



## **MEDIA, GENDER AND SOCIAL JUSTICE: TOWARDS AN EQUITABLE SOCIETY**

**THE NETWORK OF WOMEN IN MEDIA, INDIA  
17<sup>th</sup> NATIONAL MEETING, PATNA, 27-29 JANUARY 2023**

### **A Report**



More than a hundred media women from across India gathered at the twin campuses of the Aryabhata Knowledge University and Chanakya National Law University in the institutional area of Patna on a wintry morning in January 2023. The excitement was palpable at the first in-person meeting after February 2020 and the subsequent lockdown and restrictions due to the Covid-19 pandemic. It was a time to renew old ties and meet new members, learning from each other and building new bonds.

















The morning of self-introductions was filled with laughter, curiosity and an eagerness to match faces to names that were familiar only online. Participants from 19 states – Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Delhi NCR, Goa, Gujarat, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Nagaland, Odisha, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal – and one Union Territory – Jammu & Kashmir – gathered in Patna to participate in the conclave.







## **SESSION 1**

### **What's "Mainstream" anyway?**

#### **The role of local and regional media in the media landscape**



*With the growing corporatisation of and state control over “mainstream” media, there is increasing frustration among both media persons and audiences with the content and format of news. With the political polarisation of legacy media, its “social media-isation” and apparent disinterest in issues that affect disadvantaged sections, newer trends in the media sphere provide hope. This session aimed to look at emerging directions in the media field, where independent initiatives are leveraging the hyperlocal, going beyond urban-centric media. What does the future hold for regional language and hyperlocal journalism and what hope can it offer for Indian democracy?*



The first session of the 2023 meeting began with a panel discussion on hyperlocal media that engaged with the strengths and weaknesses of alternative social media platforms used by journalists, most of them working as independent journalists.



The moderator of the session, **Sweta Singh**, assistant professor, GGSIP University, New Delhi, welcomed the gathering and said that the panellists would talk about their reasons for using alternative media to share stories that mattered to the local population even though they recognise the power of new and emerging digital spaces for hyperlocal journalism.



**Aheli Moitra**, formerly at the *Morung Express* (currently involved in research on local media for her PhD), focussed on independent media in Nagaland which, while hyperlocal in terms of its target audience and reach, are mainstream media in the context of Nagaland. She spoke about how the COVID pandemic had hit 'traditional' news institutions like the print media, and how it took newspapers a while to recover from the setback (many are still recovering, she said). She mentioned the rise of new media players in the broadcast and digital media space and pointed out that print media in the state also felt the need to develop their digital presence, if not to shift to digital entirely, but most lacked resources (financial and human) to do this. "There is need for more 'collaborative journalism' involving 'mainlanders' and journalists who belong to the northeast region," she said, "so that they can help each other and exchange expertise, instead of continuing with the 'leeching' syndrome that defines the current relationship, the terms of which are set by the former for the latter."



An independent journalist based in Siliguri, West Bengal, **Anuradha Sharma** spoke about how the ‘national’ media cover Darjeeling and other hill areas of the state of West Bengal. She dwelt upon the disconnect between the way Delhi, or even Kolkata, looks at the region and the ground realities that people face every day. She elaborated on the blinkered tendencies of the so-called mainstream media. “They train their focus on Darjeeling and surrounding areas only when there's a law-and-order problem,” she pointed out. They tend to view extended periods of general strikes and agitations over the demand for a separate state of Gorkhaland as merely law and order situations, without giving a thought to the conditions that have given rise to the feeling of alienation and marginalisation among the people, she said.

**Neetu Singh**, who runs a YouTube Channel called *Shades of Rural India*, said that in view of the present situation of ‘mainstream’ media, there is a great need for hyperlocal reporting. According to her, hyperlocal media are currently the only ones left in which stories that do not find a place in the mainstream media can be covered.

Noticing the dearth of reporting on issues concerning rural women, Neetu left her job in 2020 and launched *Shades of Rural India*. She travels to different states to try and understand rural women’s concerns from their own perspectives. “We want to reach out to marginalised women and girls whose experiences do not make it into the ‘mainstream’ media. Over the past two and a half years, we have travelled to many districts of Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal and U.P. We have tried to cover the issues of tribal communities,” she said.



She pointed out that such initiatives by independent journalists are necessary and commendable but they work with limited resources. Channels like hers highlight news that does not attract TRPs and, in fact, operate at considerable risk and survival is a constant challenge. “When we talk about women journalists, these challenges and risks increase manifold, especially when they do ground reporting with limited resources. Despite these difficulties, it seems necessary to do this work – so we keep doing it. Many of the stories we have covered have received views in the millions,” she said.

“Our stories have had an impact and perhaps this is what results in the peace we have felt as independent journalists. There is currently a severe lack of reporting on rural issues. That is why many journalists like me have left their jobs and started YouTube channels which operate at a hyperlocal level,” she explained.

In the course of her work, Neetu realised that the people of the community whose stories they were covering could be encouraged become journalists. To increase the participation of rural women in journalism, she started the Meera Fellowship in the name of her late mother. The fellowship programme was launched on 3 November 2022, her mother’s 21st death anniversary. “We received 330 applications from 15 states of the country. Due to limited resources, we could not give an opportunity to many colleagues,” said Neetu. “However, with the help of five experienced jury members, we selected five Meera Fellows and they are currently reporting for *Shades of Rural India* from their localities. These are the grassroots stories of the people in remote areas, whom we are often unable to reach.”



**Priyanka Jha**, from the *Alt News Hindi* portal involved in fact-checking, pointed out that all social media platforms have credibility problems. While WhatsApp may have a larger number of users in India and therefore appears to spread the most misinformation, the nature of the problem is the same across all platforms. “We have to look at the issue in a holistic manner,” she pointed out.

According to her, we need to reach out to children, perhaps in the 10-11 age group, before they imbibe and internalise biases, and teach them how to view and validate information, and how to recognise the difference between fact, opinion and propaganda. “Most misinformation is designed to trigger you at an emotional level,” she said. “Misinformation is what you are, in a way, compelled to share. The language that is used is designed to cause an emotional appeal in your head and, as a result, you end up forwarding something in an emotional state of mind.”

The amount of disinformation in the public sphere began to increase as its creation became more and more organised, she explained. The problem may have started with misinformation but now it is hate speech that is being spewed via social media. Once you have polarised society and targeted particular sections of the population using misinformation, it is much easier to propagate hate speech against them because you already have changed the mindset of people, she pointed out.

Priyanka cautioned that it is important to be aware that not all sources and pieces of information are reliable and that sometimes customarily reliable sources of information can make mistakes. One of the best ways to avoid falling for misinformation is to practice lateral reading, always checking if other reliable sources have published the same information. However, this is not completely reliable all the time, she clarified. It is necessary to read comments posted below articles, images or videos online as well as consult fact-checking websites to remain updated about narratives of misinformation.



**Tanzil Asif**, founder, and CEO, *Main Media*, a hyperlocal news platform in Seemanchal region of north-eastern Bihar said, “If you are not shouting, running a propaganda or pleasing a particular group of audience by turning and twisting every story in their favour, it is not easy to run an independent news organisation. You don’t get enough views and engagement on social media for considerable revenue. So, it becomes very challenging. You have to keep looking for alternative sources of revenue.”

*Main Media* has survived so far on grants from Google News Initiative (GNI) and the Independent and Public-Spirited Media Foundation (IPMSF). An independent news organisation can only survive if audiences come forward to make crowdfunding or subscription models successful. He went on to say that hiring women journalists was a challenge as parents in rural areas did not encourage their daughters to become journalists, and those who did become journalists preferred to move to cities like Patna or Delhi. “So, it’s [a] challenge to keep the gender balance in the organisation,” he said.



Independent journalist **C. Vanaja**, spoke about YouTube as the “new mass medium”, with a particular focus on Telugu YouTube channels. According to her, YouTube is to television, what OTT is to cinema. “We all need to use the medium, it is an important platform for independent and senior journalists,” she said, pointing out that it doesn't need much technical expertise or investment to set up and run a YouTube channel and provides scope for many formats, both formal and informal. “I request all my friends here to use the medium, our voices are needed there. The right-wing has captured it,” she said.

For individuals, the best format, she finds, is ‘perspective videos. Since there is a flood of news, both ‘fake’ and authentic, on the internet, which includes social media, senior journalists can sift through the noise, connect the dots, read between the lines and provide much-needed perspective to help people make sense of it all. She gave the example of perspective videos put up by Dhruv Rathee. “If a non-journalist can do it, a journalist can do it better. In fact, there are hundreds of YouTube channels with good infrastructure and they have really made it big. In fact, some YouTube channels in Hyderabad have infrastructure matching with TV news channels,” she said.

Vanaja added that one doesn’t need to be confined to ‘hard’ news and analysis. “Journalists can start producing videos in their area of expertise. For instance, a Telugu sports journalist who specialised in cricket started a channel and got a huge following,” she said. “Take the example of Ravish Kumar. As soon as he left NDTV he switched to YouTube and has proven that nobody can stop him from what he was doing as a journalist. He too began with perspective videos. His videos are watched by millions and

it works out financially too. There is Sakshi Joshi who switched from mainstream journalism to YouTube and is doing well. ... not that everybody can make a living, but if one can get a couple of lakh subscriptions it can be sustainable,” said Vanaja. She cited the example of Thulasi Chandu from Hyderabad, who used her old phone to shoot, edit and upload videos initially. Soon she became a verified channel and is now a prominent current affairs journalist in Telugu. She has reached more people directly through YouTube than she did during her decade in mainstream journalism.

Vanaja highlighted the reality of online abuse. “Trolls are the biggest menace on YouTube. There are troll armies waiting to pounce. There are hundreds of fake ids subscribing to particular ideologies and political parties. Anything you say on YouTube against any of those parties will get a backlash.... But it is also a reminder that you are doing something to change the status quo. It is the people who advocate change and propagate progressive ideologies who are the most hated on social media,” she said.



**Sonal Kellogg**, founder and editor of *Life News*, which covers sexual violence and gender, discussed niche reporting in the context of hyperlocal journalism. She started in 2021 with a small team of paid freelancers. After funds ran out, it has largely been pro-bono work by journalists keen to fill the gaps in mainstream reporting who have kept the portal live.

Sexual crimes in India are heavily underreported even to the police, and only 6-8% of sexual abuse is reported. And only 2-3% of the 6-8% reported rapes are reported in the media. “This is a dismal situation. The government is aware of the high crimes against women and children and has put in place laws but they are poorly implemented which

means there is hardly any conviction and there is no deterrent against sexual crimes,” she said. “My efforts to report on sexual crimes is to keep the spotlight on such crimes, especially against children so that this issue remains in the public consciousness.”

### **PUBLIC MEETING AT HOTEL PATALIPUTRA NIRVANA**

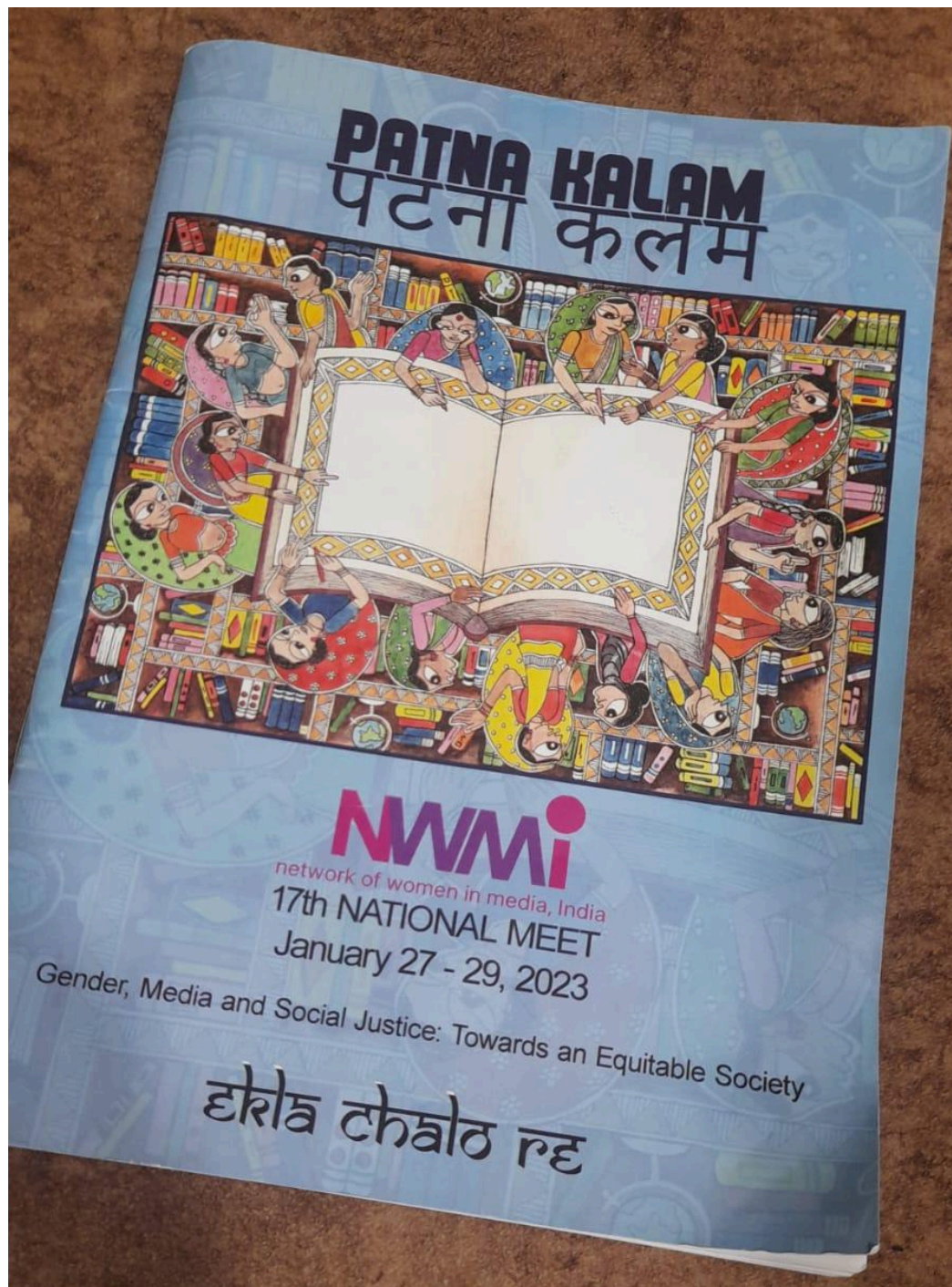




Following the welcome address by **Sumita Jaiswal**, co-ordinator of the Bihar chapter of NWMI, a brief introduction to the NWMI was given by **Shahina KK** and **Yirmiyan Arthur**.



This was followed by the release of '[Patna Chalo](#)', the souvenir of the 17<sup>th</sup> National NWMI meeting, by **Justice (Ret'd) Mridula Mishra**, VC, CNLU. Her brief speech was followed by editors from Patna providing a snapshot of the mediascape in Bihar.



“Freedom of Expression: Media, Gender and Social Justice”



Considering media-related developments of the last couple of years, it is important to focus attention on the endangered status of freedom of media and freedom of expression. This is not just a media issue but a matter of public interest. It is also relevant in terms of the theme of the meeting: gender equality, social justice, and an equitable society depend on universal access to fundamental rights, including freedom of expression, which includes media freedom.





Moderated by **Geeta Seshu**, NWMI member and co-editor, Free Speech Collective, the panellists included **Dhanya Rajendran**, Editor, The NewsMinute; **Shahrukh Alam**, columnist and Supreme Court advocate; **Kiran Shaheen**, senior journalist and media activist; **Meena Kotwal**, Founder-Editor, Mooknayak; **Pushendra Pal Singh**, media educator and head of Public Relations Society of India, Bhopal chapter; and **Manikant Thakur**, former correspondent, BBC Worldwide. **Kalpana Sharma**, independent journalist and author and **Daniel Bastard**, Asia-Pacific Director for Reporters Without Borders, Paris sent special video messages.









For a complete report of the Public Meeting, click [HERE](#).

Following dinner, members of the NWMI went on to showcase their talents in a session facilitated by RJ Barkha, Tasneem Kutubuddin and Vasanthi Hariprakash, regaling the audience with music, dance, stand-up comedy, poetry and story-telling.

## **DAY 2, SATURDAY, 28 JANUARY 2023**

### **SESSION 2**

***Challenging marginalisation in the media: Exclusion, Online abuse and digital security for women journalists***



Seventy-five years after Independence and 20 years after the NWMI was launched, women journalists in India are still in a minority, and the Indian media has no SC or ST journalists in leadership roles. What makes for this poor representation and what are the factors that hinder women journalists—especially those from oppressed castes—from being recruited, promoted and occupying leadership positions in the Indian media? Alongside, poor wages, lack of job security and workplace harassment seriously threaten the professional base of journalism. Online abuse has serious ramifications on the mental health of women journalists, their work and for media freedom. This session explored online harassment of women journalists, cyber security and mitigation strategies as well as the barriers to gender justice, caste discrimination and exclusion in newsrooms and media workplaces. It came up with practical steps to make newsrooms genuinely inclusive and diverse.



**Ramya Kannan**, the moderator, introduced the session by highlighting that NWMI gives space to regional media and regional language media, as also journalists from marginalized sections. She spoke of the online abuse many women journalists faced, across the world. Women journalists such as Gauri Lankesh had were killed for expressing their opinions. Organisational structures enable marginalization, she said, citing caste in the newsroom, and the difficulties journalists faced in Kashmir since the abrogation of Article 370.



**Anuradha Sharma**, independent journalist from Siliguri, began by saying, “I’m an independent girl reporter” (a humorous reference to the term used by a panellist at the public meeting the previous day). She spoke about toxic masculinity in the newsroom, and the stereotyping of women as being ‘fit’ for certain roles and beats. “Come out of your comfort zone, men say to us. This is what it is to be a girl journalist, not wanting to come out of your comfort zone. This is often the reputation of women in newsrooms. The very nature of understanding the job of a journalist in non-urban spaces is that it is a man’s job,” she said. She explained that toxic masculinity also affected the way women displayed their authority. “If you’re doing a man’s job, you should be like a man. Women become bottled in because they have to fit into this structure. We have to address this toxic masculinity in newsrooms,” she said.



**Priti Salian**, independent journalist from Bengaluru spoke about "[A 9-step plan](#) for 'curb-cutting' disability access in India's news and newsrooms", which she had created for the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. "There is little awareness what a disability could mean for journalists. The barrier is not just ramp or wheelchair access. Barriers could be parents telling disabled youngsters not to work in a risky profession, not finding access, not finding the right place to work. Not having the right networks."



She recounted an instance when a journalist was unable to go into a national newsroom due to lack of wheelchair access. There was no action from the administration for four months. Another was kept waiting for one year because they couldn't construct a ramp or accessible toilet for him. One blind journalist said, what can you do for us? One editor asked a blind journalist, 'Will you be able to commute and report from ground?' The

journalist replied: 'I will do it just like anyone else, I'll take an auto and go there.' Journalists have to ask questions to understand disabled journalists. A large part of the problem of inclusivity is not having conversations about disability, and not having an environment where they can open up and talk about their disability, she explained.



**Kumari Vaishnavi** from the Viklang Adhikar Manch, Bihar, said, “Gender, caste, and disability all work against us.” Making a case for solidarity, she explained that even a few women being oppressed or held back due to disability was akin to all women being oppressed. “We have only two options: Either we struggle or just go home, after which the only option is to sleep and die. We have to walk together if we decide we will not let oppressive forces work,’ she said, elaborating that there was no difference between ‘women’ and ‘women with disabilities’. On terminology, whether divyang or disabled, or differently abled, Kumari said, “Whatever term you use, just bring the issues to the fore whether you use the politically correct terminology or not.”



**Srishiti Jaswal**, independent journalist and digital security trainer who has faced serious online trolling, said, “I was trolled online, and the abuse goes on in stages even though I am an upper-caste Hindu woman, and it would be much worse for a Muslim or lower caste woman. My family was impacted by violence, which was extreme. The experience brought about a lot of consciousness and empathy. ‘Why me?’ Asking this led me to many solutions that I wish share with you today.

“When you’re going through online abuse, save everything. Document everything, whether you want to take the legal route or not. When this happened to me, I didn’t understand how it began. When I began to look into it, I realized there is an IT cell that was spreading misinformation. They used WhatsApp, Telegram etc. to send these messages to a wide network.”

Highlighting the importance of protecting oneself while doing the work of a journalist, she said, “You are free till words come out of your mouth. You have freedom till you speak. Write it and say it in a way that can be protected legally.”



Srishti shared the following tips to tackle online abuse: “Take care of your mental health, social media is very draining. We live in semi-celebrity culture, and many people know us, but it is draining. Our work culture is such that we are forced into public life, doesn’t matter how many followers you have. It is important to be careful. If something like this happens, you should have someone to reach out to. Solidarity is important. At the time, I

didn't know NWMI. Thousands of people were hurling abuse at me, and raising questions on my character, using photos. I was wondering: is this is me? People told me, it's not you, and having support like that is very important. A monthly circle of sexual harassment really helps. When I was being trolled, it continued for a week. Many are trolled because they are women or from marginalized communities, even ordinary people are being trolled.

Srishti concluded by exhorting women journalists to read the laws, and keep codes of journalism in mind while reporting.

Talking about **journalism in Kashmir**, a journalist from the Union Territory said that after the abrupt abrogation of Article 370 on 4 August 2019, there was a shift in political and geographical realities. The first targets were journalists. "We woke up to a communication blackout: no phones or internet. The intention was that news should not go out of the region." Despite the restrictions, journalists who have lived through such hardships for decades went about their jobs. Someone went to the airport and sent out news via pen drive, others used OB vans to read out news to friends or colleagues – that's how the first couple of months unfurled. Later, there was frequent summoning and questioning. Before, mostly male journalists faced that kind of intimidation and violence, but now women are not spared. There was no soft approach. The worst part is the continuing restrictions. Journalists require permission from the court to travel, the journalist said, giving the example of Sana Mattoo who was on the team that won the Pulitzer Prize, but was not allowed to attend the award ceremony. "Much of this harassment is invisible, and 90 per cent of the journalists at home do not speak about it. People feel like they are safe only if they are silent. They think if you speak, your family won't be spared. We don't see a way out. I might get solidarity if I speak. Immediately, if I put out a tweet, there will be statements and other solidarity. But by the third day, when I am in the lion's den, who will support me?"

Speaking about self-censorship, the journalist said one had to be very careful with language and vocabulary as one could never know what word or phrase would be targeted and become the cause for a backlash. "There is news, and things are happening but we cannot report. Journalists have been the window to Kashmir, and with that window shut, everyone thinks that everything is fine." There is silence. People are self-censoring. whoever is able to save themselves and their families do so – it is their top priority. Some fellow journalists say they cannot sleep without medicines. There are mental scars that are not healing. I don't want to be quoted anywhere or put on social media. I feel this is a safe space to say what I can.



As Ramya summed up, “It is clear from what we have heard that there is an immense cost to doing journalism today.”



**Ismat Ara**, a reporter with the Frontline magazine, narrated her experience of being harassed and intimidated while reporting on the field and said, “I’m still struggling to figure out how to be a Muslim woman journalist.” Last year, her photograph was put on a poster and shared widely as the ‘bulli bai deal of the day’. “It is tricky today to be a Muslim woman journalist,” she said. “We negotiate a lot to come out of our homes. When things like these happen, I don’t know what to say to my family.” She has filed FIRs but the accused get out on bail, leading to further fears about harassment. “Now I’ve started self-censoring myself... What do I write that may be (construed as) politically incorrect? I am still struggling to deal with the fact that I am a Muslim woman writing on issues,” she said.

Srishti added, “When you target women or a few people, it leads to creating a general atmosphere of self-censorship. They want to silence everyone through one person. It is a thought-out agenda.”



**Meena Kotwal**, editor of Mooknayak, talked about caste in the newsroom. “We need to change some things in the newsroom because there is only one section of people in the newsroom who have never faced this type of caste discrimination,” she said. Greater diversity of in the newsroom—with Dalit, ST and OBC reporters—is the only way to ensure that issues affecting different communities get equal play. A journalist from OBC community once told their editor that there has been an episode against Dalit, but the editor asked, ‘what is new about this? This keeps happening.’ They think Dalit issues ‘keep happening’, so why should we cover them? You can imagine how they bring Dalit issues on board. We need to include people who recognize these issues.

“Someone told me, (Dalit) people are coming into newsrooms only recently, so how can they be in decision making? They acknowledge that there are no Dalits in the newsroom. This is your shortfall, not ours,” she said. The onus of bringing about change in newsrooms is put on Dalits. “As journalists, we have no caste or religion, but the latter

are always placed before our identities as journalists to enable change in newsrooms,” she said, telling an anecdote about a former editor who had told her they do not consider caste while hiring. “You shouldn’t but you must be considering *something* if the same kind of people are entering newsrooms. What kind of filter allows you to keep them [in and us out]?... The more we are silent, we will be oppressed. We must be springs—the more you push us down, the more we jump back.”

“You will notice that in Dalit issues, there is a lot of focus on the culprit. Names (last name) never revealed with upper castes, but when the accused is Dalit, their last names and caste are revealed. In the Hyderabad gang-rape case, there was an immediate police encounter of the Dalit accused. When there is an upper caste culprit, the cases go on for years. The Kashmir temple rape case, for example,” she pointed out.

**Nick Low**, British Deputy High Commissioner, East and Northeast India, said, “As regards women in journalism in my country, the UK, we have a lot of diversity as we are a multi-racial society. The media should reflect that. We cannot discriminate. One particularly important factor is the different social classes in my country. In the 1970s, news casters Angela Rippon and Anna Ford had three things in common, they were white, young and good looking. That was a barrier. Eventually we saw women of colour appearing on TV, some slightly older. Whatever your ethnicity, whatever your appearance, if you’re good enough, you can break in. The visible differences – sexuality, disability, social class, much more difficult to get hold of. British journalists are drawn from 7% of people who have private school education. It is not diverse. Private education is very expensive, there are scholarships but they are an exception. This is what journalism in my country looks like.”

Moving on to other current issues like the online safety bill, Low talked about the rich debates in the British parliament and the media. “The online safety bill will regulate companies that use generated content, terrorism and violence. Child pornography, abuse and exploitation is the other issue. That is unlawful and will not be allowed.” The bill would also consider ‘legal but harmful’ content such as smoking and drinking, which are legal but harmful. This section will also be used to tackle sites that distribute material which advocates or endorses behaviours that could be harmful in the long run, such as anorexia, bulimia and eating disorders.

Low illustrated this with the tragic story of 14-year-old Molly Russel, who took her life in 2017. When the family’s computer was checked, it was found that for a year and a half she had been visiting sites encouraging bad eating habits and ultimately offering suicide as an option. “I think the online safety bill will be known as Molly’s Law and will encourage rigorous monitoring and taking down material reported to be problematic,” he said.

### **SESSION 3 *Experiments with Social Justice: The Bihar Model***



*This session focused on the concept of social justice associated with politics in Bihar in order to gain an understanding of the relationship between political rhetoric, government policies and ground realities. Despite recent governments launching schemes and policies with the supposed aim of empowering women and disadvantaged castes/communities, Bihar's human development indicators remain low and it is still identified as a 'backward state'. Did Lalu Prasad Yadav make a radical difference to the condition of OBCs? Has prohibition in Bihar really made women's lives better? What impact have initiatives such as the bicycle scheme for school-going girls, 50% reservation for women in panchayat raj institutions and 35% reservation in police had on the ground in terms of ensuring gender and social justice? How will the ongoing caste census in the state help promote equality and social justice for all, including those belonging to historically disadvantaged castes? Experts from Bihar gave us insights into the state's politics and society at the session.*



**Prof Iftikhar Ahmed**, Director, School of Journalism and Mass Communication, Aryabhatta Knowledge University (AKU), moderated the session along with **Sonali Singh** of Doordarshan, Bihar. Prof Ahmed pointed out that the way people address someone from Bihar: “Ay Bihari!” is almost an abuse. However, he had a counter to that: “*Ek Bihari Sab pe Bhari*” (One Bihari can dominate all others”).



BBC correspondent **Divya Arya** began by saying that the ongoing caste-based census in Bihar was of great relevance to ensure that policies were formulated for the marginalised before moving on to the effect of prohibition in the state since 2016. “It started with women in mind to bring down violence within homes. But there has been so much tragedy surrounding hooch.” Lastly, she highlighted the issue of the ‘Migrant Bihari’ looking for livelihood in other states, saying, “Why do they keep leaving?”



**D.M. Diwakar**, former director of the A.N. Sinha Institute of Social Studies, Patna, said social injustice was structurally rooted in Bihar, which was the first to introduce the Zamindari Abolition Act. However, the Act couldn't be implemented fully, and till today, land remains concentrated in the hands of a particular group and class. Without land redistribution, the justice question can't be resolved, he said.

Piecemeal efforts at change only give a temporary sense of relief, but no emancipation. While governments could bring in social change, the Congress which ruled Bihar from 1950-67, then from 72-77, and finally from 85-90, confined itself to welfare programmes. It was the socialist government under Karpoori Thakur, who was chief minister for six months in 1971, and then for two years from 1977 to 1979, which went further and introduced free education till matriculation, set up a primary school in every village, and also increased the representation of OBCs in his cabinet. However, even he didn't touch the land issue.

The next regime to tackle social justice was that of Lalu Prasad Yadav. Under him, the poor got a voice, which itself weakened the feudal character of Bihar's society, and the bargaining strength of the OBCs improved, as did their presence in the bureaucracy, but he did not carry out any institutional transformation. His aim was to empower the working classes to have access to the State.

Nitish Kumar's approach has been different, and he depends on the bureaucracy to implement his programmes unlike Lalu, who counted on political workers. "It's not surprising that his schemes have fallen short of their targets. Unless you empower people on the ground, you can't succeed," he said.



**Sudha Varghese**, 78, a nun from Kerala who has been working with the Dalit Musahar community in Bihar for 50 years through her organisation Nari Gunjan, said she had approached Nitish Kumar to help work with the government to implement prohibition.

For the Musahars, landlessness and poverty remain the biggest problems. Till those were resolved, they could not be stopped from brewing liquor. That is the only skill they had, apart from rearing pigs, for which there was no meat processing industry to make it commercially viable. However, the CM had not responded, she said.

The ban on alcohol was announced in 2016, but without an alternative source of income, land or assets, the Musahars continued to make alcohol. Raids take place regularly on their homes. Varghese said that the Musahars survived the Covid lockdowns with great difficulty and are still facing hunger, adding that bureaucrats rarely rolled out the schemes meant for the community.

Citing the example of the Indira Awas Yojna, under which each family was to get ₹1.2 lakh to build a house, she said ₹25,000 was taken away by the village *mukhiya* (leader) and ₹25,000 by the *mistri* (mason) who builds the house. She said she had seen the houses constructed with the money left: some had no ceilings, others had doors made of straw and bamboo. No bureaucrat bothered to visit the families to check if the schemes had been implemented properly. =

The process of brewing liquor was unequal: the women bought the materials and sat by the fire to brew it; the men sold it to customers and drank with them. So women did occasionally become victims of domestic violence. Returning to the topic of prohibition, she said it had failed to bring about social justice. Musahars continue to brew alcohol and live in the same conditions as before, poor and malnourished. “We cannot imagine the level of their poverty,” she said.



**Prof Pushendra**, ex-chairperson, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Patna, began by quoting Ambedkar: “In politics we will have equality and in social and economic life we will have inequality.” Bihar, he said, had contradicted this prediction. Despite social and economic inequality, Bihar had more political equality due to the politics of social justice. “Social justice includes more than caste, I prefer to differentiate between caste as social phenomena and caste as political phenomena,” he said.

‘Caste social’ is ritualized through produced inequalities. ‘Caste political’ is in political participation. This ‘caste political’ has acquired a significance in politics of social justice. What we have achieved in terms of social justice is in terms of caste political while caste social is still lagging behind.



Caste as a social phenomenon was based on scripture and ritualised, but caste also has a political dimension. What Bihar had achieved was social justice in terms of caste as a political phenomenon, but caste as a social phenomenon had not evolved, he said. Pushpendra pointed out that in the society built under the Nehruvian vision, the focus had been more on higher education rather than universal primary education. This benefited the middle-class desire for higher education, but what happened to those deprived of primary education? Today, only the children of the poor went to government primary schools, resulting in poor quality education despite the high enrolment numbers.

He raised the question of what would happen to Bihar given the present focus on the service sector rather than the manufacturing sector, and said, “Current conditions in Bihar were created by economic policies, a part of structural injustice. Bihar is bound to remain the unskilled labour supplier for the informal sector,” he said.



Elaborating on this, he pointed out that social justice had been reduced to political representation. The Bihar Legislature now had more OBCs, but the bureaucracy was still dominated by the so-called upper castes who got promotions because of their educational qualifications. The budget proposals for higher education were also disproportionately high, given which castes had access to it. “So, the inequalities of the caste structure continue. Bihar’s future is linked with what happens to its labour,” he said. “If you want to bring real social justice and economic equality, you must think of those who matter for Bihar’s future: its labour class and those who go to government schools,” he said. “Development can’t be based on government schemes; these play only a supplementary role. The main vehicle for social justice and economic equality is land and education.”

Pushpendra spoke of the importance of the caste census currently ongoing in Bihar. There was a feeling that OBCs had been given less than they deserved, because they

were not fully enumerated. The British had done their last caste survey in 1941 but didn't release it. The caste census holds great potential for OBC mobilisation, including that of EBCs. To create a division in Lalu's core votes, Nitish Kumar had come up with categories Dalit and Maha Dalit, OBC and EBC, explained Prof Pushpendra. The entire OBC section could be mobilised around the results of the caste survey.

In the 1931 census, OBCs were 52 %. This number was likely to have risen. Already, the Muslim-Yadav factor was a formidable winning formula, and this combined with OBCs, could influence electoral outcomes. However, this focus exclusively on political representation revealed a reductionist understanding of society. civil society was complicit in this interpretation because it benefited from it. Political representation helped civil society members get influential contacts in the government and its agencies. This was seen as part of Bihar's "welfare politics".

Prof Pushpendra saw the prohibition policy as a way of using illegality as a strategy against the poor, the very people to whom political representation was given.



**Usha Kiran Khan**, 77, a historian, award-winning author and Padma Shri, opened a window into the lives of rural Bihar's women. As an observer of rural life, she had found primary schools had been set up in most villages, at a distance of 3 or 4 kos (1 kos = 3.1 km). Parents, including those belonging to Dalit and Maha Dalit castes such as Paswans and Musahars, sent their children to school by boat or bullock cart but after sending their daughters to primary school, they hesitated to send them far away to secondary schools. Primary school students study while working in the fields and herding and grazing cattle. The boys tended to run away after the mid-day meal, but girls stayed on in class, and women may soon outdo men in Bihar, she observed. Despite girls showing a greater interest in education, the attitude was that boys must be sent for higher education because they can go out and earn. Girls get tied down because of the distance and household chores. Secondary schools are few and far between. "So, girls become literate, but not educated. They are bright and sensible, but unable to get the opportunities they deserve," she said.

She made the point that inflexible rules of patriarchy and caste often left upper caste women unhappier and more backward “because they cannot move out of the house without the permission of their men. There is more violence there.”

Usha Kiran Khan’s book on Asha workers was released by Prof Shiv Narayan Singh.



**Ravi Shankar Upadhyay**, a journalist, wound up the session on a lighter note, speaking about the cuisine of Bihar and its written history that dated back 5,000 years, and provided a glimpse into the cultural mores that underpinned the social and political dynamics of the state.

He said ancient Bihar had observed prohibition too, citing the Jataka tales which spoke of *sharab bandi* (ban on alcohol) in Rajgir/Rajgriha, the ancient capital of Magadh. British traveller Peter Mundi wrote in 1632 that during his journey from Agra to Patna, he looked for alcohol in Sasaram, Sher Shah Suri’s capital, and was told it was illegal, and if he was caught consuming it, his home would be demolished and he would be jailed.

Turning to the food of the region, he said *litti chokha*, a wheat ball stuffed with spiced Bengal gram flour and served with a vegetable dish of roasted tomato, onion, garlic and potato or brinjal, is Bihar's most famous dish, followed by *thekua*, a crisp sweet offered as *prasad* during the *chhat puja*; and the sweet *khaja*, which now has a GI tag. Some of these were mentioned in Panini's *Ashtadhyayi*, the 6th century BCE grammar treatise.

Bihar has a long tradition of using different varieties of rice, he said, explaining that when Xuanzang (Hiuen Tsang) came to Nalanda in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, he was welcomed with Maha Shali Rice. Biharis do not eat new rice but instead use it to make dishes such as *malpua* and *pitha*.



Bihar was also known for sweets made from sesame seeds: Gaya's *tilgut* was famous, as were *tilwas* (sesame laddoos) and *anarsa* (sweet made of rice flour, mawa and sesame).

Due to time constraints, he could not give a fuller picture of Bihar's cuisine, especially its fish and mutton dishes, but he gave the group a taste of it all during lunch on the sunny lawn.



**LUNCH**

**Internal Network Session for NWMI Members Only**



Sitting on the sun-soaked lawns after lunch, moderators **Laxmi Murthy** and **Sameera Khan** introduced the session for the many new members. “Since the NWMI is growing on a daily basis—there more than 750 members now—this session is to allow newer members to get a sense of our functioning and ethos, and for older members to participate in figuring out how to streamline functioning, deepen democracy and strengthen collectivism. A short background was shared, and specific points were discussed.



Members were made aware of the structure and functioning of the network, which is characterised by non-hierarchical, collective functioning. The moderators shared a snapshot of the behind-the-scenes work (website, social media, statements, etc) and how it gets done, the process of issuing statements in a democratic manner, and contributing to initiatives such as research studies and the Gender, Media and Election section on the website. Other points shared were: the process of emergence of local chapters and their relationship to the national group and the reasoning behind staying non-registered: to remain autonomous despite the challenges.



Membership criteria were discussed, in light of the changing nature of the media, the lack of permanent jobs and the low pay that was a feature of freelance work. There was a consensus that working in corporate or government PR, would not fulfil the membership requirements. Membership of political parties came in for discussion as well, with some states being more politically active than others. The consensus was to come up with a detailed document on membership criteria and discuss it with the larger group.



An ongoing concern, diversity in the NWMI, came up for discussion. Small steps towards increasing diversity like the NWMI Fellowships with contribution by individual NWMI members and travel grants to attend NWMI meetings were set up to ensure that lack of resources do not hinder participation in a non-funded network.

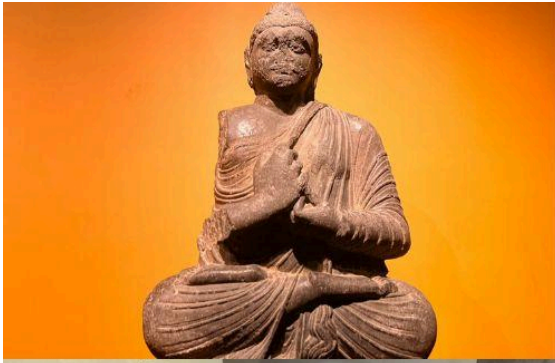


There were discussions about potential projects NWMI could take up, including a helpline for members facing sexual harassment at the workplace, online abuse or legal cases, and; creating a freelancers' union, or a mentorship programme. Each of these initiatives would depend on members willing to anchor the project and also get others on board.

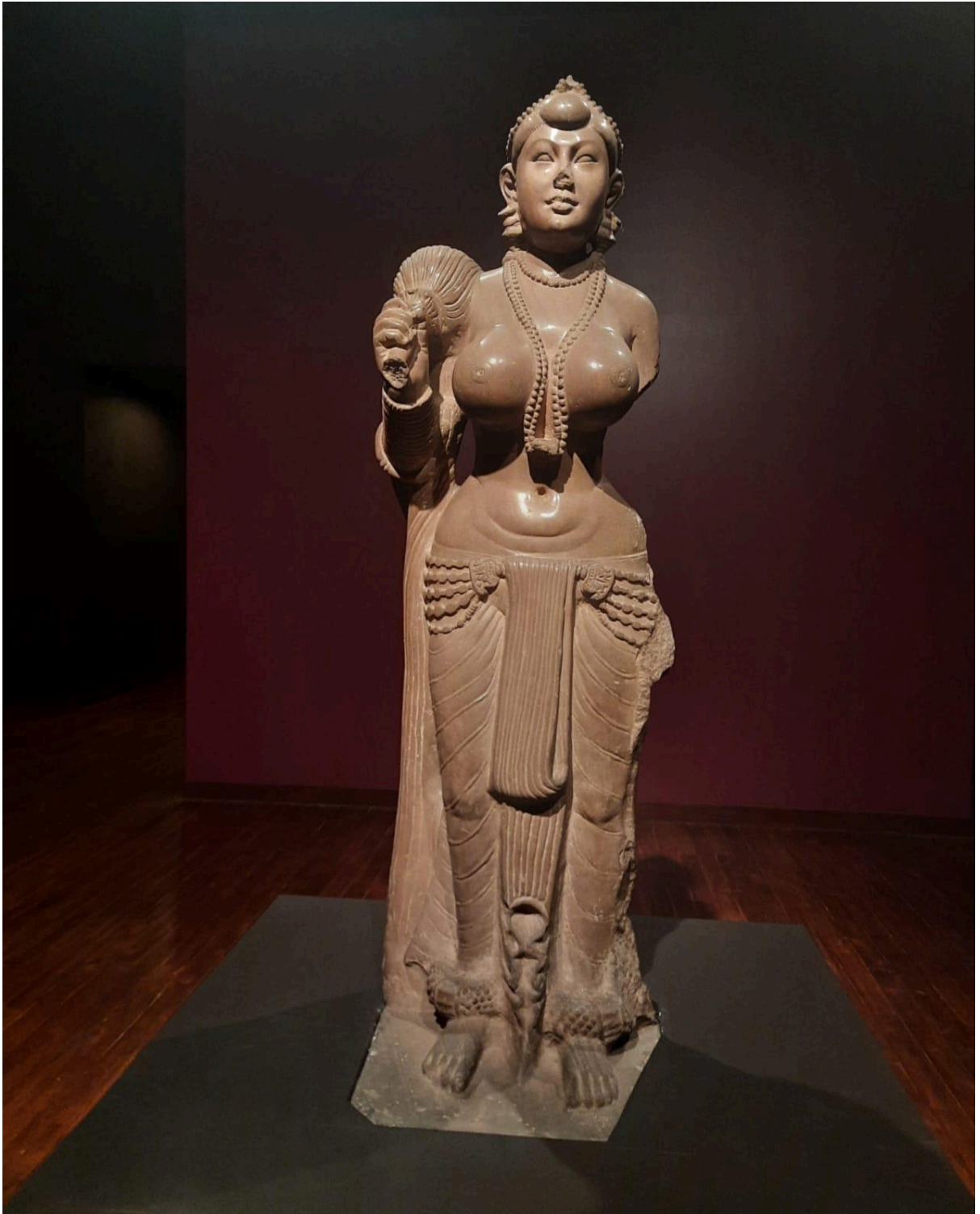
### **Guided Tour of Bihar Museum**

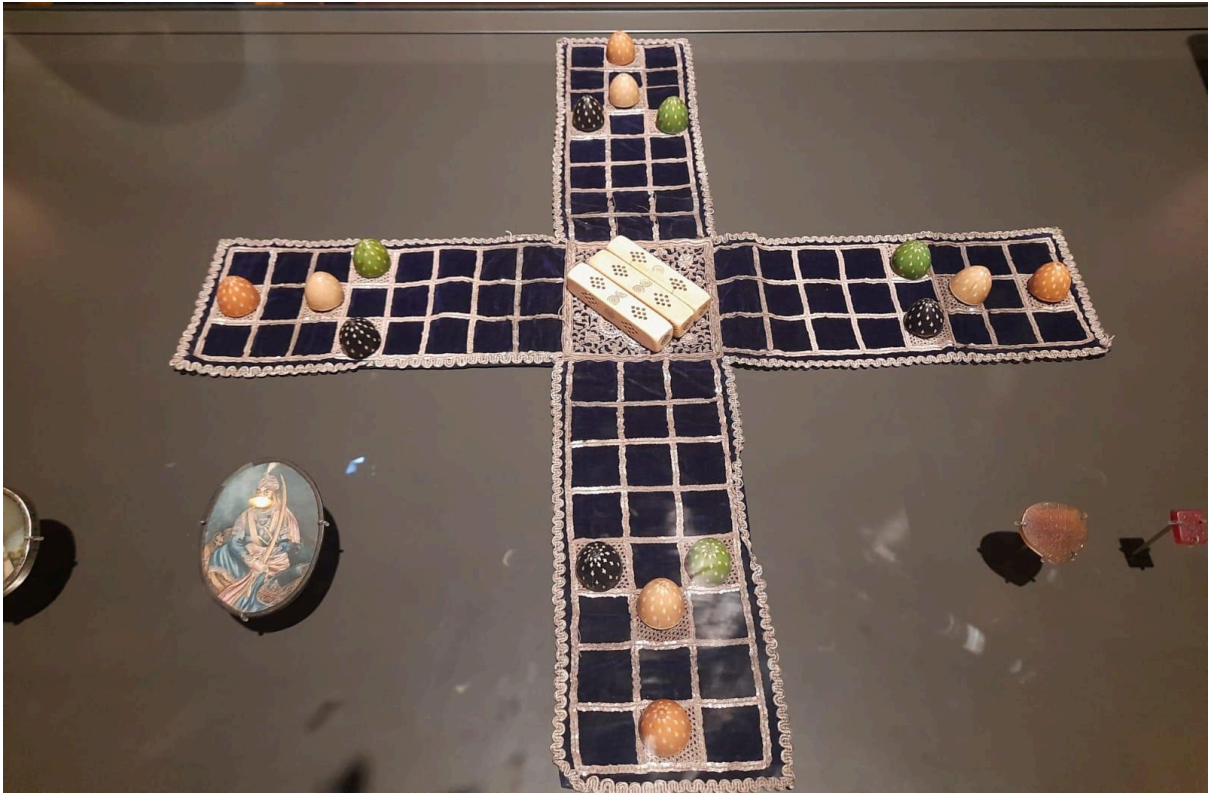


The members' visit to the Bihar Museum was extremely memorable. Spread over an area of more than 13 acres, the museum which was opened in 2017, showcases the rich heritage of the state. The collection of artefacts represents artistic thoughts and exquisite craftsmanship that flourished in the region for over 2,000 years.





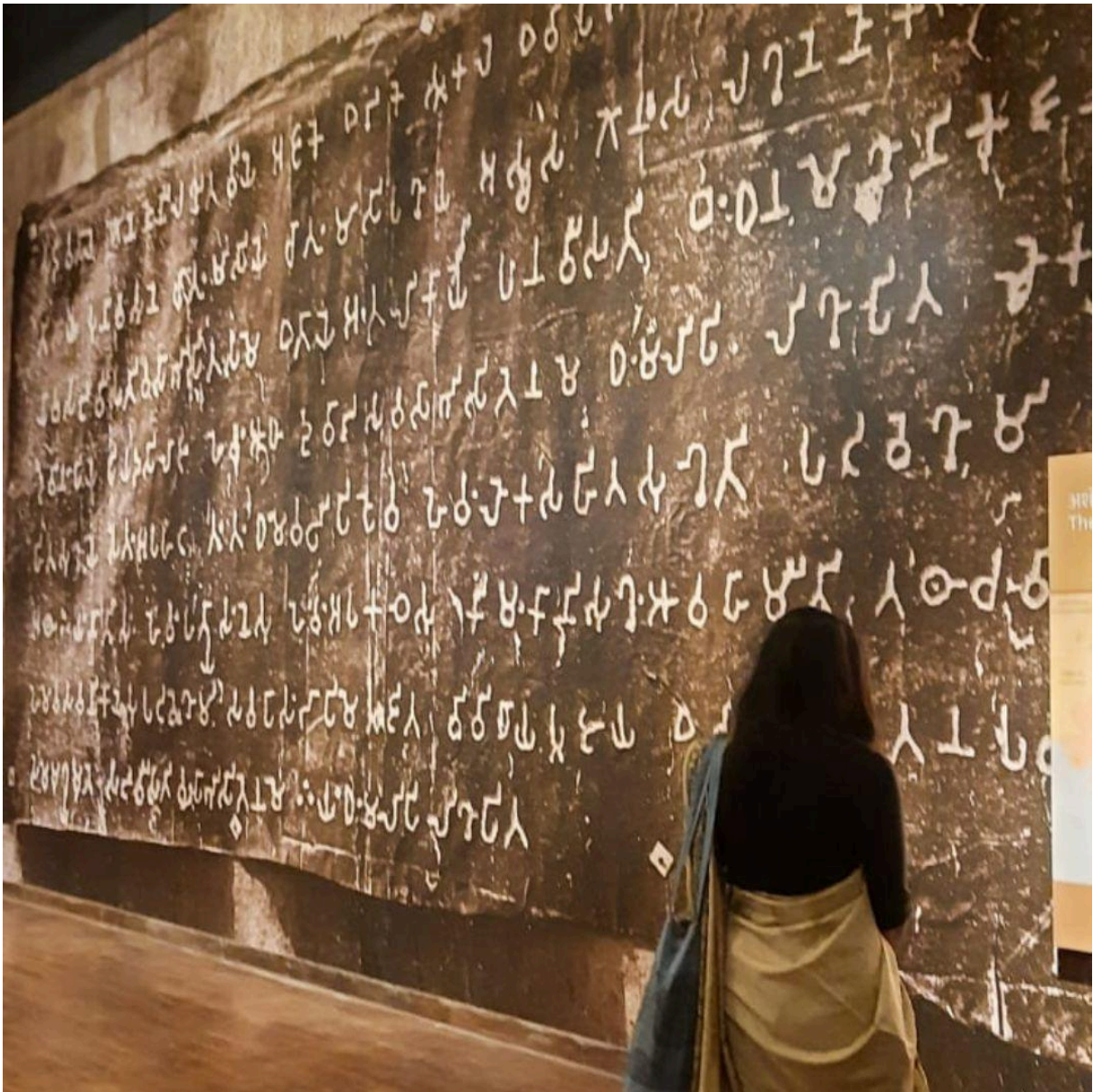














A range of artwork, including Madhubani paintings, bamboo craft, Manjusha art, Tikuli art, doll art, stone sculptures and classic terracotta artefacts, were on display. The museum also houses the 2300-year-old Didarganj Yakshi that was discovered on the banks of the Ganga in Didarganj. Carved from a single piece of buff-coloured sandstone, the sculpture is known for its intricate details and classic feminine beauty.



At the auditorium to attend, students of the department of music at the JD Women's College, which began to admit male students recently, staged a cultural programme with traditional folk music and sufi songs. A big hit was Amir Khusro's 'Chaap Tilak', which had the audience up on their feet, swaying to the rhythm.



The evening concluded with snacks at the museum canteen and a brief foray into the shop, bursting with beautiful handwoven dolls, handicrafts made of Sikki grass, Madhubani paintings, delicate glass bangles and earrings, colourful sarees and kurtis, jute bags and exquisite artefacts. On seeing the creativity of Bihar's artisans, the journalists couldn't resist and purchased many things from the shop and clambered into the waiting buses arms full of bags.

### **Listening Circle on sexual harassment**

A Listening Circle on sexual harassment was facilitated by **Neha Dixit**. The idea was conceptualised because NWMI has recognised the trauma that such experiences and environments create. The first step was simply to listen to one another, in person.

It was an attempt to create a safe healing space where all members could speak without judgement, listen to one another, hold hands and vent. It was a two-hour-long moderated session that offered a space to speak openly and freely.

The goals of the session were to:

- **Help the NMWI community heal:** Recognized the harm that many members experienced, NWMI hoped to work together to repair that harm and strengthen the community.
- **Listen:** It was a space for members to speak about their experiences and to listen to one another. The aim was to hear everyone's ideas so that the members could support one another better.
- **Share information, resources, and support:** NWMI wanted to hear what it was that members needed to feel supported. Participants also shared their expectations from such a circle and the NWMI community in the future.

**The following guidelines were communicated in several languages:**

- We invite you to be as honest as you need to be. At the same time, we ask that you remain respectful of the feelings of the people present in the meeting.
- Please be mindful of the time you take. While there should never be a time limit when one is trying to express hurt and discomfort, we would like everyone to have a chance and since time is limited, it would be good to share!
- We hope to be able to make the space open and free. This can only happen if all of us leave our judgements behind.
- Please feel free to speak in any language that you are comfortable with. We are certain we will all find a way to translate and understand each other.
- We want this to be a pleasant experience for all of us. And yet, sometimes we can all say or do things that can make others uncomfortable. We ask everyone to be aware of this and refrain from using classist/ casteist/sexist language. Some of us also know each other well and find it easier to connect in groups. This may make it easier for some of us to talk, but we must bear in mind to make space.
- Let's find ways to listen. The flow of conversation becomes difficult... we might land up speaking over each other or cutting each other off if we are not mindful. We ask everyone to find patience and try to avoid overlaps.
- It is totally okay for you not to say anything during the chat and listen in. Silences are valuable... small pockets of reflection in between!
- This is a private space. We ask that nothing that is shared in this session is carried outside to anyone else. As we know that trust is a powerful, yet delicate thing... one that we must preserve with utmost care.
- We take no photos and make no videos. We request this be a no-gadget space and ask that you keep your phone on silent for these two hours. It will help all to just be present in the conversation.

- Do not discuss the details of individual incidents and/or cases that you hear in this session without explicit consent.
- If anyone becomes disruptive, they will receive a warning from the moderator.
- It might be late in the day for some of you. In order to maintain solidarity and respect everyone's voice, we ask that we all stay till the very end and support each other.

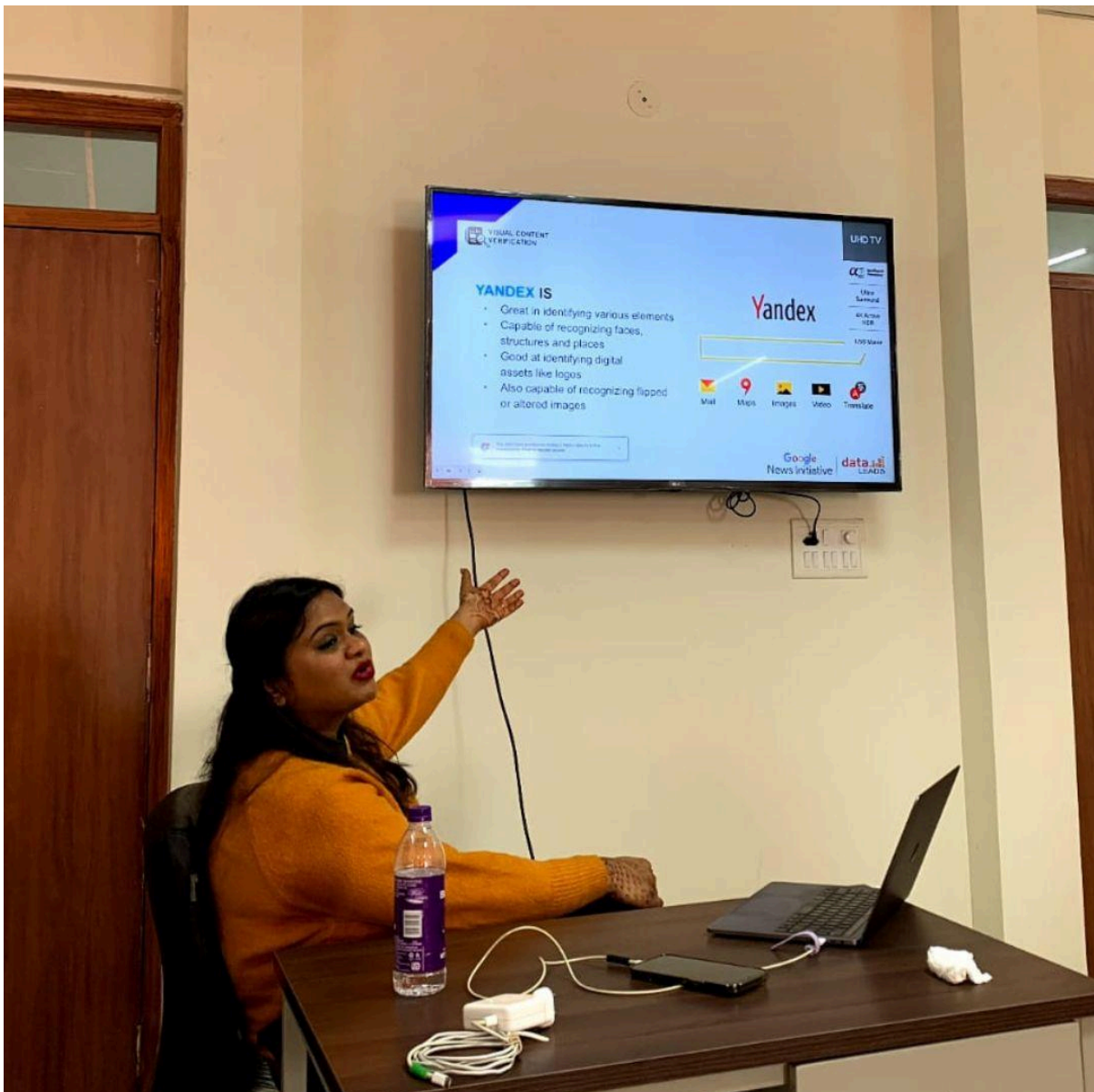
The session was attended by 73 members who shared their experiences of facing sexual harassment at the workplace and the complexities of it. Many members also shared the need to think of ways of resolution and how best to support each other outside the formal systems considering many NWMI members work as freelancers. Some members also talked about the limited understanding of what constitutes sexual harassment. The session was roughly three hours long and concluded with everyone hugging without any comments, judgements or suggestions to those who shared their experiences, in the true spirit of listening to each other.

## **DAY 3, SUNDAY, 29 JANUARY 2023**

*Simultaneous Breakout Workshops were conducted on the following topics:*



1. A workshop on podcasting was conducted by **Menaka Rao**, consulting editor with Suno India. She talked about the kind of podcasts possible; how they can be produced; technology suitable for production and platforms they can be uploaded on. Field reporting can be done using a phone voice recorder too, or even online platforms such as Zoom. She focused on field reporting for podcasting and how stories can be told using sound. Writing for podcasting involves listening to hours of recorded audio, making sense of it and constructing a narrative using key characters. It is not vastly different from long form journalism, but sometimes the choice of characters depends on the audio available since some things sound better on audio, but are not as effective in print and vice versa.

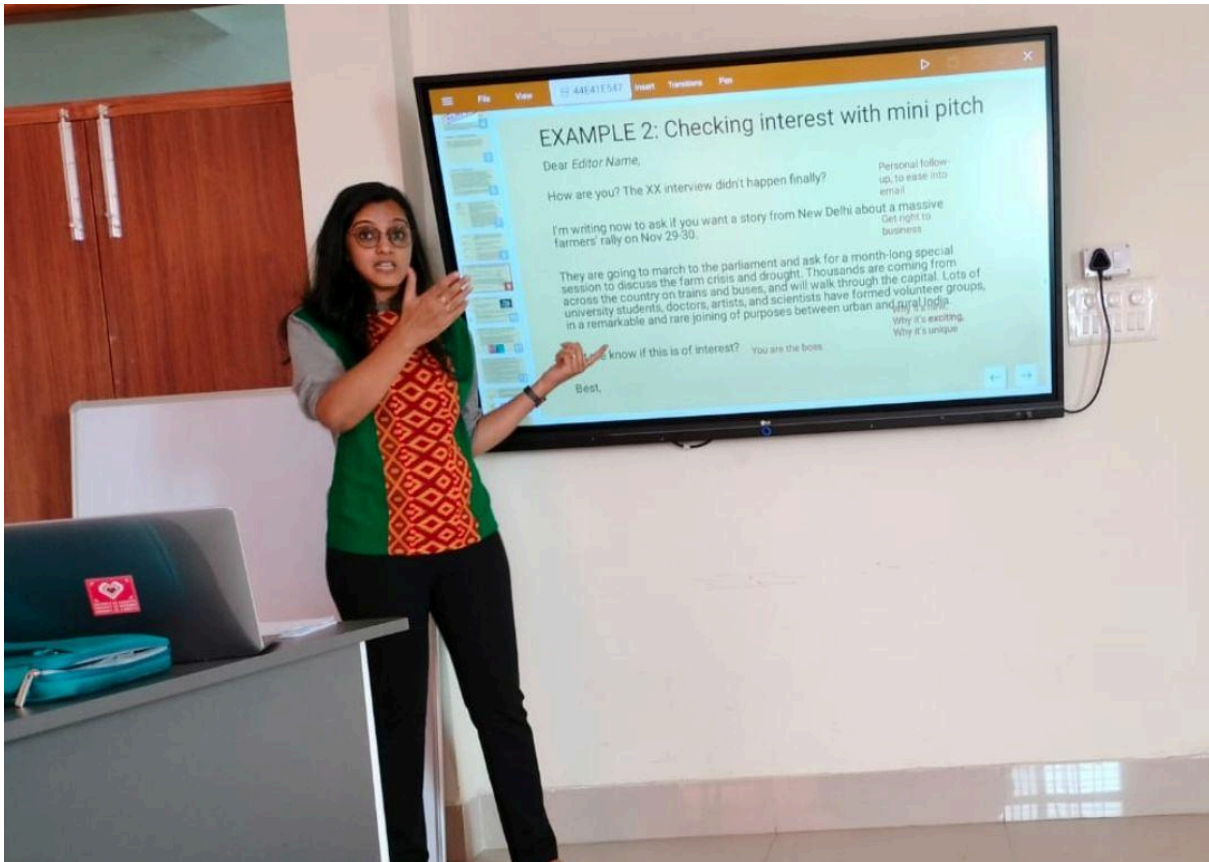


2. A workshop on visual investigation was conducted by **Geetika Rustagi** and **Shruthi Mohan** (Google News Initiative India Training Network). The data verification and visual verification workshop was intended to build capacity in journalists, editors

and newsrooms to tackle the growing menace of misinformation and fake news. The workshop introduced tools that help debunk misinformation, verify the source, investigate images and videos for their authenticity, among others. Over 30 journalists and media students attended this workshop.



3. A workshop on mobile journalism was conducted by independent journalist **Hema Rakesh**. About 25 NWMI members as well as staff of Aryabhatta University attended the workshop. Hema spoke about social media monetization, social media best practices and social media algorithms. The workshop was hands-on, with everyone actively implementing the learnings on their own mobile devices. Participants were interested in keeping up with the digital age, and many of them requested lectures on digital journalism and social media techniques.



4. A workshop on pitching to international publications was conducted by independent journalist **Rohini Mohan**. The workshop was all about honing a story idea, giving it context and newswiness, along with a global hook, for any news, features, politics and environmental subjects. The workshop was specifically aimed at freelance journalists. The attendees included English and non-English reporters from Odisha, Kashmir, Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Bihar.



5. A workshop on ‘Digital security for women journalists’ was conducted by independent journalist **Srishti Jaswal**. She shared practical tips on how to protect devices such as mobile phone and laptops from data leaks and hacking. She demonstrated how a participant’s phone number and email ID were breached. She also shared information about relatively new technology for password security such as Bitwarden and KeyPassXC. The workshop also discussed secure browsing via Firefox and provided an introduction to internet anonymity.

## Concluding session

The last session was an internal discussion on the venue of the next national meeting, and the publication of a statement.







The Patna Declaration was discussed and unanimously adopted. Titled 'Stand Up for Media Freedom', the declaration took note of the increasing attacks on freedom of the media and called upon journalists, media workers and the public to stand up for press freedom, ethical journalism, gender equality and social justice.

### The NWMI Goes dolphin-spotting





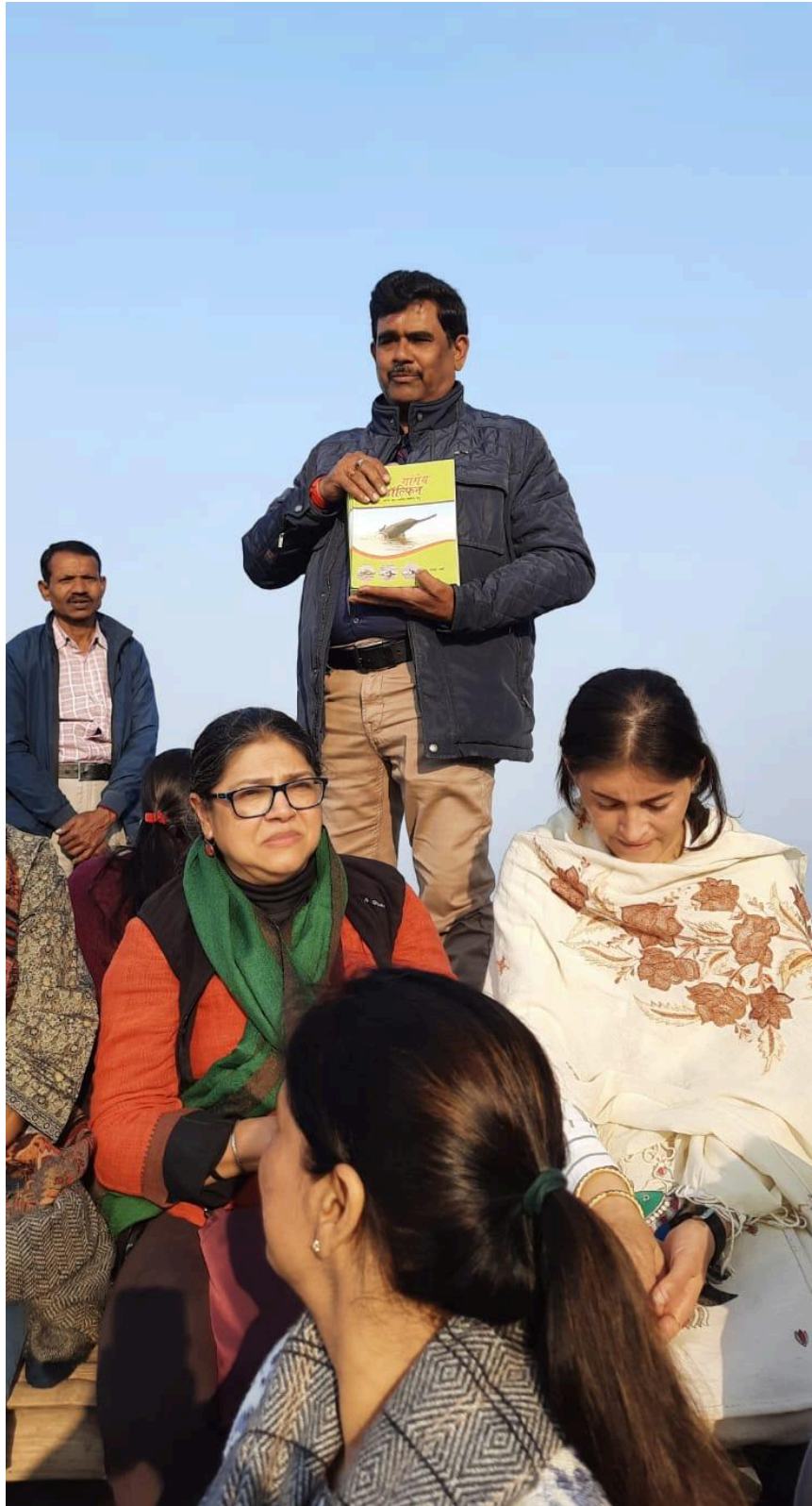






Membership of the NWMI extends beyond engaging in conversations about journalism—and an exhilarating trip along the Ganga to spot the Ganges river dolphin (*Platanista gangetica*), known locally as *susu*, was a chance to have some fun and adventure.





Guiding us on the dolphin-watching expedition was Dr. Gopal Sharma, a seasoned researcher and scientist with the Zoological Survey of India. A wooden boat cast off from the Gandhi ghat with excited NWMI members on board. The Ganga presented a picturesque backdrop, with the crisp air adding to the ambiance. Together with Dr. Sharma, the boatman Rajender Saini, an experienced dolphin-man himself, explained dolphin habits and habitats and the optimal spots and times for observation during the

hour-long expedition. The deeper reaches of the river were where the dolphins were likely to surface.

As they ventured deeper into the river, the solitary figures gracefully broke the surface, their dorsal fins visible in the water. The members counted at least a dozen of these majestic creatures.





**Report:**

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