

# Changing Ecology of Indian Media

ASHOK PANKAJ

This short monograph on the Hindi language press in India raises vital questions about the role of media in ensuring the constitutional rights of freedom of expression and free formation of public opinion that is crucial to the making of an informed and enlightened citizenry, and above all, a free and fair functioning of democracy. It shows that the increasingly vicious nexus between media, business, and politics is clouding the free and fair functioning of Indian democracy. It also draws attention to the elitist and socially exclusionary character of the Indian media. An illustration of the elitist character of the Indian media is the fact that the English language press commands much greater respect and gets an easy audience of those in power, compared to their vernacular language counterparts. Similarly, the exclusionary character of Indian media is demonstrated by the dominance of upper castes in the substantive positions of owners, managers, and editors.

For example, a study of 315 editors and other media persons in Delhi, conducted by Anil Chamadia, Jitendra Kumar, and Yogendra Yadav in 2006 shows that 85% of them were upper castes, of which around 50% were Brahmin (Drèze and Sen 2013: 222; Media Studies Group 2019). Another survey data of press personnel in Prayagraj shows the predominance of upper castes, mainly Brahmin and Kayastha, among the office-bearers and members of the Allahabad Press Club and among the press reporters (Drèze and Sen 2013: 220). Dalits and women are meagrely represented in these spaces, and those who are there often find it difficult to rise to high positions.

## 'National' and 'Regional' Media

An important narrative on media in India makes a distinction between the English language press and its vernacular counterparts. The former is considered

## BOOK REVIEWS

**The Journey of Hindi Language Journalism in India: From Raj to Swaraj and Beyond** by Mrinal Pande, Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2022; pp 176, ₹1,195.

“national,” “progressive,” “cosmopolitan,” and “international in outlook,” whereas the latter is belittled as “regional,” “parochial,” “conservative,” and “provincial in outlook.” This book shows that such a distinction is not only counterfactual, but also derogates the massive contribution of the vernacular press to the making of modern India.

The vernacular language press played a vital role in propagating the message of the national movement. *Amrit Bazar Patrika* in Bengali, *Kesari* in Marathi, *Punjab Kesari* in Punjabi, *Navjeevan* in Gujarati, *Quami Awaaz* in Urdu, *Pratap* in Hindi, among other vernacular dailies were the torchbearers of India's freedom struggle. Apparently perturbed by their nationalist tone and anti-colonial stand, the British government, with a view to crack down on nationalist newspapers and periodicals, enacted the Vernacular Press Act, 1878. The English language press, however, was not considered seditious towards the British colonial government and, hence, was kept out of the purview of the Vernacular Press Act. In the post-independence period, they played a vital role in the sociopolitical awakening of the Dalits and backward classes and towards the consolidation of Indian democracy. Yet, they are dismissed as “regional” and derogated as “parochial” and “provincial.”

Against the narrative of being “national,” the English language press has never been the media of the Indian masses. Even in the 1950s, vernacular dailies outnumbered their English counterparts, both in numbers and circulation. Out of 320 dailies in the early 1950s, only 41 (12.81%) were English; the

rest 279 (87.19%) were vernacular, of which Hindi dailies (76) were the largest, followed by Urdu (70), Marathi (26), Kannada (25), Gujarati (23), Malayalam (21), Tamil (12), Punjabi (9), Bengali (7), Telugu (6), Oriya (3), and Assamese (1). They outnumbered English dailies in circulation as well. Against the total circulation of 6,97,000 (27%) copies of English dailies, vernacular language dailies sold 18,13,000 (73%) copies, of which the Hindi dailies had the highest circulation of 3,79,000 copies, followed by Bengali (2,40,000), Urdu (2,13,000), Malayalam (1,96,000), Marathi (1,19,000) and so on (p 48).

In 2009, as per Round 1 of the Indian Readership Survey (IRS 2009), the top 10 highest circulating dailies were vernacular ones. *Times of India*, the largest circulating English daily, was only at the 11th rank (p 69). Further, as per Round 2 of the IRS (2008), against the 55.74 million copies sold by the top-selling Hindi daily, *Dainik Jagaran*, the top-selling English daily, *Times of India*, could sell only 13.34 million copies per day, about one-fourth of the former. The other three top-selling Hindi dailies were also much ahead of the *Times of India*. *Dainik Bhasker* sold 33.83 million copies per day, *Amar Ujala* 29.38 million and *Hindustan* 26.63 million copies. Moreover, the circulation of English dailies has been mostly limited to urban areas and predominantly to the English-educated population who, even today, constitute only a small fraction of the total population of India. Yet, English dailies are considered “national” and Hindi and other vernacular language dailies as “regional.”

The categorisation of the English language press as “national” and vernacular language press as “regional” privileges the former over the latter. For example, the English media has been privileged to access important government sources, press briefings, press conferences, and summit-level meets of the heads of states and governments, often to the exclusion of Hindi and vernacular language journalists. The author of the book under review, an eminent Hindi journalist, narrates an incident of an important

press conference in Delhi in which “a vernacular journalist had to risk being called a ‘trouble maker’ and shout to be noticed” (p 5). She recalls her days as she entered the profession:

I joined a Hindi language news agency around 1981, when no one of any public standing—political leaders, bureaucrats, even most revolutionary writers of tracts against the Emergency in English—would waste their time or attention on journalists from some obscure Hindi news agency they had never heard of. Even the agency journalist, I discovered, had low self-esteem. (p 2)

Further,

The questions and answers in any important government media exchange following major international meets or the annual Union Budget were nearly always between males and in English. (p 5)

Also,

The VIPs in Delhi would not meet or even answer phone calls from a mere representative from a Hindi news agency. But they were readily available to our English-language counterparts. Hindi journalists, I was advised, should forget about cultivating sources among the ranks of important bureaucrats and corporates. (p 8)

Some of the Hindi dailies accessed these briefings through their sister English dailies, for example, *Hindi Hindustan* through *Hindustan Times* and *Navbharat Times* through the *Times of India*.

### Social Exclusion and Business Ethics

The exclusionary character of Indian media is another painful reality. Owners, editors, and journalists invariably come from upper castes. Women, Dalits, and Muslims holding crucial positions in the media is so rare that it can be counted on one’s fingers. Moreover, their rise has not been easy. The author narrates her own ordeals: “a rare female, who defied odds and rose to be editor, had to face frequent confrontations with misogyny and insubordination by her own senior male staff” (p 5). Though in the last couple of decades or so, women have made an impact as anchors on television in a big way, which reveals another layer of deeply entrenched gendered worldviews. She explains: “With no data to back it up, the male reasoning was that ‘modern’ Indian viewers preferred young and nubile female anchors as presenters of

news on tv, preferably in Western attire” (p 10). No wonder, “grey hair in men lent in certain gravitas, but greying female anchors must hang up their gloves” (pp 10–11).

The ethics of media business has also changed substantially since the 1990s. Raising revenues and hobnobbing with power have driven the editorial and managerial policies of most of the media houses lately. Under such circumstances, the moot question posed by Mrinal Pande is: “Can editorials continue to care for individual rights and local cultures in view of their proximity to political and corporate lobbyists?” Editors have not only lost their freedom to write independent editorials, but the “phenomenon of paid news” has badly dented the credibility of the Indian media. It is not surprising that in the global index of free press, India stands at 161 out of 180 nations. More worrying is its slipping position. It slipped from the position of 150th rank in 2022 to 162nd rank in 2023; an 11-point decline in one year (*Times of India* 2023: 10).

Another associated development is the subordination of professional editors to owners and managers who have stationed themselves as executive editors, or with some other suave but camouflaging designations, side-by-side professional editors. It is not surprising that the big dailies or weeklies are not able to attract and retain editors of very high calibre, who would stand by certain principles and for independence of the media. Smart and technology-savvy managers, who can raise the revenue graph every quarter, are in greater demand than editors of high professional credibility.

The recent change in the media outreach policy of the Government of India, implemented with effect from 1 August 2020 that, of course, favours vernacular language media, is another disturbing trend. The government has centralised control over the advertisement revenue of the media; government advertisement forms an important source. Now, all ministries and departments will hand over 80% of the funds meant for outreach programmes to the Bureau of Outreach and Communication of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting (MIB) in

the very first quarter of a financial year. It means that 80% of all government expenditure on outreach programmes will be spent by the MIB. This does not augur well for the media, as Pande has rightly apprehended that it “will expect media organizations to be ‘favourably disposed’ towards any requests from governmental quarters” (p 153).

### An Overview of the Book

The first two chapters of the book deal with the evolution of Hindi language and subsequently explain the rise of Hindi language press and journalism. Chapter 2 describes the growth of the Hindi press in the post-Emergency period and attributes it to (i) rising sociopolitical awakenings of the backward classes, (ii) growth in literacy rate, and (iii) demographic growth. Chapter 3 focuses on the changing dynamics of the business of the media in general and Hindi press in particular, which expanded massively in the 1990s. It shows that the growth story of the Indian media since the 1990s has been led not by the big media houses but by vernacular language dailies like *Dainik Jagran* and *Dainik Bhaskar* in the Hindi belt. Chapter 4 peeps into the dark underbelly of the media and gives an insider view of its fault lines. It painfully notes the phenomenon of the use of “stingers” instead of regular professional news reporters and “paid news” that raises ethical questions about the professional credibility of the Indian media. She writes,

In a nation with a large number of unemployed or under-employed finding bright and eager young people to do risky running around without raising ethical questions is not too difficult. But it often results in the local politicians and markets getting promotional stories, planted as news. (p 18)

Chapter 5 explains the impact of digital and social media on print media. It shows that they have different markets. They are not at a cut-throat competition. Chapter 6 describes the growth of Hindi newspapers and Chapter 7 describes the new media ecology. Finally, there is a short postscript on media after the COVID-19 pandemic that explains the massive expansion of digital media and its penetration into the rural hinterland during the COVID-19 lockdowns.

### Compulsions of Survival?

While this book maps the journey of Hindi language press and devotes a whole chapter to its origin and evolution, its main focus is contemporary, that is, the changing media ecology, especially the nexus between politics, media, and business. But, a question of vital significance remains unanswered, that is: Why is it that most of the media houses, especially the new-generation owners, have become obsessively revenue-driven, with the added pursuit of access to political power? Is it a market compulsion to survive? Or, is it an abdication of the path trodden by their fathers and forefathers, who were also industrialists and capitalists but ran their media business with different ethics?

While raising this question, one is bound to reflect on the overall decline in public life, and the functioning of various institutions, including the legislature, the executive and the judiciary. Has the fire that lit the freedom struggle and then propelled the task of nation-building in the early decades after independence

been extinguished? Why is it that we have not been able to create another Indian Space Research Organisation, another Indian Institute of Science, another National School of Drama (NSD), another troika of *Sahitya*, *Sangeet* and *Natak* Akademies, or another Amul? Why is it that the second generation of Indian Institutes of Technology and Indian Institutes of Management have not come even to the level of the first generation? On the occasion of the completion of 75 years of independence, officially being celebrated with great fanfare as “Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav,” this question begs an answer.

Given the changing ecology of media, one would expect this book to have discussed (i) the role of the regulatory body, that is, the Press Council of India (PCI); (ii) the working (service) conditions of journalists; and (iii) the role of various associations of media personnel, though the author has discussed the Indian Women’s Press Corps. In the changed scenario, the role of the PCI has

become more vital and significant. The working conditions of journalists is another important aspect of the independent functioning of the media. They are an organic part of the media structure. Any story of the media in India remains incomplete without analysing the role of these bodies. Nonetheless, this book is a commendable work that draws our attention to the multifaceted challenges facing Indian media and democracy.

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Ashok Pankaj ([ashokkpankaj@gmail.com](mailto:ashokkpankaj@gmail.com)) is with the Council for Social Development, New Delhi.

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