



Media Things

Department of B.A. Mass Media

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Bhima Koregaon Violence and Media

The anger of Dalit protesters on the streets of Mumbai was palpable. It was not just directed at the Maharashtra government, but at Big Media, too, for its obscurantism.

What stood out during Wednesday's largely peaceful state-wide *bandh* was how *NDTV* journalist Sumit Singh was howled down by Ambedkarite protesters as they asked him to shut down his camera and stop reporting. "*Band kar*" ("shut down"), they shouted. The crowd stopped short of manhandling the scribe and destroying the camera.



Panic-stricken, Sumit resumed his coverage albeit in a frightened voice and after a brief pause.

(https://youtu.be/_AzSg0gT7QM)

❖ Media ‘boycotts’ Bhima Koregaon event and the attack:

The protesters have reasons to be angry and their wrath unfortunately fell on Sumit as he faced their collective angst against the media, which he represented. It is important to understand where this anger is coming from.

Just days earlier, almost no TV news channel – Hindi or Marathi – covered the historic incident marking the 200th year of the British Army’s Mahar Battalion defeating Peshwa forces.

As the new year of 2018 dawned, according to one estimate, close to 3 lakh people thronged Bhima Koregaon village, about 30 km east of Pune.

The commemoration soon turned into grief as some Dalit groups faced a targeted attack from youths holding saffron flags, who also burned and damaged vehicles bearing blue flags and the Ashoka chakra (Ambedkar followers proudly flaunt it on their vehicles and houses). Literally none of the mainstream media organisations, including Marathi channels covered this attack of January 1, although it was out in the open for everybody to see. Many Facebook users uploaded photos and videos of Ambedkarites bleeding after stone-pelting.

In the absence of media coverage, it was upon visitors themselves to record the attack at the site on mobiles and to gather evidence.

For instance, *Ambedkar TV*’s [Facebook page uploaded a video](#) of the dastardly attack caught on camera by the leader of Samata Sainik Dal (an organisation formed by Dr Ambedkar).

Ideally, such recording of events is the work of the mainstream media. But large sections of it chose to ignore the violence at Bhima Koregaon, just like they ignored other Ambedkarite gatherings — the December 6 event in Mumbai to mark the death anniversary of Dr Ambedkar or the October 14 event in Nagpur to mark his conversion to Buddhism.

Many were injured in the Bhima Koregaon attack and it was only on the evening of Tuesday, January 2, when Ambedkar’s grandson Prakash Ambedkar called for a state-wide bandh when TV news media started taking note of Dalit protests that had erupted in parts of Maharashtra.

❖ **Channels change the narrative: ‘caste politics’ and ‘traffic problems’**

The bandh was mostly portrayed as a “clash” of two castes. This is when channels started their coverage of the bandh with “traffic problems”.

On Tuesday, Arnab Goswami of *Republic TV* invited Prakash Ambedkar, only to insult him by asking if he was “shameful”. Without giving him even two uninterrupted seconds to speak, Arnab pestered him about JNU student leader Umar Khalid’s presence at a rally held in Pune on December 31.

Prakash kept saying he was not the organizer of the rally, but Arnab would hear none of it. Annoyed, Prakash left the debate, and *Republic TV* ran the hashtag #StopCastePolitics.



While completely ignoring the attack on Dalits, Arnab and *Aaj Tak* anchor Rohit Sardana put the blame on Congress president Rahul Gandhi, Khalid and Gujarat MLA Jignesh Mevani for the January 1 attack. Not even for a minute were Sambhaji Bhide and Milind Ekbote – Hindutva leaders with links to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh – mentioned.



Republic TV's competitor Navika Kumar of *Times Now* was no different. She opened the January 2 debate by saying “Jignesh Mevani has brought caste politics from Gujarat to Maharashtra.

Why this violence 24 hours after his speech?” The channel ran the hashtag #IndiaAgainstHate. Navika too did not dwell on the January 1 attack on Dalits, and changed the narrative completely, although participants on her show such as Devashish Jarariaya tried to bring the focus back on Bhima Koregaon.

The bandh itself was covered by Marathi, Hindi and English channels as a “traffic problem” causing major inconvenience – like they do when covering rain in Mumbai. But they did not cover the police lathicharge that allegedly killed 14-year old Dalit boy Yogesh Jadhav in Nanded and seriously injured 3 others at Chembur, Mumbai.

Aaj Tak ran a programme “Protest over Pune violence, Dabbawala service suspended in Mumbai”. *NDTV reported*, “during Maharashtra Bandh, Dalit protesters block trains, buses in Mumbai”. The report mentioned an FIR against Mevani and Khalid but did not mention an FIR being lodged against Ekbote and Bhide.

The coverage and images flashing on TV screens only helped in creating negative sentiments against the Dalit community for causing a “disruption”.

Very few of the media houses touched upon the cause of the bandh. In *Mumbai Mirror*, Alka Dhupkar wrote “this time, Bhide and Ekbote have ranged the Hindutva forces against the Dalits in the state. They achieved this by desecrating the samadhi of a Mahar named Govind Gaikwad who is credited with performing Shivaji Maharaj’s son Sambhajiraje Bhosale’s funeral when nobody else would touch the body as it could have invited the Mughals’ wrath.”

With so much material available, it’s surprising why TV channels chose not to discuss roles of Bhide and Ekbote.

❖ Channels exonerate CM

Maharashtra CM Devendra Fadnavis handles the home portfolio but since he has become the chief minister, his record has been abysmal as far as law and order are concerned. This writer wrote an article in *Newslandry* last December on the increasing violence on Dalits in the state – be it in Nashik or Satara – with no punishment or arrest of culprits. To add to Dalit resentment, a sessions court in Ahmednagar recently **acquitted** all accused in the murder of Dalit youth Nitin Age, despite the fact that he was killed in broad daylight in front of everyone. The police and local administration could not even gather evidence as witnesses turned hostile.

During discussions on the Bhima Koregaon violence, TV channels and anchors could have at least made an attempt to dissect these issues and brought to light cases of Dalit atrocity in Maharashtra, but they confined their coverage to the Maharashtra protests, calling them “Clash of Castes”.

Our Prime Minister who is prompt in tweeting about the municipal elections and gives ample time to movie stars for their film promotion, did not tweet once while Dalits were being attacked. Even when pictures emerged showing Modi and Fadnavis with the alleged violence masterminds Bhide and Ekbote, it did not become breaking news.

❖ The faceless protesters

Most of the TV media did not deem it necessary to talk to any of the protesters during the bandh. Dalit women were out in large numbers to agitate but one did not see reporters rushing to them, asking them about their grievances.

As the bandh ended in the evening, many protests were peaceful and not disruptive. Sanjana, who lives in Andheri, took pictures of the protesters and tweeted: “Women Children Sloganeering, No violence, no stone-pelting, just people exercising their rights.”



Sanjan @sanjanaa · 20h

this was a protest outside our home in andheri (w). women. children. sloganeering. no violence. no stone-pelting. just people exerting their rights.



Why is it that such voices and faces escaped TV media's attention? Overall, it appears that not much has changed in the coverage of protests by Dalits, which are used as a last resort to demand justice at a time when the police, administration and judiciary have failed them.

The police have always been extremely harsh on assertive Dalits. In Maharashtra itself, exactly 20 years ago in 1997, when the police killed 10 unarmed Dalits protesting against the desecration of a statue, the media had blamed the protesters, believing the police version that a mob was out to set an LPG tanker on fire.

A judicial inquiry by Justice Gundewar had found the police version incorrect and inspector Manohar Kadam was sent to life imprisonment that he never served.

In 2006, after Dalits hit the streets in outrage against the gruesome rape and murder of a Dalit family in Khairlanji, Maharashtra, many in Big Media criticised the community for disrupting traffic and normal life, without even dwelling on the Khairlanji case. On the other hand, the police unleashed a series of atrocious cases on the protesting Dalits and locked them up indiscriminately.

Note that this is in stark contrast to how many sections of the media reported on the recent Karni Sena and Rajput protests. TV debates gave ample air time to the protesting Rajputs and lent them a patient ear: they were allowed to elaborate on their “hurt sentiments”, wield swords in TV studios and humoured unlike any of the Dalit protesters in this case.

It is no one’s case that the media does not speak of the violence during protests or speaks of the unruly elements that burnt buses or destroyed property, but surely it could have done more than just present that as the sole reality without putting the protests and their cause in context.

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