

## Human Rights and Contemporary Indian Journalism: Towards a “Journalism for People”

Gopalan Ravindran

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**I**N 2018, India remains an incredible nation, in its positive and negative planes of existence. In India, forces of modernity are struggling to make their presence felt in the face of the continued supremacy of the forces of tradition. In contemporary India, forces of feudalism are working overtime to prevent the forces of progress and development to succeed. This peculiar condition of a nation that prides itself as the largest democracy also makes it a land of a million inequalities. Inequalities are the antithesis of the fundamental rights guaranteed in the Indian Constitution. How to grapple with this situation where a modern nation is also unable to work against the forces which seek to make it either less modern or more feudal, at least, in terms of ideas? How to facilitate media and society interfaces, particularly the site of journalism, in this task? Is there a way ahead, at least from the perspective of a journalism teacher/professor? These are the questions the present article focuses on to provide an understanding of the state of affairs concerning the domains of Indian journalism, journalism education/training and human rights.

Indian journalism, like the nation, remains a peculiar entity. One needs to look at this institution critically. There is a dire need to look critically at human rights, fundamental rights and how they are promoted or not promoted by the supposedly democratic pillars of a modern state. It is obvious that if we want to change something like our society or nation, firstly, we must come clean in our individual roles as family members, citizens and public servants.

In 2018, there is no single site of contestations against modernity and progress; there are many hidden sites which make social, cultural, political and economic progress problematic. One of the sites, which collaborates with the site of politics in rendering the meaning of progress and development of a modern state like India problematic and challenging, is Indian journalism. Like the Indian society, Indian journalism is a feudalistic enterprise and anti-modern, despite its use of modern media technologies

in print, television, radio, internet, mobile phone, and other mediums and its origins in the Western/colonial contexts. This may be read as a harsh comment, but if one gets to engage with contemporary Indian journalism's engagements or lack of it with the issues of social inequalities and human rights violations, even without the help of scientific tools of research such as content analysis, one would be shocked to realize the role of Indian journalism as a promoter of social inequalities and human rights violations.

We are a nation where hype scores and scores more even as truth becomes hidden, but does not get erased or buried for long. For instance, any one who reads India's English newspapers or watches its television programs or films would get the impression that India is colorful, modern, progressing and "incredible," as the nation's tourism slogan proclaims. But this does not tell the entire story or truth. This does not tell the sufferings, agonies and suppression of its rural and urban poor or its marginalized communities or its women and children. Why? The answer is Indian media and journalism are as casteist as any other social institution and as corporatized as any other modern business enterprise. Indian media are owned by the upper castes and do not have on their payroll journalists from lower castes such as *Dalits* in any significant number. Moreover, Indian media/journalism is also a class enterprise, owned by the upper crust of the society and serviced for/by the middle class, against the marginalized and excluded classes of society. The feudal and class parameters of ownership of media promotes human rights violations and social inequalities.

This is not to deny the role of individual journalists working for Indian media or newspapers in promoting social equality, progress or human rights. They may be right thinking and responsible individuals. But they exist more as the helpless worker portrayed brilliantly by Charlie Chaplin in his 1936 film, *Modern Times*. They are caught in the crushing wheels of the social logic of Indian journalism (casteism), the political logic of supporting the party in power and the business logic of corporatization of journalism.

Every age gets its journalistic dues as well as its dues of inequalities and human rights. Every age also becomes instructive about what to do and what not to do in the sphere of journalism. What are the lessons for contemporary Indian journalism as regards human rights and the scope for its promotion through journalism.

When Indian journalism was born in the efforts of James Augustus Hicky, an Irishman, who was annoyed with the inequalities and violations

of human rights among the British living in Calcutta of 18<sup>th</sup> century, he was daring to go as a voice against Warren Hastings, the Governor General and his "corrupt" wife, Marian Hastings, through the medium of newspaper. His newspaper, *Hicky's Bengal Gazette* or *Calcutta General Advertiser*, started in January 1780, is normally cited as the first newspaper of India. *Bengal Gazette*, must be seen as the first ever attempt in India that used the medium of print to rebel against social inequality and human rights violations, even though both Hicky and Warren Hastings were fighting against each other, not as natives, but as British subjects of the East India Company's version of colonialism in India.

When Hicky started his newspaper, he had no direct conflict with the forces of corruption, his problems started when he was asked to pay bribe to the Governor General's wife for using the postal services to distribute his paper, in the face of what Hicky felt as the partisan attitude of East India Company officials to favor his rival newspaper, *The India Gazette*, which was started later. Hicky protested, ran a campaign against the inequality he suffered, worked against the violation of his right to free expression and the corruption in the establishment. He was jailed, but he continued to publish his paper from jail. His press was seized in 1782, forcing him to give up his right to express his views through the medium of print. He became poverty stricken after his release in 1784 and died en route to China in 1802.

What are the lessons here for contemporary Indian journalism and the sphere of human rights? Hicky's kind of journalism may be read as an ideal version where there was no source of inspiration other than his individual wish to fight corruption, secure his right to express freely and fight against inequality in the then East India Company social circles in Calcutta. There was no institutional framework for the first journalist of India. He was the *institution*. He was the moral arbiter. He was the reporter. He was the editor. He was the owner. He was the one-person army against public corruption made possible by the greed of the beneficiaries of the globalization of the East India Company's colonialism.

We cannot have Hickys today for obvious reasons. Contemporary Indian journalism is governed by its institutional framework where the likes of Hickys have no place. Because much water has flown down the decades and centuries since the fire of journalism was extinguished in steps and stages since the times of Hicky. The last time when Indian journalism was made to fight against the powers that be before extinguishing itself was during the

periods of India's national emergency (1975-1977) and the post-emergency period of 1980s. The 1990s and 2000s brought about the signs of death of journalism, as we knew it earlier, and ushered in the phase of corporatized and "journalism as a business only enterprise."

If one goes through the pages of the Indian newspapers and magazines published during 1970s and 1980s and compare them with that of contemporary pages of Indian journalism, one would realize the enormity of the crisis ushered in by the institution of journalism in collaboration with the forces of corporatized politics, lawmaking and judiciary. This means that all the four pillars of democracy are working against the spirit of the Indian Constitution which seeks to promote human rights as fundamental rights and fundamental rights as human rights. This is not a brazen comment again. One would agree with this comment, if one cares to examine the acts of these four pillars in the recent past.

### **Silence of Mainstream Media on Issues of the Marginalized**

In the pages of contemporary Indian newspapers there is silence that smacks of silence in funeral processions on matters where religious fundamentalism in the name of right-wing politics has taken a toll on the lives of the minorities, marginalized and the oppressed sections of Indian society. The conventional definition of who is a minority, marginalized and oppressed is thrown out in favor of a new liberal definition where the ruling block defines its versions of minorities, marginalized and the oppressed. Here is the case of an oppressor defining the site of its target, the oppressed. The oppressed becomes a non-subject in the corporatized discourses of Indian journalism. The oppressed are the people who are at the receiving end in the face of draconian and shortsighted policies of the current Indian government regarding *demonetization* (when on the night of 8 November 2016, the Indian government announced that 500 and 1,000 Indian Rupee notes were not valid any longer) and the start of *Aadhaar* card system, originally meant as a tool of proving a citizen's identity but progressed as a site of violation of privacy rights of citizens and a state surveillance system. The growing attacks on the food cultures of the majority as well as the minorities, by the cow vigilantes, is also a cause for concern, not for Indian media or its journalists, but for the activists and the families of the people who were/are killed in the name of

protection of cows as sacred animals by the workers of right-wing *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP) and its affiliates.

The conventional Western logic measures the relationship between human rights violations and the right to free expression by media in terms of the number of journalists who get killed in a country or the number of journalists who get arrested in a country. This article argues that we need to suspend this logic or avoid this logic in the Indian case, where the number of ordinary people who got killed in the wake of the failures of the pillars of the democracy are hundred/thousand times more than the number of journalists killed for the cause of protection of human rights, free speech and social inequality.

### **"Journalism for People" Project**

Let us move on with the possibilities of rescuing Indian journalism from its bed of death. One small step forward initiated in 2015 in University of Madras' Department of Journalism and Communication was the non-institutionalized project, "Journalism for People." This project seeks to put the minorities, marginalized and the oppressed back on the agenda of journalism as a people-driven framework, even as it seeks to strengthen the linkages between freedom of expression and human rights as integral domains of Indian journalism. This project seeks to cultivate an anti-thesis of Indian journalism which has erased the people from its domain and brought in political and corporate vested interests as the primary definers of news. This project seeks to leverage people as the definer of news and journalism.

This project also seeks to address the failures of the corporatized and alienated journalism. It is no secret that the mainstream media are not including ordinary people and their struggles in their news agenda. "Journalism for People" is conceptualized as an ideological and pragmatic counter to the contemporary trajectories of Indian journalism's multiple avatars - "Journalism for Corporates," "Journalism for the Middle Class," "Journalism for the Government" and "Journalism for Politicians."

At present, masters' students of journalism at the University of Madras are working with people and children of fifteen marginalized communities in Tamil Nadu to drive home the need for a people-centric journalistic and human rights approach to resolve their issues and express themselves, without depending on mainstream newspapers and media.

The “Journalism for People” project seeks to transform the children of marginalized people as future journalists. “Journalism for People” project hopes to help the children of marginalized people to become journalism students, journalists, film makers, poets, short story writers, novelists, photographers, artists etc., “Journalism for People” project will be a change agent for the future generations of the marginalized communities in Tamil Nadu. This project is driven by the passion of the members of the theater and folk arts group, *Muttram* (Courtyard), which seeks to leverage folk and theater arts for the cause of human rights awareness and people-centric journalistic practices. *Muttram* was established on 25 November 2009 as a “Class outside Class” to leverage the communication and journalistic skills of students through folk and theater arts, outside the framework of a time-table- and mark-driven journalism classroom.

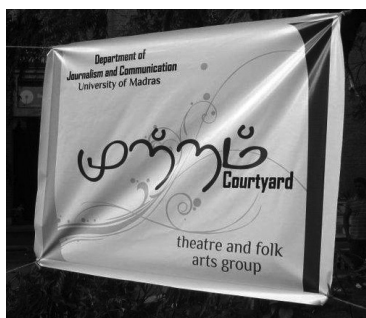


Photo shows *Muttram* members performing on 10 January 2018 during the harvest festival program with *Parai*, a leather drum associated with *Dalits*, which is being leveraged as a tool of empowerment against casteism by journalism students of the University of Madras in the courtyard of the university, which is normally used for parking cars.



"Journalism for People" is driven by the passion and commitment of a group of teachers and student volunteers of the Department of Journalism and Communication, University of Madras, who want to bring alive the journalistic and communication talents of the school children of marginalized communities in Tamil Nadu over a period of the next five years.

## **Workshops**

Muttram's first "Journalism for People" activity, the first field workshop, had good innings for three days during 15 – 17 September 2015 in the villages of the tribal people of Yelagiri, a picturesque hilly region on the Eastern Ghats in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu. Yelagiri is 228 kilometers from Chennai. There are fourteen villages in Yelagiri. We decided to embark on the first "Journalism for People" journey to Yelagiri for the reason that tribal people were the ones who figure high on the scale of marginalization as per the 2011 census, assuming literacy as one parameter of development. The literacy level of tribals in Tamil Nadu was 41.5 percent compared to the overall literacy level of 73.5 percent for Tamil Nadu. In a sense, as regards literacy, tribals in Tamil Nadu are marginalized or lagging behind other communities to the extent of 32.0 percent.<sup>1</sup> Illiteracy must be read as a barrier to human rights and people-centric journalism.

This figure supports our experience in the Department of Journalism and Communication with regard to the question of who enters the Masters' programs in journalism and communication at the University of Madras and who does not enter these programs. The ratio of tribal and non-tribal journalism students during the past five years defies computation as we have had only two tribal students from Tamil Nadu's thirty-six tribal communities (both from Eastern Ghats), one transgender and one student from Pazhaverkadu fishing region in comparison with scores of *Dalit* students, during the past five years. This is proof enough that marginalization has taken a toll on these communities as far as the prospects of higher education for the tribal children in Tamil Nadu is concerned.

This issue has not figured in any news story or editorial, to the best of our knowledge in the pages or airtime of Tamil/English newspapers and television channels in Tamil Nadu during the past five years. This is proof enough that the sphere of journalism in Tamil Nadu has failed to take notice of the backward state of the thirty-six tribal communities in Tamil Nadu

as regards literacy. This is also proof enough that their marginalized socio-economic realities are not seen as newsworthy by this sphere. Hence, these were reasons enough for the volunteers of the “Journalism for People” project to embark on the journey to transform the lives of the school children of Yelagiri villages as future journalists of their communities. They will be the change agents working with the tools of digital communication to work against the forces of marginalization in the years to come.

The members of Muttram employ street theater to create social awareness among adults and children in the communities where they have been conducting the “Journalism for People” workshops. Their plays also aim to cultivate and promote media literacy skills among children. For the past few years, the children of Karambai village (Tirunelveli district, Tamil Nadu) have been given orientation through street plays on the appropriate modes of engagements children should cultivate with media, media celebrities and mobile phones. The children and adults, more importantly, the local leaders of fisherfolk villages of Pazhaverkadu were made to introspect on the lives of the fisherfolk, particularly the womenfolk and youth, with the help of a street play titled, *Karuvadu* (Dry Fish). In Yelagiri, the village children were made to perform a street play in the village square on the threats to their education and their parents’ lives by the policies of the central government. In all these cases, the children showed themselves as keen observers and ended up pleading with the members of Muttram not to leave them and would normally walk a few kilometers to bid adieu. The adults, particularly elders, would request the Muttram members to do more. In one instance, the village leader of Karambai took a seven-hundred-kilometer journey to the University of Madras to thank the professor and the Muttram members for their work in the village.

The members of Muttram are likewise learning from the experience of staging theater plays in the communities. Ms Krithika Srinivasan, who acted as Karuppi has this to say about the influence of Muttram in her life. She said that “Only Muttram gave me social awareness. That’s where I could learn about casteism, feminism and the plight of the marginalized”. She was not a journalism student. She was a sociology major student, but was accepted as a member of Muttram, in tune with the principle behind Muttram. Muttram is the courtyard in traditional Tamil architecture, where there is no ceiling and all the elements of nature enter the house. The courtyard is surrounded by pathways, where members of the joint family used to pick conversations

even as the sun light, air, rain water and smells of nature entered the house. Unfortunately, traditional houses with Muttram are fast being replaced with modern houses in Tamil Nadu.



Ms Krithika Srinivasan, who acted as Karuppi, with other students (from left to right: Ms Yashini (II MA), Ms Karthikga (II MA) and Mr Salai (II MA))

### **Magazines and Other Results**

It was heartwarming to see thirty-five students of the Department of Journalism and Communication, University of Madras, training the tribal children of Yelagiri villages the basics of reporting and writing from the con-

finances of their villages and schools. The number of journals made possible by the enthusiastic filing of reports by the children of Yelagiri villages exceeded our initial target of five issues of magazines. The workshop also provided several interesting sessions for the masters students of journalism to practice their writing and reporting skills in the verdant settings of Yelagiri villages and introspect on human rights issues affecting the tribals. The school children of these villages were inspired by our teachers and student volunteers to discover their native creative talents in the areas of poetry, theater, photography and journalism. The visit also provided opportunities for our budding young scholars to map the communication/spatial practices of villagers in Yelagiri.

Street workshops use any available space in urban poor places near Chennai, as in this case, a sitting bench in a small shop, as these poor neighborhoods do not have the same spatial advantages as rural villages.





Sukumar (above) and Kavithran (below) are PhD students in marginalized neighborhood of University of Madras, Lock Nagar. They are teaching journalistic skills. Kavithran was the first student to enter the one hundred sixty-year old University of Madras from Lock Nagar.

Sukumar (above) and Kavithran (below) are PhD students in marginalized neighborhood of University of Madras, Lock Nagar in December 2017. They are teaching journalistic skills. Kavithran was the first student to enter the one hundred sixty-year old University of Madras from Lock Nagar.



Masters students of journalism with the children of Koraikuppam village, Pazhaverkadu, Tamil Nadu, in a “Journalism for People” workshop in 2017.

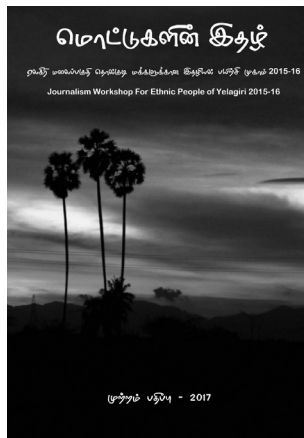
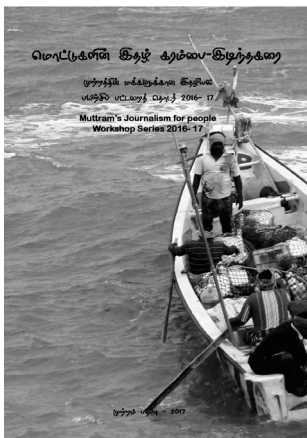




(Opposite page, below, and above). The "Journalism for People" Workshop at Yelagiri Tribal Villages, Tamil Nadu in 2017.

The magazines brought out by the school children, with the support of the members of Muttram, are of two kinds: i) handwritten magazines; and ii) printed magazines. The former are released at the end of the "Journalism for People" workshops in the villages and the latter are the result of compilation, editing and printing of content that appeared in the handwritten versions. The content of these magazines reflect the children's views on issues regarding politics, elections, environment, family and, more importantly, their love for their villages. The drawings and photographs of the children are included in the magazines. In Idinthakarai, a fisherfolk village (Tirunelveli district, Tamil Nadu) that has been witnessing long running people's protests against a mega nuclear project at Kudankulam, which is within its neighborhood, the children's expressions in the printed magazine are mostly focused on the threats to their health and environment from the nuclear plant. In Karambai, a farmers' village (Tirunelveli district, Tamil Nadu), the children are more concerned about the drying up of village ponds and wells and water scarcity. Some of them are also appealing to their readers seeking financial support to help them continue their studies. For instance, the first page of the Karambai magazine has a note from A Suresh,

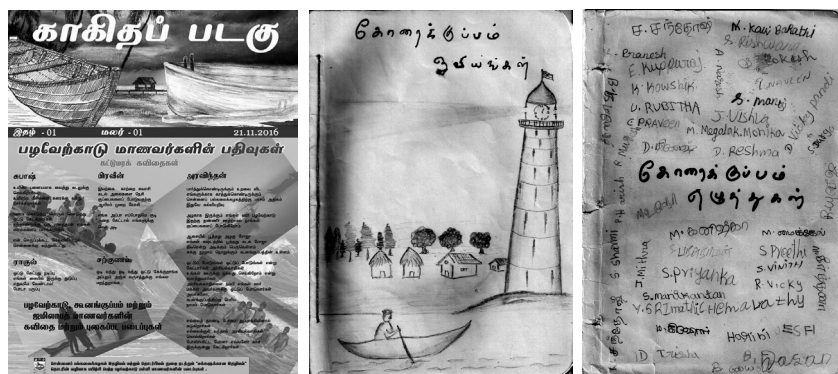
Std. V, “My father died after he was hit by a falling fertilizer bag. My mother is working as a daily wage earner. We are four in the family. Please help us to



The covers of magazines brought out during the “Journalism for People” Workshop at Yelagiri Tribal Villages, Tamil Nadu. The first cover is titled “I am longing to become a Bird.

study. Please ...” In Yelagiri, children are evocative in relating to the beauty of their hilly environment.

In Pazhaverkadu, children of the fisherfolk are more politically aware and, like the children in other regions, are more concerned about their environment. The wall newspaper, *Paper Boat*, brought out by the children of Kunamkuppam village, Pazhaverkadu, Tamil Nadu on 21 November 2016 has hard hitting poetic content against electoral politics, particularly the deceptive acts by politicians against the poor. It included a poem by Rahul: “Seeking votes is acting. We have our oars. We do not want anything from



The wall newspaper, *Paper Boat* (left), brought out by the children of Kunamkuppam village, Pazhaverkadu, Tamil Nadu. The magazine, *Koraikuppam Letters and Art* (center and right), brought out by the children of Koraikuppam village, Pazhaverkadu, Tamil Nadu. The names of the children can be seen on the second cover.

you. Get Lost!” The children of Koraikuppam village, Pazhaverkadu, Tamil Nadu brought out the magazine, *Koraikuppam Letters and Art*, in 2017.

Close on the heels of the successful “Journalism for People” field work in the villages of Yelagiri, members of Muttram decided to work with children of the fisherfolk communities in Pazhaverkadu/Pulicat region, sixty kilometers north of Chennai. They have been working with the students of Kunamkuppam, Koraikuppam and Jameelabad villages, three of the more than thirty fisherfolk villages in the historic town of Pazhaverkadu/Pulicat. Pulicat figures in the work of *Ptolemy* as the ancient port and became famous when the Dutch set-up their trade post in this ancient port town in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. *Pulicat checks/Madras checks* became the prized textile export by the Dutch from Pulicat during their heydays of trade.

For nearly three months since 20 February 2016, every Saturday, members of Muttram were engaged in a workshop with a very meaningful format - teaching journalistic/communication skills to school children of Kunamkuppam, Koraiuppam and Jameelabad and instilling in them the need to continue their studies beyond school level. Muttram volunteers continued their workshop routines and field visits until 8 April 2016. Nearly fifty children were nurtured by the members of Muttram to discover their native talents (literary, visual, spoken, dramatic, etc.) through the media of poetry, photography, videography, short stories, storytelling, etc. The members of Muttram added areas from the marginalized neighborhoods of Chennai during 2017 for their field work.

### **Concluding Statement**

The “Journalism for People” project is not only teaching journalism skills to the school children, but also creating human rights awareness with the hope that the next generation of Indian journalists would be more caring and concerned about the social inequalities and human rights violations in India and the failures of corporatized Indian journalism in addressing the same. This project believes that we cannot change the current crop of journalists and journalism. This initiative believes that we can change the mindset of the future practitioners of journalism and promoters of human rights.

### **Endnote**

<sup>1</sup> The gap in literacy rate between general population and tribal population as per 2011 census is available at the site of Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India at <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=85918>.