Prof. S. BASHIRUDDIN MEMORIAL LECTURE 2026

Impact of Women on Journalism

by

Prof. Padmaja Shaw
Retired as Professor of Communication and Journalism,
Osmania University, India.

On 10th February, 2026
Prof. Kethu Vishwanatha Reddy Seminar Hall,
Academic Building, University Campus.

Organised by

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Open University
Prof. G.Ram Reddy Marg, Road No. 46,
Jubilee Hills, Hyderabad (TS) 500 033

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At the outset I would like to express the deep sense of gratitude and honour I feel at being invited to speak at the annual Professor Bashiruddin Memorial Lecture organised by Dr BR Ambedkar Open University. Bashir saab had a deep impact on this university. And he had a deeper and longer association with the Department of Communication and Journalism of Osmania University, where I was recruited during his tenure and served the department for nearly 28 years. He shaped the future of the department in a substantive way, and in the process shaped us as professionals in remarkable ways. I am indeed grateful to be here amongst you today to celebrate his memory.

Impact of Women on Journalism

- Prof. Padmaja Shaw

Introduction

Journalism, as a profession, was never designed for women. It developed in societies where women were denied the vote, excluded from property ownership, restricted from higher education, and legally subordinated to fathers or husbands. In Britain, married women could not own property until the late nineteenth century; in the United States, women gained suffrage only in 1920. In colonial India, women were largely excluded from formal education and civic participation.

Yet it was within these exclusions that women across the world entered journalism - not as a career path, but as a form of resistance. From the 19th century onward, women across the world entered journalism not by invitation but by insistence. They did so not merely to report news, but to expand the boundaries of who counted as a citizen, a witness, and a knower.

Denied access to legislatures, courts, and universities, women turned to journalism as an alternative public sphere, a place where they could reason publicly even when they were not legally recognised as citizens[3]. Writing itself became an act of defiance.

Globally and in India, women broke through legal, social, and intellectual barriers to reshape journalism itself. Their work did more than document events; it created new consciousness about gender, rights, and justice, and laid the groundwork for the kind of investigative journalism women in India practice today.

For early women journalists, the barriers were structural. Without voting rights, their political opinions carried no formal authority. Without property rights, their economic independence was precarious. Without formal education, their intellectual credibility was routinely questioned. Journalism therefore demanded not only skill, but audacity.

Across continents, women journalists used newspapers, pamphlets, and magazines to argue for rights they themselves did not yet possess. They wrote their way into citizenship.

Global Pioneers

In the 1840s, Margaret Fuller became one of America's first professional women journalists, writing for the New York Tribune. At a time when women were barred from voting and largely excluded from higher education, Fuller reported on European politics, revolutions, art, and philosophy with authority. She was one of the earliest woman war correspondent who was sent to Italy to cover the war there by the Tribune.

Editors and critics often dismissed her work as overly emotional or "feminine." Fuller responded not with protest, but

precision-filing deeply researched dispatches that could not be ignored. Her journalism insisted that women were not merely subjects of reform but producers of knowledge. This insistence laid intellectual groundwork for later feminist journalism.

Ida B. Wells worked in a world where Black women possessed neither political rights nor physical safety. She was a sociologist by training and wrote extensively in the 1890s, she investigated lynchings in the American South, documenting patterns of racial violence that contradicted official narratives.

After she published her findings, her newspaper office was destroyed. She was forced into exile. One frequently cited anecdote describes Wells carrying a pistol while travelling to report-a stark reminder that journalism for women, particularly women of colour,often meant personal risk.

Her work reframed violence against marginalised communities as a matter of public accountability, a model that would influence investigative journalism globally.

In an era when women had no vote and limited control over their earnings, another journalist Nellie Bly feigned insanity to gain entry into a New York asylum. Her exposé revealed horrific abuse of women patients-many institutionalised simply for being poor or foreign.

Editors initially doubted her claims. Only when Bly returned with meticulous notes did the story force policy reform. Her work demonstrated that women journalists could expose systemic injustice by accessing spaces men could not-or would not-enter.

Indian Experience

In nineteenth-century India, the very idea of women's

literacy was contested. A woman who wrote publicly risked ridicule and social exclusion. Yet women entered journalism precisely to challenge these norms.

Swarnakumari Devi, editor of the Bengali journal Bharati, worked in a society where women could not vote and had limited legal rights. Printers resisted taking instructions from her. She responded by issuing formal written editorial directions-transforming social resistance into procedural compliance.Her journalism asserted that women were not merely readers, but editors, thinkers, and public intellectuals.

Pandita Ramabai, despite her scholarship, lived in a society that denied women property rights and educational autonomy. Her writings on child marriage, widowhood, and women's education combined moral urgency with empirical detail.When critics accused her of exaggeration, Ramabai published statistics-numbers of widows,literacy rates, educational access-anticipating modern data-driven journalism. She reframed women's suffering as a structural injustice requiring reform, not sympathy.

The Freedom Movement and the first post-Independence decades

During the nationalist movement, women journalists wrote in magazines and journals that linked women's rights with self-rule. They argued that political independence without gender justice was incomplete.This echoed global suffrage movements where women journalists connected democracy to inclusion, insisting that citizenship could not be selective.

Across regions, women journalists redefined what counted as "news." They wrote about domestic labour as economic work, marriage laws as legal inequality, education as citizenship, and

violence against women as a public crime rather than a private matter.This reframing created a new gender consciousness. Journalism became not just descriptive, but transformative.

With Independence, Indian women gained the right to vote (1950), constitutional equality (Articles 14-15), and access to education (Article 21A, later). Yet newsroom power structures remained male-dominated. However, several remarkable women,beginning with the pioneering pre-Independence era photojournalist Homai Vyarawalla, Usha Rai, Prabha Dutt, Pamela Philipose, Lakshmi Murty, Jyoti Pumwani, broke through the barriers.

Over the years, in print and electronic media women journalists were often relegated to women's special pages, assigned to "soft" beats, or confined to desk jobs, but many transformed these spaces into serious reporting on courts, education, labour, and communal relations. Their work built long-term public memory rather than momentary headlines.

Contemporary India: Women at the Investigative Core

The turn of the century witnessed the entry of several remarkable women journalists who brought courage, commitment, and focus to the practice of journalism.

Malini Subramaniam, stands as one of the clearest examples of how investigative journalism in India can become physically dangerous-especially for women-when it scrutinises the intersection of state power, armed conflict, and marginalised communities. Her reporting from Bastar, Chhattisgarh, on counterinsurgency operations, human rights violations, and the impact of militarisation on Adivasi populations represents a continuation of the oldest feminist journalistic tradition: bearing witness where denial is policy.

Subramaniam's work is marked by deep local engagement. She lived in Bastar while reporting, building trust among villagers, activists, and local officials. This proximity allowed her to document patterns of sexual violence, forced displacement, and intimidation linked to security operations-stories that rarely survive editorial caution in metropolitan newsrooms.

A defining and widely cited episode in her career illustrates the cost of such journalism. In 2016, following sustained reporting on abuses by security forces, Subramaniam faced an orchestrated campaign of harassment. Stones were thrown at her home, false accusations were circulated, and local authorities failed to provide protection. Ultimately, she was forced to leave Bastar, not because her reporting was disproven, but because it was effective.

This episode is crucial not merely as a personal anecdote, but as a structural warning. Subramaniam's forced exit revealed how informal intimidation operates alongside formal law, particularly against women journalists who challenge nationalist or security narratives. Her experience echoes that of early women journalists like Ida B. Wells, whose work was met not with rebuttal but retaliation.

Importantly, Subramaniam's journalism did not frame conflict zones as exceptional spaces outside democracy. Instead, she showed how constitutional rights-freedom of movement, expression, bodily safety-are selectively suspended for certain populations. In doing so, she brought constitutional questions into journalism, making her work relevant not only to readers but to courts, civil liberties groups, and international press-freedom bodies.

From a gendered perspective, Subramaniam's career underscores a persistent truth: when women journalists report on violence, they themselves often become targets. Yet her work also affirms the counter-truth established by generations of women journalists-that exclusion sharpens scrutiny rather than silencing it.

Within the contemporary Indian media landscape, Malini Subramaniam's reporting represents journalism at its most elemental: grounded observation, corroborated testimony, and refusal to accept official narratives as final truth. Her career stands as a reminder that investigative journalism in India is not only about uncovering facts, but about defending the conditions under which truth can be told.

She is the recipient of International Press Freedom Award (2016), Oxfam Novib/ PEN International Freedom of speech award (2017)

Neha Dikshit, an award-winning investigative journalist, has opened new pathways and set important precedents for women journalists. Neha Dixit represents a critical strand of contemporary Indian investigative journalism that focuses on state power, conflict zones, surveillance, and the lives of those rendered invisible by national security narratives. Working largely through long-form investigations, Dixit has reported on internal displacement, custodial violence, counterinsurgency operations, and the impact of state policy on marginalised communities.

Dixit's journalism also foregrounds gender in non-obvious ways. Rather than focusing only on women as victims, she documents how conflict, surveillance, and displacement reshape entire social ecosystems, while paying close attention to how women navigate, resist, and survive these disruptions. This

approach extends the feminist journalistic tradition of making structural power visible without reducing women to symbols.

Her work demonstrates that investigative journalism in India today is not merely about exposing scandal, but about contesting the terms on which the state defines truth, security, and citizenship.

Revati Laul's investigations reconstruct communal violence through detailed interviews with victims, witnesses, and perpetrators. Her work reveals how ordinary social conditioning produces extraordinary brutality.By focusing on process rather than spectacle, she extends a tradition begun by early women journalists who prioritised explanation over sensation.

Swati Chaturvedi exposed organised online harassment and political trolling, documenting how digital platforms are used to silence women journalists and dissenters.Her work parallels earlier feminist journalism that exposed informal mechanisms of power-now operating through algorithms and anonymity. Her work played a significant role in educating social media audiences about the processes of content creation and the evolving modes of information orchestration in India.

Ritu Sarin, also an award-winning journalist, is a member of the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ).She a senior journalist still doing remarkable work while still with a legacy media house like the Indian Express, reports on terrorism and internal security demonstrating that investigative journalism can scrutinise the state without compromising responsibility. Her work relies on documents, court records, and sustained inquiry rather than leaks alone.She has worked on several ICIJ projects including Offshore Leaks, Swiss Leaks, the Pulitzer Prize-winning Panama Papers, Paradise Papers, Implant Files and FinCEN Files.

Risk, Resistance, and Resolve

Women journalists in India today face legal intimidation, professional isolation, and relentless online harassment. These pressures may be digital and bureaucratic, but they are not new. Some of the women journalists mentioned here like Dixit, began working with legacy media but when the managements fell short and could not defend their work, they have moved on to become independent journalists. Earlier women journalists lost presses, livelihoods, even freedom.

The response, then and now, is the same: persistence.

What connects Indian women journalists across generations-and links them to their global counterparts-is not gender alone, but a shared professional ethic:

- Truth over access
- Evidence over opinion
- Public interest over personal safety

Why This Matters for Indian Democracy

India's democracy depends not only on elections but on scrutiny-of courts, police, digital platforms, development projects, and communal narratives. Women journalists have been central to building this scrutiny.

They have shown that journalism does not need to shout to be powerful. It needs to stay-in courtrooms, villages, archives, inboxes, and uncomfortable conversations.

From Swarnakumari Devi's editorial desk to contemporary investigative reporting, Indian women journalists have continuously expanded who journalism is for and what it demands of power.

This is an Indian story, rooted in local realities of caste, religion, law, and democracy. But it belongs to a global lineage of women who reshaped journalism by refusing to look away.Across time and place, women journalists have taught the profession one enduring lesson:Democracy is sustained not by loud truths, but by stubborn ones.

Women journalists did not wait for voting rights, property rights, or full educational access before acting as citizens. They practiced freedom daily-through writing, investigation, and refusal to remain silent.

By reporting on women's lives and injustices, they reshaped public consciousness about gender. By insisting on evidence and accountability, they strengthened democracy itself.In India today, women journalists stand in a long global tradition-one forged not by privilege, but by persistence.

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Padmaja Chiruvolu Shaw

- MPhil and PhD in Development Studies, MA (Telecommunications) Michigan StateUniversity, USA, MCJ (Osmania University).
- Retired as Professor of Communication and Journalism, Osmania University, India.
- Was Executive Director (Programmes and Utilization Research), SAPNET (MANATV, now T-SAT) Govt. of Andhra Pradesh. Coordinated programme productionactivity, scheduling, training and research for the 5 TV channels catering toeducation and development.
- Anchored several media research projects. Currently India coordinator for theGlobal Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) for 2025. Coordinated India chapter in2020. GMMP is a cross-sectional study since 1995 that monitors representation ofwomen in media both as subjects and journalists across the world media every 5years.
- Presented academic papers on film and media industries at conferences of
- IAMCR (International Association for Media and Communication Research)
- AMIC (Asian Media Information and Communication Centre)
- ESA (European Sociological Association)
- London Indian Film Festival Conference, University of Westminster
- Published academic papers in international peer reviewed journals and bookchapters.
- Published articles on contemporary issues on women, media industry in newspapersand news websites.

Dr. B.R. AMBEDKAR OPEN UNIVERSITY

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