

Paper 364 : Empowerment and Transformation : A Case Study of Communication Skills of Dalit Women in India

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Women are central to the development of rural areas and to national economies. They make up 43 per cent of the agricultural work force worldwide, and as much as 70 per cent in some countries. Often working longer hours than men, rural women are also the caregivers who look after children, the elderly, and the sick. In addition, many rural women are small business entrepreneurs and investors who dedicate most of their earnings to the well-being of their families and societies. But despite some progress, most rural women and girls are still struggling. They typically face more obstacles than men in gaining access to public services, social protection, decent employment opportunities, and markets and other institutions. However, if women had the same access to resources as men, they could increase farm yields. When women are empowered - economically and socially - they become leaders and agents of change for economic growth, social progress and sustainable development.

India is a predominantly patriarchal society, which goes to add to the already existing unfavourable stereotypes established for women in our country. One wonders if the anatomy of women is the main reason behind the gender discrimination she faces in her day to day life. Lack of literacy and economic resources for women living in rural areas adds to the burden faced by them. They also lack representation and involvement in decision making which leads to their ongoing marginalized status. The key issues related to their daily lives go unnoticed. One is not surprised to find a woman still observing *parda*¹ in the 21st century, due to the overpowering nature of traditional norms and conservative frame of mind, especially in villages. . Another reason behind their disparity is the declining female ratio. Further yet, women belonging to the weaker sections of society, i.e. the scheduled castes and tribes, working in informal, unorganized sectors, who suffer more It is these women, who need the power and backing of a common resource available to all – media.

The situation of Dalit women in India therefore needs special attention. They are one of the largest socially segregated groups anywhere in the world, and make up 2% of the world's

¹ **Purdah** or **pardah** (from Persian meaning "curtain") is a religious and social institution of female seclusion in Muslim-majority countries and South Asian countries.

total population. Dalit women constitute half of the country's 200 million Dalit population, and 16.3 of the total Indian female population. The hardships of Dalit women are not simply due to their poverty, economical status, or lack of education, but are a direct result of the severe exploitation and suppression by the upper classes, which is said to be legitimized by Hindu religious scriptures.

Communication is extremely important for women's development and the mass media has an important role to play – to create an awakening in women to achieve their potential as the prime movers of change in society. We see however that there is a shift in the gender balances within the field of media. With more women making their careers out of journalism and writing for various papers and magazines, they are proving their worth and capabilities.

The need to empower women , especially the rural masses through the media has often been pointed out. Critiquing India's development trajectory as 'profoundly undemocratic' , Sri. Sainath² makes a plea for change, a plea to involve people in determining the direction of their own development. But, 'if change is to come, those who author it must have credibility. And that a credibility of record. Not one invented by a media chorus that has no link at all to what hundreds of millions of Indians are thinking. This growing disconnect of the " mass media" from mass reality is getting worse. If this 'disconnect' has to be repaired, surely it is time to empower rural populations such that they can begin to tell their own stories, in their own words and language. They will begin to represent their own reality as they experience it. They should be the subjects of their own development.

² Sainath P., *Everybody loves a Good Drought*, 1996, Penguin India. Ramon Magsaysay Award winner for Journalism and Literature in 2007. P. Sainath's book, *Everybody loves a Good Drought* is a landmark journalistic work which throws light on the lives of the poorest of the poor and explores the true face of India's development.

We see however that there is a shift in the gender balances within the field of media. With more women making their careers out of journalism and writing for various papers and magazines, they are proving their worth and capabilities. It is perhaps the late night shifts, reporting from sensitive areas and the lack of security which prevent them from pursuing their careers in journalism with the same zest with which men do. It is mostly the women who tend to cover the gender sensitive issues, and this perhaps works in favour of those unfortunate voices which cannot be heard. Of course, like any other corporate field, media too is said to have its “glass ceiling” which prevent the success of more women than men. Issues of sexual harassment are not new to women in any field. However we definitely see the tide changing, with more women journalists entering into the field and with more women making their presence felt in the print media, we may soon be heading towards a much awaited change.

Fortunately, there are many examples of brave Dalit women who are aware of the horrifying truth and despite the heavy odds still strive to put an end to their suffering .In doing so, they most certainly ensure a brighter future for the generations to come.

What could have happened when a group of lower-caste and tribal women joined hands to launch a newspaper, because the existing media in the area was not reporting on issues that concerned them, because they wanted to enter a male domain and also because they wanted to prove that they too could make it as journalists? The result was ***Khabar Lahariya (KL)***- Bundeli³ for ‘News Waves’ , a 4,000-circulation rural newspaper that covers the news that the mainstream media has forgotten and reaches over 150 villages in Chitrakoot district in the largest Indian State of Uttar Pradesh. And one that doesn’t accept advertisements that promote casteism, fundamentalism, sexism, violence or superstition this newspaper project was started by Nirantar, a Delhi based NGO and resource centre for Gender and Education, set up in 1993 and working on a range of innovative initiatives to engender literacy and processes of education. Chitrakoot district is located in is one of India’s 200 poorest districts. There is practically no industry worth its name and the local economy survives on rain-fed agriculture. Literacy levels are abysmal, and only one in three women knows how to read and write. The sex ratio is skewed in favour of men. And incidents of sexual violence are high.

³ **Bundeli** is a Western Hindi language (often considered a dialect of Hindi) spoken in the Bundelkhand region of the State of Madhya Pradesh and in southern parts of the Indian State of Uttar Pradesh .

Representing the voice of rural India in print, *Khabar Lahariya* - Bundeli for 'News Waves' - is a weekly rural newspaper written, edited, illustrated, produced and marketed by a group of women - most of them from marginalised Dalit, Kol and Muslim communities - in Chitrakoot and Banda districts of Uttar Pradesh in north India. The decade old newspaper which began as a fortnightly publication in May 2002 from Chitrakoot district of Uttar Pradesh in Bundeli language, a second edition was launched in the adjoining Banda district in October 2006. There are also editions from Lucknow, Sitamarhi and Sheohar districts with a sixth edition launched in 2012 from the holy Indian city of Varanasi. Presently, between both editions of Chitrakoot and Banda, *Khabar Lahariya* (News Waves) which has certainly made waves, as its name suggests is a weekly local language newspaper brought out by a collective of 40 rural women journalists. Each week, 6,000 copies of *Khabar Lahariya* are sold across 600 villages of the Indian States of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, reaching a readership of 80,000. The readership is high because one paper is often read by more than 15 to 20 people. *Khabar Lahariya* began as the only Bundeli language newspaper in India and now has editions in local languages such as Bhojpuri, Awadhi, Hindustani and Bajjika. It connects with its rural audiences through its unique local language content that mainstream media rarely covers. Unseen places and unheard voices are what *Khabar Lahariya* brings into the sphere of journalism. *Khabar Lahariya* empowers poor rural populations to access news and information, rights and resources, and plays the role of a media watchdog. In 2008, the *Khabar Lahariya* group registered as an independent organisation, Pahal - one of the only rural women's media collectives in the country.

Khabar Lahariya , an eight page, 11x16 inch sized paper, written in a mix of Bundeli and Hindi carries primarily local development news and information. The newspaper reports on cases of violence against women and on Dalit issues, as well as exposés on bureaucratic corruption. There are pages on current news (*Taaza Khabar*), national and international news (*Desh Videsh*), women's issues (*Mahila Mudda*), panchayati raj, entertainment (*Idhar Udhar*), regional news, and an edit page (*Hamaar Sandesh*) . *Khabar Lahariya* also produces quarterly special issues - these could be themed around topical issues like local, state and national elections, or investigate important development issues from a feminist perspective.

Diligent, responsible and dependable, Meera Devi is the calm centre of the KL team who comes from a privileged , upwardly mobile Dalit family background. Designated as the Editor of KL, Meera herself had a hard time initially accepting her identity as a journalist.

Meera has never actually met what she calls a ‘real’ editor, meaning the editors from mainstream Hindi newspapers like Dainik Jagran or Amar Ujala.

While creating the unique content of KL, their gender-caste location leaves the team open to attack as they try and become commentators on the events of their time and not just mute spectators. The team has faced everything from catcalls to threats of sexual violence; from charges of incompetence to simply being called liars. They are civic journalists who report on the situations and communities they live in. And just as being Dalit and women is a double disadvantage in most walks of life in India, so also in the practice of civic journalism, it is no different. Loose reporting or poorly sourced stories are bad for any journalist, but for KL, they could be fatal. But for these women, to break into a man’s domain has been exhilarating. People valued their work and it had brought change, for example, some villages had lights because of their reports, people got their salaries and in one instance, a Dalit woman who cooked mid-day meals for school children could stay back despite opposition from the upper castes in Sitamarhi district in the Indian State of Bihar.

Khabar Lahariya has a weekly production cycle. After meeting to plan the issue, the reporters chalk out their beats. They visit villages or government offices to follow up on leads, gather information and interview people. They scan mainstream newspapers and magazines for story ideas. Mid-way through the production cycle, they hold a daylong editorial meeting, at which the stories being pursued are discussed and editorial content is decided. A few days later they meet again at the *Khabar Lahariya* office for a two-day production workshop – a high-intensity spell of writing, giving feedback on others’ stories, editing, designing, illustrating and proofreading. The women not only gather news but also do the layout and search for national and international news, for which there is a section, on the Internet. Initially, some of them were even scared to touch a computer but now they are all net savvy. Once done, one of the women takes the paper to Allahabad (the nearest big city, 100 kms away) to be printed. After two days, when the paper comes hot off the press, the reporters double up as saleswomen. They collect their copies from the office... and the cycle begins again.

Dismantling the two most pervasive of social hierarchies – the gender and caste hierarchy, this group of poor, rural, ‘low-caste’ women received one of the highest journalism honours in the country - the Chameli Devi Jain Award in India’s capital, New Delhi in March 2004. The women were being recognised for their fortnightly newspaper, *Khabar Lahariya (KL)*

and KL was being honoured because, by sheer dint of its existence, it represents a revolution in new and profound ways. The Chameli Devi Award won by the KL team also fetched them registration as a self-help group (SHG) by the District Magistrate who asked them to help the government implement its 'women's' schemes! KL also won the Laadli Media Award in December 2012 for gender sensitivity.

Nirantar, a non-governmental organisation which runs this Khabar Lahariya newspaper project also won international recognition through the 2009 UNESCO King Sejong Literacy Prize, for promoting literacy. This prize is an affirmation of Nirantar's work with Dalit, rural women on issues of literacy and information creation. The prize also recognises Nirantar's 'well-structured method of training newly literate women as journalists and democratizing information production provides an easily replicated model of transformative education.' The UNESCO International Literacy Prizes are awarded every year on 8th September in recognition of excellence and innovation in literacy throughout the world.

***Khabar Lahariya*spreading its wings**

Khabar Lahariya is set to establish its unique presence in more districts of Bundelkhand, beginning with a new edition in Mahoba district. UNDEF will support this new edition of *Khabar Lahariya*, as well as a series of trainings for *Khabar Lahariya* journalists in reporting, writing, marketing, photography and ICT skills. The two-year project, entitled 'Strengthening Grassroots Democracy in India through Women and Participatory media' and a national network of rural women journalists marks the beginning of a new phase of *Khabar Lahariya's* life. The website of *Khabar Lahariya* was launched in February 2013.

Brand *Khabar Lahariya*

With the growing popularity and recognition that *Khabar Lahariya* has achieved, Nirantar is now working on expansion of the newspaper. A women's collective is now producing an edition of *Khabar Lahariya* from Sitamarhi district of Bihar. Nirantar also organises Rural Journalism Courses to train other women's collectives to bring out editions of *Khabar Lahariya*. Nirantar's course on Rural Journalism trains and provides skills on newsgathering, writing and editing along with building an understanding of gender, rights and development, language and so on.

The Rural Journalism Courses have triggered a significant shift in Nirantar's long-term strategy triggering the up-scaling and creation of a '*Khabar Lahariya*' brand of newspapers that can change the landscape of media in the rural hinterland. Nirantar plans to collaborate with and support grassroots, especially women's groups, to create a wide net of women journalists, and newspapers across the country and beyond.

The success of *Khabar Lahariya* has validated Nirantar's idea of newspapers produced by rural, marginalised communities as powerful tools to create a print-rich environment, especially in areas of low literacy. The course design, therefore, is practical, hands-on; its location in a rural/ semi-rural context provides the opportunity for trainees to plunge right into specificities of rural newsgathering. Participants also develop a critical view of the limits and constraints of mainstream media. Perhaps the USP of the course is the involvement of the *Khabar Lahariya* team in the training process, both to take participants on their beats, but also in the training space, to share their experiences of producing KL.

Although women journalists are admittedly no longer such a rare species in the Indian media landscape, not many of them occupy positions of power even in mainstream urban newspapers. At such a time, their presence in an interior rural area poses dramatic challenges to accepted gender roles. The KL team have barged into a well-guarded male preserve- the production of information and knowledge. Also, while most local newspapers continue to portray women as sorry subjects, KL is all about women and human rights, writing for people with low levels of literacy, when the rest of the world writes for the literate few. Unlike most media products, which continue to cater to a target audience with purchasing power, KL writes specifically for the poorest of the poor. And while most publications are written by 'others' for a target audience, KL is written by the target audience itself. These twice empowered women produce it for other women like themselves. i.e the women of rural Chitrakoot. Above all, it brings the written world – news, information and knowledge – into the rural hinterland !

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