

From Silence to Justice: The Role of Indian Journalism in Empowering Marginalised Communities

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Abstract

Dalits, Adivasis (Scheduled Tribes), women from marginalised castes, religious minorities, and rural poor populations have all historically been under-represented and misrepresented in Indian mainstream media. Nearly 90% of leadership positions in newsrooms are held by members of the upper caste, which has led to episodic, atrocity-focused coverage that frequently ignores systemic injustice and community agency.¹ By promoting journalism by and for the margins, community and alternative media efforts like Khabar Lahariya, The Mooknayak, CGNet Swara, Video Volunteers (IndiaUnheard), Sangham Radio, Radio Mewat, and others have broken this silence.² To amplify voices, gain tangible redress (infrastructure, wages, justice in atrocity instances), develop economic agency for reporters, and promote democratic involvement, these platforms make use of local languages and dialects, mobile technology, participatory techniques, and accountability journalism. This essay makes the case that inclusive, community-led journalism is crucial for converting constitutional equality into lived justice, using the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, RTI, and constitutional guarantees under Article 19(1)(a). Mandates for diversity in newsrooms, ongoing support for community media, moral standards for reporting on gender and caste atrocities, and legislative backing for digital voice infrastructure are among the recommendations.

Keywords: Dalit journalism, community media, Indian journalism, and marginalised communities. Participatory journalism, media diversity, Khabar Lahariya, The Mooknayak, CGNet Swara, media representation, Article 19, and the SC/ST Act

INTRODUCTION

Although journalism is essential to democracy, in India, the press has historically mirrored and upheld caste, class, gender, and geographic societal structures. Scheduled Castes (about 16–17% of the population), Scheduled Tribes (around 8–9%), Other Backward Classes, rural women, and religious minorities are examples of marginalised communities that have either stayed mostly mute in mainstream narratives or figure predominantly as victims of spectacular violence. Instead of seeing them as agents of

¹ Oxfam India & NewsLaundry, *Who tells our stories matters: Representation of marginalised caste groups in Indian media* (2019 & 2022 editions).

² Journalism University, “Groundbreaking Community Media Initiatives in India”; Al Jazeera Media Institute, “Breaking Barriers: The Rise of Citizen Journalists in India’s Fight for Media Inclusion”.

their own lives, this "outsider's gaze" frames them through preconceptions of criminality, insufficiency, or exoticism.³

"From Silence to Justice" sums up a revolutionary change: the emergence of alternative and community media that gives traditionally marginalised people access to communication instruments. Platforms include CGNet Swara (voice-based citizen journalism for Adivasi communities), The Mooknayak (the "leader of the voiceless"), Khabar Lahariya (all-women, mostly Muslim and Dalit rural reporters in Bundelkhand), and Video Volunteers' IndiaUnheard Network shows how journalism may become a tool for accountability, dignity, and tangible change when marginalised people tell their own experiences.⁴ The structural obstacles in mainstream media, the legal and constitutional framework that promotes free speech, comparative lessons, the actual effects of community initiatives, and avenues for a more equitable media ecosystem are all examined in this study.

Literature Review, Research Gap, and Conceptual Framework

Caste and gender exclusion are regularly documented in Indian media scholarship. According to the Oxfam India–NewsLaundry reports (2019 and 2022), there are no SC or ST editors-in-chief or equivalent in the sampled mainstream outlets, and approximately 86–90% of leadership roles in print, television, and digital newsrooms are held by upper-caste (General category) professionals.⁵ Similar biases can be seen in bylines, anchors, and panellists; in major Hindi and English publications, only roughly one in five pieces are authored by journalists from SC/ST/OBC backgrounds. Research on framing reveals a pattern of episodic reporting that emphasises specific crimes while ignoring structural inequality, labour exploitation, land rights, and caste violence.⁶ "Voice poverty" and the democratising potential of participatory approaches are highlighted in community media literature.⁷ Ambedkarite ideas of representation and self-respect, critical political economy of media, and framing theory serve as conceptual pillars. awareness the complex obstacles faced by Dalit women journalists requires an awareness of intersectionality (caste × gender × class × geography).⁸

Research gap: There is a dearth of integrated analysis connecting newsroom composition data, constitutional jurisprudence, comparative media systems, quantifiable impact metrics (grievance resolution, audience growth, policy influence), and specific policy recommendations for systemic reform, despite the existence of descriptive accounts of individual initiatives. By combining empirical evidence of empowerment with a justice-oriented perspective, this study fills that gap.

³ Chakraborty, "The Outsider's Gaze: Media Representation of Dalit, Adivasi, Queer, and Minority Lives" (2026).

⁴ UN News, "From rural margins to media trailblazers: India's women journalists are rewriting the news" (2026); The Guardian coverage of Khabar Lahariya (2021).

⁵ Oxfam India–NewsLaundry reports (2019, 2022); confirmed in multiple secondary analyses including DW (2023) and The Print (2024).

⁶ Studies on episodic framing of caste atrocities; see also Public Policy Research Centre report on media coverage of SC atrocities (2017).

⁷ Vinod Pavarala on community radio and "voice poverty"; Annapurna Sinha, "Participatory Advocacy Journalism in Central India" (2023).

⁸ Intellect journal study on intersectional challenges faced by Dalit women journalists (2025).

Conceptual framework: In accordance with Articles 14, 15, 17, and 21, journalism is both a duty (amplifying silenced voices toward substantive equality) and a right (freedom of expression and the public's right to know). Community media serves as "voice infrastructure," transforming information into agency and responsibility.

Statement of the Problem

Marginalised populations are routinely excluded from production and decision-making roles in mainstream Indian journalism, which leads to inaccurate or nonexistent coverage of their daily experiences. In addition to undermining democratic accountability and sustaining structural inequality, this silence deprives communities of the information they need to assert their constitutional rights. Though they are still underfunded, susceptible to sustainability issues, and inadequately integrated into the larger public realm, alternative and community media have started to fill the hole.

Research Questions

- How are marginalised communities portrayed in Indian newsrooms based on caste, gender, and class composition?
- How have Dalit, Adivasi, rural women, and minority voices been strengthened by community and alternative media initiatives?
- What institutional, legal, and constitutional frameworks support or restrict journalism that promotes justice for the marginalised?
- What quantifiable effects—such as the resolution of complaints, changes in public opinion, or the financial empowerment of journalists—can be linked to these initiatives?
- What changes are necessary for inclusive journalism to become institutionalised?

Objectives

To examine systemic obstacles to mainstream media coverage.

To record and assess the methods and results of important community media projects.

To outline the pertinent legal and constitutional framework.

can make comparisons with other democracies that have a history of social hierarchy.

To make evidence-based suggestions for newsroom procedures, media policy, and civil society assistance.

Hypothesis

Community-led and alternative journalism, when practiced by members of marginalised communities themselves and grounded in local languages and participatory methods, significantly enhances visibility, accountability, and empowerment compared with mainstream coverage, thereby contributing to the realisation of constitutional justice.

Methodology

This study looks at how Indian media empowers underprivileged populations using a qualitative, multi-method research methodology. A strictly quantitative approach would be insufficient given the intricate interactions between caste, gender, class, and media dominance. With an exploratory component that aims to comprehend how community and alternative media practices transform silence into voice and justice, the research is mainly descriptive and analytical.

The majority of the data included in the study is secondary. Academic books, peer-reviewed journal papers, organisational reports, and policy documents are examples of important sources. These include scholarly works on community media by Vinod Pavarala, Kanchan Malik, and Annapurna Sinha; documented impact assessments of programs like Khabar Lahariya, CGNet Swara, The Mooknayak, and Video Volunteers; and Oxfam India–Newslaundry reports (2019 and 2022) on caste representation in Indian newsrooms. The study's legal corpus consists of the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, the Right to Information Act, Supreme Court rulings on Article 19, and constitutional provisions. These secondary sources offer theoretical support as well as empirical data.

The fundamental analytical approach is a multiple case-study method. Three criteria were used to purposefully choose six initiatives: journalism created by members of marginalised groups; a consistent focus on themes of caste, gender, and rural exclusion; and the availability of verified impact. The chosen cases—Khabar Lahariya, The Mooknayak, CGNet Swara, Video Volunteers (IndiaUnheard), Sangham Radio, and Radio Mewat—represent a variety of geographical areas and media types, including print, digital video, voice-based platforms, and community radio. Organisational structure, journalist makeup, content practices, language use, and quantifiable results like audience reach, grievance redressal, and reporters' economic empowerment are all considered in each case. The narratives created by community media are compared with mainstream media coverage of marginalised communities using content and framing analysis. This makes it possible to distinguish between victimhood and agency, episodic and thematic framing, and the existence or lack of structural analysis. The enabling and restrictive constitutional and legislative framework controlling press freedom and the rights of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes is mapped using legal and document analysis.

Framing theory, the political economy of media, intersectionality, participatory communication, and Ambedkarite concepts of representation and self-respect are all incorporated into the methodology's theoretical framework. These perspectives aid in understanding how community media practices create counter-publics and how exclusion in newsrooms perpetuates silence.

Certain shortcomings are acknowledged in the study. Organisational self-reports may be biased if they heavily rely on secondary information. Although a questionnaire has been created for future extension, primary fieldwork involving audience studies and interviews with community journalists has not been carried out in the current form. Comprehensive coverage of all community media experiments in India is further restricted by linguistic and regional variation.

Legal and Constitutional Framework

Freedom of speech and expression is guaranteed by Article 19(1)(a) of the Constitution. Press freedom is part of this, according to the Supreme Court's repeated rulings (*Romesh Thappar v. State of Madras*, 1950; *Bennett Coleman & Co. v. Union of India*, 1972).⁹ Article 19(2) requires that restrictions be reasonable and appropriate.

Articles 14, 15, 16, and 17 do away with untouchability and forbid discrimination. The enlarged right to life under Article 21 includes access to knowledge and dignity. Intentional insults and intimidation in public are illegal under the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 (as amended); subsequent High Court decisions have expanded the definition of "public view" to include internet and social media

⁹ *Romesh Thappar v. State of Madras* (1950); *Bennett Coleman & Co. v. Union of India* (1972); standard constitutional commentaries on Article 19(1)(a).

platforms.¹⁰ Ten Marginalised communities have used the Right to Information Act of 2005 as a potent instrument to demand accountability on programs like MGNREGA.¹¹

Press Council of India norms emphasise accuracy, fairness, and sensitivity in reporting on vulnerable groups; the Council has resisted blanket bans on the term “Dalit,” recognising contextual necessity.¹² Community radio policy and digital public infrastructure offer further enabling frameworks, though implementation gaps persist.

The Press Council of India has acknowledged the contextual requirement of the term “Dalit,” but has opposed its outright ban. Accuracy, objectivity, and sensitivity are highly valued in the Council’s requirements for reporting on vulnerable groups. Twelve Community radio policy and digital public infrastructure offer further enabling frameworks, even though there are still implementation gaps.

Comparative Perspective

Similar patterns of elite capture can be seen in the post-apartheid South African media (commercial dominance restricting Black and working-class voices) and in the historical coverage of African-American communities in the United States (stereotyping, under-representation in newsrooms until the civil rights era and later diversity efforts).¹³ Unlike usual Indian coverage of caste atrocities, which frequently stays episodic or politicised, Black Lives Matter coverage in U.S. media occasionally provided a more comprehensive structural analysis.¹⁴ Affirmative action in newsrooms, public-interest media funding, community media support, and ethical rules prohibiting voyeuristic or decontextualised reporting of violence against historically oppressed communities are among the lessons learned. India’s size, linguistic diversity, and constitutional dedication to social justice provide special chances for vernacular and community models that, with sufficient funding, can outperform many experiences in the Global North.

Empirical Findings

- Newsroom composition: Persistent upper-caste dominance (Oxfam–Newslaundry 2019/2022) correlates with limited, often sensational coverage of caste issues.¹⁵
- Khabar Lahariya: Founded 2002; all-women team (Dalit, Adivasi, Muslim, OBC) reporting in Bundeli and other local languages. Transitioned to digital video; reaches millions monthly (YouTube subscribers >500,000, views in hundreds of millions). Documented impacts include accountability on local governance failures, improved service delivery, and increased confidence among rural women to report violence. Documentary *Writing with Fire* brought international recognition.¹⁶
- The Mooknayak: Founded by Meena Kotwal (Dalit journalist); focuses on Dalit, Adivasi, and minority issues. Employs reporters from the communities themselves, including those with limited formal training, producing nuanced coverage that mainstream outlets often miss.¹⁷

¹⁰ Calcutta High Court and Bombay High Court rulings extending “public view” under SC/ST Act to social media and digital platforms (2025–2026).

¹¹ BA Notes and case studies on RTI use by marginalised communities, especially in MGNREGA contexts.

¹² Press Council of India decision (2018) declining blanket ban on the term “Dalit”.

¹³ Comparative analyses of Indian and South African media (Academia.edu paper); U.S. race representation literature.

¹⁴ Newslaundry analysis comparing Indian caste coverage with U.S. Black Lives Matter reporting (2020).

¹⁵ Oxfam India–Newslaundry (2019/2022).

¹⁶ Khabar Lahariya organisational data; UN News (2026); *Writing with Fire* documentary reception; Journalism University profiles.

¹⁷ Al Jazeera Media Institute profiles of Meena Kotwal and The Mooknayak; New York Times feature (2023); DW (2023).

- CGNet Swara: Voice-based platform for Adivasi regions; hundreds of thousands of calls, thousands of published stories, and hundreds of documented problem resolutions (hand-pumps fixed, wages paid, medical interventions, Forest Rights Act issues). Operates effectively in low-literacy, low-connectivity areas.¹⁸
- Video Volunteers / IndiaUnheard: Network of community correspondents (predominantly from marginalised groups, majority women) producing thousands of videos; significant share lead to measurable impact (problem resolution affecting millions). Training includes RTI use and mobilisation.¹⁹
- Other initiatives: Sangham Radio (Dalit women in Telangana), Radio Mewat, Cybermohalla, Appan Samachar, and social-media accounts (Dalit Desk, Bahunjan Lives Matter) expand the ecosystem. Technology (smartphones, Bluetooth, YouTube) has lowered barriers dramatically.²⁰

Across cases, common outcomes include: heightened community awareness of rights, direct redress of grievances, economic empowerment of reporters (salaries, skills, confidence), linguistic inclusion, and gradual influence on mainstream agendas.

Findings, Recommendations, and Conclusion

The demographic bias of mainstream media results in inaccurate framing and representational silence. By giving the impacted people the microphone, community media reverses this and turns journalism into a vehicle of justice. Both tangible (services provided, cases pursued) and symbolic (dignity, self-representation, democratic engagement) effects are evident. There are still issues with financial sustainability, journalist safety (particularly for Dalit women who are subjected to intersectional abuse), scale in relation to need, and partial integration with mainstream platforms.

Recommendations:

1. **Newsroom diversity:** Mandatory transparent caste, gender, and regional diversity audits; affirmative recruitment and leadership pathways for SC/ST/OBC and women journalists.
2. **Funding and policy support:** Public and philanthropic endowments for community media; simplified community-radio licensing; integration of community content into public broadcasters.
3. **Ethical standards:** Press Council and self-regulatory bodies to issue detailed guidelines on atrocity coverage (contextualise structural causes, centre survivor agency, avoid sensationalism).
4. **Training and technology:** Scale mobile journalism and data skills for community reporters; support language technology for Adivasi and regional languages.
5. **Legal and institutional:** Strengthen RTI facilitation in media-dark areas; ensure protection of journalists under existing laws; extend public-view protections thoughtfully in digital spaces.
6. **Research and monitoring:** Independent annual audits of media representation and impact of community initiatives.

¹⁸ CGNet Swara impact reports: over 575,000 calls, 6,900+ stories, 287+ documented resolutions (as of mid-2010s data, with continued activity); Microsoft Research and ICTD papers.

¹⁹ Video Volunteers annual reports and IndiaUnheard impact metrics (hundreds of impacts affecting millions); IJNet and Al Jazeera coverage (2024).

²⁰ Profiles of Sangham Radio, Radio Mewat, Cybermohalla, Appan Samachar, and social-media Bahunjan initiatives (Journalism University and related sources).

Conclusion:

Indian journalism stands at a pivotal moment. The constitutional promise of equality and free expression remains incomplete while vast sections of the population remain unheard. Community and alternative media have proven that when silence is broken by those who lived it, justice becomes possible—not merely as legal remedy but as everyday accountability, dignity, and voice. Scaling these models and reforming mainstream institutions is both a democratic imperative and a practical pathway toward a more inclusive public sphere.

Limitations

This paper relies primarily on secondary sources and organisational impact reports; independent longitudinal evaluation of causal impact is limited. Geographic and linguistic coverage is weighted toward North and Central India. Future research should incorporate primary fieldwork, audience studies, and quantitative content analysis across a larger sample of outlets.

APPENDIX A: QUESTIONNAIRE**Proposed survey instrument for future empirical work**

1. Demographic information (caste category, gender, region, years in journalism, education).
2. Frequency and framing of coverage of caste/gender/Adivasi issues in your outlet (self-assessment).
3. Barriers faced in reporting or accessing mainstream platforms (safety, resources, editorial gatekeeping, language).
4. Perceived impact of your reporting (examples of redress, audience feedback, personal empowerment).
5. Suggestions for improving representation and support for community media.
6. Experience with digital tools, RTI, and legal protections.

PRIMARY SOURCE

1. Oxfam India & Newslaundry – Who Tells Our Stories Matters: Representation of Marginalised Caste Groups in Indian Newsrooms (2019)
2. Oxfam India & Newslaundry – Who Tells Our Stories Matters (Second Edition, 2022)
3. Ali Saha – Dalit Identity in Indian Print Media: Caste, Power, and Representation (Routledge, 2026)
4. Ali Saha & Samanthi Gunawardana – “Paradoxical Inclusion of India’s Ex-Untouchables in New Casteist Media” (Media, Culture & Society, 2022)
5. Annapurna Sinha – Community Newspapers in India: Manifestations and Metamorphosis (Routledge, 2023)
6. Annapurna Sinha – “Participatory Advocacy Journalism in Central India: ‘Every Reader is a Reporter’” (South Asia Research, 2023)
7. Vinod Pavarala & Kanchan K. Malik – Other Voices: The Struggle for Community Radio in India (Sage, 2007)
8. Kanchan K. Malik & Vinod Pavarala (Eds.) – Community Radio in South Asia: Reclaiming the Airwaves (Routledge, 2020)
9. Vinod Pavarala – UNESCO Chair writings on community media and “voice poverty”
10. Tamanna Priya & Jay Kumar – “Dalits in Indian Print Media: Unravelling (Mis)(Re)presentation and Distortion” (Contemporary Voice of Dalit, 2026)
11. Chandrani Chakraborty – “The Outsider’s Gaze: Media Representation of Dalit, Adivasi, Queer, and Minority Lives” (2026)

12. Ramesh Aroli – “Mirroring the Marginality: A Study on Coverage of Caste in Indian Press” (Akademos, 2023)
13. Kailash Koushik & Madhuri D. Gupta – “The Persistence of Untouchability: Working Conditions of Dalit Journalists in India” (The Political Economy of Communication, 2024)
14. Priyanka Srivastava – Dalit Media Field Discourses in Print and Online Forums (JNU PhD thesis, 2021)
15. Robin Jeffrey – Works on Indian media ownership and caste (various publications)
16. Shyoraj Singh Bechain – Media aur Dalit (Gautam Book Centre)
17. Shyoraj Singh Bechain – Ambedkar, Gandhi aur Dalit Patrakarita
18. Shyoraj Singh Bechain – Mooknayak
19. Anuradha Kumar – Bharatiya Dalit Patrakarita
20. Tejas Harad – Writings on experiences of Dalit journalists in mainstream media
21. Meena Kotwal – Writings and interviews related to The Mooknayak
22. Paromita Pain et al. – Studies on CGNet Swara and citizen journalism impact
23. Bill Thies & Microsoft Research papers on CGNet Swara (ICTD conferences)
24. Jessica Mayberry & Stalin K. – Video Volunteers / IndiaUnheard documentation and impact reports
25. Garima Sharma – Community Journalism and Grassroots Development in India (case study of PARI, Khabar Lahariya, Gaon Connection – PhD thesis)
26. V. Ratnamala – Media and Minorities: Media Representation of Dalits in Tamil Nadu
27. V. Ratnamala – “Media on Violence against Dalits” (Contemporary Voice of Dalit)
28. Dr. Swadesh Singh – “Representation and Exclusion of Dalits in Media”
29. B.N. Uniyal – “In Search of a Dalit Journalist” (classic essay)
30. Harish S. Wankhede – Writings on caste, media, and Ambedkarite perspectives
31. Yagati Chinna Rao – Works on Dalit identity and history
32. Badri Narayan – Writings on Dalit politics and representation
33. Public Policy Research Centre – Question of Media-Justice (report on coverage of SC atrocities, 2017)
34. Ambedkar, B.R. – Critiques of the press and writings on representation (foundational secondary reference)
35. Kanchan K. Malik – Articles on gender, community media, and rural journalism
36. Vasuki Belavadi & Aniruddha Jena – Studies on indigenous community radio (e.g., Radio Dhimsa)
37. Preeti Raghunath – Policy ethnography of community radio in India
38. Journalism University / academic profiles on Khabar Lahariya, Radio Mewat, Cybermohalla
39. Al Jazeera Media Institute – Reports on citizen journalism and marginalised voices in India
40. UN News / United Nations in India – Coverage and analysis of rural women journalists (Khabar Lahariya)
41. International Journalists’ Network (IJNet) – Articles on Video Volunteers and community video
42. The Print / Newslaundry opinion and analysis pieces on caste and digital media
43. DW (Deutsche Welle) – Features on Dalit journalists and alternative media
44. The New York Times – Profiles of Meena Kotwal and The Mooknayak
45. The Guardian – Coverage of Khabar Lahariya and Writing with Fire
46. SAGE journals and Contemporary Voice of Dalit – Multiple articles on media and caste
47. Media, Culture & Society – Articles on casteist media framing
48. Routledge / Taylor & Francis collections on South Asian media and community communication

49. Shodhganga theses on Dalit media, community journalism, and grassroots development
50. Deccan Development Society / Sangham Radio documentation and related academic studies on Dalit women community radio