

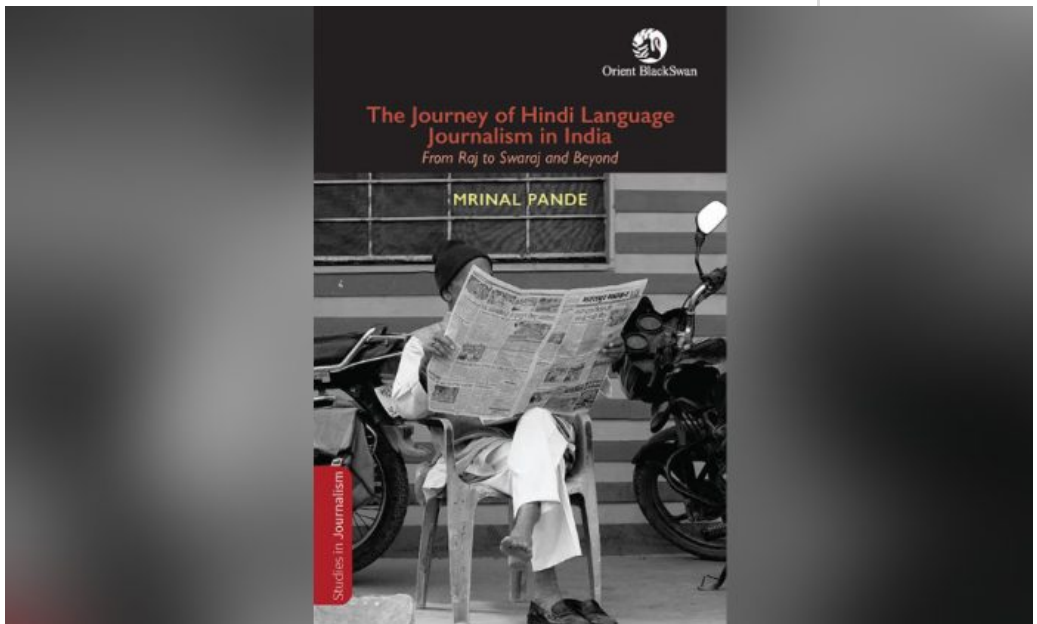
Book review: How Hindi journalism is gaining readers, but losing guts

In 'The Journey of Hindi Language Journalism in India: From Raj to Swaraj and Beyond', Mrinal Pande unveils the Hindi journalism's success story with a remarkable grasp over its inner functioning

MR Narayan Swamy

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The Journey of Hindi Language Journalism in India: From Raj to Swaraj and Beyond By Mrinal Pande
Orient BlackSwan pp. 176; Rs 1,195

If Hindi journalism dominates India's media scene today, one may have to thank Indira Gandhi for it. Despite playing a key role in India's Independence movement, Hindi journalism remained in the shadows of its English counterpart for more than three decades after 1947, causing much heartburn among its adherents. It was the end of the 19 months of the Emergency rule of Indira Gandhi and the nationwide hunger to enjoy freedom of speech yet again that led to its dramatic growth.

In *The Journey of Hindi Language Journalism in India: From Raj to Swaraj and Beyond*, Mrinal Pande, who has had a long career as an editor in Hindi journalism, unveils the Hindi journalism's success story with a remarkable grasp over facts and its inner functioning. She doesn't overlook the shortcomings, including how and why many successful Hindi newspapers, despite their financial clout, have come to shamelessly laud those in power.

Authentic voice of freedom movement

Since the time the first Hindu/Urdu newspaper *Udant Martand* (The Rising Sun) came out in May 1826, the industry's growth had been painfully slow. By the end of the 19th century, demands were made to use Hindi in courts in northern India, where Urdu reigned supreme. Royal patronage helped Hindi media to grow. For many princes, the use of Hindi was a symbolic assertion of their Hindu identity.

In the first four decades of the 20th century, particularly between 1920 and 1940, there was disaffection between Hindus and Muslims who saw Urdu and Hindi as separate markers of culture and community. As the freedom movement galloped, Hindi papers addressed politically sensitive audiences. Hindi became a symbol of political resistance against the British and also the Queen's English. Hindi papers were seen as the authentic voice of the freedom movement. Many national leaders used Hindi to communicate with the masses.

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But Hindi journalists remained poorly paid compared to their English practitioners – this was true even after Independence. Pande laments how for decades VIPs in Delhi would not meet or even answer phone calls from a Hindi news agency though they were readily available for the English counterparts. In the early 1950, although there were 76 dailies in Hindi compared to 41 in English, the latter's total circulation almost doubled Hindi's. No wonder, English media came to be dubbed as the national media while the Hindi media joined the ranks of the vernacular.

English-Hindi gap

The real spark in Hindi media came after the Emergency. This was when many young writers plunged headlong into the ethos of a reborn democratic India. Many quit various other jobs to enter Hindi journalism. Pande left a decent job of teaching English literature in Delhi University. Rajendra Mathur, then editor of *Nai Dunia* (and later *Navbharat Times*), also had a Master's degree in English literature. Rahul Barpuje, who preceded Mathur in *Nai Dunia*, was an agricultural scientist by training. Sharad Joshi later became an early celebrity script-writer. Kapoor Chand 'Kulish' of *Rajasthan Patrika* was a Sanskrit scholar and an authority on the Vedas. It helped that both during the Janata Party rule of 1977-80 and the later coalition governments, many who held power were fluent in Hindi and started to patronize the Hindi media.

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After 1977, there was a swift rise of Hindi language periodicals edited by known poets and fiction writers. A certain pompous style of writing began to give way to a more colloquial Hindi. In 1978 alone, Hindi papers recorded a growth of 11.8 percent and Hindi dailies numbered 318. The politically volatile 1980s also brought Hindi media personalities personally and collectively closer to various dominant political ideologies and leaders in the Hindi belt. In the early 1980s, among the 28 highest-selling Indian dailies, four were in Hindi: Navbharat Times, Hindustan, Punjab Kesari and Nai Dunia. The gap between English and Hindi dailies began to widen.

Patterns of political and corporate corruption

Around the late 1990s, advertisements or advertorials disguised as paid news cropped up. For once, mainstream Hindi media, too, began printing promotional articles about individuals, products and corporate houses for a fee. By then, in each part of India, vernacular print media was far outselling English. There were 131 million readers for Hindi print in 1999. By 2002, their numbers swelled to 155 million and by 2005 to 200 million. The expansion was mind-boggling. A 2009 Indian Readership Survey showed that the top 10 dailies were all Indian language newspapers — six in Hindi. The largest English daily, The Times of India, was at spot 11. Its total sales of 13.34 million copies per day were a fraction of the numbers sold by the top four Hindi dailies: Dainik Jagran (55.74 million), Dainik Bhaskar (33.83 million), Amar Ujala (29.38 million) and Hindustan (26.63 million).

After the Emergency, successful vernacular media in India had come to be run by businessmen whose primary interests were in other sectors. The easing of rules to import newsprint and the latest technology made publishing a very attractive commercial proposition for Indian capitalists. As the interests of the media barons began to merge with political masters, hardcore editorial work got diluted by the end of the 20th century. The close relationship between Hindi editors and political parties had far-reaching consequences.

Pande confesses that most major Hindi dailies are undeniably partisan and happy to use governments' version of events and root for their schemes wholeheartedly today. She asks a pertinent question: How did patterns of political and corporate corruption that our free press exposed and attacked for over half-a-century suddenly become our shared future?

Since the digital media is growing at a much faster pace, the print media's dominant ad share is getting eroded, Pande argues. Today, it is much more in need of, and dependent on, advertising revenue from government sources. This is why the mainstream print media today appears to be much more supportive of government policies than independent digital news portals.

Hindi media's isolationist view of nationalism

As the 20th century drew to a close, Hindi print had established its numerical superiority over the Indian media, thanks to huge growth in literacy in Hindi states. But Hindi media exhibited smugness and a dangerous isolationist view of nationalism. As it slipped into the hands of growing consolidation of big media companies, with the absence of curbs on cross-media ownership strengthening monopolies, coverage of issues like rural or urban poverty, environmental degradation and real development issues in general shrank.

Since 2014, the author says, old media hands have seen an undeniable growth in numbers of embedded journalists in most media organizations. Hindi media became more wary of exercising editorial autonomy. Most major Hindi dailies meekly accepted the official versions of events handed to them by government functionaries to the near exclusion of other viewpoints. The incumbent government, the book reveals, reportedly spent millions of rupees on Hindi print advertising and even raised the rates for the coveted Directorate of Advertising & Visual Publicity (DAVP) ads. But with over 600 million Facebook users and 400 million monthly active users of WhatsApp in India, the movers and shakers now seem far more sensitive to reporting in the digital and visual media than the more compliant print.

"It is hard to predict a clear future for the Hindi media at this point, but one hopes that as in the early decades of the 20th century, the sizable Hindi-speaking area and its audience will once again push for a robust, democratic space in which they have a voice." This is Mrinal Pande's wish. Will it be fulfilled? Her own narrative, exhaustive and well-researched, doesn't give much hope.

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