

Substantiated Storytelling

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Some day in the foreseeable future, news may no longer live in a binary world of social media versus mainstream media. YouTube channels are already the chosen medium of many chroniclers of the current world, some with greater finesse or wider reach or sharper narratives than others. Tik Tok videos, Insta stories and many more hybrid models of storytelling will be de rigueur journalistic practice. And, while I am happy to report that good journalism in India does not expect to be rendered redundant any time just yet, the newspaper or television channel as we know it is already in the throes of metamorphosis. Whether you see it as journalism under siege or news-reporting 3.0 being liberated depends which side of the debate you are occupying, but, either way, one thing that is not difficult to agree upon is that books such as *Poverty Matters: Covering Deprivation in India* by are going to be important, key additions to the discourse on how journalism will stay relevant in the coming decades.

The book, part of the Studies in Journalism series of monographs, textbooks and edited volumes, is a distillation of a series of annual lectures delivered by visiting professor K Nagaraj at the Asian College of Journalism (ACJ) in Chennai between 2001 and 2016. The series editor is Nalini Rajan, also professor and dean of studies at the ACJ. According to the editor's note, the book has also used contributions, in the form of lectures, by P Sainath, Utsa Patnaik, C P Chandrasekhar, Jayati Ghosh, Balaji Sampath, Madhura Swaminathan, Kalpana Sharma, and others. While that makes it a book for practising media professionals and especially those starting out at this delicate juncture in history, the subject actually appeals to a wider audience, including those consuming the news with any discernment, as well as those with more than a passing interest in understanding deprivation in India. For the last set, the book is, additionally, a sort

Poverty Matters: Covering Deprivation in India

by K Nagaraj (based on lectures)/Nalini Rajan (ed),
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of guidebook on how to take a deeper dive into a range of associated topics ranging from population theory to neo-classical economics, from Amartya Sen to Thomas Piketty.

What to Avoid

Divided neatly into four sections, the book first looks at current trends in how Indian media portrays poverty and affluence today, and includes an early indictment of present-day business journalism in India, delivered as an example of what students of journalism must avoid:

Deprivation involves extremely complex, technical and contentious issues, and as a natural consequence, there are differing perspectives on each one of them. Whether it is about policy issues or the measurement and extent of factors underlying deprivation, the world is divided into different camps. Our perspective is uncommon in large parts of the media and in most academic discourse. Not everyone need accept and adopt this viewpoint, but any adopted perspective must be argued clearly and be open for challenge. Our perspective is hammered all through this volume for the reason that the alternate viewpoints are all around us, particularly in our pink press—i.e., the business newspapers. And all these perspectives tend to be biased towards the corporate sector.

Warning issued, the book goes on to grab the reader by the jugular as soon as it refers, in subsequent pages, to a news headline on “2 am kids,” a news feature on the life and times of affluent youngsters zipping around an information technology hub in the wee hours in search of food and sustenance for the soul. Poverty and affluence, as the book tells young readers of the first chapters, are “two sides of the same coin,” because the 55 Indians who are “dollar billionaires” live cheek by jowl with millions who live on less than a dollar a day, since affluence sadly feeds on growing inequality.

The second section is a galloping study of data and technical matrices, tools for measuring poverty, the dimming relevance of using calorific norms for populations, the direct and indirect methods of assessing poverty levels, the Planning Commission's adjusting of the poverty line upon receiving the Suresh Tendulkar Committee report and, importantly, the possibility of some data in India being doctored.

The third section actually opens the book's dialogue, drawing in anyone with even a passing interest in reportage and writing on the Indian poor, and also those who may consume such reportage. In “Broadening the Concept of Deprivation,” the chapters address the post-1990 world of measuring deprivation, looking at how India has fared on the human development index (HDI) vis-à-vis other countries, how Indian states have performed, how some relatively poor countries may improve on the indices of health and education through appropriate policies, and how some very resource-rich countries remain tragically poor performers on HDI. The individual chapters on health, gender and literacy are solid, using broad brushstrokes but touching on various details. Students especially would find themselves returning to these chapters later, for they can offer a useful trajectory in the midst of a reporting or writing assignment.

It is the three chapters that comprise the final section of the book that breath-takingly tie it all together. A chapter on the theory of comparative advantage studies the idea of trickle-down effects versus inclusive growth, the poverty trap capital-scarce nations face, doubts surrounding trade as an engine of growth, the problematic assumptions of the free trade theory, how the dice is loaded in favour of developed countries, and the multiple internal contradictions of the theory. It sums up its argument against the free-trade champions thus:

What is the reality? In 2001, the International Labour Organization reported that as much as one-third of the world's workforce of 3 billion people is unemployed or underemployed. In the developed world alone, there was 3–25 per cent unemployment between 1993 and 2003. After the global crisis of 2008, the situation has worsened.

A chapter on population and a concluding chapter on various current aspects of policymaking follow.

A careful reading of this final section can enrich the discourse on any major news story of our times. What is the nature of growth that has left millions of forest-dwellers fearing eviction while a law to grant them rights over forestland remains implemented in fits and starts? What are the contradictions in free trade theory for communities in mortal fear of carrying on traditional occupations? As Indian agriculture's absorption of labour falls, what are the big ideas for human capital? Is there specific data for jobs from the Make in India thrust? As fuel for fresh ideas, the final chapters are a gold mine for journalists and non-journalists alike.

Writing about the poor in India sometimes stumbles through the us vs them prism, either ignoring the injustice and multiple laws flouted in their inability to get redress or picking a romanticised, stylised narrative that is shocking and moving without positing their reality in relevant socio-economic data and trends. This straight-talking account of some basic tools is, in that sense, a useful reminder for practising journalists of some vintage as well, that journalism is ultimately making sense of society as it changes, or as it does not, and for that purpose narratives

spliced dutifully with data, context and scientific assessment do the job best.

Perhaps, because the chapters are based on lectures to a student community, the tone and tenor are often didactic, the early chapters clearly meant for students who are assumed to have not consumed any world-class journalism on the Indian growth story. In later chapters, there is sometimes a sense of hurrying along to cover a road map of subjects and issues, without pause for some non-essential but exciting digressions.

Surprisingly, and a little disappointingly, the book does not address the subject of caste in connection with deprivation. The centrality of the caste experience among the landless, the malnourished, those unable to access their rights on gender, nutrition, health and literacy is a common thread running through some of our big under-reported themes. One assumes the subject is omitted deliberately to be tackled exhaustively in a later title in the series. The other subject that was absent was the linkages between deprivation and climate crisis.

Old-fashioned Journalism

In times when journalism in the old-fashioned sense of the term is under attack, not just from the millions wielding a camera and the power to broadcast to

millions, but also from fake news and a post-truth world, the tools the book offers are going to be more, not less, important. Because professional journalists now find they must go increasingly off-camera, where TikTok cannot go. Data journalism, good, old-fashioned storytelling substantiated by rigour and context, investigations, all of these require grounding in technique. But, while the rules of journalism are being rewritten, who's to say that a TikTok video cannot tell an important story of deprivation and loss? Mobile journalists are already publishing very powerful stories and eventually all scholarly work on journalism will have to acknowledge this new form of news story, and assess whether it sets its reportage in scientific matrices too. Social media has ushered in passionate daily debates on everything from Swachha Bharat to smoke-free kitchens to women's literacy.

Arguably, these may not be the most well-informed or nuanced. But, what if they were, what if they could be? Journalists have long carried the cross of educating and re-educating themselves, and now the practitioners of new forms of journalism might find impactful gains from doing so as well. This book is therefore essential reading for them too.