13. Imposed by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in June 1975, following her unseating by a court.
14. Language in India, http://www.languageinindia.com/march2003/hindustani.html.
15. Ibid.
16. Alok Rai, interviewed by author, New Delhi, 28 January 2006.
17. Shashank Shekhar Tripathi, interviewed by author, Varanasi, 15 March 2006.
18. Alok Rai, interviewed by author, New Delhi, 28 January 2006.
19. Ramesh Agarwal, interviewed by author, Mumbai, 27 January 2005.
20. Mrinal Pande, interviewed by author, 24 June 2006.

3

A Rural Newspaper Revolution

'I can read, but my paper does not talk to me.'

In 1982, the Second Press Commission complained, in its majority report, about the urban bias of the newspaper industry. But it incorporated a dissenting note in which three members of the commission wrote, 'The fact of the matter is that papers are not being read in the villages because of illiteracy, lack of purchasing power and lack of communications.' Whenever this situation changed, they added, newspapers would blossom in the rural hinterland without any prodding from the government of the day. In other words, the market would be there to tap the rural readership (*Report of the Second Press Commission* 1982: 224).

And indeed, that is what has transpired. Northern India's local newspaper revolution which began to flower across the Hindi-speaking states from the mid-1980s, was catalysed by a number of factors, but the most important were three. Literacy expanded, purchasing power increased and better communications made it possible to print newspapers from a number of small towns and deliver them to semi-urban and rural areas in the morning. Underlying these were two other important factors: a more politically aware rural population in the Hindi belt which had a hunger for news, as well as an increase in aspiration levels and consumerism as the rural market began to be strategically targeted by consumer goods marketing firms.

While citing the same three reasons as necessary for the expansion of newspapers Robin Jeffrey in his countrywide study of India's newspaper revolution offers the hypothesis that in making people into newspaper readers 'literacy and political participation precede raw purchasing power and advanced printing technology'. The fastest

growth rates in newspaper circulation, he says, were in states which showed the strongest growth rates of literacy, not of per capita economic growth. These were Orissa, Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka.

Then again he cites Kerala's experience to show that political involvement is also crucial to improving newspaper penetration. In India's most literate state newspaper penetration of Malayalam was more than 85 dailies to a 1,000 people by 1996, twice the all-India ratio, even though Kerala's per capita income stayed below the national average. Its politics meanwhile remained fiercely competitive with governments changing in all but one of 11 elections between 1957 and 1996 (Jeffrey 2000: 32).

The readership surveys were reflecting the increased rural penetration of the print media, particularly in the Hindi belt. Between the NRS (National Readership Survey) rounds of 2002 and 2005, the overall readership of language publications rose, especially in rural markets. NRS 2005 showed that the rural markets of Bihar, Jharkhand and Uttar Pradesh had achieved 'tremendous growth' in their readership of language publications. The number of readers in Bihar and Jharkhand (combined), and Uttar Pradesh increased by 8.4 million each. In Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh (combined), the number increased by 5.4 million readers in these three years, while in West Bengal, Orissa and Assam, the numbers had grown by 3.7 million, 3 million and 1.7 million respectively[1] (Table 3.1).

TABLE 3.1 Increase in rural readership between NRS 2002 and NRS 2005 (*in millions*)

State	*Increase*
West Bengal	3.7
Orissa	3.0
Assam	1.7
Bihar and Jharkhand	8.4
Uttar Pradesh	8.4
Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh	5.4

Source: National Readership Survey (NRS) 2002, 2005.

Given that politics in all these states was becoming more broad-based on account of the rise in political parties representing backward castes and Dalits and on account of the spread of local self-governance

in villages and towns, Jeffrey's hypothesis could also hold for the northern part of the country. But as this chapter will argue, rise in rural incomes and consumer aspirations was also catalytic. Overall readership figures in 2005 were showing that there almost as many readers in rural as in urban India.

If one were to divide the population of a state by the combined daily newspaper circulation for the same state, a per copy picture emerges which is one indication of newspaper penetration. However the findings below are only indicative because of the non-foolproof method adopted by the Registrar of Newspapers in India (RNI) in gauging total daily circulation in a given state. It bases its circulation statistics on statements returned by publishers. The number of statements submitted is far fewer than the total number of publications registered in a particular state and the RNI does not check the accuracy of statements filed. Still, assuming that the level of inaccuracy does not change over time, the trends are clear enough to allow firm conclusions.

In *India's Newspaper Revolution*, Robin Jeffrey used the available statistics, including those from RNI, to postulate that between 1976 and 1996 the number of people clustered around each copy of a newspaper declined from one newspaper for 80 people to one newspaper for just over 20 people. I have attempted a similar exercise with RNI numbers for some of the Hindi-speaking states. It shows that between 1997 and 2002 the number of readers per copy across this region declined. In Bihar in 1997 there were 45 people per copy of a daily newspaper. By 2002 the figure for the divided state was 32 readers per copy in Bihar, and 30 in Jharkhand (figures have been rounded off). In Uttar Pradesh in 1997 there were 22 readers per copy, which came down in the divided state to 16 readers per copy in UP and 8.4 per copy in Uttaranchal. The latter was the Hindi-speaking state which recorded 72.28 per cent literacy in the 2001 Census.

Rajasthan's 20 readers per copy in 1997 declined to 12 by 2002. Himachal Pradesh had high literacy (77.13 per cent) but few newspapers, as a result of which there were 125 readers per copy in 1997, which declined to 66 persons per copy in 2001. Madhya Pradesh (MP) in 1997 had 21 readers per newspaper; this declined in the divided state to 13 in MP in 2002 and 16 per copy in Chhattisgarh (Table 3.2). Readership per copy decreases as circulation increases.

TABLE 3.2 Readers per copy

State	*1997*	*2002*	
Bihar	45	32	(Bihar)
		30	(Jharkhand)
Uttar Pradesh	22	16	(UP)
		8.4	(Uttaranchal)
Rajasthan	20	12	
Himachal Pradesh	125	66	
Madhya Pradesh	21	13	(MP)
		16	(Chhattisgarh)

Source: Based on *Census of India* 1991 and 2001, and annual reports of RNI, 1999 and 2004.
Note: Population divided by total circulation according to RNI.

Literacy, which spread in this part of the country later than it did in the southern states, recorded a dramatic increase as reflected in the 2001 Census. In four states of the Hindi heartland—Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh—literacy had remained between 37 and 45 per cent as reflected by the 1991 Census. As the other socio-econonic statistics were equally unflattering, these states were given the derisive acronym of Bimaru, which means ailing. But the 2001 Census showed that the growth in literacy was now faster in each of these states and the new states carved out of them (except Bihar and Jharkhand), than in India as a whole (Table 3.3). The numbers tell the story but so does the heartwarming scene any early morning visitor to the rural Hindi belt will encounter: endless groups of children going to school, a cloth or gunny bag slung on their backs, many of them barefoot. As a block functionary in Banda district in UP said with quiet satisfaction, '*Aaj ki peedi bilkul sakshar hoga*' (The current generation will be totally literate).[2]

Kerala in the south, long eulogised for its impressive literacy numbers, was suddenly paling in comparison with Uttar Pradesh which, in absolute numbers, now had three times as many literates as Kerala. What's more, Kerala's 25.6 million literates were 80 per cent of its population, whereas UP's 77.7 million literates spelt only 47 per cent of its population, so there was an even bigger potential audience waiting to be tapped. Rajasthan, which recorded a decadal increase in literacy of 22.45 percentage points, against an all-India

TABLE 3.3 Change in literacy rate, 1991–2001

State	*Literacy rate (2001 Census) (in %)*			*Literacy rate (1991 Census) (in %)*	*Change in literacy rate (1991–2001) (in %)*
	Person	*Male*	*Female*		
INDIA 1	65.38	75.96	54.28	51.63	13.75
Andaman & Nicobar Islands	81.18	86.07	75.29	73.02	8.17
Andhra Pradesh	61.11	70.85	51.17	44.09	17.02
Arunachal Pradesh	54.74	64.07	44.24	41.59	13.15
Assam	64.28	71.93	56.03	52.89	11.52
Bihar	47.53	60.32	33.57	37.49	10.04
Chandigargh	81.76	85.65	76.65	77.81	3.94
Chhattisgarh	65.18	77.86	52.40	42.91	22.27
Dadra & Nagar Haveli	60.03	73.32	42.99	40.71	19.33
Daman & Diu	81.09	88.40	70.37	71.20	9.89
Delhi	81.82	87.37	75.00	75.29	6.53
Goa	82.32	88.88	75.51	75.51	6.81
Gujarat	69.97	80.50	58.60	61.29	8.68
Haryana	68.59	79.25	56.31	55.85	12.74
Himachal Pradesh	77.13	86.02	68.08	63.86	13.27
Jammu & Kashmir	54.46	65.75	41.82	NA	NA
Jharkhand	54.13	67.94	39.38	41.39	12.74
Karnataka	67.04	76.29	57.45	56.04	11.00
Kerala	90.92	94.20	87.86	89.81	1.11

(Table 3.3 continued)

(*Table 3.3 continued*)

State	Literacy rate (2001 Census) (in %)			Literacy rate (1991 Census) (in %)	Change in literacy rate (1991–2001) (in %)
	Person	Male	Female		
Lakshadweep	87.52	93.15	81.56	81.78	5.74
Madhya Pradesh	64.11	76.80	50.28	44.67	19.41
Maharashtra	77.27	86.27	67.51	64.87	12.39
Manipur	68.87	77.87	59.70	59.89	8.97
Meghalaya	63.31	66.14	60.41	49.10	14.21
Mizoram	88.49	90.69	86.13	82.27	6.22
Nagaland	67.11	71.77	61.92	61.65	5.45
Orissa	63.61	75.95	50.97	49.09	14.52
Pondicherry	81.49	88.89	74.13	74.74	6.74
Punjab	69.95	75.63	63.55	58.51	11.45
Rajasthan	61.03	76.46	44.34	38.55	22.48
Sikkim	69.68	76.73	61.46	56.94	12.61
Tamil Nadu	73.47	82.33	64.55	62.66	10.81
Tripura	73.66	81.47	65.41	60.44	13.22
Uttar Pradesh	57.36	70.23	42.98	40.71	16.65
Uttaranchal	72.28	84.01	60.26	57.75	14.53
West Bengal	69.22	77.58	60.22	57.70	11.52

Source: 'Provisional Population Totals: India', *Census of India*, 2001, Paper 1 of 2001.

increase of 13.17 percentage points, also saw dramatic changes in readership figures after the mid-1990s and very rapid expansion and localisation by *Dainik Bhaskar* and *Rajasthan Patrika*. Female literacy in the state doubled during 1991–2001—from 20.44 per cent to 44.34 per cent.[3]

Between 1991 and 2001 Madhya Pradesh recorded a 19.41 percentage rise in literacy as Table 3.3 shows. The state's *Third Human Development Report* recorded proudly that 'more than one person out of six persons removed from the category of non-literates in India in the decade of the 1990s is from Madhya Pradesh.' This one state alone, taken together with Chhattisgarh, accounted for 17.9 per cent of the total decadal decrease in illiteracy in India in the 1990s. As for female literacy, the report said, almost one out of every five women removed from the category of literates in India was from Madhya Pradesh (*Third Human Development Report* 2002: 35).

Rural literacy in undivided Bihar grew from 27.7 per cent in 1981 to 33.83 per cent in 1991 and then to 44.42 per cent in divided Bihar in 2001. Total literacy grew from 32.05 per cent in Bihar in1981 to 38.48 per cent in 1991 (*National Human Development Report* 2002: 87). Between the 1991 and 2001 Censuses Bihar recorded a 10.4 per cent rise in overall literacy, and the part of the state which became Jharkhand in 2000 recorded a 12.74 per cent increase (see Table 3.3). The growth over the last decade in this region was therefore rapid. The very states that had even in the early 1990s ranked lowest in national development indices on account of low literacy, high population growth and low industrialisation, were slowly acquiring a readership potential which made them desirable markets for manufacturers and media houses alike.

But literacy is only the first requirement for creating a newspaper reader. It has to be supported by much else. By education that goes beyond literacy, by politicisation in its broadest sense which creates a hunger for news, by a desire to read what the newspaper is offering, by the capacity to buy a daily newspaper at a price higher than urban readers (who were beneficiaries of price wars) were paying, and by the ability of publishers to reach a freshly minted newspaper to a rural clientele at the start of the day. All of this was beginning to converge in the 1990s.

Literacy and Readership

Literacy movements in different parts of the Hindi belt have generated their own understanding of the link between literacy and newspaper reading. In Chhattisgarh, two different social action agencies use newspapers in their literacy centres and offer different surmises of what these do for new literates. To Rajendra Sail of the Indian National Social Action Forum, literacy has to be qualitative in order to enable a person to read. While there are three stages to literacy, moving from recognition of letters to making sentences, and then to reading and writing, the literacy campaign has not gone beyond the recognition of letters.

> The person who really learns to read and write through literacy campaigns, such a person wants to read newspapers. But a new literate cannot read a newspaper. To my knowledge, in the 75 villages that I have visited in Mahasamund zilla (district), literacy means knowing how to write your name. If you say to them read this, they cannot.[4]

Yet the literacy centres that his organisation runs have explored the usefulness of newspapers in imparting literacy. They benefit from newspaper localisation because political, social and women-related news gets documented. These items are read out at their *baithaks* (group sit-ins) and analysed for the benefit of those who cannot really read yet. This helps to trigger the social awareness that creates the desire to read. Others at the Bharat Gyan Vigyan Samiti, which has been working on literacy in Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh since 1990, make the same point: literacy has given rise to the desire to read papers. And they differ with Sail in asserting that literacy campaigns have in fact given people the capacity to read and write, not just sign their names.[5]

How much of the increase in the circulation of newspapers is on account of increasing literacy remains a conjecture in the absence of hard research data that bears out the connection. First, there is the question of how much of an increase in the literacy rate recorded by the census data is on account of primary education, and how much because of adult education. Primary school-going children are unlikely to govern the decision to become a newspaper-subscribing household; nor is a child in Grade 1, treated as literate for the purpose of census data, likely to be able to read newspapers. Then there is the question of how accurate the census is when enumerators base their estimate on information given by the head of a household. without conducting any tests to ascertain literacy.[6] However, in the case of Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, whose literacy rates increased by 22.48 per cent and 19.41 percentage points respectively between 1991 and 2001, the increase has been linked to the likely success of specific programmes.

> In Rajasthan, there have been some noteworthy initiatives in education during the late eighties and nineties such as Lok Jumbish and Shiksha Karmi projects, which have apparently made visible impact. In Madhya Pradesh also, the Education Guarantee Scheme, the District Primary Education Programme and programmes like Mahila Samakhaya have apparently made some impact.[7]

If this surmise is correct, exposure to literacy may have resulted in a genuine ability to read, but it does not establish the relationship with other relevant factors.

Opinions on the relationship between circulation and literacy vary even within the newspaper establishment. In Delhi, Om Thanvi, the editor of *Jansatta* which is read across the Hindi belt, says of the rural newspaper revolution that literacy may have been one reason for the growth in circulation, but it was not the major reason. People had begun to purchase newspapers because they were now more aware, politically, socially and had more purchasing power.[8] In Chhattisgarh, *Nava Bharat* and *Deshbandhu* had diametrically opposing views on this. The resident editor of the former in Raipur was categorical that newspapers do not grow because of literacy, and that a slightly educated person can never read a newspaper. 'I have never heard or seen such an assertion that because of literacy a newspaper's circulation increases. *Nava Bharat* is the oldest newspaper and has its own credibility. This is the reason for the expansion of its circulation.' His circulation manager Ramesh Tiwari would assert that their circulation agents knew the field, and their experience did not bear out this assertion. 'We target the educated segment for

our circulation, both rural and urban. Becoming literate means being able to sign your name, that does not give you the ability to read a newspaper.'[9]

But *Deshbandhu* in Raipur sees itself as a newspaper with a development mission and its attitude to the question of literacy and newspaper expansion is different. For its editor, Lalit Surjan, the literacy movement in the region has definitely been a factor in increasing circulation.[10] For his circulation manager too, adult literacy and newspaper circulation have a direct linkage. [11] As also for the circulation manager of *Dainik Bhaskar* in Raipur:

> The two are interlinked. In Rajasthan, literacy kendras are sent newspapers by the government. The Kendra pays for the paper. But in Chhattisgarh this does not happen yet. If newspapers approach the literacy centres, circulation goes up. Readership increases because of literacy and a newspaper's approach.[12]

In Madhya Pradesh, however, the *Deshbandhu* circulation manager did not concur with his Raipur counterpart. He took a dim view of the well-publicised literacy efforts that had been made by Digvijay Singh's government (1993–2003) in the state. He thought migration rather than an increase in the numbers of literate people had caused the increase in his newspaper's circulation. People came to work in Bhopal from all over Madhya Pradesh, as well as from the bordering states of Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh, and were desperate for news from their native areas. Those who were from UP took *Jagran* in Madhya Pradesh, and those who were from Maharashtra were catered to by *Nava Bharat* which covered both states.[13]

For newspaper reading to take root in a society requires not just literacy but the desire to read a newspaper based on felt need. Both the proprietor of a publishing empire and a school teacher in an Adivasi village understood this and explained it equally succinctly. The Agarwals of *Dainik Bhaskar* are fond of stressing this to explain why they lay so much store by reader feedback. As Girish Agarwal of *Bhaskar* puts it:

> There are three filters. One is literacy, the second is who can read. And the third is, who is reading. The housewife is happy in her own world, she is not interested in what the paper has to offer. In Bombay city, out of a population of 13.4 million, 5.8 million can read English, but 2 million are reading. Literacy is not a factor. I can read, but my paper does not talk to me.[14]

And for a paper to talk to a potential reader, he was quite certain, it should talk about what is of greatest relevance to the reader, namely local news.

Far away in his Jharkhand village, the school teacher Mohammad Manjoor Alam would emphasize that news about Adivasi traditions and culture does not appear in the newspaper; if they did, people would be able to relate to newspapers much more.[15] A voluntary agency worker in the same village, Sindho, thought that 'if the name of our village appears even once in a month, people will start taking interest in the newspaper'. And when Mangal Soren, an educated youth there, asserted that if they start publishing potato, onion and garlic rates in newspapers every farmer would be interested in reading them, he was underscoring Agarwal's point about local relevance.

Political Participation

But there is more to the spread of newspaper reading than just local curiosity and local relevance. In many parts of the Hindi belt, literacy and a growing political awareness have gone hand in hand. A hunger for news has been nurtured by the increased inroads television has made into the rural areas. It has brought 'breaking news' to the rural interior. But deepening democracy and political participation have also fed this hunger. The revitalisation of panchayati raj (local self-government), which began in Madhya Pradesh after the 73rd/74th Constitution Amendments, dates back to 1994. When Madhya Pradesh became the first state to hold panchayat elections after the 73rd Amendment, the sheer scale of participation in it indicates the extent of political activity that must have preceded it. Nearly half a million people's representatives were chosen in that election, including fair numbers of scheduled caste and scheduled tribe candidates, women, and Backward Class candidates (Mathew 1999). By 2005, panchayat-level political activity was more than a decade old.

Since Chhattisgarh was carved out of Madhya Pradesh only in 2000, it began life with the legacy of a rejuvenated panchayat system.

In both these states, as also in other parts of the Hindi belt, panchayats and panchayat-level politics have played a discernable role in the penetration of newspapers into villages. The first reason was the state government policy of picking up the tab for subscriptions to newspapers. This was also true of Madhya Pradesh, as the circulation manager of *Nava Bharat* confirmed.[16] Many development workers report that this is often the only copy that reaches villages that do not have a social elite with the purchasing capacity to buy a newspaper. People read the newspaper that comes to the panchayat office, and their acquaintance with newspaper reading grows (unless, of course, unpaid bills prompt the local circulation agent to stop delivering the paper—as happened in Kothda block in Rajasthan).

As panchayat politics began to strike root and newspapers became available, panchayat leaders began to subscribe to them at home. Hindi-speaking India now had a rural middle class which was both aspirational and politicially aware. Panchayat elections increasingly reflected political party affiliations, which meant party mobilisation was now going down to the village level. Together with the greater spread of education, this led to a market for news, a demand for political and administrative accountability, and for media which feeds upward mobility. Even the weaker sections in a village, while being oppressed, were developing their political consciousness and seeking more information relevant to their needs.

If in a Naxal-dominated area like Dantewada in Chhattisgarh people are reading *Jansatta* and *Deshbandhu*, it has to do with all of the above. Advertising from panchayats is increasing, and *sarpanches* want their pictures used in the newspaper! Political workers now subscribe to newspapers, since they are delivered in the morning. Lalit Surjan makes the point that the panchayati-raj system has seen the emergence of 1,200 panchayats in Chhattisgarh. Newspapers are now going to these panchayats.[17]

Jeevrakhan Lal Banjari, *sachiv* (secretary) of a gram panchayat, lives in village Khaira in the Mahasamund division in Chhattisgarh. He has begun to take a newspaper at his home because the panchayat's work has made reading newspapers a necessity. The village is 1 km away from a *pucca* (paved) road. *Deshbandhu* carries news from this village sometimes so he subscribes to it and his copy is read by 10–20 people every day.[18]

In Madhya Pradesh too, village-level social activists have been reporting that local news, especially news about block politics, panchayat politics and panchayat leaders, is being read avidly.

> There has been an increase in readership in the interior areas of the state. In comparison to what it was two years ago, now every panchayat or the teacher in the village has a newspaper coming to them. Many a time, they share their newspapers. This leads to dialogue. Not just information sharing but discussions, leading to debate![19]

In Hoshangabad the secretary of the Gramin Sevak Committee thinks that there has been a visible increase in the number of newspapers reaching rural areas, that they give the most space to politics, and that they have served to increase the advantage that the upper classes who can read them and afford them have.

> From the newspapers, the politically empowered people are keen to know what the political trends are, which leader is doing well for himself, who is not doing well for himself, etc. They read the news and make their decisions. While they may read crime news, nearly 50 to 60 per cent of them take the paper to read about politics.[20]

This entire process was catalysed by the emergence of political formations in these states representing the Dalits and Backward Classes from the late 1980s onwards. This will be dealt with later in this book. Apart from democratic decentralisation, the regionalisation of politics in the post-Congress scenario in states such as Uttar Pradesh and Bihar has created a politics based on social cleavages of region, religion and caste. Both Hasan (1998) and Yadav (2004) point out how the states became the primary arena of political contestation. Within the states there was a democratic upsurge, with electoral politics witnessing

> ... higher participation and more intense politicisation of the hitherto marginalised groups, first OBCs and dalits and then women and adivasis. Then, around 1990, there was the

'sudden arrival of three "M"s (Mandal, Mandir and Market) on the centrestage of Indian politics [which] changed the political idiom and the nature of ideological contestation' (Yadav 2004).

All of this must certainly have contributed to a greater hunger for news.

Communications and Printing

By the turn of the 21st century, the communications infrastructure in states like Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Haryana was making the morning delivery of newspapers to villages a viable proposition. With the improvement of road and rail links, the paper was reaching on time.

> Earlier, we had to rely on the sole government bus going to remote places in the state. Over the last eight years, we are now in a position to ensure that the paper is in Jhabua at 6 A.M. because of the increased use of taxis.[21]

The circulation manager of *Deshbandhu* in Bhopal was underscoring the fact that earlier there was only one bus and if they missed it, the edition never reached people. 'Today we have several options, we can send the paper by road, bus or by train. Alternatively, voluntary agencies subscribe to the paper by post. For instance, Eklavya takes the paper in as remote an area as Khategoan in Dewas district.'[22]

Meanwhile, improved telecommunication links meant that facsimilie transmission was facilitating the gathering of very local news for separate district pages. Fax and modem centres were sprouting in Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh, and in Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Uttaranchal which had been hived off from them in 2000. The blossoming of better telecommunications meant that even in small regional newspapers, modem transfers on high speed lines became the norm once computerisation came in and telecom cables began to be laid. Computers also did away with the need for subeditors at many locations, and the need to typeset at each edition. Some proprietors were more inclined to attribute the local newspaper revolution to this than to increased literacy. 'What has made localisation possible is better communications. We can give the latest newspaper in each and every place in two hours maximum,' Sanjay Gupta of *Dainik Jagran* would say in 2005. His paper at that point had the highest readership in the country.[23]

In addition to the spread of communication links, there was a sprouting of print sites across India, not just in the Hindi belt, because of other reasons. After the Emergency of 1975–77, foreign exchange controls and restrictions on the import of newsprint eased.* The Emergency with its 21 months of press censorship had created a hunger for news; when it ended and the Janata Government came in, a process of easing controls began which became marked in the early 1980s after Indira Gandhi returned to power. The import of printing equipment and technology increased. Jeffrey notes that whereas a 1974 survey of more than 200 daily newspapers located only six web-offset presses in India, by 1985 there were a thousand (Jeffrey 2000: 40). At the same time printing machines began to be manufactured in India, lowering costs.

Overall, therefore, the cost of getting a new print site going, and launching a new edition, came down. Running costs dropped, the cost of communications collapsed. It became economical to go into smaller towns and give people a newspaper at their doorstep at dawn as the rise in literacy opened up the market. The big newspapers still import expensive high-speed machines for colour printing, but the increased advertising support as well as high valuations of newspaper stocks have made such investments viable.

An Emerging Rural Middle Class

Other changes have shaped a growing market for newspapers. Somewhere along the way rural India ceased to be an economic backwater

*Imposed by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in June 1975 and lifted in February 1977.

and began to display a consumer potential that had many chroniclers. Cropping patterns were changing, increasing purchasing power and thus making daily newspapers affordable. Farmers were switching from food crops to cash crops, and increased irrigation in some areas also led to increased family incomes. Whether it was the Tawa Dam reservoir in Madhya Pradesh or the Mahi Dam in southern Rajasthan, irrigation had meant increased incomes for farmers in their catchments.

The service sector in the rural areas was growing too. As the chief managing director of a leading rural marketing company put it, rural India was not now 100 per cent dependent on an agrarian economy. Unlike in the past where the ratio between those involved in agriculture and in other business was 75:25, today the estimated ratio is 50:50, if not 60:40. He estimated that 50–60 per cent of the rural population is involved in other businesses.

> A lot of people belonging to the second generation are getting white-collar jobs in nearby towns. So, there is a growing middle class with a monthly income in rural India and it is a drastic change from the past where their income was totally dependent on the monsoon, cropping season, etc.[24]

The National Council of Applied Economic Research published data in 2005 which showed that in the previous 10 years, incomes in rural India had grown several-fold, more than keeping pace with the increase in urban incomes. From 55 to 58 per cent of the average urban income in 1994–95, average rural income went up to 63 or 64 per cent by 2001–02 and then touched almost 66 per cent in 2004–05. The rural middle class was growing annually by 12 per cent, against the 13 per cent growth of its urban counterpart. And rural India was projected to have a 22–23 per cent share of the upper income class—those with household incomes of over Rs 1 million per annum—and whose numbers would be 21 million by 2009–10.[25]

The English language media in India had begun to carry stories on how the local arms of international consumer marketing companies were targeting India's rural market. Whether it was Hindustan Lever or Coca-Cola, rural India was where the action was. Lever had started Project Shakti in late 2000 to extend the company's reach into 80,000 of India's 638,000 villages. It enlisted some 20,000 poor and mostly illiterate women to peddle soap and toothpaste in villages. A correspondent from the *Washington Post* profiled one of these women.[26] And Coca Cola doubled the number of its outlets in rural areas from 80,000 in 2001 to 160,000 in 2003, which increased market penetration from 13 per cent to 25 per cent. It also halved the average price of its products from Rs 10 to Rs 5, thereby bridging the gap between soft drinks and local options like tea, butter milk and lemon water. In 2003, the company reported that the rural market accounted for 80 per cent of new Coke drinkers and 30 per cent of total volumes.[27]

By 2002 it was already being estimated that a third of all premium luxury goods was sold in the rural market, and two-thirds of India's middle-income households were now rural. Fifty per cent of the total sales turnover of Hindustan Lever at that point was estimated to be in the rural market, valued at over Rs 50,000 million. Discussions at marketing forums were recording how colour television was replacing black and white in rural markets, and the sales of washing machines, refrigerators and bicycles were going up. Even talcum powder, believed to be an urban market product, found many users in the villages.[28]

Against this picture of upward mobility, the National Sample Survey Organisation's (NSSO's) data, released at the end of 2002, reported that while there were 148.1 million households in the rural areas, consumer durables penetration had just begun to reach these. Twenty-six per cent of rural households possessed a television set, 6.7 per cent had a moped or scooter and 0.6 per cent had a car or jeep. Tractor ownership was 1.7 per cent, while 5.3 per cent of rural households had fixed telephones and only 0.9 per cent had cellphones. Urban demand too was hardly satiated, according to the NSSO. There were 58 million urban households, 66 per cent of whom had a TV set. But only 28 per cent possessed a refrigerator, 23 per cent a moped or scooter and a little over 15 per cent an air cooler.

In 2004 the rural market was estimated at 742 million people, accounting for 80 per cent of sales for fast moving consumer goods and was seen as a lucrative market by a host of new sectors. More than 50 per cent of insurance policies were being sold in rural India, as were more than 50 per cent of landline telephone connections.

Farmers were taking to *kisan* (farmer) credit cards (which gave them a credit limit with banks) with alacrity. The eminences of corporate India would gather periodically to brainstorm on such topics as 'Rural Marketing in the 21st Century'.[29]

To reach this market, you needed a vehicle for advertising that would reach this population. From the point of view of consumer goods marketers, the socio-economic categories to reach were B and C if the market had to expand.* They lived in small towns, semi-urban settlements and large villages. That became the marketing logic for opening up local newspaper editions that would increase circulation by bringing district towns, *kasbas* or sub-division town and villages into the readership net. Robin Jeffrey articulated this logic:

> Newspapers do not seek readers because of an innate human desire to foster the free exchange of ideas, provide useful information or create informed 'public opinion'. Rather, newspapers push out to new readers when those readers demonstrate they are consumers or potential consumers. Newspapers localise because advertisers see a commodity worth buying: rural and small town spending power. (Jeffrey 2000: 75)

White goods and consumer appliance makers were ready to change their advertising targets to reach consumers further down the retail chain, so advertising budgets earlier earmarked solely for the national press were now going to the regional press as well. Advertising was shifting from towns to sub-towns. That is why, through the 1990s and the first decade of the new century, the regional press in north India was expanding much faster than the national press.

The advertising potential for any media that could demonstrate that it was reaching this rural market was immense. Hindi newspapers were not blind to this, their marketing departments went into overdrive to gauge potential, and the nature of their expansion was designed to provide a vehicle for such advertising. If you had a certain number of very local editions, in all-India terms you became the preferred vehicle over some other newspaper. Hence the push for 'outsider localisation', which saw the biggest players in the Hindi market entering new states at the rate of one a year, and multiplying printing centres to establish as many local editions as possible. The reach of the print media in the rural market increased from 17.1 per cent to 19.1 per cent between NRS 2002 and 2005.

*Socio-Economic Classification (SEC) is a matrix of occupation and education used in research in India to reflect lifestyle, as opposed to mere income, A1 being the highest group and E the lowest.

Hindi newspapers were conscious of the numbers they had to offer. A power point presentation devised by *Dainik Jagran*'s marketing department sought to aggressively posit the paper's home state, Uttar Pradesh, as the premium destination for any marketer looking for numbers. It pointed out that UP has more literates than the combined literates of Kerala and Tamil Nadu, more post graduates than the total in the four southern states of Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka put together, as many households with a minimum household income of Rs 15,000 as Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh combined, and so on. Companies sold more white goods in this state than they did in two or three other states put together. 'UP alone consumes more Coca-Cola than AP, Karnataka and Kerala put together.' In other words, UP had the numbers to offer advertisers and *Dainik Jagran*, the leading paper in the state, was where the advertiser should put his money[30] (Table 3.4).

TABLE 3.4 Media intensity: UP vs India

- Every 7th print media reader in India is from UP
- Every 8th TV viewer in India is from UP
- Every 22nd C&S viewer in India is from UP
- Every 6th FM listener in India is from UP
- Every 15th cinema goer in India is from UP
- Every 15th Internet surfer in India is from UP

Source: 'Destination Uttar Pradesh' *Dainik Jagran* power point presentation for marketers (Media Reserch Users Council–IRS 2002).

If all of this established the presence of a market in rural India and its importance for the advertiser, what was the situation with regard to potential readers? The man in charge of both news gathering and circulation for *Nava Bharat* in the Madhya Pradesh town of Itarsi described the changes in his catchment area. Ten to 15 years ago, he said, only one copy of a newspaper was likely to go to a village. Now there was demand for nearly 20–25 copies per village.

He attributed this to the spread of education, and the awareness that the electronic media had created.

> TV creates the atmosphere for people to demand more news. Apart from this, today, thanks to the Tawa Dam Reservoir which has taken 30 years in the making, farmers have been able to improve their lot. There are a lot of well-to-do farmers here. They are in a position to buy newspapers. Earlier, farmers were able to raise only one crop and had to live on one meal a day. Today, farmers are able to take care of 20 acres of land and they have tractors, fridges, TVs and they like to read newspapers because people in the cities read newspapers. It has become a status symbol of sorts.[31]

Increased irrigation could well have been a trigger for better purchasing power. The gross irrigated area in Madhya Pradesh recorded a 51.47 per cent increase in the decade from 1988–89 to 1998–99 (*Third Human Development Report* 2002: 401).

Aspiration was becoming a visible driver. The presence of Navodaya (premium government-run) schools in the rural areas had also led to better-educated children in rural families. The desire for further education led to the mushrooming of educational institutes which in turn became a major category of advertisers in local editions. In Varanasi, an executive at *Hindustan Times* testified that in the last four or five years educational advertising had emerged as the most fertile category of advertising in his edition, and that was the case for other newspapers in the city as well.[32]

Elsewhere too you find a fascinating window into the nature of small-town and rural aspiration. The Madhya Pradesh Government publishes a weekly magazine called *Rozgar aur Nirman* (Livelihood and Development), which goes out to panchayats as well as individual rural subscribers (Figure 3.1). Its most popular feature is a career advice column called *Hamse Puchiye* (Ask Us) written by Jayantilal Bhandari in Indore. Some 8,000 to 10,000 postcards come every month posing queries for this column. It epitomises the sort of 'news you can use' that young people are clamouring for, and the kind of aspirations inherent in the upward mobility of a new generation. A scheduled caste girl would write to ask how she could become an air hostess. A student in Class XI in Satna district wanted to know how

FIGURE 3.1 *Rozgar aur Nirman* and *Panchayika*: panchayat-level publications in Madhya Pradesh

he could be a tennis player. Another youth wanted to manufacture footballs and volleyballs, two young women from Sehore and Rajgarh wanted to manufacture soft toys ....

Bhandari clubbed the names as well as the towns or villages of questioners together for each question he answered, an indication that the questions were representative of several young ambitions. How can I become a hospital manager? This from both young men and women in Shahdol, Badwani, Ujjain, Bhopal, Datia, Sehore, Dhamnod and Rajgarh-Vyavara. Others writing from Guna, Javra, Sarani in Betul and Shivpuri, Morena and Shahdol wanted to be conservationists and wanted to know the career options in this field, and places which would train them. The list of those aspiring to be software engineers was the longest (*Rozgar aur Nirman*, 27 January 2005). People from small town India were aspiring to careers in forensic science, information technology and aviation. Possibly some of those aspirations had come from exposure to the media.

But every now and then there would be a query from a pragmatic soul interested in setting up a small-scale industrial unit in his or her village: two unemployed village youth from Jabalpur and Satna wrote to ask how they could set up units to produce mosquito coils that drive away mosquitos, another wanted to know how to go about setting up a cattle-feed unit in his village in Sagar. Rural India had large numbers of educated rural youth seeking avenues of employment. These also formed part of the readership base for newspapers in villages. As did educated women who came into villages as brides. Radhika Vaishnav, a recent subscriber to newspapers in her married home in Khaira village would tell an interviewer that she read *Nava Bharat* because she was looking for a job and needed to see the vacancies columns, but also to improve her general knowledge so that she could prepare for the public service exam.[33]

The readership surveys were also reflecting this positive shift. The Indian Readership Survey, Round 9 of 2002, showed that readership for the two largest-circulated Hindi dailies was not only 2.1 times higher than that of the most circulated English daily but also 5.5 million higher than the largest circulated Telugu daily and 4.7 million higher than that of the largest selling Tamil daily. Dailies from Bengal, Gujarat and Karnataka lagged far behind. The numbers for these two mass-circulation dailies, *Dainik Bhaskar* and *Dainik Jagran*, were

coming precisely from the Bimaru states. With dramatic increases in literacy figures matched by the localisation thrust of the leading Hindi newspapers, the national readership map was being reconfigured. Out of the backward, overpopulated Hindi belt, were emerging the media powerhouses of the future.

Changing Readers

The proprietor of *Amar Ujala*, interviewed after the release of the National Readership Survey 2003, touched on all these factors and underscored a significant change in the reading universe in this part of the country.

> The focus of newspapers has changed a great deal from a time when they played a catalytic role in our freedom movement. Till even a decade and a half ago, newspapers were essentially the preserve of the intellectuals. But that is not the case any more. Newspapers today reach out to the common man, and therein lies a huge challenge.[34]

A Hindi daily, he explained, now had to simultaneously do several things. It had to augment the breaking news that both urban and rural readers got from television, but it also had to cater to their lifestyle needs and aspirations. If the Hindi newspaper looked different in 2003 and had a greater quotient of 'news-you-can use', it was because readers had information demands in addition to the day's news. 'There is now a demand for education-related information, which was not the case some years ago. Similarly, readers take keen interest in subjects like health, lifestyle, etc., and hence newspapers bring out the periodical supplements.' Perhaps the most striking comment on upward mobility was the fact that both his newspaper and the *Navbharat Times* in Delhi carried regular weekly columns on how Hindi speakers could improve their English.

The fact that newspapers now had to cater to lifestyle aspirations was something that other editors too were very conscious of. A resident editor of the *Hindustan* in Bhagalpur said he was catering to a

mixed readership, a combination of 'masses and classes'. People like him had to redefine the Hindi reader. 'If you go to sub-division towns you find CDs and DVDs of the latest Holywood films are available for rental. In a puja-time mela they are also showing *Anaconda*.'[35] And his chief editor in Delhi would point to the fact that visits to villages now revealed the existence of beauty parlours offering bridal make-up and facials. If glossy weekend supplements in local Hindi papers carried recipes for Western cooking and home decoration tips, it was because people wanted to aspire to the lifestyles these represented. 'The poor', she declared, 'don't want to read about poverty'.[36]

Television facilitated this process. Its presence throughout the country, not just in the urban areas, was growing. The National Readership Survey of 1999 was reporting that some 69 million homes had access to television and 276 million adults watched broadcasts in a typical week. Television was rapidly becoming the principal source of information and entertainment in most Indian homes.[37] By NRS 2002 there was 12 per cent growth in the reach of television since 1999. And cable and satellite television penetration in the country recorded 31 per cent growth.[38] The Indian newspaper trade believes that television has been an important trigger for print penetration, contributing in no small measure to a hunger for news that increased newspaper sales. TV penetration increased considerably between 1995 and 2005. To Suresh Dubey, the *Nava Bharat*'s man in Itarsi in Madhya Pradesh, who doubled as bureau chief and circulation agent for the paper, the fact that nearby villages now took 20–25 newspapers each when they had taken less than one each 10 years ago, was partly because the electronic media was creating the atmosphere for people to demand more news.[39] Hawkers who supplied newspapers in this region, made the same point. When people watched a big cricket match on television, they wanted to read about it the next morning. In Jaipur, Nihar and Siddharth Kothari, young scions of the family which owns *Rajasthan Patrika*, confirmed and elaborated on this theory: with the coming of television to semi-urban and rural India, the news habit was growing.[40]

As the rural print revolution made rapid inroads into the countryside, it created in the process a newsprint-enabled public sphere which was unprecedented in its reach, and in which a stratum of citizenry not reported on before, began to make itself heard.

Notes

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4

Creating New Media Hubs

'Is the editor going to decide how much and what news people need?'

As the social contours of the Hindi heartland changed, the media landscape also began to be transformed. Rising literacy numbers, growing purchasing power and the blossoming of rural communications laid the base for accelerated expansion and localisation of the Hindi press. Between 2000 and 2005, there was overall growth in newspaper readership of 28 per cent, while the growth figure for Hindi publications during this period was as high as 67 per cent.[1] The key to such rapid growth was the rapid proliferation of newspaper editions at the district level. In the districts of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan and in the new states of Uttaranchal, Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand, beginning from the mid-1990s a readership began to be created at a hitherto untapped local level.

As the chief executive of *Hindustan* in Patna put it, the rapid localisation achieved by Hindi newspapers was a matter of evolution rather than a revolution. It was driven by different needs in different parts of the Hindi belt. These had to do with deployment of accumulated capital, the need to summon publishing clout to protect industries owned by the publishing group, the need to find alternative advertising to compensate for advertising lost by publications to television, and the need to decentralise printing to overcome the infrastructural barriers to reaching a newspaper to all corners of a state. Expansion came first as a strategy, and localisation became its editorial twin.