



## A Qissa of Brutal Honesty from an Observant Flaneur

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THE JOURNEY OF HINDI LANGUAGE JOURNALISM IN INDIA: FROM RAJ TO SWARAJ AND BEYOND by By  
Mrinal Pande *Orient BlackSwan, 2022, 188 pp., INR 1195*

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Journalism is an ever-evolving chaos because its umbilical cord is attached to the socio-cultural-political movements of a society that needn't necessarily have any design, formulae or pattern. It is an institution of discourses that are formed on shared beliefs, anomalies, conflicts, power dynamics and confluences. In India, the global and local practices of journalism merge to create a unique communication system that underlines her contemporary socio-cultural-political spectrum. The following review of a book that champions the history of journalism and its relationship with the society sheds a spotlight on the linguistic, financial and social journey of Hindi journalism.

My reading of the veteran journalist Mrinal Pande's latest book *The Journey of Hindi Language Journalism in India* became a personal affair. The book seemed like a deep dive into the alleys of my museum of memories because of its detailed and accurate accounts of the letterpress printing era, the offset printing decades to the contemporary digital printing technology. The ethnographically rich paragraphs on the newsrooms of the 70s and 80s, the description of Bharatendu Harishchandra who was the scion baniya from the Varanasi-based Agarwal family, the change in scenario after the implementation of the Vernacular Press Act of 1878 that empowered the British to confiscate any assets of vernacular papers and of course, the arrival of Gandhi—these portions of the book truly make you believe that it takes practice to master the theory. Mrinal Pande's prose that researches primarily the world of black ink and the new media flows like poetry but, without frills. It is sharp, scathing and blunt. It is straightforward yet endearing like a qissa you don't want to wrap up. What makes each chapter of the book stand out is the brutal honesty with which it is dealt. Be it describing the ill-paid condition of Hindi language stringers with no job assurance, the caste politics of a Hindi newsroom that still persists, the dependence on patronage then and advertising budgets from a customer list that includes the government now, the less than normal representation of women in newsrooms—the commodification of women anchors and their absence in higher editorial desks, the click-

bait digital news, the fake news era of twenty-first century and the diminishing role of independent media regulatory bodies literally operating as a toothless watchdog.

So, does the book present a grim picture of this grand Hindi institution, just like my teacher and the living phenomenon Professor Harish Trivedi rather quirkily asked in hopeful anticipation of *ulti Ganga* in his introductory remarks of *Chutnefying English: The Phenomenon of Hinglish* (ed. Rita Kothari and Rupert Snell): ‘Who cares what happens to Hindi except that routinely derided community called Hindiwallas...?’ Well, a lot of fresh and decayed water has gone under the bridge since this *yaksh prashna* was raised by him. We are living in a hyper-local world where language, if anything, has proven to be the biggest marketplace of all times. What makes it even more exciting is that Hindi’s is perhaps the only linguistic industry that has historically not let any monopoly sustain for long. The philosophical concepts of flat-structure, democratization, antithesis and juxtapositions can be seen at work through decades. Pande recalls how both India and Pakistan couldn’t have Hindi and Urdu as their respective official languages because of resistance from the other linguistic groups. The final resort to English as the official language in India even after seventy-five years of Independence is an impending testimony of this non-resolvable conflict. Yet, to be able to have a readership of teeming millions is therefore a success story of Hindi journalism. ‘Not classy, but massy’ is an old story. Welcome to the new ‘cool Hindi’ readership age that thrives on being called a Hindiwalla, receives pay-packages as good as the English counterparts, and is a source of ‘original’ data and stories (probably the biggest achievement in terms of its intellectual contribution).

Pande’s book is like a thick narrative that the playwright indulges in to describe the stage setting. Those who witness the happenings of the stage to drive their understanding of the story are called an engaged audience. But it takes a nuanced flaneur to absorb the background score, colours, consistency of design and character’s subsuming of narrative, and create a *mahaul* (atmosphere) for legit understanding of the ontology of the subject matter. Pande plays the observant flaneur way too well. She narrates ‘the story of Hindi’ beginning from the oral vernacular tradition of the ‘Hindavi’ era where the poet-scholar Amir Khusro compiled *Khalik Bari* in 1320, to the evolution of ‘Indostani’ under the Portuguese in the seventeenth century, to the *Bhaka Munshis’* preference to standardize the *KhadiBoli* version of *Hindavi* at the Fort William College of then Calcutta in 1800s. Of course, none of it worked in isolation. The standardization of Hindi was closely related to the political unification of the country. Gandhi from Gujarat, Raja Ram Mohan Roy from Bengal, Dayanand Saraswati from Punjab and many more social reformers of the era chose Hindi as their connect language with the masses.

The Hindi public sphere has travelled a long and challenging journey since Independence. The sub-set of it—the Hindi print and public culture and another sub-set of it—the world of Hindi journalism is also the story of *jugaad*. Theoretically decolonized but partly colonized in social reality, India continues to remain enchanted with the English-language media that till about recently was considered the ‘national media’, while vernacular media remained ‘regional’

However, from the 1980s onwards, demographic changes and growth in literacy in the Hindi heartland broadened the market for Hindi newspapers. In this book, Mrinal Pande accounts for the early days of nationalist newspapers in the colonial period; the subservience of the intelligentsia to English print media in the early decades of Independence; the stimuli of socialist fervour in the post-Emergency 1980s when an inclusive Hindi, propped up by regional dialects, became the best vehicle for furthering Indian democracy.

We learn. We learn from this book that journalism should be studied as a case in point through the lens of historical institutionalism. The academy treats journalism as a deinstitutionalizing force in the face of economic and technological changes that lead to institutional adaptation. This auto-pilot process is associated with the social changes and therefore leads to reinstitutionalization of the current agencies that call themselves media houses. A student of a specific branch of journalism, if at all it be considered one—communication and public relations is tempted to focus on the institutional theory for the study of legacy in historical institutionalism. Here, the polemics and rhetoric attached to the Hindi journalistic institutions hold particular promise of being authentic for the reader. Over a period of time, the academy of historical institutionalism has been deeply invested in the processes that account for the stability of institutions. This book is an important chapter in the study of journalism in India because of this reason. This ethnography of print culture is born out of a mixed methodology. Tools like participant observation, interviews, group discussions, snowball method and most importantly, reference to the inevitable statistics, make the arguments convincing for a student of historical institutionalism.

When does a person become an institution? When she does her yatra. What happens when this human-institution critiques a social-institution with which she has been subsumed for almost all her professionally active years? There are two things that could happen. First and most common, the human-institution offers a biased (good or bad) opinion about the social-institution. Second, the human-institution lends herself to the Bildungsroman-like journey where her self-confessed biases make way for a deeper understanding and thus appreciation of the social-institution. The second option is where a story worth telling is. The second option is where this book is born.

(Mrinal Pande is a veteran journalist, television personality, and author. She was the first woman Editor-in-Chief of the multi-edition Hindi daily, Hindustan. The first woman to be Secretary-General of the Editors' Guild of India, she is also the Founder-President of the Indian Women's Press Corps, a national body of India's women journalists. She was also Chairperson of India's public broadcaster, Prasar Bharati, from April 2010-March 2014. She was awarded the Padma Shri in 2006 for her services in the field of journalism.)

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