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The Politics of Representating Dalit Women: A Study of the Newspaper *Khabar Lahariya* and the Documentary *Writing with Fire*

By Harishma Hari K.¹ and Khamarunnisa P. A.²

Abstract

Redefining power is the only means to redress the gender bias that women have had to endure in a male-dominated society. As H  l  ne Cixous declared in "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1975), "  criture feminine" (or women's writing) is the only way to emphasize women's perspectives and end stereotyping of women and their opinions in literature. Such ideas helped to transform the representation of women in literature. This transformation is required not only in the literary world, but there is also an urgent need for the realistic representation of women in every section of society. Media being a powerful tool has adapted to this paradigm shift, resulting in the increased visibility of women. Dalit women also need the same reassurance and reception in the media so that their lives are also represented without any bias. Visual media often are biased, because the elite are most often the content creators or the subjects of the content. The representation of women in visual media is increasing in the twenty-first century but Dalit women's realities are still ignored in the mainstream media. The public domains of arts, politics, and media are still not offering a space for Dalit women. The construction of space itself is a political act especially for the Dalit community. Meera is the chief editor of *Khabar Lahariya*, India's only newspaper run by Dalit women. The documentary *Writing with Fire*, directed by Rintu Thomas and Sushmit Ghosh, showcases the redefinition of representation and the power of Dalit women. This study focuses on how a group of Dalit women can enter and break the traditions of the news media in India. With their smartphones, this group confronts real issues that need to be heard through digital journalism. The efforts of journalists like Meera are the means to break the norm of ostracizing Dalit women, and this study tries to identify the possibility of redefining power politics through an inclusion of the Dalit community.

Keywords: Politics of Representation, Dalit Women, Dalit Identity, Journalism, Video Documentary, India

Introduction

The feminist narratives in the mainstream media, especially visual media, are often accompanied by a patriarchal voice. Thus, it becomes a herculean task for women to voice their own narratives, and this task becomes even more complex for the Dalit women. The documentary *Writing with Fire* depicts the story of *Khabar Lahariya*, India's first news agency

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run by Dalit women, which started off as a newspaper and now has branched out into the digital platform. These women journalists are redefining the boundaries of politics in an institution that has been dominated by men since its inception. The documentary showcases the indomitable grassroots-level work of a group of women as they determinedly tell their stories against all odds. The hand-written newspaper published by a group of Dalit women who were denied formal education is fast becoming the voice of villages in Northern India. It must be noted that these women have resisted a caste-ridden patriarchal society through their writings. By doing so, they are breaking many rigid stereotypes of women and Dalit women that previously existed in the media.

Background

Khabar Lahariya originated in a literacy camp conducted by a Delhi-based non-profit organization, Nirantar, which works for women's rights. Kavita Devi and Meera Jatav are the founders of *Khabar Lahariya*. It was first published in the Bundeli language on May 30, 2002 in a small town called Karwi in Chitrakoot, Uttar Pradesh. The entire process including writing news, editing, publishing, and distribution is handled by women. Initially, *Khabar Lahariya* was managed by six members. The newspapers were distributed around six hundred villages in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Madhya Pradesh. They were printed in the Avadhi, Bhojpuri, and Bajjika dialects as well as Bundeli. *Khabar Lahariya* started its digital edition in 2013 and now consists of a network of eighteen women reporting in the twelve districts of Bundhelkhand. *Khabar Lahariya* is also active on YouTube and other social media handles like Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook, and it is the first digital rural news magazine with a circulation of 300,000 every month. *Khabar Lahariya*, their official YouTube channel has 169 million views and 553,000 subscribers. Initially, *Khabar Lahariya* published news on the issues of the villagers like violence against women, discrimination and harassment against the Dalits, farmers' problems, water crises, and public health. They meticulously covered these issues which are ignored by the mainstream media and made sure their reporting had an impact. Gradually, they started including national and international news content. Kavita Devi is the only Dalit member of the Editor's Guild of India.

The documentary *Writing with Fire* portrays how the unimaginable—Dalit women journalists in India—became a reality and changed the age-old tradition and perceptions regarding women's position in society. The documentary directed by Rintu Thomas and Sushmit Ghosh is the winner of twenty international awards including Sundance Film Festival (US): Special Jury Award: Impact for Change; Sundance Film Festival (US): Audience Award; BlackStar Film Festival (US): Best Feature Documentary; San Francisco Film Festival (US): Best Feature Documentary; and Seattle International Film Festival (US): Special Jury Prize. *Writing with Fire* was nominated for the best documentary (feature) at the 94th Academy Awards in 2021. The women reporters of Bundhelkhand like Meera are fierce and determined and are not ready to step back from the unfair treatment meted out to them by the patriarchal institutions of Uttar Pradesh. The documentary shows the simple tools used by these reporters, such as a smartphone, unlike other journalists who possess sophisticated pieces of equipment. Chief reporter Meera with her team members seeks to expose all kinds of injustice, covering cases of corruption, caste issues, and crimes against women. In *Writing with Fire*, Meera is the central character and the documentary filmmakers narrate the stories through the lens of Meera. The women journalists along with Meera are working tirelessly to seek justice for the silenced voices in society such as rape victims or common citizens denied their rights due to caste discrimination. The local government bodies and police are forced to take action in response to the injustices happening against the oppressed as *Khabar Lahariya* relentlessly reports the crimes taking place every day. The documentary starts with an investigation of a rape case which shows how these women are bold and fearless in carrying out their mission.

Analysis of *Writing with Fire*

Through the lens of the chief reporter, Meera, the documentary outlines the existing belief in the caste system and the oppression of lower castes in the north Indian villages. The journalists are trying to break the existing inequalities in society by destroying the entrenched power centers in those communities. But the positive impact of their journalism, like the construction of roads and getting electricity supply for the villages, gives them hope to challenge the power centers in their region. The documentary does not employ any narrative voiceover as it shows the intimate working atmosphere of the protagonists including the reporter, Meera. The footage of them working and covering a story does not require a voiceover or narration.

Meera, the fearless journalist is a wife and mother of two. She was born into a lower caste family in a deeply casteist patriarchal society. Meera confronted the problems that arose due to caste and gender bias in rural India and now is leading a dozen female reporters in *Khabar Lahariya*. The conditions of other protagonists in the documentary are no different, be it Suneeta who is continuously fighting family pressures, or Shyamkali who left her abusive partner.

Journalism has become one of the most dangerous professions to pursue over the last couple of decades in India with an increasing number of journalists being murdered. The atrocities against journalists are increasing and those who probe the injustices are being targeted. The scenario is not at all safe for reporters, but this does not deter the journalists of *Khabar Lahariya* from asking questions of the crowd fearlessly, equipped with only a smartphone. The documentary reveals the social background of the protagonists; Shyamkali is not very highly educated, Meera holds a Master's degree in political science, and Sunita is the daughter of a miner from a mining village which helps her in reporting on illegal mining and the problems faced by the miners. These women are on a mission to provide service to the unprivileged in their community. These journalists question those in power: the politicians of the ruling Bhartiya Janata Party, the police who do not act against the criminals, and the patriarchal power structures that expect them to stay indoors.

Writing with Fire recounts the sequence of events that occurred over the span of five years from 2016 to 2021 in chronological order. The filmmakers met the team of journalists in the year 2016 when they took a great step forward in the transition to digital media. The major reason behind this transition was the desire to reach a wider audience which they accomplished over the five years since 2016. The number of views on their digital content is evidence of their reach. In an interview given to *Salon*, a digital media platform, Rintu Thomas talks about this transition:

The first few years they were still figuring out the workflow on how to manage the digital beast. Here, practical problems started. A story that would typically take a day took longer. And connectivity was (sometimes) an issue. Internet networks are all over the place, and they would send interviews off to a producer who puts the story together and send it to the editorial team in Delhi. That was a giant process for all of them to figure out. When they became more proficient in YouTube Live, Facebook Live, and Twitter, and as people responded with comments, they realized they were becoming a force. (Thomas)

Conclusion

The documentary movingly showcases both their successes and the hardships they faced as Dalits, women, and journalists. Meera's husband did not expect her to be successful as a journalist and Suneeta's father and some male journalists mock her working style. But they

did not let any adversity deter them and continued reporting in every possible way they could. Their triumphs depicted in the documentary are also noteworthy, such as Suneeta's reporting from Colombo, Sri Lanka which revealed how far they had come. Their success can also be counted in terms of the number of cases that their news reporting helped to bring to prosecution and how they managed to bring the attention of the authorities to the community's issues.

The newspaper *Khabar Lahariya* underscores the voices that speak out against gender inequality and violence. It represents the voice of the underprivileged in society. The founders Kavita and Meera and their lives motivate every woman in India to work hard despite their living circumstances. The reporters Suneeta and Shyamkali are role models for those who have a dream. These Dalit women are constantly trying to disrupt all caste and power politics and have succeeded to a great extent in changing the perceptions of people around them. *Khabar Lahariya* is indeed showcasing quality journalism with a significant impact on gender equality.

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