

***Khabar Lahariya*: A Feminist Critique of Mainstream Hindi Print Media**

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Abstract

The Hindi media is rapidly expanding its market in Hindi heartland of India. Hindi newspapers are increasing their readership in areas of the Hindi-speaking belt. In contrast to this scenario there is a rural newspaper called '*Khabar Lahariya*', which is paving its own way against the mainstream Hindi print media. It is a weekly newspaper in the local language -Bundeli and is run completely by women from Dalit, Muslim, and lower caste communities. This newspaper was started in 2002 in the Chitrakoot district of Uttar Pradesh, India. *Khabar Lahariya* employs neo-literate and semi-literate journalists and many of them have been working for the newspapers since it started.

This paper is an attempt to analyse *Khabar Lahariya* as a feminist critique of mainstream Hindi media hegemony. It tries to understand the women working with *Khabar Lahariya* and their struggles against the rural-patriarchal society. It reflects on the under discussed and ignored issue of family versus work. My research suggests that *Khabar Lahariya*, this completely women-run newspaper, embodies an inclusive work-culture that is not sexist or masculinist. I reflect on the relationship between women journalists and their location in the media amidst existing choices in market-driven media hegemony. *Khabar Lahariya*'s work challenges the existing division of labour in mainstream media where newsrooms tend to be upper caste and male dominated. Since it is published in local languages, *Khabar Lahariya* also breaks the language hegemony of mainstream Hindi media.

This paper explores the personal journeys of women journalists in *Khabar Lahariya* drawing on my experience while working on a project with a non-profit organisation called 'Point of View'. As a project coordinator, I worked closely with *Khabar Lahariya*

team members. It is an attempt to convert my field experience into an academic contribution towards feminist media analysis.

Keywords: *khabar labariya*, *bundeli*, mainstream hindi media, feminist critique, hegemony.

Introduction

Running a newspaper is an economic activity. Newspapers are a medium having a certain structure for the dissemination of information. The Hindi media is expanding into the Hindi heartland with efforts to increase its reach and access. The more corporate a newspaper, the more power it has to negotiate a profit. Sevanti Ninan (2007) writes that

The decade of the 1990s saw the convergence of many changes in the country and in the Hindi belt, which transformed the print media landscape. Literacy, which had been low in the region, grew rapidly, as reflected in the dramatic increase recorded by the 2001 Census. [...] Rising farm incomes and a growing service sector in rural areas pointed to the emergence of a rural middle class whose purchasing power had made newspaper affordable. It was targeted by marketers who underwrote the expansion of newspapers in these parts. The market in small town and rural India was expanding (Ninan 2007: 14-15).

Amidst all these transformation of the mainstream Hindi print media some interesting new 'print-spaces' in the rural areas have been largely ignored. One such intervention is *Khabar Lahariya* (KL), a rural newspaper that seeks to reflect on the realities of rural society.

Khabar Lahariya is a weekly newspaper that started in 2002 from Chitrakoot district of Uttar Pradesh. The first edition was in the local language, Bundeli. Currently, it has six editions; one each from Chitrakoot, Banda, Mahoba, Banaras, Faizabad in Uttar Pradesh, and Sitamarhi in Bihar. The newspaper is printed in four local languages, namely Budeli, Bajjika, Bhojpuri and Awadhi. There is also an online edition where English translations are made available. The use of local languages for the KL editions is an attempt to highlight the local rural issues and problems like the lack of infrastructure in the villages, water scarcity, veterinary issues and health facilities, and local administrative issues such as scams and crime.

KL consists of eight pages with seven sections covering news on the Village, the Town, Women Issues, Regional News, National-International News, Entertainment, and Editorial. It is the only newspaper that covers issues from rural areas that are usually ignored by mainstream print media. KL has launched its online edition (<http://khabarlahariya.org/>)¹. This is an achievement as it allows for a rural local language newspaper to have an online presence thus giving it world-wide access and visibility.

KL is run completely by women from the Muslim community and lower castes, many of whom are neo-literate and semi-literate journalists and some of whom have been working for the newspaper since its inception. Over the past decade, this all-women team has been challenging the stereotyped roles of women in rural areas by creating their own media. This is a unique example of feminist intervention at this level. This newspaper gives a challenge to the existing patterns of media ownership; which is largely controlled and regulated by men.

Background of *Khabar Lahariya*

In 2002, Nirantar² a Delhi based NGO took the initiative to start a ‘completely-rural-newspaper.’ They called it ‘*Khabar Lahariya* (KL)’, which means spreading waves of news and information, in Bundeli—the language of the first edition of the newspaper. Nirantar, as a feminist organisation took the lead in democratising rural communication to start *Khabar Lahariya* in Chitrakoot in 2002. Nirantar has been encouraging and conducting the training of the women as journalists; improving their literacy skills and honing their reporting abilities. This training involves news-collection, dealing with public figures, news-sources and improving their editing skills. Now *Khabar Lahariya* is a well- established rural-newspaper with a reputation that it has earned over time.

Khabar Lahariya was the kind of breakthrough that happens only every once in a while, when many streams of thought and action come together in constructive, inspired fusion. Unlike other media products,

¹ *Khabar Lahariya* website having all the KL editions in different languages.

² Nirantar is Delhi-based feminist organisation that works towards enabling empowering education, especially for girls and women from marginalised communities. It promotes transformatory formal and non-formal learning processes, which enable the marginalised to better understand and address their realities. Nirantar has been actively involved with the women’s movement and other democratic rights movements since its inception in 1993.

Khabar Lahariya was not guided by commercial interests, nor launched by a large media company as part of its rural outreach strategy. But the paper like all other before and since did have an agenda: to empower the people of rural Chitrakoot, to give them a voice, to strengthen their fragile literacy skills and give them power to construct their own words. It was the product of an ideology, at the core of which lay the values of feminism, equality and justice for the most marginalized, the twice disenfranchised, the rural poor, the Dalits, the women (Naqvi 2007: 21).

The team of KL journalists exhibit a more inclusive work culture challenging the upper-caste controlled mainstream media where the number of women journalists is low.

Methodology

I was appointed Project Coordinator with a non-profit organisation called ‘Point of View’ (POV)³ situated in Mumbai, India. While working as project coordinator on the *Khabar Lahariya* - Information, Communication, and Technology (ICT) project, I got to know *Khabar Lahariya* from the inside. This work is based on my observations and conversations with the *Khabar Lahariya* journalists during their Information, Communication, and Technology (ICT) workshops learning process. To some extent, imparting ICT training to the journalists gave me some insights into their work culture and enthusiasm to learn new things. This paper is based on my work experience and is an attempt to convert it into an academic contribution towards feminist media analysis.

This paper uses a qualitative approach to understand the *Khabar Lahariya* journalists’ location in personal and professional media space. Apart from this, it takes the help of secondary literature and certain resource materials of ‘Point of View’.

An Exploration of Mainstream Hindi Media Hegemony versus *Khabar Lahariya*

Recently the Hindi heartland is experiencing a major media expansion targeting maximum profit from Hindi-readers. “As a result of the increased literacy, improved communication and rising rural incomes, as well as aggressive marketing strategies adopted by publishers, newspapers penetration in the Hindi belt increased” (Ninan, 2007:15).

³ Point of View is a Mumbai-based non-profit platform that brings the points of view of women into community, social, cultural and public domains through media, art and culture. Point of View was started in Bombay, India, in November 1997. It amplifies the voices of women and removes barriers to free speech and expression. Our work straddles multiple forms of media, art and culture, both online and offline.

Ninan (2007: 113) writes that:

Newspaper expansion and the localisation had many colourful consequences for daily journalism in the Hindi heartland. It created a genre of news which did not exist before in this region, and a new breed of news gatherer. As urban and rural local self-governance took root in India, as local-communities become more vocal and more conscious of their rights, as local commercial interest came forward to make viable the publications that could engender such a space, its emergence became inevitable (Ninan 2007: 113).

Today, cities are witnessing the growth of an urban-mall-culture, which has a direct relationship with the advertisement and revenue generating systems of newspapers. In the Hindi heartland, the news content gives more space to commercial interests and rural coverage is sidelined.

Khabar Lahariya editions seem to have content that addresses rural lives and issues of interest to them. Since local-rural news and issues are in focus, people are more aware and interested to read the newspaper. Here, women deliver the news-content in language that is more inclusive and eschews the stereotyped-male vocabulary. Thus, KL journalists challenge the sexist and male-constructed language of mainstream Hindi print media that neglects women's perspectives in its language. KL brings women's perspectives and their language of experiences in rural patriarchal society, having a specific socio-cultural contextual meaning. The following are some examples of headlines from KL: "What is the point of institutional deliveries" (July 22, 2014) – this headline talks about the failure of the Janani Suraksha Yojana under the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM). A woman who chooses to deliver in a government health centre, is supposed to receive an incentive of Rs. 1400, but in some cases beneficiaries did not receive their incentives despite choosing institutional deliveries. Other examples of headlines include "Black Out in Chobepur Bazar: Power Supply at Three Hours a Day" (July 28, 2014), "What Do The Poor Do In Time of Inflation" (August 4, 2014), "Post Pregnancy Death Leads to Protests in Banda, FIR filed" (August 25, 2014), "2 Pregnant Women Burnt for Dowry" (September 1, 2014), "Dalit Women Beaten Up by High Caste Neighbour" (September 15, 2014), and "They Threatened Us to Agree to a Compromise" (September 16, 2014). The last mentioned news story is about incidents of gender and caste-based violence where women were raped and asked to withdraw the case. All these headlines highlight the nature of local problems and issues in these rural areas. The women journalists bring out these issues, which demonstrate that each news article has a gender aspect, and focuses on marginalised sections. This kind of news remains overlooked in mainstream media.

Being a weekly newspaper *Khabar Lahariya* cannot be compared with the other Hindi-language daily newspapers. However, it must be acknowledged that it has all the potential to challenge the market-driven mainstream Hindi media. KL has introduced seriousness for rural issues that did not exist earlier in the region. A fact that cannot be ignored is that KL is really making progress entering into the male-dominated media market strategies and breaking the glass ceiling. Media strategies are designed to gain profit following the corporate model focusing more on advertisement and revenue generation. KL has emerged as an alternative model that focuses more on the quality of the content rather than attracting profits.

Khabar Lahariya aims to promote gender equality, rural development, and women empowerment, which are interlinked with mainstream politics. KL publishes a 'special issue', which is dedicated to one theme covering different special stories on Women, Travel, Election, Health, Water and issues relevant to current affairs. Previous special issues included one on the situation after the Muzzaffar Nagar riots (*September 15, 2014*) and others on themes such as the Elections, Media, Travel, Technology, the Monsoons, and Food. The emergence and existence of *Khabar Lahariya* paradoxically both reflects and undermines the gender gaps in media practice through systematic discrimination in rural society of north India.

Modern Communication Technology and New Media Empowering *Khabar Lahariya* Journalists

The team members of *Khabar Lahariya* try to make KL journalists confident on a personal level too. While being part of the newspaper they are capable enough to deal with the struggles and challenges of personal life. Many of the team members who are from small villages and towns shared their experiences with a sense of being empowered.

Chhoti Meera, a journalist working with *Khabar Lahariya*, says that her two daughters enjoy working on the computer because they see her do so. She said that she too had a keen desire to learn computers ever since she joined KL but was initially afraid of even touching one. She mentioned that while working with KL she feels empowered by the fact that she is running her family and has her own earned identity. Being outside of home for work and getting to know the outer world has brought about a positive change in her. Chhoti Meera shared that she did not ever think of becoming a journalist but she always wanted to be a self-reliant woman.

Another rural journalist working with *Khabar Lahariya* got an opportunity to learn computers properly only when she joined the newspaper. She mentioned that she also tried to learn from a

training centre but only learnt how to turn the computer on and off. She admits that she does not know English well, which makes it difficult to learn computers but she has picked up typing well.

A long time after its inception, it was decided that *Khabar Labariya* should be made available online to expand its reach and access. Journalists were given training to understand new media. Many of the journalists who were not tech-savvy found it very exciting and helpful in their work for newsgathering and sharing news.

It was a completely new experience for them to learn about new media particularly the use of search engines, mailing, blogging, Twitter and Facebook for their work as well as for their own personal use. Moreover, they now understand that it is a versatile platform to promote their newspaper. It is interesting to see how these rural women are using new media to write their own history of their commendable work.

This introduction to new media gave them more access to the world of information. It gave them access to a wide range of knowledge and information available online, which they intend to use for their professional growth and to improve their performance. The journalists learnt about feminist blogs available in Hindi.

They demonstrated that they had learnt to use the Internet well by accessing information through government web portals and official websites. One KL journalist expressed the view that it was good to know about the wide range of things available and that things are changing at fast pace. It indicates a divide in mainstream media and a rural newspaper in terms of having resources and material support. This brings out the stark reality of the market, where resources are controlled by the powerful.

Khabar Labariya actualises the need to highlight the local-rural issues. Here I would like to argue that the training the KL journalists in the use of communication technology and new media can cultivate their skills but it does not make them aware of their location as a woman in rural patriarchy. KL women have been trying bravely to set a new example of a rural-professional woman. However they face criticisms and are expected to prove themselves more on the personal front since a woman leaving the home is not easily accepted in rural society. When they visit their respective native places they are expected to dress traditionally, wear marriage symbols and abide by the accepted norms and values, which shows another side of these women. Though

the KL women are economically independent, they find it difficult to exercise their freedom and choice in the rural social surroundings.

Women Journalists' Life and Experiences Working with KL

It is interesting to see the personal and professional journey of the women associated with *Khabar Lahariya* who have also shown great capacity to learn. Sunita, a KL rural journalist, who belongs to Banda, walks long distances to reach far-flung places to collect news stories. Many small villages do not have roads, transportation, and connectivity, yet she covers the distance on foot to gather news. KL journalists show great dedication to the newspaper, taking risks to cover news stories even in areas that are dacoit-infested and infamous for crime. She says that hardly any other newspaper journalist comes to cover these small villages so the question of covering women's issues does not even arise. This area is poverty-ridden and inhabited by scheduled tribes. Other journalists do not cover these issues and problems or ask to be paid to get the news published.

Another journalist Shyamkali, who also hails from Banda shared that prior to becoming a journalist at KL she was afraid to take up this profession, but after having spent some time as a journalist, she has learnt how to voice issues and deal with people. She expressed the feeling that she could never have imagined becoming a journalist but now, she does not give up easily and she no longer thinks that being a woman prevents her from taking up any job.

Shivdevi, while working with KL bought herself a piece of land. It gives her a sense of ownership and power. She has been associated with KL since before its inception. She continued studying even after delivering her baby and continued her efforts to be economically independent. Shivdevi revealed that earlier she was not aware of 'women's issues' and what those meant. She said that it used to be a challenging task to go to officials and talk to them. While working with KL she developed her understanding of her own rights and as a result about women's issues more broadly. Working as a journalist for the area gave her confidence. She shares, with pride, that because of KL she was able to buy property, which made her feel empowered. Shivdevi mentions that this job allowed her to know more about her own small district with regard to its geographical location in relation to the rest of India.

Another KL journalist who is good at newspaper distribution in villages, is confident enough to reach out to new places. While selling the newspaper to new places she informs people about

KL. She takes pride in this work of distributing newspapers. She strongly feels that KL has changed her life and gave her freedom and economic independence.

Fieldwork has given these rural journalists strength and exposure to their own surroundings. In a social context where women and their mobility is strictly controlled by men, it is an achievement for these women journalists to talk to the *Pradhan*, the head of the village. This is an example of how these journalists, belonging to lower castes, challenge the hierarchy of the male-dominated and patriarchal society to which they belong.

Each journalist appreciates being associated with *Khabar Lahariya*. A young rural journalist says that it is common to see men working in every field but women are seen less. *Khabar Lahariya* women are developing new approaches to local feminism to negotiate their own set of struggles. Most of the women working with KL have faced bitter experiences and struggles in their personal life and many have had to suffer because they were not educated and independent. However, *Khabar Lahariya* proved them capable, and strong enough to deal with personal life too.

I need to emphasise here, the subjective understanding of the development and empowerment of these socio-economically weaker rural women through the KL newspaper, in the context of the rampant patriarchy of North Indian villages. The word ‘empowerment’ has real application here, which is working with an impact to challenge the rural patriarchy. Does the economic independence really make them stronger against the rural patriarchy? Or are they merely considered as another earning member who can manage both the home and their journalistic work, at the same time? Empowerment remains limited unless women are free to take their own decisions regarding household work. The situation for most of the KL women journalists is that they are still expected to prioritise household work over their journalistic work.

Breaking down the Dominant Social-Cultural Order in the Workplace

The interesting fact about KL is that it is an egalitarian workplace working against social and economic hierarchies. The workplace shows a great sense of understanding of employees’ skills and attempts to bringing out the best in them. The production meetings are full of work and fun, and keep the team in high spirits. Even the training workshops are fun learning experiences for the team members.

When new journalists join KL they learn from their seniors; be it legwork for newsgathering or distributing the newspaper. Many journalists working with KL shared that traveling and visiting new places has given them a great sense of confidence.

The KL work culture is in contrast to the ‘lobbying culture’ that is a reality of work place politics of the newsrooms. There is, therefore, every chance of power lobbying. Byerly and Ross (2006) write that

[...] newsroom culture that masquerades as a neutral “professional journalism ethos” is, for all practical and ideological purposes, organised around a man-as-norm and women-as-interloper structure. [...] The consequences for women who choose to work in the male-ordered domain, which is the newsroom are to develop strategies that involve either beating the boys at their own game or else developing alternative ways of practicing journalism (Byerly and Ross, 2006: 79)

In such a scenario the emergence and existence of KL demonstrates that it is possible to have a women-only space. Having all female colleagues makes the working environment very comfortable. The KL-team reflects sisterhood, breaking certain power-dynamics existing in other media organisations. Though the concept of sisterhood has been criticised on different grounds, showing the hierarchies within, it has been used by essentialist feminists to call for a women-only space. To my mind, the KL work culture is a successful method to challenge the mainstream media, which is reluctant to accept women as professionals. KL has made it possible to have an alternative workable model to run a newspaper having no men on the team.

Some KL journalists are very young; they are given a feminist orientation and understanding about themselves as women. They are taught how to deal with the many questions they are likely to be asked while conducting fieldwork in small villages and far-flung rural areas. In mainstream media, training of newcomers is intentionally gender-blind, where it is emphasised that ‘a journalist is journalist’ whether it is a man or woman. This profession conveniently disregards gender, perhaps assuming that the women taking up this profession are already empowered and therefore do not need to be identified as a woman anymore.

There is still a widespread assumption among many female journalists and feminists scholars that the news would change into new directions more relevant to women if only there were more female journalists. Two questionable issues are at the heart of this assumption: one is that journalists have sufficient

autonomy in day-to-day work to perform in a uniquely individual in gendered manner. However, there is ample of research that suggests the profession is organised such that different individuals will operate in much the same way, whether they are women or men. The second issue is that women journalists are distinguished more by their femininity than by any other dimension of identity, like professionalism or ethnicity, However, the contested and contradictory nature of gender has become common sense in most feminist theory, thus undermining any possibility of a definitively 'feminine' input to the news by female journalists (Van Zoonen, 1998: 34).

According to a government report of the National Commission for Women, sexual harassment is a part of the work culture in media organisations in India but women either do not know how or, for a wide variety of reasons, choose not to do anything about it. The report (Bhagat 2004) states,

Women in media are vulnerable to harassment from colleagues who come drunk for night shift and the night staff leaving pornographic pictures and messages on their computers. Making sexist, vulgar comments is common in the editorial room of newspapers as also so-called humorous or snide remarks on women colleagues' work. Most women hesitate to speak of sexual harassment, but are more than willing to speak of sexist remarks they are subjected to at workplace (Bhagat, 2004: 49).

This is the stark reality of sexual harassment in the newsrooms of mainstream media. However, to date, the KL workplace has had no issues of sexual harassment at the workplace as experienced by women journalists working with mainstream print media.

The KL workplace provides a healthy working environment and gives no space to 'sexist work culture'. The women journalists working with *Khabar Lahariya* are well aware of their rights and remain alert during fieldwork, as the field is an extension of their workplace. They are regularly encouraged to participate in gender-sensitisation and orientation workshops to fight against gender discrimination and sexual harassment. A journalist working with *Khabar Lahariya* shared her experience that initially while distributing newspapers in villages she sometimes faced ridiculing and sarcastic comments regarding her work. Another young journalist mentioned that she was often criticised for being a 'woman' journalist, since this was seen as job unfit for women as it requires being outside the home. She says, however, that now in some areas where people know *Khabar Lahariya*, they no longer verbally express their criticisms but still their gaze at KL women journalists expresses a lot. She adds that some people in villages show great respect for the newspaper and its work. *Khabar Lahariya* might not be a powerful profit-making

newspaper but it does have a strong egalitarian system with little or no power manipulation and especially no aggressive masculine style of work culture.

In a survey⁴ (2006) conducted in Delhi, the social background of 315 key decision makers of 37 Delhi based (Hindi and English) publications and television channels have been underlined. They are predominantly Hindu upper caste and male. Almost 90% of decision-makers in the English language print media and 79% in television are of the upper caste, although the upper castes are about 16% of the country's population; Brahmins alone constitute 49% of this segment, and 71% of the total are upper caste men. Not one of the 315 is a Dalit or an Adivasi. Only 4% are OBC, 3% are Muslims (13.4% of the country's population). Christians do better (4%) as a proportion of their population (2.3%). Women are vastly under represented, 17% of the total, although they do better (32%) in the English language electronic media. The diversity of the newsroom work force is rarely a topic of discussion, which has resulted in the social hierarchy being reproduced over time. *Khabar Lahariya's* work force composition challenges dominant social hierarchy by employing women from lower caste, scheduled tribes and the Muslim community, and representing women from these marginalised groups. These rural journalists are coming from socially excluded backgrounds and have been working while challenging these deeply rooted caste hierarchies.

Conclusion

In the preceding paragraphs I have tried to analyse *Khabar Lahariya* as a feminist critique of mainstream Hindi media and demonstrate its potential to challenge the hierarchies in the mainstream media. This paper reveals that *Khabar Lahariya* is developing an intersectional approach by bringing together women from different socio-economic backgrounds. *Khabar Lahariya* challenges the existing division of labour, based on dominant socio-cultural values where newsrooms are male-dominated, which is the 'de facto' in mainstream media. It also addresses issues that have been largely ignored, such as the issue of family versus work.

⁴ Upper Castes Dominate National Media (2006) a survey conducted in Delhi. The survey was designed and executed by Anil Chamaria, freelance journalist, Jitendra Kumar from the Media Study Group and Yogendra Yadav, senior fellow at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS).

This study shows that *Khabar Lahariya* is a challenge to the market-driven mainstream media and its homogenised content. It gives importance to rural issues that have been overlooked by the mainstream Hindi print media. The local dialect of the newspaper breaks the language hegemony in the region where Hindi language is used as an ideological tool for ruling elite. It also highlights the fact that if rural women, like those involved with KL, can run alternative feminist media then urban women journalists can also come forward to challenge mainstream media by creating their own feminist alternatives.

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