

Journalists and Politicians

'If you want Rajya Sabha membership you have to show that your (newspaper's) reach is considerable at the level of the electorate.'

In both provenance and evolution, Hindi journalism was a far less sanitised commodity than English journalism. It soaked in societal influences and responded to them. Whether cordial or contentious, it had a closer rapport with regional politicians. The language it used continued to evolve and respond to both local and market influences. And its practitioners had pragmatic yardsticks of professional ethics.

What this meant in practice was a cosier relationship with local politicians, and far more give and take than journalistic ethics might dictate. The political linkages were useful to obtain land for their offices and presses as well as for commercial ventures. Media is an industry, and there is one striking point of contrast between the leading lights of the English and Hindi press in India. By 2006 the only major English publication to be still owned by other industrial interests was *Hindustan Times*. For the others, whether it was the owners of *The Times of India*, *The Hindu*, *Indian Express*, the *Living Media Group* or even *The Telegraph* and *Deccan Herald*, the main business interests were media-related. That was not always the case with the Hindi press. Though they did not own significant businesses to begin with, media owners went on to acquire other businesses.

The *Dainik Jagran* was a striking example of a newspaper owned by a group which began with just a newspaper to its name and then went on to acquire sugar mills and a shopping mall, apart from other businesses. As one of its directors put it:

We spent little on the paper and had a lot of profit. With the power of the newspaper they were making *Jagran* micro motors.

Kalpanath Rai became sugar minister, he gave licenses for sugar mills. Instead of paying for the license we gave coverage to him and printed advertisements free of cost.

Two of the Gupta brothers look after the industries, including the mall, and a hosiery unit. The acquisitions were possible because the group had garnered advertising wealth, he said. *Jagran* was *The Times of India* of UP.¹ In 2005–06 it reported advertising revenue of Rs 3,060 million.

The *Dainik Bhaskar* increased its business interests substantially over the years that it had a growing newspaper. In early 2005 Sudhir Agarwal its managing editor, estimated that of the group's total turnover of Rs 15,000 million the newspapers and the printing press in Noida accounted for Rs 6,000 million.² The rest, then, was accounted for by other industrial interests including a factory in Sri Lanka. The group went into the gold importing business in 2005.

Though the owner of *Nai Duniya* would say that his was the only newspaper without a '*punitipati*' (industrialist) behind its founding,³ this paper went on to acquire substantial landed assets as well as a few businesses. When a land allotment to it became the subject of a CBI (Central Bureau of Investigation, the Central Government's investigating agency) enquiry ordered by the governor of Madhya Pradesh, the state government's defence was that there was ample precedent: 'Almost all national and regional newspapers have been given pieces of land to build their offices in almost every town in the state.'⁴ The *Nava Bharat* group in Madhya Pradesh and Chhatisgarh had ventured into entrepreneurship including a tree farming venture, though not always successfully.

Narendra Mohan, the late patriarch of Jagran Prakashan Pvt Limited which published *Dainik Jagran*, sought to dispel the notion that Hindi newspapers were constant beneficiaries of real estate allotments. He recounted at a panel discussion that when his group wanted to establish a newspaper in Delhi, they were not allotted land, even after obtaining a letter of recommendation from Prime Minister Indira Gandhi.

The government of UP did not allot the land and we had to pay for the land through our nose, 2.7 millions of rupees for the plot and we spent another 8 millions for the building.

Similarly in Varanasi we did not get the land, in Lucknow we did not get the land, in Bareilly we did not get the land, in Agra we did not get the land. We did not get the land anywhere. We did not receive any favour from any government. (Narendra Mohan, quoted in *Vidura Roundtable* 1992: 13)

Journalists, he added, were much more successful in obtaining concessional housing plots for themselves. But the above statement only confirms that land was sought, at all these places.

Thirteen years later his son and brother would speak again, in an interview, of how *Dainik Jagran* was never given land in New Delhi's press row and assert, 'Bahadurshah Zafar Marg (in the heart of the capital city of New Delhi) is the biggest bribe that English journalists can get. We had applied for land in B.Z. Marg in the 1970s. That request is still pending.'

Apart from easing their business expansion, political linkages also helped to insulate newspaper owners against workers' strikes, and ensured that they would continue to get government advertising. Hindi newspapers up until the 1990s got less commercial advertising than English ones.

Close relations with those who ruled the state also meant that they became power brokers at the local level, peddling influence, as Lalit Surjan, the owner-editor of *Deshbandhu*, in Chhatisgarh put it. He gave examples: a PWD (Public Works Department) contractor would go to a newspaper owner to arrange a meeting with the chief minister, or a film producer would solicit their help in getting entertainment tax withdrawn on a particular film. As for localisation and the increase in district editions, that too was part of a game plan: 'If you want Raiya Sabha membership you have to show that your reach is considerable at the level of the electorate. If the chief minister is going to a particular village and sees copies of a newspaper he knows the newspaper reaches there.'⁵ Surjan's own paper demonstrated considerable editorial support to Ajit Yogi when he was Chief Minister of Chhatisgarh, but he maintained that as an editor he eschewed political ambitions.

He describes the sort of favours political parties could expect from more solvent newspaper groups: 'Five years ago when Congress had its conference at Pachmarhi the party approached newspaper houses

to host lunches and dinners for its duration.'⁶ In turn, chief ministers attended when the children of proprietors or editors got married. And there were occasions when a chief minister would put his state plane at an editor's disposal. The Press Council of India's report on favours given to journalists had described 30 categories of favours.⁷ To this Surjan added another category: 'Business houses which owned newspapers also dabbled in pipe supply. You need lots of pipes for tubewells. All the newspapers are into this.' And there was yet another category which the Press Council had failed to note, because its report was prepared before the new states came into existence. That was the obtaining of mining leases in these states. The vice-president of *Hindustan Times* in Patna had obtained a gold mining lease in Jharkhand.⁸

In Bihar, however, Lalu Prasad Yadav's professed disregard for upper-caste journalists who he thought were biased against him, led to a distinct lack of pampering. Unlike Madhya Pradesh, where thanks to Chief Ministers Arjun Singh and Digvijay Singh over the years many prime location government houses were occupied by journalists, journalists in Bihar got no housing from the government.

Numerous Beneficiaries

It was not only the big newspapers who benefited from government largesse. Small time Hindi journalism had its entrepreneurial dimensions. In Uttaranchal, a hill state without much job generation, self-employment was the norm. If you were not running a school or a coaching academy in Dehradun, you were likely to be running a newspaper. In 2002 there were 11 daily newspapers and no less than 84 weeklies coming out of this city and they had a very unique periodicity—neither weekly nor daily, but on demand. Many of these publications were listed with the Directorate of Advertising and Visual Publicity and when required to furnish proof of their existence, from time to time, the proprietors would rush to print copies, with different datelines. To use a term well understood in Dehradun, they printed for the file. Altogether, Uttaranchal had 31 dailies, out of Dehradun, Haridwar, Udham Singh Nagar, Tehri, Pauri Garhwal and Nainital, and 122 weeklies. The majority of both kinds of publications,

were four pagers. Why they appear at all may seem a mystery to outsiders who encounter them but in the state everybody seems to understand the economics of this publishing industry only too well.

The fact that most state governments had annual advertising and publicity budgets running into several millions of rupees and a stated advertising policy designed to encourage the existence of small newspapers, meant that they often ended up propping up dud publications. Newspapers were patronised by rotation, and there were some days in the year when everybody got advertising: Republic Day, Independence Day, Uttaranchal Raising Day, when a new government completed a hundred days in office and so on. In Mayawati's UP the list would include Ambedkar's birthday. All of it put together could add up to some Rs 20,000 worth of advertising a year for a publication, and if you owned ten such publications, that was Rs 200,000 of income for doing precious little. The state government was not the only patron of these publications. Public sector giants such as the Oil and Natural Gas Corporation patronised publications such as the *Garhwal Post* and were rewarded with glowing articles about the corporation in the same issue.

It was a trend that Dehradun inherited from the mother state of UP, which had a thriving tradition of small newspapers, with towns like Kanpur publishing even more titles than Dehradun. Madhya Pradesh does not have such a tradition, but Bihar did. Avdesh Kaushal, founder of the Rural Litigation and Entitlement Kendra in Dehradun and a leading social worker in the city puts down the motivation for such publishing to three reasons: for blackmail, for government and public sector advertisements and for newsprint quotas which were then sold in the black. Several would be printed from the same press; you printed a few copies of one masthead, change the masthead and print a few more, and so on. What these papers earn for the proprietor depended on how many of them he owned.⁹

In the year 2005 Uttar Pradesh's public relations department had a total of 1,523 publications registered with it, for advertising. Some 385 of these were dailies. The deputy director of the Directorate of Information explained that if the common man wanted to get close to those in power, he could do so by floating a newspaper.¹⁰

The Hindi belt politician had a clear and pragmatic understanding of what the media was worth, and what it meant for him. There is a telling anecdote that a retired Lucknow journalist Gyanendra Sharma narrates, about a Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh in the 1960s, Govind Narain Singh, who was frequently criticised in the national press for his less-than-hands-on approach to governance. One day Singh emerged from a lift in Vallabh Bhavan in Bhopal to see two journalists waiting to go up.

When he saw my senior colleague, he took him by his arm and said: '*Bhai Saab aap bahut acchha likhte hain lekin shaayad aapko yeh naheen pataa ki mere vidhayak aapkaa angrejee kaa akhbaar naheen padhte so apke likhane se meree sarkaar ke liye koyee khatraa naheen hai.*' [You write very well but perhaps you do not know that my MLAs do not read your English newspaper so your writing does not constitute a threat to my government.] '*Ve Hindi kaa akhbaar* [he named one prominent Hindi daily] *zaroor padhte hain aur mujhe yeh pataa hai ki unko kaise khush rakhaa jaaye*' [Ofcourse they do read Hindi newspapers but I know how to keep those people happy]. '*Rahay bat mere kshetra kee, so wahaan ke log to koyee akhbaar padhte hee naheen, isliye wahaan bhee mujhe koyee khatraa naheen hai.*' [As for my constituency, the people there do not read any newspaper so there too I have nothing to fear from you.] His constituency was Rampur Baghelan in Satna district. He said it, laughed and went away without waiting for any response from us. But what he said made a permanent impression on my memory. What the witty CM said then still holds good, probably more than before.

Except that with the coming of localisation people in his rural constituency today would be reading a newspaper.

Sharma adds that it was much easier for the regional politicians to keep the regional newspapers on the right side than the national press. They not only got a security cover and protection from government departments entrusted with the job of enforcing a number of state laws—particularly the labour laws, but also monetary support

in terms of advertisements, land at a cheaper rate and facilities for non-newspaper business interests of the proprietors.¹¹

Perhaps that is why the political class in this region was wont to demonstrate from time to time that it did not fear the Hindi press. In Chhattisgarh in 2002, the chief minister who was a bureaucrat-turned-politician could recall that when he took over as collector of Indore his predecessor left him what was known as a charge report, a sort of handing-over report. According to Ajit Jogi one of the pieces of advice in that report was that if he wanted to succeed in Indore he would have to talk to Abhay Chajlani (the owner of *Nai Duniya*) every night before going to sleep. He recalled that the paper had a hold on the state of a kind not to be seen any where else in the country. 'They decided everything, even matters relating to sports and lotteries.' Jogi took credit for working to undermine this kind of influence. He said he invited the *Dainik Bhaskar* to come to Indore, gave them land and support, and watched them fight *Nai Duniya* tenaciously till they overtook it in circulation. According to Jogi the Congress party (Indian National Congress) later backed the *Bhaskar* group in entering Rajasthan to take on the *Rajasthan Patrika*.¹²

Some strong regional newspapers had identifiable political affiliations which they did not bother to deny: *Nai Duniya* with the Congress, *Rajasthan Patrika* with the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) when Bharon Singh Shekhawat was chief minister, *Dainik Jagran* also with the BJP. Some had a member of the owning family in the Rajya Sabha with a party affiliation: *Ranchi Express's* Ajay Maroo was a BJP MP in the Rajya Sabha (Upper House in the Indian Parliament) in 2005, *Nava Bharat's* P.K. Maheshwari had previously served as a Congress MP in the the Rajya Sabha. Shobana Bharatiya, the proprietress of *Hindustan Times* group which published *Hindustan* accepted a Congress-headed coalition government's nomination to the Rajya Sabha in the eminent persons category in 2006.

The family which owned *Dainik Jagran* was the most pragmatic in this regard. Its proprietor Narendra Mohan is known to have campaigned hard for a Rajya Sabha ticket from the Congress and finally accepted one from the right wing BJP. Some years after his death, his brother Mahendra Mohan Gupta, his successor as chairman of the *Jagran* group of publications, was also keen on the BJP sending him to the Rajya Sabha from UP just as it had sent his brother

When that did not work out he accepted, in 2006, the offer of a Rajya Sabha ticket from the Samajwadi Party (a democratic socialist party in North India), then in power in the state. From the point of view of the party too, getting the head of the leading newspaper in the state aboard, was a clever move.

The *Dainik Bhaskar* was equally pragmatic. It was seldom inclined to rock the ruling party's boat. In Haryana its rise paralleled the chief ministerial reign of Om Prakash Chautala. Political scientist Yogendra Yadav cites an anecdote to illustrate how careful the paper was to not offend. In 2001 when he took part in a *padayatra* (a long march undertaken for a specific purpose) in Haryana as part of a Jayaprakash Narayan memorial observance. The *Dainik Bhaskar* approached him to write a daily diary. On 8 March, International Women's Day, he wrote about how the event did not seem to feature in the chief minister's daily schedule at all, though Haryana was a state notorious for female foeticide. The CM had not paused to take cognisance of it. The comment brought an agitated response from the paper after it was published. Why, the paper's Panipat headquarters wanted to know, what he writing on such controversial subjects? The diary which had been appearing on page one till then, began appearing on page seven for the rest of the *padayatra*. Yet there was no official rejoinder from the state government to contradict the assertion made in his diary column.¹³

The most chequered relationship that a local press corps had with a chief minister, perhaps, was the one UP journalists had with Mulayam Singh Yadav in his different terms as chief minister. In his first term he was so lavish with handouts of cash and land to journalists that when Mayawati succeeded him and publicised the favours, a Press Council of India committee was set up to look into the entire issue. The second time around he declared a *Halla Bol* (call to attack) on *Dainik Jagran* and *Amar Ujala* for encouraging, he said, a separatist movement in Uttaranchal. Arun Shourie described the consequences of this cry for the papers in question:¹⁴

Addressing a public meeting on October 12, UP chief minister Mulayam Singh Yadav denounced the two papers, '*Halla Bol*', he exhorted his followers, 'Commence the storming'. Why read them, he told them, you don't have to even see them. No one

present had any doubt what they meant: Don't let them be seen, that is what it [sic.] meant.

Knowing from past experience what could be in store for them, many journalists left the meeting post-haste.

Since that call, hawkers and news agents selling the two papers have been beaten up. Journalists of the two papers have been beaten up. Vehicles carrying *Jagran* have been waylaid and burnt. The house of the editor of *Amar Ujala* has been attacked. Advertisements to the papers have been cut. Thousands upon thousands of copies of the papers been torched.

Shourie does not say on what grounds Mulayam Singh denounced the two newspapers. But when an Editors Guild committee inquired into the circumstances, the chief minister produced a letter on file, to show that the *Jagran* group had asked for land to start a sugar factory, a request that had not been complied with. The *Halla Bol* was vicious enough to become a landmark in relations between the press and the chief minister.

When Mayawati became chief minister in 2002 much of the UP press had such a rough time with her that there was relief when Mulayam Singh returned to power in 2003. Two free lance writers recorded the responses of journalists:

Mediapersons in Lucknow were almost jubilant when Mulayam Singh Yadav replaced Mayawati as the chief minister of the country's politically most important state. The same press which had become very hostile towards the government because of Mayawati's attitude towards them, has changed colours overnight—and this is only partly because Mulayam Singh's government is in its initial days

They went on to cite gushing headlines in the city newspapers.¹⁵

This term of Mulayam Singh Yadav, however, was marked by less open access to journalists, and some self-censorship on the part of the latter. When a TV channel, Aaj Tak exposed change of land use to favour some bureaucrats in Mulayam Singh's government, the chief minister hit back by holding a well-rehearsed press conference in

which he disclosed how many plots journalists had received from the Uttar Pradesh Government. At the *Hindustan Times* the resident editor noted that newspapers overall were now being circumspect about the excesses the chief minister was lavishing on his constituency in Etawah. 'We have our holy cows.' One of the paper's top executives was himself in the queue for land allotment favours in Lucknow. She also described how the *Jagran* had changed its earlier hostility to the chief minister and begun to hedge its bets with regard to all political parties in the state. 'You can see in *Jagran* careful double-column stories on each party. They will give balanced coverage.' She made the point that UP politicians were now less interested in the print media. 'They ask for TV reporters by name. Now the demand is for the electronic media, not for Hindi or English.'¹⁶ The resident editor of *Hindustan* who had moved to Lucknow from Panna would describe how Mulayam Singh Yadav was latterly reluctant to give interviews to journalists, and distinctly less accessible than Lalu Prasad Yadav used to be.¹⁷ He ascribed the decline in direct access in part to the emergence of Amar Singh, the Samajwadi Party's point man for access to the chief minister.

The self-censorship the Uttar Pradesh press was practising was evident in the coverage until then of Mulayam Singh's tenure, many instances of which were documented. The start of his new tenure was marked by transfers of bureaucrats, something Mayawati had been roundly criticised for. This time around the criticism was muted and the *Indian Express*' *Express Newslime* from Lucknow called it 'a cleansing touch'. The chief minister's support for a former minister, Amarnani Tripathi, against whom the CBI was finding more and more convincing evidence of murder, also called for more stringent criticism than it got. Then the chief minister withdrew the POTA (Prevention of Terrorism Act) case against the Thakur politician Raja Bhaiyya, but there was less outrage in the media than there had been when he was arrested by Mayawati.¹⁸

When Mulayam Singh broke the record for appointing jumbo ministries with a 98-member ministry, criticism of this was moderate in most mainstream papers. And the *Rashtriya Sahara*, whose proprietor Subroto Roy was allied to the Samajwadi Party, actually justified the large ministry as a compulsion of coalition politics. The inordinate delay in swearing in ministers, it explained, was because

the honourable chief minister was busy co-ordinating between the coalition partners. It praised the chief minister for fairly representing all parties, regions, castes and communities, and giving weightage to such factors as seniority of leaders. It even had a word of consolation and advice, rather condescendingly, for those who did not get to become minister. Above all, it said that criticism was uncalled for as previous chief ministers have also had jumbo ministries (Kalyan Singh had 93; Rajnath Singh, 85 and Mayawati, 79).¹⁹

The Indian Express' Lucknow edition was a franchise edition owned by a Raiya Sabha Congress MP and because the Congress party was supporting the Mulayam Singh government, it too fell in line. *Dainik Jagran*, sobered by its brush with Mayawati, let the *Halla Bol* become a thing of the past. When the chief minister completed two years in office in August 2005 it published a survey that was critical of his achievements, but the induction in the subsequent year of its chairman M.M. Gupta into the Samajwadi Party as a Raiya Sabha MP seemed to suggest that the paper was not viewed as an adversary by the ruling party in the state.

Conclusion

The commercial instincts of the Hindi press were honed early on by developing pragmatic political linkages to procure land and favours. Both big and small Hindi newspapers benefited from government largesse. The relationship between press and politicians in this region was calibrated by the needs of both. Some strong regional newspapers had identifiable political affiliations which they did not bother to deny. But whatever their affiliation, all of them chose to tread carefully with the party in power. When Mulayam Singh Yadav returned as chief minister in 2003 his term was marked by less open access to journalists, and some self-censorship on the part of the latter.

Notes

1. Vinod Shukla, interviewed by author, Lucknow, 30 August 2005.
2. Sudhir Agarwal, *Bhaskar* Group, interviewed by author, 27 January 2005.

3. Abhay Chajani, interviewed by author, Indore, 15 February 2005.
4. 'Conflict of Interest', *India Today*, <http://www.india-today.com/webexclusive/dispatch/20010524/mishra.html> (downloaded 8 July 2003).
5. Lalit Surjan, editor, *Desbandhu*, interviewed by author, New Delhi, 21 March 2005.
6. Ibid.
7. The Report of the Press Council of India, http://www.nwmindia.org/Law/Bare_acts/press_council_guidelines.htm.
8. Sevanthi Ninan, 'Starehood: Good for the Media?', *The Hindu*, 22 September 2002.
9. Sevanthi Ninan, 'Uttaranchal's Dubious Publishing Boom', [http://www.thehoot.org/posted/6 June 2002](http://www.thehoot.org/posted/6%20June%202002), <http://www.thehoot.org/story.asp?section=&lang=L1&storyid=webhoothoot1K0990210&xpn=1>.
10. R.C. Thagela, deputy director, information directorate, interviewed by author, Lucknow, 31 August 2005.
11. Gyanendra Sharma, email communication, 9 September 2005.
12. Ajit Jogi, then chief minister of Chhattisgarh, interviewed by author, Raipur, June 2002.
13. Yogendra Yadav, interviewed in New Delhi, 5 July 2006.
14. Arun Shourie, 'Secular Hypocrisy, Double Standard, and Regressions', *The Observer*, 8 November 1994, <http://arunshourie.voicesofdharmacom/articles/19941108.htm>.
15. Sachin Agarwal and Shivam Vij, 'For Lucknow Scribes Happy Days are Here Again', <http://www.thehoot.org/story.asp?storyid=web210214166112Hoot8430%20PM942&xpn=1>.
16. Sunita Aron, resident editor, *Hindustan Times*, interviewed by author, Lucknow, 26 August 2005.
17. Naveen Joshi, resident editor, *Hindustan*, Lucknow, interviewed by author, Lucknow, 1 June 2005.
18. Sachin Agarwal and Shivam Vij, 'For Lucknow Scribes Happy Days are Here Again', <http://www.thehoot.org>, 19 October 2003.
19. Ibid.