. Dalit journalists are aware that the lack of social capital negatively affects their journalism careers. One journalist recalled that, "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" (Harad, 2020: 11).

A few Dalit journalists who break this first obstacle are faced with questions about caste in the face-to-face interview process. Balasubramaniam (2011) was able to clear the multiple levels of recruitment. When he reached the final interview with the editor, he was asked only one question, about his caste. Although many are not asked directly, Dalit journalists have faced questions indirectly try to disclose their caste position. A television journalist respondent recalled such questions:

When you go for an interview, normally there are group discussions as part of the screening for the interview. So I remember I went for an interview and the guy asked which book are you reading now? I was reading *Who Are Shudras* by B R Ambedkar, and I told him, and instead of asking about my professional things, he started asking questions about my views on the Ambedkarite movement, about the Bhim army, about



the radical Ambedkarite movement and nothing else. (Television Journalist 1, research interview with K. Koushik, January 19, 2020)

This practice also takes the form of questioning candidates on their opinions concerning caste issues:

There is another app, *InShorts*, it's a news app, and they are based in Noida Film City. There was a job opportunity, I sent my résumé, and they called me. I went through a written examination, I was qualified, I had an interview session. He was asking general knowledge questions, and this was the time Justice Kannan headed the Kolkata High Court and had accused the Chief Justice of India (CJI) and Supreme Court judges that they were [involved in] corruption in the judiciary. And the CJI after hearing the case sentenced the High Court judge to six months jail for defamation, and he [Kannan] is a Dalit guy, and the interviewer asked my opinion about it. I gave my opinion, as I knew the matter well, and I also told him that I also belonged to the Scheduled Caste. Immediately, he started to ask, what is my view about reservation, about casteism, about Hindu religion, what are your views, etc. (Television Journalist 2, research interview with M D Gupta, February 7, 2022)

Although these questions might seem to be neutral, they aimed to figure out the caste of the candidate, even though this has not been mentioned in the application or in the identification of candidate names. [2] In the two instances discussed, the candidate was not recruited. Dalit journalists have also been excluded from employment ostensibly for their low proficiency in the English language, even though they graduated from the same education system and successfully passed the English tests/exams for the interview. This matter will be considered further in the next section. Exclusion based on linguistic capabilities forces Dalit journalists to apply for regional language news media positions where similar types of exclusionary practices prevail (Mullick, 2015; Rani, 2016).

For Dalit journalists who make it into the newsroom, exclusion is experienced in the process of pitching news stories. Constant rejection, which is not based on any rationale, is a common experience verified by journalists who were interviewed and in secondary sources. The digital journalist interviewed narrates:

The taunts, the talks behind my back, the rejection of stories all started again. The same story I had pitched, if someone else pitched it, it was accepted, and they were sent to cover it. I mean even in the meeting it was openly said that <Name redacted> is not qualified to do this and the whole environment was just too toxic, constantly reinforcing <Name redacted> doesn't know how to do this, she doesn't know how to handle that, she is not worthy for work, like in the beginning I had a filed a story and I had received appreciation from London. It had gone to London. But still, they would say you don't know how to work [and that] this is garbage work. (Digital Journalist, research interview with K. Koushik, January 29, 2020)

Journalists face multiple rejections of story ideas, even though important issues are being raised by them (Rani 2016). Respondents with this experience recalled the constant battle to prove the viability of their story, as the following digital journalist testimony reveals:

Most of the stories I would pitch would be about Dalit issues and women's issues. And I mean this continued. My relationship with the Digital editor was always a problem. I had to pitch all my stories to him and even in the meeting, it was he who had the power to pass my stories. And he would always find some problem with my story and

if he could not find anything he would say, think more about this, what more can you do, and the story would stop there. I would get tired just trying to prove myself. (Digital Journalist, research interview with K. Koushik, January 29, 2020)

These instances of rejection of story rejection also hinder the professional development of Dalit journalists. This aspect will be discussed later, in the exploitation section. Exclusion also occurs on the basis of food habits. The majority of upper caste journalists (Brahmin and Baniya) were vegetarian and were enforcing this diet on others in the newsroom (Harad, 2020). Exclusion occurs not just in the newsroom but also in important social spaces such as the press clubs, which serve as a common space for all journalists to convene. These spaces are also dominated by the upper castes, further advantaging upper-caste journalists and contributing to a very close-knit system (from which journalists of lower castes were excluded). (Rao PV, 2022). Overall, it is evident that Dalit journalists' experience multiple instances and types of exclusion. Integrating into mainstream media newsrooms is difficult for journalists belonging to the Dalit community. Kandasamy (2008) describes the dilution of her hopes of integration: "The newsroom looked like a particularly hybrid cross between a circus and a concentration camp. Like one of those horror movies that throws you into fits of laughter or a comedy that gives you the creeps" (125, para 2).

### *Humiliation*

Gopal Guru and others have done extensive work on Humiliation studies (2011). Parekh (2011) suggests that the humiliation faced by the community is experienced as self-degradation or a "falling in one's own eye". Further, this "gets defined by the acknowledgement of the humiliating meaning that the tormentor assigns to the victim" (7, para 1). Guru's (2011) framework offers insights into the lived realities of Dalits by focusing on the public nature of humiliation, the denial of social recognition, and the potential for resistance. We will focus on how such public humiliation manifests within a newsroom.

### *Concealment of caste identity*

Fearing mistreatment, obstacles to professional growth, and a general fear of humiliation, many Dalit journalists conceal their caste identity. Jeffrey (2007), Mondol (2017), and Haneef and Khan (2022) state that Dalits do not self-identify their caste as this might be detrimental to their professional growth. The concealment of caste is not limited to journalism, even Dalit bureaucrats working for the government conceal their caste fearing consequences. Yengde (2019) has argued that the Indian society is so toxic that people from marginalized castes tread a careful line between their private caste identity and public identity. They have no space to express their identity freely. The concealment arises out of the fear of consequences, and more prominently, "potential gossip about their caste in their friendships with colleagues" (Yengde, 2019: 118). The caste of the journalist, if known, is seen as an embarrassment (Jeffrey 2007; Haneef and Khan 2022). The consequences which follow if their caste identity is revealed are expressed by a television journalist.

If you reveal your caste, you will not get the good bulletins, you will not get the good shows, as there is hierarchy there also. In what show you are producing what work you are doing? So if you reveal your caste you will be discriminated [against] in the newsroom hierarchy. You will not get a good opportunity, your opinion will not be heard, your appraisal and promotion will get affected. See, I was the only Scheduled Caste in ABP, ZEE, and India News from entire newsrooms which have like 200 or

300 hundred people. (Television Journalist 3, research interview with M D Gupta, April 11, 2022)

A reporter who is open about his caste observed that caste discrimination functioned in very subtle ways, such as non-recognition of stories, taunts by colleagues, and subtle innuendos aimed at his caste (Sheth, 2015). It is also to be noted that due to these microaggressions, Dalit journalists are forcefully excluded from expressing their own identity and that this sometimes leads to mental trauma. Yashica Dutt (2019) and Haneef and Khan (2022) have documented the experience of Dalits in upper caste-dominated newsrooms who rarely reveal their caste. They are in constant discomfort when topics of reservation (affirmative action) come up in such spaces. The situation is similar in educational institutions including premier journalism institutes such as IJMC and the Asian College of Journalism (Dutt, 2019). Further, the journalists who are open about their identities of caste are relegated to ‘caste beats’ and find it difficult to move up the occupational hierarchy, as the pigeonholing of their work impacts negatively during appraisals and promotions. Evidence of this can be found in the Oxfam report which noted the absence of Dalits in higher designations of newsrooms (Dutt 2019; Oxfam India, 2019). The same experience is recounted by this journalist:

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's 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. (Harad, 2020: 16)

As Mondol (2017) states, Dalits should not be just hired to cover Dalit issues. Society requires perspective on politics, business, sports, and all beats from a Dalit lens.

The television journalist who was interviewed recounted how an attempt to bring forth Dalit journalists to open up about their identity during a celebration of B R Ambedkar failed. Hardly anyone came forward, even though the journalist himself belonged to the community. Journalists also fear they might not feel included in the newsroom if they reveal their caste. Most important is the perception that it might affect their livelihood (Haneef and Khan, 2022). The digital journalist explains:

In the Indian media, there aren't many Dalits working and whoever is there they have not revealed their castes and are continuing to do small jobs without raising their voice. After I put my experience in public, many of the journalists shared their experiences too.

But many won't talk about it because it's a matter of their livelihood. (Digital Journalist, research interview with K. Koushik, January 29, 2020).

### *Disregarding skills*

Dalit journalists are also humiliated through a consistent disregard for their abilities. If rejection of suggested stories is one way they endure humiliation, questioning their proficiency in the English

language is another. A Dalit journalist who was denied employment after the entire interview process, questioned the management of the media house about his non-selection. The response provided was “Language skills not on par”. The candidate had passed the written test of the interview process which tested all aspects of English language skills (Sheth, 2015). Humiliation based on language is seen both in the interview process and in employment. As stated earlier, many Dalit journalists refrain from applying for jobs in English-language media and instead opt for regional-language media. Low proficiency in the language is indirectly communicated to Dalit journalists in words such as lacking ‘qualification’, ‘merit’, ‘and skill’, all pointing to a very specific kind of English language (Sheth, 2015). The struggle with language is expressed by this newspaper journalist:

They also constantly keep changing the way we write, saying this shouldn't be written like this, or saying you shouldn't talk like this. Their behavior really makes us sad, they sideline us, form their groups and we start feeling, why did we even come here! (Newspaper Journalist 2, Research interview with K Koushik, May 6, 2022)

There exists a class divide too, especially when it comes to proficiency in the English language, and this further alienates Dalit journalists. Upper-class/caste journalists mostly come from English-speaking schools and their domination in the newsroom dictates its culture and excludes the working class. Caste journalists are positioned as being unaware of urban cultures, lifestyles, and experiences (Harad, 2020).

Disregarding skills extends from language to professional practices, with journalists berated for their writing and overall structuring of news stories. An experience which illustrates this was recalled by a digital journalist:

I had to fight a lot and try hard to get my story passed, but once I did the story, they would scold me as to, why did you do it like this? Why did you approach it like this? This is not how it's done. I would start feeling like I really didn't know anything. I would feel low, but when the story would be published it would do very well and I would get appreciation. (Digital Journalist, Research interview with K Koushik, January 29, 2020)

Exacerbating this situation is the low representation of Dalits in the newsroom. This has resulted in both a patronizing show of superiority towards Dalit journalists from others and a general rejection of their opinions, as expressed by this television journalist:

So when they are deciding something, your opinion is not being taken seriously. You start getting deprived of the entire thing. See, because of this, they can write whatever they want, they can produce a show however they want, there is no one to represent the issues of these castes. (Television Journalist 1, research interview with K. Koushik, January 19, 2020)

The use of a specific language, a particular syntax, is weaponized by upper castes against Dalits. This occurs in the pointing out of grammatical mistakes publicly and in the rejection of alternative views in the use of language. This results in the deflating of confidence and extreme humiliation (Guru, 2002).

*Casteist slurs/remarks/taunts*

The most blatant form of humiliation faced by Dalit journalists is the experience of openly made casteist slurs and remarks in newsrooms. The digital journalist describes her experience: “They would taunt me about [my] caste. If anyone from Brahmins (sic) were coming, they would loudly address them as ‘Panditji’ in front of me and that would taunt me” (Digital Journalist, Research interview with K. Koushik, January 29, 2020). ‘Pandit’ is the term used most often to refer to a Hindu priest and is a clear marker of a person belonging to the Brahmin caste. Casteist remarks are used in common spaces of newsrooms as illustrated by a television journalist:

So we were in the canteen, we were having lunch with my seniors and my teammates were also there, and we were discussing and I was really shocked why these poor people were beaten so badly, and I can still remember my senior who was supposed to teach me about journalism and the work told me ‘Dogs and Dalits can’t digest the Ghee’[3] Although it was not targeting me directly, it showed me their mentality. (Television Journalist 1, research interview with K. Koushik, January 19, 2020)

Casteist slurs are common in the newsroom, as described in the following television journalist testimony:

So in newsrooms what happens [is] when there is a breaking news, people shout from different parts of the room and there is a lot of shouting, during this process, so what my colleague who was a Gupta [*upper caste*], he was senior to me, did was that he stood up and shouted ‘*Iss newsroom mein Chamar [4] ghus gayi hai, itna halla machake rakha hai, hum logon ko kaam hi nahi karne dete*’ [The Chamars have infiltrated this newsroom. They are creating havoc and won’t let us do our work in peace’]. (Television Journalist 3, research interview with M D Gupta, April 11, 2022)

The same television journalist narrates another incident that occurred during their performance appraisal process at the newsroom:

I joined in May 2017 and there was an increment process going on and some of them had benefited and some of them were not satisfied with the increment. And I remember we were working in the newsroom and one of my colleagues stood up and shouted very badly that ‘*Chamaronko paisa badhadiya aur hamara nahi badhaya*’ [The Chamars got a raise, we didn’t get any]. (Television Journalist 1, research interview with K. Koushik, January 19, 2020)

The prevalence of the use of casteist slurs creates a toxic environment for Dalit journalists, with constant taunts and humiliation, creating an unfavorable work environment. Furthermore, Guru (2011) emphasises the public nature of humiliation, where acts of discrimination are not isolated incidents but serve as a public performance that reinforces the caste hierarchy. This aligns with the experience of Dalits, who are subjected to caste violence and verbal abuse often in front of witnesses, further reinforcing their subordinate position (Guru 2011; Teltumbde, 2020). Combined with the constant need to hide caste identity, a disregard and non-recognition of skills, results in persistent humiliation throughout the workday. Unwritten ground rules about office spaces, office architecture, body language, attire, and work protocols all create an insurmountable edifice that “inflicts humiliation” (Guru, 2002: 5006). The humiliation also reinforces notions of caste superiority in newsrooms with journalists harboring such biases. Humiliation is normalised within such institutional spaces. It becomes accepted through institutional practices and processes of

mediation, delegation of authority, appraisals, conflict resolution and moderation (Guru, 2011). These instances demonstrate why some Dalit journalists choose to hide their caste identity.

### *Exploitation*

The exploitation of journalists in India through non-payment/underpayment of wages, and intensified routines both in time and workload has already been documented (Ramesh, 2018; Koushik, 2018). Dalit journalists experience discrimination aside from low salaries and intense work. An incident that did make mainstream headlines showcases the extent of exploitation. A Dalit journalist was not provided medical leave and was removed from the payroll without any intimation. They later died of cancer (Nagarajan, 2015). The Telangana Union of Journalists and Delhi Union of Journalists stated that they would fight the employer, *The Indian Express*, against “casteist discrimination and contractual exploitation meted out to him by his employers... [who] underpaid him, denied health benefits, Provident Fund and other monetary rights pushing him to death” (Sheth, 2015, para 3). The deceased journalist was berated by the resident editor for raising concern about his increment during his fight against cancer (Sheth, 2015). Although such cases rarely come out in public, overall, the contracts which have replaced the permanent wage scale of the Working Journalists Act (WJA) negatively affect Dalit journalists rather than upper-caste journalists.

To understand exploitation and conditions of work, it is necessary to review wage/salary levels, length of the working day, and intensity of work routines, as recommended by the Working Journalists Act [5]. The recommendations of wage boards constituted under this Act are ignored by newspaper owners. Short-term contracts are being introduced as the race to the bottom line within media organizations pushes the salaries of journalists to dismal levels (Ramesh, 2018). The enormous gap between how much newspaper journalists earn and what CEOs/managing directors of the respective newspapers earn has also been documented (Koushik, 2018). Salaries in the media industry, especially among journalists, have been on the lower end, except for a few news anchors and journalists who have attained popularity. In the vernacular press, especially in medium-sized cities, journalists keep their options open for other sources of income (Chaterjee, 2019). For Dalit journalists, their dependency on alternative sources of income creates sites of disputation. This is highlighted during times of performance appraisals and promotions. Jeya Rani, a journalist in the southern state of Tamil Nadu, with over a decade of work experience, was being paid ₹18,000 (\$239) per month, a normal occurrence after the weakening of the Working Journalists Act (Rani 2016). Ved Prakash, an Indian Institute of Mass Communication (IIMC) graduate working for a television channel was earning ₹8000 (\$106) a month in New Delhi (Ashraf, 2013a). A student from the Asian College of Journalism (ACJ) had applied for the position of a reporter in *The Indian Express*, Hyderabad bureau, and was offered a monthly salary of ₹14,500 (\$192) (Sheth, 2015). One of the interviewed newspaper journalists, was aware of these salary disparities and was worried about the return on investment in journalism education: “See, we spend a lot on education, sometimes for [mass communication] masters, it’s a couple of lakhs and after all that, if I can’t even get a job that pays me ₹25000, what is the use?” (Television Journalist 1, research interview with K. Koushik, January 19, 2020). All the interviewees recognized that there were inequalities in the salary paid to them, in comparison to upper-caste journalists. However, they also acknowledged that providing proof of this would be difficult because each journalist would have a separate contract with different terms, especially in regard to salary. Reports state Dalits journalists are not

being paid as much as upper-caste journalists even if they have contributed to major news stories consistently (Nagarajan, 2015).

Discrimination based on caste was, and is, especially visible during the time of annual performance appraisals and promotions. Jeya Rani received a hike of as little as ₹100, while employees who had much less experience than her had higher increments and reached salaries of around ₹40,000. She felt she wasn't even seen as an equal or on par with her colleagues (Rani, 2016). The television journalist tried to rationalize such discrimination:

See you are from a state or a city, you have similar culture and similar language and you share the pain. Similarly, if you are from the same caste and they are the decision-makers, they can discriminate in distributing shows, and then they can easily discriminate in the promotions and salary. (Television Journalist 1, research interview with K. Koushik, January 19, 2020)

This quote also illustrates the kind of exclusion Dalit journalists feel with no one in the newsroom able to share a common experience. An observation common among the interviewees was the connection between the news stories allotted for journalists (or shows on television) and their respective appraisals and promotions. Appraisals and promotions are based on quantifiable aspects such as the number of bylines, special stories, or exclusive shows. When a Dalit journalist is denied an opportunity to report a particular event that might adversely affect their chances during appraisal, this amounts to discrimination. A newspaper journalist describes their experience:

Even in providing space for writing, there is discrimination. My friend is working in <district redacted> and he writes well. There was a literature festival in <district redacted>. He could have been asked to go report but he was put on desk duty, and whoever they wanted was sent on the field. Especially when there is a special event, they deliberately sideline you. They will send who they like, they will say 'See this is a good opportunity, you will get experience, go'. They never send us! (Newspaper Journalist 1, research interview with K. Koushik, March 1, 2020)

Economic research has shown that discrimination and exploitation also occur in the allocation of different jobs (assignments, projects, etc.) to employees from different communities (Deshpande, 2011). It is observed that highly rewarding assignments and jobs are rarely given to employees from certain communities if the employer/manager harbors negative stereotypes about the employee's community (Coate and Loury, 1993). Consequently, employees from one community are being 'seen' to be doing rewarding work, whilst employees from another community are stuck with mediocre assignments, subsequently reinforcing the employers' negative bias (Deshpande, 2011). This resonates with what has been described above, that Dalit journalists are not being allocated jobs that bring credibility (either through bylines, frontpage stories, exclusive shows, exclusive interviews, etc.). They are consistently pushed to do mundane reports, thereby hindering their career progression. Experiences of Dalit journalists being told to stop reporting about caste, allocation of stories from hinterlands which rarely make it to print, and assigning only press releases, are well documented and directly impact career progression. (Harad, 2020).

Coate and Loury's (1993) research on affirmative action's effect on stereotyping states two possible (theoretical) impacts. A space can be created where minority employees can showcase their abilities thereby weakening the stereotype. Conversely, such an initiative may play out negatively in that employers patronize minority employees, in turn reinforcing the stereotype. Unfortunately, Coate and Loury's (1993) suggestion that minority employees need to work towards greater

productivity to prove the stereotypes wrong, results in both intensification of work and an increase in work-related stress. And, the onus of fighting stereotypes falls on those who are affected. With affirmative action absent in Indian media, the effects of negative stereotyping might strengthen such that Dalit journalists are constantly expected to prove their presence in the newsroom. This example from the television journalist respondent illustrates this:

There is a sense of insecurity about caste. [...] See, in Hindi news channels there is a ticker that keeps going, normally the breaking news comes here. You make a simple spelling mistake there and it's very easy for your seniors and teammates to say that mistake is because of reservation [affirmative action] and you are not capable of doing these things. You are good for nothing. I have heard these statements. (Television Journalist 1, research interview with K. Koushik, January 19, 2020).

The same journalist also described the psychological pressure to be 'perfect':

I believe that you should be the master of your work, wherever you are, doing whatever you are doing, you should be [a] master. There should not be any loophole, there shouldn't be any mistake, you should be a master. That's my formula to work in the industry. That's because there is a chance of [being called] reservation person, useless person, so there is a psychological pressure also to perform, extra performance actually, that we need to perform more extra and do more work compared to your other colleagues who belong to a different caste. (Television Journalist 1, research interview with K. Koushik, January 19, 2020)

Dalit journalists work under pressure not just to fit in, but to ensure that they can work to avoid humiliation, as expressed by this journalist:

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 backgrounds to do my work. (Harad, 2020: 10)

As reported by Ashraf (2013c), a similar incident occurred in which a news editor in an Agra newspaper shouted at a Dalit journalist for a minor error. When questioned, he made the journalist write a submission stating that such mistakes would not be committed again. The reinforcement of negative stereotypes (due to hiring through social caste networks, non-allocation of exclusive stories, etc.) can be observed in the claim by newspaper management that Dalits lacked the qualifications for being a journalist (Jeffrey, 2001). This has real implications. Santosh Valmiki, an IIMC topper with more than two decades of media experience stated in 2013 that people who were his juniors had already reached the position of editors, but he was still a special correspondent (Ashraf, 2013a).

In regard to the length of the working day, although Dalit journalists did not face longer working hours compared to others, the benefits connected to working overtime were not provided for them. One of the interviewees describes their experience at an international television news channel's Hindi bureau:

It is an 8-hour shift. But reporting, it's all flexible. Its policy says that the working day is 8 hours, but if you work more you get overtime. Sometimes, I used to go to the office at 9 AM and come back at 2am in the morning! And it was general practice in



such cases, where editors would tell reporters that if you have worked late on a story you can come to the office late the next morning. But I was never given this privilege. No editor ever told me to come late. Nor was I paid overtime. I never got any overtime pay. (Digital Journalist, Research interview with K. Koushik, January 29, 2020).

It should be noted that very few media organizations do have overtime pay. Unfortunately, all remuneration decisions rest in the hands of the editors.

The choice for many Dalit journalists working in the news media is to either work in highly exploitative and/or psychologically traumatizing conditions or leave the profession itself (Rani, 2016, Ashraf, 2013c). It is evident that under the exploitative conditions present in Indian media (Koushik, 2018), Dalit journalists face exclusion, humiliation, and exploitation. But the capitalist-Brahminical media ecosystem within which Dalit journalists function treats them as untouchables, consistently excludes them from media spaces, humiliates them with casteist slurs, and simultaneously exploits their labor.

A pertinent question that follows from the preceding analysis concerns the impact of ongoing untouchability in Indian journalism on democracy in general. The critical political economy of media “examines how the political and economic organization of the media industry affects the production and circulation of meaning and connects the distribution of symbolic and material resources that enable people to understand, communicate and act in the world” (Hardy, 2014: 9). Extending this definition to the findings of this article, it is evident that the social organization and political-economic organization of Indian journalism is shaped by upper castes. Consequently, the production of meaning across a huge, diverse country is in the hands of a small minority (Harad, 2020). Journalism’s core purpose in a democracy ought to be to afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted. Journalism should also work to ensure an informed citizenry by providing varied perspectives about the society they live in (McChesney, 2008: 24). The preceding analysis has shown that the marginalized castes do not have the opportunity to participate in the production of meaning as journalists. They labor in conditions of exclusion, humiliation, and exploitation. The presentation of varied perspectives from newsrooms is precluded by upper-caste dominance (Oxfam India, 2018; Harad, 2020). To take on the work of a journalist under such conditions is extremely tough. Advancing the democratic responsibilities of journalism within a democracy is even tougher, as the rights, dignity and self-expression of Dalit journalists are denied. Representation in the news and newsrooms is vital not only on diversity grounds; it also makes newsrooms more inclusive to work in. The following quote from the television journalist illustrates this point:

They don’t have the shared experience or background. So it is difficult for me to make a connection with them. I can be more professional. See, other people might also do [sic] extra effort but caste makes it more comfortable. See, if there are 10 people in a room and they are abusing, they are making fun of and passing lewd comments about women and there are no women in the room, and you put a lady or any girl in that room and the abusing words and jokes will stop automatically. They won’t do it because there is representation, they will hesitate to say. So our community people are there so we can change decision making, and story selections. Representation matters not only for perspectives, but professionally also it is good to have people from diverse backgrounds. (Television Journalist 1, research interview with K. Koushik, January 19, 2020)

As Harad (2020) states “news cannot reflect society unless newsrooms do” (18, para 4). If journalism is to work in favor of democracy, the inclusion of Dalit journalists and the creation of favorable conditions of work is extremely important. Any struggle for equality, equity, justice, and abolition of the caste system must also fight for improved inclusivity and working conditions for Dalit journalists. This in turn will require a structural overhaul of the Indian media ecosystem.

## **The way forward**

The Indian media ecosystem does have pockets of resistance media facilitated by journalists from the Dalit community, to challenge the status quo and provide platforms for self-representation and empowerment. Inspired by the newspaper started by B.R. Ambedkar, The Mooknayak is a news webportal founded by Meena Kotwal, which is “dedicated to marginalised, underprivileged & Bahujan Society” (The Mooknayak, 2024). Similarly, Dalit Dastak, started as a monthly magazine, and has now crossed media into a web portal and a YouTube channel. Its work involves “raising the issues and providing coverage to problems affecting the downtrodden masses: the Dalit-Bahujans, Adivasis and the minorities.” (Dalit Dastak, 2024). Khabar Lahariya, a newspaper completely run by Dalit women has been the focus of multiple research papers and documentaries (Hari and Khamarunnisa, 2022; Sinha and Mallik, 2018, 2022; Thomas and Ghosh, 2021). Web portals such as Round Table India, and YouTube channels such as Dalit Camera, can be seen as forms of resistance which are reclaiming dignity and agency for Dalit voices. They combat the public humiliation and denial of recognition that Dalit journalists confront within mainstream media spaces. These alternative media outlets offer a challenge to the symbolic annihilation, the denial of recognition, and the silencing of Dalit experiences in mainstream media narratives (Guru, 2011). Online outlets such as The Wire, The Print, The News Minute, and Newslandry also bring voices of the marginalised into the mainstream. As suggested policy level structural changes are also required to bring voices of marginalised communities into the mainstream, and to ameliorate the general working conditions of journalists.

During the writing of this article, the Working Journalists Act (WJA), constituted to ameliorate the conditions of journalistic work, was dissolved by the current Indian Government. Much to the dismay of the journalist unions, the Act was assimilated within the three labor codes that were passed to improve the ‘ease of doing business’ throughout India (Chhabra, 2020). Many legal safeguards which were present under the WJA have been diluted or removed by the new labor codes, and the struggle for better working conditions for journalists has become harder (Chhabra, 2020). In the absence of strong legislation, Dalit journalists will bear the brunt of this change. The reintroduction and upgrading of the Working Journalists Act is necessary for not just improving the overall conditions of journalistic work of journalists, but for advancing the rights of Dalit journalists.

Balasubramaniam (2011) suggests the implementation of legislation modeled on the American Society of News Editors (ASNE). This aimed to make newsrooms more diverse by proposing a diversity department, offering scholarships and training to African-American students, conscious hiring of trained students and conducting annual checks on diversity. These measures improved the diversity of newsrooms across the United States of America, a similar model might work in India for the Dalits (Balasubramaniam, 2011).

Harad (2020) also suggests implementing affirmative action policies for news organizations and guaranteeing recruitment of individuals from marginalized castes. For example, newsrooms need to

facilitate conversations and conduct workshops on caste discrimination (Harad, 2020). Here, the International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN) has developed Dalit Discrimination Check, a tool for companies to prevent exploitation and harassment of Dalits throughout their entire supply chain. The tool provides “simple descriptions of what the components of Dalit discrimination looks like in the business context, and allows managers to check their company’s policies, procedures and performance” (IDSN, 2008: 5). Such checks will also help newsrooms to become more inclusive.

Further, media literacy courses in India need to cover the themes of caste and caste discrimination. Implementation of clear policies to prevent caste discrimination in the workplace, efficient mechanisms for journalists to complain and address issues of discrimination, and concrete consequences for violation of those policies, are also required (Harad, 2020). In a 2019 panel discussion, journalist Sudipto Mondal discussed the Taramani Charter, which was inspired by ASNE’s decision to advance diversity within newsrooms (Newslaundry, 2019). Such charters along with legislation will ameliorate working conditions for Dalit journalists and possibly end the existing practices of untouchability. Diversity and inclusion policies have to be mandatory for media houses. Respondents who participated in this study also emphasized this. One journalist explained that,

There is a lack of diversity in the Indian news media.... That's why there should be diversity in [all] media institutions. This will help the [media] to understand the sufferings of the people. [They] will be able to be honest in their work. Right now the media is dominated by people of a particular society, this domination should end. (Television Journalist 3, research interview with M D Gupta, April 11, 2022).

Apart from these industry suggestions, research concerning the critical political economy of media in India needs to incorporate ‘caste’ as a category of analysis. A full conceptualization of this incorporation can’t be provided here. However, a small illustration will provide the springboard for further exploration. Norris (1990) defined the political economy of communication as the study of how power, wealth, and knowledge are interrelated in a society. Mosco (2009) has identified four characteristics of political economy: history and social change, social totality, moral philosophy, and praxis. In the Indian context, the interrelation of power, wealth, and knowledge has a caste dimension. Historically, the caste system has been the primary mode of social stratification and production (Rao and Mudgal 2015). Using Norris’ definition, historically, power was in the hands of Kshatriyas (warrior caste), wealth was in control of Vaishyas (business caste), and knowledge and knowledge production has been controlled by Brahmins (priestly caste) (Ambedkar, 1936/2014). Ignorance of the historical development of Indian media and its caste specificities (refer to Udupa, 2010; Thomas, 2010) will lead to flawed analyses. The article thus recommends a revamping of the political economy of communication theory to include caste, alongside class relations.

To conclude, this article started with the findings of a 2019 Oxfam report which showed the absence of journalists of marginalized castes in mainstream Indian Media. The latest report by Oxfam (Oxfam, 2022) shows little change in India’s media landscape since 2019. Digital media news sites such as Mooknayak, Dalit Dastak, and Round Table India, have brought much-needed diversity and voice into the Indian media ecosystem, but there is a long way to go. What was/is reported in the Oxfam study and what is being analyzed in this research is not new to Dalit journalists. One can nevertheless confirm from in-depth interviews and available secondary sources that the practices of untouchability, characterized by exclusion, humiliation, and exploitation are

still prevalent in Indian media organizations. Further studies based on these categorizations will assist in ascertaining the actual extent of untouchability. Already, research indicates that the Indian news media ecosystem requires a structural overhaul. This article recommends the introduction of affirmative action through legislation, caste awareness workshops in news media houses, anti-discriminatory policies, and declarations such as the Taramani Charter.

## Author Bio

Kailash Koushik is an assistant professor of media studies at the Department of Media Studies, Christ University Bangalore. He completed his PhD from Florida State University, prior to which he was in the Manipal Institute of Communication and the London School of Economics & Political Science for his postgraduate education. His research interests include the critical political economy of media, media labor, Marxist theory, and qualitative methodologies for media research.

Madhuri D Gupta is an independent research scholar. Her research focuses on the intersections of gender, and media and communication. Her interests also include film and cinema studies.

## Endnotes

- [1] Dalit is a collective term used for all the castes that were deemed untouchable in the caste system and have undergone centuries of discrimination and social exclusion. (Harad, 2020).
- [2] Upper Caste names have very specific markers which indicate caste and subcaste. For example, the author's second name indicates he is a Brahmin, and indicates the *gotra* (lineage).
- [3] Ghee (clarified butter) was considered a luxury, and lower castes were denied access and were not allowed to consume ghee (Ambedkar, 1936/2014).
- [4] Chamar is the name of a community of leather workers who were considered untouchable. The Supreme Court of India has ordered that the use of the word to humiliate and offend is punishable by law (Singh, 2008).
- [5] For a detailed discussion on the comparison of salaries of what the wage board recommends and what is being paid refer to Koushik (2018). The conversion of the Indian Rupee to the US Dollar was done on 14 May 2021.

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