Epilogue—Habermas Revisited

In the region of Bundelkhand which straddles both Uttar Pradesh (UP) and Madhya Pradesh (MP), in district Chitrakoot, is a village called Markundi which comes alive every day at around 8 a.m. That is when the local passenger train pulls in if it is on time, and unleashes a frenzy of activity. Women who have been sitting with headloads of wood gathered from rapidly depleting forests scramble on, with children. They will ride ticketless into Madhya Pradesh, sell the wood at Satna which is three or four stations down the line, buy provisions with the money and catch the evening train back. It is a daily routine, and one that is followed by other women who will shove their headloads onto the same train from Tikaria, Itwa, Majgaon and Chitara. The men don't go because, unlike the women, they will be harassed by the train guard for travelling without a ticket.

There is little other means of livelihood in these parts, it is a hilly area where rainfall is scarce and ground water not accessible because of the topography. The steady deforestation has the makings of an impending ecological crisis. The compulsions of the women and the plight of the forests are both covered in a page one lead story in the 1–15 May 2006 issues of *Khabar Lahariya*, the eight-page fortnightly in the Bundeli dialect that is brought out by Dalit women from these parts. It is a clear-eyed, non-judgemental account. Markundi and the surrounding Manikpur block figure in other ways in other issues of this paper as well: It has a hospital without a doctor, and a 20-year-old school building in need of repairs. Right after the morning passenger train pulls out there is a fair presence of locals and visitors at the tea shop close to the tracks. Its owner keeps a copy of both the daily newspapers that reach these parts, *Dainik Jagran* as well as the latest issue of *Khabar Lahariya*, because the women have badgered him to buy a copy. Its dialect also makes it popular in this region.

Tea shops throughout the Hindi belt subscribe to at least one daily newspaper, and if they are price-conscious they buy *Aj*, which at

Rs 2 is priced the lowest. There are thousands of tea shops in these parts just as there were some 3,000 coffee houses in early 18th century London (Calhoun 1993: 12). While they are far removed from the coffee houses which helped Habermas formulate his early theory of the public sphere, they bear out in a different locale, a different era and in a very different economic sphere his theory of a 'diffuse public' which emerges in the course of the commercialisation of cultural production (Habermas 1989: 38). The coffee houses were the early manifestation of a public sphere, the penny press came much later. He idealised the rational–critical debate which he ascribed to the former (ibid.: 182–85) and assumed a degeneration of the public sphere as the media passed into capitalist hands and became a mass product. He predicted the control of media organs by the state and corporations and termed this a refeudalisation of the public sphere. At the same time he theorised that to be truly 'public' the public sphere needed more participants (Calhoun 1993: 3).

Comparisons

If one were to apply Habermas's formulations to the changes that were transforming the public sphere at the turn of 21st century in the Hindi belt, both the parallels and divergences are compelling. The journals that were part of the bourgeois public sphere in 18th century London were small ones, not widely circulated mass publications. Similarly the early public sphere in the Hindi belt had consisted of small literary and political journals discussing a variety of issues and had begun to focus by the 1920s on the movement for freedom from British rule that was gathering force. Post-independence many regional newspapers, big and small, came into existence and helped create a local public sphere in the states of the Hindi heartland.

The refeudalisation of this public sphere in Habermasian terms took place when some of these regional newspapers began to expand in order to compete, adopted a commercial policy of localisation to add to their circulation and moved out of their traditional circulation areas into new ones in order to offer bigger numbers to advertisers. The catalysts of the shrinking of an existing local public sphere and

its reinvention were the second and third generations in the leading newspaper owning families, and their appetite for grasping the challenge of the market. In its reinvented state the public sphere in these parts became more local and drew in larger numbers, becoming 'truly public' in the process. The village tea shops were helping to bring in these participants, but because their clientile was hardly drawn from highly educated gentry, Habermas might have judged them incapable of elevated political debate.

But in fact when commercially-driven newspaper barons pushed their products into small towns and villages with the help of price incentives, the effect was not entirely one of degenerating the public sphere. These newspapers democratised debate so that an impoverished head-loader could figure in it, as much as a chief minister. True, local editions stocked by tea shops were avidly read for local crime and gossip, but they also raised public expectation that the state would respond to the needs and grievances of ordinary people, aired in these newspapers. In a literal sense if you listened in, the debate was both rational and critical though perhaps not as intellectually lofty as in Habermas' bourgeois public sphere. On this morning (11 July 2006) the local denizens drinking tea in Markundi described the paradoxes of modern development in their village.

Mobile phones had come to Chitrakoot the year before, and a public sector telephone provider was planning to offer mobile services this village. Equipment to set up a mobile tower had arrived a few months ago but had been languishing there since, rotting in the open in sun and rain. Nobody had come to set up the tower and activate the service. Meanwhile the electronic telephone exchange in this block which served land line telephones for the entire block had been lying dead since February. Many complaints had been lodged. Apart from *Khabar Lahariya*'s female correspondent who visited at least once a fortnight to check what was new with this part of the district, there was an *Amar Ujala* correspondent in the village who had written on it more than once and even carried a picture in his newspaper of the defunct exchange with padlock on its door. To no avail. A pensioner in the village said succinctly in English, 'The pen has got no power nowadays.'

Shabir Hussain, a tailor at his sewing machine a few shops further down from the tea shop in the main alley of Markundi, offered a comparison on the mainline press represented by *Jagran* and *Amar Ujala* and the community press represented by *Khabar Lahariya*. The big papers looked at small crime but they did not give sufficient importance to small things which loomed large in the life of the village he said, such as black marketing of rations at the local ration shop. The *Khabar Lahariya* women did, what's more they did not just report, they got to the bottom of it. '*Bhanda phod karte hai.*' *Bhanda phod* is the colloquial Hindi term for an exposé.[1]

To return to the dead telephone exchange, what of the political representative from this area? Was he not able to persuade an errant telephone department to set this exchange right? This time somebody else replied in Hindi that he was from the Bahujan Samaj Party, but a 'gunpoint *ka* candidate'. Meaning, he had been elected by getting his henchmen to intimidate voters at gunpoint. (Chitrakoot is known for the bandits who hold sway here.) He was consequently disinclined to put himself at the service of his constituents in the villages.

To the extent that a public sphere reflects broad political consciousness, its constituents in Markundi were conscious of the mockery of political representation, the complete and fearless indifference of the servants of the state, and the impotence of the mainstream press. The village was reported on by both kinds of media. By the small, independent press represented by *Khabar Lahariya* (sustained by grant funding), which was committed to foregrounding news of Dalits and those at the bottom of the power structure. And it also had a representative of the local edition of a very big multi-edition newspaper, replete with advertising and commercial intent, but even so not as devoid of public conscience as Habermas made out in his chapter on 'The Transformation of the Public Sphere's Political Function' (Habermas 1989: 181). The local correspondent was not entirely focused on becoming 'the gate through which privileged private interests invaded the public sphere' (ibid.: 185). He strove to represent the pressing problems of the village community as a whole. But neither the big nor small media vehicle was able to be always effective against the brazen indifference of the state and the political class.

Publicity, Good and Bad

At the same time, there could be other circumstances in which at the most local level, at the level of the village, elected people's representatives were leveraging the national–regional–local media to achieve publicity, a concept Habermas defines in various ways. He links publicity with public opinion, and distinguishes between manipulative publicity and critical publicity (Habermas 1989: 247–48). In the district of Banda in Uttar Pradesh adjoining Chitrakoot, a *pradhan* (the term used in Uttar Pradesh for a *sarpanch*) of a Dalit village had learnt to use the good offices of the Brahmin local correspondent of *Aj* to publicise the work he did in his village. Munna Lal Varma of Barsana Khurd said that in his area a pulse polio programme was in progress and he had achieved 100 per cent coverage of the children in his village. He wrote up the news, he said, and gave it to the correspondent who published it. Was this manipulative publicity? Or did it have demonstration value that could put it in the category of critical publicity? Indeed much of the coverage of local events, gentry and panchayat and block activities had a public relations patina to it, yet it helped to promote a sense of community and inclusiveness, creating a participatory public sphere. To Habermas' older categories of elevated and not-so-elevated discourse and public opinion, were being added more nuanced uses of communication that an advertising-driven mass media was making possible.

For instance once the local correspondent or stringer became know as being accessible, rural folk learn to make the most of his presence. With a fine sense of what might be called critical publicity, a village readership only lately acquainted with the usefulness of newspapers had learned to turn local correspondents eager for village news to their own advantage. Varma described how panchayat *karamcharis* (functionaries) were kept on their toes in his area because village people had taken to rushing to newspaper correspondents with their grievance, every time they had a problem with a *karamachari*.[2] Whereas the bureaucratic machinery might ignore bad publicity as seen in the case of Markundi above, a mere functionary who felt vulnerable might be more easily brought to heel by such judicious planting of complaints. Accountability was thus becoming an element of the public sphere.

Identity in the Hindi Public Sphere

A reinvention of the public sphere implies some degree of reshaping of public perceptions. The relationship between media consumption and the sense of belonging that a citizen acquires has been frequently explored. With the advent of cyberspace comparisons are now made between how newspapers have traditionally fostered a sense of community (through acts of community spirit boosterism such as those described in Chapter 4) and how the Internet atomises identity by enabling a user to create his own individual news product.[3]

How media shapes a community's sense of belonging is perhaps better understood by applying Benedict Anderson's theory of 'Imagined Communities' to the way in which local communities were beginning to perceive their own identities in the Hindi speaking states. Anderson defined a nation as an imagined political community—imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. 'Finally, it is imagined as a community, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship' (Anderson 1991: introduction). He also asserted that the practice of print-capitalism facilitated the imagining of the nation: '... made it possible for rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves, and to relate to others, in profoundly new ways' (quoted in Jeffrey 2000).

In India's Hindi heartland the notion of how linguistic, cultural and political entities imagine themselves is still evolving. Yogendra Yadav points out that the creation of states along linguistic lines in the Indian Union has resulted, in time, in a stateisation of both politics and the press.[4] In the 1950s and 1960s neighbouring areas artificially divided by political boundaries tended to behave in the same way. They had a cultural contiguity, and the politics of neighbouring regions would have been the same politics. But over time there has been a federalisation of Indian politics with identifiable state politics emerging within state boundaries.

> Now on both sides of an artificial political boundary such as Buldelkhand in UP and MP you will find they are politically different. There's no Samajwadi Party on the MP side. At one time it seemed there was a little bit of influence of BSP but not much.

Similarly, Yadav adds, Haryana and western UP have different politics though they are geographically contiguous. There is political divergence from one state to another, but homogenisation within a state. 'In other ways eastern UP and western UP are totally different, but not in politics. Their politics was not so similar before.'

Regional newspapers, says Yadav, fit in perfectly with that trend. Their coverage reinforces the notion of each state as an entity with its own language and politics, and state capitals as mini capitals within the country. Over 50 years since the division of states, the press and politicians have been alive to the creation of a state identity, which is periodically reinforced by state elections. The imagining therefore of the citizen voter was on two planes—as belonging to a state, within the larger identity of belonging to India. The primary identity being based on language and ethnicity, of belonging to Mithila in Bihar, or Mewar or Marwar in Rajasthan, was subsumed. The early regional papers that had statewide readership tended to nurture a state identity, whether it was *Rajasthan Patrika* in Rajasthan or *Nai Duniya* in Indore, rather than pander to regional entities within a state, perhaps because they were consciously nurturing federalism within a still-young India.

Towards the end of the 20th century when cultural divergences grew into divisive movements with perceived grievances, as with the movement for Jharkhand in Bihar, or for Chhattisgarh in Madhya Pradesh, or for Uttaranchal in Uttar Pradesh, regional newspapers in the disaffected regions tended to support these movements. You go with the sentiment of the market.

And by the 21st century, the wheel of identity turned full circle as market forces began to respond to the sheer scale of the country by creating cultural niches. As Yadav puts it, 'All the processes we identify with modernity have this dual effect, they create homogenisation and through that also carve out zones.'

As newspapers developed national–local strategies, reviving elements of dialect to incorporate into local editions became part of the strategy, appealing as it were to latent cultural identities. Hence the attempts by different newspapers to revive dialects such as *Angika* in Bhagalpur, *Maithili* in Bihar, *Wagri* in Rajathan's Banswara district and *Bundeli* in Chitrakoot. It was an element in the conscious reinvention of the public sphere that was taking place, an attempt to

create diverse homogenities. It had both a geographical and cultural dimension. It was nurtured both by dialect and by celebrating in the newspaper local religious festivals and fairs. Now, more than before, readers were encouraged to imagine themselves as part of a local culture that would reinforce the nurturing of a local market.

The worrisome question that I raised in Chapter 11 was whether this circumscribed public sphere would begin to weaken the 'deep horizontal comradeship' that used to bind different corners of the same state—a poser from the Hindi heartland for both Habermas and Anderson, that newspapers sensitive to public opinion were beginning to grapple with, in the year 2006.

Notes

1. Shabir Hussain, interviewed by author, Markundi, Chitrakoot, 12 July 2006.
2. Munna Lal Varma, interviewed by author, Banda district, 11 July 2006.
3. Michael Zielenziger, 'Newspapers in Retreat', http://www.alumni.berkeley.edu/calmag/200603/newspapers2.asp, downloaded July 2006.
4. Yogendra Yadav, interviewed by author, New Delhi, 5 July 2006.