

Hindu upper-caste Indian media is a lot like White-dominated South Africa

Two surveys confirmed our worst suspicions about caste, gender, and religion across Indian media.

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It happened over a weekend. This was the summer of 2006, the height of what was then called Mandal II. Indian media was spewing venom against the idea of caste-based reservation in higher education for Other Backward Classes. Television and newspapers were lionising ‘upper-caste’ protests against quota. Some of us were fighting a lonely battle defending the idea of affirmative action and caste-based policies to redress caste-based disadvantage and discrimination. It was tough, as it involved public **debates** with friends like Pratap Mehta.

We were sitting in my office at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), Delhi. Jitendra Kumar, then a young struggling journalist, was fuming: “I have seen it first-hand. The media is packed with upper-caste journalists with a Brahminic mindset.” Anil Chamaria, a crusader for non-upper-caste voices in the media, was also with us. “But where is the evidence?” I asked. Both of them rattled off names of well-known journalists and their castes. They had a point, but I knew their evidence would be called anecdotal. There has to be a way to test this common sense by collecting hard evidence, I suggested. They agreed.

Thus began what I believe was the first survey of the social profile of the national media professionals in India. It would be too much to call it a survey: It was more a rudimentary headcount. We began on a Tuesday or Wednesday, and, for some reason that I cannot recollect now, we wanted the findings released by Monday. Much of the work happened over the weekend. Since the sampling and data

collection could not meet academic standards, we did not involve Lokniti or CSDS. The three of us did it in our personal capacity.

The task was surprisingly easy. We drew up a list of 40 national media outlets (Hindi and English TV channels and newspapers) and requested someone there to draw a list of their top 10 editor-level decision-makers. There were some minor issues about who would be listed, but not the kind that made much difference. Then we recorded information on the gender, religion, and caste against each name. Some were happy to share this information, but most of the editors were either unavailable or unwilling. So we turned to 'informants': We asked people in the journalistic community who knew them and their family well to share their caste details. That is never difficult in India. Over the weekend, we managed to fill the excel sheet with information on 315 of the 400 persons we had shortlisted.

Jarring results

The results confirmed our worst suspicions. A staggering 88 per cent of this elite list were upper-caste Hindus, a social group that cannot possibly exceed 20 per cent of India's population. Brahmins alone, no more than 2-3 per cent in the population, occupied 49 per cent positions. Not even a single person in this list turned out to be from Dalit or Adivasi background.

More relevant to the case in point, the OBCs, whose population is estimated to be around 45 per cent, were merely 4 per cent among the top media professionals. The inverted pyramid was stark: Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and the OBCs accounted for over 70 per cent of the country's population but had a share of 4 per cent among the decision-makers. We also recorded other predictable disparities: Women accounted for only 16 per cent, and Muslims just 3 per cent.

We issued our findings in the form of a press release. Despite obvious reluctance, it did get some coverage, including in mainstream papers like *The Hindu*. News portals were not so popular those days, but alternative media outlets used this extensively. Predictably, the survey was called “controversial”, although no one ever said why. We were chided for insinuating that the caste of a journalist determines their opinion, something we never said. We stuck to a bland statement: “India’s ‘national’ media lacks social diversity, it does not reflect the country’s social profile.” I remember a signed editorial in *Dainik Hindustan* by Mrinal Pande, one of the most respected editors in the breed that has disappeared since, titled “*Jaati na poochho sadhu ki*”. She was graceful enough to publish my counter, with evidence of the bias in her own paper’s reporting.

No one ever contested our empirical findings. No one spoke about it. And no one did a thing about it.

2006 to 2022: Not much has changed

Cut to 2022. Last week, Oxfam India released a report titled ‘Who Tells Our Stories Matters: Representation of Marginalised Caste Groups in Indian Media’. This is the fourth report in an annual series, beginning in 2019, released at ‘Media Rumble’. I was happy to see that their coverage is much wider and sampling more systematic than our first-cut survey: Besides newspapers and TV channels, they cover magazines as well as digital media. I am sure future editions will extend the coverage to ‘regional media’ as well. Their definition of ‘leadership position’ is more precise now, including proprietors as well as designated editorial positions. They also analyse the TV anchors, panelists, and journalists who get bylines. Their data collection is more transparent and rigorous.

Yet, it breaks my heart to see that the big picture has not changed one bit over the last 15 years. Of the 218 persons occupying the

'leadership position' in all categories, 88 per cent come from upper-caste Hindus. (I have renamed what the report calls "General Category" since their definition of it excludes all religious minorities and SC, ST and OBC). Actually, it should be 90 per cent if you exclude the "Don't know" from the calculation. The share of SC+ST+OBC is just about 7 per cent, about one-tenth of what their population share would require. If we exclude magazines and digital media, the share of these three marginalised social groups in the leadership of our English and Hindi newspapers and TV channels is exactly zero.

The present survey takes one big step forward by analysing the social background of TV anchors, panelists, and bylined journalists across various forms of media. As you wade through hundreds of those tables (worth a careful read) the overall number remains static — barring a few exceptions, the Hindu upper-caste grabs 70 to 80 per cent share (once you exclude Don't Knows) in every category, even in the coverage of caste issues. So, the big picture is that 20 per cent of the country gets 80 per cent voice in the media and the remaining 80 per cent is limited to 20 per cent space. We have accomplished without any formal apartheid what the White regime did in South Africa.

I must again underline that every upper-caste media person need not share an upper-caste mindset. Just as every White is not a White supremacist, not every male is a male chauvinist. Yet is it merely an accident that news of caste oppression gets virtually no coverage in our media? That communal flare-up gets 9 times more coverage than caste conflict? That brazen anti-minority headlines get generated routinely? That there is a near consensus against a nationwide caste census?

These days, our foreign-educated upper-caste elite has borrowed a language of justice from the Western context. We worry about all-male panels these days. We look down upon the non-inclusion of

people of colour in any discussion. But it doesn't quite translate into a deeper self-awareness about the privileges that they have inherited in the Indian context. Rarely do they go beyond the but-I-never-knew-my-caste kind of a response. Is the Indian media open to self-correction? Or are we waiting for an outsider to break this stranglehold?