

## Empowering Marginalized Communities through Digital Media: A Case Study of the "Bai Manus" Platform in Maharashtra, India

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### ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to explore the role of a digital platform, "Bai Manus", located in Maharashtra, India, in empowering marginalized communities. The articles carried from July 2023 to July 2024 were subjected to qualitative content analysis with themes of voice and representation, advocacy for social change, and cultural preservation. The findings convey that the reporters from diversity sectors, more precisely from the works of women, tribal communities, Dalits, nomads, and LGBTQAI+, raise voices at large. It identifies a potential role for digital media in increasing visibility, bringing social change, and preserving cultural heritage, while pointing out challenges related to sustainability and equitable access.

*Keywords: Digital Media, Marginalized Communities, Empowerment, Indigenous Journalism, Cultural Preservation*

### I. Introduction

#### A. Overview of "Bai Manus" Platform

"Bai Manus" is a digital media platform set up to increase the voices of women from multiple marginalized communities residing in Maharashtra, India, including Dalits, Adivasis, nomads, and others. It was established by senior journalist Prashant Pawar and the College of Journalism and Mass Communication of MGM University. Their concern lies in countering the underrepresentation and misrepresentation of these communities in the mainstream media, overlooking their stories and struggles. "Bai Manus" looks to take the creation and dissemination of content with respect to routine and issues concerning these women to a higher level of communication facilities. It is through this participatory media approach that women from the most marginalized backgrounds get the opportunity to give their narratives, hence content representing reality through lived experiences (Couldry, 2012). Through videos, articles, and blogs, "Bai Manus" opens up a platform for the aforementioned women to share their stories but also challenges the dominant media narratives that often make them marginal.

## B. Significance of Indigenous Journalism and Digital Media

Indigenous journalism has a very significant role in the preservation and promotion of the rich cultural heritage of indigenous and marginalized communities, at the same time offering a counter-narrative to the mainstream media portrayals. Traditional media often fails to present these communities appropriately, thereby fulfilling their stereotype calling and in the end adding to their marginalization. It is indigenous journalism that corrects this by producing content created by and for these communities, ensuring that stories are told accurately and respectfully (Ginsburg, 2008; Dreher, McCallum, & Waller, 2016). Digital media democratized its use and opened access to information for all, thereby decentralizing journalism and causing new platforms to open for the marginalized communities to share their stories (Couldry, 2012). Given the existence of the internet and mobile technologies, these communities have bypassed traditional media gatekeepers and are now able to find a global audience (Wilson, 2008). Platforms such as "Bai Manus" show the great potential that digital media has for giving marginalized voices a platform, with interactive elements that help engage and build communities in the process of participation. Indigenous media serves as a powerful tool for advocacy and representation, reflecting similar trends observed in the 'Bai Manus' platform's coverage of marginalized communities (Molnar, 1995). This junction of digital media and indigenous journalism is one with huge ramifications for social justice and empowerment. By being a platform for underrepresented voices, digital media afford higher visibility and offer potential for greater awareness and understanding of indigenous issues that inform public policy and attitudes (Rennie et al., 2016). Moreover, it empowers people and gives them control over their stories, offering opportunities for economic development through the media production and content creation processes (Dreher, McCallum, & Waller, 2016).

## C. Research Questions and Objectives:

Media framing plays a critical role in shaping public perceptions of social issues (Entman, 1993). The main concerns of this paper are to seek the answers to the following questions: how does the "Bai Manus" platform contribute towards women empowerment among the marginalized in Maharashtra? And secondly, what role is played by digital media in shaping the representation of these communities? The objectives of the study are: to examine how effectively "Bai Manus" has provided a voice to women who have been otherwise marginalized, to analyze the content produced on this platform, and to understand the broader implications of digital media in indigenous journalism.

## D. Significance of the Study

The rise of digital media has significantly transformed how information is disseminated and consumed. The digital age presents new opportunities and challenges for media platforms, which is crucial for understanding the impact of platforms like 'Bai Manus' (Ginsburg, 2008). "Bai Manus" represents the best example of how digital media can become such a radical tool for indigenous journalism. For though it gives a voice to the marginalized women of the state of Maharashtra, it strikes at dominant stereotypes and furthers cultural preservation with social empowerment. This paper analyses how such platforms affect indigenous people and add to large discourses on media representation and empowerment.

# II. Literature Review

## A. Indigenous Journalism in India

Indigenous journalism in India has remained to be a fairly important tool for the survival and raising of indigenous cultures and voices. Historically, mainstream media in India mostly neglected or misrepresented indigenous issues, perpetuating low visibility and understanding of these communities in the national populous. Indigenous journalism aims to fill this gap through appropriate platforms where voices from the indigenous communities could be heard and their stories be told from their standpoint.

The arrival of indigenous journalism in India has been through grassroots organization of community media initiatives. Efforts that empower indigenous populations through training in journalism and media production, giving them an opportunity to document and share their experiences and cultural heritage, have been undertaken. This will not only preserve indigenous knowledge but also challenge hegemonic discourse when often these communities had been at the receiving end of such marginalization (Couldry, 2012).

The role that indigenous journalism has played in advocating for indigenous people's rights in India has been very vital. Indigenous journalists brought land rights, environmental justice, cultural preservation, and other related issues to the limelight, contributing to higher awareness and changes in policy (Rennie et al., 2016). The impact of these efforts underscores the importance of support and expansion of indigenous media initiatives within the country (Wilson & Stewart, 2008).

Comparative studies on indigenous journalism from other regions, such as Latin America and North America, evidence its very substantial role in community empowerment and cultural preservation (Ginsburg, 2008). Indigenous media plays an important role in Latin America in the political process of mobilization, especially in resistance to oppression. These comparative insights put a premium on indigenous journalism as it resonates globally in advancing social justice and cultural resilience (Kirmayer et al., 2011).

## B. Digital Media and Empowerment

The digital media have changed the way journalism, especially in regard to peripheral groups, happens. Digital media is an easily accessible and affordable channel through which peripheral groups can voice their feelings, share their stories, and raise their concerns about their rights (Couldry, 2012). Digital media are also more interactive; hence, there is an increase in participation and community engagement, both very instrumental in the empowerment of marginalized voices.

Digital media has been central in the past decade in giving voice to indigenous peoples. Blogs, social media, and independent news websites today can act as vehicles for indigenous journalists to tell their own stories and bypass traditional media gatekeepers to reach an international audience. Indeed, what this means is the democratization of media production and distribution, leading to greater variety and diversity of media that represent indigenous experiences and stories.

Moreover, digital media has opened up new opportunities for indigenous communities in terms of economic empowerment. Indigenous journalists and media producers can engage in the creation and commercialization of digital content to generate revenues that can be used to build a media business or other type of enterprise. This kind of economic empowerment reinforces social empowerment by giving more control over narratives and representation in the media to indigenous people.

Case studies from different regions underscore the potentials for transformation that exist in digital media. For example, "Khabar Lahariya," a rural news network operated by women in India, has been able to prove a high social and political impact of digital storytelling (Sinha, Malik, 2022). In the same breath, "CGNet Swara," a voice-based news facility, has helped the tribals of Chhattisgarh to report issues directly and get them across to the target without passing through filters of mainstream media (Mudliar et al., 2013). All this shows that digital media is powerful and in a position to empower marginalized people in different parts of the globe.

### C. Media Representation of Minorities

The way mainstream media has represented marginalized communities has been under critique and concern for a long time. Many times, it represents these communities from the vantage of stereotypes and biases, consequently going on to feed into negative perceptions and thus strengthening social inequalities. Such kind of misrepresentations not only distort reality but also further serve to silence the voices and experiences of the marginalized (Hall, 1997).

Calls to improve the media representation of underprivileged groups have been pitching the diversification of media production and providing a platform to the underrepresented voices. As indicated by research findings, it stands to reason that media created by and for marginalized communities tends to provide more real and varied characterizations of such communities (Downing, 2010). Such media initiatives undermine dominant stories or discourses and provide other perspectives, putting forward resilience, diversity, and agency for the marginalized population.

In the Indian context, it is "Bai Manus"-like platforms that stand at the forefront toward increasing the representation of marginalized communities like women, Dalits, Adivasis, and nomads. In this space provided for telling their stories, there is a media platform created that is more inclusive and equitable. The effects of all these initiatives underline the importance of support for media diversity and representation in promoting social justice and empowerment.

Comparative research has revealed that similar initiatives across the world, like "The Correspondent" in the Netherlands and "El Chamuco y los hijos del Averno" in Mexico, have been quite successful in challenging dominant narratives and offering a platform to marginalized voices (The Correspondent; Elchamuco, 2024). These global examples come to add more significance to alternative media in promoting diversity and inclusiveness.

### III. Methodology

This research only used data extracted from articles exclusively published on the "Bai Manus" platform from July 2023 to July 2024. "Bai Manus" is a platform amplifying marginalized women of Maharashtra, India, who publish articles on various themes of social justice, cultural preservation, and community empowerment.

Several criteria had to be considered while choosing articles for analysis. Articles relevant to the Dalits, Adivasis, nomads, and other groups of marginalized women in their experiences and issues were selected. Some of the keywords used in identification included "empowerment," "marginalized," "tribal," "Dalit," and "women." Besides, the articles were chosen with regard to their potential to offer insight into social justice, cultural preservation, and community empowerment themes.

A qualitative content analysis approach was followed, lending itself very well to the study of textual data and identifying patterns and themes (Creswell, 2013). Data analysis took place in several steps: familiarization, which involved reading the chosen articles carefully to become familiar with their content and context. Initial coding was followed by the selection and labeling of major segments of text relevant to the research questions, creating as many codes as necessary to capture all data characteristics. Codes such as these were then grouped under broader themes representing underlying patterns of data. In a way, themes emerged inductively from the data to ensure their validity in representing the content of the articles. Finally, the themes were reviewed and refined for coherence and distinction; this involved checking whether themes worked in relation.

#### **IV. Analytical Framework**

The study hinges on the theoretical framework of media representation articulated within Stuart Hall's work of 1997 to explicate the process of meaning-making in media representations of communities marginalized from the mainstream (Hall, 1997). Such a theoretical framework will guide the analysis in understanding how 'Bai Manus' represents indigenous and those marginal groups of people and how such representations defer from mainstream media portrayals.

Other than this, empowerment theory shall be used to understand how the empowerment of such deviant communities is pursued by the digital media initiatives. This will give an insight as to how 'Bai Manus' and its counterparts bring social and economic empowerment through media contribution and creation at the table (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995).

Finally, the framework of cultural resilience will be resorted to in order to illustrate how indigenous journalism further asserts the survival and preservation of cultural identities and practices (Kirmayer et al., 2011). This framework will be used to explain the role played by "Bai Manus" in advocating cultural continuity and resistance to cultural homogenization.

#### **V. Findings and Discussion**

##### **A. Empowerment Themes in "Bai Manus" Content**

Analysis of the "Bai Manus" platform finds a voice in themes of empowerment and social justice, as evidenced by its various content supplied through the mentioned reporters. These themes typify the dedication of the platform to the upliftment of subjugated voices and against structures of inequality. These include:

1. **Voice and Representation:** It gave a voice to the voiceless; it represented people who were otherwise on the fringes of society, such as those from indigenous communities and sexual minorities, through its wide array of diverse reporting talent. Bhagyashree Lekhami, a young woman sarpanch in Gadchiroli, throws valuable insight into the challenges that women face while taking charge in conflict zones. Similarly, Sumitra Vasave's reporting from the Nandurbar district portrays gender discrimination and superstition of tribals that challenge harmful traditional practices and advocate gender equity. This aligns with Crenshaw's framework on intersectionality, which highlights the need to understand the multiple, intersecting forms of discrimination faced by marginalized groups (Crenshaw, 1991).

2. Advocacy of Social Change: "Bai Manus" is a platform that advocates for significant social change. Apsara Agha's reporting from Pune on labour rights and social justice for women beggars, rag pickers, and sweepers underline their troublesome yet resilient struggle. This is a type of advocacy that is much needed for garnering people's sensitization and support for systemic reforms.

3. Cultural Preservation and Revival: Cultural preservation is another prominent theme that comes out clearly in the enlistment of coverage related to traditional arts and practices across the platform. Poonam Chaure has reported on Varali tribal communities and has brought out a dire need for preserving indigenous knowledge and cultural heritage. Such an emphasis would tend to preserve cultural continuity and pride within these communities.

## B. Representation of Marginalized Communities

The "Bai Manus" platform complicates the nuanced representation of the marginalized communities by addressing their unique experiences and challenges.

1. Tribal Communities: The case of tribal communities is very strong, as it speaks about the richness of their culture and socio-economic hardships. Reports by Sumitra Vasave of Nandurbar and Poonam Chaure of Dahanu reflect problems in these communities relating to gender discrimination and loss of culture.

2. Dalits and Nomads: The platform has an integral perception of the dalit and nomadic communities in their vision. Like the systemic discrimination carried out by the Pardhi community and the philosophical aspects of the Banjaras, the analysis reflects their marginalization and struggle.

3. LGBTQAI+ Community: It finds representation in the wake of critical discussion with regard to inclusivity and rights. Shamibha Patil, working on transgender issues, sheds light upon their issues and advocacies, hence showing the commitment of the platform towards highly varying social concerns.

4. Art and Cultural Expression: Representations of art and cultural expressions take a significant proportion in the content shared on this platform. Dynamic reporting of local governance and social change by Varsha Kodape, very often, runs parallel to or is fused into the telling of cultural stories depicting how activism transforms communities.

## C. Impact on Community Perception and Agency

The "Bai Manus" platform greatly affects community perception and agency by raising awareness and spurring participation in socio-economic concerns.

1. Enhanced Visibility and Recognition: The platform ensures more visibility for the most marginalized communities, narrating details with respect and dignity. Reporting by Bhagyashree Lekhami and Apsara Agha further impacts public perception by maximizing substantial examples of the problems and successes related to their issues.

2. Empowerment through Representation: The only way to empower them is to validate their experiences and those of their communities. Papers by Sumitra Vasave and Shamibha Patil

empower these women through publicizing their struggles and near-death experiences and stir conversations related to public policy.

3. Agent of Social Change: Articles on such systemic troubles—be it discrimination toward the Pardhi community or underdevelopment in tribal areas, as indeed highlighted in the case of Bai Manus can be a big cry for social change. By pinpointing these issues, "Bai Manus" mostly attempts to exhibit them, make visible, and encourage or urge the public into engagement and advocacy.

4. Enhancing Community Agency: When the community leaders and activists profiled start coming up as in the cases of Varsha Kodape and Sanjana Khandare and others. Their agency get beefed up and they begin to be more self-driven and capable agents of change. Reporting of their work brings out the transformative nature of the effect of the actions implemented on the community.

#### D. Role of Digital Media in Amplifying Voices

Digital media elevates the poor community voices reflects by the following "Bai Manus".

1. Reach and Accessibility: The "Bai Manus" reaches out to many people in the world because of the digital platform used to present voices in society—marginalized groups to express their traditional folk and issues on social-economic issues experienced. For instance, the Varali tribal group and the Tamasha Mahotsav will be enjoyed beyond the border by the largest audience, locals, and international tourists.

2. Interactive Engagement: Digital media is an interactive form of media that allows real-time engagement with content. It is now possible for readers to write in, share the articles, and do more, thus promoting the visibility of the issues at hand and letting discussion happen around it, as seen in the report published by Apsara Agha and Bhagyashree Lekhami in the case of Bai Manus.

3. Documentation and Preservation: Digital media provides inventory where digital documentation goes through preservation of cultural narratives. A traditional practice platform ensures that such narrations and cultural heritage are saved for the future generation.

Advocacy and Mobilization: Rao (2010) emphasizes how journalism influences and transforms leadership traditions in India, which aids in contextualizing the impact of 'Bai Manus' on cultural and leadership narratives within the communities it covers (Rao, 2010). The site fosters Advocacy and Mobilization via coverage of critical issues. Articles, such as the systemic discrimination and social justice that Pardhi community experiences, and those related to transgender rights, help to instigate public support for policy change.

The "Bai Manus" platform is a great example of how media has played a part in making the voice of the underdog stronger and pursuing social changes. The analysis therefore unravels the impacts that the platforms have on both community perception and agency through vivid illustrations of what the reporters did at the site. These findings are in accordance with the aims of this study and the theoretical approach, since digital media contribution to empowerment and cultural continuation cannot be generally disregarded. Several further analyses are also possible in this regard to include, for example, graphically depicted data and insight from opposing perspectives to further the understanding of the significance of the platform.

## VI. Conclusion

The "Bai Manus" platform is truly imbued with the potential of digital media to amplify marginalized voices and plead with society for justice. Several key areas demonstrate the importance of the impact this campaign has had on Maharashtra.

1. Representation and Advocacy Empowerment: "Bai Manus" raises efficiently the voice of the most subalternized sections—tribespeople, Dalits, nomads, LGBTQAI+ people. According to reports by journalists Bhagyashree Lekhami and Sumitra Vasave in Bai Manus. It envisions that through this platform, the people are empowered and rally for social change. Systemic discrimination and labour rights violations echo in the reportage of the platform with an eye on building a world based on justice and equality.

2. Cultural Preservation and Revival: Most of all, one can find that the platform remains committed to the cause of preserving cultural heritage through its filtered content on traditional arts and practices. Articles on events like Tamasha Mahotsav and the cultural contributions of the Varali tribal communities bring out very clearly the role of retaining cultural heritage and nurturing cultural pride.

3. Impact on Community Perception and Agency: "Bai Manus" has impacted the public perception to a great extent through nuanced and respectful portrayals of marginalised communities. Visibility and recognition are increased through detailed reporting, therefore increasing the agency of individuals and their communities in demanding their rights more effectively.

4. Digital Media's Role: Digital media will play a significant part in the success of the platform, putting more issues on the global scale in front of everyone and providing for interactive engagement in terms of taking part in solving them. The potential of digital media to inform and engage the global audience is epitomized by the ability to document and preserve cultural narratives on the platform and support advocacy and mobilization.

In summary, "Bai Manus" shows how digital media can really work in giving voice to the silenced and addressing social inequalities. The way that it represents different voices in cultural preservation and advocacy implies a significant responsibility for shaping public discourse and leading change. Moving forward with its new concept and quite determined reporting, "Bai Manus" has been able to raise strong impressions both at the local and the global levels.

## VII. Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should also examine long-term implications of the potential of a digital media platform such as "Bai Manus" in terms of policy changes and changes in societal attitude toward marginalized groups. Sharma, 2023, reckons the role of media empowerment in rural development with better information and communication processes (Sharma, 2023). The impact of digital storytelling on actual change and empowerment in the social world would be very useful to know. Beyond that, analysis of challenges for such platforms, including problems of sustainability and the digital divide, could create further depth in the understanding of their place within media landscapes. Through comparative studies with similar platforms in other regions, broader trends and best practices in indigenous and participatory journalism could be elicited. Integrating quantitative data—readership statistics, engagement metrics—

with qualitative insights will further flesh out our understanding of the reach and influence of the platforms (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). These recommendations look to build on the present study's findings, mapping out the way forward for future inquiry into the potential for change that digital media can bring forth in empowering marginalized communities.

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